

The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions Study Guide

The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions by Philip Novak

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Plot Summary

"The World's Wisdom - Sacred Texts of the World's Religions," by Philip Novak, is a historical account of the seven great religions of the world and a summary of primal religions that preceded them and no longer exist. The author describes the most revered and sacred writings and tomes for each of the religions. The author points out that of the estimated 100,000 religions that man created, most have faded and been overtaken by the larger religions that are showcased in the book.

The book begins by describing Hinduism, including its origin and progression throughout its history. The Hindu religion originated in Europe and was exported to India. There is an explanation and examples of Hindu hymns, which were called "Vedas" or "sacred knowledge." These vedas were fundamental in the formation of the Hindu religion. The rituals associated with these hymns were used for the well-being and success of Hindu adherents. Although reincarnation is an element of modern Hinduism, there is no mention of the concept in the early vedas. Reincarnation was introduced into the religion a thousand years after the early beginnings of the religion. The Bhagavad Gita emerged as the most important sacred book of the Hindu religion.

Buddhism first emerged in ancient India 2,600 years ago. It has been the most influential religion of the many and diverse peoples of Asia. The man who came to be known as Buddha began life as a prince named Siddhartha. Buddha, of course, is credited with the inception of the religion. Buddha stands for the "Awakened One." He taught the Dharma, also known as the Way of Truth, which is the most sacred of all texts of the Buddhist religion. Buddha lived a life of sacrifice which served as an inspirational example to the followers of the religion. He gave up a life of privilege, power and opulence in order to best serve his god and attain salvation.

Confucius was unlike most leaders of religious sects. He did not consider himself a profit or spiritual hero. Instead, he preferred the title of "student and teacher." Confucianism was based on the morality of man and of the orderly cosmos in which he lived. Confucianism is credited with having the biggest impact on the shaping of the Chinese mind.

The sacred books associated with Confucianism include its canon which is comprised of ten volumes. Some of these books were written prior to the emergence of Confucius. Later, the great educator is credited with writing what became known as the Four Books of Confucius which include: The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Great Harmony, the Mencius (the teachings of Confucius' disciple, Mencius) and the Analects which contain sayings and observations by Confucius. Although he did not think of himself as inspirational as stated before, he was a humble man who took no credit for his knowledge. He credited others for what he learned from them. Confucius never stopped learning.

Taoism advocates living in harmony and emptying the mind of all thoughts which will allow the spirit to enter the soul. Since the Chinese are known for their attraction to



contrasts as exemplified in the yin and yang, the contrary forces of the universe that man must contend with, it followed that a blending of Taoism and Confucianism would appeal to the culture. Both religions surfaced in China around the same time in the sixth century BCE.

Lao Tzu is credited with establishing Taoism. He wrote the Taoism Bible and the Tao Te Ching which has become an inspiration for people of all walks of life and of all religious affiliations. The second greatest sage associated with Taoism is Chuang Tzu who lived several hundred years after Lao Tzu. There are three types of Taoism: philosophical Taoism, yogic and vitalist Taoism and religious Taoism.

Judaism is considered to be the oldest of the world's modern religions, dating back to the exodus from Egypt some 3,200 years ago. The holy and most sacred book of Judaism is the Tanakh. It consists of three books: The Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim. The Torah is defined as law or teaching and refers mainly to the first five books of the Jewish Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The narrative of the Nevi'im focuses on the prophets. Ketuvim encompasses the rest of the Holy Bible, those chapters following the first five books which comprise the Torah.

Judaism is based on two concepts: the idea of one God and the idea of human dignity. This melding of ideas is sometimes referred to as "ethical monotheism" (p. 176). Both Christianity and Islam originate from Judaism.

Christianity had its beginning from just a relatively small group of followers of Jesus Christ. It became the fastest growing religion in history when in just 300 years. After its inception, it became the most dominant religion in the Roman Empire. The religion was based on devotion to Jesus of Nazareth who was called "Christ" by his followers. "Christ" was taken from the Greek word "Kristos" which translated to messiah. The Jewish people had long-awaited the coming of the Messiah and savior. The story of Jesus of Nazareth is told in the New Testament of the Holy Bible which is the most sacred writing of the religion. The story of Jesus Christ is referred to by many as the greatest story ever told.

Islam is the newest of the world's major religions and it is currently the fastest growing. Islam originated from both Judaism and Christianity. Muslims had major differences with the two older religions. The Muslims did not believe that Jesus was a god and felt the Jews had corrupted their own scriptures and were arrogant in proclaiming themselves as the "chosen ones."

For those reasons, God selected Muhammad as his messenger. For twenty-three years, Muhammad received the word of God and from them created the Qur'an which is the holy book of Islam. Muslims stress that Muhammad did not write the Qur'an but it was written by God through Muhammad. The Qur'an is designated by the Mecca suras, or chapters, and the Medina suras which were the two locations in which Muhammad lived while he received the word of god and compiled the Qur'an.

The primal religions that have long ago disappeared have no literature associated with them. Descriptions of these religions have been passed down by legend and myth and by archaeological discoveries.



Chapter One: Hinduism

Chapter One: Hinduism Summary and Analysis

Four thousand years ago, Hinduism sprung from pastoral ancestors who originated from northeastern Europe and who traveled to the Indus Valley of ancient India. The men referred to themselves as Aryans which meant "noble of birth." The a major focus of their religion was sacrifice by fire. These religious figures were uniquely qualified to sing the hymns that accompanied the sacrifice. The hymns were called "Vedas" or "sacred knowledge," and formed the foundation of the Hindu religion. The rituals were held to bring well-being and prosperity to religious adherents. In the early Vedas, there was no mention of reincarnation which has come to be associated with modern Hinduism. That element of the religion would not be part of the Veda until a thousand years later.

The Early Vedas

The Rig-Veda is the most important of the four Veda collections which features, Indra, the most charismatic of the gods. Indra defeated a cosmic serpent and unleashed the life-giving monsoons. Indra also assisted the Aryans in their missionary works. Agni, the god of fire, is second in popularity to Indra. There are over a thousand hymns dedicated to him. All the hymns in Rig-Veda's ninth book are sang to Soma, the god who lives in a mysterious beverage. Another god, Varuna, is an omniscient god who can hide in a drop of water. Varuna rules over the earth and sky.

"That One" (tad ekam) is the ultimate origin of things. This early concept showed an advanced sophistication in that the origin of man was discussed and questioned. One Vedic hymn puts forth the belief that the world was created by a divine being's sacrifice. In this hymn, reference is made to four levels of social groups which became the basis for the caste system. These four early groups were: the Brahmins, the religious leaders; the Kshatriyas, the political/military group; the Vaishyas, the artisans; and, Shudras, the laborers.

The Upanishads

The Upanishads contain the belief that man is trapped in an endless cycle of birth and death, or reincarnation. The Isa Upanishad teaches that each person is in all beings and all beings are in each person. The Kena Upanishad teaches that the Brahmin, or religious leader, lives up to the expectations of God and not to those of the people he leads. The Katha Upanishad contains the story of Nachiketas who seeks wisdom from Yama, the God of Death. Nachiketas seeks the secret of life from Yama. The Mundaka Upanishad teaches that Brahman is the creator and the spirit within man. The man who knows Brahman becomes Brahman. This exalted state is key to the conclusion of the endless cycle of life and death. It represents the end of all longing and desires.



From the Katha, "OM" is the word that represents self-sacrifice and glorification. In the Maitri, it is written that by contemplating OM, man reaches freedom, peace and immortality. The Chandogya teaches that all words come from the sound of OM and that OM is the universe. From the Mandukya, OM represents past, present and future and all stages of life.

In the Svetesvatara Upanishad, the practice of yoga is lauded. The upright body and head is most receptive to the OM of Braham. Yoga provides health, a clear complexion, a lightness of the body, a pleasant aroma and a sweet voice. It discourages greed. The transmigration of the soul is born in new bodies according to the works accomplished in the former life. There is a belief in the "refuge of the silence of eternity" (19) and that the silent man is open to the spirit. The Taittiriya Upanishad has a positive message: all beings have come from joy and will return to joy. The Chandogya Upanishad focuses on the light that shines in one's heart. This Upanishad contains the story of Svetaketu whose father sent him off to learn the sacred wisdom. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad teaches that the spirit of the universe is immortal and never old and provides safety from all fears.

The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is held in the highest esteem by the Hindus. It is the most "luminous" of all of the Hindu scriptures. It is the most popular book in all of Hindu literature and it is the perfect representation of both the Vedas and the Upanishads. The underlying message of the Bhagavad Gita is that man will ultimately find his purpose, realize his eternal nature and achieve union with God. The Gita represents a small part of the longest epic poem that ever existed—the Mahabharata which was created between 400 BC and 400 CE. The poem tells the story of a battle between two clans in which the warrior Arjuna seeks help from the Divine Lord Krishna.

Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that he must understand his own existence and that the true heart cannot die. Although bodies die, the soul does not. While death is certain for the living, rebirth is certain for the dead. Krishna tells Arjuna that when one takes an action, it is not the action that matters; rather, it is how the individual acts within the action. "Karma joy is perhaps the central teaching of the Bhagavad Gita." (31) Man should act for the work's sake only—not for the fruit of the work. Every action should be done free of any thought of personal gain. Actions should be taken in a courageous manner without fear of failure.

Hinduism recognizes four categories of yoga which is also referred to as self-transformation: the yoga of action; the yoga of devotion; the yoga of knowledge; and, the yoga of meditation. The mind can be controlled through meditation which results in a stronger union with Brahman. The individual must be in solitude in order to reach the optimum state of concentration.

Krishna revealed his divine form to Arjuna in chapter eleven of the Gita. Arjuna is astonished by the cosmic spectacle when Krishna transforms from the human form he took on to his natural form. Krishna spoke from many mouths and saw with many eyes.



He was adorned with ornaments and was wielding heavenly weapons. Krishna was as glorious as a thousand suns. Krishna reveals to Arjuna the kind of person who is most dear to him is the person who is dedicated to him in mind and spirit. He is calm and not swayed by emotion. He is not afraid and does not suffer grief. The person treats his friends and enemies with the same respect. Such a man will eventually know immortality.

Grace Notes

Shankara, Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi are considered three of the greatest of the Hindu mystic-sages. Mahatma Ghandi said, "Ramakrishna's life enables one to see God face to face." (40) According to Shankara, birth and death do not exist and neither do liberated and bound souls.

Ramakrishna asserted that it was insanity to claim your own religion as the only true one. Christians and Muslims are as devout as Hindus. There are many paths to God. All calls to God are received by the same source. When feeling the spirit, organized religion can be renounced. Those who reach the highest levels of spirituality have no personal agenda attached to it—not even their own salvation or self-perpetuation. The most complete representation of God is the human reality.

Ramana Maharshi taught that individuals must learn how to be happy. Before a person can cure the ills of the world, a person must find his own happiness. Religious practices are designed to help man find his own personal joy. Man may seek reality but in essence he is reality. God's grace is the beginning, middle and end of everything.



Chapter 2: Buddhism

Chapter 2: Buddhism Summary and Analysis

Buddhism is known as the Light of Asia. Buddhism first emerged 2,600 years ago in ancient India. It has had vast influence on the imaginations, morals and sensibility of the diverse populations of Asia. Siddhartha Gotama is credited as the originator of the religion. He was known as Buddha or the Awakened One. He taught the Dharma, also known as the Way of Truth.

The Instructive Legends of the Buddha's Life

Buddha's father was Shuddhodana, a king of the Shakyas. The prince, Buddha, came out of his mother's side and caused her no pain. He was born with full awareness and referred to his birth as an event that would lead to the betterment of all men. The great seer, Asita, came to see him and predicted that Buddha would reform the greedy with the teachings of the Dharma. Buddha was confronted with the "first three passing sights: old age, disease, and death" (p. 51).

Buddha withdrew into his solitude. If old age, disease, and death did not exist, the world would be beautiful. With the three passings, the world seemed to Buddha to be on fire in an all-consuming blaze. In his solitude, he learned to observe and meditate, which gave him insight and freedom from all mundane pursuits and concerns. He then observed the fourth passing: the religious mendicant. He met a recluse who had nothing and had adopted his homeless life to win salvation. Buddha was inspired to leave his life of luxury for the homeless life so he too could attain salvation. He sought out the hermitage of two great yogis, Alara Kalama and Uddalaka Ramaputta, and studied under them.

Feeling he still had not attained the highest spiritual level, he turned to bodily mortification. During this six-year-period, he endured many fasts that emaciated his body. Although his body shrunk from starvation, he grew in psychic abilities. He found that his weakened condition diminished his ability to meditate. He concluded that inward calm was needed for spiritual success. He sat bow-legged under a bodhi tree of enlightenment and vowed to stay there until he reached the highest state of spirituality. Buddha defeated Mara who represented Anger, Craving and Pride. He refused to be lured or tempted by any of these flawed emotions.

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist is to clear his mind of all distractions. That perfect state is referred to as "Nibbana" or "Nirvana." Attaining this state frees him from endless rebirth. During four nights of watch, Buddha ultimately attained the real truth. Buddha decided to teach others about the truth. His teaching career lasted for forty-five years. As Buddha neared death, he proclaimed that his death would be an occasion for joy. He left instructions for his followers. He said that teachers should not hold back the truth. He told them not to mourn his loss. Let the Dharma be your master, he told them. The



goal of the teachers, or monks, was to help man achieve happiness, goodness and truth. The last words of Buddha were: "Impermanent are all formations; observe this carefully, constantly" (p. 62).

The Rebel Saint

Buddha rejected some common aspects of organized religion including blind faith, belief in rituals and the acknowledgment that some mysteries remain unsolved. He felt it was proper and natural to have doubts. He felt strongly that the benefit of rituals was dubious. He came down in favor of good acts over reliance in rituals in order to have union with God. Buddha also contended that it was a waste of time to ponder questions that had no known or logical answers. Examples of these unknowns included: whether the world was eternal; whether the soul and body were separate entities; and concerns about what one was in the past or will be in the future.

Core Doctrines

Buddha set out the four noble truths of Buddhism in his first sermon. The four noble truths are: Suffering; the origin of suffering; cessation of suffering; and the path to the cessation of suffering. Also in his first sermon, Buddha set out the eightfold path as the middle way, which teaches against extremes. Other core doctrines are those concerning Karma, which teach that ignorance and craving perpetuates rebirth. The Three Poisons are greed, hatred, and delusions. Actions stemming from the Three Poisons will have ramifications in this or another life. The Three Marks of Existence teach that all lives are impermanent, subject to suffering, and are without self.

The Five Groups of Existence are: materiality, sensation, perception, moods, and thoughts. Anatta, or a state without self, is a basic Buddhist doctrine, which means that "I" is an ever-changing phenomenon. The Five Precepts are actions that Buddhists vow to abstain from: murder; stealing; sexual promiscuity; lying; and drug and alcohol consumption. The Nature of Right Speech goes beyond just telling the truth. How one speaks and what one says can have great influence on others. In order to achieve Nirvana, one must achieve the Four Foundations of Right Mindfulness which are: awareness of the body; awareness of sensation; awareness of the mind; and, awareness of the mind-objects.

There are four qualities that need to be cultivated to achieve the highest order of the mind: compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Nirvana is the highest spiritual state and the end of Karma and the elimination of the Three Poisons. It also is the end of old age and death and the deliverance of the heart. The Arahant is the noble person who has traversed the Buddhist path to Nirvana. His journey is completed and he is joyful.

The Three Jewels are The Buddha; Dharma; and, Sangha (those who live by the teachings of Buddha). The teaching of the awakened is summarized as refraining from evil, achieving good, and purifying one's mind.

Mahayana Buddhism



The Mahayana Buddhists appears around the first or second century C.E. They affirmed the basic tenets of Buddhists but felt that the teachings needed to be enhanced and deepened. They added three key elements: The concept of emptiness; The Bodhisattva; and, Devotional Buddhism. The Mahayana concept of emptiness taught that emptiness was the ultimate state; that everything—including Samsara and Nirvana—was empty. The Bodhisattva is the spiritual hero who refuses entry into nirvana in order to be reborn for the purpose of saving others. The Mahayana produced new scriptures—known as Devotional Buddhism—which expanded on the concepts of emptiness and Bodhisattva.

A. Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism encompasses the teaching of Buddha and Mahayana Buddhism but also believes in the doctrine of the transformative powers of being devout. Where Tibetan Buddhism departs the most from the others is in its methods. Those methods include mantra, the ritual use of sacred sounds; the creation of sacred paintings; and the practice of imaginative visualization. The Lama (monk) instructs the dying person from the teachings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The following concepts are stressed in this teaching: 1) the moment of death and the clear light of pure reality; 2) the experience of spiritual reality; and 3) seeking rebirth or reincarnation.

Tibetan Buddhism allows that even with impurity the wise man can make himself pure. Tibetan Tantrism which has a fundamental association with the philosophy of emptiness, teaches that the path to freedom can sometimes be achieved from overindulgence. Some teachings question the use and power of meditation. The Tibetan "Wheel of Life," is depicted by a huge demon named Yama who judges the dead. Each section of the figure represents a different part of life including the realms of god, of titans and of humans. The wheel depicts six different kinds of existence in the endless cycle of reincarnation.

B. Zen Buddhism

Thirteen centuries ago in China Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism merged to form what was called Ch'an by the Chinese and Zen by Japanese adherents. A renewed interest in meditation was stressed in these sects. Claims were made that Zen taught outside the scriptures; however, its foundation is found in Mahayana emptiness and scriptures such as the Heart and Diamond sutras. The sage Bodhidharma referred to Zen as seeing into ones own nature and the path to the ultimate attainment of Buddhahood.

Zen Buddhists hold the belief that their tradition is linked back to Buddha. Toward the end of his life, Bodhidharma told his disciples that they had attained his marrow—physically became part of him. Zen stressed the importance of trust in the heart and mind.

In seventeenth century China, the Zen school split into two sects—northern and southern. On the subject of the mind, the Shen-hsiu sect believed that the "body is a Bodhi tree, the mind a mirror bright." (97) The Hui-neng's belief was the opposite: "The



Bodhi tree does not exist nor does the mirror bright." (98) In an effort to discourage too much dependence on meditation, the practice was sometimes mocked. Zen Koan was the requirement that students find answers to what seemed to be impossible questions.

It was important according to Zen Master Dogen (1200-1253) that meditation be accomplished while sitting, not lying. Dogen also taught that "enlightenment" was something that was always present. Zen Master Hakuin (1686-1769) adopted Buddhism at the age of eight when he learned of the hell that awaited non-believers. He also recognized that devotion to Zen was not easy.

Grace Notes

The Dhammapada is a collection of 400 verses authored by Buddha. In these verses, Buddha wrote of the ecology of the mind; the purification of emotions; the intelligent and the foolish, human birth; joy; and; freedom. Some of these verses contained parables that taught the lessons of the Dharma.



Chapter 3: Confucianism

Chapter 3: Confucianism Summary and Analysis

Confucius taught that man can have a successful life when he is moral given the assumption that the cosmos itself sets the stage for moral order. Above all other religions, Confucianism has been the most influential in shaping the Chinese mind. The Confucian canon is comprised of ten titles. Confucius is credited with saving four of the first six books that already existed before he was born. These books are the Book of History, the Book of Poetry, the Book of Change and the Book of Rites. Later writings referred to as the Four Books of Confucius are: The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Great Harmony, the Mencius (the teachings of Confucius' disciple, Mencius) and the Analects which contain sayings and observations by Confucius.

Confucius the Man

Confucius was unlike most religious leaders in that he was not a prophet or spiritual hero; rather, he was an educator. He was dedicated to being both a student and a teacher. To Confucius, learning was a pleasure. Even at an advanced age, he never tired or learning. He did not pretend what he taught was his original idea. He was proud to say that he taught what he had learned from others. He was an advocate of learning from history and from those who went before him.

As a teacher, Confucius supported teaching both old ideas as well as new ones. Confucius would never turn a student away who was poor or disadvantaged. The only requirement of his students was that they showed an eagerness to learn. Confucius only claimed as his merits a tireless effort to learn and an endless patience to teach. Characteristics that others attributed to him included warmth; humility and candor; earnestness; integrity; sympathy; humanism; and, metaphysical sensibility. His demeanor was characterized as alert and cheerful. He was affable but firm. He was never harsh and always polite. Confucius was not presumptive; unrealistically positive; never stubborn; and, never egotistical.

The Confucian Project

The Confucian project refers to the task of creating a fully human community. It is the never-ending work of both personal and social transformation and its success demands dedication. Key are the Confucian virtues and ideals that result in great work. There was intense focus on moral law and the moral person. A key element of Confucianism was learning. Confucius said that in the early years one should learn to live a moral life so that when one passes he will die content.

"Li" is an important element of Confucianism and has a dual meaning: proper comportment and ritual. The manner in which a person behaves in his daily life is crucial to the moral life. Careful attention to daily rituals enhances ones character. The general



principles of Li taught that one should always show respect and reverence. This behavior will make others feel tranquil. Confucius said that if it would be possible to rule a country by Li, or ritual and comportment, nothing more would be necessary. If ritual cannot be applied to community, there is no purpose for it.

Hsiao - being good sons and daughters - is an important element of Li. Although Confucius focused on one's conduct in the world, he felt that the traditional Chinese veneration of ancestral spirits served to enhance one's behavior. Hsiao was the most ideal way to teach people to be loving and kind. Confucius' Golden Rule taught that one should never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.

Confucius believed that the only impact one could have on another stemmed from the moral fiber of the person. He had a love and appreciation of the arts. He understood long before anyone that music "soothes the savage beast" (p. 131). Music went hand in hand with virtue and harmony. A person who is not good has no connection to music.

The Great Learning

Ta Hsueh or "Education for the True Adult" is one of the four books of Confucius. Its core message was that in order to make the world better, one must first transform himself. The Great Learning teaches that one must define his own character, love others and display behavior that aligns with the greatest good. Peace and tranquility will be the rewards of the Great Learning.

Mencius

Mencius was the second most important philosopher of Confucianism. He lived about one hundred years after the Master. He respected the wisdom of the ages and urged the development of human goodness. Mencius also stressed the importance of righteousness in relationships. He advocated the philosophy that man is fundamentally good. While some appear to have more virtue than others, it is only because those who seemingly lack in goodness have not yet cultivated his qualities to their fullest capability. Man's natural tendency is toward goodness. A person who does not display compassion in the end destroys himself. Mencius believed that a society is only as good as the individual. He believed in family and that there is no posterity without one.

Grace Notes

As evidence of the impact of Confucianism on the Chinese mind, family letters from the mid-1700s reflect its teaching. These documents speak to the generosity of spirit and on taking responsibility for one's own behavior as opposed to blaming religious leaders for it. The letters speak of the power of love. If one loves others, then he is worthy of love. It is good to love people and bad to criticize them. The letters also reflect the closeness and support of Chinese families in that it is their tradition to share their wealth. A respect for all living things, a tenet of Confucianism, is also found in the letters.

Chinese proverbs are rich in morality and enjoyed by all people around the world. Here are some examples: "Money sometimes prevents trouble; too much money breeds it;"



"Talk not of your personal success to one who has failed; forget not your failures in your moment of success;" "One should not miss the flavor of being sick, nor miss the experience of being destitute;" "If a person's face does not show a little sadness his thoughts are not deep;" (The proverbs are excerpts from pages 142 and 143).



Chapter 4: Taoism

Chapter 4: Taoism Summary and Analysis

The Chinese believe that we live in a world of contrasts—yin and yang, light and dark, male and female. It follows then that a combination of Confucianism and Taoism would appeal to them. Confucianism focuses on will and rational behavior and Taoism, while not the exact opposite of Confucianism, advocates instinct and creativity. The blending of these two spiritual concepts represents the balance that the Chinese feel comfort in. Both religions entered the Chinese culture around the same time in the sixth century BCE.

Lao Tzu, a legendary figure who was fifty years older than Confucius, is credited with establishing Taoism. Lao Tzu wrote the Taoism Bible and the Tao Te Ching. The Tao Te Ching is a surprisingly brief work and has become an inspiration for people of all walks of life. The second greatest sage associated with Taoism is Chuang Tzu who lived several hundred years after Lao Tzu. There are three types of Taoism: philosophical Taoism, yogic and vitalist Taoism and religious Taoism.

The Tao Te Ching

Lao Tzu, dismayed by his fellow humans, retired from a position as an archivist to seek solitude. He traveled to the high country where he secluded himself for three days. The result was the Tao Te Ching, a volume of 81 brief chapters which has been referred to as, "A testament to humanity's at-home-ness in the universe." (146) It has come to be regarded as the fundamental ideology of Taoist thought. It has been reproduced more than any other work except the Bible. In the Tao Te Ching, the Tao is described as infinite and eternal. Like Buddhism there is a focus on "emptiness." Similar to Confucianism, there is focus on the order of the universe.

Taoism advocates living in harmony and emptying your mind of all thoughts. The quiet, solitude man is most receptive. Fulfillment is not sought by the master; rather, he awaits peace to come to him and he offers no resistance. When he dies, he has nothing and no illusions. Taoism advocates silence, saying, "Those who know don't talk. Those who talk don't know." (p. 152).

The Taoist phrase, "wie wu wie" is translated as "creative letting-be." It is key to practical living and promotes the concept of going with the flow and warns against egoism and aggression. Water is the most revered symbol of the sect which represents the concept of going with the flow. Taoism sees the world in traditional the Chinese concept of light and dark, or ying and yang. It warns about the problems that occur if one fails to understand and embrace those contrasting elements.



Self-knowledge is another important element of Taoism: mastering oneself is true power. Taoism teaches contentment: be content with what you have. One is gifted in life if he possesses simplicity, patience and compassion.

Chuang Tzu

The writings of Chugan Tzu, who lived 200 years after Lao Tzu, were regarded as the second most important in philosophical Taoism to those of Lao Tzu. Chugan wrote that if there was existence it was logical that non-existence would have had to precede it. He considered human emotions a mystery—where do they come from and what brings them forth? Only the truly intelligent can grasp the meaning of the identity of all things.

Relativity was another focus of Chugan's writings. A man has a dream that he is a butterfly. When he awakens, he is a man again but is he a butterfly dreaming that he is a man? He believed that civilization was the downfall of instinct. When instinct was heavily relied upon, life was a state of perfection. But as civilization developed, there were more distractions to cloud the mind. The sages encouraged a quest for knowledge and desire for gain. It was the error of the sages.

The repose of the sage is not ordinary rest; rather, his repose is created in his mind and thus he cannot be distracted. Repose, tranquility and inaction are elements of the universe and the optimum state of Tao. Keeping the world in its simplicity is of ultimate importance.

Grace Notes

Hua Hu Ching was written by Lao Tzu and was a collection of his teachings and wisdom. The basic themes of his writings had similarities to Confucianism and Buddhism. In the book, he wrote of living in the Tao; balance in life; the quiet mind; truth; and, true teachers.



Chapter 5: Judaism

Chapter 5: Judaism Summary and Analysis

Of all the world's major religions, Judaism is thought to be the oldest. It can be dated back 3,200 years to the exodus from Egypt. The Jewish Bible is called the Tanakh stemming from its three consonants - T, N and K which stand for Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim. Torah is defined as law or teaching and refers mainly to the first five books of the Jewish Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Nevi'im focuses on the prophets. Ketuvim referred to the rest of the Bible.

Judaism is based on two concepts: the idea of one God and the idea of human dignity. This melding of ideas is sometimes referred to as "ethical monotheism" (p. 176). Both Christianity and Islam originate from Judaism.

Torah: The Teaching

The Torah represents the teaching aspect of Judaism. The first books of the Bible describe creation by one God. On the sixth day of creation, man was created in God's image. On the seventh day, God had completed creation and he rested. Chapter two of the Bible describes the Garden of Eden and man's downfall in creating sin which led to the advent of death. He told the first man not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad. God declared that it was not good for man to be alone so he created woman. A serpent in the garden assured the woman that she would not die if she ate the fruit of the tree of good and bad. After they ate the fruit, the man and woman were ashamed of the nakedness. For punishment, God told the woman she would suffer pain in childbirth.

Noah's story is described as a conflict between God's offer of moral life and man's failure to respond. The story of Noah also demonstrates the covenant man can make with God. Chapter twelve of the Bible focuses on the origin of the Israel people. Abraham is considered not only the father of Judaism but also of Christianity and Islam. These religions are also referred to as the Abrahamic religions.

God promised Abraham two important things: many descendents and a promised land. Abraham's story is the first appearance of the practice of circumcision. The story of Abraham also reflects the Jewish belief that humans are co-creators of the moral universe which is evidenced by their capacity for compassion and a sense of justice. Abraham appeals to God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He poses the question before God: if the destruction of the city slays even one innocent person, is it justified?

God tested Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. He passed the test by showing he was willing to sacrifice his son for God but he was stopped from doing so by an angel. Muslims claim descent through Abraham's son, Ishmael and Jews claim descent from his other son, Isaac. Isaac's son, Jacob, who was later renamed Israel, is



an important figure. It is Jacob's twelve sons who become the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Moses was the liberator and the exalted prophet of the Jews. God appeared before Moses in the form of a burning bush. Moses was to free his people, the Jews, who were living under oppression under the Egyptian pharaohs. He told Moses to lead them to the land of milk and honey, the promised land. God told Moses to tell the Jews that Ehyey (or "I am") had sent him. The pharaoh did not allow the Jews to go willingly. He was cursed and his first born died. In order to keep their first born from dying, the Jews established Passover—so that death would pass over their own firstborn. God gave instructions for passover rituals to Moses to pass on to his people.

As Moses led the Jews from Egypt, God parted the Red Sea so they could pass through. Once in Sanai, God called Moses to the mountaintop and handed down the Ten Commandments. God promised to keep his covenant with those descendents of Abraham who loved him and kept his commandments. In addition to the Ten Commandments, the covenant involved other laws including helping the poor and caring for the earth. The Jews resisted their natural inclination to deify their heroes and the great liberator Moses remained to them a prophet. Never before or since had God singled out a human on a face-to-face basis.

Nevi'im: The Prophets

The prophets in the Bible initiated a tradition of critiquing the morality of the people—their shortcomings and failures to fulfill the wishes of God. The prophets served as the moral barometers for Israel. They admonished them for, at times, relapsing into idolatry. The Bible was unique at its inception in that it portrayed every person as a child of God and that the common man had as many rights as did a king.

The prophets Isiah and Ezekiel both had visions and callings from God. Isiah beheld a vision of God and then was called to service by Him. Ezekiel, at just thirteen, saw the heavens part allowing him to see God. God dispatched Ezekiel to appeal to the people of Israel who had rebelled against him. Isiah admonished Israel for abandoning its covenant with God. The prophet Nathan chastised King David for his immorality. Hosea criticized Israel for its tendency toward idolatry. The prophets Hosea, Isiah and Amos all decried empty ritual in favor of true religion.

Prophets did more than decry the sins of society. They predicted the coming of the Messiah, his power and the goodness he will bring. Isiah foretold that God would bring peace and justice. Ezekiel promised that suffering will end with the coming of the Messiah.

Ketuvim: Other Writings

Other writings in the Jewish Bible include literary works from various periods of time in early Jewish history. They include Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes.



Psalms is comprised of the largest concentration of poetry in the Bible and its poems are used in Jewish prayer books. The Psalms are not critical of Israel; rather, they portray the emotion of religion. The Psalms fall into three categories: laments, celebration and thanks. An example of a lament is the Psalm, "Why Have you Forsaken Me?" (p. 201). A celebratory Psalm is "Happy Are the Good" (p. 202). A Psalm of gratitude is "The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want," (p. 205), which is also known as the Psalm of David.

Proverbs focus on helping man to survive in the world. Here are several examples: "The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom; With all your getting, get insight." "Pride goes before ruin, Arrogance, before failure" (p. 206).

The Book of Job is considered a literary masterpiece and focuses on religious faith. Job lashes out at God when he loses all ten of his children and is stricken with a terrible disease. He asks God why a blameless man was made to suffer such agony. And, he asked, why were the evil allowed to prosper. There are different interpretations of God's response to Job. Some felt that no man, including Job, could understand God's ways. Others felt that man had to experience God, not require explanations from him. Others felt that there was no divine system of justice and that despite what man experiences, he must be righteous in his faith. Job recanted his laments and his final words were those of resignation.

Ecclesiastes is unique in its lack of a sense of morality, devoutness and repentance. Cynicism and weariness are apparent in some of the passages. "The sun rises and the sun goes down" (p. 210). "Alas, the wise man and the fool die the same death!" (p. 211). The oft-quoted poetry about a purpose for all seasons is included in the book of Ecclesiastes. Another passage places man and beast on the same level: "Men have no advantage over beasts. All go to the same place: all came from the dust, and to the dust all return" (p. 212). There are other cynical passages that declare that it may be better not to have been born; and, that chance, not justice, governs everything.

Oral Torah: The Talmud

Jewish tradition holds that God gave the Israelis two ways of teaching - written and oral. The Talmud is an accumulation of two thousand years of Jewish writings on law, legend and philosophy. The work includes parables about faith and encourages the study of the Torah and the importance of prayer.

Grace Notes

The Shema means "hear" and it is the foundation of Judaism. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." (216) Fundamental to Judaic spirituality is the belief in choosing life: La Chaim! To Life. In this section are writings by Albert Einstein on Judaism; Herman Wouk, on Respect for Life; Elie Wiesel on the Holocaust; and Martin Luther King, Jr. on Freedom.

The "Shabbat" or Sabbath has been reserved by the Jews but many feels that the Sabbath has preserved them. Its orthodoxy requires a twenty-four-hour break each week from normal life to remember their creator.



Chapter 6: Christianity

Chapter 6: Christianity Summary and Analysis

The Life of Jesus

The word "Christ" has its root in the Greek word, "Kristos," which translates to "mashiah" in Hebrew and in English, "messiah." When his small circle of followers began to call Jesus of Nazareth "Christ" they were calling him the messiah, the savior. The Jewish people had long-awaited the coming of the The Messiah. It was a phenomenon that a religion called Christianity that started with such a small sect of believers became the dominant religion throughout the Roman Empire in just three-hundred years. The story of Jesus of Nazareth is told in the New Testament of the Bible and is often referred to as "the greatest story ever told." (227)

The angel Gabriel came from God to Mary in Galilee and told her that she would conceive the son of God. The angels came to Joseph, her husband, to tell him of the miracle that was taking place. The baby was born in a manger and was named Jesus. When Jesus was twelve celebrating Passover with his parents in Jerusalem, he sought out the rabbis in the temple and displayed an uncanny knowledge and understanding of religious matters.

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, the skies opened and God declared that, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (p. 230). Jesus was tempted by the devil but resisted and rejected him. He began to attract followers, the first two of whom were Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Jesus began to perform miracles and gathered more followers. He drove the demons out of a man; made a paralyzed man walk; made a blind man see; and, healed a woman who was bleeding to death. Jesus told the woman, "Your faith has made you well," (p. 232), which underscored the power of belief. Word spread of the works of Jesus and his following grew.

Also gaining popularity was John the Baptist. King Herod considered him to be a threat to his rule and had him executed. It was not a good omen for Jesus. But Jesus already knew the end was near. He took his followers to Jerusalem with him where he knew he would suffer and die. He also knew that he would be raised from his tomb on the third day after his death.

As if to provoke his enemies, Jesus made a triumphant entry into Jerusalem. He challenged the moneylenders in the temple and threw them out. "My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of thieves" (p. 234). Jesus celebrated the Passover one final time at a last supper with his disciples. During the supper, he shared the first communion with his disciples when he referred to the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. Jesus was arrested for blasphemy by the Jewish guard during the night after the supper concluded.



Jesus was tried by Pilate who urged him to deny the claim that he was a god but he refused. Pilate allowed the people to choose between Jesus and a serial murderer named Barabbas. They could choose to allow one to be executed and the other to go free. The frenzied crowd sentenced Jesus to death. The Roman soldiers beat him and tied him to a huge cross. They made him walk lugging the heavy cross with him to Golgotha, or The Place of the Skull, where he was crucified. He ask God to forgive his executioners and promised the others who were being executed with him that they would be in paradise with him. The human part of Jesus asked God why he had forsaken him just as he drew his last breath.

The Bible contains two accounts of the Resurrection. Mark wrote that Mary, Mary Magdalene and other followers of Jesus went to Jesus' tomb. The stone that covered his tomb had been moved and a young man was inside who told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead and they would see him in Galilee. John wrote that Mary Magdalene, who was grieving by the tomb, first saw two angels in white and when she turned, she saw Jesus standing before her. He told her not to weep that he was ascending to be with God. Mary Magdalene told the other disciples that she had seen the Lord and told him what he had revealed to her. Post resurrection, Luke and John wrote of sightings of Jesus.

The Sayings of Jesus

A controversy rages as to which of the sayings attributed to Jesus were actually said by him and which were written by someone else. It's a mystery that will never be solved. But these words have been inspirational to believers for 2,000 years. Jesus' sayings touch on a myriad of subjects. There is focus on the sheer mystery of his being: "I am the bread of life...whoever eats of this bread will live forever." (240) "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (p. 241).

There are sayings about God's love for mankind. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another" (p. 242). "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (p. 242). In his words, he conveyed the promise of eternal life. He spoke of the kingdom of God. He also hinted at an apocalyptic end to the world. Jesus teaches to become as little children. He warns that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born again. In his sayings, there are also many parables. For example, the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Heaven is like the mustard seed which starts out as the smallest seed in the garden but turns out to be the biggest plant. The Parable of the Good Samaritan tells of the Samaritans who were non-Jews and considered heathens by the Jews. By using a Samaritan as a spiritual hero of the parable, Jesus demonstrated God's love for all men despite their ethnicity or country of origin.

Jesus also warns about the dangers of wealth. No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth. He told his disciples that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. Jesus also told of the end of the world. He said there would be warning signs including great suffering



and sunless days. The end of days would be marked by Jesus' return to earth as the Son of Man.

The Life of the Early Church

The Keys of the Kingdom were given to Peter. Jesus told Peter that "on this rock I will build my church" (p. 253). Peter is referred to as the first pope by Catholics. Jesus reappeared to his eleven remaining disciples and told them to spread his word and become missionaries. They witnessed him being lifted up and disappearing behind a cloud. On the day of Pentecost all the people were filled with the Holy Spirit.

The early Christians banded together for fellowship and to learn and pray. All peoples were one in Jesus Christ. There was no distinction between Greek and Jew, free man and slave or male and female. Christ the incarnate was one with the Father. "The Father and I are one" (p. 255). Atonement for sins was a part of the early teaching. Jesus was the lamb of God and atoned for the sins of the believers. The Trinity was taught to early Christians - God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were all one God. Early Christians were persecuted by Jews who felt threatened by their zealotry. The Nicene Creed was a statement of Christian belief and was issued in 325 CE at the first Christian Council at Nicaea by order of emperor Constantine.

Grace Notes

The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945 during an archaeological expedition. Unlike the other gospels, it does not tell the story of Jesus. It is a collection of his sayings. The tone of this gospel is unique and some of the entries even have a mystical quality. Many of the sayings stressed the value of introspection with concepts like notion that the kingdom of God resided within each person. The focus in some of the selections stressed that God was already present in everyone's life.

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and theologian wrote of being impatient for God to enter his heart. Only then, St. Augustine said, would he be full. The mystic St. Hildegard of Bingen claimed that after being struck by a blinding light, she could understand both the Old and New Testaments. St. Francis of Assisi gave up wealth to dedicate himself to helping the poor. St. Thomas Aquinas has had a lasting influence based on his blending of Catholic theology and Greek philosophy.

The writings of other influential Christians are featured including St. Bonaventure, a noted medieval writer; Meister Eckhart, a German priest and Christian mystic; Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic and co-founder of the Carmelite nuns; St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus; and, Thomas Merton 20th noted century Catholic writer.



Chapter 7: Islam

Chapter 7: Islam Summary and Analysis

In the Islam statement, "There is no god but God," (281) it is same god of that of Christians and Jews that is referred to. Muslims feel that the message of God was lost in Judaism and Christianity over the centuries and therefore God selected Muhammad, a devout Arab of the sixth century CE, to correct that failure. The result, after twenty-three years of work, was the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. Although Islam is the newest of the great religions, it is the fastest growing. Muslims do not consider Islam a religion; rather, it is a way of life. The Qur'an along with the hadiths, or traditions of Islam, are the two best sources for Islamic traditions.

The Qur'an: Suras of Mecca and Medina

In the twenty-three years that it took for Muhammad to write the Qur'an, he lived in both Mecca and Medina. The suras or chapters of the Qur'an are often categorized by these two locations. The earlier Mecca suras focused on unity, glory and the power of God. The later Medina suras focused on the social and legal aspects of life.

The Suras of Mecca include the revelations to Muhammad. They focus on the nature of God as creator and judge of man. The Sura of Medina focus on social issues like what man should eat, on the necessity of having wills, fasting, charity and money matters.

The Qur'an: Selections Thematically Arranged

The Qur'an warns that it is not to be corrupted. It is a guide to live righteously and in faith. Muslims stress that the Qur'an came through Muhammad but that God is its author. There are five elements of the Islamic faith: the nature of God (there is one God and none is equal to him); the existence of angels; scriptures, and messengers; the last day and final judgment; and the divine will and providence of God.

There are five pillars of Islam; that is, five religious practices to be adhered to by all Muslims: 1. recitation of the Shahadah (testimony); 2. Zakat (giving to those in need); 3. Salat, or daily prayer; 4. Sawm, for fasting during Ramadan; 5. Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca.

Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, condemns the practice of idolatry. Muslims are taught not to be aggressive people. The lesser jihad is the war with external enemies while the greater jihad is the internal struggle with one's own faith. The Qur'an says that Muslims should fight for God but one's enemies must attack first. God does not love aggressive man. But if attacked, Muslims should slay them wherever they are found. No mandate exists in the Qur'an for forced conversion to Islam. Social issues covered in the Qur'an include communion with believers; being charitable; kindness to parents; rights of women; marriage restrictions; divorce; modesty of men and women; inheritance; economics; and, acts forbidden in Islam.



Islam disagrees with Christianity in that they view Jesus as an apostle not God. They view the trinity as polytheism. And the Muslims do not believe Jesus died on the cross. Islam believes that Judaism has corrupted its own scriptures, broken its covenant with God and pompously declared themselves as the chosen people.

Hadith: Sayings and Traditional Accounts of the Prophet

A'ishah (Muhammad's second wife) described how God first came to Muhammad to become the Messenger of Allah while he slept. Later, he secluded himself in a cave so that he would not be disturbed while he received God's word. Muhammad said that sometimes the word of Allah comes to him like ringing bells and sometimes an angel comes to him with Allah's words. In the hadith qudsi, Allah speaks in the first person and provides a message that is not in the Qur'an. An example of that is the hadith that says, in Allah's voice, "Verily. My mercy taketh precedence over my Wrath." (314)

The traditional hadiths focus on remembering God, kindness, the Golden Rule, helping the needy, and how the perfect Muslim is defined. The hadith that addresses the "ultimate jihad" describes it as the battle for the conquest of self.

Hadiths that cover personal behavior include the many ways to be charitable, speaking in a respectable way and always telling the truth. The hadiths advocate nonviolence, traditional marriage, rights for women, abstinence and kindness to animals. Respect for the Qur'an is an important hadith. There are also hadiths that address the evils of envy and greed and the blessings of learning.

Grace Notes:

Sufis are the Islamic mystics. While Muslims believe in one God, Sufis believe that there is only God. One mystic, Abu-Yazid Al-Bistami, wrote *The Great Paradox* which states that by seeking God, one can never find Him but only seekers can find Him. Al-Hallaj, a sufi of Baghdad, declared that he and God were one. One of this mystic's statements was, "I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart. I said: Who art Thou? He answered: Thou." For this blasphemy, he was crucified. Abu Sa'id Ibn Abi'l Khayr, a Persian mystic, said that the path to God is God. Ibn 'Arabi, a Spanish born Sufi and one of the greatest mystics, said that he practiced the religion of love.

Malcolm X was once a thief, drug dealer and pimp. He found a new life as a member of the Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam. He became disenchanted with the black separatist policy of the Black Muslims and made a pilgrimage to Mecca and converted to orthodox Islam. In a 1964 letter, he praised the color-blind Muslim solidarity that he experienced.



Chapter 8: Primal Religions

Chapter 8: Primal Religions Summary and Analysis

Since the beginning of mankind there has been an estimated 100,000 different religions. Most existed in pre-literature times and have since disappeared. There is no written history of these religions. All that is known about them has been revealed by anthropologists.

Beginnings

Many of the myths focused on the mysteries of creation. The Maori in New Zealand maintained that the Supreme Io created the world. The Brotherhood of Beast and Man in Bushongo, Central Africa, held that the world was created from a regurgitation by Bumba. The Pawnee Indians of North America believed that Mother Corn grew the first human beings from the earth. A myth from Haruro, South America, Kuma, the Mother, was the source of all life. The Hopi Indians of North America had hope and faith in nature but believed that the deterioration of the world was due to human folly.

Returning to the Sacred Realm

Many primal religions had sacred rituals that were tied to their belief in the beginnings of creation. The Dayak in Borneo had rituals to make life sacred. The Yami in Indonesia had an outbursting ritual that returned them to the time of their origin.

The Spirit-Filled World

In primordial religions, there was belief in spirits who were present in the world.

The Shaman

The shaman was a person who could journey outside himself to visit other worlds and share the knowledge he learns on his travel with his community. Shamans appeared in the myths of Siberian Eskimos, in tribes in central Australia, and in Indian tribes of North America.

The Sacred Earth

Many primal religions were based on the tribe's geographic location. The bones of ancestors were sacred since it was believed that the spirits that belonged to the skeleton was not far away. Therefore, these primal religions were limited to specific terrain and could not be exported to other regions. The earth was considered holy because it was the source of life.

The Winnebago Indians and the Navaho Indians both of North America had a strong reverence for the earth. They praised nature and the earth for its beauty and peace-



giving qualities. The Dayak of Borneo worshiped the sacred land. A Balinese priest welcomed Jesus but he would not be allowed to supersede their traditional gods because those gods owned the land and were there first. The American Sioux Indians viewed the land as their ancestor. The Pawnee also revered the land and called it Mother Earth.

Grace Notes

Black Elk was a holy man of the Sioux nation. He taught that the Great Spirit was everywhere and knew what was in everyone's mind and heart. The story of the jumping mouse is a Native American mythical story of transformation and spirituality.



Characters

Jesus Christ

Jesus of Nazareth is the basis for Christianity. Jesus' followers took the Greek word, "Kristos" which means savior or messiah, and began referring to their Lord and Master as Jesus Christ. Mary of Galilee was visited by an angel from God and was told she would conceive the son of God. The baby was born in a manger in Bethlehem and was named Jesus. He showed signs very early in life that he was a spiritual leader. At twelve years of age, he met with the rabbis in the temple in Jerusalem and amazed the holy men with his wisdom and his knowledge of God.

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. After the ritual, the skies opened up and God declared that Jesus was his son and that he was well pleased in him. Jesus began to attract followers the first of whom were Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Jesus performed many miracles—he healed the sick and the blind and drove demons out of sinners. As word spread of his works and powers, so did the number of his followers. Three hundred years after Christianity was first established, it had become the most dominant religion in the entire Roman Empire.

Jesus knew that his impending end was part of God's plan. However, the human side of Jesus found his passing difficult and painful. After his death, as he had foretold, he rose and was resurrected from death. He rose into the skies to be with God. He sacrificed his life for the sins of man.

Buddha

Siddhartha established the religion of Buddhism. It emerged as a major religion some 2,600 years ago in ancient India. Siddhartha came to be known as the Awakened One or Buddha. The religious leader's father was Shuddhodana who was a king of the Shakyas. Legend holds that Buddha was born from his mother's side. That she experienced absolutely no pain from the birth attaches a mystical aura to Buddha from the very first day. Also at birth, Buddha had a full awareness and conveyed the message that his birth would translate to the benefit of mankind. A seer who came to see him at birth predicted the huge influence he would have on the morality of the people and that he would teach them from the Dharma or the Way of Truth.

As Buddha matured, he became disillusioned with his life. The reality of old age, disease and death that all men were destined for pained him. He withdrew to his solitude and gained insight and freedom from the normal pursuits of life. After observing a homeless man who had nothing, he gave up his opulent life-style and position so he too could become homeless and attain salvation. He studied under two yogis and endured years of fasting and solitude and during that time resisted all temptations. Buddha became a religious leader and a teacher and a joyful individual who had found



true happiness. His teachings and beliefs eventually led to the establishment of Buddhism.

Confucius

Confucius was unlike most religious leaders in that he was not a prophet or spiritual hero. Instead, he was an educator. He was dedicated to being both a student and a teacher. His moralistic truisms are familiar to everyone around the world.

Mohammad

Mohammad was the messenger of God. He went into seclusion for 23 years to receive the word of God and write the Qur'an.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist, who had baptized Jesus, was considered by King Herod to be a threat to his rule. To eliminate that threat by having him crucified.

Simon Peter and Andrew

Simon Peter and Andrew were Jesus' first followers. They went on to become two of Jesus' twelve disciples. They were drawn to Jesus by the miracles he performed and his compassionate nature.

Lao Tzu

Lao Tzu is credited with establishing Taoism. Lao Tzu wrote the Taoism Bible and the Tao Te Ching.

Abraham

God promised Abraham that he would have many descendents and that the Jews would have a promised land. Abraham was a moral man who appealed to an angry God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Black Elk

Black Elk was a holy man of the Sioux nation. He taught that the Great Spirit was everywhere and knew what was in everyone's mind and heart.

The Divine Lord Krishna and Arjuna

There is a historic battle between two clans in which the warrior Arjuna seeks help from the Divine Lord Krishna. This is part of Hindu legend.



Objects/Places

The Rig-Veda

The Rig-Veda is the most important of the four Veda collections which features, Indra, the most charismatic of the Hindu gods.

The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is held in the highest esteem by the Hindus. This work is the most exalted of all of the Hindu scriptures. It is the most popular book in Hindu literature and it is the perfect representation of both the Vedas and the Upanishads.

The Dharma

Buddha or the Awakened One taught the concepts of Buddhism from the Dharma which was also known as the Way of Truth.

The Four Books of Confucius

The most revered writing of Confucianism is The Four Books of Confucius which include: The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Great Harmony, the Mencius (the teachings of Confucius' disciple, Mencius) and the Analects which contain sayings and observations by Confucius.

Taoism Holy Writings

Lao Tzu, who established Taoism, wrote the Taoism Bible and the Tao Te Ching. The Tao Te Ching has become an inspirational read for people of all walks of life of all religious affiliations.

The Jewish Bible

The Jewish Bible is called the Tanakh and is comprised of the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim. The Torah is defined as law or teaching and refers mainly to the first five books of the Jewish Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Nevi'im focuses on the prophets. Ketuvim referred to the rest of the Bible's Old Testament.



The New Testament

The New Testament tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth. It is often referred to as the greatest story ever told was added to the Jewish Bible. Christians recognize both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The Jews recognize only the Old Testament.

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed was a statement of Christian belief and was issued in 325 CE at the first Christian Council at Nicaea by order of emperor Constantine.

The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945 during an archaeological dig. It is different than the other gospels because it does not tell the story of Jesus; rather, it is a collection of his sayings.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an is the Holy Book of Islam. It was written by God as told to his messenger, Muhammad.

Themes

Fundamental Similarities in Religion

Despite the cultures in which the seven major religions and the 100,000 primal religions were created and evolved there are similarities among all the religions. There is normally an inspired leader who is intelligent and curious about creation and spirituality. In most cases, the leader is willing to sacrifice himself and in some cases, his riches, in order to seek the truth.

There are many examples of the sacrifice that religious leaders have made for their religions. Buddha was born a wealthy and prestigious prince. But he gave up everything and became homeless in order that he could clear his mind of normal distractions and seek the truth and achieve salvation. The truth is generally interpreted as the way that God wants man to live. Further, once a man learns the truth and follows it, it is a sure path to salvation. Jesus Christ, of course, gave up his life for the sake of mankind. Mohammad, the messenger of God, lived in solitude for twenty-three years while he received the word of God and wrote the Qur'an.

Most religions have an incentive for a man to lead a moral and spiritual life. The curiosity that compels man to learn about his creator is driven, at least in part, by the prospect of death. It is not a satisfactory notion that man lives and then dies and that there's nothing more. For man to be compelled to live the way God ordains he should, the promise of salvation and a better afterlife is an incentive for man to follow God's will. The promise of rewards after death or that the possibility that there is no real death and only life everlasting provides the obedient man an incentive to live a life of sacrifice and denial. He can withstand the demanding standards he must adhere to if a better life awaits him after his life on earth ends. The good person will be rewarded with eternal life while the sinner will be punished for his disobedience by ending up in hell and damned for eternity.

The Creator

As diverse the cultures and ideologies of the adherents of the seven major religions are and no matter the time of span between the establishments of them, they all have a foundational similarity that is undeniable. Man was blessed with intelligence and curiosity which caused him, even very early man, to question how it all came to be. They questioned how they and the animals and the world and the universe had all been created. Stemming from that uncertainty man devised a way, through his intelligence, to provide an answer to the basic question that still puzzles modern scientists and in their minds remains unanswered in an academic sense.

The fundamental similarity between all religions including the primal ones was that the universe and the world and all its living creatures were the result of the work of a creator



who was more intelligent and more powerful than man. Since man was well aware that he could not create a living creature no less a star or planet, the only logical assumption was that whoever created everything could not have been men who preceded him. It was a supernatural conclusion to which man arrived. It was proof by deduction. There was nothing on earth that could prove that someone more powerful created it or even existed; therefore, this creator had to be other-worldly.

From those natural and logical conclusions also came the realization that this creator was someone who must be feared. From that fear came a tradition of rituals and praise by early man to honor and stay in the good graces of this unknown and invisible though mighty entity. The natural evolution from these rituals was the worshiping of this being. Man has a natural and innate compassion and fairness. He assigned those same qualities to the mysterious creator and came to the conclusion that God judged man by them.

Religious Evolution

Just like social movements of any kind, religions often change and evolve over time, when they are exported to another culture or when new leaders emerge. When Hinduism was first established, there was no mention in the sacred writings or vedas of reincarnation. However, a thousand years later—perhaps through changes in ideology or societal demands. Reincarnation had become an important and integral part of the religion.

The Buddhism established by Buddha himself was changed when it was exported to Japan where Zen Buddhism had different focuses than the original. Also emerging from the original religion were Tibetan Buddhism and Devotional Buddhism which were new forms of the religion. In China Taoism and Confucianism surfaced about the same time in China and a merging of the two religions took place.

Judaism is the world's oldest known religion to have survived to modern times. The Torah is defined as law or teaching and refers mainly to the first five books of the Jewish Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Ketuvim referred to the rest of the Bible's Old Testament. Jesus of Nazareth was considered the Messiah and the Son of the Living God by his followers, but was not recognized as such under Jewish Laws. Eventually, the New Testament which told the story of Jesus of Nazareth was added to the Jewish Bible. The New Testament is not recognized by the Jews who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Islam is the newest of the world's major religions and it is the fastest growing. Islam is an off-shoot of Judaism and emerged when there was disagreement with both Judaism and Christianity, The Muslims thought that the Jews had corrupted their own holy scripts and were arrogant in naming themselves as his chosen people. The Muslims did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God and did not believe that he was crucified. According to Muslim belief, God was angered at the Jews and selected Muhammad as

his messenger. Over a period of twenty-three years, Muhammad received the word of God directly from him and at God's direction wrote the Qur'an from his word.



Style

Perspective

"The World's Wisdom - Sacred Texts of the World's Religions," by Philip Novak is written in the third-person narrative. The book is a collection of the history and doctrines of the seven largest religions that have survived to modern times. There is no sign of bias in Novak's writing and he makes no laudatory or disparaging comments about any of the religions.

Novak is a professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Dominican College in San Rafael, California. As such, he had the credentials and was well-qualified as an expert in the field of religion and religious history to write this thorough and detailed work. The book has a text-book quality and despite the myriad of details that it contains, the author wrote with enough clarity for the reader to grasp the main thrust of each account.

In the preface, the author explains that the book was written in part because he needed a one-volume anthology to replace the disorganized and unmanageable papers that he used in teaching his classes. After his search for such a book was futile, Novak felt he was left with no option other than to write one himself. In writing this anthology, he focused on three criteria in the composition of the work: inspirational power, instructional value, and linkage to an instructor's favorite, "The World's Religions" by Huston Smith.

Tone

"The World's Wisdom - Sacred Texts of the World's Religions," by Philip Novak, is written in a scholarly tone and is intended and designed to teach and enlighten the reader about the seven major religions of the world. The book describes the history of each religion, its origin and originators and its doctrines. It also follows the evolution of the religions and the changes they underwent over the course of the centuries and the changes made to them when exported to new cultures.

For example, Buddhism was established first in India and then was exported to Japan where it was transformed into Zen Buddhism. There are also Tibetan Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism which vary from the originally established religion. Both Christianity and Islam developed from Judaism. The author has an unbiased approach to his descriptions about the religions and shows no favoritism to one religion over the other.

Novak is a professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Dominican College in San Rafael, California. The book is laid out in a clear and logical manner which is helpful in grasping the vast amount of facts and details that are presented in this work. It is obvious that the author's credentials allowed for the satisfactory manner in which the book was written and presented.



Structure

"The World's Wisdom - Sacred Texts of the World's Religions," by Philip Novak, is separated into eight rather lengthy chapters, each of which are separated into sub-categories.

Chapter One: Hinduism has four sub-categories; Chapter Two: Buddhism has seven sub-categories; Chapter Three: Confucianism has five sub-categories; Chapter Four: Taoism has three sub-categories; Chapter Five: Judaism has five sub-categories; Chapter Six: Christianity has four sub-categories; Chapter Seven: Islam has four sub-categories; and, Chapter Eight: Primal Religions has six sub-categories. The last sub-category in each of the chapters is entitled, "Grace Notes," which is a section that includes some miscellaneous writings or historical documentation about the main subject of the chapter.

Some of the text is accompanied by footnotes which provide further detail about the subject matter. Each of the eight chapters is organized in a chronological manner which provides an historical account of the origin and evolution of each religion. The author brings clarity to the evolution of the various religions as they changed over time, from being exported to new cultures or when new leaders emerged.

There is a Preface that describes the author's credentials and inspiration for writing the book. There is a foreword by Huston Smith that precedes the book, which is also dedicated to Huston. Following the last chapter are the following supporting sections: "Index of Texts," "Endnotes," and "Acknowledgments."



Quotes

"[Indra] is credited both with having created the world by slaying a cosmic serpent and thus releasing the life-giving, monsoon-bringer waters" (Chapter 1, p. 2).

"King Varuna sees through all that is between heaven and earth, and all that is beyond. He has counted the winking of men's eyes" (Chapter 1, p. 6).

"Even as a mirror of gold, covered by dust, when cleaned well shines again in full splendor, when a man has seen the Truth of the Spirit he is one with him, the aim of his life is fulfilled and he is ever beyond sorrow" (Chapter 1, p. 19).

"Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead. You should not grieve for what is unavoidable" (Chapter 1, p. 28).

"There is Buddha for those who don't know what he is, really. There is no Buddha for those who know what he is, really" (Chapter 2, p. 103).

"Music illustrates the primordial forces of nature, while li reflects the products of the creation. Heaven represents the principle of eternal motion, with Earth represents the principle of remaining still, and these two principles of motion and rest permeate life between Heaven and Earth" (Chapter 3, p. 132).

"The Chinese mind has long beheld the universe as a living process governed by the interplay of opposites." (Chapter 4, page 145)

"Viewed from the standpoint of Tao, a beam and a pillar are identical. So are ugliness and beauty, greatness, wickedness, perverseness and strangeness. Nothing is subject either to construction or to destruction, for these conditions are brought together into one. (Chapter 4, page 165)

"All things are wearisome; no man can speak of them all. What has happened will happen again, and what has been done will be done again, and there is nothing new under the sun" (Chapter 5, p. 210).

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? (Chapter 6, p. 250).

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Chapter 6, p. 254).

"This book [the Qur'an] is not to be doubted. It is a guide for the righteous, who have faith in the unseen and are steadfast in prayer" (Chapter 7, p. 287).



Topics for Discussion

What are the seven major religions on the world? Which one is the newest religion? Which is the fastest growing?

How are Buddhism and Confucianism alike? What similarities are there in Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism?

How are Judaism and Christianity alike? What is the major difference between them? What Holy Book do the two religions share, at least in part?

How is Islam like Christianity and Judaism? What complaint do Muslims have against Christianity? What complaint do Muslims have against Judaism?

How many religions have existed since the beginning of mankind? Why does modern man not know much about these religions?

What are the differences between Mahayana Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism?

What similarities are there in all religions? What do organized religions tell us about mankind?