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# **WORLD RELIGIONS**

*h.f.* **fullmann**

# HINDUISM OR BRAHMANISM

Hinduism is the most diverse of all the major religions and comprises almost all religious forms of expression known to humankind — from the worship of nature gods, to polytheism, to a philosophically sophisticated monotheism and the belief in a universal law (dharma). It is closely interconnected with the social order (caste system) and requires distinctive ritual sacrifices. It does not prescribe any universally binding metaphysical or religious views, but emphasizes the working of the universal law, which is also understood in a moral sense. The theory of retribution inherent in the teaching on karma, with its cycle of re-births and world eras (yugas), is characteristic of Hinduism.

## *The Wheel of Life*

On the Black Pagoda in Konarak The wheel is the central symbol in Hinduism, and represents the course of the cosmos with its cycles of birth and death, coming into being, maturing, decay, dissolution and re-emergence that characterize all living things. It is also a symbol for the cycle of the four Hindu world eras (yugas), which every world goes through until it sinks into darkness and comes into being again. The turning of the wheel stands for the continuity and unalterability of cosmic events. Wisdom in Hinduism means insight into this cyclical change of the universe that never ends and is thought of as a biological event. The sun temple at Konarak was in the shape of a sun chariot, a form dating back to the worship of the Vedic sun god Surya, who was thought to be the driver of the sun chariot and thus one of the architects of the cosmic cycles.

## BASIC CONCEPT AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

### The “Eternal Religion”

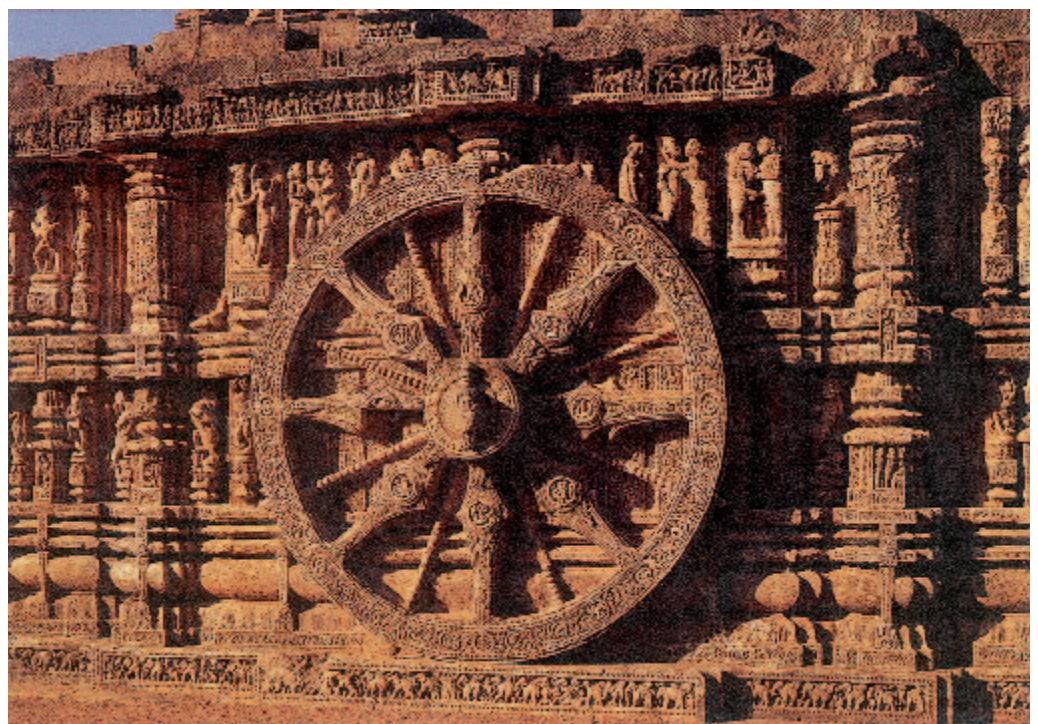
The indigenous religion of India is known as Brahmanism or Hinduism. The two terms are often used synonymously although they have different origins. “Brahmanism” is the name the religion gives itself; the word is derived from the Indian priest or Brahman caste (Sanskrit: brahmana) and refers generally to those Indians who recognise the Brahmans and their teaching as their religion. The word “Hinduism” was originally a foreign term coined by the Muslims who were advancing into India. Derived from the River Indus, it was used to designate all Indians who were not Muslims. The term “Brahmanism” has been in use since around 1000 B.C. when the Brahman priest caste first attained their prime status, while Hinduism can be traced back further to the ancient Indian autochthonous religion, which was essentially nature worship, and was later systematised and reformed by the Brahman caste.

What is striking about Hinduism is the rich diversity of both its religious practices and its social life: it is extremely creative and adaptable. The bond holding it together is neither a founder nor a sacred book, but the continuity of development from ancient times to the present day. For this reason the Hindus themselves call their faith the “Eternal Religion”

(sanatana dharma) and a central feature of it is the fact that at different times wise men and religious teachers appear and proclaim their teachings in different forms.

Helmuth von Glasenapp talks of three distinctive features of Hinduism. It is a religion that has “developed” not one which has been founded, it has no fixed dogma, and it is a specifically Indian phenomenon. The Hindus believe in the eternity of a world that is constantly renewing itself; they therefore do not think of the world as having an absolute beginning, nor of there being a unique process in history for salvation. There is no particular person as a saviour at the centre of Hinduism, which is why different systems of thoughts and different cults have essentially equal rights and are considered equally true.

The believer can have a personal creator God or can instead adhere to the idea of a non-personal law governing the world. The paths to salvation are similarly many and varied. The faith is nevertheless not completely arbitrary, but revolves around a number of specific philosophies: the idea of the cosmos as an ordered whole ruled by a universal law (dharma), the earthly representation of this order by a strictly hierarchical caste system and its purity laws, the belief in cosmic periods and world eras (calpas) with the world constantly ending and beginning again, and the belief that this natural world order also acts as a moral order.





1000 A.D.): the samhitas (collections) concerned with Vishnu, the agamas (traditions) concerned with Shiva and above all the tantras (literally: weaving), which are texts about the regulations of religion, with a decidedly esoteric character. However, the core message of Hinduism is found in the middle part of the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita and the Bhagavata Purana.

## THE TEACHING

### The Cosmos as an Ordered Whole: the Caste System as a Social Order

For Hinduism the cosmos is an ordered whole, on both macro and micro levels. It is ruled by the law of the world (dharma) which at the same time acts as a natural and moral order. The principle of this order is that all living things are strictly different from one another from the moment of birth, and as a consequence of this have different tasks, obligations, rights and abilities. In human beings there are different classes (castes) that are strictly separated from one another. The dharma is the one, eternal law of the world for all living things, but it is expressed differently for the different castes and stages of life (ashramas), which means that special religious and ritual rules are needed for the individual castes. The orthodox caste rules affect all areas of daily life and are expressed in commandments prescribing clear separation, affecting, for example, meals and marriages. The caste system is peculiar to Hinduism and is very difficult for other religions and philosophies to understand and accept.

At the top of the caste hierarchy is the priesthood, the caste of the Brahmans, who particularly emphasise the purity law, concern themselves almost exclusively with spiritual things and, through performing rituals and sacrifices, are "closest" to the gods. The second class is the warrior caste (kshatriya), who are charged with protecting the social order. Rulers and kings are normally from this class. As the "military class," they originally lived on the taxes and levies they gathered from the lower classes. The third class is made up of farmers and herdsmen, business people and traders (vaisyas); they are the actual "nourishing class." These three top castes, formed after the Aryan expansion, by virtue of belonging to the higher castes, have experienced in a certain sense



a social rebirth and are therefore called the "twice-born." For orthodox Hinduism these upper castes are the only ones with the right to study the sacred Vedas.

The lower castes are forever separate from these higher castes. The fourth class, the "sudras," are workers and artisans of the "lower" occupations whose duty is to serve the upper classes. There are further strict gradations according to purity. Thus, for example, weavers and potters are higher than laundry people, butchers, fishermen or leather tanners. The lowest group, the fifth class, is known as "pancamas," "parias" or "untouchables" (asprishyas). In traditional Indian society they often live a miserable existence and do "unclean" or "dishonest" work such as sweeping streets, cleaning toilets or are members of the various begging and thieving castes. The two lower classes were created largely by the Aryans from the original Indian population they overthrew.

Each of the five castes is broken down into numerous internal sub-divisions, so that

### *Temple of Minakshi in Madurai*

India's temples display very rich ornamentation, particularly on their facades and roofs. All available surfaces are covered with relief work depicting the gods and goddesses, demons and heroes, animals, plants and fantastic creatures. Each temple constitutes its own cosmos of highly turbulent, lively scenes, bursting with activity. The two huge gate-towers (gopuras) of the Temple of Minakshi in Madurai are also covered with thousands of stucco figures in magnificent colours. The temple complex in Madurai, with its numerous halls and courtyards, was completed in the 17th century. The temple is one of Hinduism's most important centres of pilgrimage and is visited by around 10,000 believers each day. Tradition has it that Shiva married Parvati here. The temple complex, which is mainly covered, extend over six hectares. The interiors are full of festively decorated images of gods and altars at which people constantly pray and offer sacrifices.



# BUDDHISM

The term Buddhism comes from the Sanskrit word "buddh" (to awaken) and means the awakening out of the darkness of ignorance into the light of the teaching. Original Buddhism played down the figure of the Buddha Gautama, who did not move into center-stage until later, but emphasized instead the importance of gaining knowledge by virtue of one's own strength, independent of divine revelation. This came about principally through meditation on the "Four Noble Truths," which bring about inner serenity and extinguish belief in one's own individuality. Buddhism dissolves all persistent substances into non-fixed aggregates of existence and thus stresses the impermanence of all earthly things. Later teachings made great compromises to popular faith and magical healing practices, and in this way a belief in gods, Buddhas and helpful beings like Bodhisattvas, who help others to attain salvation, gained great significance.

## *Buddha with the Wheel of Teaching*

Relief, Black Pagoda, 936/941, Fuzhou, China

The wheel is the symbol most frequently used in Buddhist imagery and iconography. It symbolizes the never-ending cycle of the flow of consciousness of each human being through the six realms of existence (rebirth, wheel of life) and the teachings of the historical Buddha Gautama. After Gautama, through meditation, had recognized the Eightfold Path that leads to deliverance from the cycle of life (Wheel of the Law) he set the "Wheel of Teaching" in motion by passing on his message. Depictions of the Buddha meditating in the lotus position refer to the buddha power nature, manifested in history in the person of Gautama.

## THE ORIGINAL TEACHINGS

### Human Knowledge and Eternal Truth

The human being, the individual, is thought of in Buddhism as a not-self (anatta), that is as something without a soul and without essence. The ego, therefore, is seen as a mere "accumulation" of elements of existence (dhammas). These dhammas determining the individual are categorized into five groups or factors (khandhas): a) body, senses, physical form (rupa); b) feeling (vedana); c) perceptions and ideas (samjna); d) driving forces (sankhara); e) consciousness (vijnana). These khandhas together constitute individuality.

Buddhism seeks to eliminate the false belief in individuality expressed typically in phrases such as "I am," "I have," "mine" (possession) or any talk of a "self." Buddhist teaching therefore breaks down the acts of perceiving or feeling, which in common parlance are assumed to have a soul or person as subject, into a series of impersonal processes. For example, "I perceive" would be replaced by: "a process of perception in the five groups is taking place."

Buddhism recognizes different ways and methods of de-individualisation, based ultimately on the insight that life means suffering and is painful, since it is subject to illness, ageing and death. Characteristics both of the individual and of the world are impermanence, suffering and non-selfhood. Neither humans, nor the world as we experience it, is a coherent whole, but are a combination of individual components that are constantly coming together, dis-

solving and coming together again. The individual therefore does not possess an immortal soul (self) that continues to exist unchanged when the body decays.

The individual and his worlds are subject to a constant process of becoming and dying. The individual constituents of this process (dhammas) are, however, subject to a strict set of laws, since there is a moral law of the world (also known as dharma) and all the individual constituents are merely different forms of expression of this one law of the world. That is why the individual aggregates are also called dhammas; there are many of these, and they are thought of as forces, even though they have a material nature. The process by which they combine and co-operate gives an appearance of coherence; for instance in humans the illusion of a "self" is created. The constant flow of these aggregates is not interrupted, even by death. They endure beyond the death of the specific "individual" and form new combinations to create the basis for the existence of a new "individual." In Buddhism (more clearly than in Hinduism) this process must be called rebirth, rather than the migration of souls, because Buddhism does not assume the existence of a soul in the classical sense.

Buddha explains this position in his teaching on "Dependent Origination" which, transposed to Western thought, is also known as "Conditioned Arising" or the "Formula of Causal Connection." In brief, it says that the aggregates are mutually dependent on and determine one another. The teaching names 12 links in the chain of aggregates (dhammas), in which links 1 and 2 are the dhammas which, in a past form of existence, constitute the prerequisite for a new "individual" to come into being in the present time (= past), links 3 to 10 explain the new "individual's" process of becoming (links 3 to 5) and the forces that are created in him (links 6 to 10 = present), while links 11 and 12 determine the aggregates of a future existence (= future).

The idea of the 12 conditioning links may be represented as follows:

Out of the precondition of ignorance (1) the driving forces (2) arise, out of the driving forces a consciousness (3) arises, out of consciousness a spiritual and physical individuality (4) arises, through this individuality the six senses (5) come into being, through the senses touch



## GOD AND HIS PEOPLE: REVELATION AND THE COVENANT

### The Covenant Tradition

In Judaism, the creation of the world serves as a prelude to the covenant God made with humankind, beginning with Abraham and the patriarchs. God enters into a relationship with the people he has created, as a personal partner in dialogue, and announces his real presence (Yahveh: "I am who I am"). The covenant is understood in very pro-active terms in Judaism: people are not simply passive objects of divine grace or divine action, but are called to responsibility and partnership, having to work at their salvation by the way they leads their lives. Creation thus seems to be designed around the two poles of God and mankind. This tradition of dialogue, on which the covenant is based, leads to an awareness of repeated encounters between God and man throughout history, requiring no intermediary figures to act as special advocates before God (such as Jesus in Christianity or Mohammed in Islam). God made the covenant with Abraham as the head of a family, (Genesis 17:1-8) and the Jewish people see themselves as the descendants of Abraham. God's covenant with Moses is more broadly defined, and includes the entire people of Israel (Exodus 6:2-8). In so far as Noah, as sole survivor of the flood, is the father of all mankind, however, the covenant is ultimately between God and all people, which means that all who follow the law will find salvation. The covenant is regarded as unbreakable, even though man often enough fails to meet God's requirements. Since God in effect "gave some-

thing in advance" and led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, Jews believe that their faith will be judged more severely and that they will be punished more severely than other people for transgressions. Thus, the covenant is both a reward for the faith of their forefathers – particularly Abraham and his descendants – and an honor, but it is also a burden and an obligation.

### The Chosen People

Since Biblical times, the reference to the "chosen people" has been a mystery – particularly for Jews themselves, because this state of being chosen cannot be ascribed to any innate merits of the people of Israel, but solely to the unfathomable will of God. As with the tradition of the covenant, being a chosen people has to be seen in its two aspects: first, that God as creator of all things is the creator and father of all people; but, second, as the God of the Hebrew Bible (or to Christians, the Old Testament), is the God of one people, namely Israel, whom he has freely chosen.

The state of being chosen is seen as being "in a relationship of trust" with God, and does not imply any kind of national superiority, but rather Israel's particular obligation to fulfil God's commandments. Thus the misfortunes that the Jews suffered during the time of exile (from 70 A.D. onwards), and still suffer, is linked in Jewish tradition to the idea of being chosen. The people of Israel have not sinned any more than other people, but are punished more severely for transgressions. Unlike in Christianity, guilt is seen not in terms of original sin but as a historical failure.

## JUDAISM

A fundamental part of Judaism, to which people belong both by descent or by choice, is the acknowledgement of the covenant of the One God (Yahveh) with humankind, whom he created and to whom he gave his commandments. The original covenant with Abraham and then Noah was elaborated by Moses, to whom God gave the essential teachings of Judaism and the law in the form of the Torah. For Jews, being the chosen people implies a particular obligation to follow God's commandments. God has repeatedly spoken to humankind through the prophets. The connection in dialogue between God and his people runs through daily life, and is reflected in the religious cycle of festivals in the Jewish year. It has also provided comfort and strength in the various experiences and sufferings that Jews have had to endure throughout the course of history. The Jewish view of history is characterized by a notable messianism, and by the divine promise of the Holy Land.

### *The animals leave Noah's Ark* Coloured copper engraving, 17th century

The first book of the Bible tells the story of the flood, which God sent over the earth as a punishment for people's disobedience. God ordered Noah to build an ark for himself and his family and to take at least two of all other creatures with him on his journey. After the flood and the salvation, a new covenant, signified by the rainbow, was made between God and humankind. This covenant guarantees, through God's pledge, the continuation and order of creation. Thus, humankind is in a sense given the chance to make a new beginning. This is not, however, a re-establishment of the state of paradise, but a starting point for history.





# CHRISTIANITY

As the world religion with the greatest number of adherents, Christianity, through its extensive missionary work, has spread across all continents. Its concept of God is rooted in Judaism, but the centre of its faith is Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, and his unique act of salvation. Christianity's trinitarian concept of God was, however, only formulated after long debates. The Christian church was formed after the Pentecost experience of the apostles. During the Middle Ages, the church attained an unprecedented position of power – both spiritual and secular – mainly through the institution of the Roman papacy. The Reformation led to an inner renewal of the religion, but also to a schism within the Christian church. Today the stronger self-confidence of non-European Christianity is beginning to have a more marked influence.

## *Adoration of the Kings*

Rogier van der Weyden, c. 1455  
Central panel of the altar of the three kings, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, detail

In line with the early Christian community's conviction that Jesus had a divine mission, even the oldest of New Testament records re-interpret the birth of the Saviour as a supernatural mystical event (virgin birth), and transform it into a miracle. Central elements of the Christian message were integrated into the birth legend: Jesus's turning to the poor and disempowered (circumstances of the birth, stable, manger); annunciation and witness of the community (annunciation to the shepherds); the message's claim to universality (adoration of the Magi); and persecution (infanticide in Bethlehem).

With the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the late Middle Ages, the "event at Bethlehem" became a central motif in Christian art.

## THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD

### God the Father

In its concept of God, and particularly the idea of God the Father, Christianity has a great deal in common with Judaism (and Islam), partly due to the fact that the Hebrew Bible was incorporated into the canon of Christian scriptures as the Old Testament (OT). God revealed Himself and described himself ("I am who I am"). He is the creator of all things, including humankind, with whom he has made a covenant. He announced his commandments to humankind, and is the Lord of history and of judgement.

However, where Christianity differs from Judaism is that in the New Testament (NT) God the Father repeatedly speaks of Jesus Christ as his son (e.g. Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22). Furthermore, when he is dying on the cross, Jesus commits his spirit into the hands of the Father, and with his resurrection proves that the Father is the God of life. St John's Gospel and the apostle Paul, in particular, deal with aspects of God's revelation of himself, and link God the Father with Christology.

Christian thinkers, particularly during the patristic age and from the Middle Ages through early modernity, have wrestled with many problematic issues: God the Father who was in the beginning, the questions raised by the oneness of God (monotheism despite Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as further aspects of the divine),

God's omniscience and whether he predetermines all events (predestination), and God's omnipotence. Another debate is the paradox of theodicy, that is, how and to what extent a good and just and omnipotent God is responsible for evil in the world.

Evil (personified) is depicted as having been created by God – in the form of the fallen angel Lucifer, who fell from grace as a result of his own arrogance – but also as God's "partner" and opponent or rival in designing the order of salvation. Satan takes advantage of human freedom and tempt an individual to turn away from God or do evil.

### God the Son: Jesus Christ

Before looking at the historical Jesus, we must first of all look at the divine functions of Christ. Jesus Christ is the central leading figure and, as is evident from the name, the "centre" of Christianity. His manifestation is directly connected with the salvation of creation and the redemption of humankind. In his Sermon on the Mount he gave his followers a new ethos, the religion of love, which at one and the same time fulfils and replaces the old (Jewish) religion.

For a long time the question of how to understand the person of Jesus Christ caused difficulties: as "begotten" of the Father from the beginning, as the Word of God (logos) that was always with God – as the prologue to John's Gospel puts it – or merely as an outstanding person "adopted" by God. At any rate God





*Mass in St. Peter's Square in front of the Church of St. Peter in Rome (during the 2nd Vatican Council)*

The general assemblies of the Catholic Church, at which only bishops are allowed to participate, are called councils (Greek: "synod"). While all eight ecumenical councils of the ancient church were convened by the Roman emperors, and primarily served to establish or further develop doctrine, the councils convened by the Curia during the Middle Ages and in modern times usually took place within the field of tension between claims to ecclesiastical and secular power. They often served to combat any attempts at reform, and to consolidate traditional positions on the law and faith. The culmination was the First Vatican Council (1869/70), which affirmed the universal episcopate and papal infallibility. The fundamental idea underpinning the councils was the conviction that the Holy Spirit would also be at work in the assembly of bishops.

Through Paul, and even more through the early Church Fathers, the apologists ("Defenders") of young Christianity found a spiritual connection to the Greek-Hellenistic world and its claim to universality, which seeped into Christianity. As described in the prologue to John's gospel, Christ was equated with the Greek logos, and interpreted as universal reason, and church teachers, particularly in the East, developed Christianized neo-Platonic philosophies. Generally speaking, it can be said that Christianity adopted the education system of antiquity and "Christianized" it.

The relationship to the Gentile Roman state underwent a great transformation. Christianity first came into contact with a state cult in Judea, where the Christians were treated as a Jewish sect by the Roman administration. The principal offence for both the Christians and the Jews was the Roman cult of the emperor which, after the consolidation of the hereditary or adoptive dynasties, had led to a god-like veneration of the emperor. The Christians rejected this as a form of idolatry, although Jesus's words with regard to secular authority are not entirely clear. Times of suspicious tolerance alternated with grave persecution of Christians, the harshest being under Emperor Nero (54–68), Septimius Severus (193–211), Maximinus Thrax (235–238), Decius (249–251) and Diocletian (285–305). In these times the number of martyrs grew, their fearlessness strengthening the faith and the profession of it. At the same time, Roman thought had a great influence on Christianity, which led to the faith becoming far more legalistic. Many devotional and structural features of the church today have pagan-Roman origins.

Emperor Constantine (306–337, from 324 sole ruler) was the first emperor to recognize the potential of Christianity to uphold state power, and in 311 issued the Milan Edict of Tolerance which guaranteed Christians the freedom of religious practice and state recognition. The victory of Constantine over his Co-Emperor Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in 312, allegedly fought under the sign of the cross, was later elaborated into a Christian legend, while the so-called "Donation of Constantine," on which the Pope later founded his claim to the secular rule of central Italy (Church States), subsequently turned out to be a forgery. In 392, under Emperor Theodosius (379–395), Christianity became the state religion, and the state prohibited all pagan cults. The subsequent Christian emperors of Western Rome proved to be for the most part politically weak, but intervened heavily in the affairs of the young State Church.

### The Orthodox Church and Byzantium

After the division of the Roman Empire in the 4th century and definitively after the fall of Western Rome (476), the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium gained increasing significance and power. Byzantium (Constantinople) flourished culturally as a "second Rome," and the Patriarch of Constantinople, who was under the protection of the emperor as the spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, gained equal status with the Pope in Rome around the year 500.

Rome and the Western Church also became increasingly independent of Byzantium. With the adoption of some of the Byzantine court rituals into the Orthodox Church, the Eastern Church became more closed towards Rome, which was surrounded by Arian Germanic peoples. The Orthodox Church spread throughout the entire Slav region, as far as and including Russia. Theologically, the main difference between the Eastern Church and the Roman Church is that the former places greater emphasis on the supremacy of the person of God, and sees the Holy Spirit as proceeding only from the Father and not from the Son as well (Filioque, meaning "and from the Son").

The Byzantine Empire was at the height of its power under the Emperor Justinian (527–565), but in the 7th century it began to lose its



# ISLAM

The word Islam means "submission to God." In uncompromising monotheism, the youngest of the world religions emphasizes the uniqueness of Allah, and the workings of God in the daily life of humankind. For Muslims the Koran is the eternal and direct revelation of God, brought by the Archangel Gabriel to the prophet Mohammed who epitomizes a life lived according to God's will. The "Five Pillars of Islam" regulate the religious life of the believers. In everyday life, Islam sets particular store by its practically-oriented legal system (shari'a) and makes a strong link between its religious and social components. Early on, the very charismatic Shi'ites broke away from the more legalistic Muslim majority (Sunnis). Throughout the history of Islam, which had its first cultural heyday in the Middle Ages, runs the thread of a strong link between religion and politics, and the search for the right relationship between these two elements also characterizes modern conflicts in Islamic countries.

## *The Archangel Gabriel brings the message to Mohammed* Turkish miniature

Mohammed, a successful and well-regarded caravan manager, was 40 when the angel Gabriel appeared to him in a dream in a cave near Mecca. He gave Mohammed a book, commanded him to read and to proclaim God's message. Mohammed put up strong resistance to this apparition, initially thinking it was the work of the devil. But when the vision came again he accepted his calling to prophecy after long inner struggles and began to make public appearances in his home town of Mecca, preaching and admonishing the people. As a result, the rich Meccans forced him to emigrate to Medina (hijra).

## MOHAMMED AND THE PROPHETS

### The Life and Significance of Mohammed

Mohammed (Arabic: Muhammad) is the founder of Islam, prophet (an-nabi) and messenger sent by God (rasul allah). He did not, however, see himself as the founder of a new religion, but as someone who brought to completion the only true monotheistic primal religion pronounced since the beginning of time.

Mohammed was born in 570 in Mecca. His parents died when he was young and he went to live in the house of his uncle Abu Talib (the father of the 4th caliph Ali, the Prophet's cousin). As a young man he tended herds of animals in the desert, and at the age of 25 became a caravan manager for the rich widow Khadija, a woman considerably older than he was, whom he later married. As a caravan manager, he went on journeys to Syria, and it was in this melting pot of cultures and religions that he first came into closer contact with the Jewish and Christian faiths and with the so-called "hanifs," the ancient Arab God-seekers who wanted to overcome polytheism and who taught the belief in one God.

Mohammed experienced his first calling when he was about 40. Sura 96, the oldest Sura in the Koran, relates how the angel Gabriel appeared to him in a dream, held out a book and commanded him to read. Again and again Mohammed resisted in his sleep although put under strong pressure by the angel. However, when he awoke "the scripture had been written on his heart." Gabriel announced to him that he – Mohammed – was the prophet of

God. Mohammed's reaction was despondency and helplessness. In a deep depression he first sought solitude, and even thought of suicide, but after considerable soul-searching he eventually accepted his mission.

In about 610, Mohammed began to make his first public appearances in Mecca, admonishing the people and preaching against the decline in morals, religious laxity and social indifference. In the style of a social reformer, he exhorted people to live according to God's will, and preached a decisive monotheism: God (Allah) alone, he said, was the Lord of the Ka'aba, the ancient Arab polytheistic shrine in Mecca.

He became more and more uncompromising, and Mohammed was seen by the rich citizens of Mecca as a troublemaker and increasingly felt to be a threat to their accustomed lifestyle. He was the victim of numerous campaigns to malign and ridicule him, led both by the Arabs of Mecca and the Jews and Christians, until finally he and his followers were banished from Mecca. His conflict with the Meccans became more and more acute, culminating in open hostility, but at the same time he gained a number of new followers.

In 622, Mohammed and his followers moved to Medina (at the time the city was still called Yathrib; only later did it become known as Medina = the city of the prophet). This exodus (hijra) marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Mohammed was given a warm welcome in Medina. He made skilful use of the rivalry between Medina and the richer Mecca, gained great status there, and several times was appointed to mediate in disputes. He skilfully smoothed out the tensions between his old followers and the new believers from Medina, and changed more and more from a radical prophet to a careful and considered statesman. In 623 Mohammed worked out the first community constitution for his followers and tried, but failed, to gain the support of the Medina Jews. In particular vis-a-vis the Jews, he formulated the closeness yet separateness of Islam. He emphasized the importance of Abraham and his son Ishmael, and declared that the Ka'aba in Mecca was a shrine built by Abraham in honour of monotheism.

In the subsequent years, Mohammed concentrated very much on the imminent conflict with the people of Mecca. In 625 there was





### *The Holy Ka'aba in Mecca*

The Ka'aba is the most important shrine in the Islamic world. During the time of pilgrimage every pilgrim tries to say at least one of the prescribed prayers here. Access for non-Muslims is strictly forbidden. Its name comes from its cubic shape. During pilgrimages, the black silk covering, richly decorated with verses from the Koran and embroidered in gold, is replaced by white fabric. A door two metres above the ground, reached by a wooden ladder, leads into an empty inner space lit by numerous gold and silver lamps, its walls decorated with prolific inscriptions. There are numerous legends about the origins of the Ka'aba. For example, it is said that the sacred black stone that is set into one of the four corner pillars of the room, was brought by the angel Gabriel. Originally white, it has been blackened by the sins of the pilgrims.



to abandoning reason. For Islam, all prophets announce what is ultimately one and the same message. Abraham is regarded by believers as the epitome of piety and obedience to God. The Koran mentions him specially as "example" and "friend of God" and he is seen as the archetypal seeker of God (hanif). Moses is referred to in the Koran as the "Chosen One," and is particularly significant for Islam as the pronouncer of the law, about which the Koran has a good deal to say. The Koran regards Jesus in many respects as directly prefiguring Mohammed. It mentions the Virgin Mary as being chosen by God to give birth to Jesus. The statements about Mary in the Koran resemble those in the Christian apocryphal scriptures in many respects. Islam sees Jesus as an important prophet who was ridiculed by the Jews (as Mohammed was by his people), but it makes no mention of his role as redeemer of mankind, and decisively disputes that he was the Son of God. God is One (Allah), He has no son and does not "associate" himself with any other person. The Koran commentators believe, however, that Jesus will come again at the end of time: he will come again as a perfected Muslim and rule as the righteous king over a unified world.

The Koran deals in great detail with Mohammed's call to prophecy, and defends him against the criticism of his contemporary opponents that he was either a liar or was possessed by demons. Mohammed knew that as

God's Chosen One he would be guided by God and that he should ask Allah to forgive people's weakness. The series of prophets ends with Mohammed as the "Seal of the Prophets." Islam is thus the religious and temporal completion of the religion that God intended from the beginning. Mohammed is both an ordinary person and a chosen prophet at one and the same time.

### **THE KORAN: ALLAH'S MESSAGE**

#### **Structure and Significance of the Koran**

For religious Muslims the Koran is the sacred book, in which God's direct revelation is written down as it was announced to the people by Mohammed. The Koran is for them the ultimate reference for how to behave in the world, a book of guidance, teaching and edification for all believers.

The word Koran is spelt "Qur'an" in Arabic and comes from "qara'a" = to read, read aloud. The Koran is thus the book that is to be read or recited. Appropriately, the first word of God's revelation to Mohammed, recorded in the oldest Koranic Sura, Sura 96, is: "Recite!" (iqa!). The Koran comprises 114 Suras (chapters) of different lengths, each named after a characteristic word in the text. They are not in chronological order, and are a mixture from the different periods of Mohammed's pronouncements, which occasionally leads to some rather contradictory statements. However, the rule of thumb

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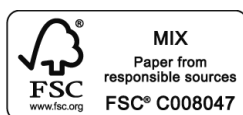
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