

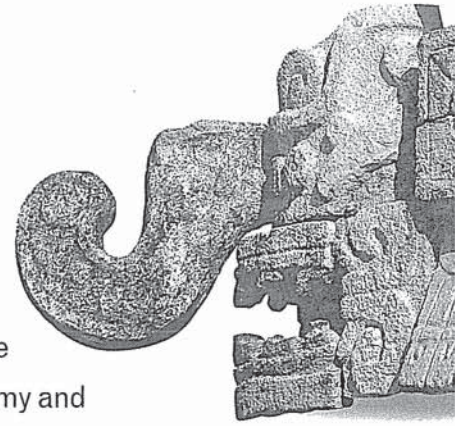
CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

# The Maya

In what is now Mexico, the Maya dominated the lowland peninsula of the Yucatan highlands, Chiapas and most of Guatemala. There was never one unified theocracy but a number of aggressive city-states. The Maya favoured the arts and learning and pushed knowledge of astronomy and mathematics much further than any previous civilization in the Americas. They recorded much of their knowledge and beliefs by means of glyphs which, since their decipherment, have enabled us to know much more about their religion.

The effects on the Mayan people of their huge pantheon of supernatural forces – deities, spiritual beings and essences, could in part be discerned or predicted by the use of their Calendars. The Tzolkin or divinatory calendar, consisted of a 260-day sacred round. Found exclusively in Mesoamerica, the calendar consisted of 13 numbers linked to 20 day names, each of which was a divine force: the first, Imix was linked to the earth monster.

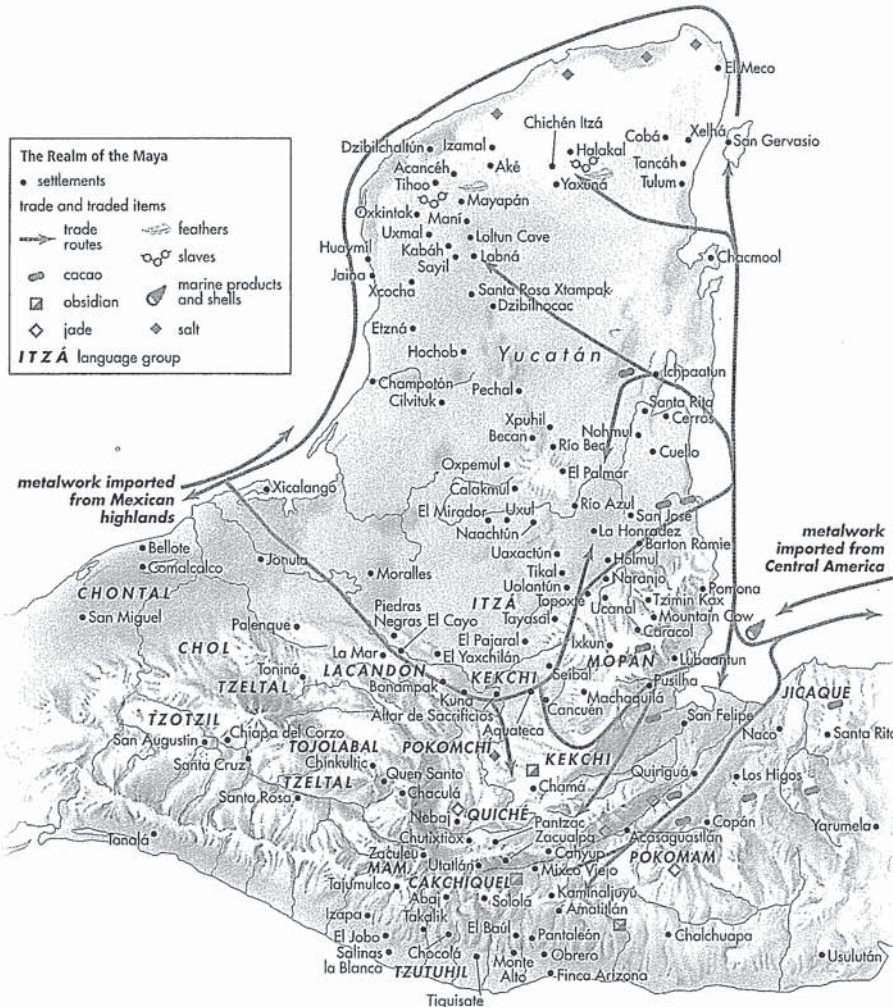
All gods were endowed with a calendrical presence, some more directly than others: the Pahuatuns or wind deities (Ik in the calendar); the Chicchans, a giant snake (Chicchan); and the four Balams, jaguars who protected the cultivated fields (Ix). Also important were Exchel, the moon and the four Chacs or rain gods. (See also pages 84–85 on The Highland Maya Today.)



The Chacs appear in many forms in the Mayan area. This is a late classic mask at Chichen Itza.



Ritual bloodletting as depicted on a relief at Palenque. Note the glyph on the arm of the figure to the left of the picture.



Left: The Realm of the Maya Like their neighbours, the Aztec, the Maya thrived on trade. This map shows the realm of the Maya, their settlements, their language groups and the items that they traded.

Right: A jade serpent recovered from a sacred well (or cenote) at Chichen Itza.

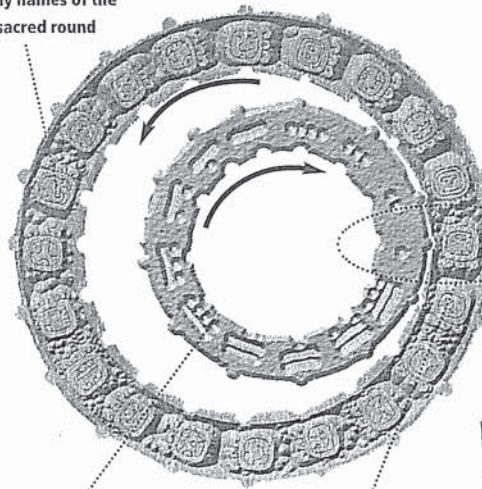
TIME LINE	
Olmecs	150–750 BC
Zapotecs	AD 300–600
Classic Maya	AD 300–900

## MAYA COSMOLOGY

In Maya cosmology, seven layers extended above the earth ruled by the 13 deities of the Heavens: six marked the sun's ascent, six its descent and one its position at midday. Below the earth was Xibalba, the realm of the dead, consisting of four layers and ruled by the nine deities of the underworld, an unpleasant place of putrefaction and strong smells from which illnesses came. Each night, the sun passed through the underworld in the guise of a jaguar, descending through four layers before midnight, to ascend again (through four) to rise in the east. The underworld was linked to the heavens by a huge tree, the ceiba, which is still considered to be sacred in Mayan communities today. The tree marked the centre of the earth, distinguishing where the sun rose (our east and linked to the colour red) from where the sun set (west and linked to black). The north and south (or up and down) were simply known as sides of heaven and associated with white and yellow respectively.

The other, 365-day calendar was important for determining the dates of ritual. It consisted of 18 named months linked to 20 numbers (360) and a month of five days known as the Uayeb, whose days were considered particularly unpropitious. The 365-day calendar was based on astronomical calculations and intermeshed with the 260-day divinatory calendar. With the two calendars combined, an identically named day only occurred every 52 years, after which a new cycle began.

The 20 day names of the 260-day sacred round



The 13 day numbers of the 260-day sacred round

The 365-day solar calendar consisting of 18 months of 20 days (here shown running together)



The Mayans, like other Mesoamerican peoples such as the later Aztecs, had a sophisticated calendar. The divinatory, 260-day calendar intermeshed with the 365-day calendar (rather like interlocking cog wheels) to give each day its distinct character. With both calendars, an identically named day only re-occurred every 18,980 days (i.e. 52 years).

## RECOVERING MAYA BELIEFS

It is the *Chilam Balam* and the *Popul Vuc*, documents written after the Spanish Conquest, which began in 1517, plus the numerous depictions on pottery and sculpture, which tell us much of what we know about the Maya's beliefs, mythology and practices: such as those of the mythical hero-twins, Xbalanque and Hunapahu, sons of Hun Hunapahu (god of corn), who were monster slayers and ballplayers. More recently the decipherment of the Mayan hieroglyphic script has added detail which previously could only be guessed at.

Rituals were huge affairs, preceded by fasting, abstinence and ceremonial steam baths, accompanied by music, dancing and incense and attended by many. Autosacrifice was an important means of contacting the deities. By drawing a cord or piece of grass through the penis or the nose, and letting blood, visions could be induced, personified by the Vision Serpent. This was performed particularly by the king and his wife. Human sacrifice did occur,

especially of war captives and occasionally of children, but not on a scale comparable to the Aztecs. Animals and birds were also offered, such as armadillos and parrots, and plants or plant products: copal, flowers, cacao, honey and the rubbery like *chicle*, from which chewing gum is made.

Deities varied from community to community as did the details of the calendars themselves. Both calendars are still to be found in use today, however, in many Mayan communities in the highlands of Guatemala, for divinatory purposes and to give shape to the ritual year.



# The Aztecs

The Aztecs were an itinerant people who settled in the Valley of Mexico between AD 1200 and 1300. From humble beginnings they rose to become the dominant political force in Central America by the time of the Spanish arrival in 1519. Daily life was dominated by the sun, Tonatiuh, who by the time of the Aztecs (1350–1525) was often equated with Huitzilopochtli, their principal deity and also a god of war. He demanded to be fed by blood in order to keep rising, necessitating human sacrifice.

**W**HAT WE KNOW of Aztec religion is primarily due to the accounts of those Spanish friars who, after the Aztec defeat, became interested in the beliefs and practices they were attempting to stamp out. The Aztec codices, folding screens books made from deer skin, give us details in a pictorial language while the sculptural forms can tell us what their deities looked like.

## THE RISE OF THE LAST SUN

The Aztecs were the last of a number of different cultures that occupied the Central Mexican plateau and the most belligerent, although their expansionist empire lasted only a century. Huitzilopochtli owed his pre-eminence to the Chichimeca-Mexica tribal peoples whose deity he was. They had made Tenochtitlan (today Mexico City) their home in

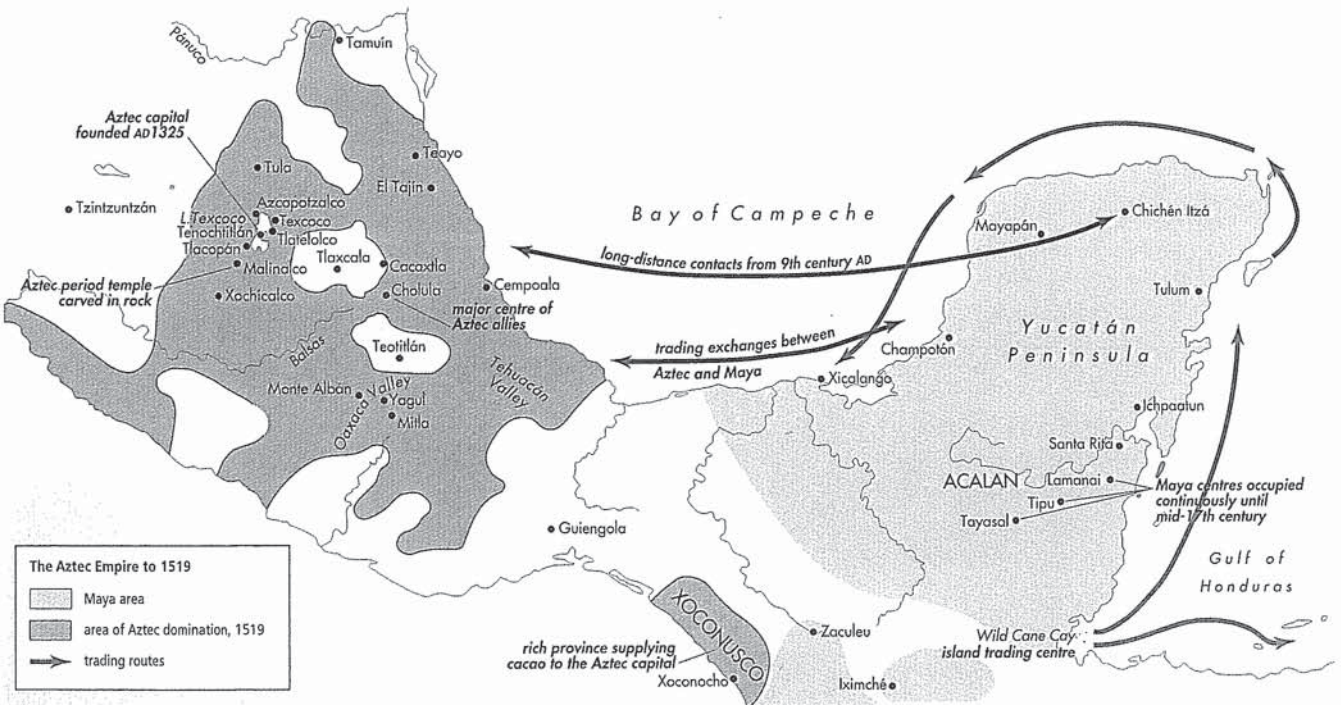
around AD 1325, after a long journey south from Aztlan during the fifth and final Sun, which was to bring earthquakes and famine.

## THE COSMOS

According to myth, there had already been four previous Suns, each of which had been destroyed. But the last was a Sun of movement, such that some of the gods had even sacrificed themselves in order to keep it in motion. The world was believed to consist of a disc surrounded by water with 13 layers above and nine layers below. In the highest lived Ometeotl, the omnipotent supreme being, deity of duality both masculine and feminine, but who also lived in Mictlan, the underworld and peopled all the other layers. Ometeotl had four sons, the four Tezcatlipocas, (a name usually translated as 'Smoking Mirror') two of whom



Above: Coatlicue, or 'She of the Serpent Skirt', was a terrifying female goddess with command over the earth, life and death.



The Aztec Empire to 1519 The Aztec relied heavily on trade and tributes for their livelihood. The map shows the major sites, settlements and trading routes of the Aztec Empire to 1519. The expansion of the Empire was also driven by the need to acquire captives for use as human sacrifices.

are sometimes known as Quetzalcoatl ('Plumed Serpent') and Huitzilopochtli ('Hummingbird on the Left').

Associated with the four early Suns, they were responsible for creating fire, a half sun and moon, water, other divine beings and the calendar. But it was the fifth Sun that completed the cosmos.

### THE FESTIVALS

The Aztecs had two calendars, the Haab and the Tonalpohualli, but most of the large monthly religious festivals were related to the former, the 365-day cycle. Many were for agricultural matters and dedicated to Tlaloc and the Tlaloque (the deities of water and fertility), while others propitiated Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca or Xiuhtecuhtli (deity of fire), or female deities, such as the goddess of love, Xochiquetzal ('Precious Flower') or Coatlicue ('She of the Serpent Skirt').



These were lavish and costly affairs, at least in Tenochtitlan which was a large and sophisticated city, with 30 distinct classes of priests and priestesses, education for women, and slaves. The ceremonies were held in the open air and were attended by thousands, including the common people.

During the preparatory days, the priests fasted (one meal per day) and observed prohibitions (on bathing and sex). An all-night vigil preceded the festival itself, which was usually of several days duration. Shrines were embowered and decorated with flowers, and offerings of food, clothing and rubber-spattered papers were made, accompanied by burning incense and libations. Throughout the festivities sacred songs were sung, music played and there was dancing.

Festivities in the countryside were simpler, more benign and often dedicated to local and feminine deities (such as Tonantzin, who represented the power of the earth). For although the Aztecs conquered a huge area and brought all the foreign deities into their pantheon in Tenochtitlan, they were unable to obliterate local customs.

Most pre-Christian practices were eradicated, with time, by the Spaniards but there are today groups in Mexico City who are disaffected with their lives and with globalization. Calling themselves the Mexica, they are attempting to reinvent Aztec religiosity.

### THE SACRIFICES

Each festival had one or more processions which included those to be sacrificed, sometimes dressed up as deities (*ixiptla*), whom they impersonated for a day or two, living in luxury, before their hearts were cut out with an obsidian knife and offered up in ceremonial vessels and their flayed skins worn by male dancers. These were theatrical occasions with dramatic appeal

and a compelling political message: that the Aztecs were the servants of their deities. Often thousands of men and women were sacrificed, captives from neighbouring groups, their bodies allowed to fall down the steps from the top of the ceremonial pyramids, after which their heads were placed on the skull rack and their flesh cooked.

Below left: The Aztecs were obsessive about pollution. Here, in a sixteenth-century codex, a baby is depicted as it is about to be immersed in water soon after the birth. The Spaniards assumed this rite was equivalent to baptism.



### QUETZALCOATL

Although still part of the Aztec pantheon, Quetzalcoatl (as the plumed serpent) was of less significance than at the time of the earlier city-state of Teotihuacan (150 BC–AD 750 – see Time Line below), where he was revered as a feathered celestial dragon. For the later Toltecs (AD 900–1200), he became the patron of warriors and associated with the morning star.

Above: A stone bust showing Quetzalcoatl's head emerging in human form from the plumed coils of his serpent body.

### TIME LINE

Teotihuacan	150 BC–AD 750
Toltecs	AD 900–1200
Aztecs	AD 1350–1525

# World Religions

## BUDDHISM

### The Buddha

The Buddha was born, lived and died a human being. He is not a god. The special thing about him was that he realized the state of sublime wisdom and compassion called Nirvana. He discovered the causes of all suffering, and the way by which all beings could reach the same state.



**G**AUTAMA SIDDHARTHA, the historical Buddha, was born in the year 566 BC, the son of the king of the Sakya people in present-day Nepal. At his birth it was prophesied that he would either become a world ruler or a great sage. His father wanted the former, so he arranged for his son to be brought up without seeing the troubles of the world. Gautama grew up to be a handsome youth, who excelled in all kinds of activities. He lived a happy and contented life within the walls of the palace, and married a princess, Yasodhara, who bore him a son, Rahula.

#### ENLIGHTENMENT

One day, Gautama persuaded his groom to take him outside the city walls. There he encountered

four things which changed his life. First he saw an old man, then a sick man, and a corpse. Gautama was shocked, and asked for an explanation. The groom told him that these conditions were normal, and happened to everyone. Gautama then met a wandering holy man, who had given up everything to practise the religious life and seek the answer to suffering. He radiated a sense of serenity which Gautama knew he had to find.

Soon afterwards, Gautama shaved his head, and slipped out of the palace. He wandered far and wide, begging for his food, and subjecting himself to all kinds of austerities. Eventually, almost dying with hunger, he decided such practices would not achieve his goal. He resolved to practise a middle way between

The temple of the Golden Buddha at Wat Traimit, Bangkok, Thailand, is famous for its five and a half ton Buddha statue of solid gold, rediscovered in the 1950s after being hidden to protect it from invaders.

#### Buddhism

Buddha was born in the year 566 BC in Nepal. At his birth it was prophesied that he would either become a great ruler or a great sage. Today, 360 million Buddhists account for almost six percent of the world's population across 92 countries. The map shows the distribution of Buddhists throughout the world.



austerity and luxury. He took a little food, and sat beneath a tree at a place called Bodh Gaya in present-day Bihar, vowing not to move until he had achieved his goal.

At the age of 35, on the night of the full moon in May, he realized Nirvana, (awakening, enlightenment) entering into deep meditation and becoming the Buddha, the Enlightened One. The Buddha would never explain Nirvana, saying that it is essentially beyond words and thoughts, and so Buddhists also refrain from speculating about it.

### HIS MESSAGE

At first, the new Buddha was reluctant to instruct others, feeling that they would not understand. However, the god Brahma appeared to him, and begged him to teach 'for the sake of those with but little dust in their eyes'. He agreed, and delivered his first sermon on the Four Noble Truths in the Deer Park near Varanasi, India. In his lifetime, the Buddha taught all who wanted to listen, men and women, rich and poor. We are also told that he taught animals and spiritual beings of various kinds.

His message was always the same: 'suffering, the causes of suffering and the way out of suffering'. He did not talk about God or the soul, or encourage speculation in matters that could not be proved. Rather, he specifically told people to believe and practise only those things which were helpful and led to freedom and peace of mind. It was a combination of profound wisdom and deep



A 14-m (46-ft) long reclining Buddha at Vihara in Sri Lanka. Reclining Buddhas represent the death of the historical Buddha, with the accompanying extinction of desire and attainment of Nirvana.

compassion, and a practical way which could be followed by those who wished. This teaching he called the Dharma. Many of his disciples chose to follow the Buddha into the homeless life, and thus was born the Sangha, or community.

Eventually, the Buddha's life came to an end, and he passed away aged 80 at Kusinara, India. His followers were grief-stricken, but the Buddha's final words to them were, 'All conditioned things are impermanent. Strive on!'

#### THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA\*

566 BC	Buddha born
550 BC	Marries Yasodhara
535 BC	Son Rahula born
536 BC	Leaves home
528 BC	Achieves Nirvana and preaches first sermon
526 BC	Founds Sangha
c. 523 BC	Order of nuns founded
c. 522 BC	King Bimbisara donates bamboo grove at Magadha
483 BC	Achieved Parinirvana (dies)

\*The dates are traditional, but not universally recognized.

### THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths are the heart of the Buddha's teaching. They are:

- The fact of suffering;
- The cause of suffering;
- The fact that there is a way out of suffering;
- The way itself.

The Buddha observed that all beings suffered. The cause of this suffering is selfish desire, and a misunderstanding of the nature of 'self', which is not the fixed, separate and enduring entity that it appears to be. What we call 'self' is actually a collection of *skandhas* (heaps or particles) which are constantly changing. These are form, feelings, perception, mind-contents and consciousness. The relationship of these constitutes our 'self' at any moment, and creates *karma* (action and reaction) which influences

our birth, life and rebirth. One of the *skandhas* is form, so rebirth is always in some form, which need not be human.

Having discovered for himself that there is a way out of suffering, the Buddha proceeded to outline it. This is the final Truth, The Noble Eightfold Path of the way out of suffering:

- Right view (understanding, attitude);
- Right aim (intention, resolve, motive or thought);
- Right speech (not lying, slandering or gossiping);
- Right action (or conduct);
- Right livelihood (means of living);
- Right effort;
- Right mindfulness (awareness of things as they are);
- Right concentration (contemplation, meditation).

The Buddha summed up this path as: 'Cease to do evil; learn to do good, and purify your heart.'

## TAOISM

# Origins

Taoism is the main surviving religion native to China. Its roots lie far back in Chinese shamanism and in philosophy and its name comes from the Chinese word for the way – meaning 'the Way, the very essence, of nature'. It developed into a full-blown religion from the second century AD.

**T**HE EARLIEST KNOWN religion in China is shamanism – the roots of which lie north of China in Siberia. Shamans communicate between the two worlds of the physical world of this earth with its creatures and the spiritual world of the deities. China has the world's oldest recorded shamanic literature including poems of divination from c. 1200 BC as well as an entire cycle of Shamanic songs dating from c. fourth century BC called the *Chu Ci (Songs of the South)*. Shamanism was

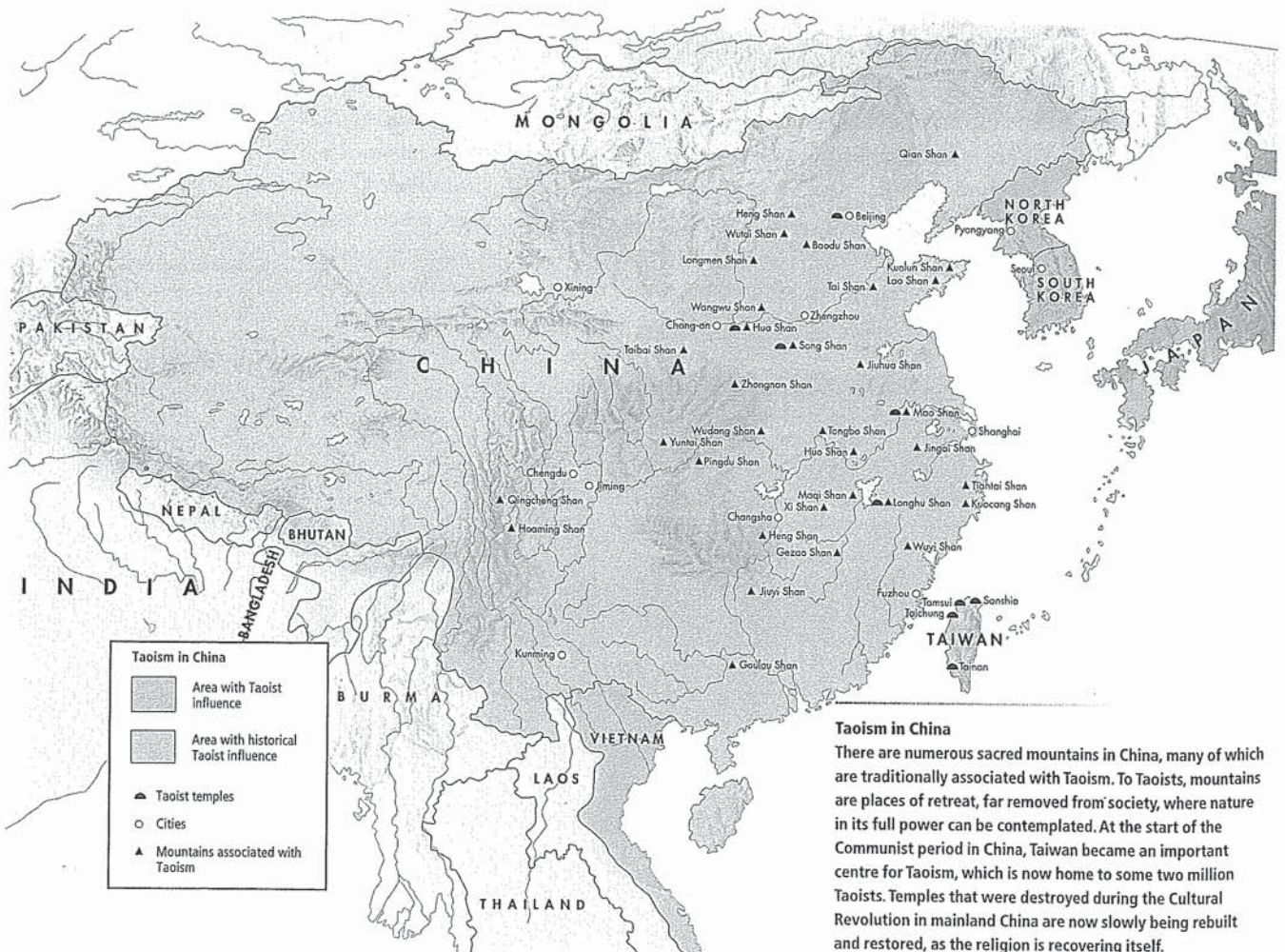
a major formative force in the early culture of China, creating priestly kings through most of the second millennium BC. These gradually gave way to specifically military and political rulers while the shamans became court magicians and divination experts.

### THE ROLE OF SHAMAN

The gradual end of the official courtly role of shamans came as a result of the rise of the Confucian elite. The world of shamans was



Lao Zi, the legendary founder of Taoism, riding upon an ox. The ox symbolizes the start of the year, hard work and Lao Zi's peasant roots.



### Taoism in China

There are numerous sacred mountains in China, many of which are traditionally associated with Taoism. To Taoists, mountains are places of retreat, far removed from society, where nature in its full power can be contemplated. At the start of the Communist period in China, Taiwan became an important centre for Taoism, which is now home to some two million Taoists. Temples that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution in mainland China are now slowly being rebuilt and restored, as the religion is recovering itself.

one of spiritual forces, unpredictability and divination. The Confucians, as the main legislative and administrative officials deeply concerned with government law, were the opposite: they sought order, control and logic and saw the shamans as unpleasant leftovers of a primitive worldview – anarchic and disordered. With the rise of the Confucian elite from the fourth century BC onwards, the shamans were gradually but firmly removed from positions of power or authority by the Confucian elite until by the first century BC they had been to all intents and purposes pushed underground.

The essential spirit of shamanism was to resurface in a more 'respectable' form through the rise of a new religion from the second century AD onwards – Taoism.

### THE RISE OF TAOISM

While shamanism was declining, the quest for immortality was rising. This was a belief that certain substances or practices could ensure the physical body, and thus the spirit never died. The First Emperor (221–209 BC) was obsessed by this quest. It is another stream of thought and practice, which flowed into the creation of Taoism.

In the second century AD, these streams came together in the rise of a number of shamanic-type charismatic figures who developed a new semi-philosophical framework, within which shamanic practices such as exorcism, combined with the quest for immortality, were expressed anew within a religious philosophy of the Tao.



Shamans performing a ritual dance at Ichon, South Korea. Taoism originates from Chinese shamanism, and shamans can still be found in some areas of Southeast Asia.

One of the key moments in the origin of Taoism as a religious movement is usually taken to be an experience of Zhang Dao Ling at some time in the first half of the second century AD when this charismatic healer/preacher – very much within the shamanic tradition – had a vision. In the vision Lao Zi, the reputed author of a major book of philosophy of the Tao, known as the *Dao De Jing*, gave Zhang the power to use his teachings to bind evil forces and heal those who repented of their sins.

Taoist monk at Hua Shan Mountain. Religious Taoist followers strive for immortality through a combination of philosophy, meditation and liturgy.

### THE VIRTUE OF THE WAY

Lao Zi was a philosopher who lived sometime in the sixth century BC and to whom a book of sayings – *Dao De Jing* meaning *The Virtue of the Way* – about the Tao is credited. We actually know virtually nothing about him – the very name just means Old Master. He was one of many hundreds of key philosophers who, from the sixth to fourth centuries BC, explored concepts of the Tao – which simply means 'the Way' as in a path. The Way had originally been used as a moral term – Confucians saw the Tao as the moral path, which the world had to follow to remain balanced. But Lao Zi took this further and explored the Tao as the very origin of nature – the source of the origin

– the very foundation of all reality.

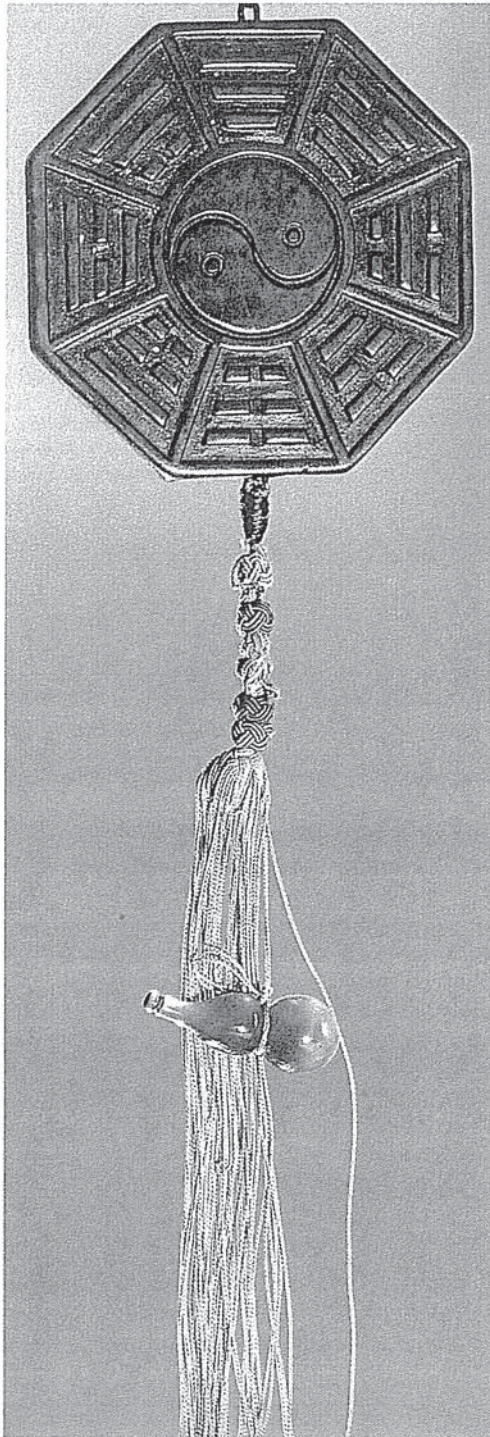
When Zhang Dao Ling claimed that Lao Zi had given him authority over spiritual forces, the key to immortality and the power of the *Dao De Jing* to combat evil, Zhang fused elements of the officially discredited shamanism of the ordinary folk with the quest for longevity and immortality and the philosophical and quintessentially anti-Confucian/elite teachings of philosophers such as Lao Zi. From this strange conglomeration came Taoism – the Way of the Tao, the religion of following Nature's Path, of seeking immortality and of combating the forces of evil spirits.





# Taoist Beliefs and Practices

The essence of Taoism is maintaining the balance of nature – of the Tao – through controlling and influencing the forces of yin and yang, exorcising evil spirits and seeking immortality. Taoist priests also act as local priests to many communities, offering advice, prayers and rituals, which maintain local life and offer the individual solace and comfort.



**T**AOISM TEACHES that the world, indeed the entire cosmos is finely tuned and balanced and that the role of humanity is to maintain this balance. Central to Taoism is the creed-like statement found in Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing*, the key text of Taoism:

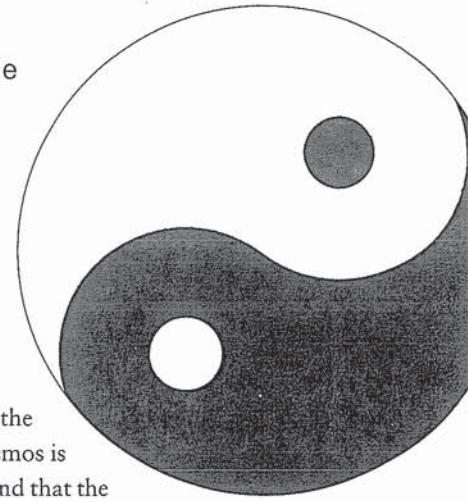
*The Tao is the Origin of the One:  
The one is the Origin of the Two:  
The Two give birth to the Three:  
The Three give birth to every living thing.*

In other words, the Tao is the primal source of all unity and existence – the One. From this one comes the twin forces of yin and yang – polar opposites that are locked in a struggle for supremacy, which can never be achieved because they each contain the seed of the other within them. Thus, for example, autumn and winter are yin but inexorably give way to spring and summer, which are yang, which in turn give way to autumn and winter.

## THE WAY

In Taoism, the Tao – the Way – moves from being a descriptive term for the relentless cycle of the natural world to being to all intents and purposes the ultimate ‘divine’ force. The Tao is classically represented in Taoist temples by three statues. These statues – male figures – represent the Tao as the Origin, the Tao as manifest in the human form of the sage Lao Zi and the Tao as Word – as found in the *Dao De Jing*.

The two forces of yin and yang dominate all existence and from their dynamic, eternal struggle they produce the three of Heaven, earth and humanity. Heaven is yang while earth is yin and their interaction gives rise to the forces which enliven all life. Humanity is the pivot upon which this all hinges. We have the power to throw the



The yin-yang symbol. In Taoism, the Tao is the ultimate whole that defines the universe, and yin and yang are the two opposite halves of that whole. Yin and yang have opposing characteristics; for example, yin is regarded as cold, dark and female, and yang is heat, light and male. However, yin and yang are mutable characteristics, found within one another and created by one another. This leads to different degrees of ying and yang, and means that one does not predominate over the other. yin and yang also have physical manifestations that affect all aspects of life, from ailments of the body to political events.

Left: An eighteenth-century boxwood pendant, showing the yin-yang symbol and the sacred trigram, as well as an agate gourd which symbolizes immortality.

## TAOIST RITUALS

Taoism offers many rituals, charms, prayers and prescriptions for dealing with physical ailments and psychological troubles. It is possible to find a charm to be cited, burnt or ingested for almost any problem. As such it plays the role of priest, psychologist and counsellor for many people.

Taoist rituals are only tangentially related to the major rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death. A traditional Chinese wedding will involve elements of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Taoism's role is more to do with establishing a relationship between the community and the spirit world – in the way that shamans link the spirit world with the physical. Taoism claims the power to control and shape the behaviour of the spirit world in order to enhance the life of those here on earth. There is still, nevertheless, an element of dealing with unpredictable forces in the Taoist rituals of invoking the spirit world. All of this is seen as part and parcel of maintaining the balance of nature – of the Tao.

cosmos out of kilter by creating too much yin or too much yang, or to balance the cosmos. Taoism embodies this in many of its liturgies and rituals.

Taoism also offers the individual the chance to slough off sins and misdemeanours through rituals of repentance and of exorcism. It also seeks to control the forces of the spirit world, which can break through to harm this world. For example it exorcises or placates ghosts of those whose descendents have not offered the correct rituals to ensure they pass to the spirit world.

## IMMORTALITY

One of the most important areas of teaching is the possibility of achieving longevity and even immortality. Taoism teaches that immortality is about ensuring the physical body is transformed into an eternal body through rituals and even diet. The quest for immortality and the supernatural powers which this involves, has been a major facet of the mythology of China and manifests itself today in serious practitioners on sacred mountains and in the extravagant antics, such as flight, of certain figures in popular Chinese movies and stories.



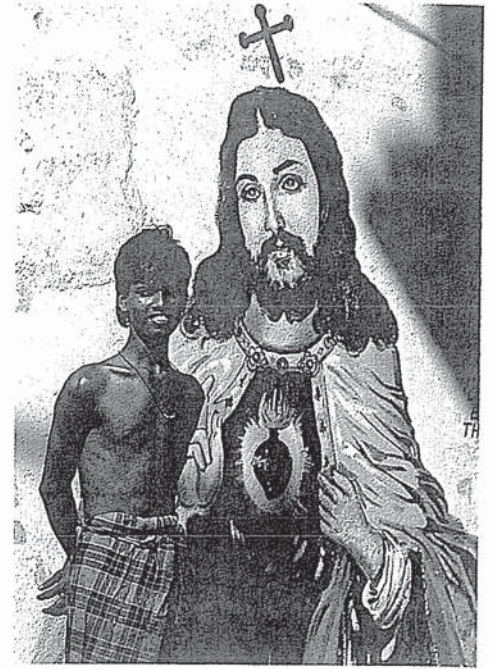
The quest for immortality takes many forms. For some it is the literal quest for certain foods and substances which if eaten will transform the body. For others it is daily meditational practices which encourage the growth of a spiritual body. For yet others it is a life of abstinence and devotion, undertaken as a hermit in the wild, by which the body becomes simply a part of the cosmic Tao and thus can never die.

Local people, Taoist priests and nuns join together to in a colourful procession to celebrate the dedication of a new temple in the Shaanxi province, China.

## CHRISTIANITY

# The Life and Teaching of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth, c. 6 BC–AD 32, is the most important person in the Christian religion. While his teaching followed the traditional Jewish style of religious debate it is who he was that is central for Christians. They believe Jesus was the Son of God, that he was born on earth, lived the life of a human being, was crucified, died and then rose from the dead. His dying and rising revealed God's love for the world and offered all people the possibility of eternal life.



**F**OR CHRISTIANS the most important event in history has been, and will always be, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Historically nothing of his life is known outside the four gospels contained in the Christian Bible. These, however, are not primarily historical accounts; rather they give an interpretation of what the life of Jesus meant. Consequently there are some events and stories that appear in two or three of the gospels and some that are distinctive to one. There is, however, a core to Jesus's teaching; the Kingdom of God is now present, God has sent prophets in the past but now Jesus's coming opens up the possibility for all people to enter that Kingdom. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to the people of Israel, that they would be his people, he would give them a land (Israel) and he would be their God.

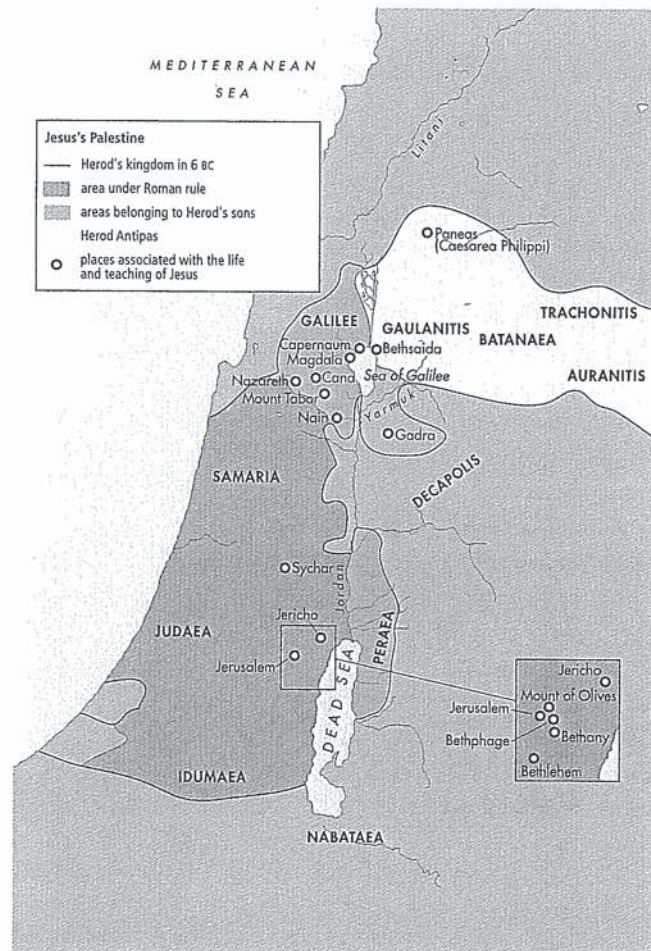
At the time of Jesus's birth (now considered to be between 6–4 BC) the Romans ruled over the land of Israel. They were the major force in the Mediterranean world. The Jews, and Jesus was a Jew, were allowed certain 'freedoms' in order to practise

their religion but were aware of the presence and pressure of their Roman overlords.

## THE JEWISH CONTEXT

There were various Jewish groups jostling for position at the time of Jesus's teaching life. The

Jesus Christ is the central figure of Christianity; the symbol of the cross on which he was crucified is synonymous with the Christian faith.



## Jesus's Palestine

Jesus was born in Palestine during the reign of Herod the Great (37–4 BC). Herod was a client king of the Romans and he left his kingdom to his three sons, Herod Antipas (Galilee and Perea), Philip the Tetrarch (northern Transjordan) and Archelaus (Judea, Samaria and Idumaea). In AD 6 the Roman government took control of Archelaus's territories which were later ruled by Pontius Pilate.

Pharisees are shown in the Gospels to be Jesus's enemies because he challenged many of their ideas and attitudes, although they were concerned to maintain the essential qualities of Jewish life and religion. Disputation, debate and interpretation were part and parcel of their method of teaching. The Sadducees, another group, reflected the interests of more traditional Jews. There were other groups, like the Zealots who were more 'Messianic' in flavour. They were expecting the arrival of the 'Anointed One' (Messiah, in Greek 'Christ') who would release them from Roman domination.

### JESUS'S LIFE

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up with Joseph, his father, and Mary, his mother, in Nazareth, in Northern Galilee. Joseph is traditionally believed to have been a carpenter and would probably have taught the growing Jesus something of his trade.

It is likely that Jesus's ministry began when he was about 30 years old. He probably taught for three years after being baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist (his cousin). Christians believe John was the forerunner of Jesus, preparing the way for him. Jesus travelled throughout Israel, teaching and

healing. He gathered many men and women around him; key amongst them were 12 men called disciples. Jesus became involved in conflict with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. He was arrested, tried and nailed to a cross, crucified and died. Christians believe, and the Gospels recount, Jesus rose from the dead. He met his followers and ate with them. After a few weeks he was taken up into heaven promising to return at the end of the world. Jesus's followers believed he was the

Messiah who had brought about the Kingdom of God. This was a dangerous idea to the Romans who thought this might mean a challenge to their power and equally disturbing to the Jewish authorities.

Jesus taught in synagogues. The main concern of many Jews, however, was that he appeared to claim to forgive sins and only God could do that. Jesus was therefore claiming to be divine and that was not acceptable to the Jewish religious authorities.



In this thirteenth-century stained glass window Jesus is depicted teaching in a synagogue. Although he was a Jew, the Jewish authorities did not welcome him forgiving peoples' sins, something they believed only God could do.

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

John, 3:16

### THE PARABLES

Jesus used parables and healings to help people understand his teaching. He taught that the Kingdom of God (an acceptance of God as Ruler and King) had arrived and it was possible for everyone to enter that Kingdom. What was necessary was to see what Jesus did and hear and understand his teaching. Some of his parables, including *The Sower* (Mark 4:3-20), *The Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:30-37) and *The Lost Son* (Luke 15:11-32), are very well known and are stories in themselves; others like *The Lost Coin* (Luke 15: 8-10) and *The Lost Sheep* (Luke 15:3-7) are short and easily remembered. Jesus, like all great teachers, took examples from everyday life with which his hearers would be familiar. Everyone knows the joy of finding something that was lost or re-uniting relationships.

His healings and miracles taught about God's power and authority. Jesus could do these things because he was carrying out God's will. He did remarkable things to

challenge those around and to help people be more aware of the will of God and the nearness of God's Kingdom.

For Christians the greatest miracles were his birth, death and resurrection (rising to defeat death). It was a demonstration of the love, authority and power of God.

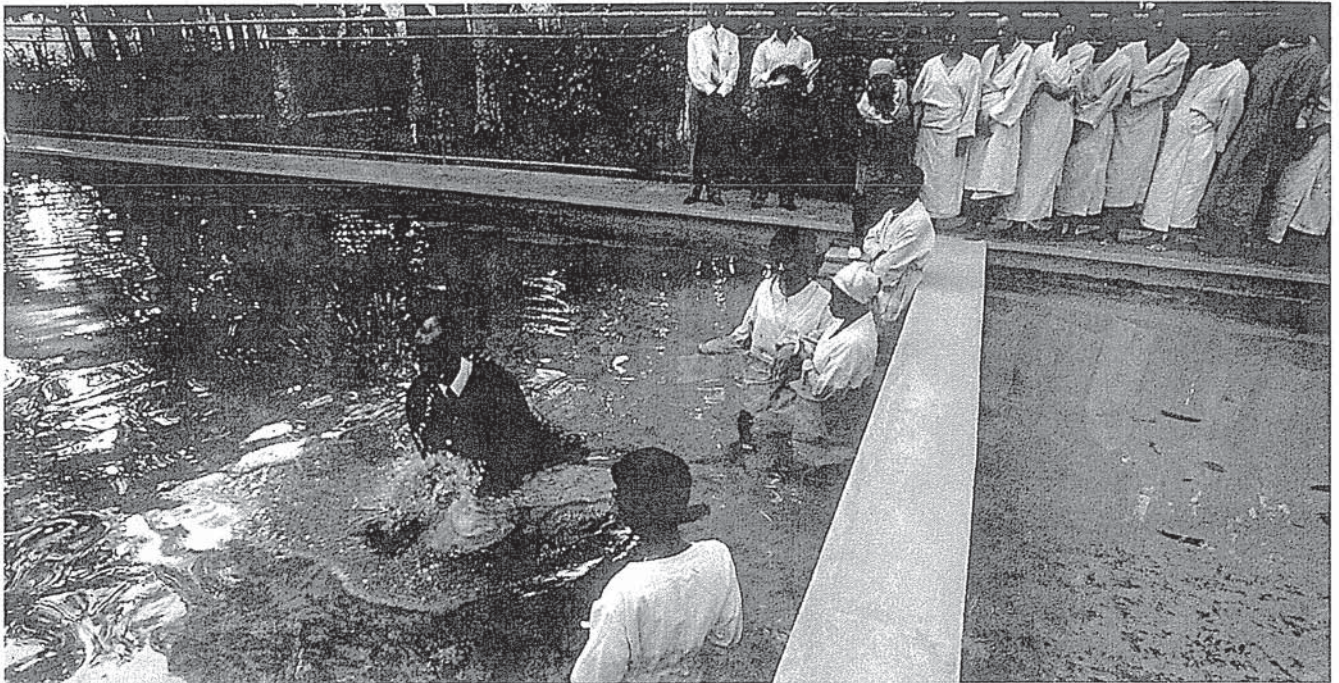


A service at an American Pentecostal church. Pentecostal churches take their name from Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and gave them the gift of tongues, the ability to speak in any language they pleased.



# Central Beliefs

Christianity is a religion of salvation. Human beings have become separated from God through disobedience. Jesus's life and death renewed that relationship giving an opportunity to enter into a special relationship with God. How this salvation occurs leads to the main beliefs of Christianity: the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Atonement.



**T**HERE ARE OVER 22,000 Christian groups and denominations and they all have different views about the person of Jesus. Most Christians believe, however, that Jesus was the Messiah (the Anointed, the Christ) and the Son of God. He died for all people as the Old Testament had prophesied; he rose from the dead, also as prophesied. This triumph over death was witnessed as true by his followers. Jesus's story is why Christians often say Jesus is alive now and lives in each person.

## CREEDS

The first followers of Jesus could rest their faith on what they knew and had seen. Quite soon, however, as other people came to the 'Way' they would be baptized, as Jesus was, into the faith of the Way. Statements of belief or 'creeds' arose as people came to join Jesus's followers and wanted to make a declaration of belief and be baptised. In doing so they put away their previous beliefs, were 'washed clean' and became Christians.

Two of the creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed (325 AD), are probably used most frequently today. They developed from the early creeds used at baptism and were intended to act as a safeguard against wrong beliefs.

## THE TRINITY

The most mysterious and least understood of all Christian beliefs is the Trinity. Christians believe there is, and always has been, only one God. Christians do, however, refer to God in three ways: as Father, the Creator; as Son, Jesus Christ; and as Holy Spirit, the power of God which people feel and experience in their lives. Thus God is expressed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

While Christians believe that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the words used to describe this belief never fully capture the experience. Human language falls short when trying to express the nature of God. What the Trinity expresses is the personal nature of God and therefore the personal relationship that exists between God and creation.

**New members of an Adventist church are baptized in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Like many evangelical denominations, the Adventists practise full-immersion adult baptism in indoor pools and, occasionally, natural sources of water, as opposed to the infant baptism from a font practised by, amongst others, Anglicans and Catholics.**



becoming a human being God revealed the extent of love He felt for creation; to be born and live as a complete human being was the only way to save all people.

An eighteenth-century, Spanish depiction of the Virgin Mary surrounded by the Holy Trinity. Christians believe in the threefold nature of God and that He has manifested Himself in three ways: as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## SALVATION AND ATONEMENT

What were people to be saved from? Christians believe that sin is what separates people from God. It is not simply wrong-doing but a misuse of the free will given to humans by God. The sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden was disobedience – a failure to do God's will. They were given responsibilities in the garden but disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree. The cycle of sin could only be broken by God's son, Jesus, being born



A Christ figure from an Easter passion play in Sri Lanka. The Passion of Christ is the term traditionally used to refer to his trial, crucifixion, death and resurrection; passion plays re-enact, often with great emotional force and dramatic skill, these events.

## THE INCARNATION

Virtually every Christian believes that, in some mysterious way, Jesus was fully God and fully human and by becoming fully human, God is willing to share our pains and difficulties. Jesus knew pain and humiliation, was frightened, cried, and shared human experience. In

on earth and, through his life, death and resurrection, removing the stain of sin.

Jesus, therefore, atones for the sins of the world and recreates at-one-ment, the bringing together of God and human beings. At the heart of Christian belief is Jesus Christ who brought victory over evil and death.

## PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden has been interpreted in many different ways by Christians. Some continue to believe its literal truth, although there is some evidence to suggest that Christians have never been fully in agreement about its historicity. Most Christians regard it as a powerful story illustrating an inherent tendency in humans to fail, to be less than perfect. What greater failure than to fail to follow their Creator God's words and commands? The story is a metaphor of what life could be like if humans accepted God's rule. The disobedience and deceit had to be healed and redeemed in some way, but humans could not do it alone, they needed God's help to heal the separation.

Belief in Jesus as God's Son and Saviour means, for Christians, that all sins are forgiven

and each person can enter into a special relationship with God. Christians believe that by believing in Jesus's life and teaching the original disobedience of Adam and Eve is healed. The outward sign of this is baptism, which symbolically 'washes away sin'.

The belief in the Trinity affirms there is one God, but Christians use three ways to express that oneness – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a statement of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, reflecting the personal relationship between God and creation.

For most Christians the mysterious nature of these beliefs is irrelevant. For them the experience of forgiveness, of being reconciled to God and feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit is more than enough. The doctrines of the Church are important but personal experience is much more significant.

*I believe in one God, the Father Almighty...  
And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only begotten Son of God  
And I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the Giver of Life,  
The forgiveness of sins....*

Extract from the 'Nicene Creed'