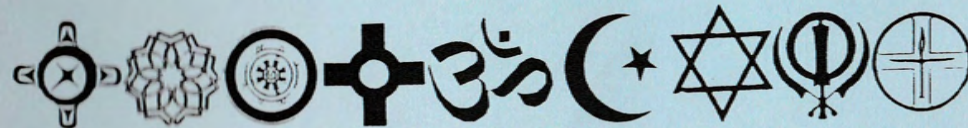


# RELIGIONS AT A GLANCE

by

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life. NSC members study Nichiren Daishonin's teaching through such books as the Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, and the organization's publication, *New Century*.

NCS or Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai of Canada is the organization of lay believers of the Nichiren Shoshu sect of Buddhism in Canada. Organized in 1975, NSC provides a base for the faith, practice and study of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings throughout Canada. The parent organization, named the Soka Gakkai or Value-Creation Society, was founded in 1930 in Japan. There are over 115 countries where Nichiren Shoshu believers live and practice Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

The umbrella organization of all lay believers, Soka Gakka International (SGI), was founded in 1975 under the leadership of Daisaku Ikeda. Mr. Ikeda has made extensive efforts visiting countries throughout the world in order to promote mutual understanding and friendship among people everywhere.

The establishment of social harmony and international peace has long been the collective aspiration of those practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. The revolution in character of one individual, awakened through this practice to a true respect for life, is the first step in this process.

This fundamental belief in absolute pacifism, founded on the dignity of human life is expressed in one of the founder's most important writings, *On Securing the Peace of the Land Through the Propagation of True Buddhism*, written in 1260. This writing is especially relevant today when our world is facing the possibility of nuclear annihilation.

The establishment of true respect for life and dignity of the individual, crucial to a lasting peace, is among the most difficult of all undertakings. The Buddhist movement, consisting of the steadfast efforts of the individual to promote in himself and others a respect for human life, is a gradual but sure process.

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## CHRISTIANITY

Jesus was a Jew, educated in his own tradition. The Hebrew scriptures consequently provided the foundation for the religious ideas of Christianity. Jesus, however, has influenced virtually every aspect of Christian belief, reshaping to some extent the tradition that he inherited.

Jesus called God "Abba", an intimate, personal term that one might use to refer to a close and beloved relative such as a parent or grandparent. Such a God is obviously loving and is intimately acquainted with people and their joys and sorrows. The love of God has been the most important belief in the Christian faith. It is the essence of the good news or gospel that Christians believe and try to proclaim in word and deed.

Jesus himself reflected the loving qualities of God in his own attitudes and behaviour. He befriended social outcasts, eating and drinking with hated tax collectors and prostitutes, and he treated women and children with a dignity and respect uncommon in his time. Jesus' stories and teachings emphasized the love God has for every creature. God, he said, sees the sparrow fall and knows the number of hairs on a person's head.

The fact that God has such an intimate and caring relationship with every creature affects the way they are to be understood and treated. Because God loves them they have value and deserve to be treated as valuable. Since God created the world it is believed to be basically good.

According to the Hebrew scriptures human beings are created in the image of God. The New Testament claims that Jesus was the "true image" or the "second Adam" who most accurately represents what human beings are meant by God to be like. To be the

image of God suggests that people share some of the creative and loving characteristics of God and are entrusted with some of the work of looking after the creation.

In the Book of Genesis human beings are said to be given "dominion" over the earth. In the life and teaching of Jesus we can see what having dominion is supposed to mean. Jesus said that he came "as one that serves" and that the greatest human being must be the servant of all. Dominion, therefore, is rightly understood in terms of servanthood or stewardship of the earth.

The use of the word image in the New Testament is more like a verb than a noun, suggesting that human beings are the image of God when they are in right relationship with God reflecting the glory of God or the Spirit of God in their lives. Christians believe that God's "Spirit is present in the world and can be received by people who then show by their behaviour the "fruits" of the Spirit, the greatest of which is love. The Spirit also gives "gifts" or talents that people can use in the work and in worship.

The reflection of God's Spirit is often missing in human behaviour. The image of God is lost when people fail to have a right relationship with God and with their fellow creatures. Sin, in Christian belief, is whatever is "against the Spirit". It consists of serving something or someone rather than God. People sin when they place a higher value on some created thing than on the Creator. Sin is a state of separation, alienation or estrangement from God. In this sense, social systems and corporate structures of various kinds can be sinful in as far as they fail to realize God's purposes for them and are under the control of something that is alien to God.

Jesus, like the Hebrew prophets, condemned the sinful distortion of life and society and proclaimed the promise of a better world under the Reign or Kingdom of God. He called for people to repent and believe in the good news of the Reigning of God. The word "repent" translates the Hebrew *Tsuvah* which means "return". Jesus' famous parable of the Prodigal Son illustrated the message of *Tsuvah* or return that can be found in the biblical writings of all the Hebrew prophets. For Jesus, as for them, salvation consisted of

individuals and social systems returning to an intimate relationship with God and a faithful reflection of God's purposes. Most Christians believe that the intimacy with God does continue after death but its chief purpose is to change life now and to make the world a better place, as God intends it to be.

Jesus himself represented humankind in the process of salvation. He was "full of the Spirit" and practised what he preached about the Reigning of God in his own person. His life was consistently a living sacrifice of love for God and for others, culminating in the supreme sacrifice at his death. In the end he chose to surrender his life rather than running away or resisting his enemies with force, even though he had never hesitated to oppose the wrong that his enemies were doing.

Christians believe that God raised Jesus from death, thereby vindicating his "way of the cross" and giving a sign of promise to all who follow in Jesus' way of salvation. By raising Jesus from death God showed that the ultimate victory does not belong to the destructive powers who are against the Spirit. The power of sacrificial love will ultimately overcome the wrong that seems to win in the short run.

The early Christians were converted to be disciples of Jesus by the experience and reports of his resurrection and by the experience of receiving the Spirit of God that Jesus himself had reflected. When they realized that Jesus was truly Godly in his life and message they were ready to call him Lord and to follow him.

In the centuries following Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the Christian church developed the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in order to try and express adequately the reality of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit who are three yet profoundly one in the process of creating and fulfilling the world.

The Christian church is the body of people who identify themselves by the name of Jesus Christ. In biblical language the "name" of someone stands for the spirit or identity or meaning of the one named. Thus, to act in the name of God means to act in accordance



with the Spirit or Word or meaning of God. The church was started when the early disciples received the Spirit of God which was also the Spirit of Jesus and thereafter believed and lived in the name or Spirit of Christ.

The sacrament of baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is when a person receives the identity of Christian discipleship and joins the body of people in a church congregation or denomination who have a similar understanding of God, Christ and the Spirit. The sacrament of Holy Communion or Eucharist is an act of remembrance of Jesus' sacrificial life and a thankful receiving again of his living Spirit as present in the ongoing community of his followers.

The Christian church believes itself called to proclaim the gospel that Jesus preached and lived, and to show people what Christ is like so that they may be convinced to follow him. To be sure, this evangelistic (from the word "evangel" meaning "good news") effort has not always been carried out wisely or in ways consistent with the message of love itself. The good news has sometimes turned out to be bad news for those who were the objects of misguided Christian evangelism. The imperfections and failures of Christian people, however, do not necessarily invalidate the meaning of God's love, although they certainly do not help to commend it or convey it to others.

Christians believe that, despite their human imperfections in every era, they are joined together by common bonds of Christ and the Spirit. This communion of saints, as it is called, creates a sense of solidarity for Christians with other Christians from the past and present. Contrary to popular opinion, saints are not perfect people but people who authentically express the Spirit of Christ, albeit ambiguously. The faith and insights of those who have followed Jesus in the past nurture the faith and insights of Christians in the present. Their love and other spiritual qualities continue to be a source of inspiration. So Christians typically sing the songs, pray the prayers and confess the beliefs of those who have lived the faith before them.

Christian hopes for the future vary much in detail but generally follow the Hebrew pattern of hoping for a just and peaceful world united by the Spirit of Christ and realizing the Reign or Kingdom of God in every aspect of the creation.

There are many variations in Christian beliefs and expressed by the doctrines and practices of different denominations. Not all Christian churches have sacraments, for example. But all are trying to express the message of God's love as it was embodied in Jesus and is present in the Holy Spirit.

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