



The Asian & Abrahamic Religions:

A Divine Encounter in America

A documentary by
Gerald Krell & Meyer Odze

STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction to the *Study Guide*

(Note: Menu on page 7)

As an aid for classroom, group or personal use, we have divided the subject matter of this documentary into twenty-nine thematic units as highlighted in the “Menu.” While there may be some overlap between categories, each of the individual “chapters” of the Menu may be viewed and discussed as a unit of the whole.

Most of the questions found in each chapter of the Study Guide are tied directly to specific scenes, visuals, and/or commentary provided by scholars, religious leaders, or laypeople. The additional discussion questions found in each thematic unit usually focus on the broader religious, social or historical context; they allow a further synthesis of the material by seeking to draw out the similarities and differences in relation to the other Asian or Abrahamic religions.

Every classroom or study group has its own distinctive make-up and character. Groups will vary in size, religious identity, and level of familiarity with the subject matter. Thus not all questions in the Study Guide will be appropriate for every discussion or discussion group. Some questions will be more relevant for people of one religious tradition than another. Discussion questions vary from a more introductory level to the more advanced. Some questions are for high school and academy age, others for college age, and a few are geared for those with a more sophisticated level of understanding. Discussion leaders are urged to select in advance the questions most suitable for the make-up and needs of their particular group. The social and religious awareness level will vary, group to group.

Discussion leaders will also want to supplement the questions found below with their own questions, each one uniquely adapted for their group. Additional questions may be generated by viewing the documentary in advance of leading a discussion. Other questions may arise from prior knowledge and experience acquired from working with Asian and/or Abrahamic religions. In addition, leaders will discover further ideas for discussion by engaging in background reading and research in encyclopedias, books and articles dealing with the various relevant world religions. Searching the web will provide other important material, including visuals.

This Study Guide could not have been produced and published without the assistance of several key people contributing their expertise and/or personal skills to this project. I especially wish to express my appreciation to Dr. D.C. Rao, primary consultant in the subject matter. Marian Desrosiers, PH.D, Formal Advisor for the National Council of Social Studies, and member of the executive board. In addition, special thanks go to Kevin Capel, my teaching assistant at Gordon College who formatted and typed the manuscript and to Adam Krell of Auteur Productions, associate producer and videographer of the documentary, who assisted with editing.

Furthermore, I wish to acknowledge with much appreciation the professional guidance and encouragement of my good friends at Auteur Productions, Jerry Krell and Meyer Odze, co-producers of this educational documentary. In this present Study Guide published by Auteur, it is particularly satisfying that this project marks the completion of a trilogy of study guides which we have produced together (*Jews & Christians: A Journey of Faith; Three Faiths, One God: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* and *The Asian & Abrahamic Religions: A Divine Encounter in America*).

As an educator, my hope is this present documentary and Study Guide will stimulate a fresh, new world of learning and provoke some deep thought and personal re-alignment in attitude and in action. In addition, may it serve as a vital educational catalyst for building bridges of sensitive understanding, mutual respect and positive engagement among people of all faith communities.

Marvin R. Wilson, Ph.D.

Primary scholar and study guide author, *Christians & Jews: A Journey of Faith* (Auteur).

Study guide author, *Three Faiths, One God: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Auteur)

THEMATIC RATIONALE

The study guide will compare similarities and differences in religious beliefs and practices that the Asian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism) have with the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). In neighborhoods, in classrooms, in professional settings and in the public square, Americans are discovering the need to understand the religious values and customs of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains and others. Many peoples of the western world are hard pressed to begin to understand and appreciate these seemingly strange and unfamiliar eastern religions whose presence is well established, and growing on American soil. How have eastern religions influenced the development of American society and culture? What accommodations will yet be necessary if our educational system and social institutions are to be declared “culturally competent?” It is important that educators teach tolerance, cooperation and inclusivity in forming attitudes of respect and understanding of different religions.

“The Asian and Abrahamic Religions: A Divine Encounter in America” explores the beliefs, practices and rituals of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism. It examines the similarities and differences with the Abrahamic religions, how they perceive each other, confront prejudice and stereotypes and how they can understand and respect one another. In a world where religion plays so central a role in social, political, and economic events, as well as in the lives of communities and individuals, there is a critical need for ongoing reflection upon and understanding of religious traditions, issues, questions, and values.

The study guide for our educational outreach campaign assumes importance for the following reasons:

It helps students toward the acceptance of others and an appreciation of their heritage. Students are avid consumers of information provided by media, and the classroom can be an excellent place to discuss and deconstruct stereotyping and negative portrayals of cultural groups. Academia increasingly understands that media educates more people about issues regarding ethnicity and race than all other sources of education available to U.S. citizens.

It is imperative that students (the future leaders of the country) who attend schools with diverse populations, develop an understanding of the perspectives of youths from different backgrounds, and learn to function in a multicultural, multiethnic environment. It is in these impressionable years that negative attitudes are formed and become increasingly ingrained in their belief system and difficult to change as youngsters mature into adulthood. Therefore it is vital for educators to help develop citizens who have an understanding of civic responsibility in a global community.

America is a global and ethnic melting pot, a land of great cultural and religious diversity. For a number of decades formal interfaith conversations have typically involved Christians and Jews, or Christians, Jews and Muslims. Increasingly, however, adherents of these traditional “Abrahamic faiths” are becoming aware of and thoughtfully beginning to engage devout representatives of various Asian religions.

Our study guide used in conjunction with the documentary allows students to explore some of the holy texts and sacred practices of the not-so-familiar major Asian religions found in America. Through interviews with scholars and spiritual leaders, and the filming of on-site religious observances, the documentary uncovers those timeless strands common to the human condition and expressed in parallel ways in different religions. While no two religions are identical, the discovery and highlighting of many of these existential, universal strands is vital to understanding culture, religion and the self-quest that historically binds the human family together. These common concerns and connecting religious links include perceptions of the Divine or Ultimate Truth, spirituality, worship, nature of religious leadership, communal life-cycle events, the after-life, the challenge of modernity, engagement of the religious “other,” and approaches toward establishing a global community of justice and peace.

The program’s educational outreach message is clear. The Asian populations in America provide a great challenge, and opportunity. We can no longer choose to ignore or simply tolerate the other. Rather we must celebrate the opportunity for interreligious understanding this brings. The study guide used in conjunction with the documentary “The Asian and Abrahamic Religions: A Divine Encounter in America,” cuts to the very core of cross-cultural awareness. Its cogent content of religious and cultural diversity should lead to changed perspectives and changed behavior toward the other.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

The study guide in conjunction with the documentary will provide a media resource for social studies programs to support classroom experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity so that the learner can:

STANDARD I - CULTURE

Knowledge – Learners will understand:

1. The influence of belief systems such as religions on culture.
2. Changes in culture accommodate different ideas and beliefs.

Process – Learners will be able to:

1. Compare similarities and differences among cultures in meeting human needs and concerns.
2. Apply an understanding of the influence of culture on traditions and beliefs.
3. Articulate the importance and challenges of cultural diversity in a society.

Product – Learners demonstrate understanding by:

1. Sharing information about a cultural group in your school, workplace, or community and issues that they face.
2. Presenting a current or past problem in the news and describing ways that help our understanding of the religious tradition.

STANDARD IV - INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY

Knowledge – Learners will understand:

1. The importance of family and religious traditions in shaping behavior.
2. The influence of social norms on forming identity.

Process – Learners will be able to:

1. Describe the ways religious traditions contribute to the development of self.
2. Analyze the role of values and beliefs in the development of personal identity.
3. Evaluate the effect of stereotyping and discrimination on individuals and groups.

Product – Learners demonstrate understanding by:

Presenting similarities and differences in individual values derived from different religious traditions.

STANDARD V – INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

Knowledge – Learners will understand:

1. The role of institutions in forming social values of individuals and groups.
2. The ways in which institutions maintain and change individuals and groups.

Process – Learners will be able to:

1. Analyze institutional influences on people, events and elements of culture.
2. Examine belief systems basic to specific religious traditions in history and in contemporary movements.

Product – Learners demonstrate understanding by:

Discussing real world problems and solutions for individuals and groups in connection with institutions.

STANDARD VI – POWER, AUTHORITY AND GOVERNANCE

Knowledge – Learners will understand:

1. Civic competence requires an understanding of how different groups and nations resolve conflicts.
2. In a democratic republic individual rights are protected within the context of majority rule.

Process – Learners will be able to:

1. Describe the relationships between individual and group rights and decisions for a just society.
2. Examine persistent issues and social problems that reflect civil rights.

Product – Learners demonstrate understanding by:

Applying understanding about the practices of religious traditions to the role of citizens as participants in governing.

STANDARD IX - GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

Knowledge – Learners will understand:

1. Increasing globalization has created opportunities and challenges.
2. Global interdependence requires an understanding of the connections among individuals, groups, institutions, nations and world communities to inform ethical decision-making.
3. Global conflicts often arise from ethnic and religious enmity.

Process – Learners will be able to:

1. Analyze the causes and consequences of lack of understanding about religious traditions as they affect society's actions toward ethnic or religious groups.
2. Explain how understanding a society's belief system can facilitate solutions to global problems.
3. Illustrate how individual decisions and behaviors connect the global with the personal.

Product – Learners demonstrate understanding by:

Writing or presenting critical global issues relating to promotion of or repulsion of a particular religious tradition.

Menu – Instructional Modules

Part I – Connections between World Cultures, World Religions & World History

1. Introduction: Respect and Understanding
2. Hinduism: Spiritual Oneness
3. The People Across The River
4. Buddhism: Becoming the Buddha
5. Sikhism: The First Guru, A Revolutionary Activist
6. The Abrahamics Meet a Religion Older Than Their Own . . . Hinduism
7. Hinduism: God or Gods?
8. God or No God: The Buddhist View
9. Sikh View of God
10. Beneath The Turban
11. Buddhist Beliefs: Commonalities, Differences
12. The Monastic Life: A Boot Camp For The Soul
13. Hinduism: What is Shared? What is Different?
14. Sikhism: A Religion of the Book
15. A Great Hindu Epic: The Wedding

Part II – Eastern Religious Traditions in U.S. History

16. Early Immigration: A Story of Contact (Chinese & Japanese Buddhists)
17. 300th Anniversary Of The Guru Granth Sahib: An American Day –
Celebration of Sikhs in Yuba City, California
18. The Transcendentalists (Walden & Thoreau)
19. Hinduism Enters The American Imagination
20. Honoring Their Buddhist Roots
21. Gandhi, Jainism And American Civil Rights
22. Asian Religions Become “Cool”
23. Lord Krishna’s Birthday
24. Yoga
25. Meditation
26. Martial Arts
27. Interfaith Marriage: The Challenges
28. Between The Generations
29. Conclusion

1. Introduction

- (a) How would you describe or define these concepts: religion, faith, and belief? Can you give an example of how each word differs in application?
- (b) In your experience, why does a person participate in a religious service at a church, temple, mosque or synagogue? What other ways do people participate in the practice of religion?
- (c) Why do people have different religious faiths?
- (d) Why have Asian religions remained a mystery to many Americans?
- (e) Have you personally had any exposure to or knowledge of any of the beliefs, practices, or rituals of the Asian religions? Explain the source(s) and the extent of this exposure.
- (f) According to Bishop John Chane, what is the “common connecting point” that binds Christians to the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism? Do you agree with the bishop? Would you wish to offer any other important common connecting points?
- (g) Are there situations you encounter in your own life where you would find useful the knowledge and insights you have gained from this documentary? Give some examples.
- (h) Prior to viewing this documentary, what do you believe are some of the many prejudices and stereotypes found in the Western world concerning the Asian religions?
- (i) How has this documentary been helpful in addressing these issues? Give personal concrete illustrations from the documentary you found particularly useful or illuminating.
- (j) What have you previously considered to be the most significant features of the Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Sikh religions? Has viewing the documentary changed your views on them? If so, how?
- (k) What surprised you most in the presentations and in the religious practices that were shown in this documentary?

2. Hinduism: Spiritual Oneness

- (a) Dr. Diana Eck uses the expression, “theology of religious pluralism.” What do you understand by the term “religious pluralism”? How does it relate to Hindu immigrants in America today? In regard to the study of world religions, distinguish how religious pluralism differs from the terms “exclusivism” and “inclusivism.”
- (b) How do you define the term “monotheism”? Are Hindus monotheistic? How do Hindus reconcile the multiplicity of gods with their concept of “oneness”?
- (c) A woman who has visited houses of worship in many different religious traditions states, “any God you put in front of me I will worship because it’s the faith that matters not who you worship.” Do you agree or disagree? Discuss.
- (d) According to Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, “the Hindu way of life is not an ‘ism’ with any concretized ideas about anything.” Rather, he points out, Hindus comprise a whole culture aimed at human liberation; the prayers and chants do not emphasize the individual but rather the inclusiveness of life and the well-being of every creature on this planet.” How does this emphasis compare with your own religious tradition? In this modern age of increasing scarcity and of ecological and environmental concerns, discuss the importance of the Hindu concern about caring for every creature on this planet.

3. The People Across the River

- (a) How did Hindus come to be known as Hindus?
- (b) Many of the influential civilizations of antiquity grew up along great rivers. The Nile River, Tigris River, Euphrates River and Indus River are among the important rivers. Francis X. Clooney refers to the “people across the river” (the Indus River) as the Hindu people. The valley of the Indus River gave rise to an advanced Asian civilization from about 2500-1500 BCE. Compare and contrast this civilization to that of Mesopotamia (literally, “between the rivers”), the world of Sumer, Akkad, and Babylonia. Mesopotamia was the home of Abraham and the biblical patriarchs. Like the Hindu people, the place of the Israelites origin is described as “Aram of the Two Rivers” (Genesis 24:10). Explain how life along a river influenced the development of religious life and rituals and practices of those who lived near that river. Provide examples from Hindu religion, Egyptian religion, and Mesopotamian religion.
- (c) Dr. Diana Eck states that the most important thing Christians, Jews, and Muslims might learn from Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains is “another tone, another landscape of religiousness.” Discuss what you believe Dr. Eck means by these words.
- (d) Karen Armstrong refers to the axial age (ca. 900 – 200 BCE) in China, India, Israel and Greece as when the great traditions which have continued to nourish humanity have their roots. All these traditions, she emphasizes, developed an ideal of compassion, and that expression of compassion had to extend outside one’s own particular group to include everybody. Discuss the important role compassion plays within the Asian and Abrahamic religions. In the international pursuit of peace and justice among nations and different religious traditions, what are some of the main enemies that seek to thwart compassion?
- (e) According to Dr. Romila Thapar, one of the important questions found in all religions is the notion of the sacred. She says, “you can pick up any object and imbue it with sacredness.” In your view, what makes an object sacred? Is a holy building (temple) of the same order of holiness as found in a person (priest) or event (sacred festival)? Should everything in a religion be termed “sacred” or “holy” or just certain areas, people, or objects? What are the characteristics and boundaries of holiness? Discuss. What role do sacred objects play in religious practice? Give examples from both Asian and Abrahamic traditions. How do Jews Christians and Muslims differ in their understanding of the term, Holy Land? Do you have an object, a place, or a person more than special but in fact sacred? For example, what kinds of places are sacred? Does a church building or an outdoor religious shrine have sacredness? For example, Pauline Maier in her book *Sacred*

Scripture states that the document, the *Declaration of Independence*, has been at times treated as sacred.

- (f) Karen Armstrong points out that major world religions all developed much the same kind of insights. Assuming Armstrong is correct, summarize some of those insights common to world religions. Does any religion have the right to claim uniqueness? How may the exclusive claims to “Truth” or unique qualities of a religion be tested and/or validated?
- (g) Are all world religions, in the end, basically the same? Discuss. Must a religion in any sense be true rather than simply beautiful or meaningful, satisfying and fulfilling? Do most people choose their religion or are they “born into it”? What are the pros and cons of both approaches? Discuss.
- (h) If religions are so similar, what are the sources of conflicts among religious peoples?
- (i) Fire altars are very important in many Hindu rites. Diana Eck states the fire altar is really the primordial focus of worship. Hindu images and temples are consecrated at a fire altar in which the divine is invited to be present and then that presence is transferred to the object. Discuss how fire relates to an understanding of the divine and of certain rituals in Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity.
- (j) According to Srimati Kamala, Hinduism claims no specific individual founder in any one location at any one time. The religion is comprised of the teachings of many religious teachers in India over hundreds of years. Discuss how Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism differ from Hinduism in regard to a named founder. In your view, does the anonymity of a religious tradition affect the importance and authority of that tradition? In short, is the message or teaching more important than the name or authority connected to it? Discuss.
- (k) The Veda comprises the oldest sacred works of Hinduism. What contributions do you think Vedic teachings have made to civilization?
- (l) Discuss the difference in approach between the Abrahamic religions that emphasize faith in scriptural teaching followed by appropriate action and the Eastern religions that give primacy to direct personal experience of the Divine.

4. Buddhism: Becoming the Buddha

- (a) Summarize the family background and early formation experiences of Siddhartha Gautama, also known as “the Buddha.” How did the travels of Buddha affect his teachings?
- (b) What triggered the transformation of Prince Siddhartha into a spiritual seeker? What questions was he seeking to answer?
- (c) According to Akbar Ahmed, at first Buddha lived in a “cocoon” in isolation, unaware of illness and death. One night, however, he gets up and walks out to begin a quest to discover the source of pain and pleasure. Discuss the dangers of isolationism, social seclusion and separation in regard to how such a life might limit an understanding and authentic grasp of one’s religious philosophy and ethic. Beside sacred texts, what role should tradition, reason, and experience have in shaping one’s perspective on religion?
- (d) Followers of Buddha look upon him as a Teacher, not as a prophet who received and spoke a divine revelation. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, however, look to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, respectively, as prophetic voices of the will of God. Has this difference had an impact on the acceptability of Buddhism as a religion in America? Discuss.
- (e) What were the experiences that led Buddha to advocate a “middle path”? What do you understand by the term “middle path”?
- (f) Buddha’s approach is not imposition of his answers on others. While Buddha’s experiences do provide guidance, Buddha encourages each individual to come to terms with their own beliefs. Discuss the deductive or instructional role of religion vis-à-vis an inductive approach of self-discovery often shaped by trial and error. How important is it to study the examples and life’s experiences of those individuals found in sacred texts? What dynamics are necessary for one to personally and actively own one’s faith as opposed to being passively “born into it”? Discuss.

5. Sikhism: The First Guru, A Revolutionary Activist

- (a) The founder of the Sikh religion is Guru Nanak, a 15th century revolutionary activist. According to Sikhism, after staying under water for three days, Guru Nanak received a revelation from God. The revelation was that he must go and tell the world that human beings are equal in every respect. Guru Nanak proclaimed there is no Hindu, no Muslim, or any other religion; men and women are equal in every respect. Discuss the implications of this revolutionary teaching in 15th century India and elsewhere.
- (b) What was the social and political context in which Guru Nanak lived and preached? What impact did that have on Sikh teachings and practice?
- (c) Founded in Northern India, Sikhism is one of the youngest of the world's religious traditions. Sikhism combines elements of Hinduism and Islam. Sikhism teaches God is the creator and thus is to be the sole object of human worship. However, as Dr. Rajwant Singh points out in the documentary, "God is not sitting in place keeping track of our actions; God is surrounding us; he's part of whatever is happening and we must feel God's presence right here." Discuss the emphasis of Sikhism that one may have an immediate consciousness of God, perceiving his presence by subjective experience. How does this compare with what Abrahamic religions say about ways to experience God? Discuss nature, reason, history, the human conscience, intuition, mysticism, dreams and visions as possible avenues for "knowing" God. Which of these, and others you might identify, are possible sources for divine knowledge in your respective religious tradition? Discuss.
- (d) What are some of the main teachings of Sikhism? Why is Guru Nanak described as a "revolutionary activist"?
- (e) According to Dr. Rajwant Singh, Sikhism teaches there is no enlightenment after death; it must be sought now. There is no salvation after death; salvation is while you are living. Many religions emphasize the futuristic aspect of salvation. Discuss the Sikh view that says salvation is now, not after death.
- (f) The word *Sikh* means a student of life, a disciple who wishes to learn. Discuss the importance and methods of learning, study, and discipleship found among the Asian and Abrahamic religions.

- (g) A guru is a teacher or guide, one highly respected due to his attainment of spiritual insight. A guru's role is to take a student from darkness to light. Why is the guru given so much importance in Asian religions?
- (h) Guru Nanak strongly emphasized the pursuit of individual and collective liberation with a view toward becoming one with God. Two of Sikhism's strongest tenets are a commitment to hard work and sharing with one's fellow human beings. Compare and contrast these emphases in other religions. Discuss.
- (i) Why is the sharing of food such an important part of Sikhism?
- (j) What is the religious importance to Sikhs of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India?

6. The Abrahamics Meet a Religion Older Than Their Own... Hinduism

- (a) Rabbi David Rosen points out that Jews and Hindus represent the two oldest religious civilizations in the world. Give specific examples of what Rabbi Rosen means by stating that Jews and Hindus have “values, teachings, and traditions that have remarkable resemblance and resonance with one another.” Discuss.
- (b) Dr. Akbar Ahmed points out that when Muslims arrived in India they saw what they believed were idols and responded in a “very Abrahamic way.” Discuss the sources of the Abrahamic objections to idol worship. How applicable were these objections to the use of images in Hindu religious life? What alternative responses might the Muslims have used when first meeting the Hindus?
- (c) The documentary mentions the Sufis, a mystical movement of Islam, a group “able to reach out and connect spiritually with the Hindus without compromising their own faith.” What does Dr. Ahmed mean by the above statement? What differentiated the Sufis from other Muslims who sent to India? How did that help establish contact with the Hindus?
- (d) Discuss the role that religious symbols and images play in religious practice. Is there a difference between symbols and images? How are they used in the Asian and Abrahamic religions? What value do they have?

7. Hinduism: God or Gods?

- (a) Compare the meaning of the terms “swami,” “guru” and “acharya” used in Hinduism. How are they different? Are they similar to or different from the term “rabbi”?
- (b) Rabbi David Rosen says that when “the delegation of the chief rabbi of Israel, which represents the orthodox establishment, meets with Hindu leaders, it’s a significant message.” What is the message?
- (c) Rabbi David Rosen points out that there is a western perception held especially by Jews, Christians, and Muslims that certain religions such as Hinduism involve some form of idol worship. The rabbi challenges this type of thinking by stating, “Biblical opposition to idolatry is not an objection to an abstraction; it is an objection to a way of life that was seen as fundamentally immoral.” Discuss idolatry as immoral types of behavior rather than simply conflict over visible likeness or representations of the one Supreme Being.
- (d) Ganesha, Krishna, and Rama are among the most popular deities worshiped in Hinduism. In the documentary, Professor Prema Pandurang explains that “it’s the same Lord who has several manifestations.” Discuss Pandurang’s explanation. Do you think Hindus worship one God or many gods?
- (e) Sri Sri Ravi Shankar observes concerning Hinduism, “the spirit which loves diversity must love its expression in diverse ways as well.” Discuss diversity of religious expression within religious traditions. Why does diversity often seem to disturb the comfort level of people? Is uniformity possible in religion? What are people praying for when they pray for religious unity in the world?
- (f) Much of the beauty of the images of Hindu gods is in their colors and variety. Some have blue skin, many heads or hands, or animals by their side. Why? How do you react to these pictures? Some people look at the figures as frightening, confusing or humorous. Much of Hindu imagery reinforces the symbol of an all knowing deity and omnipresent power, as well as the androgynous nature of humanity. Other imagery suggests the power of the animal within the religious figure. Do we have anything like this in our society (sports mascots) or Western religious imagery?
- (g) Ganesha (also called Ganapati) is the elephant-headed Hindu deity. Dr. Diana Eck points out that Hindus often make festival images of deities, brightly painting them. Hindus

invite the presence of the divine to indwell the image during the festival and then at the end of it, they give God leave, so to speak, to go and commit that image to the earth or to the water, let it go back to the elements again. She adds, “the image is a human creation for the period of worship and therefore can also be disposed of and the worship is not dependent upon that image per se.” Does it make a difference whether the image worshipped is disposed of or not at the end of worship? Why or why not? What are its implications for the view that Hindus worship idols? Is there a difference between Christians worshipping Jesus, one who temporarily appeared on this earth, and Hindus worshipping a temporary image of a deity? Discuss.

- (h) The documentary describes the significance of the various physical features of Lord Ganesha. What is the spiritual value of such symbolism applied to a specific form of God?
- (i) Francis Clooney suggests some of the images of Hindu deities may seem wild or unfamiliar at first. But, he observes that these seemingly strange forms are not so much to be taken literally but rather “suggestively” or “imaginatively.” He indicates they open the imagination of the Hindu people through the visual and sensual so they may consider the possibilities of the greatness of God. Discuss Clooney’s observation. Do we have parallels to this same thing in religions other than Hinduism? What is the appropriate use of symbolism in religion? Discuss.
- (j) As a Hindu, Professor Pandurang points to the natural world (rivers, mountains, trees, birds) and says, “We see the Lord in everything and we worship him in everything.” Is this the same as “nature worship”? Does the recognition of the divine presence in nature have a role in caring for the natural environment? How?
- (k) In the documentary, Swami Dayananda Saraswati refers to the joint declaration of the Jewish Rabbinate and the Hindu swamis as agreeing that, “Yes, yes, Hindus also worship one God.” Discuss whether Hinduism is widely acknowledged as a monotheistic faith in interfaith circles. At any contemporary interreligious “round table” each participant has the right to define himself/herself and one’s own specific religious identity. Would you personally be accepting and comfortable with a Hindu who states, “Hindus, like Jews, Christians, and Muslims, also worship one God.” Why or why not? Discuss.
- (l) Rabbi Rosen states from a Jewish perspective concerning Hindus, “We do not see you as immoral idolaters but as partners in seeking to give guidance to humanity on how to lead one’s life in a manner that is most spiritually enriching and constructively contributory to society.” Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

8. God or No God? The Buddhist View

- (a) Karen Armstrong points out that while Buddha believed in absolute transcendence and did not deny the existence of God, he preferred to talk about Nirvana as the safe haven, the ultimate peace, the truth, rather than talk about God. Discuss how this approach differs from the theocentricity of the Abrahamic religions. What are its implications?
- (b) In the Abrahamic religions, says Dr. Imtiyaz Yusuf, one encounters the ultimate reality from the “outside” as God intervenes in history and reveals himself. In Buddhism, however, the ultimate reality is encountered within the individual as Nirvana or enlightenment. Compare God as creator, revealer and redeemer (an Abrahamic view) to God as the very deepest reality, the very ground of one’s being, the very source of one’s existence (the Buddhist view, as stated by Professor Makransky).
- (c) Father Francis Tiso points out that a main focus of Buddhism is upon spiritual transformation, not theological speculation. Buddhism, states Tiso, seeks to bring an individual to the point of being truly free, liberated from the suffering, anguish, delusions and the confusions of the human condition. Compare and contrast the approach of Buddhism concerning deliverance and enlightenment to that found in Judaism and Christianity. Discuss.
- (d) Imam Feisal Rauf points to the warning by Mohammed to focus on following his teachings rather than to contemplate on the nature of God. He notes this as a similarity between Sufis and Buddhists. In your own opinion, what is similar and what is different between the approach of Buddhists and Sufis to spiritual growth?
- (e) Rabbi Harold White explains that in Judaism God says, “I am not the path. I am showing you the path.” He says Judaism and Buddhism share that in common. Comment on Rabbi White’s statement. How does this differ from the approach of Christianity and Islam?
- (f) What is a “Jubu” or Jewish Buddhist? Many Jews consider the term “Jewish Christian” to be an oxymoron or a contradiction of terms. Is the expression “Jewish Buddhist” a similar contradiction, or is it different? Discuss the question of when a Jew ceases to be a Jew. In your view, how many of the features and practices of another faith may one adopt without being a formal convert to that faith? What is the role of beliefs or doctrines as opposed to ethics and culture in forming one’s religious identity? In defining a person’s

religious identity, how important is the actual ritual practice of a religion, within community? Can one genuinely practice more than one religion at a time? In what areas are the greatest conflicts most likely to arise for “Jewish Buddhists” and other combinations of dual religious identity? Discuss.

- (g) Father Tiso states Buddhism attracts people because it simply says, “we are in trouble; let’s try to deal with the trouble, then deal later with the metaphysical and mysterious issues related to the realm of the eternal.” Personally, are you comfortable with this approach to religion? What role should epistemology (questions of truth) have in choosing one’s religious community? Are all religions equal? Discuss.

9. Sikh View of God

- (a) How is God described in the Sikh scriptures? Compare this to the concept of God in Judaism, in Islam, and in Hinduism.
- (b) Bishop Chane emphasizes Sikhs are very monotheistic and in many respects their prayer life is similar to that of Christians. Coming from his Christian perspective, explain what Bishop Chane means by stating, “Sikhs are not anthropomorphic as we might understand our relationship with God through Jesus.” How significant is this difference?
- (c) According to Sikh teaching, God is formless; it is not possible to see God with the human eye. How does this teaching compare with Judaism? The Jewish Scriptures state God walks back and forth in the Garden of Eden and God physically wrestles with Jacob until his hip is put out of joint. How has Judaism understood such “appearances” of God? Are Sikhs and Jews that far apart in their definition of God? What does Sikhism mean in its teaching that humans may pursue and achieve liberation, and thus become one with God?
- (d) The tenth Guru of the Sikhs ordained that Sikhs shall not cut their hair. How does your spiritual tradition view long hair?

10. Beneath the Turban

- (a) What is the significance of the turban worn by Sikhs?
- (b) According to Rabbi Rosen, what does a covered head symbolize in the Jewish tradition? In the Torah, what did the long, uncut hair of the Nazirites signify? In first century Christianity, summarize why the apostle Paul may have instructed women in the church at Corinth to have long hair. What other traditions require a person's head to be covered in prayer?
- (c) Long hair and turbans have posed a challenge to Sikhs, especially after 9/11/2001. Discuss why this has been the case. What is needed to remedy this situation?
- (d) Discuss "modesty of dress" in the Asian and Abrahamic religions. How have the challenges of modernity and secularization affected patterns of dress within the above faith communities?

11. Buddhist Beliefs: Commonalities, Differences

- (a) Bishop Chane draws a parallel between Jesus entering the wilderness for forty days to meditate and pray and a similar emphasis of life style found in the life of Buddha. Discuss the role of prayer, meditation, and reflection in Buddhism today. In what way is the wilderness experience of Jesus an inspirational model for contemporary Christians? In many religions prayer, meditation and fasting are practiced. Why? In what way is place and time important to each practice? Define asceticism. Would you call Christianity and Buddhism ascetic religions? Discuss. Were the Essenes of Second Temple Judaism ascetic? Discuss. What role should periods of withdrawal, social seclusion, and even self-imposed austerity have in forming a person's character and religious identity? Discuss.
- (b) Dr. Imtiyaz Yusuf refers to the eightfold path Buddha taught for righteous living, a path that would lead one from a human existence of suffering to ultimate enlightenment of Nirvana. Yusuf suggests the eightfold path of Buddhism is similar to the Jewish path of the Torah and the Muslim path of Sharia. The eightfold path in brief is: 1) right understanding, 2) right thought, 3) right speech, 4) right action, 5) right livelihood or occupation, 6) right effort, 7) right mindfulness, and 8) right concentration (meditation). In what way is the Buddhist path (marga) parallel to the teachings of Judaism and Islam? What fundamental differences are also apparent? Discuss.
- (c) According to Buddhism, its three most precious "jewels" are the Buddha (the Teacher), Dharma (the universalist truth proclaimed by Buddha) and Sangha (the assembly of monks that has studied and taught Buddhist teachings). Discuss the foundational aspects of Buddhism. Do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have parallel emphases? Discuss.
- (d) According to the documentary, the highest meaning of the word Dharma is for a person to be free from human limitation, pain, and suffering to experience the bliss of Nirvana. To what degree do you believe this is achievable? Discuss.
- (e) The Sangha (community of Buddhist monks) is supported by lay people who bring the offering of food to the community. Lay people gain merit through such acts of pious service to the monks. Discuss how dependence on others (e.g. the monks' reliance on laity) may help to cultivate the religious virtue of humility. How does this practice benefit the lay community? Almsgiving is a practice in many religious traditions. In what ways is the Buddhist tradition somewhat different?

- (f) Buddhism does not have a teaching on eternal life. It does, however, have the teaching of Karma, the moral law of cause and effect. In Buddhism, a person's past actions may impact his future lives or potentially endless series of reincarnations in this world. Thus, one has the power to change one's destiny through good (or evil) acts in anticipation of rebirth. Discuss the law of Karma. How is it different from the concepts of heaven and hell in other religions?
- (g) The documentary points to two different images in Christianity (the horrendous self-offering by death of Jesus on a cross) and Buddhism (the image of Buddha seated in a meditation posture contemplating life). Do these two images suggest Christianity and Buddhism are at cross purposes? Discuss the meaning of the crucifix to Christians and the seated Buddha to Buddhists.
- (h) According to Dr. Robert Thurman, one of the main dogmas of Buddhism is selflessness, a concept often misinterpreted by non-Buddhists. Discuss the concept of selflessness in Buddhism and other religious traditions. Do any religious traditions seek to annihilate the self or self ego? Explain. According to Buddhism, what are some of the characteristics of selflessness?
- (i) Is there a conflict between pursuing the goal of selflessness and being engaged in the world? Is it possible to reconcile these paths? How?

12. The Monastic Life: A Boot Camp for the Soul

- (a) What do you see as the similarities and differences in monastic life between Buddhism and Christianity?
- (b) Dr. Robert Thurman states, “The major change of a civilization that Buddhism implements on the ground is the gradual demilitarization of that civilization.” Discuss the key role which the monastery has had in effecting this move toward “demilitarization.” Where do you see the benefits of this change?
- (c) In Buddhism, according to Thurman, “the monastery is a boot camp for the soul.” To what end? Discuss the implications of this figure of speech. Compare this with Father Wiseman’s remark that monastic life in Christianity is about “letting your whole life become a prayer.”
- (d) The documentary points out Eastern religions employ inner exploration over a lifetime to get viable truths. Discuss some of the techniques and procedures used to achieve this inner exploration.
- (e) Father James Wiseman observes prayer is larger than having words on your lips; you are praying always by letting your whole life become a prayer. “This,” states Wiseman, “is what the monastic life is all about.” Discuss this expansive understanding of prayer. To what degree is it accessible outside monastic life? Compare this approach to prayer with what is prescribed in the Eastern traditions?
- (f) Bante Rahula speaks of practicing and teaching “mindfulness meditation.” Define and discuss mindfulness meditation.
- (g) According to Bante Rahula, Christian contemplative might define the act of meditation as “communing with God.” A Buddhist, however, would never describe the experience of meditation as “communing with God.” What possible words would a Buddhist use? Why?
- (h) Father James Wiseman states, “In every human being there is some deep desire for an absolute reality.” Do you agree that this statement applies to all major religions? How would Buddhists define that absolute reality? How would followers of the Abrahamic religions differ in defining their search for reality? Is this different from the spiritual goal in Hinduism or Sikhism?

- (i) One of the main goals in Buddhist religious philosophy is to free all people from greed and hatred, and from pain and suffering of body and mind. According to Bante Rahula, there must be a balance of wisdom and compassion, like two wings of a bird, if one is to “fly to enlightenment.” Discuss the cultivation of wisdom and compassion in the life of a devout Buddhist. Are wisdom and compassion virtues universally found in other religions? To what degree are these virtues a matter of “nature” (one is born with these qualities) or “nurture” (one acquires them)? Discuss.

13. Hinduism: What is Shared? What is Different?

- (a) The so called “third eye” is a dot worn in the middle of the forehead. According to Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, “The third eye means your perception has opened up in a way that you are able to see life just the way it is.” Discuss the role of inward focus and meditation in the perception of religious truth.
- (b) The documentary suggests a possible parallel between the “third eye” of Hindus and what Jesus may mean in the saying, “If thine eye be single, the whole body also is full of light” (Luke 11:34). Discuss. How does Judaism interpret the idiom of having a “good eye” or an “evil eye”? Discuss the interpretation of the “eye” over the pyramid on the reverse of the dollar bill suggesting it may reflect the idea of divine providence.
- (c) The Trinity of Hinduism includes these gods: Brahma (creator of worlds and beings), Vishnu (preserver of lives), and Shiva (destroyer of evil). Discuss the above aspects of the single Godhead of Hinduism. In Judaism, three terms used for God are creator, revealer, and redeemer. Discuss how Jewish religion and life revolve around these concepts. In Christianity, the Godhead revolves around the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Discuss how Christians understand the function of these three members of the Trinity.
- (d) In Hinduism, the documentary points out, life does not end with death, but death is a “rite of passage, so to speak, into a much larger life.” In the words of Dr. Ahmed, “You are born. You die. Then you start another cycle.” How does the Hindu view of life, death, and the afterlife differ from that in the Abrahamic faiths?
- (e) Dr. Eck observes that most people are accustomed to the idea that life is a sort of a mad rush from birth to death, and you have to try to get it all in this frame. What are some of the difficulties associated with such a philosophy of life? How does Hindu religion stand in stark contrast to the above?
- (f) Are you comfortable with Rabbi David Rosen’s statement that “we are not simply blood, flesh, and bone but have a spiritual core of eternal value and permanence”? Explain how you might agree or disagree with this statement. Is this statement equally true in both Eastern and Abrahamic religions?

- (g) According to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, there is a lot of similarity between various practices in both Hinduism and Catholicism. He mentions the use of bells and ashes. Are there other similarities you can point to? Explain.
- (h) Discuss the ritual use and symbolic meaning of water in Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism.
- (i) Expand upon Dr. Diana Eck's observation that "holy sound" is very much part of many religious traditions. How is sound particularly important to Hinduism?
- (j) Discuss the role of goddesses in Hinduism. Why are goddesses viewed negatively in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? If the God of the Bible is neither male nor female but pure spirit, how might you feel referring to "feminine" aspects/qualities of God? Discuss. On this topic, Francis Clooney says India creates for us the best opportunity to learn. What do you think there is to learn from the worship of goddesses in Hinduism? Goddesses in Hinduism are either a help or hindrance on the path to enlighten the soul. In Judaism notable women in the Old Testament act as sages, guides, or role models. In Catholic practice, Mary and thousands of women are saints, to whom people pray for spiritual motivation.
- (k) Prema Pandurang mentions the special form of Shiva that is half man, half woman. How does this concept strike you? Pandurang also emphasizes the importance of justice and mercy in association with male and female forms of Hindu deities. Discuss justice and mercy in the Abrahamic religions. How does God display these attributes?

14. Sikhism: A Religion of the Book

- (a) The Guru Granth Sahib is the holy scripture of Sikhism. Regarded as the teachings of the Ten Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib is of central focus in prayer and worship in Sikhism. Discuss Rabbi David Rosen's observation that the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are "religions of the books," but no religion is more a religion of the book than Sikhism.
- (b) The tenth Guru declared the Sikh scripture to be the eternal guru or guide to Sikh society. Discuss the concept of scripture as an eternal guide in Sikhism. How is this paralleled in the Abrahamic faiths?
- (c) Jessi Kaur emphasizes Sikhs do not worship their scripture but, through ceremony, give it tremendous reverence and respect. Discuss how the beautifully decorated palanquin and ceremony around it creates an aura for this respect. What place do aesthetics have in the enhancement of worship within the Abrahamic faiths? In your view, what is the difference between worship of scripture and respecting scripture? How is the Torah venerated in Jewish worship, the Gospel venerated in liturgical Christian worship, and the Qur'an in Muslim worship?
- (d) What is the primary theme of the Guru Granth Sahib?
- (e) What does Sikhism teach about obligations to your fellow human beings? Discuss the concept of justice in Sikhism and in the Abrahamic faiths. Are there any major distinctions which may be made among these faiths?
- (f) What are the ways in which Sikhs demonstrate their commitment to equality of all human beings?
- (g) Discuss the use of music in Sikhism. What other religious traditions use music, song, or chanting in the reciting of scriptural poetry? How does music help?
- (h) Compare and contrast the ceremony in which the Sri Guru Granth Sahib is taken with great pomp, with people walking behind it, and placed in its bed for the night, to the procession of the Torah in Judaism before it is returned to its place in the Torah shrine.

15. A Great Hindu Epic: The Wedding

- (a) Discuss the importance of Rama and Sita in Hindu religious life.
- (b) The marriage of the divine prince Rama to the divine princess Sita becomes a prototype for all marriages in Hinduism. How does the documentary illustrate this observation?
- (c) Diana Eck points out that the greatest gift any father or mother can give is the gift of their daughter to her husband to be. Can you think of any parallels in other religions where the gift of a person is considered the greatest gift? Discuss.
- (d) Discuss the symbolism found in various aspects of a Hindu wedding. What is the significance of the “seven steps”? Do you find any similarities of marriage vows in other religions with which you are familiar? Discuss.
- (e) Every Jewish wedding ceremony, according to the rabbis, is a re-enactment or replica of the large wedding ceremony at Mount Sinai between God (the divine Bridegroom) and the Jewish people (his bride). Compare and contrast the Rama and Sita marriage ceremony illustrated through Hindu weddings to this parallel found in Judaism. Discuss.
- (f) Compare your overall impression of the Hindu wedding ceremony shown in this documentary with weddings that you have attended in other traditions.

16. Early Immigration: A Story of Contact

- (a) Describe and discuss the religious and cultural beginnings of Chinese life in the San Francisco area.
- (b) Discuss the early role of Christian missionaries in addressing the problem of “paganism” among early immigrants. How did these Chinese immigrants view Christianity? What were the consequences?
- (c) Stephen Prothero says, “an important feature of every religion that has come here is how do we make a place for ourselves that isn’t just in the landscape, it is our own building.” Why has that been so important?
- (d) Tin How is the oldest Chinese temple in America. Can you think of other historic religious sites of religious minority groups in America? What is similar about these places of worship and/or their earliest congregants?
- (e) In addition to Buddhism, the documentary mentions Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism) as major religions in China. Discuss some of the distinguishing features of Confucianism and Daoism. Explain how these two Asian religions are practiced in modern America.
- (f) What are the main Asian religions practiced by Japanese people in America? On the Hawaiian Islands, what is the largest non-Christian religion?
- (g) What influence did the YMCA have upon the establishment of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association? Why did these Buddhists seek to model their institutions on Christian institutions? How have the “younger” Abrahamic faiths (Christianity and Islam) influenced the practices and communal life of modern Judaism?
- (h) A Sikh temple is a *gurdwara*, or Gurdwara, “the gateway of the guru.” The holy book, or Granth Sahib, is read daily in the temple. The gurdwara provided a place for American Sikhs to get in contact with Sikh religion as well as a place for social networking. Compare and contrast the role of the synagogue for Jewish immigrants and the mosque for Muslim immigrants. Discuss the rise and function of the Jewish Community Center and Islamic Cultural Center in modern American religious life.
- (i) Compare and contrast the pioneering work involved in establishing the historic Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, and the first Sikh temple in Stockton, California.

What opposition and struggles have Jewish and Asian immigrants faced due to religious prejudice?

- (j) Discuss the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 and its impact on Asian communities in America.
- (k) Why does Dr. Bruce LaBrack compare the Sikh work ethic to the puritan ethic? Compare the occupation of the early Sikh immigrants with that of contemporary Sikhs.

17. 300th Anniversary of the Guru Granth Sahib: An American Day

- (a) Discuss the origin and growth of the Sikh community in Yuba City, California.
- (b) In 2008, the Sikh community celebrated the 300th anniversary of the Sikh Scripture (Guru Granth Sahib) as a perpetual spiritual guide to Sikh religion. This annual commemoration is one of the holiest days of Sikh religious life. The Scripture is taken out and singing begins. The Scripture is sung around the city. Compare this Sikh event with singing, parading, and dancing with the Torah in Judaism. What other religious ceremonies does this remind you of?
- (c) The annual Sikh parade in Yuba City, California, is a very large event; it attracts thousands of Sikhs from around the world and numerous non-Sikhs. In Dr. Jasbir Kang's words, "It's not a Sikh event anymore; I think it's an American day." Discuss the implications of Kang's statement in relation to religious pluralism in America.
- (d) In American religious life, how do universal themes often associated with religious holidays provide opportunities for interreligious participation and/or celebrating? Consider holy days of the Abrahamic religions such as Ramadan, Passover, Hanukkah, and Christmas and the holy days of the Eastern religions such as the Buddhist New Year, Krishna's Birthday and the anniversary of the Guru Granth Sahib?
- (e) Stephen Prothero says that the move toward pluralism in America was very much a "fit and start" story that has a lot of conflicts along the way. Discuss.

18. The Transcendentalists: Walden & Thoreau

- (a) The great American Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, was influenced by Hindu religion, especially the Bhagavad Gita. Wrote Thoreau, “In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial.”
- (b) Ralph Waldo Emerson was another famous American influenced by Indian religious thought. Discuss the impact of Hinduism upon 19th century American literature.
- (c) What were some of the features of the Transcendentalist movement championed by Emerson, Thoreau, and others? How did God, nature, and solitude relate within this movement which challenged the thinking of many traditional Christians?
- (d) How did Transcendentalism influence the Unitarian movement? Compare and contrast the teachings of Unitarianism to those of Judaism.
- (e) In the documentary, Diana Eck points out that the Transcendentalists have an immediate connection with the Vedanta teachings that came to America with Swami Vivekananda. The Swami is sometimes described as “America’s first guru.” Describe Vivekananda’s influence upon American religious life beginning with Vivekananda’s appearance at the parliament of the World’s Religions at Chicago in 1893.

19. Hinduism Enters the American Imagination

- (a) In 1898, Thomas Edison sent a camera-man to India to obtain images of the Far East. In 1902, Edison produced *Hindu Fakir*. A fakir is a Hindu holyman-teacher. Edison's work was the first Indian themed motion picture to feature a Hindu. Discuss Edison's importance in introducing Hinduism into American popular culture. In general, do the characters in films with religious themes tend to distort or accurately reflect religion? Discuss motion pictures as a vehicle for purveying religious culture.
- (b) According to Stephen Prothero, Edison was on the fringes of the theosophical movement. Discuss how this 19th century movement had ties to India and Asian religions.
- (c) In the early 1900s, how did Ruth St. Denis, a modern dance pioneer, bring Indian culture and spirituality together in her performance of *Radha*? Discuss how *Radha* relates to Prothero's observation, "Hinduism is a tradition of story telling." To what degree may the Abrahamic religions also be described as traditions of "story telling"? Discuss.
- (d) Discuss Dr. S.H. Nasr's statement, "There is no religion in the world in which the sacred dance is as central as it is to Hinduism."
- (e) Dance is an expression of spirituality in many world religions. Compare and contrast dance in Hinduism with that found in Judaism and Christianity.
- (f) A *mudra* is a symbolic spiritual gesture in Hinduism and Buddhism involving the hands, fingers, or whole body. Discuss the differences of people seeking to connect with the divine through sacred art as opposed to sacred dance. Compare and contrast art and dance in regard to worship and ceremony in the Asian religions and Abrahamic religions.
- (g) In observing the Hindu dance in the documentary, how do you react to Dr. Nasr's observation, "the dancer there is really dancing to God and for God; it's a purely spiritual act"?

20. Honoring Their Buddhist Roots

- (a) Compare and contrast Shin Buddhism, a widely practiced form of Buddhism in Japan and America, to other expressions of Buddhism. Amida Buddha is at the heart of Shin Buddhist practice. Amida is a personification of all that is incomprehensible; the expression has reference to “immeasurable Life and Light.” Diana Eck points to the grace and compassion associated with Amida Buddha. How are the themes of grace and compassion common to other faiths in addition to Shin Buddhism? Discuss.
- (b) Rev. Ronald Kobata points out that his parents and grandparents endured the internment camps and even there they upheld their Buddhist roots. Describe the internment camps established in 1942 by President Franklin Roosevelt for Japanese-Americans who lived along the Pacific Coast of America. How did this form of race-prejudice affect the practice of Buddhism in the 1940’s and the Post World War II era?
- (c) Discuss the origin and influence of Buddhist Churches of America. How has the interest of Japanese Americans to assimilate into American culture affected the practice and presentation of traditional Buddhist religion? How have the Buddhist Churches of America responded to the charge of being an ethnic or “Christianized” version of Buddhism? Discuss the potential problems created by one religious community adopting various features of another. Is imitation really the highest form of flattery? Discuss “Jewish Buddhists,” “Christian Buddhists,” “Christian Jews,” and “Jewish Christians.”
- (d) The three treasures or jewels in which Buddhists “take refuge” and seek guidance are the Buddha, the teachings of the Buddha (the Dharma), and the community (the Sangha). Compare and contrast these three main emphases of Buddhism to the threefold function of the synagogue: a “house of prayer” (worship of God), a “house of study” (learning or education), and a “house of assembly” (social needs of the community).
- (e) In the documentary, Diana Eck says “if you go into a Shin Buddhist temple, it feels a little bit like my Methodist Church in Montana.” Discuss your initial comfort level upon entering a house of worship different from your own. What features appeared different, strange, or awkward? What features appeared similar to the house of worship in your own tradition? How frequently does your house of worship entertain groups of visitors to explore and learn about a different tradition other than their own?

21. Gandhi, Jainism, and American Civil Rights

- (a) Jainism is an ancient religion of India. Its central teaching is non-violence (*ahimsa*) toward all forms of life. Jains see all life as sacred and seek to avoid any intentional harm whether physical, mental, or verbal. Jains also positively advocate justice, peace, freedom, and environmentalism. Jainism teaches all life is bound together by a mutual interdependence. This diet requires respect for all of life. Jains teach, to save one's own soul, one must preserve and protect every other soul. How might Jainism become more influential to other religious traditions by its emphasis upon equality and environmentalism?
- (b) Discuss the influence of Jainism upon the life of Gandhi and his non-violent campaigns in India.
- (c) How did Gandhi influence Martin Luther King Jr.?
- (d) Reflect on Stephen Prothero's observation, "We tend to think about the civil rights movement as this engagement between blacks and whites in America, but it's also an engagement with Asian religion."
- (e) Walter Fauntroy points out Gandhi proved that an oppressed majority can overcome a powerful minority through non-violence and love. Martin Luther King Jr. proved an oppressed minority can overcome oppression by a majority through non-violence and love. Indeed, Jesus taught, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Discuss this common thread which Gandhi, King, and Jesus have in their teachings.
- (f) Srimati Kamala emphasizes Gandhi, a Hindu, was a great disciple of Jesus. She quotes Gandhi, "If you ask if I believe in the teachings of Jesus, I would gladly call myself a Christian." Comment on this statement. What are the teachings of leaders in other religions that you would gladly agree with?

22. Asian Religions Become “Cool”

- (a) The Zen sect of Buddhism places considerable emphasis upon meditation. Describe some of the features of meditation in the Zen tradition which distinguish it from other traditions.
- (b) One of the features of the “Beat Generation” of the 1950s was its interest in Eastern religion. Discuss how writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac engaged aspects of Asian religions in their writing and public speaking.
- (c) Jack Kerouac frequently emphasized the slogan, “The earth is an Indian thing.” The main Indian religions emphasized in this documentary are Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. What teachings and practices of the above four religions, in your opinion, have made the greatest impact upon westerners and those of the Abrahamic faith traditions?
- (d) In the 1960s, the Beatles become exposed to Indian religion through Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the guru of the Transcendental Meditation movement. Discuss the use of sound or mantra as a Meditation technique. Have you ever taken part in mantra chanting? Describe and discuss.
- (e) Hare Krishna made its way into popular culture through “My Sweet Lord,” a song of George Harrison, former Beatles’ guitarist. Discuss how this song relates to the Hindu God Krishna.
- (f) Diana Eck draws a comparison of the Hare Krishnas to the Pentecostal Christians. What outward form of devotion does Eck have in mind? What are some of the features of the Pentecostal movement which find parallels in other religious traditions? Discuss how devotion to God is expressed in various cultures and religious traditions.
- (g) Francis Clooney says, “The Hare Krishnas bring a figure very much like Jesus who says that if you love Krishna and give yourself to Krishna you will find what you are looking for in life.” Do you agree with the above analogy? What do Krishna and Jesus have in common? How do they differ?

23. Lord Krishna's Birthday

- (a) The celebration of the birth of Krishna, the Hindu deity, is known as Krishna Janmashtami. In the above connection, Anuttama Dasa states, "We believe that Krishna, or God himself, came to this earth five thousand years ago." Compare and contrast the Hindu concept of God coming to earth to that of the Christian concept of the incarnation of Christ. Is the concept of "God coming to earth" foreign to Judaism and Islam? Discuss.
- (b) Anuttama Dasa points out in the documentary that Janmashtami is the biggest Hindu holiday. The festival celebrates, in the description of Dasa, "God has actually come into this world; He is revealing himself. He is showing us he's not only unlimited, he is within our reach." Christmas is perhaps the biggest Christian holiday. How are the words of Dasa describing the significance of the birth of Krishna parallel to a Christian understanding of the birth of Jesus?
- (c) The Lord Krishna is depicted as playing a flute, singing and dancing. Discuss the role of music, musical instruments, and dance within the holidays of the three Abrahamic faiths. What births of major people are celebrated in the Asian religions and in the Abrahamic religions? Are there any commonalities to be observed in these celebrations?
- (d) In prayer, there is the repetition of three names of God: Hare, Krishna, and Rama. By chanting these names, the Hindu brings peace and purification of the mind. In other religious traditions with which you are familiar, how are various divine names repeated in prayer? In your opinion, what are the benefits of such a practice? What are the drawbacks? Discuss,
- (e) Discuss ritual bathing of images in Hindu worship. Describe libation offerings in ancient Judaism. How is the ritual practice of pouring water important to various world religions?
- (f) Describe the midnight service of Janmashtami. How is this the "crescendo" of a whole day of worship? Discuss the place of midnight services in other religious traditions beside Hinduism. Have you ever attended a midnight service of worship? What especially appeals to you about this hour and the event celebrated?

24. Yoga

- (a) According to Diana Eck, Swami Yogananda put yoga on the map in the United States and emphasized the mind-body connection. Who was Swami Yogananda? What do you understand by the “mind-body” connection? How does yoga help reveal this connection? Why do you think this connection has been largely neglected in earlier stages of American religious life?
- (b) Sri Sri Ravi Shankar indicates yoga is part and parcel of the Hindu philosophy. Yoga philosophy aims at bringing the individual into closer union with the infinite and the eternal. Discuss how meditation through yoga in the Hindu religion may serve as a vital means to this end. Think of Luke Skywalker in Star Wars and how Yoda works with Luke to bring him closer to union with the force through breathing and positions.
- (c) Most westerners practice yoga as a form of exercise, which in Rod Stryker’s view, “is a tiny fraction or merely the tip of the yogic iceberg.” Discuss the point you believe Stryker is making here. What constitutes the rest of the iceberg? Why is it relatively neglected by most westerners?
- (d) Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev says the meaning of yoga is “to bring an experience of universality into you.” Discuss the meaning of “universality” in the Hindu tradition.
- (e) Rod Stryker emphasizes that most people leave a yoga class feeling better because the life force (*prana*) that sustains the body and mind is allowed to flow more freely through the use of exercise and meditation. Discuss the importance of the term “life force” in the understanding of and practice of yoga. Is this term unique to yoga or do other religions employ a concept similar to this? Discuss.
- (f) In regard to yoga, in the documentary the observation is made that the physical is intimately intertwined with the mental. Compare and contrast this “holistic” understanding of the individual person with “dualistic” views which separate the body (physical) from the soul, spirit or mind. Discuss how theologians, anthropologists, and psychologists understand the relation of body to the intellectual, spiritual, and physical dimensions of human beings.
- (g) In the context of yoga, Rod Stryker speaks of “the promise of the tradition,” which is the completion of “spiritual awareness.” Discuss “spiritual awareness” as defined within the

practice of yoga. How do each of the Abrahamic religions define spiritual awareness? Are the definitions mutually exclusive or overlapping? Explain

- (h) Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev says every human being is a unique combination of four basic yogas which can be used to reach one's "ultimate nature." A person may (1) employ the physical body, (2) employ the thought process, (3) employ the emotions, or (4) transform one's life energies. Discuss the four basic yogas in regard to the broad question of "religion and health."
- (i) In the documentary, a woman describes yoga as "this feeling of coming home," of being connected to "something far greater than ourselves." Do not most religions agree they connect adherents to something far greater than themselves? Is there anything special about the way Yoga approaches this quest? Discuss.

25. Meditation

- (a) The path of meditation, according to Diana Eck, is an aspect of the Buddhist tradition which has become deeply and intrinsically part of the American quest. Do you basically agree with Eck's observation? Cite personal experiences, anecdotes, and illustrations to corroborate Eck's point about the American quest, or cite evidence to the contrary. Discuss what elements you see central to "the American quest."
- (b) Professor John Makransky points out that many professionals today bring various meditation practices from Buddhist philosophy into their work settings here in America. Have you observed meditation practices in the work place? Explain where you have observed this. What effect has it had? Discuss.
- (c) Joel Bayer calls attention to the fact that psychotherapists deal with trauma, suicidal situations, and other deeply moving crises. Meditation, he affirms, is a personal blessing in helping him cope with hurt and pain. Are there other types of occupations dealing with human crises in which meditation might prove especially beneficial as a coping skill? Discuss.
- (d) Jane Vecchio speaks of employing meditation to recover her sense joy, excitement, and adventure as a teacher after going through a period of alienation, apathy, and indifference concerning her work. Discuss how meditation may serve as a catalyst to re-invigorate life in general and certain professions in particular.
- (e) If you were a pediatric oncologist dealing with both the onset of cancer in children as well as the death of children from this disease, what coping strategies might you personally likely employ? Discuss what place, if any, meditation might have among your strategies. Compare and contrast the ancient Greek philosophy of stoicism, the idea of remaining indifferent to pleasure or pain, with that of the Buddhist philosophy of meditation.

26. Martial Arts

- (a) The English word “martial” means “pertaining to war” or the “military.” Hence, a cursory encounter with the expression, “Martial Arts,” may lead to the assumption that it concerns learning how to fight. In the documentary, however, Professor David Shaner dispels this notion. He understands martial arts as a form of personal development, of learning how to be calm under stress. A major emphasis of Buddhism, according to Shaner, is its teaching of calmness under stress. Learning how to face stress, conflict, and worry, however, is an important theme in many of the major world religions. Discuss some of the techniques and resources used in these religions to combat stress and bring about calmness. What are some of the positive things that Asian and Abrahamic religions can learn from each other in this regard?
- (b) Several times in this segment of the documentary, the term “Aikido” is used. Aikido is a martial art developed by Morihei Ueshiba of Japan. Ueshiba combined religion, philosophy, and martial studies into an art that emphasized both self-defense and the protection of an attacker from injury. As David Shaner points out in the documentary, one can become easily paralyzed under stress. Aikido, accordingly, by teaching calmness and the respect of the other person, seeks to create a “win-win without fighting.” Throughout the history of religion, many bloody battles have been fought in the name of religion. Discuss religion as a constant source of conflict in the world. What lessons from Aikido teaching might be valuable toward offering a solution to religious conflict on both an individual and institutional level?
- (c) The documentary emphasizes the importance of the “Golden Rule” to the martial arts, the need to put oneself in another’s place and to respect that person. This teaching is found in most of the world’s major religions. To illustrate, Moses teaches, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18); Jesus teaches, “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” (Matthew 7:12); Mohammed teaches, “Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you” (Farewell Sermon of Mohammed). The Jewish sage Hillel teaches, “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man” (Shabbat 31a). In addition, the ancient Hindu text, Mahabharata, says, “This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” (Anusasana Parva, CXIII,.8) Building upon Aikido teaching of cooperation and respect for the other, discuss how your own religious tradition seeks to apply the Golden Rule to eliminate hatred of the other and build mutual respect. In interreligious conversations, how do we teach people to disagree without the need to be disagreeable or disrespectful?

(d) David Shaner demonstrates how Aikido helps reinforce the Buddhist teaching of selflessness. He notes, "In Aikido we're not throwing people; we're moving together so basically this is cooperation for practicing selflessness. I can defend myself but I don't have to hurt you." Discuss the extremes of selfishness and selflessness. How would you define each of these words in the context of your own individual religious tradition? Through interreligious cooperation, how may the human family learn to live in harmony together more effectively? Discuss.

27. Interfaith Marriage: The Challenges

- (a) Interfaith marriage poses many challenges. Among some of the more important challenges are the theological (different scriptures and sacred beliefs), the religious (different practices, ceremonies, rituals, and traditions), and the cultural (different languages, customs, and behavioral expectations). As an opening point for discussion, how would you personally respond to pastoral counselor Vilasini Bala's opening question: "What are some of the initial concerns you would have upon considering marriage to someone from a different faith and culture?"
- (b) Discuss whether you think adjustment in an interfaith marriage usually poses the greater challenge to a woman or to a man. Why?
- (c) In your opinion, do sociological and cultural differences pose as great a challenge to interfaith marriage as theological and religious issues do? Why, or why not?
- (d) In respect to individual identity, can one's religious identity be easily separated from one's ethnic or cultural identity? Discuss the often complex meaning of some of the following terms: Irish Catholic, Sephardic Jew, Greek Orthodox Christian, Nigerian Christian, Ethiopian Jew, Indonesian Muslim, Buddhist American, Argentinian Jew, Saudi Muslim, Chilean Catholic and Sikh American.
- (e) If religion and faith are so much a part of many cultures and at the same time often intertwined with the political and nationalistic interests of these same cultures, how can religious pluralism and the separation of church and state be upheld as an ideal? Discuss. Are there principles or lessons from interfaith marriage which may be instructive and apply to the larger society in this regard? Discuss.
- (f) In the documentary, a Hindu man who married a Catholic Christian woman states that they decided to have two wedding ceremonies – one Hindu and one Catholic Christian – to make sure each side of the family was comfortable. How does the idea of having two different marriage ceremonies strike you? Do you see this as a wise and genuine action to help establish a comfort level between families or as a type of under pressure "tokenism" or a form of "appeasement"? Discuss what you would likely do if faced with a similar situation of interfaith marriage. In the area of interfaith relations, how do we move from simply tolerating differences to actually celebrating them?

- (g) Is it realistic to enter marriage with the expectation that one is going to “change” the religious and/or cultural identity of the other? Should love of a spouse always be unconditional, never based on any preconditions such as the expectation that one’s spouse must alter his or her basic religious identity? Discuss. In the context of an interfaith marriage, in what main areas should a couple find basic agreement and unity? Discuss. Must religious incompatibility always be destructive of marital unity? Discuss how you might counsel an interfaith couple considering marriage.
- (h) According to the testimony of several in the documentary, a key concern which often creates an initial sense of angst with an interfaith couple is the question of acceptance, respect, and feeling welcomed by the family of the other. To what degree do you see the above issue of crossing the “comfort barrier” as removing a major hurdle in order that a couple feels they can move ahead with interfaith marriage? To what degree is it correct to say one marries more than a spouse, one also marries a family and even a whole culture? Discuss. How do small actions like eating with one’s fingers make such a big impact as emphasized in the documentary? Can you provide similar examples of which you are aware, showing how small actions have made a big difference in family acceptance? Discuss.
- (i) Discuss the impact of children upon an interfaith marriage. How do the experiences of raising children often force one parent, or both parents, to assume responsibility for providing religious training? Why is this issue of religious training of children often not seriously and thoroughly addressed prior to the marriage of an interfaith couple? If it were thoroughly addressed, to what degree do you believe this would prevent later conflict in an interfaith marriage? Discuss.
- (j) The documentary mentions the burning of dung. The ritual burning of dung is practiced in Asian religions, a religious act foreign to most westerners. Discuss other rituals and practices of Asian religions which appear strange or difficult for westerners to understand or grasp. If you had an opportunity to ask questions of an expert on the major Asian religions, what questions about rituals and practices might you want to ask?

28. Between the Generations

- (a) Vijay Nathan, a comedienne, raises an important question about the Pledge of Allegiance. When an America citizen uses the expression, “one nation under God,” how is this to be understood? Nathan makes reference to the fact that as a Hindu woman, in her house there were numerous gods located all over the house. In light of the many definitions of the word “God” found among the Asian and Abrahamic religions, how strict, or how loose, do you personally believe the Pledge of Allegiance should be interpreted? Discuss.
- (b) Diana Eck points out that the second generation of Hindus has grown up here in the United States and they have a different set of challenges than their parents. In what way are they different? How did Buddhist and Sikh, Jewish and Muslim immigrants face similar “pioneering” challenges in settling in America? Discuss.
- (c) In the documentary, a second generation Asian woman observes that living in the United States you have the option of easily opting out of your faith because there are so many other faiths to choose from. But her parents chose to stay with it, a decision which has prompted her to ask, “What’s so important about it, and what makes you you?” Discuss the question of what is so important about your own personal religious tradition or faith commitment. Is belonging to a particular religion for most people an “accident of birth” rather than a conscious choice? Should it be both? Discuss. What are some of the unique problems religious minorities face when surrounded by an overwhelmingly large religious majority? Discuss.
- (d) In this segment of the documentary, the role of parents in guiding and instructing their children in the religious teachings and prayers of their respective Asian religion is palpable, though not always appreciated at first. Discuss the role, if any, your parents have had in your religious training. Do you believe parents of children from religious minorities often have a greater incentive to provide religious training for their children than those parents in the more dominant or prevalent religious traditions around them? Discuss.
- (e) A Hindu woman says on camera, “typically when you think of a Hindu, you think of someone who looks Indian; when you look at me, you wouldn’t think I was Hindu.” This “snip” from the documentary raises a very important question: to what degree are misconceptions and stereotypes about various religions generated by outward appearance, dress, or skin color? Discuss. What kind of response would you give to a person to whom you have just revealed your religious identity, who says back to you, “You don’t look

Hindu,” or “You don’t look Jewish,” or “You don’t look Buddhist.” Discuss. Comment on how conversion from one religious community to another or superficial judgments about ethnicity may create faulty assumptions about the religion of another.

- (f) The documentary points out that most Hindu households have a prayer room or a temple room containing various images. Describe or explain the function of this domestic prayer room in the daily life of one deeply committed to the Hindu faith. Do any of the other Asian religions or Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) place special emphasis upon the home as a place for prayer and/or worship? Explain or describe. How many of the Asian and Abrahamic faiths may be aptly described as a “religion of the home”? Why?
- (g) As stated in the documentary, the Hindu faith is sometimes simplistically defined or reduced to the “three C’s”: caste, cows, and curry. Using the “three C’s” as a starting point, show how such thinking is misleading and usually contributes to and perpetuates stereotypes and caricatures of Hindus and Hinduism. Give illustrations of similar oversimplifications, stereotypes or misconceptions of other faiths discussed in this documentary. How can we best dispel simplistic and superficial religious impressions of the other and take the discussion to a deeper level?
- (h) Discuss the question of whether you believe the children of immigrants to America are generally less committed to the religious beliefs and practices than those of their parents. Is there typically a cascading from generation to generation, a “loosening of the belt another notch” in regard to religious bonding connections and practices, and support of the formal religious community? What is your experience or observation? Discuss.

29. Conclusion

- (a) Stephen Prothero makes the point that the only thing Americans in the 1700's and 1800's could say to describe the Asian religions is, "This is heathenism; this is paganism." Today, however, Prothero says "more and more people are saying there is something good here; they sympathize with it and like it." How would you account for the changing attitude of Americans towards the Asian religions? How are American perceptions of Asian religions influenced by politics, education, technology, travel, and social networking? Discuss. What are some of the greatest obstacles which continue to impede understanding and acceptance of Asian religions in America? Discuss.
- (b) Bishop John Chane calls attention to the problem of marginalizing those of other faiths because they do not look like us, pray quite like us, or come from our common culture. Why does this happen? Is it because of a spirit of superiority? Do some Americans see Asian religions as a threat to what they believe? How can these tendencies be overcome?
- (c) Rabbi David Rosen makes the sage observation, "To get to know other religions is a responsibility, an obligation of the truly religious person." Discuss the importance of this remark. What are some of the basic resources available to begin to address this problem of interreligious understanding? How would you counsel someone to proceed?
- (d) Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, a Christian, wisely emphasizes, "God loves each individual within the Asian religions no less than anyone else; therefore we need to engage with them out of deep respect for what they believe." How should the knowledge of God's love for all people affect the way we view them and engage them? Discuss using both positive and negative examples or illustrations.
- (e) Dr. Robert Thurman cites the Dalia Lama, an influential Buddhist leader, to make the point that the purpose of dialogue should not be to convert another person to our belief. Rather, dialogue is to share love and enthusiasm for our own faith with others so they may be infected and awakened with a parallel joy and enthusiasm concerning their own faith. How do you personally respond to this approach? Discuss.

- (f) Imam Feisal Rauf makes the point, “We don’t have to force each other to agree on issues of personal belief.” Cite examples from history of “forced conversions” and the negative response toward those who sought to impose their faith on others. Discuss.
- (g) Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev emphasizes that we do not need more Hindus, more Christians, or more Muslims, but all human beings need to actualize their true potential. How, in Vasudev’s view, do figures like Jesus, Buddha, and Krishna provide inspiration and insight to make this possible? Discuss.
- (h) Diana Eck points to the words of an old Protestant hymn, “There is a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea.” How do these words provide an appropriate starting point for those who would engage in interfaith conversation? Discuss.
- (i) Bishop Krister Stendahl observes that the “Golden Rule” is a universal rule. Discuss the importance of the Golden Rule as a necessary commandment to further a positive, growing understanding in America of the Asian and Abrahamic religions.

TEACHER/STUDENT RESOURCES

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See also - www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-august-5-2010/akbar-ahmed

KAREN ARMSTRONG – Author of twelve books – among them are:

A History of God (1993); Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths (1996); Islam: A Short History (2000); The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (2000); The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions (2006); The Case for God (2009); Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life (2010)

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Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). He recently edited The New Comparative Theology: Voices from the Next Generation (Continuum, 2010).

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YOGENDRA JAIN - Author “Jain Way of Life”

See also - <https://jaina.site-ym.com/?page=AboutJAINA>

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Among her books are: Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations, 1978;
Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History, 2003; Oxford University Press
Early India: From Origins to AD 1300, 2002; Penguin, ISBN 0-520-23899-0
Exile and the Kingdom: Some Thoughts on the Rāmāyana 1978 Original from U of California

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**ASIAN & ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS: A DIVINE ENCOUNTER IN AMERICA
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- Karen Armstrong, noted author, “The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions” “The Battle for God” and “The History of God.”
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- Dr. Jasbir Kang, Author, “Punjabi Migration to the United States”
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- Srimati Kamala, Dir. Gandhi Memorial Center, Washington, D.C., author, “Yours Faithfully, M.K. Gandhi”
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- Professor Bruce LaBrack, University of the Pacific, Author, “Sikhs in the United States.”
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