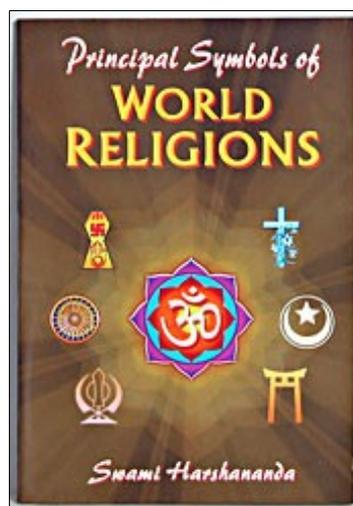


Symbolism in Religions Around the World

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Religious symbolism implies the use of unique symbols by a particular religion, that describe anything pertaining to its culture and psyche, including archetypes, events, natural phenomena or even the art that evolved in that land over a period of time. All religions of the world, irrespective of how ancient or modern they are, use symbols to help create a resonant ethos, which in turn, reflects the moral values, teachings and culture of that society. Further, adhering to this religious symbolism also helps foster solidarity among the followers, keeping them secure as a unit, helping them focus better on their object of worship.

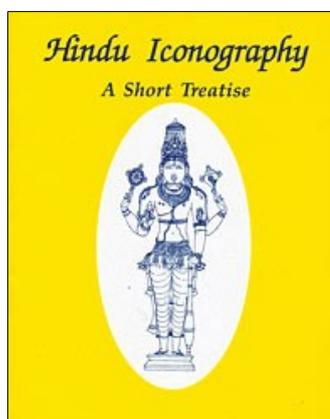
The concept of religious symbolism is very ancient and may well have had its roots from the start of mankind itself. In this article, we bring you a detailed study of the symbolisms of the major religions of the world.



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PRINCIPAL SYMBOLS OF
WORLD RELIGIONS

Hinduism



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HINDU ICONOGRAPHY
A SHORT TREATISE

Hinduism is the focal religious tradition dominating much of the Indian Subcontinent. Also referred to as the Sanatana Dharma or the Eternal Law, this religion is a complex conglomeration of various traditions and has no single founder. Taking its roots from the historical Vedic tradition, Hinduism is often considered the oldest living major religion.

There are many symbols used in Hinduism. Here, we study some of the most important ones.

AUM

Hinduism, one of the most ancient religions of the world, uses many religious symbols. Most common among them is the OM, also spelled as AUM. This mantra (sacred chant) is regarded as the greatest entity of all time - the Pranava Mantra, the one that indeed created the Earth and everything else that exists herein.

Symbolism of AUM

The symbol, which consists of three syllables, also represents the threefold aspect of Hinduism, namely:

1. The three worlds, that is, earth, space and heaven
2. The Divine Trinity of Brahma, **Vishnu** and Shiva
3. The three major Vedic scriptures, the Rig, Yajur and Sama

Many Hindus believe that if they chant this sacred mantra before taking up any activity, that task would never ever fail to succeed. To date, Aum is used in prayer, meditation and Yoga for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains alike.

The written symbol of Aum was developed from the 6th Century. It consists of three curves, one semicircle and a dot, as shown in the [picture](#). The lower curve is bigger and symbolizes the jagrat or the waking stage. Here, the human consciousness operates through the five senses and reaches outward. This curve being larger, indicates that this is the "major" state of human consciousness.

The smaller upper curve symbolizes the sushupti or deep sleep - the unconscious state. Here, the human being desires and dreams nothing. He is merely in a state of deep sleep.

The middle curve that lies between these two curves indicates the swapna or the dream state, which is between the jagrat and the sushupti stages. Here, the individual turns inward and is witness to a whole new world blossoming behind the lids of his eyes.

According to Indian mystic thought, the whole world manifests as a result of these states of consciousness. Hence, the three curves embody the creation of the world itself.

The dot is the Turiya or the fourth state of consciousness. Here, the individual looks neither inward nor outward. He is completely at peace with himself and attains this blissful state of tranquility. This is a non-relative, "Absolute" state of being.



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OM - THE HOLY HINDU SYMBOL

The semi circle signifies maya or illusion. This separates the three curves from the dot, thereby indicating that it is the clever maya that separates us from realizing the higher states of bliss. Once we cross the maya state successfully, we will forever be in the Turiya state, experience permanent bliss and divinity.

Hence, the form of the AUM represents the manifest and the unmanifest, the subtle and the gross, the physical and the metaphysical.

Aum as a Sound

Even as a sound, the concept of AUM has a logical connotation. The "A" is globally regarded as the very first sound. This is an open-mouthed sound, produced from the back of the mouth. The "M" is produced by closing the lips. The "U", like the third curve, is the stage between the "A" and the "U" stages.

AUM as the Fourth Dimension



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OM - THE SOUND OF THE COSMOS

As the seeker continues to chant the mantra of AUM, he starts losing himself in its reverberation and slowly proceeds inward to realize his own divine nature inside. Hence, AUM is considered as the fourth dimension - one which cannot be perceived by our physical senses. Contemplating this chant leads the seeker to the dot or Turiya stage, crossing all the states of the worldly maya.

AUM as the Moola Mantra

According to Indian spiritualism, God first created sound and from this sound arose the entire universe. This primal sound, AUM, is regarded the "root" syllable or the Moola Mantra - the cosmic vibration that created the Big Bang as we know it in this modern world.

Other Hindu texts liken AUM to an arrow placed upon the human body (the Prana or life-breath). This arrow pierces the darkness of ignorance and maya and finally finds its mark, the light of the Divine residing within.

AUM in Saivism and Vaishnavism

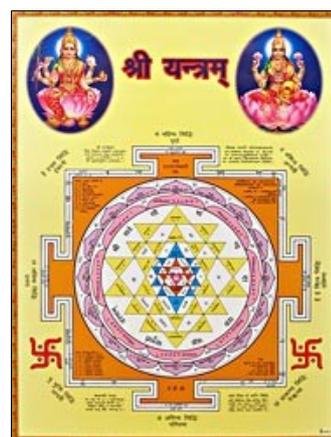
According to the Puranas, the mantra of AUM is the most important to all sects of Hinduism. Shaivites mark the Lingam (an idol embodying Shiva) with the AUM. Vaishnavites, on the other hand, regard the three sounds of AUM and its three curves as the embodiment of the relationship between Lord Vishnu, his Consort Sri and the seeker.

Even today, **people** revere the AUM Parvat, peak number 6191 in the Himalayas, as the Supreme, as it resembles the shape of the AUM.

Yantra

The Yantra, which in Sanskrit means "instrument" or "machine", is used in Hinduism as a means to balance the mind and help it focus deeply on spirituality. According to **Tantra**Shastra, the Yantra also has certain astrological or magical powers to help bring about positive changes in the life of the seeker. In fact, some Tantric sects even believe that gazing upon a Yantra in a controlled fashion may lead the seeker to mukti or liberation.

The Yantra makes use of many shapes, including squares, triangles, circles and floral patterns, each one having a particular significance. For example, a lotus represents the chakras or the seven spiritual centres in the subtle body. A dot or bindu symbolizes the starting point or the infinite cosmos. An upward triangle symbolizes the masculine power of Shiva, whereas the downward triangle embodies the **Shakti**, the Sacred Feminine, and so on.



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LAKSHMI SRI YANTRAM

Yantras are created on a particular date, in accordance with the stipulations of the Vedas. Though two-dimensional in nature, practitioners consider them as multi-dimensional and the vehicle to attain certain siddhis or Yogic powers.

Linga



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SHIVA LINGA

The Linga or the Shivalinga represents Lord Shiva and is a symbol of the male creative energy in the universe, or the phallus. This symbol is often associated with Yoni, a symbol of **Goddess** Shakti, embodying the **female** creative energy. Yet another theory expounds that the Linga represents the Stambha pillar, signifying the infinite nature of Shiva.

A natural Linga formed at Amarnath in the Western Himalayas, from the ice dripping down to the cave, freezing like a stalagmite, is a popular pilgrimage. There is also a natural Shivalinga in Uttarakhand, where the

mountain appears to be shaped like a Linga from a certain angle.

Trishula

The Trishula or Trident is used by both Shiva and his consort, **Parvati**. The three points in this weapon signify the three aspects of Creation, Maintenance and Destruction. They also represent the past, present and the future; the three worlds and also the three gunas.

In terms of the subtle body, the trishula embodies the three nadis, the Ida, Pingala and Sushumna respectively.



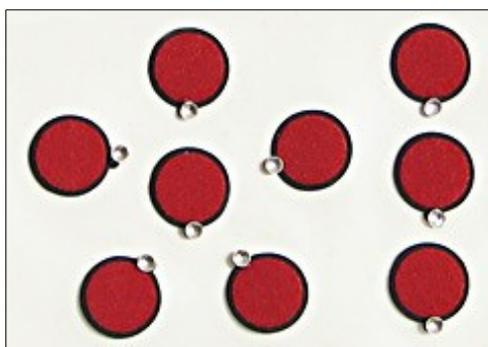
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TRISHUL

Tilak/Bindi

The tilak is a mark placed on the forehead, usually in the form of a line or lines, many times indicating a sectarian influence. Worn by sadhus (mendicants) and pious Hindus on special occasions, they can either be drawn by hand or placed with a stamp. Tilaks can be drawn of sacred ash, sandalwood paste, turmeric, vermilion, charcoal or red lead. This is believed to assist the seeker with his meditation and focusing power. Placed between the brows, it is known to have a cooling effect on the forehead as well.

Shaivites draw three horizontal lines with ash, whereas Vaishnavites draw a namam, an elaborate "U" or "Y" mark on their forehead, depending upon their sectarian orientation.



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BINDIS

The Bindi, on the other hand, is a dot Hindu females place on their forehead. This is believed to protect them and their husbands. Originally placed with sindoor (vermilion), modern bindis can be stuck onto the forehead and come in many shapes, sizes, colors and designs. These days, they are also considered more of a fashion statement.

Sikhism

Sikhism was founded in the 15th Century in Punjab and is based on the teaching of **Guru Nanak** Dev Ji and the ten successive **Sikh** Gurus. The last Sikh Guru is the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, which is the Sikh treatise and also considered as Waheguru, the Supreme God.

This is now the fifth-largest organized religion in the world and also one of the fastest-growing. In India, the state of Punjab has the maximum Sikh population.

Like Hinduism, Sikhism also employs the use of many religious symbols. Most important among them are:

Ek-Onkar

The Ek-Onkar occupies a vital place in Sikhism and has a variety of symbolisms to it. The Guru Granth Sahib, the holy treatise of the Sikhs, opens with this very phrase. Ek-Onkar means that "There is One God". Since this is considered most sacred, Gurdwaras and other Sikh places of meeting use this symbol.

Sikhs constantly repeat the chant of Ek-Onkar so as to keep reminding themselves of the existence of one common God in this universe.



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EK ONKAR

Khanda



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KHANDA

The Khanda is yet another very important symbol in Sikhism. Mostly seen at Gurdwaras, the Khanda signifies the Creative Power of the Supreme Godhead.

The Khanda is basically a double-edged sword, symbolizing the knowledge of the power of God. This is enveloped by a Chakkar, which is circular, and two Kirpans or single-edged swords pointing upward. The sword symbolizes the primal power of the Creator. The Chakkar embodies the continuity of processes in the universe - the fact that God has no beginning and no end.

The two swords on the outside are referred to as Miri and Piri and signify temporal and spiritual balance in the universe, respectively. Here, the left Kirpan symbolizes truth and the right embodies the fight for Dharma or righteousness.

Kirpan

The Kirpan is carried only by Sikhs who are baptized. But they may not have it on them at all times. They may have to do away with it during air travel and so on, so as not to break international laws of security.



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KIRPAN PENDANT

Kesh

Kesh, one of the "Panj Kakar" or Five K's in Sikhism, is one symbol of being baptized. This implies having **hair** uncut from anywhere in the body and is many times followed even by those who are not baptized.

Most Sikh females braid their hair or put it in a bun at the nape of the neck. Sikh males pile up their hair in a "Joor" or bun and secure it with a "Pag" or turban. Young Sikh boys cover their Joor with a Patka, a smaller turban.

Sikhs believe in maintaining their Kesh, as it is a natural gift given by God Himself.

Kangha

The Kangha or the comb is used by those baptized. It is used to maintain the cleanliness of the hair. Sikhs clean their hair in the morning and at bedtime as well.

Kara

The Kara is an iron or steel bracelet that Sikhs wear regardless of their gender and whether they are baptized or not. This Kara, Sikhs believe, is the implement that firmly binds them to God. Since the Kada is worn to remind the follower to do righteous deeds, he or she wears the Kada so that they can see it when they attempt to do something.

Kachhera

The Kachhera, a type of boxer shorts, is worn only by Sikhs who are baptized. Not only does this give enhanced freedom of movement, but also symbolizes chastity and sexual restraint.

Nishan Sahib

The saffron-colored Khalsa Flag with the symbol of the Khanda is referred to as the Nishan Sahib. Triangular in shape, this religious flag is one of the most important symbols of the Sikhism.

The flag-post is also covered in a saffron cloth and has a metal Khanda on top of the staff. The Nishan Sahib indicates the presence of a Gurdwara nearby.

Buddhism



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BUDDHA'S FEET

Earliest records of Buddhism, another major religion of the world, indicate that images or idols of the Buddha were not used for worship. Instead, **Buddhist** art used images to symbolize the Buddha and his teaching. These symbols included the lotus, the Wheel, the Bodhi tree and the Buddha's own footprints.

The Buddha image as we see it today became a popular representation much later. However, the ancient symbols are used even today by some Buddhist sects, probably more frequently than the image of the

Buddha. This is especially the case with Theravada Buddhism prevalent in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Tibetan Buddhism

As Buddhism spread through many countries, it picked up the cultures of that land. Hence, the imagery used there was influenced by that particular region. Buddhism in Tibet, for example, centres around the Eight Auspicious Symbols, referred to as Ashtamangala. These are printed on Tibetan prayer flags, used during mandalas and thangkas and also in other forms of ritual art. Yet another symbol, the Wheel of Life, represents the universe to Tibetan Buddhists.

Buddhism also uses a variety of colors; especially, white, yellow, red, blue and green; to depict certain aspects. The use of mudras or hand gestures is also very prevalent with this religion.



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COLORS IN BUDDHISM

Earliest Symbols of Buddhism



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BUDDHIST WHEEL OF LIFE

The earliest symbols of Buddhism include the Stupa, Wheel of Dharma and the Lotus Flower. The Wheel of Dharma, represented with eight spokes, could have had several connotations. Initially implying royalty - Monarch of the Wheel or Chakravatin - this gradually came to be used frequently, even on the Pillars of Ashoka, during the 3rd Century BC.

It is sometimes considered that the Wheel of Dharma symbolized the process of teaching the Buddhadharma, the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism.

The Lotus too can have several meanings. Most common among them is that it refers to the inherently pure nature of the mind, which, though rising from dirt and murky waters, is still very separate from it.

Then there is the symbol of the Trishula, which is a combination of the Lotus, the Vajra (diamond rod) and three jewels, which denotes the trifold way of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The Swastika is also used often among Buddhists in India and Hindus alike, especially in East Asia. This Swastika could either be left or right facing.

Mahayana Symbolism

Mahayana Buddhism use symbols of esoteric value. The Mudras are most used in this type of Buddhism. Many of these images also serve as Mandalas. Both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism use the ashtamangala. The eight symbols of ashtamangala include:

1. The Lotus, representing purity and enlightenment
2. The Endless Knot or the Mandala, symbolizing harmony
3. A Pair of Golden Fish, representing conjugal bliss and freedom
4. Banner of Victory, symbolizing victory in battle
5. Wheel of Dharma or Chamaru used in Nepali Buddhism, representing knowledge
6. Treasure Vase, symbolizing everlasting prosperity, treasure and wealth
7. Parasol, representing royalty and the crown; also protection from the elements
8. Conch Shell, symbolizing the thoughts of the Buddha



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**EIGHT SYMBOLS IN
BUDDHISM**

Theravada Symbolism

Theravada Buddhism used ancient art and history to represent its values. The reminders of the Buddha, Cetiya, were split up into spatial, relic and representational memorials.

Though the physical form of the Buddha started to be used only around the 1st Century AD, his physical characteristics are described in the Digha Nikaya, one of the most vital texts of the Pali Canon.

This description charted out 32 main characteristics and about 80 subsidiary characteristics, which are actually said to have influenced the appearance of the Buddha as we know him today.

Pan-Buddhist Symbolism

The modern school of Pan-Buddhism was founded in 1952 and adopted two main symbols at their inauguration at the World Fellowship of Buddhists. These symbols included the traditional eight-spoked Wheel of Dharma and an additional five-colored flag, which had been designed at Sri Lanka. This school of Buddhism uses these symbols to date.

Christianity

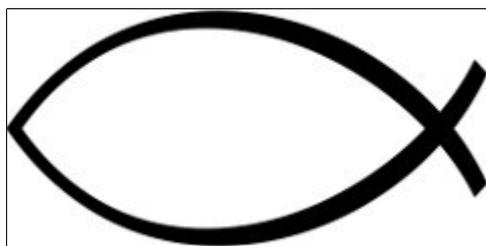
Christianity originates from the Greek word "Khristos". "Christ" literally means the "Anointed One". This is a monotheistic religion. Christians consider Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, emerging as the Savior of Humanity. The three largest groups of Christianity in the world are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Protestant Church.

As in other religions of the world, Christianity also uses objects and symbols having a deep inner meaning and expressing esoteric Christian ideas and ideals.

Symbols in Early Christianity

Early Christianity used elemental symbols. The most widely used was that of water. Water has a great significance for Christians. Water has cleansing and purifying qualities and is hence used in baptism. The other element, fire, is used mostly in the form of a candle flame. This represents the Light or the Holy Spirit.

Ichthys



ICHTHUS

Courtesy, Wikipedia
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ichthus.svg>)

Ichthys is the ancient Greek word for "Fish". Interestingly, the symbol of fish bore a lot of significance to followers of early Christianity as well. This symbolism is evident even now in ancient Roman monuments such as Capella Greca, the catacomb of St. Callistus and so on.

This symbol could have been a representation of the unexplained multiplication of loaves and fishes in the repast of the Seven Disciples. It could also signify the Resurrection on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. More importantly, it could signify the famous acrostic, which consists of the first letters of five Greek words, forming the word Ichthys (for fish), which describes the characteristics of Jesus Christ as the "Son of God, the Saviour".

Paintings on Tombs

Christians had always made elaborate paintings on their catacombs. These include images of Christ, saints, scenes from the Bible and so on. They also used images of palms, peacocks, the chi-rho monogram, the Good Shepherd, the dove, the vine and many, many other symbols. Decorative images included ribands, stars, landscapes and garlands, each having their own significance.

Icons

The tomb paintings evolved to make way for the development of icons. An icon has a likeness and symbolic or esoteric meaning for a thing relating to it. But this use of icons was strongly opposed by certain sections of the society at the time.

In the present time, icons are employed mostly among the Eastern Orthodox, the Oriental Orthodox, the Eastern Catholic and the Coptic Churches.

The Peacock

According to early Christianity, the peafowl did not decay after death and hence, it became a symbol of immortality. This is why many of the older Christian paintings show the peacock. This imagery, interestingly, is still used in the East, especially during the Easter season.

The Cross and the Crucifix

The Holy Cross is the most widely acknowledged symbol of Christianity today. According to the Jewish Encyclopaedia, the Cross took such an important position as early as the 2nd Century. Even back then, the marking of a cross upon the chest or forehead was considered to act as a talisman against the powers of Satanic forces. The Crucifix though, did not appear until the 5th Century.



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CRUCIFIX AND
JESUS CHRIST

Sacraments

Sacraments are probably some of the most ancient symbols used in the Christian church. Eucharist and baptism are always used in sacraments. The optional aspects include unction, ordination, confirmation, penance and marriage.

In the Eucharist, the bread and wine symbolize the broken body and the blood of Jesus. In Roman Catholicism, they actually become the actual Body and Blood of Christ respectively. This results in the ultimate salvation of the recipient of Jesus' grace.

Baptism symbolizes the cleansing of the sinner by God. This is more so where baptism involves immersion - this process signifies the spiritual death and resurrection of the baptized person. The opinions about sacraments are highly divided. Protestants consider these to be merely symbolic, while Roman Catholics and some other orthodox sects consider them the actual grace of God.

Other Symbols

Other symbols of Christianity include the Alpha and the Omega, the Burning Bush, the Anchor, the Cross and Crown, the Burning Sword, Borromean Rings, INRI, the Pentagram, the Shield of the Trinity and so on.

Some Christians also use the symbol of the Star of David, which is used mostly by Judaism.

Islam

Islam is a monotheistic religion, which literally means, "submission to God". Its beliefs and philosophies are centred round the Qur'an, which is believed to be the verbatim of God.

Though there are no official Islamic symbols as such, the religion does use several images and icons to convey their ideals and philosophies. The most common Islamic symbols are as follows:

Star and Crescent



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SYMBOLS OF ISLAM

The star and crescent symbol is most often used to represent Islam. It also features on the flags of many Islamic countries, such as Turkey and Pakistan.

Interestingly, this symbol is not really Muslim in origin. It was originally a polytheistic icon adopted during the spread of Islam, during the tenure of the Ottoman Empire. Sometimes, this is even considered as being controversial in some Islamic communities and countries.

Symbolism of Colours in Islam

Colours play an important role in Islam. Muslim warfare of the yore used flags or battle standards of various colours, including white, **black**, greenish-black and red. The Islamic dynasties adopted flags of different colors, which are as follows:

1. The Umayyads used white banners
2. The Abbasids employed black flags
3. The Fatimids' chose colour was green
4. Many Persian Gulf countries have chosen red flag

The Significance of Green in Islam

The color green holds a special significance in Islam. One can often find this colour in mosques and other important Islamic places, as also as on the flag of Saudi Arabia. Some aver that green being Muhammad's favourite colour, he wore a green cloak and turban. Yet other schools believe that green symbolizes vegetation and life.

It is believed by some that after Muhammad, only the caliphs were allowed to wear green turbans. But there is no actual evidence, historical or otherwise, for this claim. In any case, the colour green has been an established symbol of Islamic culture for many ages. During the

Crusades, Islamic soldiers used the colour green.

Other Symbols of Islam

Islam also employs the use of some characters in Arabic script to visually represent the religion. The word "Allah" or the Shahada are examples of the same. A sword represents Shi'ites, while the gardens of the **Mughal** Empire in India were regarded as the symbols of Jannat or Paradise.

Shahada or the Confession of Faith

Shahada, the first of the Five Pillars of Islam, is the Muslim profession of faith, which encompasses a basic belief that "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God". Muslims believe that sincere recitation of this prayer is the only requirement to become a true Muslim. This prayer, hence, represents the entire gamut and reach of Islam as not only a religion, but also a way of life.

Muslims believe that the Shahada must be recited aloud correctly and with full faith at least once in their lifetime. This prayer also indicates the muzzein's call to prayer, including the daily prayer, referred to as the Salat. This very prayer is also recited during the last moments before a person's death as also in Sufi contemplative prayer.

It is believed that the Shahada gave rise to the fundamental roots and beliefs of Islam - angels, the Qur'an and the Day of Judgement.

Judaism

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. Having its origins in the Hebrew Bible, also referred to as the Tanakh, this is essentially the expression of the relationship between God and the Children of Israel. Judaism, believed to be one of the oldest monotheistic religions, spans over more than 3,000 years. The Israelis and the Hebrews were originally referred to as Jews, but later came to be addressed as the "Children of Israel". Judaism was heavily influenced by both Christianity and Islam, as also by the Baha'i Faith.

Judaism used many symbols. Here are the major ones:

Mezuzah

This little case can be found on the doorposts of most Jewish homes, as a constant reminder of God's presence. A tiny scroll placed inside the case contains the words of the Shema and the name of God written at the back of it. This little case is to be placed in a certain angle, following a particular ceremony for placing it. Jews touch this Mezuzah and kiss it each time they pass through the doorway.

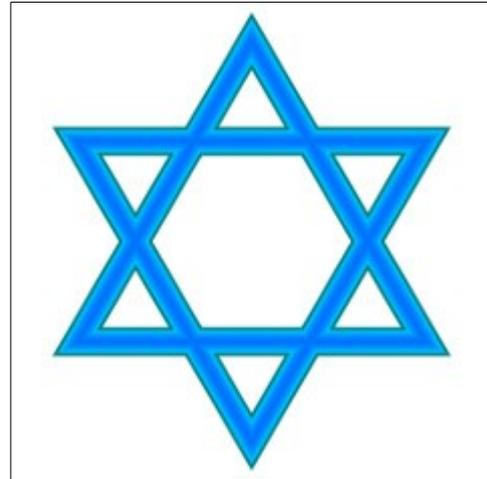
Menorah

This seven-branched candelabrum is one of the oldest symbols of Judaism. It is lit every evening with wicks dipped in olive oil and cleaned every morning. This symbolizes the light of God.

The Star of David

The Star of David, also referred to as Magen David or the Shield of David, is yet another major symbol associated with Judaism. Interestingly, this is not an ancient symbol of Judaism and does not find mention at all in the ancient Rabbinic texts either.

Some experts are of the view that the upper triangle symbolizes spirituality, while the lower one symbolizes the material world, and that the intertwining of these two triangles makes them inseparable. Many also believe that the three sides represent Kohanim, Levites and Israel. Yet other say that there are actually 12 sides, representing 12 tribes. None of these theories, though, bear any historical evidence. In any case, intertwined equilateral triangles are believed to bring good luck in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa.



STAR OF DAVID

Courtesy, Wikipedia
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Star_of_David_3.svg)

In the Middle Ages, Jews wore badges to identify themselves. Placing the Star of David outside synagogues and other Jewish houses of worship came to become a regular practice in the 17th Century. Today, it is universally acknowledged as the symbol of Judaism and even appears on the flag of Israel. The Israeli Red Cross is commonly referred to as the Reg Magen David.

Hamesh Hand

The Hamesh Hand or the Hamsa Hand is a commonly used motif in Jewish jewellery. This design usually has an eye in the centre of an upturned palm of the hand, with Hebrew letters or designs in the fingers. Some Arab cultures refer to this as the Hand of Fatima, representing the Hand of God.

Though this symbol has no particular religious connotation as such, this is regarded as a guard against the evil eye.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is a religion which is based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster, also referred to as Zarathustra and Avestan. At one time, this was believed to be among the world's

largest religions and came into existence during the 6th Century BCE in Persia. Zoroastrians believe in the worship of Ahura Mazda, the Creator and the supreme divine authority.

Some pre-Islamic Iranian dynasties gave this religion a boost - this was also when some of its leading principles were adopted by other religious cultures of the world.

Faravahar in Zoroastrianism



FARAVAHAR

Courtesy, Wikipedia
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Faravahar-Gold.svg>)

Faravahar, the winged symbol of Zoroastrianism, finds its roots in a much older symbol of a winged disk without the existence of a human figure in it. The original symbol is about 4000 years old, can be found in Mesopotamia and Egypt and relates to the Sun God. Hence, this symbol then represented tremendous divine powers and was

considered supreme by that culture.

Later, the Assyrians had a symbol of the God Shamash as a winged entity, with a human emerging from a disk, who they worshipped as their patron deity, Assur. This closely resembles the present-day Faravahar symbol of Zoroastrianism. The Achaemenid Emperors then adopted this symbol as they spread the religion of Zoroastrianism.

Since Zoroastrians believe that Ahura Mazda is formless, the exact significance of Faravahar is not very clear. But it is clear that this imagery was used to show divinity or transcendence. Maybe it was also used to associate with Fravashi or Frawahr. At the centre of this image is a human being, which depicts the soul that protects. The Faravahar is believed to be blessed by Ahura Mazda and so, is made up only of good.

The human figure seems aged, probably representing wisdom. The hand that points upwards reminds followers to strive for higher goals. The ring held in the other hand is believed to symbolize faithfulness. The circle from which the figure emerges represents immortality of the soul and also the cyclical nature of the universe.

The two wings symbolize good thoughts, words and deeds and the tail wings indicate the contrary. The two streamers represent good and evil respectively and the figure turning to one side symbolizes the seeker's constant endeavour to keep away from evil.

The Significance of Fire in Zoroastrianism

It is commonly assumed that Zoroastrians are fire worshippers. But that is not true. The religion believes in being good and pure and fire is the most preferred and most used symbol to denote that purity and goodness. Also, Ahura Mazda is likened to the light of wisdom and

purity, but he is not worshipped in the form of the fire.

Zoroastrian places of worship are called Agiaries or Fire Temples. Once it is consecrated, the fire in that temple is never allowed to move from there. In case it necessarily needs to be transported from there, certain ritual procedures have to be conducted for the same.

Zoroastrian priests are very careful not to pollute the holy fire in any way, while carrying out rituals. Hence, they wear the Padan or a cloth over the mouth and nose, so that their breath or saliva does not contaminate it. The chamber containing the holy fire in an Agiary is known as the Dar-I-Mihr or the "Porch of Mithra". This is so placed that people outside cannot view it.

In Zoroastrianism, fire plays a significant role in daily life as well. Women; especially pregnant women; light fires or lamps as a protection against evil. Many times, lamps fuelled by ghee are used, as ghee is considered a purifying substance.

Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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