

Fast Facts



Fast Facts: Religion and Medicine

Deborah CM Boyle and Men-Jean Lee



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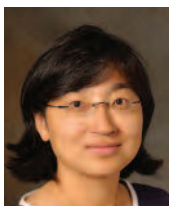
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Declaration of Independence

This book is as balanced and as practical as we can make it.

Ideas for improvement are always welcome: feedback@fastfacts.com



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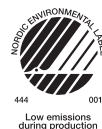
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Introduction	5
Buddhism	7
Christianity	15
Hinduism	27
Islam	42
Judaism	58
Sikhism	76
Traditional Chinese Religion	86
Other religions	101
General health issues	111
Useful resources	115
Index	116

Introduction

Despite living in a multicultural, multi-ethnic society, it is possible to have very little knowledge and understanding of the broad range of cultures and religions within it. Lack of knowledge may lead to misunderstandings and a failure to provide for the needs of others. This is particularly true in health services where a little knowledge may greatly enhance the quality of care on offer, avoid unintended offence and enrich the interaction between patient and care provider.

Various books have been written about the care of dying patients or about one religious group in particular, but none so far has embraced the major world religions in the context of general healthcare, including other health-related practices that may be confined to smaller groups. It is clear from talking with colleagues in family practice, nursing, midwifery and other hospital specialties that a book which helped them to better understand their patients' cultural and religious beliefs would be very valuable.

This book provides an overview of the major world religions and an introduction to the variable expression of beliefs within them and how they relate to healthcare. It is not, by any means, comprehensive, although there are suggestions for further reading. It is written from the perspective of two people interested in the lives, beliefs and wellbeing of others rather than by adherents of each faith, and this is reflected in the text. Throughout the book the notation BCE (before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) replace the terms BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini) as non-Christian religions do not use this terminology.

Understanding the cultural practices and religious backgrounds of the patients we serve can improve our communication with both patients and concerned family members, and enrich the sensitive healthcare that we seek to provide. When we integrate medical practice with consideration of the faith of the individual patient, we are providing personalized care that will go a long way to improving the medical outcome.

There are approximately 390 million Buddhists worldwide representing about 6% of the world's population. Buddhism originated in Northern India and is a way of life that has been followed for around 2500 years. The symbol of Buddhism is the Dharma Wheel which represents the Buddha's teaching of the path to enlightenment.



Buddhists hope to release themselves from desire and reach enlightenment or nirvana by escaping the cycle of birth and rebirth into which man is tied through desire. Through the teachings of the Buddha, followers hope to develop the qualities of wisdom, non-violence and compassion. Although Buddhists believe in a higher plane, they do not generally refer to it as God and some prefer to think of their beliefs as a philosophy of life rather than a religion.

Siddharta Gautama is the historic founder of Buddhism. He was born in 560 BCE in North Eastern India into a life of great privilege. His mother died 7 days after his birth, which has led to the belief that a woman who gives birth to a Buddha cannot serve any other purpose. The young prince was raised by his aunt. When he grew up, he married Gopa and they called their first son Rahula (meaning 'chains'), which reflected how the young prince felt imprisoned by his lifestyle. One day, he escaped from the palace and had four experiences.

- He saw a frail old man and witnessed how old age destroys memory, strength and beauty. He had not previously encountered old age.
- He saw a sick person racked with pain and was shocked to see, for the first time, so much pain and suffering.
- He saw weeping mourners at a funeral procession and was disturbed by the distress of death, which he had not encountered before.
- He saw a holy man with an alms bowl who was contented and happy.

These experiences led Siddharta to the conclusion that all of life's pleasures are ephemeral and worthless. He wished to find true knowledge and left the palace in order to find it. He tried many different ways of finding enlightenment including joining the monks, undertaking yoga and living in extreme poverty, but to no avail. He then sat under a bodhi tree to meditate, and enlightenment finally came to him in three stages over three nights: on the first night, all of his previous lives passed before him; on the second night, the cycle of birth and rebirth and the laws that govern it were revealed to him; and on the third night, he came to understand the Four Noble Truths.

- Suffering is universal.
- The origin of suffering is human desire.
- The cessation of suffering can be achieved.
- There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

He realized that if human craving ceased, suffering would also cease. In this way, he became the Buddha or 'the enlightened one'. Following this, Buddha was asked by the high God, Brahma, to help others find enlightenment, which he did for the remainder of his life.

Sects

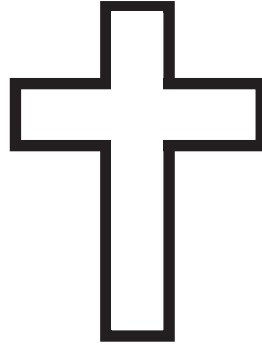
There are two predominant forms of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada is the path usually followed by monks, but most Buddhists follow the path of Mahayana.

Theravada Buddhists. Theravada Buddhism is practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand and other parts of South East Asia. An important emphasis within Theravada Buddhism is that the Buddha was only a man and one in a succession of Buddhas, but that enlightenment may be attained by following his teachings.

The Theravada Buddhists are further divided into two groups: the monks or nuns and householders. The monks and nuns or *bhikkus* rely entirely on others for the provision of food and clothing. They beg for alms from the householders, but are only allowed to do so before midday. By being free of domestic duties and devoting much time to meditation, the *bhikkus* stand the best chance of enlightenment. It is believed that only monks and nuns can truly attain enlightenment.

2 Christianity

Christianity is the world's largest religion. It is followed by an estimated 33% of the world's population and there are thought to be about 2.1 billion Christians worldwide. In Africa, there are now more Christians than Muslims; Muslims tend to be concentrated in the northern half of the continent, but Christians predominate in central and southern countries.



Elsewhere, countries that have previously been dominated by another faith, such as the traditionally Buddhist Taiwan, are experiencing a gradual conversion to a Christian majority.

Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and the Son of Man – human and yet divine – whose death and resurrection freed the world from sin. The Christian cross is the symbol of the crucifixion of Jesus and the empty cross shows that he has risen again.

Jesus was born a Jew in Palestine just over 2000 years ago. He traveled around gathering followers, interpreting Jewish law, providing people with a code by which to live their lives and performing miracles. Initially, he preached in Jewish synagogues, but opposition meant he ultimately had to teach his disciples and followers elsewhere. Eventually, Jesus was arrested and charged with incitement to rebellion by the Romans, and of blasphemy and opposing Jewish law by religious leaders. He predicted his own death at a meal, known as the Last Supper, with his disciples to celebrate the Jewish feast of Passover. During this meal, Jesus used bread and wine to signify his body and blood, which were about to be given up, and told the disciples that this would be done in order to save the world from sin. At church services during Holy Communion or the Eucharist, bread and wine are shared in memory of the Last Supper and as an acknowledgment of what Christ's

death represents. Jesus was ultimately put to death on a cross under the instructions of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor at the time. He died a slow and painful death, and his body was placed in a tomb. Three days later, the body had disappeared from the tomb and Jesus appeared to his followers that day and twice thereafter. The death and resurrection of Jesus are remembered the world over by Christians on Good Friday and Easter Day. Jesus made one final appearance when he was seen ascending into heaven 40 days after the resurrection; this is celebrated by some Christians on Ascension Day.

The Christian church was effectively ‘born’ on the day of Pentecost. (This is also the day when Jews celebrate the gift of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai.) It was on this day following the death of Jesus that the disciples heard a rushing noise and saw flames resting on each of them. This fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus that they would receive the Holy Spirit from God. The disciples subsequently preached the message of Jesus as he had foretold. One of the disciples, Peter, preached that there were four fundamental beliefs.

- Jesus was the Messiah.
- The Messiah died and was resurrected.
- Those who were sorry for their sins would be forgiven by God.
- Jesus sits at the right hand of God in heaven.

The apostle Paul did much to further the message of the early church and to welcome Jews and gentiles in many parts. His letters to people he met and his writings to encourage them in their beliefs form part of the Christian Bible.

Sects

Most Christians are Roman Catholic (1.2 billion), but there are also large numbers of Protestants (427 million) and Eastern Orthodox Christians (240 million).

The Christian religion is broadly divided, geographically, into East and West, reflecting a schism that occurred hundreds of years ago. In the East (e.g. Russia, Greece, Armenia, Ukraine), Orthodox beliefs prevail. In the West (USA and Europe), Roman Catholic and Anglican churches are more widespread. Worldwide, however, Christians are divided between many more denominations.