**FIVE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS** by Stan Griffin

Religion has played an important part in the history of our world. Religious teachings have shaped the lives of people since prehistoric times. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have been major influences in the formation of Western culture. They have also played an important role in the development of Middle Eastern life. Asian civilizations have been affected by Buddhist teachings.

Religion has been a major source of inspiration for the arts. Houses of worship are some of the world's most beautiful buildings. A lot of great music is religious. Many paintings, sculptures, books, dances, and motion pictures have been created with religious themes.

The five religions summarized in this story have a combined membership of 3 1/2 to 4 billion people. This is about 80 percent of the world's total population.

JUDAISM is the world's oldest, a religion of just one people: the Jews. They were the first to teach belief in only one God. Two other important religions developed from Judaism: Christianity and Islam. Jews think that God will send a Messiah (a deliverer) to unite them and lead them in His way. Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The Jewish people do not agree; they anticipate His arrival in the future. Judaism teaches that death is not the end and that there is a world to come. Precise details of the afterlife are not part of Jewish belief. The "Torah," the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, is the most important Jewish scripture. It contains the basic laws of Judaism. Another important book is the "Talmud," serving primarily as a guide to the civil and religious laws of Judaism. The Jewish house of worship is called a synagogue. Rabbis (spiritual leaders) conduct services, act as interpreters of Jewish laws, and deliver sermons. Assisting with Jewish services is the cantor; he chants the prayers and may also direct a choir. Today there are over 18 million followers of Judaism scattered throughout the world. A large number of those people live in the Jewish nation of Israel. Over six million live in the United States.

CHRISTIANITY is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Followers are called "Christians." They believe in one God who created the universe and continues to care for it. Their God sent his son Jesus (called the "Messiah") into the world to save humanity from sin and to make eternal life possible for them. That son died to accomplish this purpose. This is the same God that followers of Judaism worship. Christians believe they can be delivered from sin through their belief in Jesus. If they repent their sinful ways, they will be forgiven; after death, they will be judged and either rewarded or punished. The sacred book of Christianity is the "Bible." It consists of two parts: (1) The Old Testament describes life before the birth of Jesus; parts of this scripture is identical to a sacred book of Judaism; (2) The New Testament describes the life and teaching of Jesus, how the early church developed, and explains what faith in Jesus means. Christianity is divided into a number of individual denominations. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination with over a billion followers worldwide. Protestants number nearly 400 million; they include such churches as Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Presbyterian. Christianity is the major religion in Europe and the entire Western Hemisphere (all of the Americas).

ISLAM is the name given to the religion preached by the prophet Muhammad in the 600s A. D. He was an Arab born in Mecca who believed he had been sent by God (Allah) to guide his people and be their messenger. People who believe these ideas are called Muslims. Islam in Arabic means "submission," and Muslim translates to "one who submits" (to God). There is only one religion which has more followers worldwide than Islam: that religion is Christianity with its many denominations. The holy book of Islam is the "Koran." Muslims believe its words to be those of Allah himself, spoken to Muhammad by an angel. Parts of the Koran resemble the Christian Bible. It contains stories about the prophets who appear in the Old Testament and stories from the New Testament about Jesus. Muslims learn that life on earth is a period of testing and preparation for the life to come. Angels record good and bad deeds. People should behave themselves and help others, trusting in Allah's justice and mercy for their reward. Muslims pray five times daily in their mosques (churches). While praying, they face the holy city of Mecca (in Saudi-Arabia) and sometimes kneel with faces to the ground. All Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage (trip to a sacred place) to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

HINDUISM is one of the world's oldest religions. It was named for the Indus River in India where it began over 4,000 years ago. Over 2/3's of the world's Hindus live there; large numbers reside in Africa also. Hindus believe in many gods, numbering into the thousands. They recognize one supreme spirit called Brahman ("the Absolute.") The goal of Hindus is to someday join with Brahman. Until that union takes place, believers are in a continuous process of rebirth called "reincarnation." At death, the Hindu's deeds (karma) determine what the next life will be. Followers work to break this cycle--birth, death, re-birth-- (referred to by writers as the "Wheel of Life") and gain release. The Hindu's soul then merges with Brahman in a condition of spiritual perfection (moksha). Hinduism has many sacred books, the oldest being a series called the "Vedas." Traditional Hindu society was divided into groups of four classes (or varnas). This was known as the "caste system." People were generally grouped by occupations. As children were born, they became members of their parents' caste and remained there for life. After death a person's karma determined whether he or she was reborn into a higher caste or moved downward to a lower caste. Included in the caste system was a category called "untouchables." People in this group were considered impure, shunned by the other varnas, and given jobs that no one else would do. This category was outlawed in 1950, and everyone in it was awarded full citizenship. The entire caste system has weakened through the years, and today some members intermix and work with one another.

BUDDHISM was founded in India about 2,500 years ago by a teacher whose name was Prince Siddhartha Gautama. To his followers he was the Buddha ("Enlightened One"). At various times in the past, it has been a dominant religious, cultural, and social force in most of Asia. Today there are about 300 million Buddhists in the world; most live in Sri Lanka, southern Asia, and Japan. Buddhism states that existence is a continuing cycle of death and rebirth. (In this, it agrees with Hinduism; both religions use the term "Wheel of Life.") Each person's position in life is determined by his or her behavior in the previous life. This is known as their "karma" (also a Hindu belief). As long as a person remains in this cycle of birth and death, he or she cannot be completely free from pain and suffering. To break out of the cycle, it is necessary to lose all desire for worldly things. Once that has been done, people are ready to pass into a place of eternal bliss, perfect peace, and happiness. They call it "nirvana," a state of mind rather than a place. (This is similar to Hinduism's moksha.) Buddhists do not believe in a god or gods, nor in the existence of a human soul. Instead, they have faith in Buddha, his teachings (called "dharma"), and the religious community he founded ("sangha"--an order of monks). These are known as the "Three Jewels." Buddhists rejected the Hindu caste system. A scripture called the "Tripitika" was developed by Buddhist scholars. Various Buddhist schools have developed in India and within the Asian continent. These five religions have many obvious differences, of course; but they share certain elements. Those are: (1) belief in a power beyond the individual; (2) accepted teaching of salvation (goal of a life after death); (3) a code of conduct; (4) use of sacred stories; and (5) religious acts and ceremonies.