

# EXPLORING THE CONVERGING PATHS OF RELIGIONS

Saleem Ahmed, Ph.D.  
President, All Believers' Network, Honolulu

## I. INTRODUCTION

Often, we look upon our own religion as the *only* way to salvation and believe that other paths are possibly incorrect or misinformed. And when we describe Divinity, it is through passages in our respective scriptures. Generally, we may have not read a single passage in any other sacred text; in fact, probably we may have not even thumbed through any other holy book. Thus, our view of other religions is often based upon partisan writings highlighting differences between religions without discussing reasons for the same. And while there are many *ritualistic differences* between religions, there also are many *spiritual commonalities* between these. Thus, Tengriism, for example, declares: *There might also be other true religions, and a person can follow any* (see below) and Hinduism clarifies: *While different streams arise in different places, they all mingle on their way to the sea. So also, O Lord, the different paths which men take, though different and appearing to be either crooked or straight, they all lead to Thee* (see below). In this article, we will attempt to explore convergence among religions on the basis how their respective scriptures describe some attributes of the deity they worship. The Qur'an summarizes such thoughts by referring to followers of various spiritual paths as "People of the Book" (POB). These are individuals and groups who believe in Divinity and afterlife, who are righteous, and who have been bestowed with a "book" of guidance by Divine Consciousness.

Who might be among POBs? We cannot play "God" and select some religions and 'de-select' others. But, just to satisfy our curiosity, can we not use some objective criteria as "litmus test"? Table 1 begins such a test: It lists seven extra-ordinary attributes that, according to various scriptures, God possesses. Our objective will be to see which deities of various religions are also considered to possess all or some of these attributes.

Table 1. Some Attributes of God mentioned/implied in various holy books

Creator	Omniscient
Eternal	Perfect
Omnipotent	Unique

The Qur'an labels followers of the Abrahamic faiths as POBs and implies there also are many other POBs. Who could be among the other POBs? For discussion, I divide my list into four groups. This listing is, by no means, all-inclusive; it reflects the limit of my knowledge:

1. Individuals mentioned in the holy books of non-Abrahamic traditions which promote *monotheism*;
2. Individuals mentioned in the sacred writings of two recent Abrahamic faiths which also promote *monotheism*;
3. Individuals mentioned in the holy books of non-Abrahamic traditions which preach *righteousness*;
4. Unnamed individuals in the oral traditions of the pre-literate period who might have promoted monotheism. With this period stretching back to the time of the first humans, and encompassing the entire world, this listing would probably include the largest number of POBs. However, with our sketchy knowledge about that vast pre-literate period, we can only second-guess.

To initiate a discussion, I suggest six individuals as POB leaders in Group One (listed alphabetically by religion); two each in Groups Two and Three; and an undetermined number in Group Four. For groups One and Two, I also include a brief description of the Eternal Being they revere as described in

their holy book; for Group Three, I include their respective message of righteousness; and for Group Four, we have no basis to include anyone.

## I. RELIGIONS AND POB LEADERS

### Group One

#### Non-Abrahamic Religions which Promote Monotheism

##### **1. Religion: Buddhism; POB leader: Shakyamuni Buddha; Eternal Being: Amida Buddha**

###### Description of Amida Buddha

*He has no set form and can manifest Himself in any form. Though we describe His attributes, yet He has no set attributes, but can manifest Himself in any and all excellent attributes. . . . Being formless and without substance, He has always been and will always be. It is not a physical body that must be nourished; it is an eternal body whose substance is Wisdom. He has neither fear nor disease. He is eternally changeless. . His body fills every corner of the Universe; it reaches everywhere; it exists forever regardless of whether we believe in Him or doubt His existence (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism>).*

The messenger, *Gautama Siddhartha* (Buddhism's founder, 563-483 BCE), born in India, is referred to as the *Enlightened Buddha* or *Shakyamuni Buddha*. He expounded the Noble Eightfold Path to reach *Nirvana*. Buddhism's sacred text is *Dhammapada*.

##### **2. Religion: Confucianism; POB leader: Kong Zi (Confucius). Eternal Being: Tian/Tao ("heaven")**

###### Description of Tian/Tao

*He is the supreme spiritual reality. (He) sees as the people, hears as the people hear"; (He) is pervasive (widespread, omnipresent, universal); He is the supreme source of goodness. Only heaven is majestic, grand, and glorious. Heaven cannot be deceived; it rewards and punishes, depending on man's virtues. For Heaven is always kind to the virtuous. Heaven is the guiding force of the universe and judge of right and wrong.*

The above description has been gathered from different parts of the *Analects*, which is a collection of sayings attributed to Confucius, who lived in China, 551-479 BC. Confucius' other book is *The Great Learning* ([www.britannica.com/topic/Confucianism](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Confucianism)).

##### **3. Religion: Hinduism; POB leader: Unknown; Eternal Being: Brahm, Bhagwan, Bara Deo**

###### Description of Brahm

*He is the Omniscient Lord. He is not born; He does not die. Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, He dwells within the hearts of all. Though seated, He travels far; though seated, He moves all things. Formless is He, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting, he abides forever. He is all-pervading and supreme.*

This is the description of *Brahm* in the *Upanishads* (<https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/25839-the-upanishads>). The unknown sage sharing this information lived in India around 1,500 BC. Other Hindu scriptures are the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism>).

**4. Religion: Sikhism; POB leader: Guru Nanak;  
Eternal Being: Wahe Guru**

Description of Wahe Guru

*God is oneness that permeates the entirety of creation. It abides within every bit of the creation. The One is indescribable yet knowable and perceivable to anyone who surrenders their egoism and meditates upon that Oneness. God has numerous ways, but the oneness of the deity is the most important.*

This was gathered from different parts of [Sikhism - Wikipedia](#), as clarified by Guru Nanak (1469 – 1539 CE), who tried to bring Hindus and Muslims together in the worship of the one God. Sikhism's sacred book, *Guru Granth Sahib*, was compiled about a hundred years after Nanak's death. Note: While this message was delivered about 800 years *after* Muhammad died, I am including it in this list of “pre-Muhammad” sages because it echoes the same sentiments [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikhism#Concept\\_of\\_life](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikhism#Concept_of_life).

**5. Religion: Taoism/Daoism; POB leader: Lau Tzu;  
Eternal Being: Tao/Dao**

Description of Tao/Dao

*There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger of being exhausted! It may be regarded as the Mother of all things. I do not know its name.*

This was clarified by Lao Tzu (or Laotze), founder of Daoism/Taoism, who lived in China during 604 to 531 BC. He is noted for his book *Tao Te Ching* (or *Dao De Jing*). A good summary of the religion is found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao\\_Te\\_Ching](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao_Te_Ching).

**6. Religion: Zoroastrianism; POB leader: Zoroaster  
Eternal Being: Ahura Mazda**

Description of Ahura Mazda

*Ahura Mazda is: Omniscient (knows everything); Omnipotent (all powerful); Omnipresent (is everywhere); Impossible for humans to conceive; Unchanging; The Creator of life; and the Source of all goodness and happiness <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/beliefs/god.shtml>. He is also the supreme being in heaven, the uncreated spirit. beyond, apart, and without Him, there is nothing in existence. He is changeless, moving all while not being moved by anyone, he has no equal, and no one can take the heavens from him. He favors the just man, upholding the truth and proper behavior.*

This was expounded by Zoroaster (628-551 BC), who lived in Persia. Zoroastrians pay homage to *Ahura Mazda* through fire, which represents Spiritual Light. *Zend-Avesta* is their sacred text.

**Group Two. Abrahamic Faiths In More Recent Times Preaching Monotheism**

**7. Religion: Ahmadiyya sect of Islam; POB leader: Mirza Ghulam Ahmad;  
Eternal Being: Allah**

Description of Allah

*Allah possesses all power and is completely sovereign. He has the power to do anything and everything. At the same time, He is ever merciful. His infinite love is that He has said that the reward for good deeds will be multiplied ten times the value of the act, yet the punishment for doing wrong is only equal to the bad deed itself.*

This is summarized from [The Four Fundamental Attributes of God | Islam Ahmadiyya \(alislam.org\)](http://www.alislam.org). The sect was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1889 in India. Conservative Muslims have ex-communicated them as they claim their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was a prophet, after Muhammad. They continue to be persecuted by hardline Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere.

**8. Religion: Bahá'í Faith; POB leader: Bahá'u'lláh  
Eternal Being: God**

Description of God

*God is the imperishable and uncreated Being who is the source of all existence. He is described as "a personal God". He is eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, and almighty. His image is reflected in his creation. God is understood through His Manifestations, the Prophets of God throughout time. The Greatest Name for God is Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá,*

The Bahá'í Faith was heralded by Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad (The Báb, "The Gate") in 1844 in Persia., and established as an independent religion by Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Núrí (Bahá'u'lláh. "Glory of God") in 1863. Baha'is believe that God periodically reveals His will through divine messengers. Religion is seen as an orderly, unified, and progressive evolution from age to age.

**Group Three  
Non-Abrahamic Religions which Preach Righteousness**

**10. Religion: Jainism; POB leader: Mahavira;  
Eternal Being: ? (Tirthankara?)**

Message of righteousness

*Right conduct, right knowledge and right belief (as the means to achieve Nirvana)*

This was shared by Mahavira (599-527 BC, India), the last of 24 *Tirthankaras*, as being the prerequisites to attain *nirvana*. Tirthankaras are considered "super humans". Jainism's sacred texts are *Agam* and *Sutra*. While Jains do not believe in God, they believe in divine beings. They promote peace (*ahimsa*) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/jainism/beliefs/threejewels.html>).

**11. Religion: Shinto; POB leader: Unnamed;  
Eternal Being: Kami**

Message of righteousness:

*Although the people living across the ocean surrounding us, I believe, are all (our) brothers and sisters, why is there constant trouble in the world?*

This was lamented by the unnamed founder of Shinto. Their sacred texts are *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and *Nihongi* (Chronicle of Japan) ([www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto)). Shinto has no God, but it lays emphasis on devotion to "Kami", which are invisible spiritual beings and powers connected to humans ([Does Shinto religion believe in God - Bing](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto)).

**Group Four  
Unknown individuals in pre-literate times who may have promoted monotheism**

From the earliest times, several other people might have also helped spread the message of Divinity. We have no idea of who or how many individuals belong in this grouping. It is this quest that the balance of this review embarks upon.

### III. EMERGENCE AND SPREAD OF HUMANITY

As a preamble, let us try to understand how humanity may have come into being and how it may have spread around the world. There are two theories regarding the emergence of humans, both of which are considered mutually exclusive:

Emergence through creation, based on the scriptures  
(<https://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/CS/CS/CSindex.html>).

Many religions utilize mythological beings in the process of creation. . In this regard, the Bible and Qur'an inform us that God created Adam from clay and Eve from his rib (Genesis 2:4-22; Qur'an 2:30-35). While these two stories appear somewhat different, both end up with the creation of Adam and Eve. However, there is no information in either book regarding when or where did this event take place. There also are creation stories in other traditions. For example, in one Native American tradition, two mystical beings, *Tepeu* and *Gucumatz* (Feathered Serpent), contemplated together, possibly regarding creation. And whatever they thought, came into being. They thought of the Earth, and there it was; they thought of mountains, trees, sky, and animals etc., and each came into being.  
(<https://www.crystalinks.com/nativeamcreation.html>).

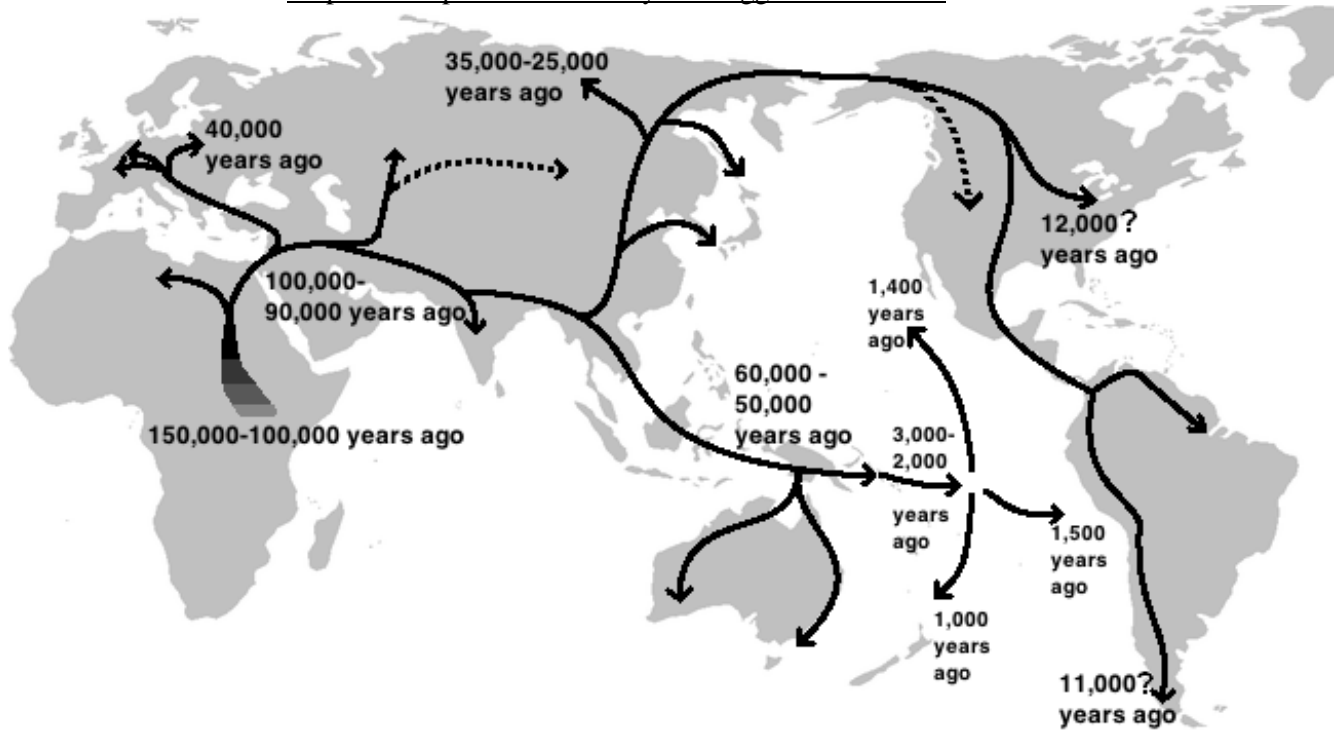
2. Emergence through evolution, based on science This suggests that the human species, *Homo sapiens*, evolved out of its earlier hominid ancestor, *Homo erectus*. *Homo sapiens* have a bigger brain and are therefore considered "smarter" (<https://vivadifferences.com/homo-erectus-vs-homo-sapien/>) They also have longer legs and shorter arms. which enabled them to move from tree hopping to ground walking. Based on the earliest skeletal remains discovered thus far, *Homo sapiens* are supposed to have emerged in Ethiopia, 150,000+ years ago. These earliest *Homo sapiens* were probably dark skinned ([www.quora.com/Were-the-first-people-dark-skinned-or-light-skinned](http://www.quora.com/Were-the-first-people-dark-skinned-or-light-skinned)) due to Ethiopia's high ultraviolet radiation. As they gradually spread to other regions of the world over the next several centuries, they gradually lost skin pigmentation, thereby becoming fairer and more susceptible to melanoma (skin cancer) ([https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/adapt/adapt\\_4.htm](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/adapt/adapt_4.htm)). It is also suggested that the differing physical features among various human races, such as the Australasians, Caucasians, Orientals, Polynesians, etc. is due to the mating of *Homo sapiens* with other related *Homo* species such as the *Neanderthals* and *Denisovans*, over the next several centuries (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neanderthal>). Both Neanderthal and Denisovan species are believed to have lived in Eurasia and to have become extinct about 40,000 years ago.

Will the twain meet? I suggest these two views of the emergence and spread of humanity -- creation and evolution -- are *not* mutually exclusive; in fact, both are needed to consider the balance of this article.

#### Spread of humanity

The speed with which humanity spread out of Ethiopia must have been initially slow, about a village per decade, constrained by finding appropriate spots providing shelter and food to the growing population. Their journeys must also have been directionless, with different groups venturing in different directions, guided by their gut feelings. And finally, global circumnavigating by humans through organized explorations was probably completed only 1,400+ years ago with the populating of New Zealand and Hawaii (Map 1).

Map 1. The spread of humanity and suggested timelines



Based largely on <https://i.imgur.com/ngDXkEt.jpg>

*Note: I propose that, in Map 1, three additional arrows be added in Africa: one going from east to west below the Sahara desert; another going south from east Africa./ and the third arrow, going north from West Africa, via the Straits of Gibraltar, to Spain. The timeline of all three should be 40,000 years ago.*

The following discussion is based on a happy marriage of the “creation” and “evolution” theories. Indeed, this discussion would not have been possible by considering either theory exclusively.

In the beginning, when humanity consisted of the “first parents” (Adam and Eve?) and their small family, belief in God must have been a “family affair”. Over the next several centuries, those extended families must have become informal faith-based conglomerations, carrying forward the Divine message, very much like the story of the “tooth fairy” we carry forward currently. These folk religions must have continued to operate on an informal basis for centuries, usually without rituals and fixed prayers, but often based on spontaneous individual inspirations. And while organized religions, starting around 5,000 BC, may have won over many converts from followers of these folk religions, all nine folk religions discussed below are still “alive and kicking”. As of 2010, an estimated 405 million people worldwide – 6% of the world population – were adherents of these folk religions. This number might grow to 450 million by 2050. (<http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/religions/folk-religions>). In some areas – particularly in the Americas, Australia, and Polynesia -- there seems to be a desire among some “natives”, who had converted to other religions, to return to their roots. As we reflect on this list, let us marvel at the fact that, although we are considering a 150,000+ years span, belief in Divinity has remained unchanged all along.

Data in Table 3 suggests the “settling time” of religions in various geographic areas. I am using the term “settling time” – instead of “initializing time” -- to clarify that I have added, quite arbitrarily, some “cushion time” to the dates suggested by the radiocarbon dating of skeletal remains, as these were most

likely not the earliest representatives of these peoples. This “settling time” is only suggestive and could be way off the mark. At least this provides a starting point for in-depth analysis and discussion.

Table 3. Suggested “settling time” of folk religions in various areas  
(150,000+ BC to 1,000 BC)

Approximate time (BC)	Location	Religion/Deity
150,000+	Africa	African Traditional Religions
60,000	India	Gond
50,000	China	Shangdi
50,000	Australia	Native Australian religions
40,000	Europe	Asatru
40,000	Central Asia	Tengri
15,000	N. America	Native American religions
14,000	S. America	Aztec, Inca, Maya. Olmec
2,000	Polynesia	Polynesian religions
1,400	Hawaii	Native Hawaiian religions

### Analysis of Table 3

Following a strictly “evolutionary” approach of creation, the “default” view regarding religious beliefs of the earliest humans would have been of atheism. The thought of religion would not even have crossed their minds as they probably might have been engaged constantly in the battle for survival against nature and animals.

But an analysis of Table 3 and the discussion below suggests the opposite; that humanity *started* with a belief in Divinity (based on the teachings of Adam and Eve?); that it came as naturally as eating. Hence, we need to look at a combination of the “creation” and “evolution” models for our discussion. Following this revised model, summarized below is my overview of the initiation and spread of nine “Folk Religions”. Their narratives suggest their beliefs in an eternal being has prevailed all along. Also, there might have been several other intermediate places where humans may have settled, such as the purported territory of the Queen of Sheba. But we do not have adequate information about these people and/or the places they inhabited to offer any definitive comment. This narrative will likely change with new discoveries; and the existing blanks in this fascinating story of humanity’s spread might get filled.

#### 1) 150,000+ years ago

Religion: African Traditional Religions (ATRs)

Location: Sub-Saharan Africa

Deities: *Olorun*; *Mulungu*,

Information source: Wikipedia. Traditional African Religion (TAR)

Africa is unique because many tribes have reportedly continued to worship the Supreme God from the earliest times to the present. Generally, West Africans refer to Him as *Amma* or *Olorun* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olorun>); and East Africans, as *Mulungu* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulungu>). Grouped together as Traditional African Religion (TAR), these have no known founder(s) and no sacred books. Their stories about creation and spread of humanity are “written” in the hearts of these people and have been passed orally over the past 150,000+ years. There are no shrines dedicated to either *Olorun* or *Mulungu*. No one seems to know when, where, or how did these beliefs originate. People simply believe that there is a “spirit/deity”, without knowing what this means (neither do we know even now). They describe the deity as being invisible,

indescribable; self-created, existing eternally on its own; and that it is the creator of everything. It is considered to be the “original source”. It is all-knowing and present everywhere, like air. It shares human images: it sees, hears, smells, tastes; and eats, it sleeps, plays, and walks. It is also very remotely located. But it provides solace and hope in times of need (<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/God,-divinities-and-spirits-in-African>).

Introspection: With several TARs being spread out across more than 2,000 miles in Africa where communication means are generally poor (<http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/religions/folk-religions>), how could they all have ended up with a uniform view of the Creator? We can only conclude that this was because they share common ancestors who must have learned about the Creator when they were a small family with Adam and Eve in Ethiopia, 150,000+ years earlier.

Across the Red Sea: With the sea level being 200-300 feet lower during the last glacial period (115,000 BC to 11,700 BC) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last\\_Glacial\\_Period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_Glacial_Period)), a land bridge – or a series of several loosely connected islands – possibly existed in the Red Sea between Africa and Arabia, especially around the narrowest point, *Bab el Mandeb*. This lies at the southwest tip of the Arabian peninsula and is currently 17 miles wide. This point must have been much narrower and shallower during the above-mentioned glacial period. This might have helped people to “island hop” between these two land masses. This part of Arabia probably became the kingdom of the Queen of Sheba (Qur’an verses 27:15-44) and King Solomon (971-930 BC) (Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31; 1 Kings 10:1).

## 2) 60,000 years ago

Location: India

Religion: Gond

Name of deity: *Bara Deo; Maha Deo; Bhagwan; Brahm.*

Information Source: Wikipedia. Gond people

The Dravidian Gond religion is much older than Hinduism, which was introduced later (around 4,000 to 5,000 years ago) by the invading Aryans from West Asia (Hinduism - Origins, Facts & Beliefs - HISTORY). *Bara Deo*'s Hindi name is *Bhagwan*. He is considered eternal and rarely worshiped, though His name is often invoked. He is a personal god, who is just, merciful, eternal, and the creator of humans. He is present everywhere; and the universe coexists with Him. However, there also are other male and female deities that personify various natural features. These came later. *Bhagwan* is present everywhere, like air. Every hill, river, lake, tree, and rock, etc. is considered to be inhabited by Him. The universe is ruled by Him and/or by other deities on His behalf. These may be benevolent or capricious and prone to harm humans, especially rule-breakers. They watch over the strict observance of the tribal rules and punish offenders. Gonds, like other central Indian tribes (which originated later), believe that most diseases and misfortunes are caused by evil spirits and offended deities. They also believe in the evil eye and witchcraft. Generally, a witch is a woman who brings sickness and death.

The most distinctive feature of Gond religion is the reverence of the *Persa Pen*, or the clan deities. Each Gond clan has its *persa pen*, meaning "great god." This god is benign at heart but can display violent tendencies. He is the Supreme Being, creator of the universe and giver of life and death. He oversees activities of the lesser gods and is to be respected and worshiped, but He does not receive the fervent devotion reserved for the clan deities. (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/anthropology-and-archaeology/people/gond>).

There are currently more than 30 “scheduled castes” in India, making up 16% of the India’s one billion plus population ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Scheduled\\_Tribes\\_in\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Scheduled_Tribes_in_India)). These are mostly ethnic, cultural, or linguistic groupings. Descriptions of their deities are often similar to the



above description of *Bara Deo*, which title in Hindi/Urdu and other South Asian languages means “big giant” or “big deity”.

### 3) 50,000 years ago

Location: China

Name of the religion: Shang religion

Name of the Deity: *Shangdi*

Information source: Wikipedia. Shandi.

*Shangdi* is the eternal supreme god in the original Chinese religious writings. The term is usually translated as “the emperor above” or the “celestial lord”. It is an important religious concept that probably dates back to earlier than the Shang dynasty (1766 – 1055 BC). The earliest reference to *Shangdi* is found in the Oracle Bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty. These inscriptions were mainly used for divination and keeping historical records. These suggest that *Shangdi* was considered to be a personal force who is eternal and often listens to prayers. *Shangdi* is usually not represented with images. Belief in afterlife is evidenced by human and animal remains and artifacts that have been found in tombs of rulers and other notable personalities.

Shamanism, the belief in a person who is seen to have access to the spirits, is common among followers. The shaman, usually a male, enters into a trance during such rituals. Usually, shamans also practice divination (knowledge of the future) and healing.

The Shang dynasty/religion is also noted for establishing a lunar calendar using a 29-day month and 12-months in a year (shangdi calendar - Bing). Since this is shorter than the actual year of 365 days, priests and astronomers were trained to recalculate the lunar year and add enough days so that each year lasted 365 days. Because of the simultaneous presence of other gods and goddesses, *Shangdi* appears similar to *Zeus* in Greek mythology and *Brahm* in Hindu mythology. These gods and goddesses are considered to be helpers to the Eternal Being and not as competitors.

### 4) 50,000 years ago

Location: Australia

Name of religions: Native Australian religions (see below)

Names of the Deity: *Altjira*

Information Source: Wikipedia. The Dreaming

“The Great Spirit” (Creator God) is the sky god and central in the *Dreamtime* concept (see below). He is believed to have lived on earth, before rising to the sky from where He watches over the earth. He is supernatural, eternal, omnipresent and omnipotent. He has numerous names in different parts of Australia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Australian\\_Aboriginal\\_mythological\\_figures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Australian_Aboriginal_mythological_figures)).

An important concept in the Native Australian belief system is of *Alcheringa*, a psychic state in which contact is made with ancestral spirits. Its translations include *Dreaming*, *Dreamtime*, *Everywhen*, *Time out of time*, and *Eternal, uncreated time*. It is thought to be a “dynamic psycho-spiritual state of human mind”. Individuals in trance can reportedly communicate telepathically with others located miles away. In the distant past, the land was thought to have been inhabited by ancestral figures, often of gigantic proportions with supernatural abilities. These figures were often distinct from gods as they did not control the material world and were not worshiped but honored. The concept of dreamtime has become widely adopted beyond its original Australian context and is now part of global popular culture. Dreaming is also used as a tribal symbol such as *Kangaroo Dreaming*, *Shark Dreaming*, *Honey Ant Dreaming*, etc.

### 5) 40,000 years ago

Location: Central Europe

Religion: Asatru.

Name of the Deity: *Odin*

Information source: Wikipedia. Odin

*Odin* is the king of the *Aesir* race of Norse gods. He is the father of all other gods and is primarily associated with magic, wisdom, war, poetry, death, and victory and defeat. We are reminded of Him every Wednesday, as the name *Odin* is derived from his Old English name, *Woden*, from which name “Wednesday” is derived.

*Odin* is a war god and appears in heroic literature as the protector of heroes; and fallen warriors joined him in *Valhalla* (see below); the wolf and the raven were dedicated to him; and his magical horse, *Sleipnir*, has eight legs and the ability to gallop through the air and over the sea (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Odin-Norse-deity>). *Odin* is also a great magician. Additionally, He is the god of poets and is usually depicted wearing a cloak, a wide-brimmed hat. and carrying a spear.

*Odin* is often described as the eternal king of gods, who listens to prayers. The Norse believe in afterlife and that warriors who die in battle enter the ‘hall of the slain’. There also are supernatural females, the *Valkyries*, who serve *Odin* and are sent by him to the battlefield to choose from among the slain those who are worthy of a place in *Valhala*. This is the place where heroes killed in battle, are rewarded by being with *Odin* and feasting for eternity. Others are chosen by the goddess *Freyja* for her afterlife-location, *Fólkvangr*, a meadow, to live eternally. *Odin* is usually thought of as a prominent figure; and medieval writings portray him as a one-eyed and long-bearded person, frequently wielding a spear and wearing a cloak and a broad hat. He is versatile and may take on any form and personality at any time. However, his true personality is not revealed to anyone.

### 6) 40,000 years ago

Location: Central Asia

Religion: Tengriism

Deity: *Tengri*

Information source: Wikipedia. Tengriism

*Kök Tengri* (Blue Sky) is the Supreme Being, the One, the creator of everything. Usually Tengriism is considered to be a pantheistic religion, with *Tengri* being an absolute concept, but who listens to prayers. This appears to be similar to the concepts of *Tao/Dao* in Taoism/Daoism and *Brahm* in Hinduism. *Tengri* is the unknowable, infinite, timeless, and creator of the universe. Other deities are revered as *Tengri's* manifestations.

*Tengriism* is considered to be a combination of monotheism, polytheism, shamanism, and ancestor worship. The religion’s main principles are: (1) There is one supreme deity, *Tengi*. He is the all-knowing creator, and judge of people’s actions; (2) He is the power behind all of nature; (3) There are many other spirits – good and bad – that reside in the heavens, the underworld, and on the land; (4) *Tengri* gives humans their soul at birth and takes it back upon their death. (5) There might also be other “true” religions, and a person can follow any; (6) There should be tolerance and respect for all religions; (7) *Tenrgi* judges on the basis of our degree of righteousness; (8) Since humans are generally weak, there should be tolerance for their shortcomings; and (9) No one is perfect.

*Tengriism* focuses on living in harmony with nature (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tengrism#God>).

The celestial world has many similarities with the earth but is undefiled by humans. The celestial world is brighter than the earth. On some days, the doors of this heavenly world are opened and light shines through the clouds. During such occasions, prayers can be rewarded. A shaman performs his imaginary journey, which takes him to the heavens, by riding a black bird, a deer, a horse, or by going in the shape of these animals. There are also many similarities between the earth and the underworld, and its inhabitants resemble humans. The sun and the moon of the underworld give far less light than the sun and the moon of the earth.

*Tengriism* is practiced in Central Asia by the Mongols, Huns, Bulgars, Turkic, and Altaic people. Its foundation was probably laid when people, spreading out of Africa, reached Central Asia and decided to settle there.

### **7) 15,000 years ago**

Location: North America

Name of religion: Several (see below).

Name of deity: Native American deities.

Information source: Wikipedia. Indigenous peoples of the Americas

The Great Spirit is the supreme and eternal being of many North American belief systems. It is conceived of as a perfect and all-powerful deity and ruler of the universe. Some tribes believe the Great Spirit is an amalgamation of a dominant Father Sky god and Mother Earth goddess. Others refer to Him as "Father", "Old Man" or "Grandfather"; in some cultures, He is perceived to be a man or an animal with human thought and speech. The belief in the "Great Spirit" permeates through all North American belief systems. And the male and female beings are considered to be equal in status.

While each tribe's unique environment impacted its belief system differently, all demonstrate similarities in the way they view their interaction with the natural world. There seems to be an amalgamation of the natural and supernatural worlds. Native American cultures are characterized by an intimate relationship with nature and deep religious sentiment permeates many aspects of their lives. Throughout history, several Native American tribes have maintained numerous and rich mythologies regarding deities they revere. Such spiritual stories are based on natural forces and embrace symbolisms of seasons and the temporal world.

### Earliest known settlement in the Americas

Radiocarbon dating of the remains of nine species of seaweed and algae found in the hearth of a human settlement uncovered at Monte Verde in Chile (South America) indicates a date of between 14,200 and 14,000 years ago. This makes this location the earliest known human settlement in the Americas (Dillehay et. al; also: Earliest known archaeological evidence of Americans found in Monte Verde, Chile – Anthropology.net). It is suggested that these people, originating in Asia, must have crossed over to Alaska via Beringea (now, Bering Straits), which was then a land mass connecting Asia with Alaska. This was during the last glacial period, which lasted from about 115,000 years ago to 11,700 years ago. Then, the sea level was 200 to 300 feet lower, thereby enabling people to trek over 12,000+ miles or sail along the coast., crossing from Alaska through North, Central, and South America to Monte Verde.

Introspection: However, it is intriguing that these earliest people did not settle at any of the several suitable places they must have crossed on their way over those 12,000+ miles across North, Central, and South America. What special attraction did Monte Verde carry, especially when their travel was "direction-less" as they did not know what lay ahead? This issue arises because, thus far, no sign of any

intermediate settlement has been discovered on that long stretch; and journey that must have taken several months to cross, regardless of whether they traveled by land or by boats along the coast. Even in the latter case, they must have gone ashore occasionally. The answer, if any, is shrouded in mystery. Thus, perhaps we need to consider an alternate route.

#### Alternate route?

I propose that these people used an entirely different route to reach Monte Verde: they must have “island-hopped” from southeast Asia, starting from around Singapore and sailing east, across several islands in present-day Indonesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and French Polynesia. With sea level then being 200-300 feet lower during the last Ice Age, this part of the Pacific Ocean must have had hundreds of islands uncovered, with several providing them with food. Even now, more than 50 islands lie in the Pacific Ocean between Singapore and Valparaiso, in Chile. The nearest island to Valparaiso, Juan Fernandez Islands, are less than 400 miles away and are about 40 sq. miles. The main town, on Robinson Crusoe island, has a population of about 1,000. During that glacial period, some of those islands were probably larger and could have provided food as well as shelter.

Different groups of those original adventurers might have possibly taken different routes on the way, casting their net much wider. With their different boats landing at different places, they selected Monte Verde as the place to settle. There is a freshwater creek right there, and apparently abundant food sources in the creek, ocean, and hinterland.

This alternate route would help explain, as suggested above, the absence of any intermediate settlement place on land in North, Central, and South America of these earliest adventurers from Asia to the New World.

#### **8) 14,000 years ago**

Location: Central and South America

Name of religions: Aztec, Inca, Maya, and Olmec belief systems

Names of Deities: *Viracocha*, *Huitzilopochtli*, *Itzamna*

Information source: Wikipedia. Indigenous peoples of the Americas

Please see the note above regarding the remnants of a human settlement in Monte Verde, Chile.

The religious life of the indigenous Aztec, Mayan, Olmec, and Incan people presents a myriad of folklores about creation, belief systems, and practices associated with the calendar and with the initiation of children into adulthood,. The Aztec, Mayan, and Olmec were Mesoamerican civilizations living in Mexico and Central America; and the Incas lived in South America. The Mayans and the Aztec people are credited with developing a calendar each, while the Incas were famed for their masonry and engineering skills.

Here are brief explanations of the three main deities revered in Latin America:

*Viracocha* is the supreme and eternal god of the Incas. Considered the creator god, He is the father of all other Incan gods and it was He who formed the earth, heavens, sun, moon and all living beings. When He finished His work, He is believed to have travelled far and wide teaching humanity about leading a righteous life. Subsequently, He headed west across the Pacific, promising to return one day. In His absence lesser deities were assigned the duty of looking after

the interests of humans. But Viracocha is, nevertheless, always watching from afar <https://www.ancient.eu/Viracocha/>.

*Huitzilopochtli* is the eternal creator and deity of war, sun, and human sacrifice in the Aztec religion. He is credited with both defeats and victories. In the Aztec mythology, *Huitzilopochtli* was the son of *Omecíhuatl* and *Ometecuhtli*, respectively, the female and male attributes aspects of the primordial god *Ometeotl*. (<http://www.ancient.eu/Huitzilopochtli/>).

*Itzamná* is the supreme eternal deity of the Mayan religion and is credited with inventing writing. He is considered to be a versatile force, and is associated with birth and creation. He is also worshiped as the god of medicine. *Itzamna* is also associated with writing, divination, wisdom, and esoteric knowledge. He can appear in many different guises, including as a priest, or as earth-caiman (a type of crocodile) (<https://www.thoughtco.com/maya-gods-and-goddesses-117947>).

### Concluding thoughts

Even though differing in details, creation mythologies play a singularly important role in the religious life of many Latin American tribes (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Native-American-religion/South-America>). These myths describe the origin of the first world and include narratives of the creation and destruction of subsequent worlds.

The practice of human sacrifice also prevailed in Latin America. But this is thought to have been inspired by some priests and not related to the teachings of the gods.

### **9) 2,000 years ago**

Location: Polynesia

Name of religion: Polynesian spirituality (various local names)

Name of the deities: *Ranginui*, *Papatuanuku*, etc.

Information source: Wikipedia. Polynesia

Polynesians form an ethnolinguistic group of closely related people who are native to Polynesia, an expansive region of Oceania in the Pacific Ocean. They trace their prehistoric origins to Southeast Asia, generally believed to be Taiwan. Polynesians have acquired a reputation as great navigators. They acquired their navigational skills by studying the movement of heavenly bodies, ocean currents, clouds, and birds. And they passed on these skills to successive generations down to the present.

The eternal Sky Father (*Ranginui*) and eternal Earth Mother (*Papatuanuku*) are omnipresent, all-knowing, and wise. The supreme God is called *Io* in Hawaiian cosmology and *Ta'aroa* in French Polynesia ([www. supreme god in polynesia - bing](http://www.supreme-god-in-polynesia-bing)). The Polynesians also have a pantheon of lesser gods and goddesses, each having a specific responsibility such as stewardship of the sky, earth, and forces of nature, as well as of war and peace. The Polynesians also believe that the spirits of ancestors can be called upon to help them in times of need, including war. Polynesians believe in life after death. At death, the soul exits from the body via a tear duct and travels to a place on each island from where it jumps off into the land of the dead. If a "soul expert" feels that the person should not have died then, he or she can find the soul, "snatch" it between cupped hands, and reinsert it into the body (<http://www.deathreference.com/Nu-Pu/Polynesian-Religions.html#ixzz6KrBCC74k>).

Many Polynesians also believe in *mana*, a spiritual life force energy that permeates the universe. All things possess *mana*; and humans can enhance the quality and quantity of their *mana*. Because *mana* is considered sacred, Polynesians developed intricate rules to protect it. Polynesians also have a deep, spiritual connection with the land and feel divinely entrusted to preserve it.

#### 10) 1,400 years ago

Location Hawaii

Name of religion: Hawaiian spirituality

Information source: Wikipedia. Hawaiian religion

The earliest humans are considered to have landed in Hawaii about 1,300 to 1,400 years ago. This was probably the last place to be populated by them. Their migration to Hawaii is memorialized through chants and narratives. While these do not carry dates, these can be reconstructed to some extent. Most of the narrative described above under Polynesia also apply to Hawaii. Belief in *mana*, the spiritual life force energy and healing power, also permeates the Hawaiian belief system.

At the apex of Hawaiian mythology is *Akua*. Some consider it to be name of a single god; others consider it to refer to a race of superhumans who have been worshiped by the Polynesian people from the distant past. The origin of *Akua*, like that of all Earth's pantheons, is shrouded in legends. According to ancient myths, the primordial Earth Mother Gaea (*Papa* in Hawaii, *Papatuanuku* in Maori) and the primordial Sky Father *Rangi* mated and gave birth to *Akua* ([Akua | Marvel Database | Fandom](#)).

### IV. FOLK RELIGIONS: SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

An amazing commonality embracing folk religions discussed above is their belief in an Eternal Being, howsoever defined. Each belief system reveres this Being in its own way, whether we classify each religion as monotheistic, dualistic, polytheistic, or henotheistic. The major commonality across all of them – as their “litmus test” -- is their belief that the object of worship is an *eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent* deity. Directly or indirectly, they also believe in afterlife; that the Creator is watching over them constantly; that “He” answers their prayers; and that “He” is wise and perfect. Followers “talk” to this Being through personal prayers (there being no written “prayer books” when these religions were initiated). While many of these folk religions also have other deities, in all cases, these are subservient to the Eternal Being and help Him in the discharge of specific duties. These “helpers” do not compete with the Eternal Being. This, in some ways, these could be considered to be synonymous with God’s angels mentioned in the Bible.

However, with time, belief in the Eternal Being got diluted in some religions with the creation of icons to represent the Being. This probably may have started unwittingly as the general human propensity is to see images of whatever is being worshiped. Thus, what may have started as an innocent desire to “see” Divinity through images, was probably blown out of proportion over the next several centuries with this creative imagery being considered to *be* the Eternal Being. The striking imagery we see in the ancient Greek religion, in Hinduism, in Polynesian religions, and elsewhere, are compelling examples. Starting from 60,000-40,000 years ago, when humans may have reached in Arabia from Ethiopia, to 1,000 BC when the Queen of Sheba reportedly ruled in parts of Arabia, the icons of these deities, instead of serving the purpose of reminding humans of the Eternal Being, possibly got transformed to *becoming* that “Eternal Being”. And currently, the Muslim reverence for the *Black Stone*, lodged in the side of the *Ka’ba* in Mecca may be considered as another example of the reverence with which an inanimate object is held by believers, although, in this case, this reverence is mandated by the Qur’an.

The tenacity with which followers of folk religions have clung to their respective beliefs in spite of possible political and psychological pressures to convert to organized religions that were founded later, needs to be recognized. As of 2010, an estimated 405 million people, comprising about 6% of the global population, were adherents of folk or traditional religion. This number is likely to grow to 450 million by 2050 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/adherents-of-folk-religions/>). Ninety percent of the global adherents of folk religions are in the Asia-Pacific region, with the other 10%, being mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

## V. CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF “PEOPLE OF THE BOOK”

a.

Some recent authors have used the phrase “People of the Book” in other contexts: For example, Johnsson identifies the Methodists and Seventh-Day Adventists as POBs; Jeffrey suggests both the Jewish people and the Torah are POBs; and Paterson and Jeffrey similarly identify the Puritans and Shakers.

### POBs and the issue of atheism

The lack of physical evidence to support the existence of God has prompted some people, including prominent 20th century philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, to turn to atheism. The concept of atheism dates back to the time of Socrates (ca. 500 BCE, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism>). A discussion of 10 common reasons supporting and refuting atheism are found at: <http://www.pravmir.com/top-10-common-atheist-arguments-fail/>.

The fact that religious writings describe the Revered Being in vague terms is because this exercise is limited by our power of imagination. But this has led to creative icons describing Him/Her/It as part of the animal kingdom (including humans), plant kingdom, extra-terrestrial world, or a combination thereof, etc. The same applies to our ability to describe creation. For example, according to one Native American myth, North America is floating on the back of a giant turtle. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtle\\_Island\\_\(Native\\_American\\_folklore\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtle_Island_(Native_American_folklore))). Possibly, the turtle was chosen because it is noted for longevity. Such varying imageries should not be considered as contradicting others, but as human desire to “connect” with the Divine.

Depending upon how we define “religion”, there are anywhere between 20 and 4,000+ such institutions worldwide (<http://www.humanreligions.info/religions.html>); (<https://www.bing.com/search?q=how+many+religions+in+the+world%3F&cvid=1696ca2c0c4c4b0186a6e12aa68fcff7&FORM=ANAB01&PC=DCTE>”). Using our suggested criteria of *eternal*, *omniscient*, *omnipotent*, and *omnipresent Being*, I suggest that POBs abound worldwide. Thus, let us celebrate the spiritual commonalities across religions instead of nitpicking on ritualistic differences. Let us honor all.

### People of the Book: Epilogue

Contemporary social scientists note that, while religious behavior varies widely among cultures, broadly speaking, religion is a spiritual tool found in most human populations. “Religion” is defined as a “social-cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, and organizations that relate humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion>). Thus, we should cast our net much wider to discover other POBs.

Religions also give meaning to life other than the “animal” experience of being simply born, living, and dying. Religions also embrace sacred histories and fill the basic human need for finding a meaning to life. Religion has survived and thrived for more than 150,000 years. And many religions describe this Being through metaphors as He/She/It is considered “indescribable.”

Researchers studying the psychology and neuroscience of religion are finding that religion may, in fact, be a byproduct of the way our brain works, utilizing our cognitive tendencies to seek order from chaos (<https://www.issr.org.uk/issr-statements/neuroscience-religious-faith/>). Religion/spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives. In general, it includes a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves. Typically, it involves a search for meaning in life. As such, it is a universal human experience—something that touches us all. People may describe a religious/spiritual experience as sacred or transcendent or simply as a deep sense of “aliveness” and interconnectedness.

## V. THE “BOTTOM LINE”

This exercise has prompted me to remove the prism through which I had looked at other religions. There seem to be many more “People of the Book” than I had envisioned. Indeed, belief in Divinity appears to be a very “human” attribute, ingrained in *Homo sapiens* psyche from the time of the first humans.

Perhaps the term “People of the Book” should now be applied more at the *individual* level than at the collective level. After all, whether I get rewarded or punished in the Hereafter depends much more on what I do individually than on what my “clan” professes to do collectively. There seems to be a limit on the “brownie points” that I can hope to get from riding on the coattails of my clan. Let us see the temple of God in all humans.



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