



INTERFAITH

11 RELIGIONS IN 7 DAYS

Anne Bokma embarks
on a whirlwind week exploring
the world's great faiths

If you could choose to be born into any religion, would you pick your own or another? Me? Sometimes I wish I'd been born a Buddhist.

Instead of being raised in the dour Dutch Calvinist church where I was exposed to such limiting concepts as unconditional election (only a lucky few are predestined by God for salvation) and total depravity (humans are incapable of refraining from evil), I would have learned about the Four Noble Truths, a philosophical guideline for ethical happy living. Rather than face the ever-present threat of hell, I could have aimed for nirvana here on earth. Instead of looking toward the heavens for answers, I would have been encouraged to seek them from within. "Be ye lamps unto yourselves," urged the Buddha.

But one's faith is usually an accident of birth. Most often, culture determines belief, and my parents were born in Holland, not Thailand. Then again, it's probably misguided to be jealous of other religions. The Buddha himself included envy on his list of the 16 defilements of the mind.

Despite its appeal, I had until recently a very superficial knowledge of Buddhism. Ditto for every other major world religion. I couldn't tell you the difference between Hinduism and Sikhism. I knew nada about less familiar religions such as Zoroastrianism and Rastafari. There are more than a dozen mosques in my hometown of Hamilton, yet I had little understanding of what goes on behind their doors. I'd been inside a synagogue only once, for a funeral. I was as ignorant about world religions as I am about the World Cup.

So when Encounter World Religions Centre, an organization based in Guelph, Ont., that promotes religious literacy, invited me to spend a week in Toronto this past summer learning about 11 religions in seven days, I didn't hesitate. Executive director Brian Carwana pitched his Discovery Week with the descriptive marketing savvy of a travel agent: "Walk across the cool stone floors and soft carpets of some of the largest temples in North America, see the spectacular icons of Buddhism, Hinduism and Eastern Orthodoxy and feel the contemplative quiet and stark simplicity of an Islamic mosque and a Zen meditation hall." He promised I'd drink wine with Wiccans, dance with Hare Krishnas, stand shoulder to shoulder with Muslims during Friday prayers, see the room where Sikhs lovingly tuck their holy book into a four-poster bed and visit an Anabaptist megachurch that broadcasts sermons to thousands of Ontarians in over a dozen movie theatres.

Carwana, 47, hosts Discovery Week every July. He also speaks to thousands of high school students each year, as well as police services, teacher organizations and NGOs. A lapsed Catholic, Carwana admits — with some reluctance — that he doesn't believe in any religion. But that just makes his program more appealing to anyone leery of potential proselytizing. Truthfully, I've never seen a non-believer so fascinated by faith. When he talks about the time a Hasidic Jewish guide showed him the bagel shops and wig stores of Brooklyn, N.Y.,

he says, "It was one of the best days of my life — up there with my wedding."

Each morning of our week begins with a lecture at the University of Toronto's Multi-Faith Centre. Funny and fast talking, Carwana breezes through thousands of years of religious history (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Indigenous spiritual traditions, Taoism, Wiccan, Rastafari and Zoroastrianism). "It's like drinking from a firehose," he warns us of the information-packed sessions. "The water's good, but there's lots of volume."

Our group of 45, from both Canada and the United States, includes police officers, teachers, retirees and university students, ranging in age from mid-teens to late 80s. After each morning's lecture, we board a school bus, eager as kids on a field trip, to travel across the city to meet priests, ministers, rabbis and imams at various houses of worship. Often we are invited to stay for a meal: lox and bagels at the synagogue; roti and dates at the mosque; lentils and rice pudding at the Sikh temple. Carwana urges us to embrace both the cuisine and the religious cultures we are introduced to. "Roast beef is great, but so is curry. This week is a buffet — there's something for everyone whether you are a religious scholar or religiously ignorant."

First up is Wicca — a belief that Carwana admits "some people are highly uncomfortable with." We head downstairs to the Multi-Faith Centre's main activity hall for a Wiccan service. A priest and priestess, garbed in robes and braided belts, demonstrate the "great rite": the priest plunges a ritual knife into a chalice held by the priestess, symbolizing both sexual union and the creation of the universe.

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We then hold hands to "raise the cone of power" and swing our arms up and down rhythmically, faster and faster, while chanting: "Air I am. Fire I am. Water, spirit and earth I am." The belief is that the collective power of this ritual will release positive energy — even to our enemies. "We might have feelings of negativity to someone, but we will still send out love and tolerance to them," the priest says while his arms pump the air.

I glance over at a pair of burly police officers in our group who are clasping hands and look as though they can't wait for this to be over. I also see that a woman who told me earlier she is considering leaving her evangelical church because of its conservative views on homosexuality has her eyes closed and seems swept up in the moment. Later, I'll joke with her about our dip into paganism: "So, do you think we're both going to hell now?" ►

The next day, before our visit to three Hindu temples, Carwana explains that Hinduism is a broad and vast faith because it “grew up in a thousand villages.” It boasts millions of deities, and followers pray to many gods, tossing marigold petals at their images in the temples and placing offerings of fruit at their feet.

Toronto’s Hare Krishnas (“the Pentecostals of Hinduism,” as Carwana calls them) worship at a large temple, once home to Avenue Road United. There, we sway to the

under a ceiling festooned with pastel-coloured paper lotus blossoms. The windows are open, and I’m distracted by the sounds of birds and traffic and fight the urge to scratch an itch. “Too many thoughts are not good for you,” resident priest Sanha Sunim tells us. She also says, “All people have the potential to be Buddha.” Judging by my restless body and mind, I doubt I’m one of them.

At Treajah Isle, an African-Caribbean shop located in Toronto’s Little Jamaica, we get an education in Rastafari



Scenes from recent Discovery Weeks in Toronto. LEFT: A Hindu *pandit* (priest) performs *aarti*, a ceremony of light. MIDDLE: Discovery Week leader Brian Carwana (left) with author Anne Bokma at a Sikh gurdwara. RIGHT: A temple guide talks to participants about Zoroastrianism, one of the world’s oldest monotheistic religions.

beat of a drum while chanting the three Sanskrit names for the Supreme Being: Hare, Krishna and Rama. The Hare Krishnas believe peace, self-realization and a higher state of consciousness can be achieved through chanting, meditation and yoga, all of which happen at the temple. Up to 10 monks live in the building, and about 400 worshippers gather here every Sunday for a “love feast” that includes a service followed by a free vegetarian meal.

We meet Bhaktimarga Swami, known as “The Walking Monk” for his cross-country treks in Canada and other countries to promote “a car-free and a care-free lifestyle.” Before becoming a monk some 40 years ago, he was raised Catholic on a Chatham, Ont., farm. “When my dad brought me to the train station to come to Toronto, he asked me why I would leave such a perfect religion. I told him I was just adding Krishna to Jesus,” he tells us. Since the monks aren’t allowed to drink, gamble or have sex, I ask him if he’s missed out on any worldly pleasures. “Maybe disco,” he says, and I’m not sure if he’s joking. “I get up at 4:30 a.m., shower and then sing and dance. I love this life.”

From there, the week is a whirlwind. We visit a Fung Loy Kok Taoist Temple in the heart of Chinatown and learn about this religion that advocates balance in all things — evidenced by its practices of tai chi and Chinese medicine. We meet Assunta, a 76-year-old who was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson’s disease in her 40s. “I was headed for a nursing home, but then I went to tai chi and never looked back,” she says.

We do a 15-minute meditation at the Zen Buddhist Temple, where we sit barefoot and cross-legged on pillows

from co-owner Natty B, who holds up a King James African Bible with annotated passages that he says prove the Garden of Eden was situated in Ethiopia and Christ was Black because he’s described in the Book of Revelation (1:14-15) as having woolly hair and feet bronzed as if burned in a furnace. Says Natty B, “We know that anything burned in a furnace is not going to come out white.”

Rastafaris consider Black people to be the Jews of the Bible, who will one day return to Ethiopia, which is Zion, their African Promised Land, after being exiled by slavery. They revere Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born activist who led a mass movement in the United States in the early 1900s, as a prophet who predicted a Black king would unite all Africans. Rastafaris believe this prophecy came true in 1930 when Ras Tafari Makonnen became the emperor of Ethiopia. They consider him a descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and the returned messiah of the Bible.

I’m embarrassed to admit I’d never heard of either Garvey or Ras Tafari. All I’ve known of Rastafari is Bob Marley and ganja. Natty B acknowledges that marijuana, the “wisdom weed,” is considered sacred in his religion — “a gift from the Creator and, if used in the proper way, it is one of the best medicines in the land.” He laments that “the stigma of ganja has been used to negativize us, to lock us in jail for using a plant. And now the government has found a way to make billions selling it.”

At the Zoroastrian temple, we gather in a smoky-smelling wood-paneled room where a flame burns in a large silver urn. This little-known religion predates Christianity and was the first to promote the idea that salvation lies in the triumph

of good over evil. Its founder, Zarathustra, “believed in free choice, a single personified god, the ongoing struggle between light and dark, and belief in three messiahs,” says Carwana. Fire is a central focus of worship and is considered the embodiment of God’s wisdom.

As the week rolls along, similarities among the various religions become evident: a love of ritual, a need for meaning-making and a desire to gather in community. The Wiccan Rule of Three (whatever you do will be returned to you threefold) and the Hindu concept of karma are just like the Bible’s edict that we reap what we sow. Rastafari, Sikh and Hasidic Jewish men restrict their haircutting as part of their religious identity. Sikhs and Jews both treat their scripture like royalty — the Torah scroll, often adorned with a silver crown, is paraded around congregants who touch it with their prayer books, while the Sikh holy book is laid on a throne under a canopy and ceremoniously fanned before being carried out in a procession and tucked into an elaborately dressed bed for the night.

Several of the religions share miraculous birth stories of a messiah — Krishna, Zarathustra and Jesus were all conceived without a sexual union. And, yes, patriarchy is a common theme: Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Rastafaris, Zoroastrians and some Christians don’t traditionally allow female leaders.

Some moments in the week rankle. At the Meeting House, for example, the evangelical megachurch that broadcasts its message in movie theatres, I’m impressed with Bruxy Cavey, the hip pastor who talks about the “radical love of Jesus,” but irked when he explains that although his church is welcoming to the LGBTQ community, it does not affirm same-sex marriage. I’m left to wonder why the radical love of Jesus isn’t extended to such partnerships.

When I confess my annoyance to Carwana, he says, “I think it’s okay to decide that you don’t like a path a particular group is taking. The word ‘tolerance’ is interesting — it means to forebear. Sometimes you will see things in different traditions that you just won’t like.”

The week also brings unexpected moments of grace. When I approach Métis elder Ernest Matton after his presentation to our group on Indigenous spiritual traditions, he stops me in my tracks when he says, “I can see your heart is heavy.” He touches my shoulder and asks, “Do you want me to go on?” I nod, and he tells me about a sadness he sees in me. “It’s stuff that’s in the basement,” he says. I fight back tears as I think of the long estrangement I’ve had from my

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family due to breaking away from the strict religion of my youth. Matton hands me a small pouch of lavender, grasps my hands, says a prayer and invites me to consider participating in a sweat lodge. I feel honoured.

Another special moment occurs in, of all places, the washroom of a restaurant where our group has stopped for lunch. A woman cleaning the sinks asks me about our group. When I explain what we’re doing, her face lights up. She tells me she was born in India and then starts singing in Hindi, right there outside the toilet stalls. I invite her to meet members of our group, and we take selfies together.

And just like that, a barrier has been crossed. Discovery Week has that kind of impact.

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