

gods on earth

Some religions have envisaged their holy people not just as individuals with a special connection to the divine, but as divine themselves, especially in the form of divine incarnations, emanations, or manifestations on earth. To Western audiences, this presence of gods on earth is best known in the form of Christian belief that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate, and in the ancient Egyptian conviction that their rulers were both gods and sons of a god. That gods sometimes walk the earth in human form is also a common theme in folklore. Many of the ancient Greek heroes fit into this category, as does the Peruvian god Cuntiraya Huiracocha, who was said to come to earth in the form of a beggar. The oldest, clearest, and most consistent belief in divine appearances among humans, though, comes from India, where theology focuses on the role of the *avatara*, the god in human form.

Only in the case of Islam is the manifestation of God on earth regarded as impossible—God being completely transcendent in Muslim theology. Even so, Islamic thought has been influenced by the Persian mystic Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), who argued that every age has had a “manifestation” (rather than “incarnation”) of God, including Adam, Noah, Jesus, and Muhammad. And the Nation of Islam in the United States, an offshoot of traditional Islam, includes the claim that its founder, W. D. Fard (c. 1891–?), was “Allah” (and therefore it is a matter of faith that God is black). Perhaps this belief influenced the African American Christian preacher Father Divine (d. 1965), who proclaimed himself to be God—a theme otherwise limited in Christianity to the figure of Jesus alone. The Baha’i faith, which also grew out of Islam, recognizes numerous founders of religions as manifestations of God, including Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, Krishna, Abraham, and Moses as well as the Bab and Baha’ullah. For Baha’is, the validity of a manifestation of God is proven by six elements: (1) that they transform the lives of people who recognize them, (2) that they reveal divine verses, (3) that they have certain characteristics, including integrity and willingness to suffer for the truth, (4) that they fit into the chain of prophecy, (5) that they are appropriate to the era in which they are born, and (6) that divine judgment will come to their opponents.

Rather different is the Hindu concept of the avatar, a “down-coming” of the divine in human form. It is not clear if this is a physical incarnation. On one hand, at least in some accounts of avatars the holy-person-god can be embraced and takes part in the physical side of human life (for example, Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, when Arjuna apologizes for holding the god disrespectfully). On the other hand, it is commonly believed that avatars only have *apparent* bodies and are not really born or subject to death. Still, avatars do take the form of a full human life, from conception to death. The term “avatar” is applied especially to appearances of Vishnu, although sometimes it is used for other gods. Vishnu is believed to have ten avatars—a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a lion, a dwarf, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, the Buddha, and Kalkin (who has not yet appeared).

The idea of the avatar seems to be a late development in Hinduism, first appearing in the later Upanishads—before that, divine appearances were in the form of “manifestations,” which suggests a definition more like that of the Baha’is, rather than a one-on-one equation of a god “in disguise” on earth. That is, the god merely sends out some of his or her essence while remaining, in effect, separate from the manifestation. In both cases, the

This belief appears for the most part in two regions in which Buddhism has adapted considerably to indigenous belief, Tibet and Japan. Thus, in Japan, the Buddhist monk Gyogi Bosatsu (668–749) was popularly believed to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva Manjushri. In Japan, the *daigon* (great incarnation), the deity appearing in human form, is a significant theme in Shinto. It also appears in the new religions of Japan—Kotama Okada (1901–1974) was the incarnation of a Shinto god, as was Nakayama Miki (1798–1887), who, in a variant, was regarded as the bodily shrine of "God the Parent." The idea of the manifest god is particularly central to Tibetan Buddhist belief and governance. Not only have certain holy figures, such as Drom Tonpa (1005–1064) or Gampopa (1079–1153), been regarded as *emanations* of various bodhisattvas, this belief has been important in establishing lineages of religious leaders. Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), founder of the Gelukpa school, was regarded as an emanation of three bodhisattvas in one body. Even more important, the reincarnating lamas are regarded as emanations of bodhisattvas; for example, since the fifth, the dalai lamas have been held to be incarnations of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

It has been argued by scholars such as Geoffrey Parrinder (1997) that the developed concept of the Hindu avatar a buddha, however, is that, for most Buddhists, Shakyamuni Buddha is the only historic buddha, while Hindu attributes (although gods play a secondary role in both religions). An important difference between an avatar and a buddha, however, is that, for most Buddhists, Shakyamuni Buddha is the only historic buddha, while Hindu avatars, as we have seen, continue to appear to the present. *Bodhisattvas* (enlightened beings, in Buddhism), however, have been regarded as manifesting or incarnating themselves on earth at times.

Belief that particularly holy people are avatars seems to have increased in recent times, perhaps because of a conviction that the troubles of the world are demanding a divine response in the form of a new avatar who will restore balance to the world. The followers of Sathya Sai Baba (1926–) recognize their guru as an incarnation of several gods and goddesses, especially Shiva and Shakti, believing that he showed signs of divinity from the age of thirteen. The Bengali female guru Anandamayee Ma (1896–1982) was told by an inner voice that she was divine—her disciples saw her as a manifestation of the goddess Kali. Meher Baba (1894–1969), creator of a syncretism movement in modern India, claimed to be the final avatar of God. And today the guru Ammachal (1953–), who achieved personal identification first with Krishna and then with Kali in 1975, reveals her true identity weekly to her followers.

The concept of the avatar has been expanded beyond the ten avatars of Vishnu, and several Hindu holy people have been regarded by their followers (or have proclaimed themselves) to be an avatar. Thus, many Hindus think that the ninth-century poet-saint Andal was an avatar of the earth goddess; Krishna Chaitanya (c. 1486–1533) has been regarded by millions as an incarnation of both Krishna and his consort Radha; Sahajananda Swami, who founded a religious movement in India in the early nineteenth century, was regarded as an avatar of Vishnu who took earthly form to bring salvation to his followers; and many Hindus worship Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) as an avatar. Some great saints of India have even been regarded as avatars of holy objects: Vedanta Deshika (1268–1370) is believed to be an avatar of the temple bell at Tirupati, while the Hindu devotional saint Hit Harivansh (c. 1502–c. 1552) is regarded as an incarnation of Krishna's flute.

god, whether manifestation or avatar, has clearly come to earth as a great teacher, to protect the righteous and to blaze a path for people to follow of virtuous behavior and connection to the divine. Thus, both Krishna (the most famous avatar of Vishnu, believed to have lived in about 3000 BCE) and Jesus were born of human parents (although, because of the doctrine of the virgin birth, Christians believe that Jesus had only one human parent) but retained full divinity, appearing on earth for the sake of the world.

This belief also appears in China, in Buddhism as well as in other religions. Thus, the Chinese Buddhist Dushun (557–640) was later believed to be an incarnation of Manjushri (bodhisattva of wisdom). Several Daoist deities have also manifested themselves in human form, some of them many times. For example, the early Daoist deity Huang-ti-chun has reportedly descended to earth to assist humankind many times in the form of various Daoist masters, including Laozi (sixth century BCE). Even the imported holy figure, the Middle Eastern prophet Mani (216–274/277 CE), became known in China as the buddha of light and an incarnation of Laozi.

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Further Reading

Parrinder, Geoffrey. 1997. *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religions*, 2d ed. Oxford: OneWorld; Waghorne, J. P., and N. Cutler, eds. *Gods of Flesh/Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*. Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1985.

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