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**“The Asian & Abrahamic Religions:
A Divine Encounter in America”**

Storyline

An introductory montage sets up the premise of the program. Focus is on the Asian religions from a number of perspectives as they relate to the Abrahamic. The montage visually represents and compares commonalities and differences; rituals and practices in the Asian and Abrahamic traditions. It also visually summarizes the story of early Asian immigration to the United States, the initial fears of the majority religion and traces how gradually, the Asian religions became part of the fabric of American society.

Many exciting scenes have been photographed on location throughout the United States of relevant religious ceremonies, festivals, rituals, and sacred dance. There is cinema vérité coverage of significant situations that demonstrate how the story of the Asian people and their religions has become part of the religious landscape of American life. The documentary consists of original high definition videography as well as historical stock footage, computer animation of paintings, lithographs, and stills.

Our story is told through a diversity of voices ranging from, distinguished scholars like Professor Robert Thurman, Professor, Buddhist Studies, Columbia University; Dr. Diana Eck, Director, Pluralism project, Harvard Divinity School; Romila Thapar, Professor of History, Nehru University, co-recipient, Kluge Prize awarded by U.S. Library of Congress; author, Karen Armstrong; BU Professor Stephen Prothero, editor "Asian Religions In America: A Documentary History." Also included are Asian and Abrahamic religious leaders as well as ordinary practitioners of Asian religions.

What follows is a condensed description of some of the sequences in the documentary.

Part one begins with Bishop John Chane presenting a challenge for our audience: "...ok folks, tell me what is the common element that binds us to the teachings of the Buddha, Hinduism and Sikhism? I think the people that I serve would look at me like I had fallen off the edge of the earth. They would say there is no common connecting point. And you want to know something? That's a crime, because there is a common connecting point and it has to do with the value of human life and the respect for the individual."

We first explore the oldest religion, Hinduism. Our camera visits a family celebrating the holiday of Ganesha's birthday. The room is crowded with family and friends participating in the colorful ceremony. Diana Eck comments voice-over: "It's interesting having Hindu immigrants in America today because they bring something with them that's distinctively American, a theology of religious pluralism."

The Abrahamic religions came into contact with Hinduism and the other Asian religions with unexpected points of commonality. Chief among them; polytheism versus monotheism. We delve in-depth into this subject. Guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar tells us "the Hindu scriptures clearly say there is only one God. The spirit which loves diversity must love its expression in diversity

as well.” We also explore the Buddhist and Sikh practices and rituals, finding differences yet discovering surprising similarities with the Abrahamic religions. For example, we photograph a Sikh service where the actual text of Sikhism, regarded as an embodiment of divinity, is set to poetry and sung by the congregants accompanied by Sikh musicians. As with the Abrahamic religions, they are a people of the books.

Our camera also visits a Buddhist monastery in a forest retreat in West Virginia. We intercut life in the Buddhist monastery with the religious life of a Catholic monastery, Washington, D.C. We learn from Catholic monks the Buddhist influence in some of their contemplative practices. In the words of Dr. Robert Thurman (the first American ordained a Buddhist monk by the Dalai Lama): “The monastery is a boot camp of the soul to overcome hatred, anger, envy, greed, pride.”

A unique scene shows what is beneath the Sikh’s turban and why it’s importance in their religious and cultural identity. A young man, in his home, demonstrates how he prepares his hair, how the turban is folded and how it’s intricately wound around his head. Rabbi David Rosen compares: “Jewish tradition articulated 2,000 years ago that a true God fearing person should not walk around with their head uncovered, because a head covering should continuously remind them of the divine presence above them...”

Part one ends with the story of a great Hindu epic, the Ramayana, as represented in a service at the Sri Shiva Vishnu Temple, Lanham, Maryland. 170 Hindu priests were invited from India to observe this occasion of the marriage of Prince Rama to Princess Sita. This is the largest such gathering in the country. The presence of so many priests creates an air of excitement and pageantry. The service looks, feels and sounds as if it were taking place in Mother India itself. This sequence is contrasted with an actual contemporary Hindu wedding at a suburban hotel. Hindu weddings are symbolic re-enactments of the Rama – Sita epic.

The second hour begins on location in San Francisco’s Chinatown where the Chinese immigrants originally landed. We see Charlie Chin, Artist in residence, Chinese Historical Society of America, in a bayside community park filled with elderly Chinese residents, some of whose parents came ashore here. “Thousands of Chinese disembarked and brought with them not just porcelain tea cups and pictures of loved ones but also their culture and religious beliefs, Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism.” We cut to the interior of Tien Hau Temple, the oldest Buddhist temple in the U.S... Charlie Chin: “As they established their temples, local church leaders became concerned about what they saw as an enclave of paganism in the middle of a Christian city, so they began sending missionaries and building churches with Asian architecture to lure converts...”

Japanese immigrants faced the same pressures. Reverend Ron Kobata, Minister of the historic Buddhist Church of San Francisco: “...they established the Buddhist Churches of America as a way of adapting to this new society.” We see the church’s interior. “We are operating our temple like a church that you’d find in any neighborhood, the only difference being the altar where there is the golden image of the Buddha.” Our camera shows a typical Pureland Buddhist service. Congregants stand in pews singing hymns, reciting the prayer: “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the teachings of the Buddha, I take refuge in the community assembled.”

Sikhs come to California in larger numbers by 1903, working as farm laborers. Since they could not buy property by law, except for a place of religion, we photographed the first Sikh Temple built in the United States, in Stockton (1915).

As with other Asian-Americans, Sikhs have become fully integrated into American society and as an affirmation of that fact, we cover the 300th Anniversary celebration of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scriptures. 75,000 Sikhs gathered in Yuba City, for the occasion. With great fanfare and dignity, the scriptures are placed on a richly flowered float. The float leads the parade passing thousands on the road to Yuba City center. Dr. Jasbir Kang, author, "Punjabi Migration to the United States": "...this parade really helped other Americans understand Sikhs...it's probably the largest event in northern California. It's not a Sikh event anymore; I think it's an American day."

Retrospectively, we show how American poets and writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, begin to take the Asian religions seriously, studying their scriptures and writing on the subject. America's first Guru, Swami Vivekananda comes to the Chicago world's fair in 1893. His good looks and eloquence, make him a superstar. He educates Americans for the first time about Hinduism. Hinduism makes its way into the American imagination in the early twentieth century; we see historic silent footage of Thomas Edison's, "Hindoo Fakir," and a dance performed by Ruth St. Denis, based on the story of a Hindu goddess.

We examine how Hinduism and Jainism had a profound effect on Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement. King was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence based on the Jain religion and their practice of non-harming, 'Ahimsa.'

Beat generation writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsburg became enamored with Zen Buddhism and write about it. We show a film piece of Alan Ginsburg chanting 'Om' in a London park, and in the 60s rare footage of the Beatles, turned on by Transcendental Meditation, on a pilgrimage to India with their Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The Eastern religions become part of the pop culture!

We establish the influence of the Asian religions in the American landscape today. Yoga, meditation, the martial arts lead many people in contemporary society to explore the underlying philosophy of Asian practices. For example, we show how Buddhist meditation is used in workshops to help burned out health professionals cope with 'compassion fatigue,' where they no longer feel empathy for others, though still committed to their work.

We explore the challenges of interfaith marriage, and finally we bring together the younger generation of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, discussing feelings of being torn between traditional desires of parents and making their own path in America, while maintaining and adapting their cultural and religious heritage.