

# Celebrating African American/Black Leaders in History: *Their Religions and Their Legacy*

**Objectives:** In this lesson, students will be introduced to several Black and African American leaders and learn about the influence of their religious beliefs on their activism and contributions to society. Students will learn biographical, historical and religious information associated with these leaders, peer-teach their findings, and gain a greater understanding of the overall historical context of their work through creating a class timeline.

**Grades:**  
**6-8, 9-12**

**Skills Covered:** Religion,  
Literacy, Social Studies, History

**Materials:** African American/Black  
Leaders and their Religions info kit  
(included), Chart paper/ White board,  
Markers, Pens, Pencils,  
Internet/Library (Optional)

**Preparation:** Draw a time line that extends across the classroom's whiteboard or across several pieces of chart paper (taped together). Draw small lines without dates across, where students will fill in dates.

## **PROCEDURE**

**Step One:** Begin a preliminary discussion by asking students what Black History Month is, what it commemorates and why. Emphasize in the discussion that, although we celebrate Black history *month*, it is important to recognize that the celebration is not about the month itself, but about the continuity of achievements by leaders over time.

**Step Two:** First, ask students to brainstorm some well-known Black leaders, either historical or contemporary. Next, ask them to cite some of the leaders' accomplishments. Finally, if they are aware, ask them to name the leaders' religious affiliations.

After students have brainstormed, write down the names of the people suggested in this lesson. Tell students that today, they will be learning about these Black leaders, their religions and legacy (some people may already have been mentioned).

**Step Three:** Explain to students that they will be split up into small groups and given an information sheet to read on a particular leader; each group will be responsible for presenting on their assigned leader. Ask students to pay particular attention to historical dates and to the religious affiliation of the individual. The presentation will focus on two main themes. The first theme is a summary of the individual's biography and of prominent events. Special attention should be given to the years that the person lived; and the years they were most active as leaders... The second theme is the individual's religion and examples of other notable Black persons who are also of that religion.

Split students up into six groups. Distribute information sheets and give them time to discuss how they will proceed. Check if they are done with the information and if they need any clarification on terms/ideas. If possible, allow students to have internet access to look up any information about which the students may be curious but is not on the information sheets.

When students have finished reading the information, tell the students that it's time to make the chronological group timeline.

In this part of the activity, each group will work together with other groups to figure out where in the timeline they belong, and arrange themselves accordingly. Have students write in the appropriate dates on the board/chart paper. The dates may overlap in some cases and should include birth and death (if appropriate); as well key years in the explaining the legacy of their work. For example students might mention the year Martin Luther King Jr. was born, the year of the March on Washington, and the year he died; as three major events.

Tell the class they have ten minutes to arrange themselves chronologically by asking creating a chronological sequence of significant events; naming at least five major events for each major person that is highlighted on the information sheets. Once the students have arranged themselves, have two students from each group stay in front of the class in the order of the chronological timeline. Have the rest sit down to watch the presentations.

Ultimately, there will be twelve students across the board, organized by chronological dates, at which point they will present their individual and what the individual did during the year on the time line. The first speaker will give a summary of their subject's biography, including the person's religious denomination, and prominent years in their lives. The second speaker will give a short description of the religion each individual leader adhered/s to, providing two examples of other notable Black persons who are also of that religion. If desired, the role of presenter can be rotated to include the other students from the group.

In presenting, start chronologically, and have each of the two students from the groups present on the biography, accomplishments, religion and other notable individuals as set forth above. At the end of the presentation, facilitate a closing discussion about what they have learned, what individuals, events, religions they found interesting.

### **Extension**

Have the students do further research on the individuals, events, religions they found interesting and have them write a paper or present on these.

Have students investigate the historical and personal connections between the leaders and events of different time periods.

# Sojourner Truth

(1797-1883)

["Truth is powerful and it prevails."](#)

-Sojourner Truth



**Sojourner Truth** was originally born into slavery in rural New York in 1797 under the name Isabella Baumfree. From age nine, when she was first separated from her family and sold to other masters, Isabella suffered much due to abuse. In 1826, inspired by personal conversations with God that helped her survive the injustice of her situation, Isabella walked to freedom carrying with her one of her four children, baby Sophia.

Sojourner worked as a maid for several families after her walk to freedom. One of those families were the Van Wagners, a **Quaker** family who, along with other **Quaker** activists, helped her get her son out of slavery and returned to her care. It was during this time that Isabella had a spiritual awakening and became a devout Christian in the **Pentecostal** tradition. Some years later, she changed her name

to Sojourner Truth and became a traveling preacher, spreading her message about abolition, women's rights and against capital punishment. Sojourner's faith spoke of the importance of living simply and following the example of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Sojourner Truth

# Religion

**Pentecostalism** is a movement within Evangelical Christianity that stresses the importance of a personal experience with God through the Holy Spirit, as happened during the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to Jesus' Apostles and followers as described in the Bible's Book of Acts, Chapter 2. Pentecostals usually believe that Jesus is the Lord and Savior, forgiving sins if one chooses to follow Him out of free will. Pentecostals also believe that one can be saved from sin by entering into the faith through baptism. Current estimates of the number of Pentecostals world-wide range anywhere from 22 to 115 million.

## Notable Black Pentecostals

- **Toni Braxton:** A contemporary musician, singer, songwriter and actress from Maryland. She has won six Grammy Awards and is most famous for her album *Secrets*.
- **Denzel Washington:** An actor who has starred in a range of films including *Glory*, *Malcolm X*, and *The Hurricane*. Washington has won academy awards for his roles in *Glory* and *Training Day*.
- **Otis Young:** Was an actor, minister and educator, best known for being the first Black actor to co-star in a television Western series – *The Outcasts*.
- **Smallwood Edmond Williams:** Democratic politician and delegate to Democratic National Convention from D.C. (1964, 1972). Member of the NAACP and the Urban League as well as the Presiding Bishop of the Bible Way Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sojourner Truth

# Religion

**Quakerism**, also known as the **Religious Society of Friends**, began as a movement in England created by people who did not feel comfortable in other, traditional Christian sects. The underlying principle of the movement is its emphasis on peace, its lack of creeds, and the idea that every person has God within them, placing importance on the individual's relationship with God. There are approximately 350,000 Quakers world-wide.

## Notable Black Quakers

- **Sarah Mapps Douglass:** (1806-1882) Black educator, lecturer, abolitionist, advocate of women's education. She had a fifty-year teaching career during which she took many risks and addressed issues then considered improper for an unmarried woman to address, including: emphasizing the need for self-improvement particularly for women and people of color and criticizing racism.
- **Bayard Rustin:** (1912-1987) Important leader in civil right's movement from the 1950's-1980's. Because of his pacifist philosophy, Rustin spent time in jail. After that time, he traveled to India and Africa to keep investigating nonviolence. Later in life, Rustin became one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s key advisers.

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# Dr. Martin Luther King Junior

(1929-1968)

“Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.”

- “I Have a Dream” speech, 1963



**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** was born in Atlanta, Georgia. He was the son of a pastor of a **Baptist** church. After college, he joined Crozer Theological Seminary, and by 1954 had earned his Doctoral degree from Boston University. During his time in college, King was influenced by the writings of Henry David Thoreau, whose writings addressed civil disobedience, a peaceful means by which to disagree with laws that one may find unjust. In agreement with this, Dr. King found himself in jail on several occasions, when he practiced Thoreau's ideas about civil

disobedience because he did not believe in certain laws, such as segregation. Dr. King became minister of a **Baptist** Church in Montgomery, and during this time gained much prestige and attention for his pursuit of equality as a strong civil rights leader. Dr. King continued to emphasize a nonviolent approach to fighting for those things he deemed unjust, at first, segregation, and later in his life, the Vietnam War as well as the causes of poverty. Dr. King also was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, who helped win freedom for India from British rule through nonviolent means. During his time as a civil rights leader, Dr. King's message brought together thousands of people, who joined in protests and marches that became known worldwide, and helped make way for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1964, Dr. King became the youngest man ever to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in nonviolence and equal treatment of different races. Unfortunately, in 1968, at the height of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's-1970's, Dr. King was shot and killed while on a trip to support striking sanitation workers. Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, after whom the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding is named, worked with Dr. King to promote Black-Jewish relations and end racial discrimination.

Martin Luther King Jr.

# Religion

The **Baptist** denomination lies within Christianity and refers to the tradition of the immersion in water as a public demonstration of spiritual birth into the faith. Some Baptists date their tradition to John's baptism of Jesus into the River Jordan. There are about 90 million Baptists worldwide, including in continents such as South America and Asia. While some beliefs may vary from one church to another because they do not have a centralized structure, some central beliefs stay constant for all Baptist congregations, including the belief in one God, the virgin birth, the sinless life of Jesus, the resurrection of Christ, and the need for salvation.

## Notable Black Baptists

- **Kwesi Mfume:** Former President/CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and five term Congressman from Maryland.
- **Elder Bernice King:** The youngest of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King's daughters, Ms. King not only followed in her father's footsteps into ministry, but also earned her degree in law from Emory University and has worked in many nonviolent conflict resolution programs.
- **Queen Latifah:** Grammy award-winning American rapper and singer. She has also worked as a sitcom and film actress. She was nominated for an academy award for her role in the film *Chicago*.
- **Eddie Murphy:** Winner of various acting and singing awards including the Golden Globe, the Grammy Award, and the Screen Actors Guild Award. He has also been nominated for an Academy Award for his role in *Dream Girls*.

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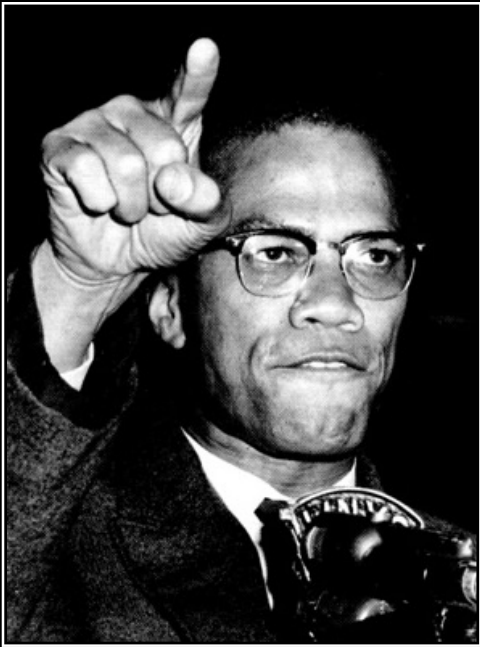


# Malcolm X

(1925-1965)

"You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom."

"Prospects for Freedom in 1965," speech, 1965, New York City



**Malcolm X** was born in North Omaha, Nebraska on May 19, 1925 as Malcolm Little. He experienced a difficult childhood due to racial discrimination against him and his family, the controversial death of his father, his mother's mental illness and events which split up his family into foster homes as well as displacement due to racist threats by white-supremacist organizations. During the middle years of his life, he moved to New York City, where he became involved with robbery, gambling and drug dealing, eventually finding himself in prison. During his time there, he educated himself in many subjects, including research that he did on the Nation of Islam, which was introduced to him by his brother. Later, Malcolm Little converted. Soon after being released from jail in 1952, Little moved to Chicago and changed his surname to "X" to signify his rejection of "slave names." In 1962, after his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X became a **Sunni Muslim**. He became a **Muslim**

minister and went on to found the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He became a strong leader and world-renowned civil rights activist who advocated black pride, economic independence of the community, and identity politics. For much of his career, Malcolm X received continued threats to both him and his family. On the first day of National Brotherhood Week in 1965, Malcolm X was shot and killed while giving a speech.

Malcolm X

# Religion

**Islam** is a monotheistic (meaning one God) religion and one of the three Abrahamic religions (the other two are Judaism and Christianity). It is the second-largest religion in the world today, with over 1.4 billion followers around the world, known as Muslims. The word *Muslim* means “One who submits to God” while *Islam* means “submission” and refers to the complete surrender to God, Allah (Arabic). The holy text of Islam is the Qur’an, which Muslims believe was revealed to Muhammad as the direct words from God. The Five Pillars of Islam are the core elements of Islam. The Five Pillars are: belief in the Oneness of God and belief that Muhammad is His last messenger, practice of ritual prayer, concern for and almsgiving to the needy, self-purification through fasting, and one pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca by those who are able.

## Notable Black Muslims

- **Dave Chappelle:** An American comedian and actor best known for his show on the Comedy Central network - *Chappelle’s Show*. He is also the recipient of 3 Emmy Nominations.
- **Kareem Abdul Jabaar:** A former basketball player for UCLA and the L.A. Lakers. He is also a six time MVP and NBA Champion.
- **Hakeem Olajuwon:** One of the greatest basketball players in the history of the NBA. Originally from Nigeria, Olajuwon played center for the Houston Rockets and the Toronto Raptors. In 1993 he became the only player in NBA history to win MVP, Defensive Player of the Year and Finals MVP in same season.
- **Muhammad Ali:** Former boxer who is largely known for being a civil rights activist and conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. In the late 1990s, Ali received a Spirit of America Award calling him the most recognized American in the world. He was also crowned as *Sports Illustrated’s* "Sportsman of the Century" in 1999.

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# Bob Marley

(1945-1981)

As it was in the beginning (One Love!);

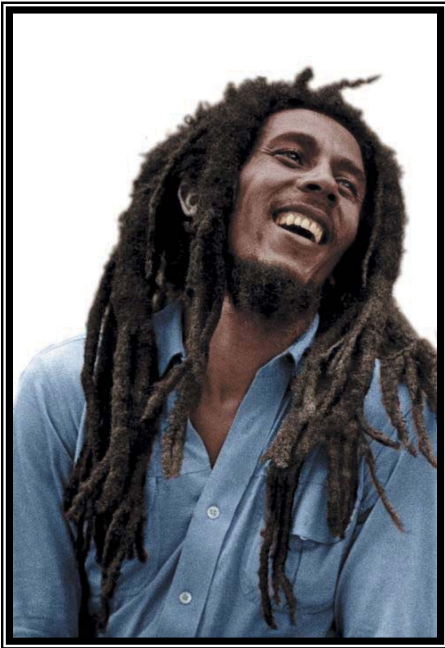
So shall it be in the end (One Heart!),

All right!

Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right;

Let's get together and feel all right.

-Song: One Love



**Robert Nesta Marley** was born February 6, 1945 in Saint Ann, a small village in Jamaica. Being of mixed race - his father was a white Jamaican of British parents and his mother a black Jamaican - Marley suffered from racial prejudice in his youth. Marley started to play music at a young age and recorded his first two singles by 1962, by the age of 17. The next year, he joined a group of young musicians to form "The Wailers." Though years later the group would break up, Marley would continue recording as "Bob Marley & The Wailers," the name which gained popularity when his first hit outside of Jamaica, "No Woman, No Cry" hit the air waves. It was shortly before this big hit that Marley became an active member of the **Rastafari Movement**, which he promoted through his music. Many of his lyrics contained religious and biblical references. In 1977, a football wound on his foot was

found to have malignant melanoma, developing to cancer. Marley refused to have an amputation due to the **Rastafari** belief that the body must be whole. After a series of concerts, Marley's health began to decline and on a flight home in May, 1981, he had to stop in Miami, Florida for urgent medical care. He died there at the age of 36. One year prior, he had been awarded the Jamaican Order of Merit, the third highest honor given by the nation of Jamaica to a citizen who has achieved renowned international distinction.

Bob Marley

# Religion

**Rastafari Movement** is a religion and philosophy that accepts the last emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, as Jah, the Rasta name for “God incarnate.” *Jah* stems from the word Jehovah, a name found in the King James Version of the Bible as the messiah who the Bible promises will return. The movement originated in the working class peasant black community of Jamaica in the early 1930’s. Some of its components include Afrocentric identification, the sacred use of marijuana and following an *ital* diet dictated by the dietary laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. In 2000, over one million people were estimated to belong to the Rastafari Movement.

## Notable Black Rastafari

- **David Nesta "Ziggy" Marley:** Jamaican musician and oldest son of Reggae singer Bob Marley.
- **Bunny Wailer:** A singer, songwriter and percussionist who was also an original member of the reggae group The Wailers.

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# bell hooks

"The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others." - From 1994 *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*



**bell hooks** is a feminist intellectual social activist who focuses her work on the relationships between class, race, gender and oppression. She is a widely published author, and writes both mainstream and academic pieces. Born in 1952 in Hopkinsville, Kentucky into an abusive family, some of her writing discusses her experience of being a female, poor, black youth growing up in racially segregated schools, and the impact of this background on her activist and writing work. Since the publication of her first major work, *Ain't I a Woman?*, hooks has been considered a respected cultural critic. She has held positions in many universities around the

country, including San Francisco State University, the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Yale University. hooks is an advocate of grassroots work, and believes that many feminists today don't reach the broad audiences they could because of their theoretical approaches. One of hooks' major influences is abolitionist and feminist Sojourner Truth, whose famous speech inspired and carries the same name as hooks' first major work. Furthermore, hooks has been influenced by civil rights advocates like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. hooks has spoken about the quality of mindfulness that her religion, Buddhism, has brought to her work, bringing her closer to the little things: "I think that's why I've always been drawn to engaged Buddhism and to Thich Nhat Hanh, because there's so much emphasis on the daily-ness of life and doing what you do with a certain quality of mindfulness and stillness. You don't have to have an agenda when you wake up in the morning, because waking up in the morning is what you're doing."

bell hooks

# Religion

**Buddhism** is a Dharmic, non-theistic religion that follows the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha or the “Awakened One”. Buddhism originated in the Indian subcontinent about 2600 years ago and spread into Asia and Eastern Europe after the passing of the Buddha. Today, Buddhism has between 350-400 million followers worldwide. There are many branches of Buddhism, including Southern or Theravada Buddhism, Eastern or Chinese Buddhism and Northern or Tibetan Buddhism. Some of the doctrines of Buddhism include the Four Noble Truths. These truths are: all living beings (people, animals) suffer; the cause of suffering is selfish desire; one can stop the suffering; and the way to stop the suffering is to follow the righteous acts stated in the Noble Eightfold Path. Another guiding principle in Buddhism is called the Middle Way, which suggests that life is to be lived in moderation without extremes, avoiding harm to others while cultivating good-will toward all.

## Notable Black Buddhist

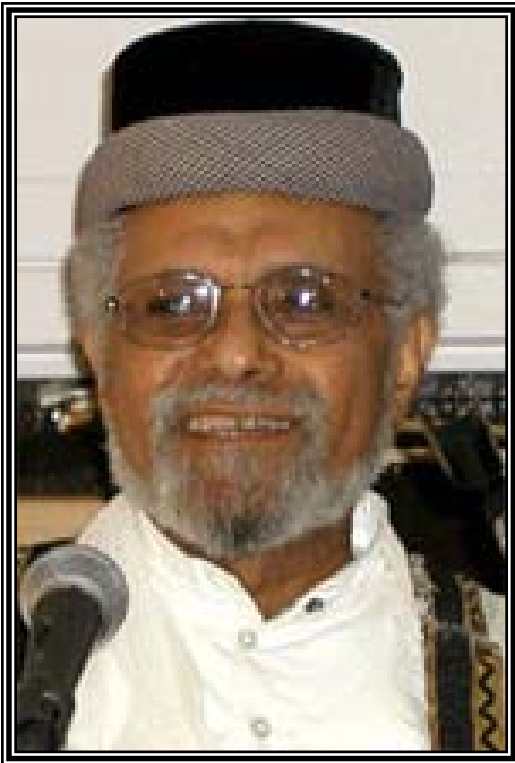
- **Russell Simmons:** An African American entrepreneur, co-founder of the pioneering hip-hop label Def Jam, and founder of Phat Farm and Russell Simmons Music Group.
- **Tina Turner:** An award-winning American pop/rock singer and actress. She was born of African American, Navajo, and Cherokee ancestry in Nutbush, Tennessee. Tina Turner's dominance in rock and roll throughout the 1980s and 1990s earned her the title "Queen of Rock & Roll". She is the winner of 8 Grammy awards and is a Kennedy Centre Honoree.
- **Alice Walker:** An author and feminist who received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983 for *The Color Purple*. Walker has also taken part in civil rights, feminist and animal rights activism.

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# Dr. Ephraim Isaac

“We are all mortal... why should we kill each other? Why fight with each other? Why hurt each other?...If anyone says he loves God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. How can you love God, whom you have not seen, when you don't love your brother, whom you do see? Peace and love are related. Love and respect are related.”



**Dr. Ephraim Isaac** was born in Ethiopia, where he received his early education. He went on to study Philosophy, Music, Chemistry, Near Eastern Languages. Dr. Isaac has taught at Harvard and Princeton, and was the first professor of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University. There, he was voted best teacher of the year by the students in the department. Dr. Isaac speaks over seventeen languages, and has written many books on a variety of topics, including Jewish literature. Furthermore, he is known in Ethiopia as the founder of the National Literacy Campaign as well as the Ad Hoc Peace Committee to promote peace in Ethiopia. In 2002, Dr. Isaac won the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding's *Peacemaker in Action* award.

Ephraim Isaac

# Religion

**Judaism** is the religion of the Jewish people. It is an Abrahamic faith and one of the first recorded monotheistic ones. Judaism has approximately 13.3 million followers worldwide. Judaism also has a rich history and ancestry that is central to its traditions and heritage. One of its fundamental principles is the belief in one omnipotent, omniscient creator God. The central source of authority in Judaism is its writings and traditions. Jews have a personal relationship with God, who made a covenant with the Jewish people to whom He gave commandments and laws to follow which set the rules for righteous living. These laws are recorded in the Torah and the Talmud. Some of the Jewish observances include special prayers and commemorative days, such as Shabbat, the weekly day of rest from sundown Friday night to sundown Saturday night. This is a day set aside to honor God's day of rest after creating the world and also the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Other special days include: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (a ten day period marking the Jewish New Year and involving a period in which Jews ask for forgiveness for the ways in which they have erred), Passover, Shavuot (celebrating the gift of the Ten Commandments from God) and Sukkot ("The Festival of Booths," which celebrates the harvest).

## Notable Black Jews

- **Lenny Kravitz:** An American rock singer, songwriter, producer and guitarist. He is best known for his albums *Let Love Rule*, *Mama Said*, and *Are You Gonna Go My Way*.
- **David Bluthenthal:** An Israeli American basketball player who has played on Israeli, Russian and Italian teams. At one time, he was signed to the Sacramento Kings.
- **Linda Bellos:** The first Black woman to join the Spare Rib feminist collective in 1981. She was vice-chair of the successful Black Section campaign to select African, Caribbean and Asian parliamentary and local candidates within the Labour Party in the UK. She was also the second black woman to become leader of a British local authority.

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