

Everything you ever wanted to know about Religions

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



Where did we come from, what's our place in the world, what happens to us when we die?

The history of religion refers to the written record of human religious feelings, thoughts, and ideas. The earliest archaeological evidence of religious ideas dates back several hundred thousand years to the Middle and Lower Paleolithic periods. Archaeologists take apparent intentional burials of early Homo sapiens from as early as 300,000 years ago as evidence of religious ideas. Other evidence of religious ideas includes symbolic artefacts from Middle Stone Age sites in Africa. However, the interpretation of early palaeolithic artefacts about how they relate to religious ideas remains controversial. Archaeological evidence from more recent periods is less controversial.

"In all times and places in our history, human beings have wondered: *Where did we come from? What's our place in the world? What happens to us after we die?*

Religions are systems of belief that have developed and evolved over time in response to these and other internal mysteries driven by the feeling that some questions can only be answered by faith and based on an intuition that there is something greater than ourselves, a higher power we must answer to, or some source we all spring from and to which we must return."

CREDIT: TED Video, *The five major world religions*, John Bellaimey, at https://youtu.be/m6dCxo7t_aE



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Timeline (from 200,000 BC to 2014 AD)

Middle Palaeolithic (200,000–50,000 BCE)

Despite claims by some researchers of bear worship, belief in an afterlife, and other rituals, the archaeological evidence does not support the presence of religious practices by modern humans or Neanderthals during this period.

- **100,000 BCE:** Earliest known human burial in the Middle East.
- **70,000–35,000 BCE:** Neanderthal burials take place in areas of Europe and the Middle East.
- **40,000 BCE:** The cremated remains of one of the earliest known anatomically modern humans to be discovered was buried near Lake Mungo.
- **38,000 BCE:** The Aurignacian Löwenmensch figurine, the oldest known animal-shaped sculpture globally and one of the oldest known sculptures, in general, was made.
- **35,000–26,000 BCE:** Neanderthal burials are absent from the archaeological record. This roughly coincides with the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in Europe and the decline of the Neanderthals. Individual skulls and long bones appeared, heavily stained with red ochre and separately buried. This practice may be the origin of sacred relics. The oldest discovered "Venus figurines" appeared in graves.
- **25,000–21,000 BCE:** Clear examples of burials are present in Iberia, Wales, and eastern Europe. These, too, incorporate the heavy use of red ochre.
- **13,000–8,000 BCE:** Noticeable burial activity resumed. Prior mortuary activity had either taken a less obvious form or contemporaries retained some of their burial knowledge without such activity. Dozens of men, women, and children were being buried in the same caves which were used for burials 10,000 years beforehand. All these graves are delineated by the cave walls and large limestone blocks. The burials share several characteristics (such as the use of ochre and shell and mammoth ivory jewellery) that go back thousands of years.
- **9130–7370 BCE:** This was the apparent period of use of **Göbekli Tepe**, one of the oldest human-made sites of worship yet discovered; evidence of similar usage has also been found in another nearby site, **Nevalı Çori**.
- **7500–5700 BCE:** The settlements of Catalhoyuk developed as a likely spiritual centre of Anatolia. Possibly practising worship in communal shrines, its inhabitants left behind numerous clay figurines and impressions of phallic, feminine, and hunting scenes.

Ancient Era

- **c.3750 BCE:** The Proto-Semitic people emerged from a generally accepted Urheimat in the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant. The Proto-Semitic people would migrate throughout the Near East into Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the eastern shore of the Mediterranean.
- **3300–1300 BCE:** Extent and major sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation. The Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC) was a Bronze Age civilisation (3300–1300 BCE; mature period 2600–1900 BCE) in the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent, noted for its cities built of brick, roadside drainage system and multi-storeyed houses.
- **3200–3100 BCE:** Newgrange, the 250,000-ton passage tomb aligned to the winter solstice in Ireland, was built.
- **3100 BCE:** The initial form of Stonehenge was completed.
- **3000 BCE:** Sumerian Cuneiform emerged from the proto-literate Uruk period, allowing the codification of beliefs and creation of detailed historical religious records. The second phase of Stonehenge was completed and appeared to function as the first enclosed cremation cemetery in Britain.
- **2635–2610 BCE:** The oldest surviving Egyptian Pyramid was commissioned.
- **2600 BCE:** Stonehenge began to take on its final form.
- **2560 BCE:** This is the approximate time accepted as the completion of the Great Pyramid of Giza, the oldest Pyramid of the Giza Plateau.
- **2494–2345 BCE:** The first of the oldest surviving religious texts, the Pyramid Texts, was composed in Ancient Egypt.

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- **2200 BCE:** *The Minoan Civilisation developed in Crete. Citizens worshipped a variety of goddesses.*
- **2150–2000 BCE:** *The earliest surviving versions of the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh were written.*
- **1700–1100 BCE:** *The oldest of the Hindu Vedas (scriptures), the Rig Veda, was composed. It first mentions Rudra, a fearsome form of Shiva, as the supreme God.*
- **1600 BCE:** *The ancient development of Stonehenge came to an end.*
- **1500 BCE:** *The Vedic Age began in India after the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilisation.*
- **1300–1000 BCE:** *The "standard" Akkadian version of the Epic of Gilgamesh was edited by Sin-liqe-unninni.*
- **1250–600 BCE:** *The Upanishads (Vedic texts) were composed, containing the earliest emergence of some of the central religious concepts of Hinduism. Buddhism and Jainism.*
- **1200 BCE:** *The Olmecs built the earliest pyramids/temples in Central America.*
- **8th to 6th centuries BCE:** *The Chandogya Upanishad is compiled, significant for containing the earliest mention of Krishna. Verse 3.17.6 mentions Krishna Devakiputra as a student of the sage Ghora Angirasa.*
- **6th to 5th centuries BCE:** *The first five books of the Jewish Tanakh, the Torah, are probably compiled.*
- **6th century BCE:** *Possible start of Zoroastrianism. However, some date Zarathustra closer to 1000 BCE. Zoroastrianism flourished under the Persian emperors known as the Achaemenids. The emperors Darius (ruled 522–486 B.C.E.) and Xerxes (ruled 486–465 BCE) made it the official religion of their empire.*
- **600–500 BCE:** *The earliest Confucian writing, Shu-Ching, incorporates ideas of harmony and heaven.*
- **599–527 BCE:** *The life of Mahavira, 24th and last Tirthankara of Jainism.*
- **c.563/480–c.483/400 BCE:** *Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was born.*
- **551 BCE:** *Confucius was born.*
- **399 BCE:** *Socrates was tried for impiety.*
- **369–372 BCE:** *Birth of Mencius and Zhuang Zhou*
- **300 BCE:** *The oldest known version of the Tao Te Ching was written on bamboo tablets.*
- **300 BCE:** *Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka by the Venerable Mahinda.*
- **c.250 BCE:** *The Third Buddhist Council was convened by Ashoka. Ashoka sends Buddhist missionaries to faraway countries, such as China, mainland Southeast Asia, Malay kingdoms, and Hellenistic kingdoms.*
- **100 BCE–500 CE:** *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, constituting the foundational texts of Yoga, were composed.*

Common Era

- **c.4 BCE–c.30/33 CE:** *The lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth, the central figure of Christianity.*
- **50–62:** *The first Christian Council was convened in Jerusalem.*
- **70:** *The Siege of Jerusalem, the Destruction of the Temple, and the rise of Rabbinic Judaism.*
- **220:** *Manichaean Gnosticism was formed by the Prophet Mani.*
- **250:** *Some of the oldest parts of the Ginza Rba, a core text of Mandaen Gnosticism, were written.*
- **250–900:** *Classic Mayan step pyramids were constructed.*
- **313:** *The Edict of Milan decreed religious toleration in the Roman empire.*
- **325:** *The first ecumenical Council (the Council of Nicaea) was convened to attain a consensus on doctrine through an assembly representing all Christendom. It established the original Nicene Creed (a statement of belief widely used in Christian liturgy and fixed the date of Easter). It also confirmed the primacy of the Sees of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, and granted the See of Jerusalem a position of honour.*
- **c.350:** *The oldest record of the complete biblical texts (the Codex Sinaiticus) survives in a Greek translation called the Septuagint, dating to the 4th century CE.*
- **380:** *Theodosius I declared Nicene Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire.*
- **381:** *The 2nd ecumenical Council (the First Council of Constantinople) reaffirmed and revised the Nicene Creed, repudiating Arianism and Pneumatomachi.*
- **381–391:** *Theodosius proscribed paganism within the Roman Empire.*
- **393:** *A council of early Christian bishops listed and approved a biblical canon for the first time at the Synod of Hippo.*

Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries)

- **405:** St. Jerome completed the Vulgate, the first Latin translation of the Bible.
- **410:** The Western Roman Empire began to decline, signalling the onset of the Dark Ages.
- **424:** The Church of the East in the Sassanian Empire (Persia) formally separated from the See of Antioch and proclaimed full ecclesiastical independence.
- **431:** The third ecumenical Council (the First Council of Ephesus) was convened due to the controversial teachings of Nestorius of Constantinople. It repudiated Nestorianism and proclaimed the Virgin Mary the Theotokos (the God-bearer or Mother of God). It also repudiated Pelagianism and again reaffirmed the Nicene Creed.
- **449:** The Second Council of Ephesus declared support for Eutyches and attacked his opponents. Convened initially as an ecumenical council, its ecumenical nature was rejected by the Chalcedonians, who denounced the Council as *latrocinium*.
- **451:** The fourth Ecumenical Council (the Council of Chalcedon) rejected the Eutychian doctrine of monophysitism, adopting the Chalcedonian Creed instead. It reinstated those deposed in 449, deposed Dioscorus of Alexandria and elevated the bishoprics of Constantinople and Jerusalem to the status of patriarchates.
- **451:** The Oriental Orthodox Church rejected the Christological view of the Council of Chalcedon and was excommunicated.
- **480–547:** Benedict of Nursia wrote his Rule, laying the foundation of Western Christian monasticism.
- **553:** The fifth ecumenical Council (the Second Council of Constantinople) repudiated the Three Chapters as Nestorian and condemned Origen of Alexandria.
- **632–661:** The Rashidun Caliphate heralded the Arab conquest of Persia, Egypt and Iraq, bringing Islam to those regions.
- **650:** The verses of the Qur'an were compiled in the form of a book in the era of Uthman, the third Caliph of Islam.
- **661–750:** The Umayyad Caliphate brought the Arab conquest of North Africa, Spain and Central Asia, marking the greatest extent of the Arab conquests and bringing Islam to those regions.
- **680–681:** The sixth ecumenical Council (the Third Council of Constantinople) rejected Monothelism and Monoenergism.
- **c.680:** The division between Sunni and Shiites Muslims developed.
- **692:** The Quinisext Council (also known as the Council in Trullo), an amendment to the 5th and 6th ecumenical councils, established the Pentarchy.
- **712:** Kojiki, the oldest Shinto text, was written.
- **716–936:** The migration of Zoroastrian (Parsi) communities from Persia to India was caused by the Muslim conquest of their lands and the ensuing persecution.
- **754:** The *latrocinium* Council of Hieria supported iconoclasm.
- **787:** The seventh ecumenical Council (the Second Council of Nicaea) restored the veneration of icons and denounced iconoclasm.
- **788–820:** The life of Hindu philosopher Adi Shankara, who consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta.
- **c.850:** The oldest extant manuscripts of the vocalised Masoretic text, upon which modern editions are based, date to the 9th century CE.
- **c.1052–c.1135:** The life of Milarepa, one of the most famous yogis and poets of Tibetan Buddhism.
- **1054:** The Great Schism between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches was formalised.
- **1095–1099:** The First Crusade led to the capture of Jerusalem.
- **1107–1110:** Sigurd I of Norway led the Norwegian Crusade against Muslims in Spain, the Balearic Islands, and Palestine.
- **1147–1149:** The Second Crusade was waged in response to the fall of the County of Edessa.
- **1189–1192:** European leaders attempted to reconquer the Holy Land from Saladin in the Third Crusade.
- **1202–1204:** The Fourth Crusade, originally intended to recapture Jerusalem, instead led to the sack of Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire.
- **1206:** The Delhi Sultanate was established.

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- **1209–1229:** The Albigensian Crusade was conducted to eliminate Catharism in Occitania, Europe.
- **1217–1221:** Christian leaders attempted (but failed) to recapture Jerusalem with the Fifth Crusade.
- **1222–1282:** The life of Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law and founder of Nichiren Buddhism. This branch of Buddhism teaches the importance of chanting the mantra Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō.
- **1228–1229:** The Sixth Crusade won control of large areas of the Holy Land for Christian rulers, more through diplomacy than through fighting.
- **1229:** The Codex Gigas was completed by Herman the Recluse in the Benedictine monastery of Podlažice near Chrudim.
- **1244:** Jerusalem was sacked again, instigating the Seventh Crusade.
- **1270:** The Eighth Crusade was launched by Louis IX of France but largely petered out when Louis died shortly after reaching Tunis.
- **1271–1272:** The Ninth Crusade failed.
- **1320:** Pope John XXII laid the groundwork for future witch-hunts with the formalisation of the persecution of Witchcraft.
- **1378–1417:** The Roman Catholic Church split during the Western Schism.
- **1415:** The death of Jan Hus, considered the first reformer of Western Christianity. This event is often viewed as the beginning of the Reformation.
- **1484:** Pope Innocent VIII marked the beginning of the classical European witch-hunts with his papal bull *Summis desiderantes*.
- **1486–1534:** Chaitanya Mahaprabhu popularised the chanting of the Hare Krishna and composed the Siksastakam (eight devotional prayers) in Sanskrit. His followers, Gaudiya Vaishnavas, revere him as a spiritual reformer, a Hindu revivalist and an avatar of Krishna.

Early modern and modern eras

- **1500:** In the Spanish Empire, Catholicism was spread and encouraged through such institutions as the missions and the Inquisition.
- **1517:** Martin Luther posted The Ninety-Five Theses on the door of All Saints' Church, Wittenberg, launching the Protestant Reformation.
- **1526:** African religious systems were introduced to the Americas, with the commencement of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
- **1534:** Henry VIII separated the English Church from Rome and made himself Supreme Head of the Church of England.
- **1562:** The Massacre of Vassy sparked the first of a series of French Wars of Religion.
- **1699:** Guru Gobind Singh Ji created the Khalsa in Sikhism.
- **1708:** Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the last Sikh Guru, died after instituting the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, as the eternal Guru.
- **1770:** Baron d'Holbach published *The System of Nature*, said to be the first positive, unambiguous statement of atheism in the West.
- **1781:** Ghanshyam, later known as Sahajanand Swami/Swaminarayan, was born in Chhapaiya at the house of Dharmadev and Bhaktimata.
- **1789–1799:** In the Dechristianisation of France, the Revolutionary Government confiscated Church properties, banned monastic vows and, with the passage of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, removed control of the Church from the Pope and subordinated it as a department of the Government. The Republic also replaced the traditional Gregorian Calendar and abolished Christian holidays.
- **c.1790–1840:** The Second Great Awakening, a Protestant religious revival in the United States.
- **1791:** Freedom of religion, enshrined in the Bill of Rights, was added as an amendment to the US Constitution, forming an early and influential secular government.

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- **1801:** The French Revolutionary Government and Pope Pius VII entered into the Concordat of 1801. While Roman Catholicism regained some powers and became recognised as "the religion of the great majority of the French", it was not afforded the latitude it had enjoyed before the Revolution and was not re-established as the official state religion. The Church relinquished all claims to estate seized after 1790; the clergy was state-salaried and was obliged to swear allegiance to the State. Religious freedom was restored.
- **1819–1850:** The life of Siyyid 'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī better known as the Báb, the founder of Bábism.
- **1817–1892:** The life of Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith.
- **1823:** The Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith claimed to see the Angel Moroni and prophesied the Book of Mormon.
- **1830s:** Adventism was started by William Miller in the United States.
- **1830:** The Church of Christ was founded by Joseph Smith on 6 April – initiating the Latter Day Saint restorationist movement.
- **1835–1908:** The life span of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the messianic Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam.
- **1836–1886:** The life span of Ramakrishna, saint and mystic of Bengal.
- **1844:** Joseph Smith was murdered, reportedly by John C. Elliott, on 27 June, resulting in a succession crisis in the Latter-Day Saint movement.
- **1875:** The Theosophical Society was formed in New York City by Helena Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, William Quan Judge and others.
- **1879:** Christian Science was granted its charter in Boston, Massachusetts.
- **1881:** Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society was formed by Charles Taze Russell, initiating the Bible Student movement.
- **1889:** The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community was established.
- **1893:** Swami Vivekananda's first speech at The Parliament of World Religions, Chicago, brought the ancient philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the western world.
- **1899:** *Aradia (aka The Gospel of the Witches)*, one of the earliest books describing post witch hunt European religious Witchcraft, was published by Charles Godfrey Leland.
- **1901:** The Spiritualists' National Union legally representing Spiritualism in the United Kingdom was formed.
- **1904:** Thelema was founded by Aleister Crowley.
- **1905:** In France, the law on the Separation of the Churches and the State was passed, officially establishing state secularism and putting an end to the funding of religious groups by the State.
- **1907:** Formation of BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) - a major sect in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya by Shastriji Maharaj.
- **1908:** The Khalifatul Masih was established in the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community as the "Second Manifestation of God's Power".
- **1913:** The Moorish Science Temple of America was founded in Newark, New Jersey, USA.
- **1917:** The October Revolution in Russia led to the annexation of all Church properties and subsequent religious suppression.
- **1920:** The Self Realization Fellowship Church of all Religions, with its headquarters in Los Angeles, CA, USA, was founded by Paramahansa Yogananda.
- **1922-1991:** Persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union. The total number of Christian victims under the Soviet regime has been estimated to range from around 12 to 20 million.
- **1926:** Cao Dai (a new religious movement in Vietnam) was founded.
- **1929:** The Cristero War ended between the secular government and religious Christian rebels in Mexico.
- **1930:** The Rastafari movement began following the coronation of Haile Selassie I as Emperor of Ethiopia. After previously failing to claim the leadership of the Moorish Science Temple of America, Wallace Fard Muhammad creates the Nation of Islam in Detroit, Michigan, USA.
- **1932:** A neo-Hindu religious movement, the Brahma Kumaris or "Daughters of Brahma", started. Its origin can be traced to the group "Om Mandali", founded by Lekhray Kripalani (1884–1969).
- **1931:** Jehovah's Witnesses emerged from the Bible Student movement under the influence of Joseph Franklin Rutherford.

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- **1947:** The first nation in the name of Islam was created called Pakistan. British India was partitioned into the Islamic nation of Pakistan and the secular nation of India with a Hindu majority.
- **1948:** The modern State of Israel was established as a homeland for Jews.
- **1954:** The Church of Scientology was founded by L. Ron Hubbard. Wicca (also termed Pagan Witchcraft), a modern Pagan religion, was publicised by Gerald Gardner.
- **1956:** Navayana Buddhism (Neo-Buddhism) was founded by B. R. Ambedkar, initially attracting some 380,000 Dalit converts from Hinduism.
- **1959:** The 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet amidst unrest and established an exile community in India.
- **1960s:** Various Neopagan and New Age movements gained momentum.
- **1961:** Unitarian Universalism was formed from the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism. It is a liberal religion characterised by a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" but asserts no creed.
- **1962:** The Church of All Worlds, the first American neo-pagan Church, was formed by a group including Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart, and Richard Lance Christie.
- **1965:** Srila Prabhupada established the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and introduced translations of the Bhagavad-Gita and Vedic Scriptures in mass production worldwide.
- **1966:** The Church of Satan was founded by Anton LaVey on Walpurgisnacht (the eve of the Christian feast day of Saint Walpurga).
- **1972–2004:** Germanic Neopaganism (aka Heathenism, Heathenry, Ásatrú, Odinism, Forn Siðr, Vor Siðr, and Theodism) began to experience a second wave of revival.
- **1973:** Claude Vorilhon (a French journalist) established the Raëlian Movement and changed his name to Raël following a purported extra-terrestrial encounter in December 1973.
- **1975:** The Temple of Set was founded in Santa Barbara, California.
- **1979:** The Iranian Revolution resulted in establishing the Islamic Republic in Iran.
- **1981:** The Stregherian revival continued. "The Book of the Holy Strega" and "The Book of Ways" Volumes I & II were published.
- **1984:** Operation Blue Star in the holiest site of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Amritsar (India), led to Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and adjoining regions, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
- **1989:** Following the revolutions of 1989, the overthrow of many Soviet-style states allowed a resurgence in open religious practice in many Eastern European countries.
- **1990s:** Reconstructionist Pagan movements (Celtic, Hellenic, Roman, Slavic, Baltic, Finnish, etc.) increased throughout Europe.
- **1993:** The European Council convened in Copenhagen, Denmark, agreed to the Copenhagen Criteria, requiring religious freedom within all members and prospective members of the European Union.
- **1995:** First Traditional Hindu Mandir outside of India created in London by Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921-2016) Guru of BAPS.
- **1998:** The Strega Arician Tradition was founded. It is a form of Witchcraft with Southern European roots and includes Italian American Witchcraft.
- **2006:** Sectarian rivalries exploded in Iraq between Sunni and Shia Muslims, with each side targeting the other in terrorist acts and bombings of mosques and shrines.
- **2008:** Nepal, the world's only Hindu Kingdom, was declared a secular state by its Constituent Assembly after declaring the State a Republic on 28 May 2008.
- **2009:** The Church of Scientology in France was fined €600,000, and several of its leaders were fined and imprisoned for defrauding new recruits of their savings. The State failed to disband the Church due to legal changes occurring over the same period.
- **2011:** Civil war broke out in Syria over domestic political issues. The country soon split along sectarian lines between Sunni, Alawite and Shiite Muslims. War crimes and acts of genocide were committed by both parties as religious leaders on each side condemned the other as heretics. The Syrian civil war soon became a battleground for regional sectarian unrest, as fighters joined the fight from as far away as North America and Europe, as well as Iran and the Arab states.
- **2013:** The Satanic Temple was founded by Lucien Greaves and Malcolm Jarry (pseudonyms).

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- **2014:** A supposed Islamic Caliphate was established by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in regions of war-torn Syria and Iraq, drawing global support from radical Sunni Muslims. This was a modern-day attempt to re-establish Islamic self-rule in accordance with strict adherence to Shariah-Islamic religious law. In the wake of the Syrian civil war, Islamic extremists targeted the indigenous Arab Christian communities. In acts of genocide, numerous ancient Christian and Yazidi (Yazidism is a monotheistic faith based on belief in one God, who created the world and entrusted it into the care of a Heptad of seven Holy Beings, often known as Angels), communities were evicted and threatened with death by various Muslim Sunni fighter groups. After ISIS terrorist forces infiltrated and took over large parts of northern Iraq from Syria, many ancient Christian and Yazidi enclaves were destroyed.

Largest Religions of the World's Population of 8 billion

Facts and Figures

Religion	Followers	% of the total
Christianity	2.382 billion	31.1%
Islam	1.907 billion	24.9%
Secular, Non-Religious/Agnostic/Atheist	1.193 billion	15.69%
Hinduism	1.161 billion	15.2%
Buddhism	506 million	6.6%
Chinese Traditional Religion	394 million	5%
Judaism	15 million	0.19%

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_religious_populations

Christianity Explained

At its most basic, Christianity is the faith tradition that focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ. In this context, faith refers both to the believers' act of trust and to the content of their faith. As a tradition, Christianity is more than a system of religious belief. It also has generated a culture, a set of ideas and ways of life, practices, and artefacts handed down from generation to generation since Jesus Christ first became the object of faith. Christianity is thus both a living tradition of faith and the culture that the faith leaves behind. The agent of Christianity is the church, the community of people who make up the body of believers.¹ The Christian faith centres on beliefs regarding the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While it started with a small group of adherents, the spread and adoption of Christianity throughout the world is widely viewed as one of the most successful spiritual missions in human history. Some basic Christian concepts include:

- Christians are monotheistic, believing in only one God, and he created the heavens and the earth. This divine Godhead consists of three parts: the father (God himself), the son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit.
- The essence of Christianity revolves around the life, death and Christian beliefs on the resurrection of Jesus. Christians believe God sent his son Jesus, the messiah, to save the world. They believe Jesus was crucified on a cross to offer the forgiveness of sins and was resurrected three days after his death before ascending to heaven.
- Christians contend that Jesus will return to earth again in what's known as the Second Coming.
- The Holy Bible includes important scriptures that outline Jesus's teachings, the lives and teachings of major prophets and disciples, and offer instructions for how Christians should live.
- Both Christians and Jews follow the Old Testament of the Bible, but Christians also embrace the New Testament.²



Picture Credit: "Mary anoints Jesus' feet" by Lawrence OP is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

¹ Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity>

² Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/history-of-christianity>

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Catholicism



The word "Catholicism" refers to many things, including its religious beliefs (called **theologies** and "**doctrines**") and its form of religious worship (called **liturgies**). The word also refers to Catholic religious beliefs about **ethics** (things that are right and wrong). It also refers to how members of the Catholic religion live and practice their faith. Many people use the word Catholicism to talk about religious beliefs of the **Catholic Church**, whose leader is called the "**Bishop of Rome**" and often called the "**Pope**". The **Catholic Church** is based in the **Vatican City**, a small independent country in the city of **Rome, Italy**. Sometimes the word also refers to beliefs of other Christian churches, including the **Eastern Orthodox Churches**, who have many beliefs similar to the **Catholic Church**, but do not believe the Bishop of Rome is their leader.

The word *Catholicism* itself is often used to tell the difference between the beliefs of Catholic Christians and the beliefs of others called **Protestant** Christians.³

Picture Credit: "Pope Francesco I" by JeffyBruno is licensed under **CC BY-NC-ND 2.0**

Islam Explained

The word "Islam" means "submission to the will of God." Muslims are monotheistic and worship one, all-knowing God, who in Arabic is known as Allah. Followers of Islam aim to live a life of complete submission to Allah. They believe that nothing can happen without Allah's permission, but humans have free will. Although its roots go back further, scholars typically date the creation of Islam to the 7th century, making it the youngest of the major world religions. Islam started in Mecca, in modern-day Saudi Arabia, during the time of the Prophet Muhammad's life. Followers of Islam are called Muslims.

- Islam teaches that Allah's word was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel.
- Muslims believe several prophets were sent to teach Allah's law. They respect some of the same prophets as Jews and Christians, including Abraham, Moses, Noah and Jesus. Muslims contend that Muhammad was the final Prophet.
- Mosques are places where Muslims worship.
- Some important Islamic holy places include the Kaaba shrine in Mecca, the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and the Prophet Muhammad's mosque in Medina.



Picture Credit: "Suffa Tul Islam Central Mosque, Horton Park Avenue, Bradford" by Tim Green aka atoach is licensed under **CC BY 2.0**

³ Source: <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholicism>

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- The Quran (or Koran) is the major holy text of Islam. The Hadith is another important book. Muslims also revere some material found in the Judeo-Christian Bible.
- Followers worship Allah by praying and reciting the Quran. They believe there will be a day of judgment and life after death.
- A central idea in Islam is "jihad," which means "struggle." While the term has been used negatively in mainstream culture, Muslims believe it refers to internal and external efforts to defend their faith. Although rare, this can include military jihad if a "just war" is needed.⁴

Hinduism Explained

Hindus believe in the doctrines of samsara (the continuous cycle of life, death, and reincarnation) and karma (the universal law of cause and effect). One of the key thoughts of Hinduism is "atman," or the belief in a soul. This philosophy holds that living creatures have a soul, and they're all part of the supreme soul. Roughly 95 per cent of the world's Hindus live in India. Because the religion has no specific founder, it's difficult to trace its origins and history. Hinduism is unique in that it's not a single religion but a compilation of many traditions and philosophies. Some basic Hindu concepts include:

- Hinduism embraces many religious ideas. For this reason, it's sometimes referred to as a "way of life" or a "family of religions," as opposed to a single, organised religion.
- Most forms of Hinduism are henotheistic, which means they worship a single deity, known as "Brahman," but still recognise other gods and goddesses. Followers believe there are multiple paths to reaching their God.
- Hindus believe in the doctrines of samsara (the continuous cycle of life, death, and reincarnation) and karma (the universal law of cause and effect).
- The goal of Hinduism is to achieve "moksha," or salvation, which ends the cycle of rebirths to become part of the absolute soul. One fundamental principle of the religion is that people's actions and thoughts directly determine their current life and future lives.
- Hindus strive to achieve dharma, which is a code of living that emphasises good conduct and morality.
- Hindus revere all living creatures and consider the cow a sacred animal.
- Food is an important part of life for Hindus. Most don't eat beef or pork, and many are vegetarians.
- Hinduism is closely related to other Indian religions, including Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.⁵

Buddhism Explained

The word Buddha means "enlightened." The path to enlightenment is attained by utilising morality, meditation and wisdom. Buddhists embrace the concepts of karma (the law of cause and effect) and reincarnation (the continuous cycle of rebirth). Followers of Buddhism can worship in temples or where they live. Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama ("the Buddha") more than 2,500 years ago in India. Its practice has historically been most prominent in East and Southeast Asia, but its influence is growing in the West. Many Buddhist ideas and philosophies overlap with those of other faiths. Some key Buddhism beliefs include:

- Followers of Buddhism don't acknowledge a supreme god or deity. They instead focus on achieving enlightenment—a state of inner peace and wisdom. When followers reach this spiritual echelon, they're said to have experienced nirvana.
- The religion's founder, Buddha, is considered an extraordinary being but not a god. The word Buddha means "enlightened."
- The path to enlightenment is attained by utilising morality, meditation and wisdom. Buddhists often meditate because they believe it helps awaken truth.
- There are many philosophies and interpretations within Buddhism, making it a tolerant and evolving religion.
- Some scholars don't recognise Buddhism as an organised religion, but rather a "way of life" or a "spiritual tradition."
- Buddhism encourages its people to avoid self-indulgence but also self-denial.

⁴ Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/islam>

⁵ Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/hinduism>

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- Buddha's most important teachings, known as The Four Noble Truths, are essential to understanding the religion.
- Buddhists embrace the concepts of karma (the law of cause and effect) and reincarnation (the continuous cycle of rebirth).
- Followers of Buddhism can worship in temples or in their own homes.
- Buddhist monks, or bhikkhus, follow a strict code of conduct, which includes celibacy.
- There is no single Buddhist symbol, but a number of images have evolved that represent Buddhist beliefs, including the lotus flower, the eight-spoked dharma wheel, the Bodhi tree and the swastika (an ancient symbol whose name means "well-being" or "good fortune" in Sanskrit).⁶

Chinese Traditional Religion Explained

While many think of China as a homogenous culture, it may surprise you to learn that the religious scene in China is quite diverse. Most of the world's major religions are practised by native Chinese people with great devotion. In almost every city, you are sure to see a diverse range of ethnic groups participating in their historical religious traditions ranging from Buddhism to Christian Protestantism.



Picture Credit: Grand Buddha at Ling Shan, Wuxi

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Chinese religion is not an organised, unified system of beliefs and practices. It has no leadership, headquarters, founder, or denominations. Instead, "Chinese religion" is a term describing the complex interaction of different religious and philosophical traditions that have been influential in China. Chinese religion comprises four main elements. The religious outlook of most Chinese people consists of some combination of beliefs and practices from these four traditions. It is rare for only one to be practised to the exclusion of the others.⁷ It isn't easy to define this religious form. In the past, Chinese folk religion was sometimes mistakenly considered a fusion of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, but it is now widely recognised as a separate system of belief and practice. Many Chinese who would self-consciously claim no religious identity are often adherents of Chinese Folk Religion. Chinese folk religion is a modern idea conceived by contemporary scholars. The very idea of religion as a differentiated part of culture is new. A Chinese term for religion (*zongjiao*) came to exist only in the late 19th century. In addition to practising religion, many people also follow a collection of beliefs deeply ingrained in Chinese culture that can be referred to as "traditional Chinese folk religion" - a diverse mixture of beliefs. Daoism, Buddhism, and the religious aspects of Confucianism are combined with local folk beliefs and practices to form the backbone of Chinese religion. Unlike western religions, which are henotheistic (requiring exclusive adherence), eastern religions often are not exclusionary but incorporate different belief systems. Furthermore, the syncretic* nature of the Chinese folk religion allows easy incorporation of certain local beliefs and practices.⁸

* characterised or brought about by a combination of different forms of belief or practice.

⁶ Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/buddhism>

⁷ Source: <https://religionfacts.com/chinese-religion>

⁸ Source: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/religion-traditional.htm>

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Judaism Explained

Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion, dating back nearly 4,000 years. Followers of Judaism believe in one God who revealed himself through ancient prophets. The history of Judaism is essential to understanding the Jewish faith, which has a rich heritage of law, culture and tradition.

Jewish people believe only one God has established a covenant—or special agreement—with them. Their God communicates to believers through prophets and rewards good deeds while also punishing evil. Most Jews (except for a few groups) believe that their Messiah hasn't yet come—but will do so one day. Jewish people worship in holy places known as synagogues, and their spiritual leaders are called Rabbis. The six-pointed Star of David is the symbol of Judaism.

Today, most Jews live in the United States and Israel. Traditionally, a person is considered Jewish if their mother is Jewish. The Jewish sacred text (Torah) is called the Tanakh or the "Hebrew Bible." It includes the same books as the Old Testament in the Christian Bible, but they're placed in a slightly different order.⁹



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