

World Religions Overview

World Religions

BUDDHISM: Worldwide—est. over 600 million; U.S.—est. 1.5 million

CHRISTIANITY: Worldwide—est. 1.9 billion; U.S.—est. 135 million

HINDUISM: Worldwide—est. 825 million; U.S.—est. 1.5 million

ISLAM: Worldwide—est. 1 billion; U.S.—est. 6 million

JUDAISM: Worldwide—est. 16 million; U.S.—est. 6 million

America has become a symbol of hope for many religious groups. Estimates suggest that there are more than 1,500 religious organizations in America. Some of these religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, have long traditions. Others, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are more recent manifestations. The twentieth century has witnessed the greatest influx of religious groups into the United States, and many of these “new” religions consider America to be a prime mission field.

World religions have been classified into two categories: Far Eastern and Middle Eastern. Hinduism and Buddhism began in India, while Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originated in the Middle East. The major tenets of each of these faiths are listed below.

HINDUISM began about 2000 B.C. It has no single founder and is the most diverse of all major world religions.

Most Hindus are polytheistic. Diversity within Hinduism allows for other concepts, including monotheism, henotheism (one god among many), and monism (only one eternal reality exists and everything comes from it). The most popular gods are Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu, who have come to earth in various incarnations (avatars) to aid human beings.

Hindus do not have one set of scriptures, though many of their beliefs and practices can be found in the Vedas and Upanishads. The former is a collection of oral traditions, while the latter is an appendage and synthesis of the Vedas.

The world is an illusion, and the goal of humanity is to free the soul from rebirth and to be absorbed into the ultimate principle, called

Brahman. A chief concept in Hindu thought is karma—the idea that deeds, thoughts, and actions have an impact on one’s future fate. The accumulation of negative karma leads to reincarnation.

There are three major paths to salvation. Karma Marga is a way of works or ritual. Jnana Marga represents a way of knowledge through mystical intuition. Bhakti Marga, the most popular path, is devotion to one of the Hindu gods or goddesses.

BUDDHISM began as a movement within Hinduism through the efforts of Siddhartha Gautama (b. 563 B.C.), who was dissatisfied with Hinduism’s answers to life’s problems. While sitting under a fig tree one day, he found the answers to life’s problems through enlightenment. Later, he was called Buddha (“Enlightened One”).

The chief problem in life is suffering, and it is caused by desiring worldly things. Suffering is eliminated only by abolishing desire. Adopting a lifestyle of moderation in all things extinguishes desire and helps achieve salvation. Salvation is defined as realizing Nirvana, the extinguishing of continual rebirths.

After Buddha’s death, the religion split into two schools of thought. Theravadas, prevalent in Burma and Thailand, acknowledge Buddha as a great teacher but believe that salvation is achieved by living as a monk. Mahayanas, the larger group and predominant in Korea, China, and Japan, elevated Buddha to savior status. Trusting in Buddha as savior allows people to reach salvation. Most Buddhists do not believe in life after death. The Pure Land School asserts that by trusting in the savior, Amitabha,

people can go to paradise when they die.

Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism is a strong missionary faith. Zen Buddhism, with its emphases on meditation and self-salvation, became popular in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, it has dozens of centers in the United States.

JUDAISM traces its origin to Abraham, who lived in the Middle East about 2000 B.C. Judaism focuses on worshipping one God. It was the first world religion to adopt the belief that there is only one God. God is seen as loving, personal, and good in His creation of the universe and in His dealings with humanity. Human beings were created in His image and were meant to worship Him. Jews believe they are God's chosen people who are to spread His truth to the world.

The sacred scripture of Judaism is the Torah (Old Testament), which details, in historical context, God's will. The Ten Commandments are the basis for serving God and for relating to others. Jews also follow the Talmud, a collection of rabbinical interpretations of the Torah. Salvation comes by following God's will and fulfilling His commandments.

Sabbath observance is the foundation for Jewish worship. The 24 hours from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday are designated as a time of worship and rest from work. From the time of Solomon, Jews worshiped at the Temple in Jerusalem. They carried out ritual sacrifices there until the Romans destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70. Contemporary Jews worship at synagogues, where rabbis read and expound the Torah. Major Jewish groups currently include Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Two major events in the twentieth century have influenced the Jews: the Holocaust—the Nazis' destruction of millions

of Jews—and Israel's reconstitution in 1948.

CHRISTIANITY originated with Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ because He is considered the Messiah—one who would bring salvation to the world. Christians are Trinitarians. They believe there is one God. But they also believe the one God has revealed Himself as three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As in Judaism, creation, history, and humanity have great meaning and were brought into being by a loving God.

The Scriptures of Christianity are the Old and New Testaments, which contain God's will for humanity. Salvation is a gift of God. Because of sin, no one is worthy to have a relationship with God or go to heaven. Jesus gave His life on the cross as a substitute for humanity. One must accept Jesus as Savior and Lord and believe that He experienced death and resurrection. To those who trust in Christ, salvation assures a relationship with God and a place in heaven.

ISLAM is one of the most recent world religions, beginning with the work of Muhammad (A.D. 570-632) in what is currently Saudi Arabia. Islam has parallels with Judaism and Christianity, particularly its belief in monotheism. Differences with Christianity include rejecting the Trinity and denying the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. They believe He was, however, a great prophet.

The scripture of Islam is called the Qur'an, God's word dictated to Muhammad. Life is to be lived in subordination to God's will. Devotional life centers on the confession, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." Other activities include fasting during Ramadan, praying five times a day, pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and giving alms.

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