

INTRODUCTION TO WORLD RELIGIONS (NWTC)



Andy Tigert

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College

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Andy Tigert

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: About Religion



Religion describes the beliefs, values, and practices related to sacred or spiritual concerns.



Definition: Religion

The Latin origins of the word “religion”—In Latin **religiō** originally meant ‘obligation, bond’. It was probably derived from the verb *religāre* ‘tie back, tie tight’ (source of the English word *rely*), a compound formed from the prefix *re-* ‘back’ and *ligāre* ‘tie’ (source of the English words *liable*, *ligament*, etc). It developed the specialized sense ‘bond between human beings and the gods’, and from the 5th century it came to be used for ‘monastic life’ – the sense in which English originally acquired it via Old French *religion*. ‘Religious practices’ emerged from this, but the word’s standard modern meaning did not develop until as recently as the 16th century.

In J. Ayto, *Word origins* (2nd ed.). London, UK: A&C Black.

More Definitions



Émile Durkheim

Social theorist **Émile Durkheim** defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.” To him, sacred meant extraordinary—something that inspired wonder and that seemed connected to the concept of “the divine.” Durkheim argued that “religion happens” in society when there is a separation between the profane (ordinary life) and the sacred. A rock, for example, isn’t sacred or profane as it exists. But if someone makes it into a headstone, or another person uses it for landscaping, it takes on different meanings—one sacred, one profane (secular).



Max Weber, 1918

Max Weber believed religion could be a force for social change. He examined the effects of religion on economic activities and noticed that heavily Protestant societies—such as those in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Germany—were the most highly developed capitalist societies and that their most successful business leaders were Protestant. In his writing *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he contends that the Protestant work ethic influenced the development of capitalism. Weber noted that certain kinds of Protestantism supported the pursuit of material gain by motivating believers to work hard, be successful, and not spend their profits on frivolous things. (The modern use of “work ethic” comes directly from Weber’s Protestant ethic, although it has now lost its religious connotations.)



Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Karl Marx viewed religion as a tool used by capitalist societies to perpetuate inequality. He believed religion reflects the social stratification of society and that it maintains inequality and perpetuates the status quo. For him, religion was just an extension of working-class (proletariat) economic suffering. He famously argued that religion “is the opium of the people”.

These definitions come from a singularly masculine approach to the study of religions in our world, and some very different approaches will come from female scholars, leaders, and writers.

It may be useful to read this article about the place of women in religion – [Women's Studies in Religion](#). Much of the field of religious studies was considered a male field of study, and yet women have been key parts of religions across the globe for all of human history.



This is the photo used by those creating events with the 1000 Women in Religion Project 1 November 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions

To quote the article,

“Although most religions are male-dominated in terms of power structures, female adherents are the majority participants in many religions, and a small number of religious movements and sects—such as Afro-Brazilian healing cults, Japanese Ryūkyū religion, Christian Science, and Black Carib religion—can be described as women’s religions to the extent that the leaders and most of the adherents are female (see Sered, 1994).

Women’s sacral power is honored cross-culturally through specialist roles as ascetics, diviners, healers, mystics, prophets, shamans, and witches. Frequently women are leading organizers and participants in purification, fertility, birth, and funerary rites and carry the burden of preserving oral traditions. Within many religions women prepare ritual food and observe low-profile and often private rites within the household (e.g., praying, fasting, chanting) as a means of protecting their families and their livelihoods from harm.

Although leadership positions are more associated with male religious roles, women share with men authority and leadership positions in many religions,



Swearing-in ceremony of the first ever GwètòDe held 2/25/2017 at National Black Theatre in Harlem NYC. GwètòDe's are the clergy of Haitian Vodou, representing the interests of Haitian vodouyizan in a specific geographic region. The Haitian Constitution of 1987 gave Vodouyizan the same rights as practitioners of other faiths.

whether as bishops, priests, and preachers in certain Christian denominations, as priestesses in traditional African religion and Haitian Vodou, as Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Jewish rabbis, as Buddhist teachers, and in the rare but not unheard of cases of Hindu gurūs and Daoist priests.

Some religions offer females certain roles and communities that allow them to be independent from the conventional domestic arrangements of marriage and childbearing, as in women's religious orders in Buddhism and Christianity.

Stories of powerful female heroes, teachers, and saints are preserved in many traditions. Women have been active as founders of new religious movements, including Mother Ann Lee, the eighteenth-century founder of the Shakers in North



Depiction of Nakayama Kokan in Osaka doing missionary work.

America, and Nakayama Miki, the nineteenth-century founder of Japanese Tenrikyō. In the late twentieth century women-dominated goddess-based feminist spiritualities became popular. Amid this colorful diversity it is clear that the reasons women become involved with and remain in religions are many and complex and are subject to the influence of various social, political, and economic factors that inform women's needs and desires."

According to the **MacMillan Encyclopedia of Religions**, there is an experiential aspect to religion which can be found in almost every culture:

[...] almost every known culture [has] a depth dimension in cultural experiences [...] toward some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life. When more or less distinct patterns of behavior are built around this depth dimension in a culture, this structure constitutes religion in its historically recognizable form. Religion is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience—varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the environing culture.

Religion is a **social institution**, because it includes beliefs and practices that serve the needs of society. Religion is also an example of a **cultural universal**, because it is found in all societies in one form or another. While some people think of religion as something individual because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms centered on basic social needs and values. Moreover, religion is a cultural universal found in all social groups. For instance, in every culture, funeral rites are practiced in some way, although these customs vary between cultures and within religious affiliations. Despite differences, there are common elements in a ceremony marking a person's death, such as announcement of the death, care of the deceased, disposition, and ceremony or ritual.

- **Religious experience** refers to the conviction or sensation that we are connected to "the divine." This type of communion might be experienced when people are pray or meditate.
- **Religious beliefs** are specific ideas members of a particular faith hold to be true, such as that Jesus Christ was the son of God, or that reincarnation exists. Another illustration of religious beliefs is the creation stories we find in different religions.
- **Religious rituals** are behaviors or practices that are either required or expected of the members of a particular group, such as bar mitzvah or confession of sins.

✓ Interesting Interview

In this show, you will hear about and explore the connotations of the word "faith" in four traditions and lives: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. You will hear Krista Tippet speak with Sharon Salzberg, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Anne Lamott, and Omid Safi.

- [The Meaning of Faith](#)
- <https://onbeing.org/programs/sharon-...th/#transcript>

Types of Religious Organizations

Religions organize themselves—their institutions, practitioners, and structures—in a variety of fashions. For instance, when the Roman Catholic Church emerged, it borrowed many of its organizational principles from the ancient Roman military and turned senators into cardinals, for example. Sociologists use different terms, like ecclesia, denomination, and sect, to define these types of organizations. Scholars are also aware that these definitions are not static. Most religions transition through different organizational phases. For example, Christianity began as a cult, transformed into a sect, and today exists as an ecclesia.

Cults, like sects, are new religious groups. In the United States today this term often carries pejorative connotations. However, almost all religions began as cults and gradually progressed to levels of greater size and organization. The term cult is sometimes used interchangeably with the term new religious movement (NRM). In its pejorative use, these groups are often disparaged as being secretive, highly controlling of members' lives, and dominated by a single, charismatic leader.

✓ Example

Listen to this account of Diane Benschoter as she describes being a Moonie. She shares an insider's perspective on the mind of a cult member, and proposes a new way to think about today's most troubling conflicts and extremist movements.

https://embed.ted.com/talks/diane_be...wire_the_brain

Controversy exists over whether some groups are cults, perhaps due in part to media sensationalism over groups like polygamous fundamentalist Mormons or the Peoples Temple followers who died at Jonestown, Guyana. Some groups that are controversially labeled as cults today include the Church of Scientology and the Hare Krishna movement.

A sect is a small and relatively new group. Most of the well-known Christian denominations in the United States today began as sects. For example, the Methodists and Baptists protested against their parent Anglican Church in England, just as Henry VIII protested against the Catholic Church by forming the Anglican Church. From “protest” comes the term Protestant.

Occasionally, a sect is a breakaway group that may be in tension with larger society. They sometimes claim to be returning to “the fundamentals” or to contest the veracity of a particular doctrine. When membership in a sect increases over time, it may grow into a denomination. Often a sect begins as an offshoot of a denomination, when a group of members believes they should separate from the larger group.

Some sects do not grow into denominations. Sociologists call these established sects. Established sects, such as the Amish or Jehovah's Witnesses fall halfway between sect and denomination on the ecclesia–cult continuum because they have a mixture of sect-like and denomination-like characteristics.

A denomination is a large, mainstream religious organization, but it does not claim to be official or state sponsored. It is one religion among many. For example, Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist are all Christian denominations. Sunni, Shia and Sufi are all Muslim denominations. Mahayana, Vajrayana and Theravada are Buddhist denominations.

An ecclesia, originally referring to a political assembly of citizens in ancient Athens, Greece, now refers to a congregation. In sociology, the term is used to refer to a religious group that most all members of a society belong to. It is considered a nationally recognized, or official, religion that holds a religious monopoly and is closely allied with state and secular powers. The United States does not have an ecclesia by this standard; in fact, this is the type of religious organization that many of the first colonists came to America to escape. There are countries that have an official state religion, and these do then have an ecclesia. You might find the chart (it's on page 7 of the link) in this article interesting: [Which Countries Have State Religions?](#)

 [Pie chart of global religious distribution: Christian 31.2, Muslim 24.1, Hindu 15.1, Buddhist 6.9, Folk religion 5.7, Other 9, Jewish 0.2%](#)

“In 2010, the Pew Research Center conducted a demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories. The results showed that an estimated 5.8 billion adults and children around the globe are affiliated with a religious group, representing 84% of the 2010

world population—which at the time was 6.9 billion. Following is the breakdown of groups based on the total population of followers:

- Christians—2.2 billion followers (representing 31.5% of the world’s population)
- Muslims—1.6 billion (23.2%)
- Non-religious people—1.1 billion (16.3%)
- Hindus—1 billion (15.0%)
- Buddhists—500 million (7.1%)
- Indigenous religions—400 million (5.9%)
- Other religions—58 million (0.8%)
- Jews—14 million (0.2%)

? Activity

Check out this interactive map of [World Religions from PBS Learning Media](#)

Source of this Data

The data presented in this interactive map was drawn from the results of a 2010 Pew Research Center demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories. The study relied on more than 2,500 censuses, surveys, and population registers. This [addendum](#) lays information out in text format, country by country, for those countries not appearing on the interactive map.

Some of these groupings, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, are relatively easy to define because they are organized around a central figure and a sacred text or texts. While interpretations may differ concerning the figure or texts, followers around the world share certain fundamental beliefs. Other groupings demand further information.”

Indigenous Religions, which include folk religions, are closely tied to a particular people, ethnicity, or tribe. In some cases, elements of other world religions are blended with local beliefs and customs. Examples of folk religions include traditional religions from tribes in the Americas, Australian aboriginal religions, South Asian, and African tribal traditions.

Non-Religious People refer to people who are unaffiliated with a religion. This includes atheists (who believe there is no God or gods), agnostics (who claim neither faith nor disbelief in God), and people who do not identify with any particular religion.

The Other Religions category is diverse and consists of groups not classified elsewhere—often because surveys do not include them by name. Examples include Bahá’í, Jainism, Paganism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Taoism, Unitarianism, and Zoroastrianism. Because many countries do not collect the data, the Pew Research Center did not estimate the size of individual religions within this category.”

Religious syncretism exhibits the blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation of beliefs from unrelated traditions into a religious tradition. Examples would include Candomble, Rastafarian, Vodou, etc.

? Exercise

Take a few minutes to try Pew Research Center’s [Religious Typology Quiz](#)

- First take the quiz and get your result
- Then check out [How Do Religious Typologies Compare?](#)

Key Terms for the Study of Religion:

Polytheism

a belief in many gods

Monotheism

a belief in one god

Pantheism

a belief that everything is god

Atheism

a belief that no god or gods exist

Agnosticism

a belief that no one can really know about the existence of god

Dualism

a belief that reality is good and evil in conflict

Transcendent

the concept that the sacred is beyond this world

Immanent

the concept that the sacred is within this world

Animism

the religion that believes in the divinity of nonhuman beings, like animals, plants, and objects of the natural world

Cults

religious groups that are small, secretive, and highly controlling of members and have a charismatic leader

Denomination

a large, mainstream religion that is not sponsored by the state

Ecclesia

a religion that is considered the state religion

Established sects

sects that last but do not become denominations

Sect

a small, new offshoot of a denomination

Totemism

the belief in a divine connection between humans and other natural beings

Syncretism

blending of multiple religious systems into a new system

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[1.1: Sacred Spaces](#)

[1.2: Sacred Texts](#)

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1.1: Sacred Spaces



“Your sacred space is where you find yourself again and again” (Joseph Campbell)

We all live in a specific place on the planet, and where we live impacts, in visible and not so visible ways, the ways that we interact with the world, with other people, and with our internal self. The child raised in prairie or tundra spaces may find the deep forest intimidating or enclosing. The child from the seaside may long for water in ways that the desert dweller may not completely understand.

So the concept of Sacred Space will change from people to people, during history, dependent on location, belief and lifestyle. This unit will attempt to help us think about the concepts that make a space Sacred.

Let's start with a definition:

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the definitions of the word sacred is:

“b. Dedicated, set apart, exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose.”

During the summer of 2010, PBS went on a quest to find sacred spaces in eight cities across America. The results of that journey is a curated selection which appears in their City Guides to Sacred Spaces in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, New York, Portland, Santa Fe and San Francisco (downloadable at pbs.org/godinamerica/outreach). During this the staff thought long and hard about what it is that makes a space sacred.

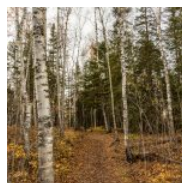
Their definition of a sacred space includes the following:



Traditional Sacred Space – A house of worship designed and built for a congregation to gather, meet and enjoy community for the purposes of worship, liturgy and/or ritual



Civic Sites – engineered structures, secular in nature and scope – usually built by cities, state or government entities



Landscape Sites – sequestered spaces with natural features including water, trees, parkland which encourage quiet meditation and pause



Memorial Sites – markers of an event or person, burial grounds, cemeteries, sites of conscience and memory



Spiritual Places that have been imprinted over time, or have been historically seen as “sacred” a priori – set aside for the public good

? Exercise

Take some time to consider what you might have in the way of Sacred Spaces in your community. There are likely Traditional Sacred Spaces of some sort. What else can you think of that exists in your community that is a Sacred Space of some sort?

- Go visit a sacred space, preferably one you have never visited before. Take a look at things like layout, façade, intent, function, and form in that space. Can you describe what happens in this space? Can you describe why it is considered “set aside”?
- Read this article from Tricycle, a US Foundation centered on promoting Buddhist views. [Sacred Spaces](#)

Religions of the world use varied places and settings for rituals, worship, burial, and other activities. Some of these spaces become more universal in use, as a church or synagogue or mosque might become, in many ways, a community center. AA might meet there, exercise groups gather, pre-schools find housing, clinics, tutoring centers, counseling centers –all of these may use a sacred space as well as the original congregation of people who built it. Some are much more restricted in their use. A monastery is not going to be open to the public, but lived in solely by the Buddhist monks or Catholic monks who dwell there. A labyrinth is limited in use to the walking of it–this is not a park, nor a playground.

Key Takeaway: Creating Sacred Space

Look at how the concept of Sacred and Space come together in this modern example from upstate New York: it’s a response to the Covid pandemic.

- [Pandemic grief and hope](#)

Places become sacred because of their use, their intent, their functions. As we look at various religions, we will be looking at various ways that religions uses particular kinds of spaces. We also will see, in news articles, in research, in social media and in reflections that you create, the ways that spaces become sacred and why they become sacred.

📌 EXAMPLES

There are a vast diversity of Sacred Spaces. You might enjoy visiting some that may not have originally occurred to you as being set aside as somehow sacred:

- [Angkor Wat](#)
- [Brazilian Forest Reserve](#)
- [Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor](#)
- [Okapi Wildlife Reserve](#)
- [Joya de Ceren Archeological site](#)
- [Taj Mahal](#)

- [Masada](#)
- [Auschwitz Birkenau](#)
- [Singapore Botanic Gardens](#)
- [Independence Hall](#)



“God In America.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/godinamerica/outreach/tour.html.

UNESCO, en.unesco.org/.

“The Buddhist Review – The Independent Voice of Buddhism in the West.” *Tricycle*, tricycle.org/.

Adams, Beth. “Earth Altars: Sacred Spaces Honor Pandemic Grief, Offer Hope for Future.” *WXXI News*, Public New New York, 2021, www.wxxinews.org/post/earth-altars-sacred-spaces-honor-pandemic-grief-offer-hope-future.

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1.2: Sacred Texts



Start by reading this article from the New York Times: [What is the Meaning of Sacred Texts?](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/b...armstrong.html)
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/b...armstrong.html>

Karen Armstrong, author and former nun, writes, “Our English word ‘Scripture’ implies a written text, but most Scriptures began as texts that were composed and transmitted orally,” she writes. “Indeed, in some traditions, the sound of the inspired words would always be more important than their semantic meaning. Scripture was usually sung, chanted or declaimed in a way that separated it from mundane speech, so that words — a product of the brain’s left hemisphere — were fused with the more indefinable emotions of the right.”

The author of the article regarding Armstrong’s book about scriptures, Nicholas Kristoff, says,

“Armstrong argues that this approach [literal reading] misunderstands how Scripture works. It’s like complaining about Shakespeare bending history, or protesting that a great song isn’t factual. That resonates. Anyone who has been to a Catholic Mass or a Pentecostal service, or experienced the recitation of the Quran or a Tibetan Buddhist chant, knows that they couldn’t fully be captured by a transcript any more than a song can be by its lyrics. “

Armstrong states, in a way that helps the reader understand the difference between something being insightful and something being factual,

“Because it does not conform to modern scientific and historical norms, many people dismiss Scripture as incredible and patently ‘untrue,’ but they do not apply the same criteria to a novel, which yields profound and valuable insights by means of fiction,”

Armstrong writes:

“A work of art, be it a novel, a poem, or a Scripture, must be read according to the laws of its genre.”

Many faiths have a rich history of revered and honored texts, be they the word of God as revealed to prophets, oral stories retold by one generation to another over centuries, or the sayings of a Teacher written down (eventually) into books. Looking at the history and context of these writings is useful as one explores the origins and developments of the world’s major faiths. It is also important to understand that a number of religious expressions have used and continue to use oral tradition in passing on teachings, rituals, stories and rules. In some places, oral tradition has never been and possibly never will be written down in any formal way. In some other places what is written down for a culture or group or tribe may come after centuries of oral expression, passing on stories, ideas, rituals and other values. And all writing must be set into its context—when was it written, for whom was it written, why was it written, what function did it serve? All of these questions help us understand the role of any sacred text.

Outside Reading

Read a bit of good basic information about sacred texts and their development, style, and content here at Britannica: [Scripture: Religious Literature](https://www.britannica.com/topic/scripture) (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/scripture> . In this you will find:

- A broad definition
- Characteristics of sacred writings

- How western or non-western writings differ

The use of sacred texts helps make tangible the beliefs and history of a faith tradition. This can be useful in approaching any particular faith. It can also, in some ways, freeze a faith tradition in time. Cultural, historic, and geographic context matters, as one considers what has gone into making a text what it is. Reading any text as if it were written today is to miss both the real meaning, but also to miss the possible richness found in its words and images and stories. In most faith traditions, the interpretation of the written word matters a great deal, and years of study is needed in order to help understand what is involved in something that seems, at first, to be simple.



Let's use an example of how this interpretation might work. We will look at a portion of writing from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. **Isaiah** lived in 8th century BCE. He was a prophet after whom the book of Isaiah is named. His call to prophecy in mid-8th century BCE coincided with the beginnings of the expansion of the Assyrian empire, which was just to the east of Israel, and which threatened Israel. Isaiah proclaimed, in poetry, prose and story, and certainly in this following parable, warnings from Yahweh to the people of Israel, whom he claimed were abandoning their faith and ethics. We are going to look at a story from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 5, verses 1-7.

If you do not know the agricultural importance of a vineyard to the people of Israel, nor what work goes into cultivating vines, then a story about a failed vineyard is a little hard to follow. What's the fuss here, and why is the owner of the vineyard complaining? But if one starts to understand that parts of the country of Israel are arid, and only small numbers and types of crops thrive in some of those places, one starts to have a little more context. And then when the total disappointment of a failed crop clearly means that the owner has no income, that this is a true catastrophe, then we have even more context.

Still, this narrative is not just a story of a failed grape crop. This story is making a point to the reader. We must realize that this is no ordinary vineyard owner, but is Yahweh, the God of Israel. And these are not really vines, but are instead the people of Israel who are producing "sour grapes", unfit for eating or for making wine. Then when we look at when this story is written, we see that the people of Israel at this time are trying to become a nation like any other surrounding them, and as a people they are not following the basic commandments of their faith, nor following Yahweh as commanded in the covenant that they have with their God.

Surrounding nations are taking notice that Israel has some decent water resources, has access to the ocean and ports, and that it is a prime crossroads for trade routes. The people of Israel are not faithful to their religious origins, however, and the guidance and protection of Yahweh seems to mean little to them any more—ambition and power are seeming to be more attractive to the people at the time of this prophet. So Yahweh, seen in the story as the owner of this poorly producing vineyard, is going to allow the vines—those people—to reap the consequences of their current behavior and see how they like those consequences. Yahweh symbolically throws hands in the air and lets the surrounding nations deliver those consequences, once the protection of Yahweh is gone. One can, with a bit more historic and cultural context, then, read the parable of the Vineyard owner in the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, chapter 5: 1-7



The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard (NRSV)

5 Let me sing for my beloved **my** love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.

² He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.

⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

⁵ And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.

⁶ I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!

Analysis

When a reader starts to approach a Sacred Text, it is important that they do a little research. The reader should always ask:

- Who wrote this? (was it a priest? a scholar? a storyteller? a prophet?)

- When was it written? (can you find a reliable date?)
- Where was this written? (location, location, location matters)
- Who was the audience? (common people? religious leaders?)
- What form does this take? (Sayings? story? poetry? instructions?)

When the reader knows a bit more about the who, what, where, when and why of any Sacred Text, then the material can begin to sing.

? Exercise

Take a look at the Sacred Texts website for the British Library. In it are articles, videos, data and reflection from experts in the fields of sacred writings. [British Library: Sacred Texts](#)

- First, note the various traditions being considered in the site
- Second, be aware that there are more traditions not considered here than there are present for study.
- Third, look for other sites that may have resources available. One such, which just offers the texts with no commentary, is [Internet Sacred Text Archive](#)

There are many, many texts found in the religions of the world, some of which will seem familiar, and some of which you may never have heard.

They are a fascinating mix of advice, historical style writings, rules, mythology, ritual, guidance and encouragement. Each unit in the text will have links to original writings for that faith tradition, translated into English. Almost none of the sacred texts in the world were written in English, however, so one must be aware that there are nuances not found in the translation!

“You are what you believe in. You become that which you believe you can become”

— *Bhagavad Gita*

“If you realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold on to. If you are not afraid of dying, there is nothing you cannot achieve.”

— *Lao Tzu, Daodejing*

“Whoever destroys a single life is as guilty as though he had destroyed the entire world and whoever rescues a single life earns as much merit as though he had rescued the entire world.”

— *Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9*

“He who knows and knows that he knows is a wise man – follow him; he who knows not and knows not that he knows not is a fool – shun him”

— *Confucius, The Analects*

Sacred Texts in so many traditions were created as something resembling what we would call fiction. They are written as literature, meant to educate, elevate, inspire and support us, but not to give us rigid interpretations of preconceived views nor absolutely accurate historical narrative, and so reading them thus is a mistake.

Example: A Mission

Reading Sacred Texts is tricky. Check some advice on how this is being done in modern times! Read about the impact that early Mesopotamian culture had on Jewish, Christian and Muslim writings, and how it makes clear that scriptures change with time and culture and human interpretation. “An especially gifted scribe would sometimes be required to address current preoccupations by transforming and adapting the ancient traditions. He was even allowed to insert new material into the stories and Wisdom literature of the past. This introduces us to an important theme in the history of scripture. Today we tend to regard a scriptural canon as irrevocably closed and its texts sacrosanct, but we shall find that in all cultures, scripture was essentially a work in progress, constantly changing to meet new conditions. This was certainly the case in ancient Mesopotamia. An exceptionally advanced scribe

was allowed—indeed expected—to improvise, and this enabled Mesopotamian culture to survive the demise of the original Sumerian dynasties and inform the later Akkadian and Babylonian regimes by grafting the new onto the old.”

- [A Mission to Reinterpret the World's Sacred Texts](#)

It is a mistake that people make fairly regularly, however, and this style of reading sacred texts allows the literalist to condemn or attack others for not reading and accepting these sacred words in the same way that they, as literalists, choose to interpret them. Fundamentalists in various religions can cite passages from the Apostle Paul to oppose same-sex marriage or the ordination of women, they can quote the Torah to displace Palestinians from land in Israel, or they can point to narrow, out of context passages in the Quran to justify violence against those that they want to attack for other reasons — but all of that behavior and reading is an abuse and misuse of those Sacred Texts, and does not reflect the role that they have always been intended to play. We must know the genre, the original audience, the writer, and the intent of these writings in order to gain the wisdom that they have on offer for all readers. This is true whether those readers are believers or whether the readers approach the texts purely as interested students of this material.



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Kristof, Nicholas. “What Is the Meaning of Sacred Texts?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 11 Nov. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/books/review/the-lost-art-of-scripture-karen-armstrong.html.

Armstrong, Karen. *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts*. Anchor Books, 2020.

Bhagavad Gita Free PDF – University of Macau. Translated by Lars Martin Fosse, University of Macau, library.um.edu.mo/ebooks/b17771201.pdf.

The Analects of Confucius. Translated by Robert Eno, University of Indiana, [chinatxt.sitehost.iu.edu/Analects_of_Confucius_\(Eno-2015\).pdf](http://chinatxt.sitehost.iu.edu/Analects_of_Confucius_(Eno-2015).pdf).

“Dao De Jing (Eno) – Indiana University Early Chinese Thought[B\VE\VP374 Fall 2010(R Eno The Dao De Jing Introduction If You Walk into Borders Books or: Course Hero.” Translated by Robert Eno, *Dao De Jing (Eno) – Indiana University Early Chinese Thought[B\VE\VP374 Fall 2010(R Eno The Dao De Jing Introduction*

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Clayson, Jane, and Anna Bauman. “A Mission To Reinterpret The World’s Sacred Texts.” *A Mission To Reinterpret The World’s Sacred Texts | On Point*, WBUR, 4 Dec. 2019, www.wbur.org/onpoint/2019/12/04/karen-armstrong-lost-art-scripture.

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1.3: Religion Resources

“...[It] is my firm belief that all religions aim at making people better human beings and that, despite philosophical differences, some of them fundamental, they all aim at helping humanity to find happiness.”

— Dalai Lama XIV, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*

Useful Links

- [Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life](#)
- [Lumen: sociology and religion](#)
- [Humboldt State University OER for Religion](#)
- [British Library: Sacred Texts](#)
- [Harvard's Pluralism Project](#)
- [Religion Online](#)
- [Alta Lib Guides](#)
- [New York Times Religion and Belief](#)
- [BBC: Religion](#)
- [National Public Radio: Religion](#)
- [Religion in American History: a list from OER Commons](#)
- [PBS Religion and Ethics](#)
- [Ted Ed Lessons on Religion](#)
- [OER resources on religion from Humboldt University](#)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Asian Origins



Confucius presenting the young Gautama Buddha to
Laozi

*Ming Dynasty

The people of Ancient China, before the great traditions of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism emerged, already saw patterns in nature, had concepts of yin and yang, venerated their ancestors, and followed other beliefs associated with what is called “the Chinese way”. Over the centuries, both Daoism and Confucianism developed these ideas further but in different directions. Combined with Buddhism, these three traditions impacted the culture, the history and the practices of Chinese life. By the twelfth century CE, Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism—known as the Three Doctrines—were seen as both complementary and necessary to life in China. From that time moving forward, these three sets of doctrines often overlapped, and their rituals, architecture, and art integrated into something more than any one specific element or influence. This influence spread to southeast Asia, Japan, Korea, and eventually across the globe.

One of the earliest references to the idea of the *sanjiao* (literally “three teachings”) of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism is attributed to Li Shiqian, a prominent scholar of the sixth century CE, who wrote that “Buddhism is the sun, Daoism the moon, and Confucianism the five planets.”^[1] Today many of their ideas have migrated to other continents, been modified, and adapted to new countries and contexts.

“The three teachings are a powerful and inescapable part of Chinese religion. Whether they are eventually accepted, rejected, or reformulated, the terms of the past can only be understood by examining how they came to assume their current status. And because Chinese religion has for so long been dominated by the idea of the three teachings, it is essential to understand where those traditions come from, who constructed them and how, as well as what forms of religious life (such as those that fall under the category of “popular religion”) are omitted or denied by constructing such a picture in the first place.”^[2]

✓ Example

Take a look at this excellent summary of The Three Teachings from the Center for Global Education: China Initiative.

- [The Three Teachings](#)

A little history of the era of Confucius and Lao Tzu might be helpful, even if presented in a fast and frantic way!



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIWORYToTo4>

 divider-5318234_640-300x150.png

Green, John. "Crash Course: 2,000 Years of Chinese History! The Mandate of Heaven." *Crash Course*, PBS Studios, 2012, youtu.be/yIWORYToTo4.

Asia for Educators, Columbia University. "Sanjiao: The Three Teachings." *Living in the Chinese Cosmos | Asia for Educators*, 2021, afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/ort/teachings.htm.

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1. Li's formulation is quoted in Beishi, Li Yanshou (seventh century), Bona ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), p. 1234. Translation from Chinese by Stephen F. Teiser. [↵](#)
 2. *The text of this topic, Sanjiao: The Three Teachings, was adapted, with the author's permission, from "The Spirits of Chinese Religion," by Stephen F. Teiser. [↵](#)

[2.1: Buddhism](#)

[2.2: Buddhist Resources](#)

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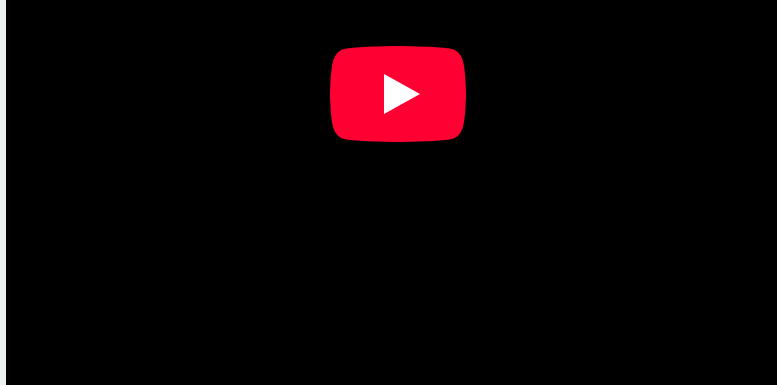
2.1: Buddhism



Originating in northern India in the 5th-6th century BCE Buddhism is concerned with the universal searching for enlightenment. The Buddha lived as Prince Siddhartha Gautama before renouncing his family as an adult and leaving his life of privilege in search of enlightenment. The Buddha lived and taught in north-east India in the 5th century BCE, dying in his eightieth year. The Theravāda tradition puts his death in 486 BCE, while the Mahāyāna tradition has it in 368 BCE. Recent scholarly research suggests his most likely dates were 484–404 BCE.

Telling the Story of Buddha: Siddhartha Gautama

The excellent PBS documentary film: The Buddha (there are transcripts beneath the video if you would rather read this material)



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vc7_VyVXDLs

Buddhism teaches that all of life is suffering, caused by desire. To cease suffering one must end desire and this can be achieved through following the Noble Eight-fold Path (eight rules that guides the life and morals of a follower). Buddhists believe that all actions bring reward or retribution.

Buddha rejected many aspects of the Hinduism traditions and beliefs of his day. These included rejecting the caste system, an emphasis on rituals, and the belief in a permanent spiritual reality. He accepted Hindu ideas on karma and rebirth and the notion of liberation, which he called nirvana instead of moksha. In the centuries after his death, several schools emerged that eventually crystallized into the great branches of Buddhism recognized today: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

Branches



Theravada is the only surviving conservative school whose goal was to pass on the Buddha's teachings unchanged. Theravada Buddhism centers on the interdependence of the community of monks with ordinary people. Monks pursue nirvana supported by the people, who gain merit (good karma) by providing them with food, clothing, and provisions for the monastic life. Monks, in turn, are role models who offer advice, and run schools, meditation centers, and medical clinics. "In Theravada (Southern) Buddhist countries, the monks (bhikkhus) are easily recognized because they wear the characteristic orange robe, have their heads shaven, and go about barefoot. They are given a new name and the robe, and will live according to a code of 227 rules (the Vinaya). A monk may decide to disrobe (cease being a monk) at any time."^[1]



The **Mahayana** branch subdivided into many different schools and introduced innovations in teachings and the practice of Buddhist life for ordinary people. The Mahayana ideal was the deeply compassionate person called a bodhisattva, who refused to fully enter nirvana, but stayed among people to help others end their suffering. The historical Buddha was deemphasized by a worldview that saw the universe populated by many Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Major schools of this form of Buddhism include Shingon, Tendai, Pure Land, Nichiren, and Zen. In Mahayana (Northern) Buddhist countries there are two main branches, the Tibetan with monks wearing the characteristic maroon robe, and the Far Eastern Zen, which also has an unbroken line of nuns, where the robes are black or grey.



Dalai Lama

Associated with Tibetan Buddhism, **Vajrayana** combines Mahayana principles of living and teaching with various ritual practices incorporating mantras, mudras, and mandalas. An interesting feature is the transmission of leadership through reincarnations of other lamas (leaders). "Tibetan Buddhism is to be found not only in Tibet, but right across the Himalayan region from Ladakh to Sikkim, as well as parts of Nepal. It is the state religion of the kingdom of Bhutan. It also spread to Mongolia and parts of Russia (Kalmykia, Buryatia and Tuva) Tibetan refugees have brought it back to India, where it can be found in all the many Tibetan settlements. In modern times it has become very popular in the West. Tibetan Buddhism takes as its motivating spiritual ideal the way of the bodhisattva, the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment for all beings. All Tibetan traditions place special emphasis on the teacher-student relationship. This distinctive approach is based on the Indian ideal of the guru (Lama in Tibetan). The Vajrayana or Tantra is not considered separate from the Mahayana, but has a special connection within it, as it is based on an

altruistic Mahayana motivation. Tantra is a path of transformation in which you work under the guidance of a suitably qualified teacher to allow you to access subtler and deeper states of consciousness such as transforming the emotions and ego.”^[2]

Four Noble Truths

- **Dukkha** –all life is suffering, as one is incapable of finding ultimate satisfaction. This is an innate characteristic of existence in the realm of *samsara* (the life cycle that includes reincarnation);
- **Samudaya**–the origin, the arising of this suffering is craving, desire, wanting. Dukkha comes together with this *taṇhā* (“craving, desire or attachment”);
- **Nirodha**– the cessation, the ending of this *dukkha*, this suffering, can be attained by the renouncement or letting go of this *taṇhā*, the craving and desire;
- **Magga**–the way one gets rid of craving is through the path, the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the path leading to renouncement of *tanha* and cessation of *dukkha*.

The eight Buddhist practices in the Noble Eightfold Path are:

1. **Right View:** our actions have consequences, death is not the end, and our actions and beliefs have consequences after death.
2. **Right Resolve or Intention:** the giving up of home and adopting the life of a religious mendicant in order to follow the path; this concept aims at peaceful renunciation, into an environment of non-sensuality, non-ill-will (to loving kindness), away from cruelty (to compassion).
3. **Right Speech:** no lying, no rude speech, no telling one person what another says about him to cause discord or harm their relationship.
4. **Right Conduct or Action:** no killing or injuring, no taking what is not given, no sexual acts, no material desires.
5. **Right Livelihood:** beg to feed, only possessing what is essential to sustain life;
6. **Right Effort:** preventing the arising of unwholesome states, and generating wholesome states,
7. **Right Mindfulness:** “retention”, being mindful of the *dharmas* (“teachings”, “elements”) that are beneficial to the Buddhist path.
8. **Right Concentration:** practicing four stages of *dhyāna* (“meditation”), which culminates into equanimity and mindfulness. In the Theravada tradition and the Vipassana movement, this is interpreted as concentration or one-pointedness of the mind, and supplemented with meditation, which aims at insight.

The Three Fires

(1) Desire/Thirst, (2) Anger (3) Delusion

“Your house is on fire, burns with the Three Fires; there is no dwelling in it’ – thus spoke the Buddha in his great Fire Sermon. The house he speaks of here is the human body; the three fires that burn it are (1) Desire/Thirst, (2) Anger and (3) Delusion. They are all kinds of energy and are called ‘fires’ because, untamed, they can rage through us and hurt us and other people too! Properly calmed through spiritual training, however, they can be transformed into the genuine warmth of real humanity.” ^[3]

Buddhists promotes virtues such as kindness, patience and generosity. The virtues of wisdom and compassion are valued most of all. *Ahimsa* or harmlessness, connected with a respect for all things, is described, in part, by the term compassion. This desire to cause no harm to all beings includes animals, plants, and the world in general. In addition, this is a tradition that asks one to think and reflect on all one’s actions. Buddha himself told his followers not to believe statements or teachings without questioning, but to test each one for themselves.

Buddhists try to practice these Buddhist virtues actively in their everyday lives. The final goal of all Buddhist practice is to bring about that same awakening that the Buddha himself achieved through an active transformation of the heart and passions and the letting go of “self”.

Summary information about Buddhism: Harvard University
[Buddhism in Brief](#)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pG4R-rmX7HA>

The term ‘Buddha’ is not a name but a title, meaning ‘Awakened One’ or ‘Enlightened One’. The man Siddhartha Gautama is not seen as unique in being a Buddha, as Buddhas are seen to have arisen in past eons of the world, and will do so in future. They are not incarnations of a God, but humans who have developed ethical and spiritual perfections over many lives. A Buddha is seen as one who becomes awakened to the true nature of reality, and awakened *from* ingrained greed, hatred and delusion. They are enlightened in being able to clearly see the nature of the conditioned world, with its many worlds in which beings are reborn, and Nirvana, the timeless state beyond all rebirths. Moreover a Buddha is seen as a wise and compassionate teacher who shows people the path beyond suffering.

Devotees founded temples and monasteries and sponsored the writing of holy texts.

Read and watch a short video about the development of Buddhist Texts

Peter Harvey^[4] has written for the British Library about the development of sacred texts within the varied branches of Buddhism. The article begins with a longer description of the enlightenment of Buddha, and then moves into talking about Buddhist Texts.

“How were the Buddha’s teachings collected?”

Soon after his death, 500 disciples who were enlightened *Arahats*, free of further rebirth, gathered to agree what he had taught, and arranged these into two kinds of text that could be communally chanted: *Vinaya*, on monastic discipline, and the *Suttas*, or discourses. At that time, writing was little used in India, but there was a well-developed tradition of passing on detailed texts orally. Different group of monks in time had slightly different versions that they passed on, but there is a remarkable overall agreement. The form preserved by the Theravāda school, in Pāli, was written down for the first time around 20 BCE in Sri Lanka, running to over 40 modern volumes.

The *Suttas* do not focus on the person of the Buddha, but his *Dhamma* (Pāli, Sanskrit *Dharma*): his teachings, the realities they point to, especially the nature of the world and the Path to Nirvana, and experiences on the Path, culminating in Nirvana. The Buddha said, though, that ‘he who sees the *Dhamma* sees me’.”

- [The Buddha and Sacred Texts](#)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jex4R3-qJn8>

As the Buddha's teachings spread across Asia, different sects stressed particular aspects of the quest for enlightenment. In addition to spreading the practices and beliefs of Buddha, it is also true that Buddhism had a strong influence on the early trade routes in Asia. Buddhism started its development from India, and reached other regions along what are known as the Silk Roads. Because beliefs moved along the trade routes, as well as material goods, Buddhism practices changed from place to place, developing within particular communities according to the traditions of those cultures. Buddhist monasteries were built and established along the developing trade routes, so that one would say that these faith communities were linked to economic growth. The commercial exchanges that occurred contributed to the improvement of the Buddhist monks' lives. Because of the Buddhist concept of *Dāna* (generosity), monks received contributions from the merchants and traders along the Silk Roads. In return, monks provided spiritual guidance.

The development of trade amongst merchants of the region along the Silk Roads resulted in a further expansion of Buddhism towards eastern Asian lands, including in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. In addition, Buddhism moved north, to Japan, Korea, and areas in northern China. Goods and travelers from the Silk Roads moved north and Buddhism was one of the most influential imports brought to Japan along the trade routes. The ancient capital city of Nara, Japan, contains many Buddhist temples. Valuable items from the Silk Roads merchants and travelers are found in Nara's Shosoin Treasure Repository of the Emperor.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBpGT_-5iVg

Ted Talks from practitioners of Buddhism

Buddhism has spread well beyond Asia, and is somewhat familiar even in Western Countries. Check out these stories and reflections from Western Buddhists.

- All It Takes is 10 Mindful Minutes - https://www.ted.com/talks/andy_puddi...indful_minutes
- The Habits of Happiness - https://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu_r...s_of_happiness
- We Can Be Buddhas - https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_thu...can_be_buddhas



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“The Silk Roads Programme.” *UNESCO Silk Roads Programme | Silk Roads Programme*, 2021, en.unesco.org/silkroad/.

“Buddhism in Brief.” *Buddhism in Brief*, Harvard University, 19 Apr. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pG4R-rmX7HA.

“The Buddha.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2010, www.pbs.org/thebuddha/.

“The Buddhist Review – The Independent Voice of Buddhism in the West.” *Tricycle*, 2021, tricycle.org/.

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Thurman, Robert. “We Can Be Buddhas.” *TED*, Ted Talks, 2006, www.ted.com/talks/robert_thurman_we_can_be_buddhas.

1. <https://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/p...ad-of-buddhism> ↵

2. <https://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/p...etan-buddhism/> ↵

3. <https://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/p...ntal-teachings> ↵

4. Peter Harvey is Emeritus Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Sunderland. He was one of the two founders of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies and edits its journal, *Buddhist Studies Review*. His books include *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge University Press, 1990, and 2013), *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), and *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism* (Curzon, 1995), and he has published many papers on early Buddhist thought and practice and on Buddhist ethics. Most recently, he edited an extensive integrated anthology of Buddhist texts, *Common Buddhist Text: Guidance and Insight from the Buddha* (2017) published for free distribution by Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand. ↵

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2.2: Buddhist Resources

“It is like a lighted torch whose flame can be distributed to ever so many other torches which people may bring along; and therewith they will cook food and dispel darkness, while the original torch itself remains burning ever the same. It is even so with the bliss of the Way.”

— Buddha Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni, The Sutra Of The Forty-Two Sections

Useful Links

- [Discovering Sacred Texts: Buddhism](#)
- [Website of the Dalai Lama](#)
- [Alta Lib Guides: Buddhism](#)
- [The Buddhist Society](#)
- [The Expansion of Buddhism: Harvard University](#)
- [Tricycle: the Buddhist Review](#)
- [Buddhist Digital Resource Center Buddhism Resources: Library of Congress](#)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Indian Sub-Continent Origins

 [Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism are major dharmic religions also known as Indian religions](#)

4 symbols of Dharmic Traditions

There are 4 traditions called Dharmic Religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Most people have heard of Hinduism and Buddhism. They may not, however, have heard of Jainism and Sikhism, which are also religions common to India and the subcontinent.

“Dharma is a concept of social order and duty that sustains the whole universe. A person’s placement in a caste (varna) and birth group (jati) is one element of dharma.”^[1]

Although in many ways these traditions are similar in beliefs, there are surprising differences between them as well, and the source of each of the other three traditions is Hinduism. Because Buddhism has spread so widely to East Asia, it is covered in the section of this book that deals with traditions from that part of the world, even though it is one of the four Dharmic traditions and did, in fact, originate in the Indian sub-continent. But the Jains and Sikhs are still primarily located in the Indian subcontinent, and it is these, along with Hinduism, that we will consider in this unit.

Hinduism developed out of the beliefs brought to India by Aryan invaders from Central Asia in the 2nd millennium BCE. The earliest written formulation of these beliefs and religious practices is found in the Vedas, collections of hymns and rules for the performance of rituals.



Trimurti, Cave No. 1, Elephanta Caves

Hinduism later absorbed many different philosophies and practices. The three main deities, called the Trimurti, are Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. They represent the universal concepts of creation, destruction and preservation. Hindus believe in *dharmā*, a universal law that defines the right conduct in life, and *karma*, the power of actions to determine the form of one’s future rebirth. The ultimate goal in life is to break the endless cycle of incarnations (*saṃsāra*) and achieve *mokṣa*, union with the Divine.

Both Jainism and Sikhism were born out of Hinduism and include in their ideas a rejection of the Vedas, the main scriptures of the Hindu faith.

Jainism was founded by Vardhamana Jnatiputra or Nataputta Mahavira (599-527 BC), called Jina (Spiritual Conqueror). The Jains believe that there is no real god, and that everything has always been and always will be, without a beginning and an end. No one really knows how many Jains there are in the world, since many Jains identify themselves as Hindu.

For Sikhs, Guru Nanak founded Sikhism in the late 15th century CE based on universal love. Sikhism has ten gurus, or people who created the texts and beliefs of the religion. Their beliefs are codified in the writings called the final guru, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Sikhism is based in the Punjab region of India. Sikhs believe in one God, also sometimes referred to as Allah, just as the divine is referred to in Islam.

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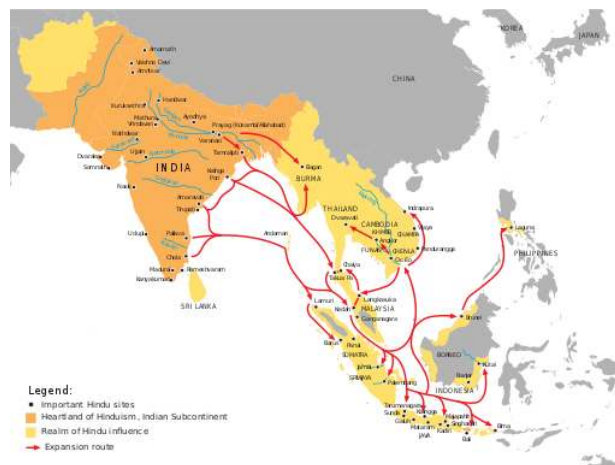
1. Copyright © 2021 The President and Fellows of Harvard College from Dharma: The Social Order, an article from the Pluralism Project [↩](#)

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3.1: Hinduism



Hinduism is also known as ‘*sanatana dharma*’ to Hindus. Considered the oldest organized religion in the world, Hinduism originated in the Indus River Valley about 4,000 years ago in what is now northwest India and Pakistan. With about 1.2 billion followers, about 15% of the world’s population, Hinduism is the third largest of the world’s religions. Hindus believe in a divine power that can manifest as different entities or avatars. Hindu practice has many seemingly independent centers of tradition, often with distinctive sacred texts, deities, myths, rituals, saintly figures, codes of conduct, festivals and so on, but on closer scrutiny these different centers can be seen to link up with each other. This also explains how, while other faiths and civilizations have come and gone, Hinduism continues to thrive and put out new shoots and roots, even when old ones have died away. Diversity is accepted in Hindu traditions, as it considers each path one of value.



Hinduism expansion in Asia, from its heartland in Indian Subcontinent, to the rest of Asia, especially Southeast Asia, started circa 1st century marked with the establishment of early Hindu settlements and polities in Southeast Asia.

Three main incarnations of the divine, called the Trimurti—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—are sometimes compared to the manifestations of the divine in the Christian Trinity. They are considered the deities of creation, preservation and destruction. They are a part of Brahman—the One Ultimate Reality. Although there are many deities beyond these three, and many images of those deities, in various shrines, temples and holy places, there are no images of Brahman. That One Ultimate Reality is unknowable and beyond human comprehension. But all deities are a part of that One Ultimate Reality. And human goals are to become united with that One—to achieve moksha.

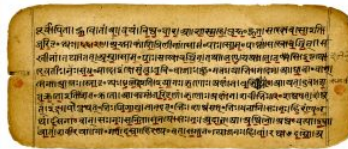


Hinduism percent population in each nation World Map Hindu data by Pew Research

History

Hinduism developed within a group of tribes who referred to themselves as Aryans. There are disputes concerning where they originated; some scholarship says that they were already present in western India, others that they came into the area from Central Asia, or even that they came from further west, including eastern Europe. It is known that the Aryans began to assert their presence in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent at about the beginning of the second millennium BCE, interacting with the Indus civilization that already existed there. The Indus civilization is so named because it seems to have spread out from settlements on the Indus river. They called the Indus river ‘*Sindhu*’, and it is from this term that ‘Hindu’ comes. Hinduism thus signifies the Aryans’ culture and religious traditions as they developed over time, incorporating elements from other cultures that the Aryans encountered along the way.

The religious tradition that emerged early on (almost before anything that looks like modern Hinduism) had a variety of gods and was centered on priests performing sacrifices using fire and sacred chants. This is much like traditions in many places around the continent.



The Rig Veda is one of the oldest and most important texts in the śruti tradition of Hinduism.

The Indus river valley people create sacred texts, collectively called the Vedas, that contain hymns and rituals from ancient India and are mostly written in Sanskrit. The term Vedas means ‘knowledge’. The Vedas were believed to have arisen from the infallible ‘hearing’ (*śruti*), by ancient seers, of the sacred deposit of words whose recitation and contemplation bring stability and wellbeing to both the natural and human worlds. The Vedas are believed to have developed over a span of 2000 years. The hymns in particular were largely directed at transcendent powers, most of whom were called *devas* and *devīs* (misleadingly translated as ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’). These powers, individually or in groups, were thought to exercise control over the world through cosmic forces. In this early phase of the Veda, there is reference to a One (*ekam*) that undergirds all being. During later periods of this earliest pre-Hindu tradition, questioning and changes in spiritual philosophy produced the Upanishads, an addition to the Vedas. These are also written in Sanskrit and contain some of the central philosophical concepts and ideas of the Hinduism we now know. These works record insights into external and internal spiritual reality (Brahman and Atman) that can be directly experienced.

Hindus generally believe in a set of principles called *dharma*, which refer to one’s duty in the world that corresponds with “right” actions. Hindus also believe in *karma*, or the notion that spiritual ramifications of one’s actions are balanced cyclically in this life or a future life (reincarnation).

Introduction to Hinduism: Discovering Sacred Texts in the British Library, PBS Learning

This excellent introduction to Hinduism is found at the really impressive British Library website exploring Sacred Texts of the world. Start here:



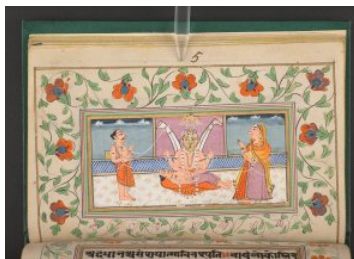
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AxUtOLG9gc>

After this, watch this simple introduction to Hindu Concepts from PBS Learning Media:

- [Core Tenants of Hinduism](#)

Two other *dharma*-texts of a different order, the *Mahabharata* ('The Great Tale of the Bharatas') and the *Ramayana* ('The Coming of Rama') came later. Both compositions were originally compiled in Sanskrit verse over several hundreds of years, beginning from about the middle of the first millennium BCE. The *Mahabharata* narrates the story of the rivalry between two groups of cousin warriors, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. With the aid of hundreds of supporting characters and intriguing sub-plots, the story contains teaching about the nature of *dharma*. Embedded in book 6 of the *Mahabharata* is perhaps the most famous devotional sacred text of Hinduism, the 700 verse *Bhagavad Gita*, or 'Song of (Krishna as) God'. The *Gita*, as it is often called, mainly contains teachings by Krishna, as Supreme Being, to his friend and disciple Arjuna about how to attain union with him in his divine state.

The *Ramayana* recounts the adventures of the exiled king Rama and his various companions as they make their way to the island-kingdom of Lanka – off the southern tip of India – to rescue Rama's wife Sita, who had been abducted by Ravana, the ten-headed ogre-king of Lanka. For a great many Hindus, the *Ramayana*, and devotion to the *avatar* (the chief representation of the Supreme Being in human form) Rama offers an accessible path to salvation.



A finely illustrated manuscript version of the Bhagavad Gita, one of the most inspiring expressions of Hindu spirituality, produced in Rajasthan, in the 18th century.

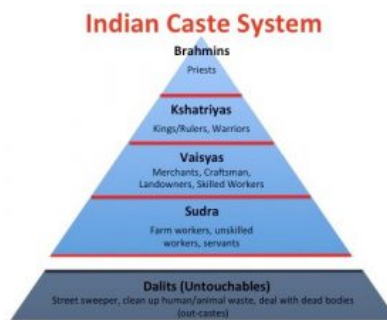
The mysticism and abstractness of materials in the Vedas is balanced with practical religious elements that form the everyday spirituality of most Hindus. This practical approach described in the Gita states that one should first work to meet one's social obligations in life. Then the Gita recommends four paths, or **yogas**, that take into account one's caste and personality type. The paths of knowledge (jnana), action (karma), devotion (bhakti), or meditation (raja) may be practiced. Other yogas combine elements of these four. Yoga is considered a form of spiritual work in Hinduism.

Key Terms:

The term **Brahman** stands for a monistic outlook that sees one invisible and subtle essence or source of all reality—human, divine, and cosmic. All is ultimately one. (Monism is the metaphysical and theological view that all is one, that there are no fundamental divisions between anything, and that a unified set of laws underlie all of nature. The universe, at the deepest level of analysis, is then one thing or composed of one fundamental kind of stuff.) **Brahman** is the term used to describe "god" as this Oneness of the universe. Supreme Universal Spirit might serve as a better or more broad way to express this concept of Brahman. (do not confuse Brahma from the Trimurti with Brahman. They are completely different!)

Atman is the innermost spirit within all human beings, which ultimately is identical with Brahman. Sometimes we talk about the soul in about the same way. It refers to the real self beyond ego or false self.

Maya reflects a sense of magic and mystery and accounts for the perception of different forms or multiplicity in the world. Maya hides or veils the underlying unity of all things.



For more than two thousand years in Indian society there has been an organization of the society in the form of the **Caste** system, although this phrase is a 19th century term. Organization of Indian society had its own structure that, with the coming of the British in the colonial era, took on a much more rigid approach.

Varna is a term that literally means *type, order, or class* and it groups people into classes, a structure that was first used in Vedic times. The four classes were the Brahmins (priestly people), the Kshatriyas (rulers, administrators and warriors), the Vaishyas (artisans, merchants, tradesmen and farmers), and Shudras (laboring classes). It had an additional category, identifying people beyond societal status, considered the untouchables.

Jati is a term used in India to refer to a person's lineage and kinship group. Indians identify themselves by the community they belong to and these jati are sub-groups of specific castes. The status of the jati one is born into is still a factor in marriage selection, even though the strict isolation of caste in India is softening. Each jati, or subgroup of a caste level, has a set of jobs common to their position, but this can change with effort on the part of the community. Jatis are much less obvious in their caste associations than was previously thought.

The Indian Constitution outlawed the concept of Untouchability in 1947 upon receiving Indian independence from Britain, and the group called Dalit (once considered the untouchables) are working even now towards their civil rights.

The Indian Government has established special quotas in schools and Parliament to aid the lowest jatis. Caste discrimination is not permitted in gaining employment and access to educational and other opportunities. But this does not mean that caste is illegal or has faded away. Caste groups as political pressure groups work very well in a democratic system. Caste may provide psychological support that people seem to need. Economists and political scientists are finding that caste is no real barrier to economic development or political democracy.^[1]

Key Takeaway: The Dalit movement in the 20th century

Take some time to read this interview about the Dalits in modern India. *Michael Collins is a 2020 Kluge Fellow from the University of Gottingen. Collins is working on a project titled "From Boycotts to Ballots: Democracy and Social Minorities in Modern India." Boris Granovskiy, who recently detailed at the Kluge Center, interviewed Collins on his work.*

The 20th Century Transformation of the Dalit Movement in India

Karma and rebirth/reincarnation are important aspects of the Hindu worldview. Justice is built into the very fabric of reality. The moral consequences of one's actions will be experienced in this life or the next. So a belief in reincarnation is central to Hindu belief. One moves up or down the caste ladder depending on the caliber of one's life just lived.

Moksha represents the idea of final liberation or freedom from all limitations, especially the round of death and rebirth. Moksha entails going beyond egoism and identifying with the unity and sacredness that everything shares. After enough lifetimes, and learning achieved, one eventually leaves the cycle of rebirth and is liberated.

There are 4 goals in life:

According to Hinduism, the meaning (purpose) of life is four-fold: to achieve **Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha**.

The first, **dharma**, means to act morally and ethically throughout one's life. However, dharma also has a secondary aspect; since Hindus believe that they are born in debt to the gods and people, dharma calls for Hindus to remember these debts. These include

debts to the Gods for various blessings, debts to parents and teachers, debts to guests, debts to other human beings, and debts to all other living beings.

The second meaning of life according to Hinduism is **Artha**, which refers to the pursuit of wealth and prosperity in one's life. Importantly, one must stay within the bounds of dharma while pursuing this wealth and prosperity (i.e. one must not step outside moral and ethical grounds in order to do so). So it is considered good to prosper, but not at the expense of others.

The third purpose of a Hindu's life is to seek **Kama**. In simple terms, Kama can be defined as obtaining enjoyment from life. Again, this is not to be done at the expense of others, but it is considered a good thing in life to have joy and pleasure.

The fourth and final meaning of life according to Hinduism is **Moksha**, enlightenment. By far the most difficult meaning of life to achieve, Moksha may take an individual just one lifetime to accomplish (rarely) or it may take several. However, it is considered the most important meaning of life and offers such rewards as liberation from reincarnation, self-realization, enlightenment, or unity with God. Often, in human lives, people focus on this goal as elders. As a young person, the other goals may be more important, or more demanding.

There are stages to human living, too, according to Hinduism:

Ashrama, also spelled asrama, Sanskrit āśrama, in Hinduism, is any of the four stages of life through which a Hindu ideally will pass.

The stages are those of:

1. **the student** (*Brahmacari*), marked by chastity, devotion, and obedience to one's teacher,
2. **the householder** (*Grihastha*), requiring marriage, the begetting of children, sustaining one's family and helping support priests and holy men, and fulfillment of duties toward gods and ancestors,
3. **the forest dweller** (*Vanaprastha*), beginning after the birth of grandchildren and consisting of withdrawal from concern with material things, pursuit of solitude, and ascetic and yogic practices, and
4. **the homeless renouncer** (*Sannyasi*), involving renouncing all one's possessions to wander from place to place begging for food, concerned only with union with *brahman* (the Absolute). Traditionally, *moksha* (liberation from rebirth) should be pursued only during the last two stages of a person's life.

Exercise: Flashcards

One fun way to get a handle on difficult or new terms is through flashcards. Try these, just for fun

- [Brainscape on Hinduism](#)

The Divine

The multiple gods and goddesses of Hinduism are a distinctive feature of the religion. However, **Professor Julius Lipner**^[2] explains that Hinduism cannot be considered polytheistic and discusses the way in which Hindu culture and sacred texts conceptualize the deities, as well as their role in devotional faith. (the full texts, of which this material is only excerpts, can be found at [The Hindu Sacred Image and Iconography, Hindu Deities](#))



“One of the most striking features of Hinduism is the seemingly endless array of images of gods and goddesses, most with animal associates, that inhabit the colorful temples, and wayside shrines and homes of its adherents. Because of this, Hinduism has been called an idolatrous and polytheistic religion.

Hinduism can be likened to an enormous banyan tree extending itself through many centers of belief and practice which can be seen to link up with each other in various ways, like a great network that is one, yet many. The concepts of deity, worship and

pilgrimage in Hinduism are a prime example of this ‘polycentric’ phenomenon.

Deities are a key feature of Hindu sacred texts. The Vedic texts describe many so-called gods and goddesses (*devas* and *devīs*) who personify various cosmic powers through fire, wind, sun, dawn, darkness, earth and so on. There is no firm evidence that these Vedic deities were worshipped by images; rather, they were summoned through the sacrificial ritual (*yajña*), with the deity *Agni* (fire) generally acting as intermediary, to bestow various boons to their supplicants on earth in exchange for homage and the ritual offering. Some Vedic texts speak of a One that seemed to undergird the plurality of these *devas* and *devīs* as their support and origin. In time, in the Upanishads, this One (***Brahman***) was envisaged as either the transcendent, supra-personal source of all change and differentiation in our world which would eventually dissolve back into the One, or as the supreme, personal Lord who was the mainstay and goal of all finite being. In both conceptions, we have the basis for subsequent notions of a transcendent reality that is accessible to humans by meditation and/or prayer and worship.

Exercise: watch this short video about Hindu deities



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_NJAJGCKD8

Avatars

It is in the *Bhagavad Gita* that we first find sustained textual evidence of developed thinking about devotional faith in a personal God, named Krishna. In this text, Krishna teaches his friend and disciple, Arjuna, about his divine nature and relationship with the world, and how the devoted soul can find liberation (*moksha*) from the sorrows and limitations of life through loving communion with him. Here, also for the first time in Hinduism, we encounter the doctrine of the *avatāra* (also known as ***avatar***), which teaches that the Supreme Being descends periodically into the world in embodied form for, according to the *Gita*, ‘re-establishing *dharma*, protecting the virtuous and destroying the wicked.’ The doctrine of multiple *avatars* with their specific objectives was to develop subsequently over the centuries in various sacred texts.

Places of worship

The first archaeological evidence we have of standing temple construction and its implication of image-worship of the deity occurs in about the 3rd century BCE – of a Vishnu temple (in eastern Rajasthan) and of a Shiva temple not too far away. Presumably, since these were constructions of mud, timber, brick, stone etc., the process of temple-building had begun appreciably earlier, though we cannot say exactly where or when. We can also assume from textual and archaeological evidence that image-worship in Hinduism was present by about the 6th to the 5th century BCE.

Companions

Most deities have an animal associate (*vāhana*) which helps identify the deity and express the latter’s specific powers; this was achieved too by an artistic device that attributed multiple body-parts, such as hands and heads, adorned by weapons and other objects, to the image. There are many stories, especially in the *Purāṇas*, which describe the origin and role of the *vāhana* and the weapons and other attributes associated with the image.

Worship

Other than by forms of temple worship, which include both personal prayer and various rituals conducted by priests, the deity may be worshipped at home too, in a format called *puja*. In its simplest form, *puja* usually consists of making an offering of flowers or fruit to an image of a god at a home shrine. It can also happen by way of meditation (*dhyāna*). *Dhyāna* can include highly specialized kinds of visualization of the deity invoked, in which the deity is often envisaged as communicating with the worshipper.

Another form of worshipping the deity in Hinduism is through pilgrimage (*yātrā*). Pilgrimage is a way of creating a sacred landscape, of indicating that the whole world, including the pilgrim, belongs to the deity and is under its rulership. Through every pilgrimage, Hindus encounter a *tīrtha*, a sacred ford or crossing-point between heaven and earth, by which they may come to terms with this world of sorrows and arrive at the threshold of liberation. Over time, a great many *tīrthas* have developed across the Hindu sacred landscape.”

How to look at Hindu mythology

You may be finding the concept of the divine, or dealing with all these deities, really confusing. Try listening to this Ted Talk, which may help:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7QwxbImhZI>

Bhakti

Dr Rishi Handa^[3] looks at *bhakti* in Hinduism, exploring its common modes, the Hindu concept of enlightenment and how to achieve it, the importance of the Divine Name and the veneration of forms of the deities.

“If any aspect of religiosity can be said to pervade India, it is *bhakti*. In a land whose culture is filled with a plethora of *devīs* (goddesses) and *devas* (gods), it is the foremost way by which Hindus express and experience the Transcendent.

Bhakti is best rendered in English as ‘loving devotion’, but it is much more than that. While common objects of *bhakti* can be one’s *guru* (teacher) and one’s country, this *bhāva* (emotion or feeling) is typically directed to *īśvara* (the divine, ‘God’). *Bhakti* can be articulated through gratitude, honoring of the deities, engaging in formal ritual service to a deity, hymn-singing, reading devotional scriptures, and constantly remembering the name of one’s deity. This list is certainly not exhaustive.

The nine modes of *bhakti*

According to a number of Hindu texts, there are nine ways of expressing *bhakti*. These differ depending on the text. According to two of the key Purāṇas of Hinduism, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* centred on Krishna (also spelt Kṛṣṇa), and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (focused on Vishnu, also spelt Viṣṇu), the nine ways are:

1. *Shravana*: Hearing the Lord’s virtues, glories and stories.

2. *Kīrtana*: Singing the Lord's glories in the form of hymns.
3. *Smarana*: Remembering the Lord at all times.
4. *Pādasevana*: Serving the Lord's Feet.
5. *Archanā*: Honouring the Lord.
6. *Vandanā*: Prayer and prostration unto the Lord.
7. *Dāśya bhakti*: Being a servant of the Lord.
8. *Sākhya bhakti*: Friendship with the Lord.
9. *Ātma-nivedana*: Self-surrender to the Lord.

A little summary...

You might be feeling a little overwhelmed by all of this detail and history. Try a summary from Crash Course:



<https://www.youtube.com/embed/tDEkG5PHv7U>



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1. <https://asiasociety.org/education/ja...e-system-india> ↵
 2. Julius Lipner is Professor Emeritus in Hinduism and the Comparative Study of Religion in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. He specializes in Hindu philosophical theology and modern Hinduism and in the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity. His published works include *The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedāntic Theology of Rāmānuja* (1986), *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (1999), *Ānandamath or The Sacred Brotherhood* (2005), *Hindus: their religious beliefs and practices* (2nd ed. 2010), and *Hindu Images and their Worship with special reference to Vaiṣṇavism: A Philosophical-Theological inquiry* (2017), and numerous journal articles. He is an Emeritus Fellow of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of the British Academy. ↵
 3. Dr Rishi Handa is Head of Sanskrit at St James Senior Boys school. ↵

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3.2: Hindu Resources

“The essence of Hinduism is the same essence of all true religions: Bhakti or pure love for God and genuine compassion for all beings.” – Radhanath Swami

Useful Links

- [Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies](#)
- [Harvard University’s Pluralism Project: Hinduism](#)
- [Alta Lib Guides: Hinduism](#)
- [British Library: Sacred Texts/Hinduism](#)
- [Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life: Hinduism](#)
- [Hinduism in the News: the BBC](#)
- [Asia Society](#)
- [Hinduism: Library of Congress](#)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Middle Eastern Origins

4 Abrahamic symbols representing Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Baha'i faiths

When we talk about the Abrahamic faith traditions, we often just think of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But we should really include a fourth tradition—the Baha'i Faith, which comes out of Islam in the 19th century CE. These 4 faiths have a great deal in common, have common history and prophets, use overlapping scriptures, and come from the general area of the Middle East. All of them venerate Jerusalem as a holy city, and point back to Abraham and Sarah as original leaders who accepted and promoted monotheism.

And yet they differ in ways that do matter. There are varying ways of describing and relating to the divine. They each have prophets and leaders that the other traditions do not accept. The primary languages differ for the scriptures in each faith. Festivals, holy days, rituals—all have developed other ways of doing things, expressing their faith, living their beliefs, even as they continue to look back at the same roots.

We have some materials from the British Library written by Anna Sapir Abulafia ^[1] If you would like to read the entire article, it is at [Abrahamic Religions](#)



Saint Patriarch Abraham

The term 'Abrahamic' highlights the hugely important role which the figure of Abraham plays in each of these traditions. Jews, Christians and Muslims look to their sacred texts to find the history of Abraham and how it has been interpreted through the ages. For Jews, the central text is the Hebrew Bible consisting of the Torah (the first five books or Pentateuch), the Prophets (*Nevi'im*) and the Writings (*Ketuvim*). Abraham's story unfolds in Genesis, the first book of the Torah. Abraham is referred to over and over again throughout the Hebrew Bible as well as in post-biblical rabbinical materials interpreting the biblical narrative (*Midrash*). For Christians, the Hebrew Bible is the Old Testament, the precursor of the New Testament that narrates the birth, ministry, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as the life and preaching of the earliest followers of Jesus. For Christian understandings of Abraham the Letters of St Paul are of particular importance. Muslims engage with the figure of Abraham/Ibrāhīm in their holy book, the Qur'an, as well as in the *Hadith*, the body of writings which transmit the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

The shared origins of the Abrahamic faiths

There are many different Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions concerning Abraham. Interpretations of Abraham reflect the wide variety of beliefs and customs among Jews, Christians and Muslims at different times and in different places. Varieties exist *within* each tradition as well as between them. Recognition of how different these interpretations are and how often these interpretations exclude the other is important if one is to understand the tumultuous history of relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims. Wishful thinking of a peacefully shared Abrahamic vision belies the realities of centuries of bitter conflict and persecution. Having said that, it is also important to acknowledge the fruitful work that has been done in the field of interfaith dialogue over many years. A good example is the approach taken by the Oxford Abrahamic Group, which outlines Jewish, Christian and Muslim perspectives on Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad in order to find commonalities that can lead to fruitful discussions. Just as Abraham is seen by all three traditions to have been a man who put his trust in God, so too must the adherents of the three main Abrahamic religions trust each other enough to be able to engage in respectful dialogue.



Abulafia, Anna Sapir. "The Abrahamic Religions." *The British Library*, The British Library, 7 Dec. 2018, www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/the-abrahamic-religions.

1. Anna Sapir Abulafia is Professor of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall. She has published widely on medieval Christian-Jewish relations. At present she is engaged in a project examining the place of Jews and Muslims in Gratian's Decretum. ^[1]

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4.1: Judaism



a close-up photo of the Shema inscription on the Knesset Menorah in Jerusalem.

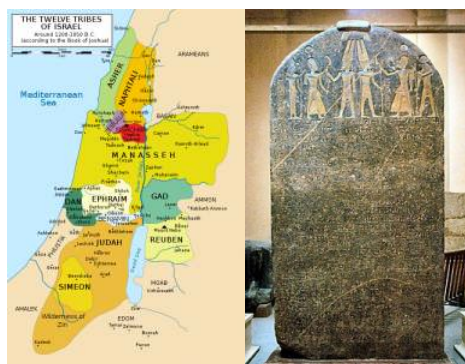
Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion in our world. There have been and are those who argue for Hinduism being monotheistic, and those who point to Egyptian Akhenaten as leading the brief monotheistic sect of Aten worship. But there are arguments against each of these being true monotheistic faiths, and for the most part, scholars agree that it is Judaism that introduces real monotheism—the worship of only one god—to the organized world religions.



Video 1: Judaism Through Its Scriptures. Learn about the key beliefs and practices of Judaism through an examination of its sacred texts and their interpretation.

The history of the Jews can be divided into four general periods of time

In the **first** period in the early history of the Hebrew people included nomadic and tribal life. There are various important events in the lives of these people, most of which we have no real historic or archaeological proof of being factual. These are elemental stories that inspire and show a covenant between the people and God, however, and the point of the stories is not really to be history, but to be inspirational. Early Jews followed various prophets from Abraham and his sons and grandsons, all the way to Moses and Joshua, and the tribes eventually found a homeland in what is now called Israel/Palestine.



This first period is marked with the milestones of establishing first a tribal confederacy with judges ruling, eventually a kingly dynasty, the establishment of a capital in Jerusalem, and the first temple for sacrificial worship. The three great kings in Jewish tradition are Saul, David and Solomon. The approximate dates for this royal dynasty are **1020 to 922 BCE**. These kings might more closely resemble tribal chieftains than European royals, but they were war leaders and lead a united kingdom of the tribes. After the reign of Solomon ended, the nation of Israel divided into two due to civil war, and after this the north was still called Israel, and the south, was then called Judah. The first historic indicator that we have indicating the factual reality of a nation called Israel comes from an Egyptian artifact called the Merneptah Stele, found at a dig in 1896 CE. On this item, which is a celebratory marker which writes about Merneptah conquering various neighboring nations, is found the name of the nation of Israel. The stele dates to 1208 BCE, and firmly establishes some kind of timeline for the nation's existence. Although the texts talks about virtually eradicating Israel from existence, that clearly is an exaggeration.



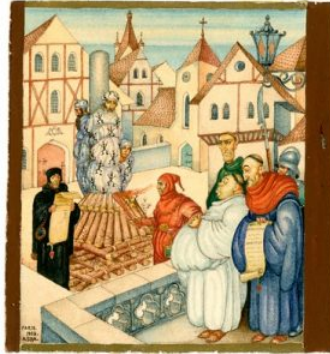
A **second** period began between the eighth to the sixth century BCE when the kingdom of Assyria conquered northern Israel ion about 722 BCE, and then the kingdom of Judah and its first temple were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the people were forced into a fifty-year exile in Babylon starting in about 596 BCE. Although there were many Jews forced to leave Judah, the majority of those so exiled were the educated, skilled, and upper classes of the Jewish people. Peasants, farmers, and those at a distance from population centers did not leave the country. This caused some rifts in the Hebrew people over time, especially when the exiles returned to Israel. This event called the Exile, however, led to the emergence of the synagogue style of worship instead of temple sacrifices, as the people in exile had no temple to use, and prompted putting religious law and history into a written form to guarantee its survival. Oral tradition translated into written materials, and we see psalms, the Torah, and other bits of writing coming from that era.

A second temple was eventually built in Jerusalem when the exiles were allowed to return home to Israel from Babylon. They began writing down in more permanent form what is now the first half of the Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures. Influences from the surrounding cultures entered into Jewish life both before and after this era. From the Babylonians came Zoroastrian ideas, such as the dualism of heaven and hell, and later the appeal of Hellenistic/Greek culture impacted Jewish worship and practice. Tensions arose because of differing ideas and practices in Judaism, and the differences between accepting and rejecting of these foreign influences led to the rise of Jewish factions after 165 BCE. These groups included the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, and the Essenes, who assembled the Dead Sea Scrolls. This period also saw the growth of the Diaspora, Jewish communities established outside the land of Israel.



The **third** period was initiated in the Common Era when the second temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, as they violently put down a Jewish rebellion against the Roman occupation of Jewish land. This destruction of both the city and the temple ended the power of the temple priesthood, as sacrificial rituals were no longer possible, and forced the religion to move toward a greater focus on scripture. The Hebrew canon (the established list of books in the Hebrew scriptures) was finalized and

commentaries about them were written in the next several hundred years. Classical Judaism and traditional Jewish life were also established during this time. Great communities of Jewish people in the Diaspora (non-Israeli lands) both flourished and endured persecution, mainly at the hands of European Christians. Considered “Christ Killers” by the Catholic and eventually Protestant churches, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Pogroms, and much general restriction and persecution took place during the entire Christian Era (post 30 CE). The Nazi era was actually preceded by hundreds of years of killing, persecution and hatred aimed at the Jewish people.



The **fourth** and final period, called the Reform Period, began in about 1800 CE as a response to the European Enlightenment. It was a time to question and modernize traditional Judaism, and it helped produce diverse branches within Judaism today, which hold differing views on Jewish identity and practice. The standard branches of Judaism came to be—the Orthodox, the Conservative, and coming out of the more academic and liberal wing of Judaism, the Reform Jews. These three became identifiable branches of the faith, with the Reconstructionist Jewish group coming about in the late 20th century CE. Centuries of persecution reached a climax with the Holocaust under the reign of Adolf Hitler. One-third of all Jews in the world were killed. Shortly after the end of World War II, the nation of Israel was born. Zionism, which is the concept of returning Jews to a Jewish homeland in what had been historic Israel, was born in the 3rd period, and came to full fruition in the 4th period with the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948. The centuries of conflict between the monotheistic faiths, between Europe and the Middle East, and between people who had lived in the Palestine/Israel area for many years, and those who immigrated there and bought land has continued to this day.



Judaism and their Sacred Texts

Judaism is often associated with its most important writings. The Hebrew Bible contains a variety of material that records interactions and responses between the people and a God who is portrayed in complex ways, perhaps reflecting different ancient traditions that were ultimately combined. The scriptures are divided into three parts.

First is the **Torah**, the sacred core of five books containing stories of the Creation, Adam and Eve, a Great Flood, the Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs, and Moses, the great liberator and lawgiver. It includes laws about religious ritual and daily conduct, including the Ten Commandments.



Video: Discovering Sacred Texts: Judaism

The Torah

We look at the major scripture of Judaism—the Torah—with assistance from Maryanne Saunders^[1], writing for the British Library. The entire text of the article on the Torah can be read here at [The Torah](#):



Jewish boy holding a scroll with the names of Holocaust death camps and slave labor camps at his Bar Mitzvah.

Torah (תורה) in Hebrew can mean teaching, direction, guidance and law. The most prominent meaning for Jews is that the Torah constitutes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (also called the Pentateuch, ‘five books’ in Greek), traditionally thought to have been composed by Moses. These sacred texts are written on a scroll and kept in a synagogue. Sometimes the word Torah is used to refer to the whole Hebrew Bible (or *Tanakh*) which additionally contains *Nevi'im* (נביאים), which means Prophets, and *Ketuvim* (כתובים) meaning Writings. Torah can also refer to wider scriptural commentaries (*Talmud*) and even all Jewish religious knowledge. It is in this sense that Jews will often speak of the importance of living a life guided by Torah.

Example: the 10 Commandments

1. I am the Lord thy god, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
2. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.
4. Remember the **Sabbath** day to keep it holy.
5. Honor thy father and thy mother.
6. Thou shalt not murder.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.
10. Thou shalt not covet anything that belongs to thy neighbor.

These five books are the same five books that make up the start of the Christian Bible. The Torah text can be written out by a scribe in Hebrew onto a scroll and used



Reading of the Torah, Aish Synagogue, Tel Aviv, Israel.

in public prayer services or printed in books for individuals and congregations to study. The Torah has central importance in Jewish life, ritual and belief. Some Jews believe that Moses received the Torah from God at Mount Sinai, whilst others believe that the text was written over a long period of time by multiple authors. The scroll must also be written entirely in Hebrew with no vowels or indication of how the words are pronounced. This means that readers must have existing knowledge of the Torah to identify what each word means, emulating the texts and scholars as they were millennia ago. The text within is divided up into fifty-four portions, so that one (or sometimes two) can be read per week for a year, before starting again on a holiday called ***Simchat Torah*** ('Rejoicing with the Torah'). Scrolls are generally required to be made out of animal skins and can take up to two years to produce, mainly due to the rules against erasing any of the words – which means that the scribe cannot make a single mistake without starting again. It was not until the 4th century BCE that the Torah became a holy object reserved for public readings. The text of the Torah would have originally been written down on papyrus scrolls to be studied and discussed by scholars. It is only after the Babylonian Exile in 444 BCE as the Jews returned to Israel, that Ezra the scribe is recorded as having read aloud from the five books of Moses (Nehemiah 8).



Page pointers for reading of Torah, El Transito Synagogue, Spain.

Traditionally, the Torah is read four times a week in the synagogue: at the Sabbath (Saturday) morning and afternoon services and in the morning service on Mondays and Thursdays. Additional readings may occur on high holy days such as *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) or *Rosh Hashana* (New Year). Many synagogues are in possession of more than one scroll, but all are housed in the Ark, a large cabinet positioned to face Jerusalem. As a sign of the sacred status of the Torah, the scroll is often covered with a decorative mantle. As well as being covered, the Torah is not read without a pointer to highlight and direct the reader. Hands don't touch the surface, but instead a silver or bone pointer is used.

The Torah is chanted in the synagogue by the rabbi, the cantor (singing leader) or a person who has been called up to the *bimah* (an honour called *Aliyah*).

Example: Psalm 23

Cantor and senior Rabbi Angela Buchdahl from Central Synagogue, New York City



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIKa9Lk_tbU

Whether there is any musical accompaniment depends on the denomination of the synagogue: for example, in Orthodox congregations the singing is in classical Hebrew, unaccompanied and without a microphone; on the other hand, in Reform synagogues there may be a choir, musical instruments and vernacular language used.

Another way in which the denomination of a synagogue may affect services is the degree to which women are included. In Orthodox and some conservative congregations, women are seated separately from men, in a gallery or behind a screen. In these congregations it is less likely that a woman would be permitted to go up to the *bimah*, read from or even touch the Torah scroll. On the other hand, Liberal, Reform and other synagogues allow women to be ordained as rabbis, lead prayer services and sit with whomever they please.

The Talmud

The Talmud is a set of writings about faith, and how to live the law. The Talmud, meaning ‘teaching’ is an ancient text containing Jewish sayings, ideas and stories. It includes the **Mishnah** (oral law) and the **Gemara** (‘Completion’). The Mishnah is a large collection of sayings, arguments and counter-arguments that touch on virtually all areas of life. The Gemara is known as a ‘sea’ of learning, a collection of stories about biblical characters, sober legal arguments and fanciful imaginings of the world of old and the world to come.



Babylonian Talmud, vol XXII, Masechet Sanhedrin, Edit. & Print A.J. Menkes & S. Sprechner, Lwow (Lemberg) 1864

The Talmud developed in two major centers of Jewish scholarship: Babylonia and Palestine. The Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud was completed about 350 CE, and the Babylonian Talmud (the more complete and authoritative) was written down about 500 CE, but was further edited for another two centuries. The Talmud served as the basis for all codes of rabbinic law.

From the Palestinian tradition of Jewish worship came the Ashkenazi rite used in Western and Eastern Europe and Russia. From the Babylonian tradition came the Sephardi rite followed in Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and the Middle East. Both rites, as well as some others, are still practiced in Orthodox Jewish communities worldwide.

Coming to grips with a Talmudic text can be demanding. While it is possible to read a page of the Bible in a matter of minutes, depending on the difficulty, a page of Talmud may take an hour or considerably more to go through with understanding. Traditionally it is studied with a partner or ‘friend’ in order to recreate the internal arguments and make sure that the subject in

question, whether marriage, business ethics, capital punishment, property law or dietary regulations, has been examined from every conceivable angle.

Judaism centers on a way of life that recognizes the presence of God and the holiness of human life. Beyond embracing the Ten Commandments, the most obvious examples are keeping the Sabbath, observing holy days and festivals, and following dietary practices. Judaism is known for its strong moral and ethical orientation and a focus on everyday life that has led to major contributions in multiple fields that serve humanity, such as medicine and law. There is considerably less emphasis on an afterlife.

The Haggadah



The Golden Haggadah, internal pages showing Passover story

The *Haggadah*, which literally means ‘telling’, is the Hebrew service book used in Jewish homes on Passover eve to commemorate the Israelites’ miraculous liberation from hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt. Its text is a collection of biblical passages, blessings, legends and rituals arranged into an orderly sequence. The *Haggadah* is used primarily to teach the young in families about the continuity of the Jewish people and their unflinching faith in God, as summed up in one of its verses:

“And thou shall tell thy son in that day, saying: it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt”. (Exodus 13. 8)

The *Haggadah* has long inspired artists and remains one of the most frequently illustrated texts in Jewish life. Perhaps because it was mainly intended for use at home, and its purpose was educational, Jewish scribes and artists felt completely free to illustrate the *Haggadah*. Indeed it was traditionally the most lavishly decorated of all Jewish sacred writings, giving some well-to-do Jews of the middle ages a chance to demonstrate their wealth and good taste as well as their piety through owning elaborate, sometimes gilded versions of the *Haggadah*.



Passover plate with ritual elements that include a bone shank, an egg, horse radish, bitter herbs, vegetable, salt water and charoset (apple, nut, and spice mixture)

Passover commemorates one of the most important events in the story of the Jewish people. Like Christianity and Islam, Judaism traces its origins back to Abraham. He was leader of the Israelites, a group of nomadic tribes in the Middle East some 4,000 years ago. Abraham is said to have established a religion that distinguished itself from other local beliefs by having only one, all-powerful God – a God who chose the Jews to be an example to the whole world.

The Israelites became slaves in Egypt, after they came there, according to the story of Joseph, because there was famine in the land of Israel. Eventually, a prophet called Moses delivered the Jews from their captivity with the help of several miraculous events intended to intimidate the Egyptian authorities. The last of these was the sudden death of the eldest son in every family. Jewish households were spared by smearing lambs’ blood above their doors – a sign telling the ‘angel of death’ to pass over.

Synagogue Worship and Rituals in Judaism

With some assistance from Rabbi Johnny Solomon^[2], we read more about rituals and holidays within Judaism:



Individual prayer with shawl and tefillin

Prayer is a part of Jewish life. Rather than prayer being solely personal, as we find in some few prayers in the Torah, it became, after the Diaspora, primarily a communal activity; and rather than worship being spontaneous, it had become highly prescriptive. Collective prayer overtook individual ritual worship. Temple worship often involved one person or one family bringing a sacrifice for prayers. As synagogues developed, prayer turned into a primary activity, and focused on the needs of the congregation.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Ezekiel wrote:

“Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the peoples, still, I have provided them with a miniature sanctuary in the countries where they have been exiled” (Ezekiel 11. 16)

Some have understood this to be a reference to the institution of the synagogue. First, while the Jewish people were exiled in Babylon, and later, after the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 CE, there was no way for the people to perform tradition rituals. So during both of these times, new activities emerged.

Since the destruction of the temple, the rabbis placed much emphasis on the value of collective worship by speaking about verbal prayer as a replacement for sacrifices (see Hosea 14. 3), by invoking biblical verses such as ‘in the multitude of people is the king’s glory’ (Proverbs 14. 28) and by stating that while private prayer may not always be heard, communal prayer is always heard.

Various rituals in Judaism emerged. Upon waking up in the morning, a Jew recites a prayer. They then wash their hands in a ritual manner and recite a blessing; even the manner in which they get dressed can be informed by Jewish laws and values.

Beyond additional prayers recited at meal times, the home was, and is, also the place



Complete circumcision set, consisting of knife, enamel powderbox and protecting plate. Knife handle shows Judith with the head of Holofernes in one hand and a sword in the other. This circumcision-set was bought from Mrs. Goitein, widow of the late Rabbi Goitein from Karlsruhe, (Baden, Germany).

for a variety of Jewish rituals, such as the circumcision of Jewish boys that takes place – ideally – when they are eight days old. For girls, naming and dedication ceremonies developed to take place when the baby was that same age.

Beyond this, while the synagogue and the home reflected the different aspects of formal and informal, and public and private worship, a third institution played critical role in Jewish communities for the past 2,000 years – namely, the house of study. The book of Joshua relates how Torah should be studied day and night (Joshua 1. 8). In every village, town or city where Jews lived, the study house would be where Jews (although historically this refers primarily to male Jews) would gather to study sacred texts such as the *Talmud*, or listen to lectures delivered by leading rabbinical scholars exploring legal or ethical teachings.

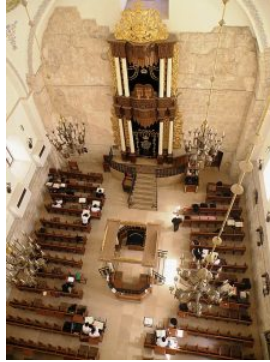
Various community holidays also emerged, as Jewish life become more formalized.

All Jewish holidays begin the evening before the date specified. This is because they believe that a day begins and ends at sunset. In reading the story of creation in Genesis 1, it says, “And there was evening, and there was morning, one day.” From this it is

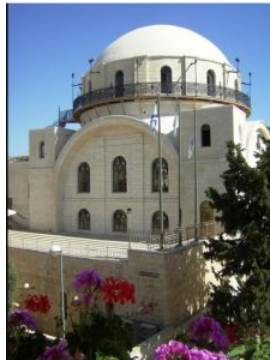
concluded that a day begins with evening, that is, at sunset. In addition, the Jewish calendar is lunar, with each month beginning on the new moon. So the dates of holidays vary, depending on the moon cycle. The most commonly celebrated holidays include:

- **Rosh Hashanah**, the Jewish New Year
- **Yom Kippur**, the Day of Atonement, asking for forgiveness and repairing relationships (see this reflection on repair: [Repair](#))
- **Passover**, the 8 day festival in the spring, celebrating the Exodus—the rescue from Egyptian slavery, led by Moses
- **Hanukkah**, a minor holiday that commemorates the miraculous victory of the Maccabees and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. NOT the equivalent of Christmas!
- **Purim**, the carnival style celebration of foiling an attempt to kill Persian Jews

Other holidays include celebration of harvest, of the end of the year reading of the Torah, bar and bat mitzvahs (coming of age ceremonies for children) and other community activities.



Interior, Hurva Synagogue, Jewish Quarter, Jerusalem



Exterior, Hurva Synagogue, Jewish Quarter, Jerusalem

Many people have heard the term **Kosher**, but apply it more in slang terms to mean “genuine” or “legitimate”. In Jewish ritual, however, the concept of something being Kosher describes food that meets the standards of *kashrut*, which is a set of laws dealing with what foods can and cannot be eaten, and how they are to be prepared. The term Kosher is also used to describe ritual objects that are made in accordance with Jewish law and are fit for ritual use.



Although the details of *kashrut* are extensive, the laws all derive from a few fairly simple, straightforward rules^[3]:

1. Animals allowed to be eaten must have cloven hooves. This includes addax, antelope, bison, cow, deer, gazelle, giraffe, goat, ibex and sheep. In addition, kosher meat and poultry require special preparation. Birds allowed, at least in the US, are duck, turkey, chicken and goose. Fish must have a specific kind of scale and skin in order to be eaten. Pork and shellfish are specifically forbidden.
2. Of the animals that may be eaten, the birds and mammals must be killed in accordance with Jewish law and using kosher equipment.
3. All blood must be drained from the meat or broiled out of it before it is eaten.
4. Certain parts of permitted animals may not be eaten, such as the back half of the cow, some internal organs where removing the blood is almost impossible, etc.

5. Meat (the flesh of birds and mammals) cannot be eaten with dairy. Fish, eggs, fruits, vegetables and grains can be eaten with either meat or dairy. According to some views, however, fish may not be eaten with meat.
6. Cooking equipment that has come into contact with meat may not be used in cooking with dairy, and vice versa. Utensils that have come into contact with non-kosher food may not be used with kosher food.
7. Grape products made by non-kosher processes may not be consumed. This include jellies, pastries, juice and wine.

Keeping a kosher lifestyle and kitchen is considered a sign of obedience, even while some believe that these were early health restrictions, eating kosher is considered a sign of faith. Not all Jews follow the dietary laws, but all Orthodox and many Conservative Jewish people do.



Basic Beliefs

The earliest nomadic Hebrews were polytheistic, believing, as many groups in the Middle East did, in various deities representing different forces of nature such as fertility, agriculture, sun, rain, and so on. Eventually, however, early Hebrew prophets began to speak of just one God as the creator of all. Early Biblical authors gave God names such as *Elohim* (gods), *Adonai* (my lord), *El Shaddai*, (God almighty) and the tricky YHWH, which comes from the same root as the verb “to be,” sometimes written in English as *Yahweh*. God says, “I am who I am” in Exodus, when Moses asks for a name to use. It has also been translated as “I will be who I will be” or “I will become who I choose to become”. This intangible nature of God is part of the both immanent and transcendent nature of the divine in Jewish thought.

Example: one image of the divine



A coin from Gaza in Southern Philistia, fourth century BC, the period of the Jewish subjection to the last of the Persian kings, has the only known representation of this Hebrew deity. The letters YHW are incised just above the hawk(?) which the god holds in his outstretched left hand, Fig. 23. He wears a himation, leaving the upper part of the body bare, and sits upon a winged wheel. The right arm is wrapped in his garment. At his feet is a mask. Because of the winged chariot and mask it has been suggested that Yaw had been identified with Dionysus on account of a somewhat similar drawing of the Greek deity on a vase where he rides in a chariot drawn by a satyr. The coin was certainly minted under Greek influence, and consequently others have compared Yaw on his winged chariot to Triptolemos of Syria, who is represented on a wagon drawn by two dragons. It is more likely that Yaw of Gaza really represents the Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic Sun-god, El, Elohim, whom the monotheistic tendencies of the Hebrews had long since identified with Yaw...Sanchounyathon...based his history upon Yerombalos, a priest of Yeuo, undoubtedly the god Yaw, who is thus proved to have been worshipped at Gebal as early as 1000 BC.

According to prophecy and stories throughout the early parts of the Bible, the God the Hebrews encountered was all-powerful and benevolent, merciful and just. Hebrew writings do not represent God in any visual way, but describe this god as a universal God, engaged in a lasting relationship with humankind and in a more specific covenant with the people of Israel. Various leaders and prophets have spoken about this relationship, and are honored—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel (the patriarchs and matriarchs) as well as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many more.

The ancient Hebrews write in Exodus about the laws that came directly from God. We see this in both the 10 Commandments, well known to the world, but also in the development of more detailed laws regulating Jewish life, ritual, and worship. According to the Hebrew people, God is not abstract or distant, but is actively involved in history through revelation and as the people do or do not live out their covenant with God. Throughout Jewish history, the common thread has been God’s relationship with humanity. It is a covenant based on centuries of tradition, belief and ritual.

There is a belief in the existence of human free will, which is what determines good and evil, and this idea leads ultimately to a belief in human freedom and dignity.

Judaism is not a missionary religion. It accepts converts, but it is up to individual congregations and their process as to how that would work.

Traditionally, the Jewish people live in expectation of the coming of a Messianic Age in which universal peace will be established on earth according to the vision of the prophets of Israel.



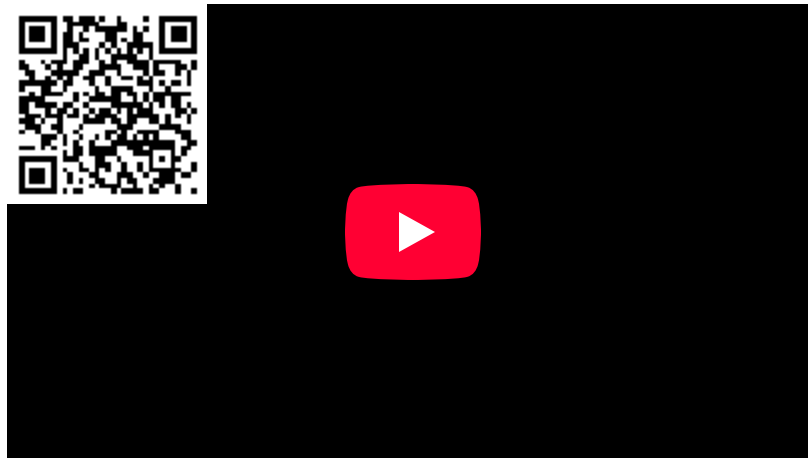
The Samaritan's logo: Shma Israel in Samaritan ancient letters (kind of ancient Hebrew). Shaped as flame

One is judged by one's actions—one lives the faith and tradition by deeds, not by claiming a creed of any sort. The basic statement of faith is the Shema—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One". Shema means, literally, "listen, heed, hear and do".

A summary is stated well by the Harvard Pluralism Project:

"Jews today continue to pride themselves on the fact that the ethical monotheism of Judaism is the basic building block of Western religion. The idea of one God unites broad human communities historically, religiously, and culturally to the present day."

Key Takeaway: One more Food for Jewish Thought



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZ7A34luj40>



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1. Maryanne Saunders is a PhD candidate in the Theology and Religious Studies Department, King’s College London. Her research interest is religious modern and contemporary art with a particular focus on gender and sexuality. [↩](#)
 2. Rabbi Johnny Solomon is a lecturer in Jewish Thought and Jewish Law and an independent Jewish education consultant to numerous Jewish schools and adult education programs. He has written numerous articles about contemporary Jewish law and trends in contemporary Orthodoxy, and he is currently completing his first book exploring the relevance of the ‘Sheheheyanu’ blessing. [↩](#)
 3. If you want more extensive information, this page at the Orthodox Union website will help: <https://oukoshher.org/the-kosher-primer/> [↩](#)
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4.2: Jewish Resources

“I do not want followers who are righteous, rather I want followers who are too busy doing good that they won’t have time to do bad.” – *Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk*

Helpful Links

- [British Library: Sacred Texts/Judaism](#)
- [Jewish Virtual Library](#)
- [Harvard University’s Pluralism Project: Judaism](#)
- [Yad Vashem: Jerusalem’s Holocaust Museum](#)
- [US Holocaust Museum](#)
- [US Jewish Museum: New York](#)
- [Union for Reform Judaism](#)
- [United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism](#)
- [Orthodox Union](#)
- [Reconstructing Judaism](#)
- [Yale Open Courses: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible](#)
- [Jewish Food for Thought](#)

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4.3: Christianity

Christianity



Last Supper fresco from Kremikovtsi Monastery, Bulgaria, 16th century AD

In the beginning of the movement that became Christianity, the earliest followers were not actually “Christians”. They were Jewish, loyal followers of the rabbi Jesus, and, especially at the very beginning of the movement, were focused on reforming Judaism. They talked to anyone who would listen, instructing their fellow Jews on the ideas taught by Jesus, this itinerant rabbi whom they eventually came to believe was the longed for messiah from numerous Hebrew prophecies.

Jesus was born in Palestine about 4 BCE.^[1] He lived life as a Jew, in northern Judea, which had been conquered and was occupied by the Roman Empire. His teaching ministry was, at most, three years long. Jesus was thought to be in his thirties when he was put to death by crucifixion, a commonly used Roman style of execution of serious criminals. His followers said that they found his tomb empty three days after the execution. It is said that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that he appeared before the disciples and followers, ate and talked with them, and proclaimed the kingdom of God to them before ascending to heaven.

Jesus did not write his message down in any way during his lifetime, nor did others who were immediate followers write about him during his ministry. Written materials started emerging in letters and gospels about 25-30 years after his lifetime.

Today Christianity has three major divisions, each possessing its own branches: the Catholic Church, Orthodox Christian churches, and Protestant churches. Within this broad framework, created by disagreement over tradition, belief and belief, are contained literally hundreds of smaller groups.

Learning Object

A quick and slightly tongue in cheek summary of some of the following content:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG55ErfdaeY>

The Ministry



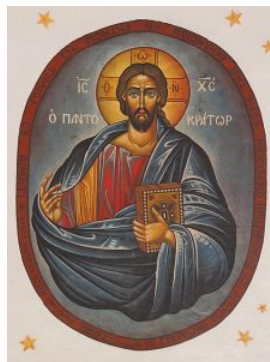
Title: Face of Christ on St. Veronica's Cloth. Artist: Claude Mellan (French, Abbeville 1598–1688 Paris) Date: 1649

Christianity is centered on the person of Jesus. He was alive during a time of great religious and political unrest in Israel, which was a country that had been conquered (yet again!) and was under Roman rule. Many Jews believed that they were living in the “end times” and so expected God to intervene on their behalf, which would include the appearance of a political leader called the Messiah.

Jesus was a teacher and preacher, talking to people along the road, in groups in a field or on a hill or beside a lake. He talked in parables, which are small stories that make a point, a bit like Aesop's fables or other stories—short, moral, and instructive. He is said to perform miracles of healing, of transformation and even of returning people from death to life.

The Messianic prophecies had suggested that they could expect a new King David, a warrior, but also a devout follower of the Jewish faith. Jesus was not quite like this—certainly not a warrior, nor a rebel, nor a military leader.

After his very brief teaching ministry, Jesus was arrested in Jerusalem at Passover time by authorities who considered him a heretic, and even a threat to the tentative peace that the leaders tried to maintain with the Romans. He was soon tried by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Israel at that time, and was executed by crucifixion by the Romans. Three days after he was killed, his followers found an empty tomb. Other followers reported appearances and visitations by a transformed Jesus who had been resurrected from the dead.



Pantokrator (Agios Nikolaos church, village Skopos, Greece). Roof fresco.

Christian scriptures say that forty days after finding the empty tomb, Jesus ascended to the heavens, promising to return again.

The content of the preaching from Jesus and his followers focused on the “great commandment” to love one's neighbor as oneself. “Neighbor” is defined not just as the person living next door, but as including all people, especially the poor, the needy, the outcast, the foreigner, the unloved and societally outcast. He warned people to remember their own flaws before judging others and invited those who were completely without sin to “cast the first stone”, referring to a practice of that era of stoning prostitutes. This acceptance of all into the Kingdom of God was not popular with the rich or elite or the powerful religious leaders, but offered hope to those who felt shunned by their religion, their society, their country. The preaching of a Kingdom of God offered to all was a departure from traditional religious teaching at the time.

The Writings

Virtually all we know of Jesus comes by way of the four Biblical Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the Christian New Testament. These four accounts describe the life and teachings of Jesus. The four portraits of Jesus were recorded some time after

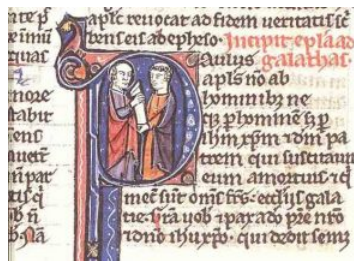
his death, with estimates of dates of writing being between 65-100 AD, more than a generation after the death of Jesus. Each gospel reflects the distinctive viewpoints and culture of the individual writers. Jesus is portrayed as a Jew accepting the practices and authority of his Jewish tradition, preaching from the prophets and writings of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus centers his teaching on the subject of the Kingdom of God. He emphasizes love for God and love and compassion for other people. He recommends not judging others, giving help to the needy and oppressed, offering forgiveness, and practicing nonviolence. The writers turned oral stories and teachings into written materials in the genre called a gospel.



Four Evangelists, miniatures from the Gelati (Georgia) Gospels, Eleventh century.

Originally there were many gospels, few of which were included in the Bible. We know of some of these gospels that did not become part of the canon (the accepted authoritative list of Biblical books), such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Peter, various infancy Gospels, some gospels mentioned by early church writers that no longer exist in any written format, gospels from the Gnostics, and fragments of many more. What we can actually know about the ministry and person of Jesus and his followers is limited to what writers created from oral transmission, and that still exist in some form today.

The small group of Jesus' followers were inspired to travel and create communities of believers throughout the Mediterranean world and, eventually, throughout the rest of the world. It was in Antioch, now in Turkey, that they were first called "Christians". Some of the traveling preachers wrote encouragement, instruction and correction to a number of these small congregations, and these letters, which are found in



Beginning of the New Testament Epistle to Galatians translated from Greek into Latin. An illuminated manuscript, in the picture Apostle Paul hands his Epistle to a Galatian

the Christians scriptures under the genre of Epistle, are considered the earliest indications of the movement that would come to be called the Christian church. A man named Paul wrote many of the letters, but some of the letters are titled but unattributed, and some bear the name of someone else who was well known in the early churches. These were likely not actually written by that leader, but just written under those important names, to lend authority to the messages contained within.

Paul is largely responsible for the spread of belief in Jesus as messiah beyond the Jewish world through his extensive travels and powerful letters. Because of Paul's leadership, the early church finally decided that converts to the Christian faith did not have to observe Jewish religious laws. Gentiles were then accepted as believers in the communities around the Mediterranean.



Apostle Paul, Rembrandt

In Paul's view, a right relationship with God came only through faith in Jesus. Following moral rules was done willingly out of gratitude for what God had accomplished through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Essentially, Paul's views on the meaning of Jesus, morality, and Christian practice became the norm for most of the Christian world. Paul's ideas are still sometimes preached more frequently than those of Jesus.

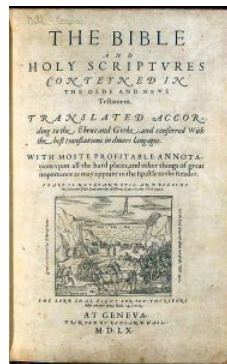


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X5StCk6nDY>

With help from Scott McKendrick^[2], we see some of the history and content of the Christian Bible. Christians use both the Hebrew Scriptures (which they call the Old Testament, as opposed to the Jewish term Tanakh for these writings) and the writings of the first and early second century church leaders, called the New Testament.

The Christian Bible has had a long and complex genesis. The term 'bible' is derived from the Greek word βιβλία (books), which in turn is based on the Greek word for papyrus (βύβλος or βίβλος). (Throughout antiquity papyrus was the principal material from which books were made.) As reflected in its name, the Christian Bible is a book made up of many books, incorporating a large number of Jewish scriptures as its first section, known as the Old Testament (derived from the Latin word *testamentum*, in the sense of dispensation or covenant), and a smaller corpus of Christian texts as its second section, the New Testament. Although the Christian Church regards both Testaments as inspired, it also holds as a fundamental doctrine that the New Testament bears witness to the fulfilment of the Old.

Early Christians adopted a Greek version of the Jewish scriptures that had been produced for Jews residing in Egypt and other Greek-speaking territories, who were less familiar with Hebrew. Known as the Septuagint ('seventy' in Latin), this translation was traditionally attributed to seventy or so scholars working in Alexandria for Ptolemy II Philadelphus (308–246 CE). The Septuagint has at its heart the three key elements of Jewish scripture. The first, the Torah, is traditionally ascribed to Moses and comprises the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy. The second is the twenty-one books of the Prophets, including the twelve Minor Prophets. The third, the Writings, comprises thirteen assorted books: the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles 1–2. The shaping of these thirty-nine books had evolved over nearly a millennium.



Geneva Bible 1560

The Septuagint also contains several texts that are excluded from the canon of Jewish scripture, most notably Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Baruch and the two books of Maccabees. These texts were thus accepted by early Christians, who developed their canon based on the Greek rather than the Hebrew version of the Jewish scriptures. When St Jerome (c. 342–420 CE) undertook the translation of the Bible into Latin, he advocated that the Church follow the Jewish canon, and designated these extra texts as Apocrypha (from ἀπόκρυφος, hidden). Because the Protestant reformers of the 16th century used copies of the Jewish Hebrew canon of Scripture as the basis for their translations, these texts either do not form part of Protestant Bibles, or are included in them separately as apocrypha or deuterocanonical books (from the Greek word δεύτερος, or second canon). The apocrypha do, however, remain part of Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.

Whereas their opinions differ over the Old Testament, Protestants, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians all accept the same New Testament canon. This was formed over a much shorter period than the Jewish scriptures, but similarly comprises several distinct texts. The core of the New Testament is the Four Gospels. The word ‘gospel’ is possibly derived from the Old English translation of the Latin word *evangelium*, which is itself based on the Greek εὐαγγέλιον (good news) and is the origin of the term for the authors of these texts, the Evangelists. The Four Gospels of Sts Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were widely accepted as uniquely authoritative from an early date.



A Bible manuscript from 1300, National Museum of Israel Collection

The other twenty-three books of the New Testament include the Acts of the Apostles, in which St Luke recounts the life of the Church immediately after Jesus’s ascension, letters to early Christian communities or individuals written by the Apostle Paul and other early Christian leaders, and an apocalyptic account, or revelation, traditionally attributed to St John. Although the core of the New Testament canon, the Four Gospels and thirteen Epistles of St Paul, was established by the middle of the 2nd century, the full canon of twenty-seven books was formally confirmed only during the 4th century CE. Until then, some books, such as Hebrews and Revelation, were in doubt, and other texts, such as the Epistle of Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas, were considered authoritative by some Christians. All of the books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek, the language of the predominant literate community in the region, to further the evangelizing purpose of the New Testament.

The Creeds



The Apostles Creed European Tapestry Date circa 1550 –1600 Metropolitan Museum of Art

One feature found in most of Christianity is its emphasis on a creed, a summary statement of faith. The earliest creeds were the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, both of which were eventually validated by councils of church leaders.

THE NICENE CREED

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man: Who for us, too, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried: the third day He rose according to the Scriptures, ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of the Father: He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son: Who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified: Who spoke by the prophets. And I believe one holy, Christian, and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead and life of the age to come.

Amen.

The Council of Nicaea, held in 325 CE, was the most important of these early church councils. In some groups (understandable given the amount of time that had passed since the life of Jesus) some believers had proposed that Jesus Christ was not really human at all, but was God appearing to be human, while others had proposed that he was only a human being. The early church rejected both of these views as it worked together to articulate a consistent expression of faith for all followers: that Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully human. The concept of Incarnation was solidified—that God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus, who was born of a virgin girl called Mary.

Key Takeaway: From the Harvard Pluralism Project/Christianity

“The Latin term *credo* is often translated today as “I believe...” but it is important to remember that its literal meaning is “I give my heart...” It is language of the heart, a profound expression of commitment, not simply a list of statements to which one gives intellectual assent. When the early church was being persecuted, commitment to the way of Christ was often dangerous, requiring true courage.”

Creeds came into use during the ritual of baptism. Baptisms had been performed in Judaism as a rite of cleansing and renewal, and could happen more than once. In the early Christian tradition, a person would put on new white clothing, and become a Christian by a ritual immersion in water, often a running river or stream, and their affirmation of commitment to the Christian beliefs. Christian baptism is a one time event.

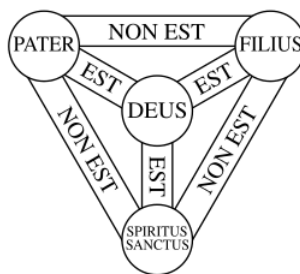
Among the oldest creeds of the Christian church is the Apostles' Creed, formed from questions that were began to be composed about 150 CE and were used ritually at the time of Christian baptism.

THE APOSTLES CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit; Born of the Virgin Mary; Suffered under Pontius Pilate; Was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven; And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; The Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body; And the life everlasting. Amen.

The Apostle's Creed came to its final form in southwestern France in the early 7th century CE. This creed had, through its series of questions, replaced other baptismal liturgies and was finally acknowledged as the official statement of faith of the entire Catholic church in the West in the early 13th century CE. As well as the Catholic church, the creedal Protestant churches accept the Apostles' Creed and use it in worship. (Some churches delete the line “He descended into Hell.”) Not all Protestant churches use creeds. Some use what are called Professions of Faith, and some are called Covenantal churches, expressing their ideas in simpler expressions of faith.

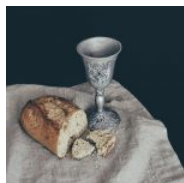
Beliefs



Compact version of a basic minimal (equilateral triangular) version of the “Shield of the Trinity” or “Scutum Fidei” diagram of traditional Christian symbolism, with original Latin captions.

The Christian theology took many centuries to be fully worked out through discussions, controversies, and great councils that produced the central creeds of the faith. One vital idea developed is that of the **Trinity**, which is the belief that God, although one, is three “persons.” The Father is the guiding intelligence that created the universe and made human beings an important part of the divine plan. The Son is Jesus Christ, who has both a fully human and a fully divine nature united in one person. His presence in the world is called the **Incarnation** of the divine. The Holy Spirit is the power of God that guides all believers.

Christians believe in life after death, a resurrection of all people, and a final judgment. Controversies over doctrine and church structure led to schisms in the church, which then produced the great branches of Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christianity—with Protestantism itself subdividing many more times. Christian practice is rich, complex, and varied in beliefs and practices within the different branches.



All Christians practice baptism and observe the Lord’s Supper, with varying understandings of what each practice actually means. Holidays that mark significant times in the life of Christ and the early church, such as Easter and Christmas, are



celebrated. Christianity has had a profound effect on the arts in the fields of architecture, painting, sculpture, and music. Its themes and stories are echoed in much great literature.

Now, people seem to think that Christians, at least at some point, all believed the same things and thought about their faith in the same ways. This has simply never been the case.

According to Wayne A. Meeks, Woolsey Professor of Biblical Studies at Yale University:

“The early Christians put a great emphasis upon unity amongst one another, and the odd thing is they seemed always to have been squabbling with one another over what kind of unity they were to have. The earliest documents we have are Paul’s letters and what do we find there? He is, ever and again, having defend himself against some other Christians who have come in and said, “No, Paul didn’t tell it right. We have now to tell you the real thing.” So, it is clear from the very beginning of Christianity, that there are different ways of interpreting the fundamental message. There are different kinds of practice; there are arguments over how Jewish are we to be; how Greek are we to be; how do we adapt to the surrounding culture – what is the real meaning of the death of Jesus, how important is the death of Jesus? Maybe it’s the sayings of Jesus that are really the important thing and not his death and not his resurrection.

Now, this runs very contrary to the view... which the mainstream Christianity has always quite understandably wanted to convey. That is, that at the beginning, everything was unity, everything was clear, everything was understandable and only gradually, under outside influences, heresies arose and conflict resulted, so that we must get back somehow to that Golden Age, when everything was okay.

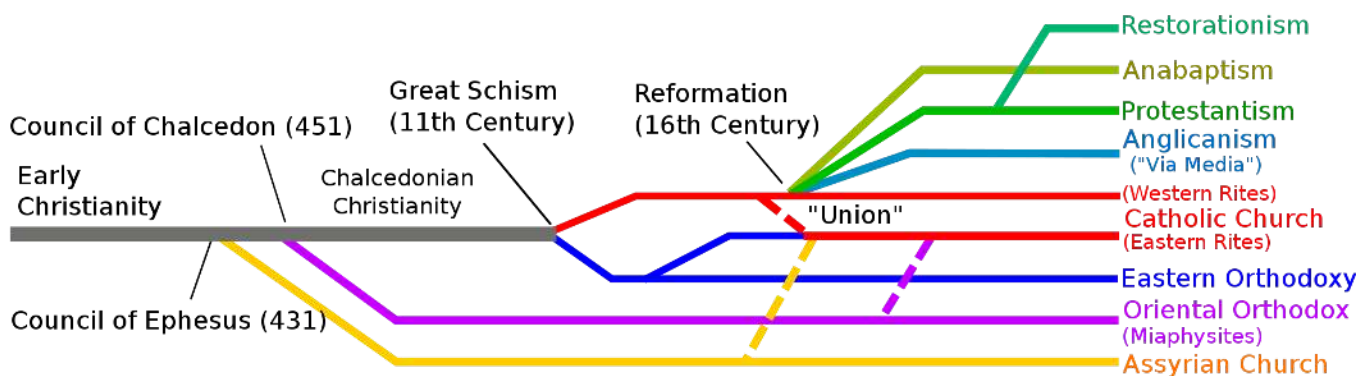
One of the most difficult things which has emerged from modern historical scholarship, is precisely that that Golden Age eludes us. The harder we work to try to arrive at that first place where Christianity were all one and everything was clear, the more it... seems a will-o'-the-wisp. There never was this pure Christianity, different from everybody else and clear, in its contours....The notion of Orthodoxy, which is only the flip-side of the notion of heresy, [developed in the second century]. So heresy which... simply means [in Greek], a choice, and is most commonly used to talk about a philosophical school, now takes on a negative connotation for the Christians. [It] first of all implies a schismatic group, a choice, which is different from the mainstream,... and then secondarily, [implies] people have wrong ideas, people who think wrongly about this or that, notably about the identity of Jesus Christ. The other side of that, of course, is our side, which has orthodoxy, that is, right thinking. The great controversies of the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries, which create what we will know as orthodoxy, and in the west, Catholicism, emerge from this very drive to create a unified body of opinion."

The Divisions

The three big branches of Christianity are Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Churches and Protestant Churches. Each has additional branches within, but these are the umbrella categories of Christians. (There are groups that don't fit within these branches that also call themselves Christian, but the debate over their place in Christianity is ongoing.)

As Christianity moved away from Judea and the small house churches that developed early in the faith, and as centuries passed, belief and practices in the communities of faith began to differ according to location, history, and cultural ideals. Long-rising disagreements about belief and practice between the churches who looked to Rome for leadership and those Byzantine churches who looked to Constantinople (now called Istanbul) resulted in a split that divided the European Christian church into two major branches: the Western Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. This split is known as the Great Schism, or sometimes the "East-West Schism" or the "Schism of 1054 CE."

Major branches within Christianity



The divide between East and West did not stop Christians from their disagreements, however. Many issues continued to cause deep concern and outrage, ranging from the power (and often corruption) of the clergy and the church in ordinary people's lives, to the money taken by the church from the people, to the inability of ordinary people to read the Bible, and much more.

Although there were other early church reformers and group of protesters, it is generally held that the Protestant Reformation began in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517.



Martin Luther (1483–1546) painted by Lucas Cranach the elder

On this day, **Martin Luther**, a teacher and a monk, published a document he called Disputation on the Power of Indulgences, or 95 Theses, and nailed them to the door of the cathedral there. The document was a series of 95 ideas about Christianity that he challenged the church to consider.

Following Luther at about the same time period came people such as John Calvin, William Tyndale, Huldreich Zwingli, John Knox, and many more. From this early start come Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and eventually groups like Quakers, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and so forth. In the modern era, there are hundreds of Protestant denominations, split from original groups over belief, practice, style of worship, politics, dress, social issues, and much more.

Interesting data

There are some interesting statistics about Christians in various groups, across the globe. Check out this data from Pew Research about the various branches of Christianity:

- [5 Facts about Protestants Around the World](#)
- [Q&A: A Closer Look at Orthodox Christians](#)
- [The Global Catholic Population](#)

Growth

The spread of Christianity took place gradually, moving around the Mediterranean basin for the first decades, and gradually into mainland Europe. It is not, originally, a European movement, however. With a little help from Brian Stanley^[3], we get some more history.

Christianity was not originally a western religion. It originated on the western fringe of Asia – what we tend to call the ‘Middle East’. However, for many centuries the expansion of Christianity into the rest of the world was directed from Europe and became entangled with the growth of the great European empires.

The earliest growth centered around the Mediterranean, both the African and European shores. With time, the messages of Christianity moved further inland, again into Africa and Europe, but also into Asia Minor. It was not until the 9th century CE that any major inroads in converting Scandinavia occurred, for example. (An excellent article with more detail about this process can be found at the National Museum of Denmark’s website—[Christianity comes to Denmark](#))



The Christian Church has sent out missionaries from the days of the Apostle Paul down to the present day. In the 16th and 17th centuries CE many of them belonged to the Catholic religious orders – societies of men (and later women) who followed a strict rule of life and committed themselves to the task of spreading the faith. The Society of Jesus – or Jesuits – established by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1534 was especially influential in China. Jesuit missionaries were also active in South America and in the ancient Kongo kingdom in West Africa. Although Latin remained the language of liturgy used in the Mass throughout the Roman Catholic Church until after the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65, some Catholic missionaries were quick to realize the importance of teaching the faith in the languages of the people to whom they were sent.

Our belief in the integrity and value of all human cultures is quite a recent development. From the early 20th century, anthropologists have taught us to try to understand all societies in their own terms. Before then, Europeans believed that all peoples could be placed somewhere along a single spectrum from primitive superstition to modern civilization and rational ways of thinking. Such ideas profoundly influenced Christian missionaries, who frequently assumed that part of their job was to move people along the spectrum so that they would become civilized.



A good example is provided by the Puritans who emigrated to North America in the early 17th century CE. The Puritans made strenuous efforts to bring the gospel to the indigenous inhabitants of the New England colonies. Like other Europeans of the time, their most notable missionary, John Eliot (1604–1690 CE), believed that they needed to be taught the principles of ‘civilization’, which meant persuading them to exchange their nomadic pattern of life for a settled existence under European supervision. Such attempts to reform the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous peoples proved misguided, as they increased their vulnerability to European diseases, to which they had no resistance.

The Protestant churches that were formed as a result of the 16th-century Reformation lagged behind the Catholics in their involvement in overseas mission, though the efforts of the New England Puritans were a notable exception. John Wesley (1703–1791), the Anglican clergyman who became the founder of Methodism, is another example from a century later.

The legacy of Christian missionaries is mixed. Christians outside Europe may remember them with affection as their spiritual fathers and mothers. However, in Europe some find their forebears’ unquestioning confidence in their own religious beliefs disturbing. Perhaps the most lasting cultural impact of the missionaries has come through their contributions to Bible translation and education. By translating the Bible into the language of a non-European people, missionaries had to become pupils, learning the finer points of a local language from indigenous teachers.



The ten first of the Salvation Army’s selected Swedish missionaries to India, together with two Indian captains, during a farewell meeting in Stockholm on 13 September 1887

They had to express Christian doctrines using the terms already available in that language – and that meant allowing Western ideas of Christianity to be modified by the cultural assumptions that shaped the language. What’s more, by giving a people education, missionaries not only taught them Christian beliefs, they also gave them tools that they could put to any purpose they wished.

But the motivation of the missionaries, while perhaps at times well intentioned, was so focused on the urge to convert all people to Christian European practices and belief that there was a devastating effect on the health, cultures and societies of people across the globe.

Some excellent materials on American Christianity can be found in this article and this interview. Both offer insightful commentary on how Christianity has impacted American policies, life and history, and what is happening with Christianity in America more recently.

- [Martin Marty on America's Changing Religious Landscape](#)
- [Charles Lippy on Christianity in America](#)

Knowing something about the setting of the origins of the faith, the basic beliefs, the traditional practices, and the ongoing developments help all understand the enormous impact of Christianity on our world.

Learning Summary

If you have time, you might enjoy the very fine production from PBS's Frontline on "From Jesus to Christ", which is released on line in 2 segments, both almost 2 hours long.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/showsreligion/>



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crashcourse. "Christianity from Judaism to CONSTANTINE: Crash Course World History #11." *Crash Course World History*, 5 Apr. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG55ErfdaeY.

1. early calendars in the Common or Christian era were based on approximate guesses as to the date of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and are judged to be slightly off ↩
2. Dr Scot McKendrick is Head of Western Heritage Collections at the British Library. His recent publications include *Codex Sinaiticus: New Perspectives on the Ancient Biblical Manuscript* (BL Pubs, 2015) and *The Art of the Bible: Illuminated Manuscripts from the Medieval World* (Thames and Hudson, 2016). ↩
3. Brian Stanley is Professor of World Christianity in the School of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh. He has published widely on the history of the missionary movement and its offspring – what is now called 'world Christianity'. His most recent book is *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton University Press, 2018). ↩

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4.4: Christian Resources

19

Christian Resources



“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.”
Martin Luther

Helpful Links

[British Library: Sacred Texts/Christianity](#)

[Harvard University’s Pluralism Project: Christianity](#)

[The Vatican](#)

[Orthodox Church in America](#)

[Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#)

[The Church of England](#)

[Alta Lib Guides: Christianity](#)

[Links to various Christian resources from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill](#)

[Open Yale Courses: Introduction to New Testament History and Literature](#)

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4.5: Islam



Muslim calligraphy

Islam is an Arabic word which means “submit.” Islam is described as being a way of living one’s life that is centered around submitting to God’s will and plan. A Muslim is one who attempts to live their life according to the ideas that God has made plain in the Qur’an, the revelation from God to Muhammad, the final prophet. The Arabic word for God is Allah, and Muslim people in all cultures and in all languages still use the Arabic to identify and call on their divine.

Like the other Abrahamic traditions, Christianity and Judaism, Islam originated in the Middle East, but is now a global faith. There are more than one billion Muslims living all over the globe. According to Muslims, Allah’s final prophet and messenger was Muhammad, and Allah’s final word the Qur’an. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, communities of Muslims have been following the path of Islam in many cultural contexts.

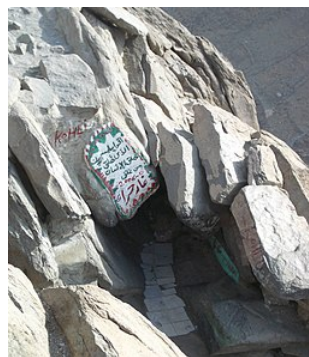
Try this!

Take this quiz from the Pew Research Center and test your knowledge of Islam. Once you have taken it, it will give you statistics comparing you to others in the US:

[Muslims and Islam](#)

The beginnings

Born in the city of Mecca on the Arabian peninsula, a man named Muhammad was born in 570 CE to a powerful tribe, the Quraish, who were merchants. He was raised an orphan in his uncle’s house. He married an older woman, the widow Khadijah, for whom he had worked in the caravan trade as a merchant. Muhammad performed devotions each year on Mount Hira, outside of Mecca. The year he was 40 years old, he began a series of visions that would change his life, and change the world.



Cave at Hira, near Mecca

One year, Muhammad reported having a strange encounter during his devotions. The angel Gabriel, ((*Jibra’il* in Arabic)) commanded him, “Recite!” Twice Muhammad asked, “Recite what?” After he had asked this three times, the angel replied: “Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know.” (Qur’an, 96:1-5).

Muhammad felt “as though the words were written on [his] heart.” He ran down the mountain, but he heard a voice from the sky: “Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God, and I am Gabriel.”

From about 610CE until his death in 632CE, the Prophet Muhammad received the revelations first at Mecca and subsequently at Medina, to where he had emigrated in 622CE. The messages that he received warned of divine judgment and an invitation to return to the ways of the earlier prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. As he gained more followers, these revelations challenged his society. His world was polytheistic at the times, and the revelations to Muhammad spoke of the unity and oneness of the divine being. Meccan merchants were afraid that trade, which they believed was protected by the pagan gods, would suffer if polytheism was destroyed. Tribal feuds were a common part of the social structure, but the Prophet spoke of a universal community, or *ummah*. The revelation Muhammad received demanded social justice and reform: one should not only perform regular prayers, but also care for the poor and the weak.

As his message gained followers, Muhammad was threatened in Mecca. For a time, the influence and status of his wife Khadijah and his uncle, Abu Talib, the chief of the clan, protected Muhammad. After they died, however, Muhammad's situation in Mecca changed.

The early Muslims encountered increasingly harsh persecution. In a forced flight in 622 CE, the Prophet and his followers emigrated north from Mecca to Medina. This event became known as the *hijrah*. The Prophet became the actual leader of all of Medina, establishing order and unity in the town. In 630 CE, after a series of military battles and negotiations with enemies in Mecca, Muhammad returned to the city with most of his followers. Many Meccans then embraced Islam, and the Prophet dedicated the *Ka'bah*, which had been a



Kaaba in Mecca

place of pilgrimage even before the beginning of Islam, to the worship of the this one God. By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 CE, much of the Arabian peninsula had embraced Islam.

When Muhammad died he had not named a successor to lead the Muslims as they expanded across Arabia and into Africa. One faction, the Shi'a, believed that only individuals directly descended from the Prophet could lead the Muslim community righteously. They thought that 'Ali, Muhammad's closest surviving blood male relative, should be their next leader. The other faction, the Sunnis, believed that the Prophet's successor should be determined by a consensus of the followers, and so they successively elected three of his most trusted companions, commonly referred to as the Rightly Guided Caliphs (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman), as leaders of the Muslim community; 'Ali succeeded them as the fourth caliph.

Today Islam remains divided, largely, into Sunni and Shi'a branches. Sunnis revere all four caliphs, while Shi'as regard 'Ali as the first caliph. The division between these two groups, based on their ideas about proper leadership for the people of Islam, has resulted in differences in worship as well as varied political and religious views. Sunnis are in the majority and occupy most of the Muslim world such as Syria, Egypt, Yemen and large majorities in southeast Asia, while Shi'a populations are concentrated in Iran and Iraq, with large numbers in Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait, Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Key Takeaway

To quote Harvard's Pluralism Project: "Most Muslims are careful to insist, however, that "Muhammad is no more than a messenger" (Qur'an 3:144), and not a divine being. When Muslims refer to the Prophet Muhammad, to show reverence, his name is often followed by the phrase "salla llahu alayhi wa sallam" meaning "May the prayers and peace of God be upon him." In writing, this may be abbreviated as (sa), SAW, or PBUH meaning "peace be upon him," while in other cases the calligraphic Arabic form is written."

5 Pillars of Islam

The Five Pillars are the core beliefs and practices of Islam:

- **Profession of Faith (shahada)** The belief that "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" is central to Islam. Saying this once, with sincere conviction, is what makes one a Muslim.

- **Prayer (salat)** Prayers happens at least 5 times a day and specified times. This can be literally anywhere, as the belief is that holy space is created where one is when one prays. These prayers happen at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and after dark. Prayer includes a recitation of the opening chapter (*sura*) of the Qur'an, and is sometimes performed on a small rug or mat used expressly for this purpose.
- **Alms (zakat)** A fixed percentage of one's excess income must be given to the poor and needy. This can be done in a variety of ways and for a variety of causes, ranging from feeding the poor to building a library. The rate of zakat is generally 2.5 percent of annual accumulated wealth, including savings and nonessential property.
- **Fasting (sawm)** Fasting happens during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan. This includes abstaining from food, drink, and sex. During Ramadan they share the hunger and thirst of the needy as a reminder of the religious duty to help those less fortunate.
- **Pilgrimage (hajj)** At least once in the life of each Muslim whose health and finances permit, one is required to go to Mecca on hajj. The men then receive a title of Hajji, and women Hajja.

Exercise: watch a clip from National Geographic about the Hajj



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM81wroj_MQ

Beliefs

Diverse traditions within Islam have different interpretations of the Qur'an, the Hadith (teachings of Prophet Muhammad), and views on designating leadership within Islam. The main branches of the tradition are: Sunni, Shi'a, and one that connects at times with both, the Sufi movement. All agree on most beliefs, but the differences in practice are real.

1. The Oneness of God

About Allah



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05b1BwNvqCk>

2. Belief in Angels

Angels, “Malaikah” in Arabic, are beings made of light who make plain God’s commands and plan for humanity. Islam claims a function for a number of angels, including Mika’il, (known in the west as Michael), who is believed to guard places of worship and reward people’s good deeds. As the Angel of Mercy, he asks Allah to forgive people’s sins. It is believed that both the Angel Jibril and the Angel Mika’il will be present on the Day of Judgment. Another angel is Izra’il, also known as the Angel of Death, who takes the souls at the time of death,. Raqib and ‘Atid record the deeds of every person, both good and bad, and Munkar and Nakir will question the soul after death. The most important function however, is that of the archangel Jibril, (also known as Gabriel in the west), who conveyed God’s revelations to divinely chosen persons known as prophets.

“The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and [so have] the believers. All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers, [saying], ‘We make no distinctions between any of His messengers.’ And they say, ‘We hear and obey. [We seek] your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the [final] destination.’” (Qur’an 2:285)

3. Divine Revelation



Nagel Quran, 4th century Anno Hegirae, Nagel village, Hawraman-Kurdistan

Allah is beyond being directly perceived by humans, so over time angels have conveyed the commands and desires of Allah to all of the prophets, and these prophets spread theses ideas and commands to the rest of humanity. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was given the Qur’an by Jibril, , previous prophets were also given revelations from God: the Scrolls to Abraham, the Torah to Moses, the Psalms to David, and the Gospel to Jesus. However, since the Qur’an is considered the final scripture and final words for all of humanity, it supersedes all previous revelations and writings until the Day of Resurrection. Memorizing parts or the entirety of the Qur’an is an activity that is encouraged and is common for most Muslims. **Hafiz** is a title in Islam, which is used for someone who has completely memorized the Qur’an.

4. Prophets and Messengers



Indigo colored leaf glided tile. Painted over glaze, Takht-e Soleyman, 1270-1275. National Iran Museum, Tehran.

Prophets are people who lived in many different centuries and were required to deliver God’s messages and commands to humanity. Muslims believe the prophets should be respected but never worshipped, however. There are twenty-five prophets explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an. These include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Muslims believe that while prophets are sinless human beings, they do not believe that any prophet share any aspect of divinity. Prophets are examples of how to put Allah’s teachings into practice. Muhammad is considered the final prophet, and it is held that he was sent to all of humanity for all times and places, and with him all revelation is complete.

5. Day of Judgement

According to Islam, every prophet came to warn their people about the impending Day of Judgment; the time in which a person’s deeds will be judged and they will be sent either to Paradise (*jannah*) or to Hell (*jahannam*). Hell is described as physical and spiritual suffering, while Paradise gives joy, comfort, and bliss. Entrance into Paradise earned by following the word given by prophets and living a pious and devout life, while an afterlife in Hell is warranted by rejecting Allah’s revelations and prophets, and living an immoral life. Paradise is ultimately given to human individuals based on Allah’s mercy – a person’s sins can be forgiven Allah decrees this, and no one enters Paradise except by Allah’s mercy . Forgiveness is key to this set of beliefs, and Muslims are encouraged to repent and ask for forgiveness for their sins.

6. Divine Decree



from Library of Congress <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.amed/ascs.071> The first chapter of the Qur’an entitled al-Fatihah (The Opening). Recited at the very beginning of the Qur’an, this surah proclaims God as Gracious and Merciful, the Master of the Day of Judgment, and the Leader of the straight path.

Judgement Day is based on a key belief that all people have been given free will. To some extent, this contradicts the idea that Allah is all-knowing, including knowing each person’s destiny in the afterlife. Allah is believed to be just in all judgment and will do what is considered right for each person at the time of judgment. Each person will be judged according to the free choices they have made. Allah will know all the choices a person might make, however. The contradiction between a belief in free will and in stating that Allah knows and predicts all is generally settled in the phrases like “insha-Allah” (God-willing), and “masha-Allah” (God willed it).

“The Lord has created and balanced all things and has fixed their destinies and guided them”. (Qur’an 87:2)

While Shi’a Muslims generally agree with Sunnis in the aforementioned beliefs, they differ primarily by the inclusion of the doctrine of Imamate.

Imamate

Though the Prophet Muhammad died, Shi'as do not believe this means humans were left without a guide or leadership after his death. The Imams, a group of individuals descended from the Prophet Muhammad's family, are those leaders. They show how to live Allah's teachings. There were 12 Imams in sequence after the death of Muhammad. Although the twelfth Imam died long ago, it is believed that he still guides people and will come again at the End of Times to restore peace and justice to the world. For Zaydi Shi'as, these were five individuals, not twelve, and their leadership has continued with successive rulers. For Isma'ili Shi'as, the Nizari branch holds that the Imams have continued up until the present, with the current Imam referred to as the "Imam of the Time". Beliefs about the character, role and functions of the Imams change with the various branches of the Shi'as.



A 14th century Mamluk Qur'an, held at the British Library

The Qur'an

Islam's main sacred text is the Qur'an. According to Muslim tradition the Qur'an is the actual word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabic language through the intermediary of the Archangel Jibril (Gabriel).

The Qur'an consists of 114 *surahs*, or chapters. The text is traditionally read aloud, as Muhammad was instructed in the first revelation he received: 'Recite in the name of your Lord' (Surah 96. 1). The word Qur'an comes from the Arabic verb meaning 'to read'.

After Muhammad's death, his secretary, Zayd ibn Thabit, compiled the revelation into a book, and the text was later collated and definitively codified by order of Caliph 'Uthman in 651CE. This is the text used in all Qur'an manuscripts, although the styles of calligraphy and illumination depend on the place and date of production.

The Qur'an, the central scripture of Islam, begins with *al-Fatihah*, literally "the Opening":

*In the name of God, The Lord of Mercy, The Giver of Mercy!
Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds,
The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,
Master of the Day of Judgment.
It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help.
Guide us to the straight path:
The path of those You have blessed
those who incur no anger
and who have not gone astray.*

With help from Mustafa Shah^[1], we consider the Qur'an in more detail:

Preserved in the language of Arabic, the Qur'an is Islam's sacred text. It is believed that the Qur'an enshrines the literal word of God. With its unique composition and style, the Qur'an is also considered the pre-eminent literary masterpiece of the Arabic language and one of the earliest extant Arabic literary sources. Its contents, which focus on the theme of God's unity of being and his transcendence, provide the foundations of the beliefs of Islam. Emphasizing the theme of continuation, the Qur'an does not present its teachings as representing a new religion, but rather the revivification of an ancient monotheistic tradition of faith which shares the same spiritual legacy with Judaism and Christianity.

The Islamic literary sources intimate that at the age of forty, while secluded in a cave on the outskirts of Mecca, the very first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel, thus marking the beginning of his call to prophethood.

*Recite in the Name of your Lord who created;
Created man from a congealed clot of blood;
Recite and indeed your Lord is most merciful;
He who taught by the pen;
Taught man what he knew not.*

According to Muslim literary sources, when the Prophet passed away in 632 CE the Qur'an did not formally exist as a fixed text but was 'written down on palm-leaf stalks, scattered parchments, shoulder blades, limestone and memorized in the hearts of men'. During the rule of one of Muhammad's later successors, the caliph Uthman (r. 644–656 CE), a standardized copy of the Qur'an was compiled and distributed to the main centers of the Islamic Empire. Although the caliph's original codices have not survived, his introduction of a



Two pages of the Qur'an by Yaqut al Musta'sim

fixed text is recognized as one of his enduring achievements. One of the oldest copies of the Qur'an, which is dated to the 8th century, is held in the British Library; it includes over two-thirds of the complete text.

The traditional view is that the Qur'an's contents were revealed piecemeal. Revelation identified with the early Meccan years focused primarily on the accentuation of God's unity and transcendence. Early Qur'anic revelation includes declarations about the omnipotence and omniscience of God, the resurrection of the dead, the impending Day of Judgement and rewards and punishment in the hereafter. The theme of personal morality and piety is also promoted, while polytheism and idolatry are condemned. The imposition of a detailed system of ritual practices and laws occurs in the post-*Hijrah* period, while the people were in Medina. Set times for prayer, fasting, the giving of alms, and the performance of pilgrimage were made obligatory by the Qur'an at Medina. A range of legal measures was introduced, including rules for inheritance and dietary guidelines, the proscription of usury, laws on marriage and divorce and a penal code.

The requisite practice of committing the whole text to memory has an extended history, and still forms an integral part of the curriculum followed in seminaries throughout the Islamic world. The preservation and study of the Qur'an led to the flourishing of literary traditions of learning, including grammar, philology and even poetry, as scholars used insights from such scholarship to interpret the Qur'an.

Hafiz literally meaning “guardian” or “memorizer”, depending on the context, is a term used by Muslims for someone who has completely memorized the Quran

Definition of *hafiz*

: a Muslim who knows the Qur'an by heart —used as a title of respect, so “Hafiz ” and then the name.

In the Qur'an, Muhammad is designated as being the final prophet sent to mankind and is hailed as being one of a distinguished line of divinely appointed messengers who were sent to proclaim the message of God's unity. It states:

*Indeed, those who believe, the Jews, the Christians, and the
Sabians – all those who acknowledge God and the Last Day and
perform good works – will be granted their rewards with their Lord.
Fear shall not affect them, nor shall they grieve (Q. 2.62)*

Confirming the shared spiritual heritage with Judaism and Christianity, the tribulations and triumphs of biblical personalities are also portrayed in the narratives of the Qur'an. Teachings on Jesus emphasize his human nature, although the Qur'an upholds the notion of his immaculate conception and the miracles he performed. However, it rejects the claim that Jesus was the Son of God and also the concept of the divine Trinity; the Qur'an also denies the Crucifixion. Jesus is lauded as a prophet to the Children of Israel, and his mother Mary is held in great esteem, even having a chapter of the Qur'an named after her. It is significant to note that in deference to the sacred status of their revealed scripture, the Qur'an describes Jews and Christians as being 'the People of the Book'.

Exercise: watch this!

Watch this video from the British Library on the Qur'an



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_CDBv6CICc

Growth

Over the centuries, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Islam was spread throughout the Middle East, Northern Africa, into Asia, and beyond. Some of the spread was peaceful and associated with trade and scholarship, art and architecture. Some of the spread of Islam came along with the conquering of lands and other tribes.

Muslim rulers, soldiers, traders, mystics, scholars, poets and architects all contributed to the shaping of distinctive Islamic cultures. Across the expanding Islamic world, religious beliefs began to blend with various cultures and traditions to produce local versions of Islam. Not all ritual and practice was the same from place to place, although the stated beliefs carried through. Various dynasties of powerful families rose, and as they converted to Islam, their tribes or countries converted with them. Trade and the travel of scholars had a large influence on the expansion of the faith.

These two brief videos (each about 8 minutes) will give you a map and some indications of where, when, and how the religion spread. Because it was both a spiritual as well as political expansion, you can often see differences in how things happened and how local populations responded to the new Islamic Empire.

Key Takeaway: The Context for the development of Islam–Khan Academy



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB7ya6386iA>

Key Takeaway: The Spread of Islamic Culture



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDSTgKIQAzE>

According to the Harvard Pluralism Project:

Under each of these empires, transregional Islamic culture mixed with local traditions to produce distinctive forms of statecraft, theology, art, architecture, and science. Further, many scholars argue that the European Renaissance would not have been possible without the creativity and myriad achievements of Muslim scholars, thinkers, and civilizations.



“Basic Beliefs of Islam – God.” *Basic Beliefs of Islam: God*, University of Nottingham, England, 26 Jan. 2016, youtu.be/05b1BwNvqCk.

“Islamic Beliefs.” *The Pluralism Project*, Harvard University, 2021, pluralism.org/islamic-beliefs.

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"Discovering Sacred Texts: Islam." *Discovering Sacred Texts*, British Library, 2 Oct. 2019, youtu.be/2_CDBv6CICc.

"Islam Introduction." *British Library*, Discovering Sacred Texts: Islam, 2019, www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/islam-introduction.

"Spread of Islamic CULTURE: World History: Khan Academy." *Khan Academy*, 26 Apr. 2017, youtu.be/sDSTgKIQAzE.

"Contextualization–Islam | World History | Khan Academy." *Khan Academy*, 16 June 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB7ya6386iA.

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1. Mustafa Shah is a Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). His principal research interests include classical Qur'anic commentary, ḥadīth scholarship, classical theology and Arabic linguistic thought. Among his publications is the collection of articles devoted to Qur'anic exegesis: *Tafsīr: Interpreting the Qur'an* (Routledge, 2013). He is also joint editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* (OUP 2019). ↩
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4.6: Muslim Resources



“O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Surely the most noble of you before God are the most reverent of you. Truly God is Knowing, Aware.”

— *Qur'an* 49:13 (ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr)

Helpful Links

[Discovering Sacred Texts: Islam](#)

[Alta Lib Guides: Islam](#)

[Harvard University's Pluralism Project: Islam](#)

[Pew Research Center: Islam](#)

[Khan Academy: Islam](#)

[The Maydan](#)

[Islamic Societies with Ira Lapidus](#)

[Islam and the West with John L. Esposito](#)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Tribal Traditions- Africa, Australia and the Americas



 [Inca Sun \(Sun of May\)](#)



It is really too big of a topic to try and discuss traditions of tribes in this textbook, as not only each continent, but each country, each tribe, and each ethnic group has a rich, diverse, and important story to tell. One can only apologize and say that this is a very traditional “world religions” book, and we have been looking at religious traditions that are global in nature, and which have a more formal organization to them.

However, some attention to the kinds of traditions, rituals, beliefs and practices of our indigenous people across these specific four continents informs us as to how spirituality eventually emerged in those places.

So we are going to look at the North American Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) from the Great Lakes area of the US and Canada. This group has a rich tradition of spirituality, of belief, and of ritual.

According to the Pluralism Project of Harvard University,

One of the few common elements within the diversity of Native traditions is the idea that all dimensions of social life are profoundly integrated. Instead of “religion,” the broader term “life-way” is often used to describe the traditions of Native peoples.

5.1: History, Beliefs, Rituals, Legends

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5.1: History, Beliefs, Rituals, Legends

The Anishinaabe



Pow-wow dancers at Grand Portage National Monument

The Ojibwe, also known as Chippewa, refer to themselves in their original language as the *Anishinaabe*, or “the people.” The term Ojibwe comes from what other tribes called the Anishinaabe people, and means “puckered”, which refers to the toes of the moccasins that the Anishinaabe people made and wore. The term Chippewa is just a variation of the pronunciation of the word Ojibwe.

Numbering more than more than 170,000 in the United States and more than 160,00 in Canada, the Ojibwe people are a network of independent bands or tribes, knit together by a shared language, culture, and traditional clan system, and inhabiting the Western Great Lakes region of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ontario, and Manitoba. The Anishinaabe are culturally related to other peoples of the Northeast Woodlands and linguistically related to other peoples of the Algonkian language family.^[1]

History and Belief

According to oral history, the people who eventually became known as the Anishinaabe originated on the east coast of North America, and because of a series of prophecies, they traveled by various routes to the western Great Lakes area, both north and south of the lakes. These prophecies came to be known as the Seven Fires. The Seven Fires Prophecies make for vivid and interesting listening: [Seven Fires Prophecies](#)

The religious beliefs and activities of the Anishinaabe can vary from place to place, and clan to clan, but are all based on a profound respect for life and the gifts of life.

Beliefs include:

- understanding the *manidoog* (sometimes spelled *manitous*), the spirits, or “mysteries.” The *manidoog* are the sources of life and existence. All things have spirit—plants, animals, the earth, as well as people.
- gratitude to the Giche Manidoo, “Great Spirit” or “Great Mystery.” The Anishinaabe are basically monotheistic, although some also refer to Mother Earth as worthy of reverence. Mother Earth is considered both the physical manifestation of all physical creation, and also of the Great Spirit Gitche Manidoo who created it.
- praying to the spirits is important, asking for health, expressing gratitude, looking for assistance in troubles, rejoicing, naming children, and much more. Prayer takes many forms, but is often accompanied by one or more of these— smoke, drums, singing and dance.
- Elders are respected for their wisdom and knowledge. The clan system reveres these wise ones, and various behaviors indicating respect are part of daily life.
- Women are respected as bearers of life, and protectors of water.
- A key value includes walking in harmony with the world, connected to all parts of the land, with no separation between sacred and secular.

As with many indigenous peoples, the immigrant Europeans tried to impose their lifestyle, beliefs, and manners on the tribes of the Americas. With the Ojibwe, this took the form of removing them from their land, forcing them into individual land ownership and farming instead of communal land ownership and hunting/gardening, and various forms of forced assimilation. For decades Ojibwe children were removed from their homes and sent to “boarding schools” in order to lose their native identities, languages and

practices. Learning about these schools, and the graveyards now being discovered across Canada and the US is crucial to understanding some of the suffering still being experienced in Ojibwe culture.

A story: Catholic Boarding School in Wisconsin

One woman's story of her mother's experience in a school, and the impact on her life, the life of her children, and her legacy. The Atlantic is a subscription publication, but allows for a few free articles a month.

[Death by Civilization: the traumatic legacy of native boarding schools](#)

The tribe local to the the author's home is the Fond du Lac Band of Ojibwe, and is primarily located in Cloquet, Minnesota. Before white settlers arrived here, the band lived in an area in Duluth now key to commercial shipping, and with access to both the large natural harbor and to Lake Superior, called *Gichigami*. More in depth stories about the lives and history of the people who originally lived at this western end of Lake Superior can be found here: [Onigamiinising Dibaajimowinan](#)

The Fond du Lac Band is one of six Chippewa Indian Bands that make up the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. The Fond du Lac Reservation was established by the La Pointe Treaty of 1854. Archaeologists, however, maintain that ancestors of the present day Chippewa (Ojibwe) have resided in the Great Lakes area since 800 A.D. Today, our Band includes over 4,200 members. The Ojibwe name for the Fond du Lac Reservation is "Nagaajiwanaang", which means "where the water stops".^[2]

Local life of the Anishinaabe is seen in many places around the city, including at [American Indian Community Housing Organization](#), at art galleries in the area, both at the University of Minnesota and at the [AICHO Galleries](#), in the [Lake Superior Ojibwe Gallery](#), and in many public parks, as increasingly the debt owed to the Anishinaabe is becoming clearer. Local colleges offer language and history courses, and local authors bring materials to local readers. [Onigamiising](#) is a set of essays on life in Duluth as an Ojibwe.

Lyz Jaakola is an Ojibwe member of the Fond du Lac Band and well known musician in the area. Hear her comments on the ongoing struggle for health in the community, and her composition for healing.

Healing Music: Lyz Jaakola

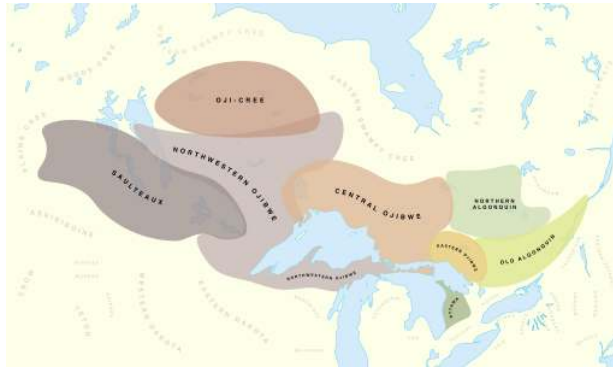


<https://youtu.be/g7zRxLCd9Lk>

Location

Whether one accepts the oral tradition of the Seven Fires or not, both Ojibwe oral history and a number of archaeological finds indicate that these people moved from the east coast to the upper midwest over several centuries. It is well documented that by the time the French fur traders and various explorers arrived in the Great Lakes area in the early 1600s, the Ojibwe were well established as far west as Sault Ste. Marie, Madeleine Island at the northern tip of Wisconsin, and into Minnesota.

One of the larger tribes in North America, the Ojibwe live in both the United States and Canada and occupy land primarily around the western Great Lakes, tribes being located in Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ontario. The Ojibwe tribes who moved into the plains area of North Dakota and north into Canada are known as the Saulteaux.



pre-contact Anishinaabe map from Information derived from R. E. Asher and Christopher Moseley's *Atlas of the World's Languages*, 2nd edition, 2007

Lifestyle

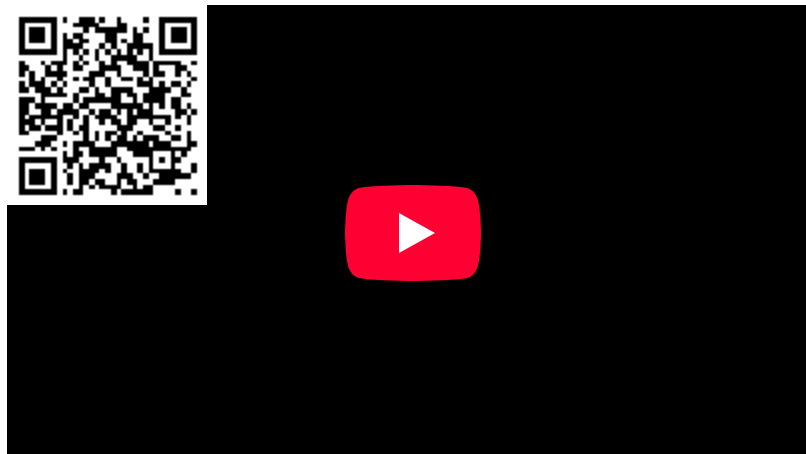
The Ojibwe have historically lived in heavily forested areas, rich with lakes, rivers, and swamps. Activities in their originally semi-nomadic lives have included:

- hunting, usually for bear, deer, moose and various birds
- fishing, by spear, hook, and in all seasons, including ice fishing in the winter
- maple sugar and syrup production
- harvesting wild rice, the “food that grows on water”, which was prophesied for them long before their arrival in the Great Lakes area
- gathering, but also some gardening

These activities continue in modern life, with increasing attention being paid to former treaties that guarantee that these activities may continue on tribal lands.

Example—Wild ricing in northern Minnesota

[Manoominikewag](#)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zs8UyGIL3iU>

Ritual

Various rituals relating to spirituality have developed over the centuries among the Anishinaabe. These may include:

- smudging—usually using one of 4 herbs—tobacco, sage, cedar and sweetgrass—smoke is created to surround and cover a place, a person, a thing, or a situation for purity, cleansing, hope
- sweat lodges—small constructions with heated rocks to are constructed and used by people in a way that causes deep sweats. Adding to this prayers and ritual on the interior provides healing, direction, or other ways of connecting with the spirit
- vision quests—a time of fasting and solitude arranged so that young people might find their purpose, direction
- pow-wows—held for many reasons, these times of dance, eating, and ceremony are a community event for rejoicing, naming of children, supporting sobriety, community health
- drumming circles—the drums speak through the drummers. The drummers allow the voice of the spirit to come to the people through the drums
- sacred pipes—not Peace Pipes, which is a European phrase, but a carefully held and prepared pipe is used for prayer; as the smoke rises , so do the prayers
- Midewiwin (Medicine Lodge)—composed of healers and spiritual leaders, this is a fairly guarded set of knowledge that allows those trained in this knowledge to support the community in body and soul
- gift exchanges—connecting with community through giving
- clan identity—there are up to 29 acknowledged clans within the Anishinaabe people: a little more information can be found here

About the Clans



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iP2_TZYq8Y8&t=2s

And, of course, there are many narratives, stories, shared detail from the elders of the community.

The Anishinaabe Creation story



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Etn92Ms8plo>

“White Earth Wild Rice Harvest- Manoominikewag.” *White Earth Land Recovery Project*, 14 Sept. 2013, youtu.be/Zs8UyGIL3iU.

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1. with help from The Pluralism Project: Harvard University <https://pluralism.org/anishinaabe-ojibwe-ways> ↵

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: European Origins- Paganism, Nordic, Wicca

 Various neopagan religious symbols (from left to right): 1st Row Slavic Neopaganism ("Hands of God") Celtic Neopaganism (or general spiral triskele / triple spiral) Germanic Neopaganism ("Thor's hammer") 2nd Row Hellenic Reconstructionism neopagan pentagram (or pentacle) Roman Reconstructionism 3rd Row Wicca (or general Triple Goddess) Kemetism (or general ankh) Natib Qadish

[1] 'Paganism' is used here as an umbrella term for a variety of traditions including Druidry, Wicca, Goddess spirituality, Asatru, shamanism and animism. Reconstructionist groups such as Heathens, who seek to revive Norse religion, are sometimes included under the heading. This 'new religiosity', including Paganism, is more personal than traditional religions, and individual experience is the main source of authority. Several traditions are drawn upon (many Pagans talk, for example, about *karma*, and may include deities from different pantheons in their practice). There is not so much stress on creeds, doctrines, beliefs or metaphysical truth claims, and more emphasis on rituals, stories and mythology. There is a tendency to be the opposite of dogmatic, including in the ethical realm – the Wiccan Rede (counsel):

‘An it harm none, do what thou wilt’

(though sounding archaic, it was probably coined in the 1960s) being a typical example. Groups tend to be connected networks rather than institutions, and many focus on the divine immanent in nature, linking with concerns about the planet. New rituals, stories and even deities can be created to suit contemporary needs.

A useful discussion of historic paganism can be found here at the American Humanist Association: [A Brief Overview of the History of Paganism](#)

“Humanist Common Ground: Paganism.” *American Humanist Association*, 1 Sept. 2021, americanhumanist.org/paths/paganism/.

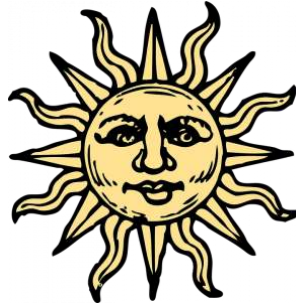
Cush, Denise. “Contemporary Paganism in the UK.” *British Library*, *Discovering Sacred Texts: Contemporary Paganism*, 2019, www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/contemporary-paganism-in-the-uk.

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6.1: Nature as the Sacred Text

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6.1: Nature as the Sacred Text



With assistance from Denise Cush^[1] Paganism is growing in popularity, and Pagan themes and motifs are frequently found in contemporary culture, reaching far beyond those who would consciously label themselves as Pagan. Not focused on a sacred text, contemporary Paganism is mostly a recent creation, and is indicative of a wider trend within the changing religious landscape. The sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead have referred to this movement as a ‘spiritual revolution’.

Example: Ross Douthat—is there going to be a post Christian United States?

The Return of Paganism



The pentacle and the five elements of the cosmos: water, fire, earth, air, and spirit. In some Wiccan esoteric rituals, the wachttowers, the guardian spirits of the four elements, are invoked to catalyze the energy of the goddess.

The two most influential forms of Paganism today are Wicca and Druidry, both of which have various subgroups, and, although drawing upon some elements of older traditions, they are substantially creations of the 20th century. Wicca can claim to be the one religion which originated in Britain (traced back to Gerald Gardner in the 1950s), and Druidry also places much emphasis on British land and heritage. Developing at the same time and among similar circles, Wicca and Druidry (as well as other forms such as Goddess spirituality) have much in common, and it does make some sense to talk of a generic ‘Paganism’ while also acknowledging that these two manifestations of Paganism are the most commonly practiced at this time. Other forms of Paganism might include believers following ancient Egyptian, Roman, Greek, or Celtic deities and rituals. In all Pagan religions, it is up to the believer to decide what the concept of “divine” means, who or what Deity is right for them and how they choose to maintain or express any relationship with their chosen Deity.

One Story: National Geographic



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nPsyZJBTeQ>

Nature as the sacred text

Perhaps the central and distinctive feature of Paganism is the sacredness of the natural world, making it particularly appropriate for a society facing a human-created climate emergency which could lead to the extinction of many species, including ourselves. It could be said that the sacred text of Paganism is not a holy book but the natural world itself. Pagans may be pantheists, polytheists, animists or even atheists but they are united in finding the divine within nature, rather than beyond it. For many followers of Goddess spirituality, the Goddess IS nature, an immanent rather than transcendent deity, not a female version of the God of Abrahamic traditions. Pagans stress the interconnectedness of all life and seek to live in harmony with nature, viewing the current environmental crisis as a result of humans considering themselves separate from and superior to the rest of life. Pagan rituals often take place outside among trees, on hilltops, near [ancient stone circles](#), by streams or waterfalls. Humans are a part of an interconnected community of all life, including all other-than-human beings, whether these are animals, spirits or deities, and actions and lifestyles should reflect this.

Sociologists such as Max Weber spoke of the ‘disenchantment’ of the world brought about by modernity, science and industrialization. Paganism seeks to ‘re-enchant’ the world and restore the sense of awe, wonder and magic. This may sound romantic (and much Paganism is definitely influenced by Romanticism), but this deep emotional connection with nature is a resource for environmental activism, and Pagans have been at the forefront of many protests and campaigns. Many Pagans are vegetarian or vegan to avoid harming animals or exploiting them in any way, whereas others think eating meat is natural but that we should be fully aware of and thankful for the life that has been sacrificed to give us nourishment.

Example: More about Wicca

[From The Conversation: What is Wicca?](#)

[Halloween isn't about candy and costumes for modern-day pagans – witches mark Halloween with reflections on death as well as magic](#)

Other Pagan beliefs

Paganism does not focus much on beliefs or metaphysical truth claims and there is no creed or list of doctrines to which one must assent. Generally, it is up to the individual, and there is a positive welcoming of diversity and pluralism. However, there are a number of shared themes, and these may be spelt out in more detail at the level of particular groups.

Some Pagans are polytheist, with a pantheon of deities; Wiccans talk of the Goddess and the male God; others are more pantheist and talk of the divine energy within all things. Often, as in Goddess spirituality, polytheism and pantheism are reconciled – the many goddesses are, at a deeper level, aspects of the one Goddess. What tends to be rejected is the idea of a deity beyond and separate from the natural world.

Example: About Asatru

From the National Museum of Denmark: [The Old Nordic Religion Asatro](#)

From the Iceland Magazine: [11 Things to Know about Asatru](#)

There is a spectrum of views as to how far deities are ‘real’ or a form of colorful poetic or metaphorical language used to express spiritual experience. It is thus possible to be a Pagan atheist, accepting religion as a useful human creation. Experience, both everyday life and the more numinous/mystical/magical is central. While the idea of ‘revelation’ as found in Abrahamic traditions (communication between a transcendent deity and a prophet or messenger, often eventually written down as a sacred text) is not really found in Paganism, there is talk of ‘inspiration’ and insights gained from interaction with animals, plants, spirits and deities or what Druids call ‘awen’, the creative force flowing through all nature.

Pagans have various views of life after death, such as reincarnation, or the otherworld of the spirits, or the Summerland, or union with the divine life-energy. Other Pagans believe that there is no life after death and that we should concentrate on living this life on earth.

Some Pagan practices



Members of the Ásatrú religion, belief in the old Norse gods, gather at Thingvellir National Park in Iceland.

Ritual is very important in most Pagan practice, and can be simple and spontaneous or a scripted performance. Some practices in some traditions are only for the initiated, but many others are open to all. They may all be described as magic(k), which can be defined as the use of symbolic action to bring about change or transformation. This transformation can be understood either as in external reality, or in our own consciousness, or in both, as for example in healing.

Many Wiccan rituals involve casting a circle, establishing the four directions and the elements of fire, water, earth and air, and inviting the presence of deities or positive energies. Many rituals are designed by participants or adapted from existing sources to suit the particular occasion. There are lifecycle rituals for events such as welcoming new babies, funerals and weddings (‘handfasting’), the latter becoming popular even with people who don’t identify as Pagan. The cycle of eight festivals, found in Wicca, Druidry and Goddess spirituality is well known beyond Pagan circles: Samhain, Yule, Imbolc, Spring Equinox, Beltane, Summer Solstice, Lughnasadh and Autumn Equinox. Symbols include the pentagram/pentacle and the Druid ‘awen’. Stories and mythology are very important for Pagans and may be used in rituals, whether taken from traditional texts such as the Welsh *Mabinogion*, 19th-/20th-century literature, or more recent sources. Some local folk customs (often not as ancient as is sometimes believed) have gained a more Pagan feel in recent years. An interesting example of the use of Pagan ritual beyond Pagan circles is that words from a ceremony composed by Druids Philip Shallcrass and Emma Restall Orr for an inter-faith gathering at Avebury in 1993 were used for the closing ceremony of the [Paralympics in London in 2012](#); the slightly adapted version being:

*The circle is unbroken,
The ancestors awoken.
May the songs of the Earth
and of her people ring true.
Hail to the Festival of the flame
of root and branch, tooth and claw,
fur and feather, of earth and sea and sky.*

Pagan values

Generally, there is a life-affirming attitude, celebrating nature, the human body, sexuality and freedom. The approach to ethics is summed up by the Wiccan Rede – but living without fixed rules can be quite challenging as it involves making constant judgements about what is the least harmful course of action in each context. Important ethical issues for Pagans include

environmental concerns, equality and diversity and social justice, and Pagan theologians and philosophers are starting to explore Pagan ethics in more detail.

A concern: What to do? Can people corrupt your religion?

This is an article from The Atlantic, a very fine journal. You can only get a few free articles a month from them, but they are well worth reading. Try this one:

[What To Do When Racists Try To Hijack Your Religion](#)

Key Takeaway: Values found in most Pagan traditions

Pantheos is a website with some very useful materials, in a general way. It is wise to check the credentials of each author, but many authors on the site are qualified and thoughtful in what they write. ^[2]

[Paganism for Beginners: Values](#)

Pagan identity

Identifying as Pagan is becoming more acceptable than it was in the middle of the previous century, and there are Pagan schoolteachers and members of the police force. The Pagan Federation joined the Religious Education Council in 2011 and the Inter-Faith Network in 2015. However, there is still something of a ‘countercultural’ feel about Pagan identity, stemming in part from its association with witchcraft (illegal until 1951), the ‘hippies’ of the 1960s and various anti-war and environmental protests. Women find the stress on Goddess(es) and the roles of witch or priestess empowering compared to the patriarchal attitudes of many older religions, and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender generally feel welcome among Pagans. Young people identifying as witches or Pagans interviewed by the author found in Pagan identity a source of self-esteem and a vocabulary with which to interpret their experience. They also found that Pagan rituals gave them a sense of control and thus reduced anxiety. Many Pagans talk about ‘coming home’, finding a name and a community that shares the views and feelings they already had. As a relatively new tradition, many first identified as Pagans as teenagers or adults, but as children are increasingly born into Pagan families, it will be interesting to see how the Pagan community (or rather communities plural) develops in the future.

Learning about living as a Wiccan: Don Frew



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUI8ecaYO7c>



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-
1. Denise Cush is Emeritus Professor of Religion and Education, Bath Spa University. Her interests include Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and alternative spiritualities such as Paganism, as well as religious education. She taught religious studies at school and university levels, and religious education in both primary and secondary teacher education. Books include Buddhism, a textbook for A level, co-editing the Routledge Encyclopedia of Hinduism, and editing Celebrating Planet Earth, a Pagan/Christian Conversation as well as many other publications on religious education and religious studies. In 2016 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Uppsala, Sweden. ↩
 2. Yvonne Arburrow has been a Pagan since 1987 and a Wiccan since 1991. She has an MA in Contemporary Religions and Spiritualities from Bath Spa University and lives and works in Oxford, UK. She has written four books on the mythology and folklore of trees, birds and animals. ↩

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