

18 Major World Religions — Study Starters

Religion is a vast subject. Actually, that's an understatement. Religion touches on everything about the world around us, from the explanations we seek for the creation of the universe and our purpose within to the higher power behind these things to the way we behave, treat one another, and interact with society to the values, laws, and beliefs that govern us. Whether you are a person of faith, a skeptic, or something in between, the concepts of spirituality, organized religion, and morality affect us all. They produce cultural constructs, power dynamics, and historical narratives. They can also produce philosophical innovation, ethical reform, and the advancement of social justice.

In other words, religion is so diverse and nuanced a subject that it's nearly impossible to encapsulate all of the world's major religions in just a few words. But we're going to try anyway.

This is a study starter, an entry point for understanding the basics of the world's major religions. We'll give you the quick low down on the belief systems, theologies, scriptures, and histories of the world's major religions. Taken together, these brief and sometimes overlapping histories offer a window into human history itself.

Each of these entries is a surface-level look at the religion in question. (Try capturing everything about Buddhism in just 250 words!) We also scratch the surface when it comes to the number of actual religions and denominations, both current and ancient. There's a lot out there. This is merely an introduction.

Use it to get started on your religious studies essay, to brush up before an exam on religion and world history, or just to learn more about the world around you. Below are some of the leading spiritual and religious traditions in the world, both past and present:

1. Atheism/Agnosticism

Atheism refers to either the absence of a belief in the existence of deities or to an active belief that deities do not exist. This belief system rejects theology as well as the constructs of organized religion. Use of the term originated in the ancient world and was meant to degrade those who rejected commonly accepted religious precepts. It was first self-applied during the Age of Enlightenment in 18th century France. The French Revolution was driven by the prioritization of human reason over the abstract authority of religion. This prompted a period of skeptical inquiry, one in which atheism became an important cultural, philosophical, and political entity.

Many who characterize themselves as atheists argue that a lack of proof or scientific process prevents the belief in a deity. Some who refer to themselves as secular humanists have developed a code of ethics that exists separate from the worship of a deity. Determining the actual number of “practicing” atheists is quite difficult, given the absence of a unifying religious organization. Polling around the world has produced an extremely wide variance, with the largest rates of atheism generally seen in Europe and East Asia.

Closely related is the idea of agnosticism, which doesn't profess to know whether there is or isn't a deity. Instead, agnosticism argues that the limits of human reasoning and understanding make the existence of god(s), the origins of the universe, and the possibility of an afterlife all unknowable. Like atheism, the term emerged around the fifth century BCE and was contemplated with particular interest in Indian cultures. It gained more popular modern visibility when coined by **English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley**, who in 1869 recognized that incapacity of humans to truly answer questions regarding the divine. To Huxley, and the agnostic and atheist thinkers who followed, theistic or gnostic religions lack scientific basis, and therefore, should be rejected.

2. Bahá'í

The Bahá'í faith is essentially a spiritual ideology that teaches the value of all religions, espousing the importance of universal equality and unity. Bahá'u'lláh, the founding figure in the Bahá'í faith, officially established his

ideology in 1863 in Persia (or modern-day Iran). As something of a hybrid of other faiths, Bahá'í grew out of the tradition of Babism, which itself emerged from an Islamic denomination called Shaykhism. (Today, Babism exists with a few thousand adherents, concentrated largely in Iran, and standing separately from the Islamic ideologies that surround it.) Like Babism, Bahá'í incorporates some of the teachings of Islam but merges them with some Christian principles. The central governing body of the Bahá'í faith, a nine-member council called the **Universal House of Justice**, operates from Haifa, Israel. Today, the Bahá'í faith has somewhere between five and seven million adherents around the world.

3. Buddhism

Buddhism is both a religion and philosophy. The traditions and beliefs surrounding Buddhism can be traced to the original teachings of Gautama Buddha, a sagely thinker who is believed to have lived between the fourth and sixth centuries BCE. The Buddha lived and taught in the eastern part of ancient India, providing the template for a faith based on the ideas of moral rectitude, freedom from material attachment or desire, the achievement of peace and illumination through meditation, and a life dedicated to wisdom, kindness, and compassion. The Buddha's teachings proliferated widely through much of Asia in the centuries that followed.

Though its scriptures and traditions inform countless subsequent sects and ideologies, Buddhism is largely divided into two branches: Theravada — the goal of which is to achieve freedom from ignorance, material attachment, and anger by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, all in pursuit of a sublime state called Nirvana; and Mahayana — the goal of which is to aspire to Buddhahood by practicing the Zen principles of self-control, meditation, and expression of the insight of Buddha in your daily life, especially for the benefit of others, all to the end of achieving bodhisattva, or an ongoing cycle of rebirth by which you can continue to enlighten others.

Today, roughly 7% of the world practices some form of Buddhism, making it the **fourth largest of the world's religions**, with an estimated 500 million adherents across both the Eastern and Western World.

4. Christianity

Christianity is a monotheistic religion based on the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity teaches that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah (the savior of humanity foretold in the Torah, the primary scriptural doctrine of the Jewish faith). Christian scripture incorporates both the Torah (referred to by Christians as the Old Testament) with the story of Jesus, his teachings, and those of his contemporaneous disciples (the New Testament). These form **the Bible**, the central text of the Christian faith. Christianity began in Jerusalem as an outgrowth of Judaism that considered Jesus the Christ (meaning “anointed one”). This idea and its adherents spread rapidly through ancient Judea around the first century CE, then throughout the ancient world.

Christians believe Jesus successfully met and completed all the requirements of the Old Testament laws, took upon himself the sins of the world during his crucifixion, died, and rose to life again so that those who place their faith in him are forgiven their sins, reconciled to God, and granted grace for daily living. Christians maintain that heaven with God awaits them after bodily death, whereas eternal separation from God in hell awaits those who neither received forgiveness for their sins nor acknowledged Jesus as Lord.

Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with roughly 2.4 billion adherents, or 33% of the total population.

5. Confucianism

Confucianism was a dominant form of philosophy and religious orientation in ancient China, one that emerged from the teachings of Chinese philosopher Confucius, who lived 551–479 BCE. Confucius viewed himself as a channel for the theological ideas emerging from the imperial dynasties that came before him. With an emphasis on family and social harmony, Confucianism was a distinctly humanist and even secularist religious ideology. Confucianism had a profound impact on the development of Eastern legal customs and the emergence of a scholar class (and with it, a meritocratic way of governing).

Confucianism would engage in a historic push and pull with the philosophies of Buddhism and Taoism, experiencing ebbs and flows in influence, with high points during the Han (206 BCE to 220 CE), Tang

(618–907 CE) and Song (960–1296 CE) Dynasties. As Buddhism became the dominant spiritual force in China, Confucianism declined in practice. And with the emergence of communism and Maoism in the 20th century, the mainstream practice of Confucianism was largely at an end.

However, it remains a foundational ideology and force underlying Asian and Chinese attitudes toward scholarly, legal, and professional pursuits. Indeed, the strong work ethic advocated by Confucianism is seen as a major catalyst for the late 20th century rise of the Asian economies. Today, there are various independent Confucian congregations, but it was only in 2015 that congregation leaders in China gathered together to form the **Holy Confucian Church**.

6. Druze

Druze refers to an Arabic ethnoreligious group that originated in and still largely inhabits the Mountain of Druze region in southern Syria. Despite a small population of adherents, the Druze nonetheless play an important role in the development of their region (known in historical shorthand as the Levant). The Druze view themselves as the direct descendants of Jethro of Midian, distinguished in Jewish scripture as the father-in-law of Moses. The Druze consider Jethro a “hidden” prophet, one through whom God spoke to “revealed prophet” Moses.

As such, the Druze are considered related to Judaism by marriage. Like their in-laws, the Druze are monotheistic, professing faith in only one God. Druze ideologies are something of a hybrid though, drawing from the cultural teachings of Islam, but also incorporating the wisdom of Greek philosophers, such as Plato, and concepts of reincarnation similar to those in Hindu canon.

Jethro’s status as a hidden prophet is an important conceptual dimension of the Druze culture. Indeed, its present-day **scriptures** and community remain somewhat insular. The close-knit communities rooted in present day Syria, Lebanon, and Israel have long been subject to persecution, particularly at the hands of Islamic theocracies. This may be one reason that the Druze, while participating actively in the politics and affairs of their home nations, shield their customs and practices from the eyes of

outsiders. Today, there are between 800,000 and one million Druze adherents, nearly all of them concentrated in the Middle East.

7. Gnosticism

Gnosticism likely refers not to a single religious orientation but to an “interreligious phenomenon” in which various groups across an array of regions evolved to a similar set of beliefs and ideas. A term adapted in modern historical discourse, gnosticism concerns the variety of religious systems and beliefs in the ancient world that emerged from the Judeo-Christian tradition. These belief systems held that emanations from a single God were responsible for the creation of the material world and that, as such, all humans carried the divine spark of God. Gnosticism is dualistic and draws sharp divides between the superior spiritual world and the inferior material world, with the gaining or receiving of special, hidden knowledge (“gnosis”) allowing transcendence from one realm to another. Emerging in the first century CE — in close concert with the emergence of Christianity — gnosticism is perhaps best understood as the intermediary set of ideas shared by portions of the world as Christianity gradually eclipsed Judaism in size and scope.

8. Hinduism

Hinduism is regarded by some as the world’s oldest religion, likely dating back to what is known on the Indian subcontinent as the Vedic age. During this period, 1500–600 BCE, civilization transitioned from tribal and pastoral living into settled and agricultural living. From this emerged social classes, state-entities, and monarchies. The primary texts retelling this period of history are called the Vedas and would significantly inform the so-called Hindu Synthesis.

The Hindu Synthesis was a period of time, roughly 500 BCE to 300 CE, in which the precepts of **Hinduism** solidified from multiple intertwining strands of Indian spiritual and cultural tradition, emerging from a broad range of philosophies to share a unifying set of concepts. Critical among these concepts is the theme of the **Four Purusarthas**, or goals, of human life: Dharma (ethics and duties), Artha (prosperity and work), Kama (desires and passions), and Moksha (liberation and salvation). Other important concepts include karma, which asserts a universal

relationship between action, intent, and consequences; samsara, the Hindu concept of rebirth; and a wide range of Yogic practices merging the body, mind, and elements.

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9. Islam

Islam is a monotheistic religion that — like Christianity and Judaism — traces its roots to the Garden of Eden, Adam, and the prophet Abraham. Islam teaches that Allah is the only God and that Muhammed is his messenger. Islam holds that God spoke to Muhammed through the archangel Gabriel some time around 600 CE, delivering the revelations that would form the **Quran**. This primary text of the Islamic faith is believed by adherents to contain the exact words of God and therefore provides a full and nonnegotiable blueprint for how to live.

The Quran and the Islamic legal code known as **Sharia** inform every aspect of life, from ethics and worship to family matters and business dealings. Islam holds that good behavior and adherence will lead to an afterlife in paradise, whereas disregard for Muhammed's teachings will lead to damnation.

The Islamic faith proliferated rapidly through the Middle East, particularly around the three holiest sites of the faith: Mecca, where an awakened Muhammed made his first pilgrimage; Medina, the center of early Islamic faith under Muhammed's leadership; and Jerusalem, the spiritual capital of the ancient world. In the centuries to follow, Islam would simultaneously produce countless wars of succession and a growing sense of spiritual unity within the Arab World. This dichotomy between internal conflict and cultural unity remains a presence in the Islamic faith today. This dichotomy would also give way to a division between the two dominant sects of Islam, **Sunni and Shia**. Today, Islam is the dominant faith for large swaths of geography, particularly in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and North Africa. With **more than 1.6 billion adherents**,

Islam is the second largest religion in the world and the chief spiritual identity for more than 24% of the world's population.

10. Jainism

Jainism is an ancient Indian religion that — according to its adherents — can be traced through a succession of 24 sagely teachers. The first of these teachers is thought to have been Rishabhanatha, who lived millions of years ago. Jainism's primary tenets are *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *anekantavada* (many-sidedness), *aparigraha* (nonattachment) and asceticism (abstinence from pleasure). These and other concepts are outlined in the *Acaranga Sutra*, the oldest of the Jainist scriptures.

As one of the earliest extant religious traditions to emerge from the spiritually fertile Indian subcontinent, Jainism both shares with and diverges from features of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions that also emerged there. Like Hindu and Buddhism, Jainism teaches the doctrines of karma, rebirth, and monastic (as opposed to theistic) spiritual practices.

Jainists believe the soul is an ever-changing thing, bound to the body only for a lifetime, which differs from Hindu or Buddhist ideas about the soul as part of an infinite and constant universe. This focus on the corporeal also extends to the Jainist caste system, which, not unlike Hinduism, requires adherents eschew social liberation in favor of spiritual liberation. Today, most of the world's four to five million Jains reside in India.

11. Judaism

Judaism is one of the oldest monotheistic world religions, among the first ethnoreligious groups to move away from idolatry or paganism and toward the recognition of a single deity. Judaism is said to have begun with the figure of Abraham, a man living in the Land of Canaan — a geographical expanse likely encompassing portions of Phoenicia, Philistia, and Israel. In the *Tanakh* — the body of Jewish scripture which includes a foundational text called **The Torah**, and later supplemental texts call the *Midrash* and the *Talmud* — it is said that God spoke to Abraham and commanded him to recognize the singularity and omnipotence of God. Abraham accepted, becoming the father not just of

Judaism but of the various monotheistic (or Abrahamic) religions that followed.

Thus, Abraham is seen not just as the first prophet of Judaism, but also of the Christian and Islamic faiths that sprung from the Judaic tradition. The Jewish faith is based upon a covenant between Abraham and God in which the former renounced idolatry and accepted the latter as the only divine authority. In exchange, God promised to make Abraham's offspring a "Chosen People." This Chosen People would become the Children of Israel, and eventually, the Jewish faith. To seal the covenant, Abraham became the first recipient of the ritualistic circumcision. This circumcision is still performed today on every newborn Jewish male as a symbol of that covenant.

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Historians observe that while Abraham almost certainly lived more than 3,000 years ago, literary liberties taken with the scriptures make it impossible to ascertain exactly when he lived. But his influence would loom large in the ancient world, with the rabbinic moral codes of Judaism and its model of ethical monotheism both significantly informing the formulation of law and religion in western civilization. With roughly 14.3 million adherents, practitioners of Judaism **comprise about 0.2% of the world's population.**

12. Rastafarianism

Rastafarianism is a newer religious movement that follows in the Abrahamic tradition of monotheism, referring to the singular deity as Jah. Rastafari hold the Christian Bible as their primary scripture but offer an interpretation highly connected to their own political and geographical realities. Centered around early 20th century Jamaica, Rastafarianism emerged as a ethnocultural reaction to British occupation and oppression. This oppression would play a major role in the Afrocentric interpretation of the Bible favored by Rastafari.

In the early 1930s, a movement of Rastafarians espoused that the faithful were living in an African diaspora, scattered from their homelands by colonization and slavery. To be freed from oppression in Western society

(or Babylon), many Rastafari believe it necessary to resettle adherents in the African homelands. A figure of central importance in the Rastafarian faith, **Haile Selassie** rose to the rank of Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930. This was considered the germinal moment in the emergence of the modern religious tradition. Selassie was viewed by Rastafari as the Second Coming, a direct descendant of Christ, and the Messiah foretold in the Book of Revelation.

Selassie was seen as the man who would lead the people of Africa, and those living in the diaspora, to freedom and liberation. His 1966 visit to Jamaica would become the pivotal moment in the spread of Rastafari ideas and the resultant political movement for liberation within Jamaica. This visit led to the eventual conversion of Rastafari's most famous adherent, singer Bob Marley. Marley would help to spread the popular visibility of the faith, as well as its practices of communal gathering, musical expression, preservation of the natural world, and the use of cannabis as a spiritual sacrament. Today, between 700,000 and one million adherents practice Rastafarianism, the majority of them concentrated in Jamaica.

13. Shinto

Shinto is religious tradition native to Japan. Initially an informal collection of beliefs and mythologies, Shinto was less a religion than a distinctly Japanese form of cultural observance. The first recorded use of the term Shinto can be traced to the sixth century CE and is essentially the connective tissue between ancient Japanese customs and modern Japanese life. The primary focus of Shinto is the native belief in kami (spirits) and interaction with them through public shrines.

These shrines are an essential artifact of — and channel for — Shinto observance. More than 80,000 **Shinto shrines dot Japan**. Traditional Japanese styles of dress, dance, and ritual are also rooted in Shinto customs.

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Shinto is unique among religions. As a reflection of Japanese identity, Shinto observance is not necessarily limited to those who view themselves as religious adherents. Roughly 3–4% of the Japanese

population identifies as being part of a Shinto sect or congregation. By contrast, in a **2008 survey**, roughly 26% of Japanese citizens reported visiting Shinto shrines.

14. Sikhism

Sikhism is a monotheistic faith emerging from and remaining concentrated in the Punjabi region that traverses Northern India and Eastern Pakistan. The Sikh religion came into focus during the late 15th century and draws its tenets of faith, meditation, social justice, and human equality from a scripture called the **Guru Granth Sahib**.

The first spiritual leader of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, lived from 1469 to 1539 and taught that a good, spiritual life must be intertwined with a secular life well-lived. He called for activity, creativity, fidelity, self-control, and purity. More important than the metaphysical, Guru Nanak argued, is a life in which one enacts the will of God. Guru Nanak was succeeded by a subsequent line of nine gurus, who served as spiritual leaders. The tenth in this line of successors, Guru Gobind Singh, named the scriptures as his successor. This was the end of human authority in the Sikh faith and the emergence of the scriptures as a singular spiritual guide.

Today, the more than 28 million estimated adherents of Sikhism are largely concentrated in India, making it the **seventh largest religion in the world**.

15. Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is considered one of the world's oldest religions, and some of its earliest ideas — messianism, posthumous judgment, and the duality of heaven and hell — are believed to have informed the evolution of Judaism, as well as Gnosticism, Christianity, and Islam. Its founding figure, Zoroaster, was an innovative religious thinker and teacher who is believed to have lived between 700 BCE and 500 BCE in Persia (modern-day Iran). Its primary text, **the Avesta**, combines the Gathas (Zoroaster's writings) with the Yasna (the scriptural basis of Zoroastrianism). Zoroaster's influence loomed large in his time and place. In fact, Zoroastrianism was soon adopted as the official state religion of the Persian Empire and remained so for nearly a thousand years.

Zoroaster's ideas finally fell out of authority after the Muslim conquest of Persia in the seventh century CE. What followed was centuries of persecution and suppression by Muslim conquerors, to the point of almost entirely snuffing out Zoroastrian teachings and practices in the Arabic-speaking world. These practices have seen a small resurgence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with some Iranians and Iraqi Kurdish populations adopting Zoroastrianism as a mode of resistance to theocratic governance.

Today, there are roughly 190,000 Zoroastrians, mostly concentrated in Iran, Iraq, and India.

16. Traditional African Religions

Countless **religious traditions** inform the inhabitants of the African continent, each with its own distinct practices and beliefs based on region and ethnicity. Because Africa contains diverse people groups, and their religions remain deeply tied to geography and tribal lands, the continent's history is a tapestry of distinct spiritual traditions. Many share common threads, including the belief in spirits, respect for the dead, and the importance of the intersection between humanity and nature. Also common: many of these religions rely on oral history and tradition, rather than scriptures. Though Christianity and Islam are today the dominant religious traditions in Africa, informal estimates place the number of adherents to Traditional African Religions at 100 million. The following list — borrowed from **Wikipedia** — identifies some of the best known or most prominent of these religions:

- Bushongo mythology (Congo)
- Lugbara mythology (Congo)
- Baluba mythology (Congo)
- Mbuti mythology (Congo)
- Akamba mythology (Kenya)

- Lozi mythology (Zambia)
- Tumbuka mythology (Malawi)
- Zulu mythology (South Africa)
- Dinka religion (South Sudan)
- Hausa animism (Chad, Gabon)
- Lotuko mythology (South Sudan)
- Maasai mythology (Kenya, Tanzania, Ouebian)
- Kalenjin religion (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania)
- Dini Ya Msambwa (Bungoma, Trans Nzoia, Kenya)
- San religion (South Africa)
- Traditional healers of South Africa
- Manjonjo Healers of Chitungwiza of Zimbabwe
- Akan religion (Ghana, Ivory Coast)
- Dahomean religion (Benin, Togo)
- Efik mythology (Nigeria, Cameroon)
- Edo religion (Benin kingdom, Nigeria)
- Hausa animism (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Togo)
- Odinani (Igbo people, Nigeria)
- Serer religion (Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania)
- Yoruba religion (Nigeria, Benin, Togo)
- West African Vodun (Ghana, Benin, Togo, Nigeria)

- Dogon religion (Mali)
- Vodun (Benin)

17. African Diaspora Religions

The European slave trade and the practices of colonization created what is known as the [African diaspora](#). Here, individuals, families, and whole groups were displaced from the communities or tribes they called home on the African continent. The result was the proliferation of innumerable religious groups around the Caribbean, Latin America and the southern United States during the 16th through 18th centuries. Each had its own linguistic, spiritual, and ritualistic customs, generally rooted in their respective histories and their new geographic surroundings. Often, like the traditional African religions they emerged from, these groups shared common threads regarding reverence for the spirits, veneration of the dead, and similar creation mythologies. Though too extensive to name, the following list — borrowed from [Wikipedia](#) — identifies the most notable African diaspora religions:

- Batuque
- Candomblé
- Dahomey mythology
- Haitian mythology
- Kumina
- Macumba
- Mami Wata
- Obeah
- Oyotunji
- Palo

- Ifa
- Lucumi
- Hudu
- Quimbanda
- Santería (Lukumí)
- Umbanda
- Vodou

18. Indigenous American Religions

Native American religions encompass the broad and diverse set of customs, beliefs, and practices observed by the indigenous populations that thrived in the Americas before the arrival of European colonists. The diversity of customs and beliefs represented here is as diverse as the major population centers, tribes, and small nomadic bands that inhabited the Americas for millennia.

Theologies vary widely, representing a range of monotheistic, polytheistic, and animistic beliefs. Also highly variant are the oral histories, principles, and internal hierarchical structures of these different indigenous groups. Some religions emerged around established kingdoms and settlements — especially in the monarchical societies of pre-Latin America — whereas others emerged around tribes that moved within and between regions. Some common threads include the belief in spirits and a sense of connectivity with nature.

Though many individuals and families descended from these tribes do practice some of the customs of their ancestors, indigenous religious customs have befallen the same broader fate as the Native American peoples. The arrival of Europeans signaled the beginning of a cultural, spiritual, and actual genocide, one that wiped out tribes wholesale through violence, disease, and religious conversion. Some religions would disappear entirely. Other religions are still practiced by dwindling populations, many living on reservations.

Wikipedia identifies a few major native American religions:

- Earth Lodge religion
- Indian Shaker religion
- Longhouse religion
- Mexicayoti
- Peyote religion
- Waashat religion

This is by no means a complete list. It is, by its intent, a concise look at major world religions. Truthfully, this subject defies brevity. Each religion or tradition represented here, and the countless not represented here, offer worlds unto themselves, replete with scriptures, histories, leaders, events, codes of ethics, richly drawn mythologies, and unwavering adherents. You could spend a lifetime studying each of these traditions. Of course, **many people do!**

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