

Culture and Civilization 1—World Religion—Introduction

Between forty and sixty thousand years ago, homo sapiens sapiens had come to commonly bury their dead with grave goods such as bowls of food, tools and weapons. They must have imagined that these things would be put to use in some afterlife. It seems that they were religious: that they believed that there was more to reality than the material universe. For as long as we've been fully human, as long as we've made musical instruments and art, probably as long as we've been able to speak, we've been religious. All around the world, cultures and civilizations developed their own religious systems to express this impulse. For millennia, religion wove together the strands of individual and communal life. Until the recent past, it was difficult to locate individuals, much less civilizations, which were non-religious.

How do Historians Think About Religion?

Historians have tended to avoid debates about the essence of religion. Although we may privately be Christians or Buddhists or atheists, when we are speaking as historians, we are allowed to think only about things for which we have evidence. Historians don't know what religion is in its essence, or whether one religion is "right" and another religion "wrong." We can't confirm or reject miracles, or the existence of God, or test ideas about the supernatural. But religion is clearly a powerful force in the world that we can not ignore. How do we deal with it without going beyond our evidence? Historians limit ourselves to thinking about what religious people have thought or written or done. We ask how religion functions in the physical world, how it influences human behavior, how it contributes to the organization of societies and is expressed through art and music. We speak only of what we can provide evidence for.

When a religion makes a claim about history, it does cross over into territory where historians must weigh evidence. Sometimes we will agree with the ancient texts. For example, in the Bible, Abraham, the mythic founder of Judaism was reported to be from Ur, an actual ancient Sumerian city. This was a plausible starting point for a Semite of Abraham's time. On the other hand, although Jewish, Christian, and Muslim fundamentalists teach that the earth is about five thousand years old, historians trust the physical evidence that indicates that it is much, much older.

Historians are interested in the ways that religion structures the human experience. Religious believers form organizations which infuse their beliefs into everyday life by establishing sacred time, sacred space, sacred liturgy, and sacred literature and culture. Let's go through these one by one.

Sacred Time. According to the historian, Howard Spodek, each religion creates its own sacred calendar, linking the present with the past by commemorating each year the key dates in the history of the religion and the life of its community. It marks dates for the performance of special rituals, celebrations, fasts, and community assemblies. Additionally, members of religious organizations create personal sacred calendars to mark rites of passage—the great life cycle events of birth, puberty, marriage, maturity, and death—so that each event has its own ritual observance. **Sacred Space.** Each religion creates its own sacred geography by establishing shrines where miraculous events are said to have occurred, where saints were born, taught, or died, and where relics

from the lives of holy people are venerated. The most sacred of these sites become centers of pilgrimage. **Sacred Literature.** Each religion shapes its own use of language, art, and if literate, its own sacred literature. Sacred texts such as the Hebrew Bible, the Greek New Testament, the Arabic Quran, and the Sanskrit Veda have anchored their cultures for centuries, shaping the development of language, literature, and imagery. **Sacred Art.** Religious beliefs always are expressed through art and music. Some of these, such as the pyramids and the Sistine Chapel, are among the world's greatest works. **The Sanctification of Family and Ancestors.** Most religions link living generations to those who have gone on before. Through prayer and religious rituals, religious people call to mind members of their community and family who have died.

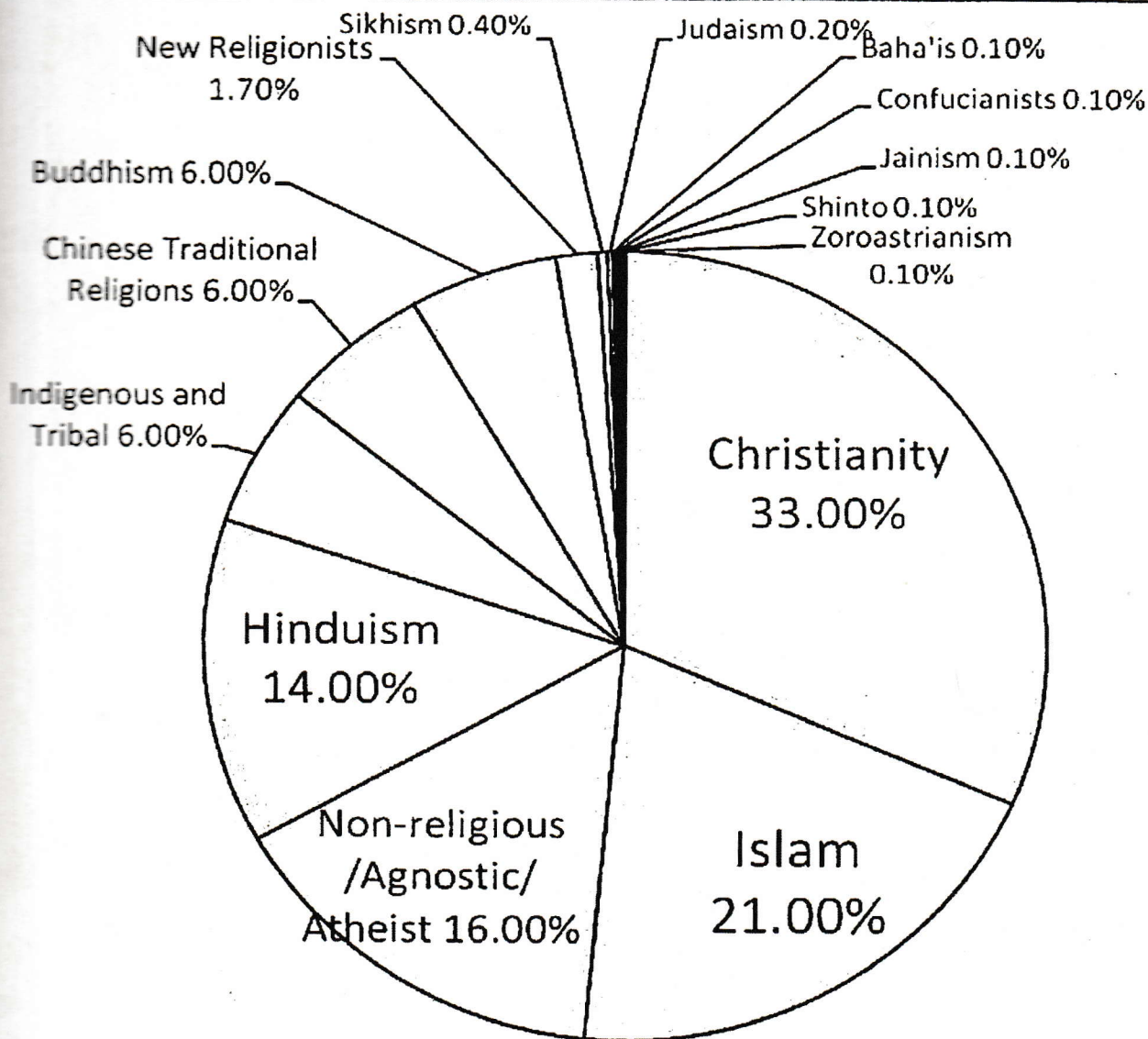
Historians, Religion, and Change Over Time

Religions develop through time. They change and evolve. Frequently, new religions emerge from older ones. For this reason, historians think of religions as belonging to different families. Judaism is the tree from which Christianity grew. And from both Judaism and Christianity, Islam later blossomed. Similarly, Buddhism sprang from Hinduism.

The historical sociologist Max Weber (pronounced Vayber) discovered a regular cycle of change that religions undergo. He noticed that many religions begin with the leadership of an inspirational, attractive, brilliant figure such as Jesus, Mohammad, or Buddha. Usually these leaders draw people to themselves through the force of their personality, the freshness of their insights, and, the miracles that are attributed to them. He called this "charismatic leadership". But charismatic leaders generally die without having built institutions to perpetuate their ministry. If nothing else happens, their movements die with them. But in the case of surviving religions, a new generation of leadership emerges, which Weber called "institutional leadership". These leaders systematize the teachings of the charismatic leaders, create rules, and build systems by which to form new leaders in the movement. In the process of systematizing, some of the original creative spark is inevitably lost. But the structures that are built do preserve the basics. The problem is that the bureaucratic religious leaders who oversee these structures generally lack the creativity and flexibility to adapt the faith to changing times. If nothing changes, eventually the structure becomes lifeless and people fall away. But in successful religions, new charismatic leaders emerge to restate the old faith in a new way. To survive for long, a religious tradition needs a regular alteration between these two kinds of leadership.

The Major Religions of the Modern World

Examine this table of the world's major religions according to www.adherents.com



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| 1. Christianity: 2.1 billion (33% of world population) | 9. Sikhism: 23 million (India) (0.4%) |
| 2. Islam: 1.5 billion (21%) | 10. Judaism: 14 million (Israel and the U.S.) (0.2%) |
| 3. Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist: 1.1 billion
(mostly China and Russia) (16%) | 11. Baha'is: 7 million (0.1) |
| 4. Hinduism: 900 million (14%) | 12. Confucianists: 6.3 million (0.1%) |
| 5. Indigenous and Tribal: 400 million (6%) | 13. Jainism: 4.2 million (India) (0.1%) |
| 6. Chinese Traditional Religions: 394 million (6%) | 14. Shinto: 2.7 million (Japan) (<0.1%) |
| 7. Buddhism: 376 million (6%) | 15. Zoroastrianism: 2.6 million
(India and West Asia) (<0.1%) |
| 8. New Religionists: 103 million (1.7) | |