

# Major Religions of the World

This article describes several of the major world religions: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Shinto, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism. American Christians, especially those living in larger cities, are experiencing considerable contact with people from many countries and cultures. A knowledge of the basics of world religions can be valuable when building acquaintances with non-Christians.

These notes are compiled from a number of sources, including Encyclopedia Britannica, as well making use of a study of World Religions by the Moody Bible Institute,

## HINDUISM

Hinduism is the oldest living religion. Hinduism has no founder, no central authority, and no fixed creed. There are about 350 million followers, almost all living in India. The beginning of Hinduism was associated with the Indo-Aryan invasion of India approximately 2,000 years before Christ. These early immigrants to India worshipped the powers of nature and assigned personalities to them. Idolatrous features of existing local religions were also absorbed by this religion and survive on popular Hinduism today.

### The Hindu Scriptures

Nature worship of the early Aryan period (from about 1500 BC) was codified and gradually combined with the Brahmanas (up to 600 BC) and the Upanishads (up to 300 BC) to form the Sruti literature, the "revealed wisdom". The most important document is the Rig-Veda, said to be the oldest religious book, put into writing during the 8th Century BC. It is composed mostly of prayers addressed to the personified powers of nature.

The Brahmanas came with the development of priesthood and contain instructions for priests. The Upanishads are philosophical and abstruse. They present Brahma, the sole Reality, the immortal, infinite, eternal, inscrutable, impersonal Absolute.

Other important sacred books are called Smriti, "tradition". These include the Laws of Manu (250 BC), the great epic poems Ramayana (story of the god Ram) and Mahabharat (Great Indian War), both written before 250 AD, and the Puranas (ancient tales), from the same period. Within the Mahabharat is the Bhagavad-Gita, currently the favorite textbook of Indian thought.

### The Main Beliefs of Modern Hinduism

During the later Vedic period (after 1000 BC), the doctrines of karma and transmigration became permanent in Hindu thought. These teachings assert that after death the soul of man will be reborn into another existence predetermined by the thoughts and actions of the present life. Karma is the law of sowing and reaping. Transmigration is the belief that all life is essentially the same, whether vegetable, animal, or human. The concept is that somehow the soul appears as an individual entity, caught in a process that will lead it through many lives. When the final effect of the last action is completed, the soul will be reabsorbed into the Infinite. There is no continuance of individuality.

Caste appeared at about the same time, probably as a result of segregation because of skin color or because of occupation. There are four main caste divisions: Brahmins, or priests; Kshatriyas, or warriors; Vaisyas, or artisans; and Sudras, or servants. Outside of these castes are the untouchable outcastes.

The four main castes are divided into some 300 subcastes which are in turn broken down into thousands of subdivisions. Even the outcastes have a multitude of divisions among them.

Caste rules originally exercised rigid control over occupation and social contacts. Today in India change of occupation is more common and many caste restrictions have been lessened. The Indian constitution forbids, on paper at least, any discrimination on a caste basis. But the major points of caste distinction are still intact.

In Hinduism, polytheism and idolatry are extreme.

The number of gods worshipped is said to be more than 300,000,000. Vedic Hinduism of the early Aryans personified the powers of nature by had no idols not permanent temples. From the conquered peoples came animism and totemism. Reform movements, Jainism and Buddhism, for example, arose during the 6th Century BC. These religions added “personal saviors”.

Brahmanism responded to these new religions by personalizing the impersonal, and Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer appeared.

From Vishnu came avatars, or incarnations, depicting various aspects of being or power. Of nine incarnations, the chief are Rama and Krishna. In some parts of India, Shiva is predominant. With his consorts he represents life energy in all aspects. In other sections, Vishnu and his incarnations are prominent.

The average Hindu is unlimited in his polytheism and not exclusive in his worship. Each god has helpers, offspring, sacred animals or birds, symbols, etc. On a lower level are the nature gods - Usha the dawn, Surya the sun, Agni the fire, etc., with various deities under them! Lower still are hordes of local gods and demons. These unite to make Hinduism the most idolatrous religion known.

#### Philosophical Hinduism

The Six Darshanas, or philosophies, were formulated after 600 BC and are based largely on the Upanishads. The Bhagavad-Gita, written much later, amplifies and continues the teachings of the Upanishads. The most influential systems are:

- The Vedanta, which stresses absolute monism (that there is only one Reality)
- Sankhya, which is dualistic (spirit and matter are eternal)
- Yoga emphasizes physical techniques for union with the Infinite.

Through the 19th Century “incarnation” of Ramakrishna, the teaching of the ancient wise man Shankara is being disseminated in the West. This teaching is described as a monistic philosophy, according to which Brahma (or Brahman) is the ultimate and only Reality. He *is* consciousness, he *is* existence, he *is* the soul of every human being, creature, and object. Salvation comes through philosophical speculation and meditation leading to the realization that Brahma and one’s self are one and

the same. Any concept of ego or individuality is simply a phase of maya, or “illusion.”

#### Devotional Hinduism

Three Ways of gaining *moksha*, or deliverance are recognized:

1. The Way of Works (karma-marga) - consistent obedience in carrying out ceremonies, sacrifices, pilgrimages, etc., to accumulate merit.
2. The Way of Knowledge (gyan-marga) - involves profound philosophical thinking. Salvation comes with the flash of realization of the oneness of all things.
3. The Way of Devotion (bhakti-marga) - demands ardent personal devotion to a particular deity above all others. This is the most common Way and is emphasized in the Bhagavad-Gita.

#### JAINISM

Jainism is considered to be an aspect of Hinduism and is the oldest religion which originated in India and was founded by a person. Jainism has about 1.5 million followers.

The founder of Jainism was Vardhamana (599 to 527 BC), who became Mahavia (great hero) of Jain (“the victor”) following his enlightenment. He was a prince of the Kahatriya caste. He renounced the world at age 30 and undertook a life of extreme asceticism in search moksha, “freedom from rebirth.” Reaching the desired state in 12 years, he spent the remainder of his life in winning converts.

Some distinctives of Jainism:

- Pluralism - matter and spirit are eternal. The individual is uncreated and indestructible.
- Atheism - denial of any creator or supreme being.
- Autosoterism - salvation purely by personal effort. Prayers and worship do not help.
- Ahimsa - non-injury, or extreme reverence for all living things. This is considered the highest of all good, and has become the outstanding characteristic of Jainism.
- Isatpragbhara - the highest heaven, is the place where the soul dwells in eternal and conscious individuality.
- Jainism retained the basic doctrines of karma and transmigration, but sought to eliminate caste, with only partial success.

## BUDDHISM

Buddhism is the first religion to become international. There are between 250 and 500 million followers today.

The founder of Buddhism was Siddhartha Gautama (560 to 480 BC), a prince of the Kshatriya caste of Hinduism. At age 29 he decided to seek the answer to the problem of sin and suffering. The way of philosophical speculation being unsuccessful, he took the path of extreme bodily asceticism. After five futile years he resorted to less rigorous practice. At 35, while seated under the bodhi tree in meditation, he experienced enlightenment and became the Buddha, the “enlightened one.” During the remainder of his life, he preached the Middle Path to Enlightenment, or **nirvana**, the place of freedom from rebirth. He died at 80, with about 500 disciples.

The Buddhist Middle Path to salvation from rebirth demands true knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. These are:

1. Existence entails suffering
2. Suffering is caused by inherently insatiable desires.
3. Desire must be suppressed in order to end suffering and existence.
4. The way to do this is to follow the Eightfold Path, which forms the heart of Buddha’s teaching: right views (beliefs); aims (intentions); speech; action; livelihood (living); self-discipline; self-mastery; and concentration (contemplation).

### Essential Features of Buddhism

Gautama’s concern was conduct, not worship. He apparently acknowledged the possibility of gods and demons but said nothing about them.

The delusion of self and questions as to whether the soul exists has been a source of quarrel among Buddhists for centuries. The ego is composed of five constantly changing *skandhas*, or states of being. While there is no permanent ego-entity, what a person does has its effect upon his future. Karma and transmigration are accepted doctrines.

Nirvana, the “place of passionless peace,” where all desire has ceased, all karma has been completed, and there is no more rebirth.

### Buddhist Scriptures

The Tripitaka, or “Three Baskets,” were transmitted orally from Buddha’s time and written in the Pali language probably during the 2nd Century BC. The Three Baskets are the Vinaya, containing monastic rules; The Sutra, teachings of the Buddha; and Adhidharma, metaphysical commentaries on the teachings. Added to these is a large body of literature, some in Sanskrit, containing many legends and much philosophizing.

### Two Main Schools of Buddhism

**Hinayana**, the Lesser Vehicle (Southern Buddhism), is generally closer to the original teachings. Salvation of the individual is emphasized, and only the original Pali scriptures are accepted. This school is found in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam. Distinctive features are:

- The saffron-robed monk is conspicuous. He follows the Path as set in the early scriptures.
- A reverent attitude toward relics and images of the Buddha is maintained.
- Monasteries are frequented by monks and by laymen who periodically enter to live as did the Buddha.
- Another Buddha named Maitreya will come to enlighten the age as Gautama did his.
- Thousands of inferior deities have been added, depending on the religious background of each country.

**Mahayana**, the Greater Vehicle (Northern Buddhism), has as its goal the salvation of all things and is noted for its adaptability and radical departure from the original tenets. Found in Japan, Korea, China, Nepal, Tibet, and Indonesia. The following features are distinctive:

- Buddha is worshipped as the supreme Reality, the divine Being, or as an avatar, an incarnate savior.
- There is an innumerable company of *bodhisattvas* - men who have attained nirvana but postpone entrance in order to help mankind.
- Prayer is addressed to images of these bodhisattvas.
- Maitreya will be the next Buddha.
- Heavens and halls in the afterlife are vividly portrayed.

### Sects of the Mahayana School

### 1. The Pure Land sect

- Found in China and Japan
- The central figure is Amida, a Buddha who presides over the Pure Land, or Western Paradise
- The Pure Land of Bliss in the Western regions is the ultimate goal
- Faith in Amida assures entrance to the Pure Land. Good works are unnecessary.
- Rules for living are few. Clergy live normal lives, not separated from the world.

### 2. Zen, the intuitive sect

- *Dhyana*, the Sanskrit word for meditation, became *Ch'en* in China and *Zen* in Japan.
- Salvation is to be found within. The true Buddha nature is within one's own heart.
- Reason cannot give truth or reality. The *koan*, an irrational question to baffle the mind, is used to facilitate enlightenment.
- *Zazen*, the method of meditation, is similar to Yoga in Hinduism
- The goal is *satori*, a flash of intuition, such as achieved by Gautama.
- Zen is rigidly individualistic, needing no temples, monasteries, or images. Simple living and self-discipline are advocated.

### 3. Nichiren, the socio-political sect

- Nichiren was a militant and intolerant reformer of the 13th Century (AD) in Japan.
- Salvation is to be found only in the Lotus Sutra, a Sanskrit scripture called also the Gospel of the Pure Law.
- Highly emotional and extremely nationalistic in practice
- Has numerous subsects which are strong in Japan

### 4. Lamaism, or Tibetan Buddhism

- A mixture of Tantrism, Shamanism, and sorcery
- Uses prayers wheels, mills, and flags
- Extensive demon worship, with many buddhas and bodhisattvas

- Celibate priests, called lamas, live in massive monasteries. Head lamas are reincarnations of the souls of predecessors.
- The Dalai Lama is the supreme head of church and state

### ISLAM

Islam claims more than 400 million followers, numerically second to Christianity. Its founder was Mohammed (AD 570 to 632) who was born in Mecca, Arabia. Troubled by prevalent idolatry, he spent much time in lonely meditation. After repeated visions, he believed himself called to preach the religion of the one absolute God (Allah), the Creator, Ruler, and Judge of the universe.

Mohammed migrated to Medina when he experienced heavy opposition in Mecca. This migration, known as the Hegira, marks the beginning of the Islamic Era. Mohammed's Rule of God expanded from Medina, and by 630 he was the ruler of all Arabia. During the following century Islam became supreme in the Near East, North Africa, and Spain.

#### Essential Beliefs of Islam

A Muslim is literally "one who submits to the will of God." Islam demands Iman, or belief in the articles of faith, and Din, the practice of religious duties. The Iman consists of the following doctrines:

- There is no god but Allah. (Allah is Arabic for God). Greatest possible stress is laid on God's oneness. He is without an equal, absolutely sovereign, and omnipotent.
- Angels are Allah's messengers. They are sinless beings who were created out of light and have life, speech, and reason. Of four archangels, Gabriel is the medium of inspiration, the revealer of Allah's truth. The devil, called Shaitan or Iblis, is an angel who fell through pride. Other beings are the *jinn*, or genii. They are created out of fire, and may be good or evil. Demonic genii serve the devil.
- The books "sent down" from Allah numbered 104. Only four remain: Taureat (Pentateuch) given to Moses; Zabur (Psalms) given to David; Injil (Evangel) given to Jesus; and Koran (given to Mohammed). The first three have been corrupted and have been replaced by the Koran, which contains all the necessary

The Koran, uncreated and eternal, was brought to the lowest heaven on the Night of Power and Excellence and given piecemeal to Mohammed as occasion demanded.

- Major and minor prophets are innumerable. Twenty-eight are named in the Koran, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed.

- Resurrection and the day of judgment will be literal for all men. There are seven heavens and seven hells.

Predestination of good and evil is the keystone of Islam. Everything is by the decree of Allah. His will is certain, arbitrary, irresistible, and inevitable.

- The Five Pillars of Islam are obligatory duties.
  1. Recitation of the Kalima, the creed, "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet."
  2. Prayer: recitation of the five daily prayers (passages from the Koran) must be preceded by ceremonial washings, with face turned toward Mecca, with a specified posture, and Arabic language.
  3. Fasting: especially during the month of Ramadan, ninth month of the lunar calendar. Abstinence is required from eating, drinking, bathing, smoking, smelling perfumes, etc., between sunrise and sunset. Feasting is permitted during the night.
  4. Almsgiving: a compulsory percentage of property owned must be given to the poor, homeless, debtors, slaves, tax collectors, etc.
  5. Pilgrimage to Mecca: required once in a lifetime for those who are able.

#### Other Essentials of Islam

Traditions - Sunna, "custom or usage of the Prophet" - supplement or interpret the Koran. This is the oral law, the second foundation of Islam. Collections of traditions are the Hadith containing records of conduct and sayings of Mohammed or the Companions, the first generation of Muslims.

Circumcision - the rite of initiation among all Muslims. It is not mentioned in the Koran.

Kaaba - a cube-shaped building in the center of the mosque in Mecca. The black stone, a meteorite built into one corner, is said to have fallen from heaven in Adam's day.

Jihad, or holy war - religious war against infidels is plainly taught in the Koran.

Polygamy - Islam limits number of wives to four at one time. Divorce is easy to obtain (for men), and women have few rights in orthodox Islam.

Sins of ignorance and of childhood are not real sins. Great sins (such as murder, adultery, disobedience to Allah or to parents, drunkenness, etc.) must be repented of before forgiveness can be expected. Little sins (lying, anger, lust) are offset by prayer and good deeds. The unpardonable sin is associating any other divinity with Allah.

#### Major Islamic Sects

Mohammed is said to have predicted that his followers would be divided into 73 sects. A Muslim authority has been quoted as estimating the number at about 150.

The Sunnis are followers of the Sunna and are the orthodox. They comprise 50% of all Muslims.

The Shi'as, also called Imamiyyas, are the most important of the heretical groups. They reject the first three caliphs (successors to Mohammed) and follow Ali (cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed) and his successors, the twelve Imams. The last of the Imams disappeared in 940 and is to reappear as the Mahdi to restore Islam. Shiites are the majority in Iran where the Shi'a faith is the state religion.

The Sufis are the mystics of Islam and seek for truth by inward search leading to enlightenment. They have been accused of pantheism.

The Ahmadiyyas were founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1839 to 1908) who claimed to be the Imam-Mahdi. This is the strong current missionary arm of Islam, although considered heretical.

#### SHINTO

Shinto and Japan are inseparable. Most of Japan's 120 million people were born into Shinto. Shinto is based on the concept of the divine origin of land and people, and it has coexisted and intermingled with Confucianism and Buddhism for 1400 years.

#### Early History of Shinto

The period of Pure Shinto was from about 660 BC to AD 552. Nature worship was associated with worship of the land. Unpainted, unadorned, wooden shrines were centers of worship, having no images, sacred book, doctrines, or code of laws. The indefinable *kami*, similar to a feature of Animism, was everywhere. Divinities were multiple and everywhere, in addition to ancestors. Worship was coupled with reverence for local and national rulers.

The later history of Shinto is dated from the entrance of Buddhism in AD 552. Buddhism entered by way of China and Korea and existed as a separate religion. Images, incense, sermons, and elaborate ceremonies were introduced. Mixed Shinto, called Dyobo, the twofold way of the gods, was developed. During the 17th Century, pure Shinto was revived. The central truth was that the Emperor is the direct descendant of the gods. No other nation was entitled to equality with Japan.

The Emperor Meiji in 1882 disestablished Buddhism and made Shinto the state religion. State Shinto, with the divinity of the emperor as symbol, became a national institution in which all were expected to participate regardless of religion. In 1945 State Shinto was disestablished, and the emperor declared himself to be mortal. Shinto has regained its strength since World War II, with an estimated 90,000 shrines.

The Shinto scriptures, *Ko-ji-ki*, "Records of Ancient Matters" (AD 712), and *Ni-hon-gi*, "Chronicles of Japan" (AD 720), trace the mythical history of Japan and of the imperial line.

According to the *Ko-ji-ki* there are 800 myriads (one myriad = 10,000) of gods. "Kami" signified in early Shinto anything that was awesome or powerful, with meaning so vast and all-inclusive as to be beyond definition. The sun-goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, holds divine preeminence and the emperor is said to be directly descended from her. Nature gods are innumerable in Shinto, with many beautiful shrines throughout the land, each being approached through the distinctive *torii* gateway.

Festivals and ceremonies are connected with the seasons and harvest. Worship is almost exclusively individual and consists of prayer, largely for material blessings. Personal cleanliness is of primary importance. Ancestor worship is common to each home.

No Shinto book contains any code of morals. Ethics and morals are based on the idea of the divinity of the celestial race. There is no concept of sin. Since the people are naturally good (!), the question of right and wrong does not arise. Culture is concerned with shame and saving face rather than with the problem of evil. Loyalty, as expressed in exact correctness of action and thought, is a basic concept.

## TAOISM

Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism were recognized as official religions in pre-communist China.

Originally a philosophy, Taoism became a religion shortly before the Christian era began. It is fast disappearing in China, its only sphere of influence.

Taoism is the oldest personally founded religion in China. The founder, Lao-Tzu (604 to 517 BC) emphasized a return to the primitive simplicity of nature, a quiet and personal search for the *Tao*, the eternal, impersonal, mystical, supreme principle that lies behind the universe.

The symbols *yin* and *yang* are notable from Taoism. These are the "two interacting energy modes", the yang being masculine, active, warm, dry, and positive. The yin is feminine, dark, cold, inactive, and negative. Everything that exists is constituted by the interplay of these two modes of energy.

The religion of Taoism bears little resemblance to the philosophy of Lao-Tzu, being characterized by superstition, extreme animism, witchcraft, astrology, demonism, and ancestor worship.

## CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is really a philosophy of life, not a religion. The main concern of Confucius (551 to 446 BC) was with human relationships, the science of government, and ethics within the social order. He acknowledged the being of God (called Heaven) and the place of religion, but he added little to that field.

The Superior Man was the ideal to be followed. Confucian temples idolized the found as this Ideal Man. Since there was no separate priesthood, government officials performed priestly functions. These included nature worship, veneration of Confucius, the emperors, and the ancestors, in elaborate ceremonies. There were five relationships indispensable to life. These existed between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother to younger, and friend with friend.

The Confucian scriptures, called The Classics and The Four Books, were compiled by Confucius and are collections of his sayings. They contain no teaching regarding a future life. These books, however, are thought to be the most important influence in the development of the Chinese ideal of character.

## ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism is the world religion that has the closest association with Bible history. The kings Cyrus, Ahasuerus, and Darius of Persia were Zoroastrians.

The founder was Zoroaster, or Zarathustra (about 660 to 583 BC), who was born in Persia. At the age of 30 a vision of Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Being, sent him forth to preach. Years of discouragement and persecution ended when the Persian king was converted in 618 BC. The last twenty years of Zoroaster's life were spent in holy wars by which he sought to promulgate his religion. Later descendants have raised the founder to a supernatural position deserving of worship, with a miraculous birth and miracle-working powers.

The Avesta is the inclusive name of the Zoroastrian scriptures. The religion is basically a cosmic dualism with good and evil in eternal opposition. The Supreme Being, Ahura Mazda, or Ormazd, is the god of light. He is in constant battle with Angra Mainyu, the bad spirit. Good and evil spirits are associated with them, and Ormazd will ultimately

triumph.

The use of sacred fire in formal worship, symbolic of light and purity, has brought the designation "fire worshippers," which Zoroastrians repudiate with vehemence.

The bodies of the dead are exposed within towers to be consumed by vultures. The aim is to dispose of the body without contaminating soil or water with decaying flesh.

High ethical morals are maintained. Salvation is by works. A future savior is expected. There will be a bodily resurrection of all dead. After the final judgment, the wicked will be purified by fire. Thus cleansed, they will go with the righteous to dwell forever in the new heaven and the new earth. All evil angels will be annihilated.