

Overview of World Religions

1. Christianity

Historical Background:

Founded in the 1st century AD, based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Emerged from Jewish roots in Roman-occupied Palestine. Became the state religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine (313 AD), then developed through schisms (e.g., Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant).

Distinctions:

- Belief in one God (Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit)
- Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God, Savior, and risen Lord
- Salvation by grace through faith in Jesus
- Scripture: Bible (Old and New Testaments)

Size:

~2.4 billion adherents (31% of world population)

Regions:

Global—strongest in the Americas, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Asia

Trends:

Decline in Europe; growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia

Subgroups:

- **Roman Catholic** (~1.3 billion)
- **Protestant** (e.g., Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal) (~900 million)
- **Eastern Orthodox** (~220 million)
- **Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, Restorationist groups** (Jehovah's Witnesses, LDS)

2. Islam

Historical Background:

Founded in the 7th century AD in Mecca (modern-day Saudi Arabia) by Muhammad, regarded as the final prophet. The Quran is believed to be the literal word of God revealed to him.

Distinctions:

- Strict monotheism (Tawhid)
- Five Pillars of Islam (faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage)
- Rejection of Jesus as divine (regarded as a prophet)

Size:

~1.9 billion adherents (24% of world population)

Regions:

Middle East, North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa

Trends:

Fastest-growing religion due to high birth rates and conversions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa

Subgroups:

- **Sunni** (~85–90%)
- **Shia** (~10–15%)—notably in Iran, Iraq
- **Sufi** (mystical tradition within both Sunni and Shia)
- **Ahmadiyya, Ibadi**, and other smaller sects

3. Hinduism

Historical Background:

An ancient, complex religious tradition rooted in the Indian subcontinent. No single founder. Scriptures include the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Distinctions:

- Polytheistic/henotheistic; belief in Brahman as the ultimate reality
- Reincarnation and karma
- Moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirth)
- Deeply integrated into Indian culture and society (e.g., caste system)

Size:

~1.2 billion adherents (15% of world population)

Regions:

Primarily India and Nepal; also present in Mauritius, Bali (Indonesia), Fiji, and diaspora communities worldwide

Trends:

Growing in India and among diaspora communities; mostly ethnic-based adherence

Subgroups:

- **Vaishnavism** (devotion to Vishnu)
- **Shaivism** (devotion to Shiva)
- **Shaktism** (devotion to the Goddess)
- **Smartism**, various philosophical schools (Advaita Vedanta, etc.)

4. Buddhism

Historical Background:

Founded by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) in the 5th–6th century BC in India as a reform movement against Hinduism. Spread throughout Asia.

Distinctions:

- Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path
- Rejection of the caste system and rituals of Hinduism
- Focus on meditation, mindfulness, and enlightenment (nirvana)

Size:

~500 million adherents (6–7% of world population)

Regions:

East Asia (China, Japan, Korea), Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar), Tibet, Sri Lanka

Trends:

Growth in Western countries through interest in mindfulness/meditation; decline in some traditional regions

Subgroups:

- **Theravāda** (Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia)
- **Mahāyāna** (China, Japan, Korea)
- **Vajrayāna/Tibetan Buddhism** (Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal)
- **Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren**, and others

5. Judaism

Historical Background:

Oldest Abrahamic faith, founded ~2000 BC with the covenant between God and Abraham. Central scriptures include the Torah and Tanakh. Jewish identity includes both religious and ethnic dimensions.

Distinctions:

- Monotheistic (YHWH)
- Emphasis on covenant, law (Torah), and tradition
- Awaiting the Messiah (not recognized as Jesus)

Size:

~15 million adherents (0.2% of world population)

Regions:

Israel, United States, parts of Europe

Trends:

Stable or declining globally; increasing secularism in diaspora

Subgroups:

- **Orthodox** (Traditional law and practice)
- **Conservative/Masorti** (Balance of tradition and modernity)
- **Reform/Progressive** (Modern, liberal interpretation)
- **Hasidic, Secular, Reconstructionist, Messianic Jews** (not recognized by mainstream Judaism)

6. Sikhism

Historical Background:

Founded in the 15th century in Punjab, India by Guru Nanak and nine successive Gurus. Combines monotheistic beliefs with Hindu and Islamic influences.

Distinctions:

- Belief in one formless God
- Emphasis on equality, service, meditation, and justice
- Rejection of caste and idolatry

Size:

~26 million adherents (0.3% of world population)

Regions:

Primarily Punjab (India), also diaspora in UK, Canada, USA, Australia

Trends:

Stable but minor religion globally; increasing cultural visibility

Subgroups:

- **Khalsa Sikhs** (initiated)
- **Nanakpanthis, Nirmalas, Namdharis**, etc.

7. Traditional/Tribal Religions

Historical Background:

Rooted in indigenous cultures; orally transmitted traditions. Often animistic or shamanistic. Include African traditional religions, Native American religions, Australian Aboriginal beliefs.

Distinctions:

- Nature spirits, ancestors, animism
- Rituals tied to seasons, life events, healing

Size:

~300 million (variable estimates)

Regions:

Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, parts of Asia, the Americas

Trends:

Declining due to conversion, though experiencing revival in some areas

Subgroups:

Highly diverse—religions of the Yoruba, Zulu, Maori, Inuit, and many others

Comparative Chart of Core Beliefs

Belief/Practice	Christianity	Islam	Hinduism	Buddhism	Judaism	Sikhism
God	One God in Trinity	One God (Allah), no partners	Many gods, all aspects of Brahman	No personal God (non-theistic or varied)	One God (YHWH)	One God (Waheguru)
Founder	Jesus Christ	Muhammad	No single founder	Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha)	Abraham/Moses	Guru Nanak
Scripture	Bible (Old & New Testaments)	Quran (plus Hadith)	Vedas, Upanishads, epics	Tripitaka, Mahayana sutras	Torah, Tanakh	Guru Granth Sahib
Salvation Goal	Eternal life with God	Paradise through submission to God	Moksha (liberation from rebirth)	Nirvana (end of suffering)	World to Come; resurrection	Union with God
Afterlife	Heaven/Hell	Heaven/Hell	Reincarnation, karma	Rebirth until nirvana	Heaven/Hell; resurrection	Rebirth or union with God
Jesus	Son of God, Savior	Prophet only	Incarnation of deity (some views)	Enlightened teacher (some views)	Not the Messiah	Respected teacher
Path to Salvation	Faith in Jesus, grace	Submission, faith, good deeds	Dharma, karma, devotion	Enlightenment through Eightfold Path	Obedience to law (Torah)	Meditation, service, righteousness
Worship Style	Prayer, singing, preaching	Prayer (5x daily), mosque services	Puja (rituals), temples	Meditation, chanting	Synagogue services, prayer	Gurdwara worship, music, service

