

# 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, Namdharies**, 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
<b>God</b>	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)
<b>Founder</b>	Jesus Christ	Muhammad	No single founder	Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha)	Abraham/Moses	Guru Nanak
<b>Scripture</b>	Bible (Old & New Testaments)	Quran (plus Hadith)	Vedas, Upanishads, epics	Tripitaka, Mahayana sutras	Torah, Tanakh	Guru Granth Sahib
<b>Salvation Goal</b>	Eternal life with God	Paradise through submission to God	Moksha (liberation from rebirth)	Nirvana (end of suffering)	World to Come; resurrection	Union with God
<b>Afterlife</b>	Heaven/Hell	Heaven/Hell	Reincarnation, karma	Rebirth until nirvana	Heaven/Hell; resurrection	Rebirth or union with God
<b>Jesus</b>	Son of God, Savior	Prophet only	Incarnation of deity (some views)	Enlightened teacher (some views)	Not the Messiah	Respected teacher
<b>Path to Salvation</b>	Faith in Jesus, grace	Submission, faith, good deeds	Dharma, karma, devotion	Enlightenment through Eightfold Path	Obedience to law (Torah)	Meditation, service, righteousness
<b>Worship Style</b>	Prayer, singing, preaching	Prayer (5x daily), mosque services	Puja (rituals), temples	Meditation, chanting	Synagogue services, prayer	Gurdwara worship, music, service

