

# What Is Religion?

One of the most interesting aspects of religion is that nobody agrees about its meaning. In fact, people cannot even agree on the origin of the word *religion*. There is agreement that it comes from the Latin word *religio*, but there is some confusion about the origin of that word. Some say it comes from the Latin verb *relegare*, which means to “read again” or “go over again,” as in the repetition of scripture or holy writing. Others say the root is *religare*, which can mean “to reconnect,” but can also mean “to bind or fasten.” In this last interpretation, religion serves the state and society by binding its believers to social rules and norms.

Definitions of religion vary. Some are extremely broad, such as that of the American religious scholar Paul Tillich (1886–1965), who called religion anything that deals with “ultimate concern.” Some definitions are very narrow, such as those that claim religion is only a belief in God, or Allah, or the Buddha, or some other divine or spiritual being. Definitions can be so broad as to include even such “nonreligious” belief systems as communism (a political theory that people should live and govern communally, or as a group) and atheism (the belief that there is no God) or so narrow that they confine themselves to only one organized form of religion and leave out all other forms.

Even though people might disagree about what religion is, they show some agreement on what religion does and how it does it. In general, religion can be described as a unified system of thoughts, feelings, and actions that is shared by a group and that gives its members an object (or objects) of devotion, someone or something sacred to believe in, such as a god or a spiritual concept. Religion also involves a code of behavior or personal moral conduct by which individuals may judge the personal and social consequences of their actions and the actions of others. Most of the time, religion also deals with what might be called the supernatural or the spiritual, about forces and powers beyond the

## WORDS TO KNOW

**deity:** A god or goddess.

**monotheism:** A religion having one God.

**myth:** A legendary story, often with no basis in historical fact, that frequently tells of the actions of deities and helps to explain some naturally occurring event or some supernatural occurrence.

**pagan:** Pre-Christian or non-Christian; also referring to those who worship many gods.

**pantheon:** The class or collection of all gods and goddesses in a system of belief.

**polytheism:** A religion worshiping many gods.

**shaman:** In indigenous tribes, an intermediary between the gods and the tribal members; also one who controls various spiritual forces, can look into the future, and can cure the ill with magic.

**supreme being:** The central God responsible for creating the cosmos.

**theology:** The study of God and of religious truths.

**totem:** Some sort of object or animal that assumes a spiritual symbolism for a clan or tribe.

control of humans. In this latter area, religion attempts to answer questions that science does not address, such as the meaning of life and what happens after death.

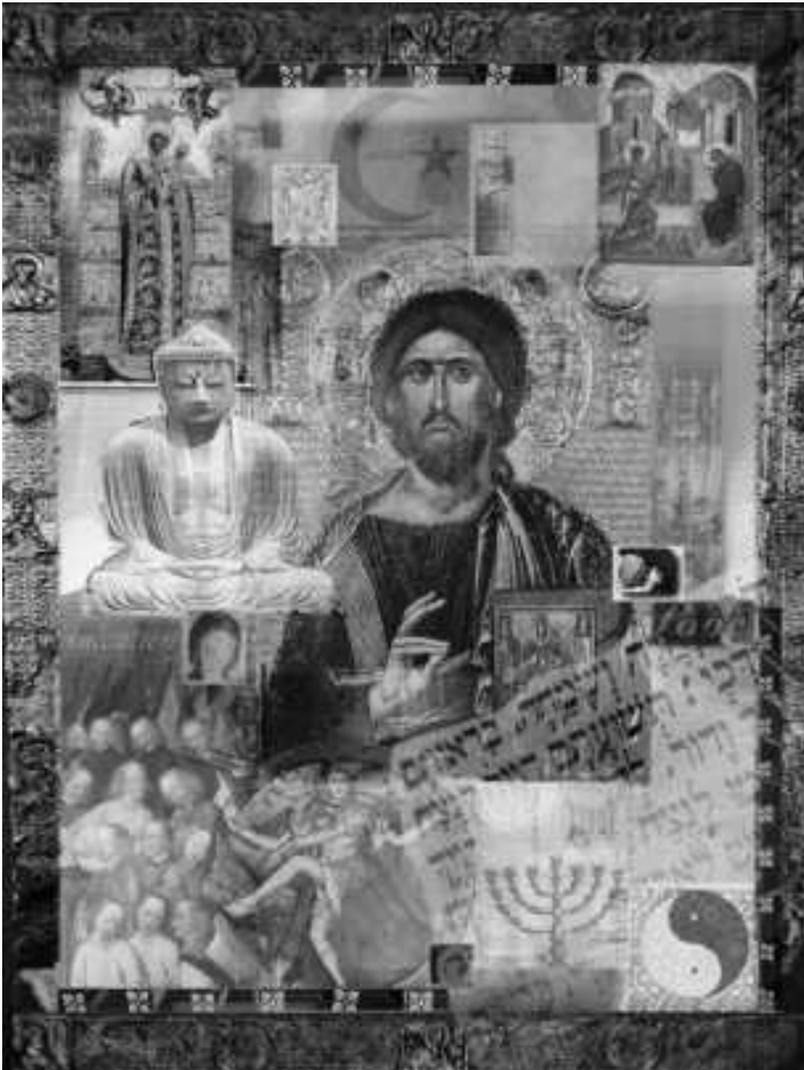
In addition, religion deals in one form or another with salvation. This can include saving the souls of humans either in a literal fashion, with a heaven after death as in Christianity, or in a more symbolic sense, as in reaching an end to suffering such as *nirvana*, as in some Eastern religions, including Buddhism. Furthermore, religion usually does its work through some form of organization and worship, as well as through sacred rites or rituals, sacred books, a clergy or priesthood that administers the religion, and places, symbols, and days that are sacred to the believers.

Even though there is no commonly held way of looking at religion, most of the world's population participates in a form in one way or another. Though hard to define, religion seems to be a universal experience and need. Of the nearly 6.5 billion people on Earth, only about 16 percent (about 1.1 billion) say they do not believe in a god or do not believe in a specific religion. The rest of the world's population, some 5.4 billion people, belongs to one of more than twenty different major religions. The world's major religions range in size from Christianity, with 2.1 billion members, to Rastafarianism and Scientology, with about 1.5 million members each.

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*Religion addresses spiritual matters and often provides guidelines for living that people can follow in their daily lives. About 5.1 billion people, or most of the world's population, identify with a religion.*

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## Origins of religion

There are essentially two different theories on the origins of religion. One is called the faith-based theory. It assumes that religions are the result of divine messages from one or more gods, or from prophets (messengers) of such a supreme being or universal consciousness or awareness. Believers accept that their religion began as a direct or indirect revelation from a deity, or god, or the cosmos. Orthodox Christianity, the set of beliefs and rituals followed by most Christians, says that Jesus Christ

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(c. 6 BCE–c. 30 CE) was both the son of God and God himself. Jesus, a man, had the authority of God within him and gave voice to God through his words. Christianity, like other organized religions, has at its center rules and doctrines believed to be supernaturally inspired. This means that these rules and doctrines are based on beliefs about what is beyond the observable world. Some deal strictly with spiritual matters, but often provide rules and guidelines for behavior meant to be followed here on Earth, such as the Ten Commandments. The Commandments provide ten rules that followers of both the Jewish and Christian faiths are told to follow.

A role similar to that of Jesus is taken by Muhammad (c. 570–632) in Islam. Muhammad is considered the true prophet and messenger of God to whom the Angel Jabraʿil (Gabriel) communicated God's will. Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892) was the messenger for the Bahá'í faith, as was Moses (c. thirteenth century BCE) for Judaism. Even in natural religions, which grow out of human questions about the universe and the way it works rather than divine messages, the truths that are found and developed are considered universal and eternally present. These include philosophy-like religions such as Buddhism, developed by the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama [563–483 BCE]). In the faith-based theory, humanity discovers a spirituality that already exists.

In the second theory on the origins of religion, anthropologists (scientists who study human societies and human origins) take a different view. They suggest that humankind created spirituality in response to either a biological or a cultural need. Those who support the idea of a biological origin for religion believe that religion emerged from the human brain's ability to think about the process of existence. In other words, it was the result of humankind's becoming self-aware, being able to see far enough into the future to realize that they would eventually die. Religion, in this view, is a reaction to death and a search for a way to avoid it, or, failing that, a chance to go on to a better place. Anthropologists who support a cultural origin for religion note that all religions are associated with either a code of behavior or a set of rituals or both. Ritual is a coded form of behavior that has special meaning for members of the culture in which it originates.

Whether or not these theories about the origins of religion are true, evidence suggests that the practice of religion is very ancient. Prehistoric archaeologists, anthropologists who focus their studies on the remains and culture of prehistoric humans and their ancestors, have uncovered evidence

of burial rituals dating to about 13,000 BCE. In France and Germany, paleontologists have found burials by Neanderthals, a subspecies of modern humans who no longer exist. Paleontologists study life from past geological periods through fossil remains. These Neanderthals carefully laid their dead in prepared graves, along with tools and weapons. The care with which the Neanderthals prepared their dead suggests that they believed in some form of an afterlife, a step that implies some kind of religion. A famous painting known as “the sorcerer,” found on the wall of a cave called Trois Frères in France and dating about 18,000 years ago, shows a figure of a bearded being that is half man, half animal. Most anthropologists believe that this figure is a tribal shaman (an intermediary between the gods and tribal members), but he may also represent an early deity.

Anthropologists believe that early religion may have developed in part out of human beings’ attempts to control uncontrollable parts of their environment, such as weather, pregnancy and birth, and success in hunting. Scientists recognize two different ways that humans try to do this: manipulation, through magic, and supplication, through religion. Magic tries to make the environment directly subject to human will through rituals. An example might be drawing pictures of large numbers of animals on cave walls in hopes of assuring success in hunting. Hundreds of such paintings have been found all around the world. Religion, on the other hand, tries to control the environment by appealing to a higher power, gods and goddesses. “The sorcerer,” for instance, may represent a god who ruled the hunt, because he is shown with deer and bison.

Special deities began to develop in three particular classes: from nature, from ancestors, and as guards or protectors. The most common deities represented natural forces, such as the sun, moon, seasons, rivers, and fertility. Any force that could either benefit or harm humans was given spirit form so that humankind could pray to it and ask for special favors. The second form of deity to develop

## Distinguishing Time

The abbreviations BC and AD are Christian in origin and refer to a calendar based on the life of Jesus Christ. When a date is given as BC, it means the year occurred “before Christ.” When the date is given as AD, it means an event happened “in the year of Our Lord” (*anno domini*, in Latin), again referring to Christ. These dates did not come into common use until centuries after the life of Jesus, so they do not correspond exactly to the dates historians now assign to his birth and death.

In the twenty-first century, dates are most often given as BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (of the Common Era). This change takes the overt reference to Jesus Christ out of the calendar, without requiring a new calendar to date historical events.

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*Many people show respect, or veneration, to their relatives through ancestor shrines and other measures. Praying to ancestor spirits for help or protection reassures many that there is something more beyond the physical life.*

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was based on the spirit of the ancestor, either an actual human ancestor, as with the Chinese, or an animal totem or object that unified a clan. A totem is an object, or perhaps an animal, that assumes a spiritual symbolism for a clan or tribe. Even on a small scale, ancestor worship was a logical extension of the summoning of deities and spirits to help living humans control their environment. This belief not only reassured the living, but also gave them hope that someone they knew was waiting for them after death. The third type of deity was one that could provide some specific service or protection, such as the goddess of the home or the god of war.

Over time one god in this group of competing deities usually assumed more power than the rest. Sometimes this may have been because competing gods represented different cities or communities. When a city conquered one of its neighbors, its god was believed to have conquered the defeated city's god. Something like

this may have happened in ancient Egypt, where several different gods and goddesses occasionally had similar or complementary responsibilities. In some cases, such beliefs led to the concept of a supreme god or deity responsible for all creation. The hierarchy of the gods became organized and so, too, did religion itself. Shamans began to form a distinct class in the clan and tribe. These men and women became the first clergy, or priesthood, and were believed to have magical powers and to have the ability to cure illness, which was thought to be caused by spirits, or supernatural beings. This class of shamans began to organize the belief system and to create certain traditions and rituals, such as the sacrificing of animals to different gods.

**Early religious practices** It appears from archaeological evidence that one of the earliest organized religions may have been the worship of the Mother Goddess. Archeological evidence of Mother Goddess worship exists in several different ancient cultures, including Çatalhöyük in modern Turkey (c. 6,000 BCE), Carchemish in ancient Iraq (c. 2,000 BCE,

and Knossos in ancient Crete (c. 1500 BCE). One early example that may indicate an early fertility goddess is the 25,000-year-old Venus of Willendorf, a small limestone statue discovered in Austria in 1908. In these cultures it is believed that the Mother Goddess was worshipped for her role in promoting the fertility of both the land and the people. Over time, the Mother Goddess was largely displaced by patriarchal, or male-dominated, pantheons, perhaps as a result of a better understanding of man's part in reproduction.

The ancient Minoan civilization has left a graphic and very beautiful record of its female goddess in wall paintings in archaeological ruins found on the island of Crete. The Mother Goddess was not only important in prehistoric Europe, but has been found in the traditions of ancient Canaan, Sumeria, Egypt and other African countries, India, native North America, western Europe, and Australia. These fertility-worshipping religions slowly gave way to more male-oriented belief systems. In Europe, invasions from the east in the fourth and third millennia BCE by warrior tribes from Central Asia introduced religions based on patriarchal beliefs.

With the development and spread of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the earlier pagan religions and their goddess worship were replaced with religions dominated by males. Nevertheless, at the time of Jesus's birth, the worship of goddesses such as Demeter, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Cybele (also known as the Great Mother) was widespread throughout Italy, Greece, and the Middle East. Some historians of religion believe that the great admiration and respect held for Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, especially in the Roman Catholic faith, may be a holdover of this earlier form of goddess worship.

By the time the first civilizations sprang up in what is now Iraq, around 3,000 BCE, religion had become a very involved process. Ancient Sumerians, people who lived in what is now the south of Iraq about 5,000 years ago, had a complex pantheon, with many gods and goddesses. Stories of the adventures of these gods and goddesses, and the relations of human beings with them, had already been collected into epics. The most famous of these epics is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the story of a human hero's search for immortality and the way in which the gods and goddesses foil his quest. Although the story survives only as fragments, there is enough of it to show how these ancient people viewed their religion, the universe they lived in, and their place in that universe.



*The Venus of Willendorf statue was discovered in 1908, but was created between c. 28,000–25,000 BCE, most likely as a representation of an early fertility goddess.*

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## Modern religions

Over the course of thousands of years, tribal totems, ancestor worship, and belief in guardian and protective gods led to increasingly complex belief systems. Myths, or stories about the creation of the world and tales of individual gods and goddesses, became a fundamental part of religion, as did certain rituals and rules of behavior, or things to do and things to avoid doing. The earliest historical religions, ones for which a written record exists, arose along the Nile River in Egypt and in the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia. An ancient form of Hinduism also emerged about the same time in what is now known as India. Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions were polytheistic, meaning they recognized more than one god. (Hinduism has many deities as well, but they are all understood as different aspects of one supreme being.) Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions influenced Judaism, which was one of the first monotheistic (having

one God) religions. Judaism stretches back as far as 2000 BCE.

In Asia, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism rose to prominence beginning in about the sixth century BCE. All three are philosophies that do not worship a god. They are pantheistic, meaning they see all the universe or enlightenment as godlike. In the West, Greek and Roman religions, with enormous numbers of gods and goddesses, were dominant until Christianity replaced them in about the fourth century CE. Islam, closely related to both Christianity and Judaism, is one of the most recent major organized religions. It began in the seventh century CE. It has spread rapidly and widely from its Arabian base to include 1.3 billion believers around the globe, making it the world's second-largest religion in the early twenty-first century.

Some scholars list ten to fifteen major religions. These include the five largest religions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as smaller but well-established organized religions such as Bahá'í, Confucianism, Daoism, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. Sometimes the indigenous (native) religions of the

Americas, Africa, and Oceania are added to these, as well as more recent forms, such as neo-paganism, which worships ancient Norse, Celtic, Egyptian, and other pagan (pre-Christian) gods.

**God has many names** As different religions developed over time and geographic regions, they all established one or more gods that the faithful could call upon and worship. The names of these gods differed across religions, although many shared similar characteristics. This is true in the monotheistic faiths that consider Abraham as a founder of their religion. These are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Jewish name for God is Yahweh, or YHWH. Another common variation on the name is Jehovah. Christianity refers to God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This refers to the Christian Trinity, in which God is believed to exist as Himself, within Jesus Christ, the son of God, and as a purely physical representation in the Holy Spirit. Islam refers to God as Allah. Muslims, the followers of Islam, have ninety-nine different variations of God's name. The religion of Bahá'í grew out of Islam and came to call Baha (glory or splendor) its God. Zoroastrianism calls upon Ahura Mazda ("Lord Wisdom") as its God.

Hinduism recognizes one supreme being, Brahma, but Brahma can manifest, or take form, in many different shapes. This includes taking shape as other gods or goddesses. Hinduism is not, however, considered a polytheistic religion (believing in more than one god) because all the Hindu deities are seen as forms of Brahma. Sikhism, which was founded in the same region as Hinduism, also has many different names for God. The main Sikh name for God is *Sat Nam*, or "true name." In contrast, Jainism does not worship one god. Jains believe that those who are truly faithful can become individual gods when they end the cycle of death and rebirth by reaching perfection.

Other religions, including Shinto, Mahayana Buddhism, and religious Daoism, have even more names for the divine. Shinto *kami*, or nature spirits, may have individual names or be simply referred to as kami. Mahayana Buddhists recognize enlightened beings, such as the Buddha, and *bodhisattvas*, those who have become enlightened but remained outside their reward to help others, as godlike. Similarly, religious Daoism has many gods, including the popular Eight Immortals, who take on a role like that of the Buddhist bodhisattvas and help people find perfection in the Dao. Most major world religions have a central figure or concept that they turn to when seeking to approach the divine and the all-powerful.

## Religion or Cult?

In the modern world there is much discussion of the danger of cults. People think of doomsday cults that keep members half-imprisoned and use mental pressure to ensure conformity. However, some say that one person's religion is simply another person's cult and that all the great world religions started out as cults.

There are ways of telling the difference between an established religion and a cult. Cults enforce obedience and discourage independent thought. True religions, in contrast, leave room for individual interpretations. Cults also attempt to cut believers off from their former life, including family and friends not involved in the cult, while religions generally embrace families as the cornerstone of society. At times, cults may also use physical threats to deal with their critics, while religions usually attempt to deal with such critics in a respectful manner. Size and age also have something to do with cult status. Usually cults are newly formed and small.

Despite the modern negative sense that the word *cult* has, its historical use was positive, or at least neutral. On the positive side, cult means a group that pays particular homage or worship to one thing or person. For example, the cult of Mary honors the mother of Jesus. A more neutral meaning is a small, recently created, religious organization that is often headed by a single charismatic (strong and appealing) leader. A cult may also be a spiritually inventive group, one that might challenge other larger and more dominating ones. A cult in this sense may simply be a new religious movement on its way to becoming a true religion. That was the situation with Christianity at its beginning as a breakaway sect of Judaism. The negative meaning of cult, involved with brainwashing its followers and abusing members, comes only from the second half of the twentieth century. So negative has the term become that the news organization Associated Press decided in 1998 to stop using *cult* to talk about a small religious group that is an offshoot of a larger one. Instead, they use the word *sect*.

## Common characteristics of religions

Religions all share certain common traits. These include, but are not limited to: (1) the tradition and maintenance of the belief system; (2) the use of myth and symbol; (3) a concept of salvation; (4) sacred places and objects; (5) sacred actions or rituals; (6) sacred writings; (7) the sacred community and place of worship; (8) the sacred experience; (9) codes of ethical behavior; (10) a priesthood or clergy to lead the believers; (11) usually a god, goddess, or group of deities to which believers pray and worship; and (12) often a leader or founder who gains almost godlike status.

The similarity of such characteristics in most religions can be seen by comparing two religions, Christianity and Buddhism. Both use myth and symbol to describe the miraculous origins of their founders. One of

Christianity's favorite stories centers on the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus to a young virgin. Likewise, the Buddha is said to have been conceived in a dream his mother had involving an elephant carrying a lotus. Following his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the desert resisting temptation from demons. The Buddha also struggled with demons and temptation before finally achieving enlightenment.

The Christian concept of salvation is rooted in the Redemption, or the forgiving of sins that the sacrificial death of Christ brought about, and in the form of an afterlife in heaven. In Buddhism, such salvation is the attainment of nirvana, a state free of wrong desires. Sacred places, objects, and rituals are basic to both religions. Pilgrimages to Rome or to Jerusalem are common for Christians, as are such trips to the Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal, or to other sites in India for devout Buddhists. Sacred objects include the bread and wine of the Christian communion and the prayer wheel, a form of meditation for Buddhists, especially in Tibetan Buddhism.

Christianity and Buddhism also share the concepts of a body of sacred scripture, rituals, and forms of meditation that separate believers from nonbelievers. The primary ritual for Christians is Communion, the symbolic meal that reenacts Jesus's last supper on Earth, while for Buddhists meditation is a major form of prayer. Sacred writings include the Bible for Christians and the Tipitaka for Buddhists. For both religions, a distinct community of believers is basic. In Christianity this community is called the church, the body of the faithful. In Buddhism the *sangha* is the community of like-minded individuals who are also pursuing truth and spiritual rebirth. Christians worship in churches, Buddhists in temples. For Christians the sacred experience is the acceptance of Jesus as Lord, the son of God, at the same time both human and divine. For Buddhists, it is the desire to begin the journey and the ultimate end of the journey, enlightenment.

Both religions also share the concepts of moral codes that govern human behavior, an organized priesthood, roots in historic personalities, and reverence of divine or semi-divine founders. Christianity inherited the Ten Commandments, rules that guide human behavior, from Judaism, and added to them the stories and teachings of Jesus. Buddhism has the Five Precepts and the Eightfold Path for moral living. Priests, ministers, and other clergy lead the faithful in Christianity, while monks and nuns do much the same in Buddhism. Christians worship God the Father. Buddhism, though it has no supreme being, has

many deities in the Mahayana branch and also reveres the state of enlightenment, or Buddhahood, as godlike and at one with the universe. Jesus of Nazareth was the founder of Christianity, while Siddhartha Gautama, who was known by the title of the Buddha or Enlightened One, was the founder of Buddhism. Christians acknowledge Jesus as the divine Son of God, and the Buddha, though he firmly denied being divine during his lifetime, has become godlike to many of his followers.

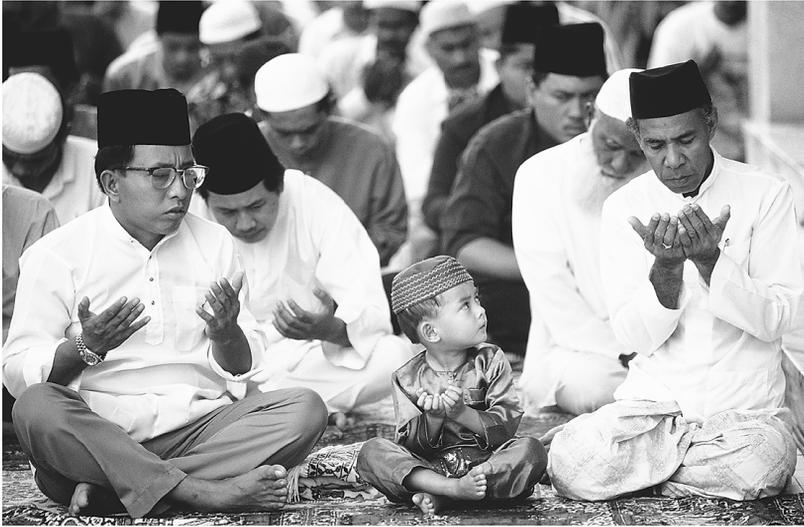
Such a brief comparison can be made for most major religions. Similar characteristics run through them all and separate them from philosophical or purely ethical systems.

### **The need for religion**

One major theory about the human need for religion is that it grew both out of human curiosity about the big questions of life and death and out of the fear of uncontrollable forces. Eventually, religion transformed this human curiosity and fear into hope. Such hope involved several aspects: a desire for immortality or life after death, for a kind creator who would watch out for humanity, and for an ultimate meaning to life.

There are several other theories as to why religion is such a universal concern. Humans are social animals, and religion in practice brings people together. In fact, for many modern people who profess a religion, the social element may be even stronger than the spiritual element. Many attend religious services for the sense of community they might receive from this experience. They take strength in sharing a commonly held belief system with others and also enjoy the weekly, sometimes daily, routine that religious services provide. For many believers, in fact, the simple act of attendance at church or temple and participation in ritual *is* religion, rather than its spiritual element.

There are also scientific approaches. Psychologists, scientists who study the mind, argue that religion answers emotional and psychological needs in humans, such as the fear of death, or a need for a higher spiritual experience than is provided in the everyday world. Religion can thus give meaning and direction to a person's life. Neuroscientists, those who study the brain and the nervous system, think that there is actually a part of the brain that has circuitry for an intense religious experience. In biology, the meme theory says that culture can be passed from generation to generation in the same way that genetic material, such as a gene for red



*A young boy looks to his elders as he learns to pray in a mosque. Some scientists use the meme theory to explain religion as a complex of inherited traits handed down from one generation to another.* © MICHAEL S. YAMASHITA/CORBIS-BETTMANN.

hair, is transmitted. Some scientists say that religion is actually a complex of memes, or inherited cultural traits, that is handed down from one generation to the next.

Religion, whatever its origins or its reasons for being, is a universal fact of life. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the rise of scientific and political theories (such as communism) that threatened the role of religion in daily life. However, religion has endured in all its various shapes. In the twenty-first century, religion is playing a more important role in world affairs than ever before.

### Religion or myth

Myth is often at the service of early religion. According to the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, *myth* is “a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation.” Myths may or may not be factual, but they are always important to religion.

Myths often deal with gods and goddesses and attempt to explain a natural phenomenon or event, or even a way of looking at the world. Primitive cultures all over the world, for example, have some form of creation myth, such as how the world was created, or who put the sun and stars in place. Such stories can be very important for a society, because they give people a sense of how the universe works and what their place is in it.

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Myth is not the same as religion, although it can be an important part of it. Some Christians believe the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ a myth: a story that aims to show how humans can be freed of their sins and brought into a heavenly afterlife. They believe that the Resurrection was not meant to be taken literally; instead, they see it as a symbol for finding new life or a new way of relating to the world when one believes in Jesus's teachings. For other Christians, however, such Biblical stories are literal truth. They believe that Jesus died on the Cross and three days later he rose from the dead and spoke to his followers again before going to heaven. Both interpretations are possible, depending on how one approaches the reading of holy texts. One person's myth can become another's historical fact.

### Religion and science

Science and religion are two ways of examining the world. The scientific method limits its examination to questions dealing with objective interaction with the world. It uses experiments and the process of trial and error to arrive at conclusions about the world. It tries not to make assumptions without a body of facts and evidence to support the assumptions. Science, in its many forms, can deal with many different types of questions, ranging from what makes people behave the way they do to what a distant star is made of.

Science, however, does not deal directly with questions of morality, such as how one should lead a good life or the nature of good and evil. Science can tell the reason for death, but not what happens after death. Religion, on the other hand, deals with what it calls absolute and eternal truth, and does so by generalization and by a leap of faith. This leap of faith, a belief in the unprovable, is perhaps the biggest distinction between science and religion.

Modern science has its roots in the Christian traditions of western Europe. For hundreds of years many of the truths of religions such as Christianity were largely accepted without question. By the mid-eighteenth century in Europe and America, however, critics had begun to question many of the biblical truths that were being interpreted, even by the faithful, as myths and fictions that were important on a symbolic or poetic level, rather than as historical fact. For example, early scientists and religious critics began questioning stories such as the Biblical account of the creation of the world. In 1650 an Irish bishop named James Ussher claimed that, based on the account in Genesis,

Earth was created on October 23, 4004 BCE. By the nineteenth century, geology (the study of rocks and natural structures) had developed enough to show that Earth was much older than the biblical creation story suggested. In 1859 naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published his influential work *On the Origin of Species*, which suggested that random acts, which he called natural selection, and not divine planning produced the many species on Earth. Darwin's second work, *The Descent of Man* (1871) took this idea a step further, applying it specifically to humankind. This was seen as an assault on the Bible's teachings that God created man in His image. So furious were the debates raised by these books that, by the end of the nineteenth century the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) could declare, "God is dead."

Nietzsche's declaration was premature; he was also speaking primarily of the West, Europe and the United States. In the twenty-first century, a large debate between science and religion, at least in the United States, continues to rage over evolution. Evolution is taught in schools, but many Christians believe that their belief should also be taught to students in science classes alongside evolution. Some Christians now argue for an intelligent design theory, with God as the designer and evolution the mechanism with which the design is carried out. The debate over whether intelligent design should be taught in science classes is one that many schools throughout the United States are dealing with in the early twenty-first century.

Despite such conflicts, however, there is no reason that both forms of thought, religious and scientific, cannot coexist. Science makes no claims to first causes. In their theories of the

## Sacred Days: Christmas

A religion often has as its sacred day the birth date or death date of its founder. December 25 is the day set aside for honoring the birth of Jesus in many, but not all, Christian traditions. The holiday is celebrated by many Christians as well as some non-Christians. But December 25 probably was not the actual birthdate of Jesus. Scriptural evidence suggests that Jesus was probably born in the spring or summer; that was the time the shepherds that Luke reports visiting the newborn Jesus would have been in the fields, watching over the young lambs. December 25, however, was a powerful day to incorporate into the new Christian religion. It had been, from earliest pagan times, a time of celebration, since it falls close to the winter solstice, the shortest day in the year. For the ancients, this was a turning point in the year, signaling the lengthening of days and the return of the sun. Prehistoric tribes and clans throughout Europe constructed sophisticated and enormous rock timepieces in the landscape, such as Stonehenge in England, to measure the fall of light at the winter and summer solstices.

In many cultures this all-important seasonal change has been a major festival day. In ancient Egypt the god Osiris was supposedly buried on the solstice. In ancient Greece it was called Lenaea and sacrifices were made, while in ancient Rome the Saturnalia was a week-long celebration that managed to blend all manner of earlier pagan celebrations from across Europe into one. Judaism has the eight-day festival Hanukkah, and Zoroastrianism gave modern Iran *Shabe-Yalda*, which celebrates the rebirth of the Sun. The concept of the rebirth of light or the coming of longer days and the Sun was a powerful symbol. The appropriation of the winter solstice for the Christian celebration of Christmas was a valuable development in the spreading of that religion.

development of the universe scientists do not say how the universe and everything in it was initially created. Such separate spheres of thought leave room for both systems to exist.

### The value of religion

Religion continues to be a vital force because it has value for people. For many, the value comes in the experience of something beyond the boundaries of day-to-day life. The religious experience is for them a valuable product of faith, linking them to a bigger universe and giving them hope of eternal life. Others find in their religion an opportunity for intellectual analysis of doctrines and teachings, while for others the value of religion comes in its teachings about leading a moral and ethical life.

Most religions teach some form of moderation, and this in turn puts limits on believers and makes society more stable. Part of this social control comes from the figures of authority in provided by each religion. Still others find comfort in the traditions of their religion, including architecture and music. In practical terms, religions have at times been responsible for founding educational institutions, hospitals, and charities, forming the backbone of social welfare networks throughout the world.

Religion also plays a large part in regulating acceptable moral behavior, and in implanting a sense of ethics, or proper behavior, and justice not only in the followers of that particular religion, but also in society as a whole. In fact, many observers divide a religion into two categories: its ethical teachings and its spiritual teachings. Examples abound for the moral teachings of religions. In the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which have a common source in the Prophet Abraham, there are similar codes of ethical behavior contained in basic rules, such as the Ten Commandments. Religions with their origins in Asia also have codes of moral behavior and right living, as seen in Buddhism's Five Precepts and Eightfold Path.

In addition to instructions for proper living, religions have also been responsible, in part, for the rule of law in society. Religious law was one of the early inspirations for secular or nonreligious legal codes. The Code of Hammurabi, the eighteenth-century BCE Babylonian code of law, takes as its inspiration the gods who put Hammurabi in power. In some cultures, the secular legal system is still highly influenced by religious law. This is true in some Islamic states, where religious law, *sharia*, is practiced. Additionally, some religious historians believe that the development of

monotheistic religions led to the creation of strong, centralized nation states, ruled first by kings, and later by elected officials. Thus, religion has had a major influence not only on the moral and ethical codes of societies, but also on their legal and governmental structures.

## For More Information

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