**What is religion?**

[*World Religions Reference Library*](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/eToc.do?inPS=true&prodId=GVRL&userGroupName=bchsp&searchType=&docId=GALE%7C0451)Ed. Julie L. Carnagie, Michael J. O'Neal, J. Sydney Jones, Marcia Merryman Means, Neil Schlager, and Jayne Weisblatt. Vol. 1: *Almanac*. Detroit: UXL, 2007. p1-17.

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.

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 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.

**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 Baháʾí, 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 Baháʾí 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 Daosim, 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.

**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 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 Siddartha 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.

What is religion? Reading questions.

1. How does the article say religion can be described?
2. Describe religion in your own words.
3. Where does the word religion come from? What does that word translate to mean? Which translation do you believe is correct and why?
4. Why might people turn towards religion when science cannot explain things?
5. Define salvation.

Modern religions. Reading questions.

1. Describe the early prehistoric religions.
2. Where did the earliest recorded religions emerge? (there are 3 places)
3. How do you think Judaism, a monotheistic religion, was “influenced” by two polytheistic religions?
4. Define pantheistic in your own words.
5. How are Christianity, Judaism, and Islam different than the Greek and Roman religions?

God has many names. Reading questions.

1. What religions consider Abraham a founder? What else could he be considered?
2. Describe the Christian Trinity.
3. How is Jainism different than Hinduism?
4. All of the major religions have “sects” or divisions. Why do you think this is true?
5. Why is Hinduism considered monotheistic?

Common characteristics of religions. Reading questions.

1. Define the word sacred.
2. Why do you think most religions have so many common characteristics?
3. Use the article to list 3 similarities between Christianity and Buddhism.
4. Use your prior knowledge to describe 3 similarities between Christianity and Islam.
5. Why do you think most people are drawn to the idea of salvation?