



A SIMPLE EXPLANATION OF WORLD RELIGIONS

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ISN'T RELIGION GOING AWAY?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people argued that society would become increasingly secular as science, technology, and global perspectives displace religion and its social and cultural significance. However, a recent study by the Pew Research Center shows that the opposite is occurring! As the *Washington Post* reported in an article titled “The World Is Expected to Become More Religious—Not Less,” religion will continue to rise across the globe and especially among Christian and Muslim adherents. While an increasing number of Americans claim no religious preference or describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” religion is growing steadily and strongly around the globe—and even in the United States.

Given the persistence and diversity of religion around the globe and in the United States, *A Simple Explanation of World Religions* provides a quick, accessible reference for understanding the world's major religions.

Jesus Christ has called us Christians to share His Gospel with all people (Matthew 28:18–20). One starting point for sharing the Gospel with people of different religious perspectives is to understand some basic information about each religion. Then, through prayer, conversation, thoughtful listening, a

relationship of trust, and, most important, the work of the Holy Spirit, we will be equipped to share the hope that we have in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:15).

Each religion summary includes current statistical information, a brief history of the origins and sacred texts, and the key concepts and teachings. After each summary, there is a brief explanation about the appeal of the religion for its adherents in answering a human need.

This guide also includes a Christian and biblical response to each religion by showing how Jesus Christ provides a better answer to human needs. While world religions may offer insight and wisdom from a human vantage point, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation come only in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

WHAT IS RELIGION?

While many people identify Hinduism or Islam as a religion, there is less agreement about Confucianism and Daoism, which appear more like philosophies than religions. And what about ideologies—like political ideologies—such as Marxism or Libertarianism?

Martin Luther taught that whenever we fear, love, and trust in anything other than the triune God, we have violated the First Commandment. Humans have a tendency to make the things of this world into gods and idols.

For Christians, however, faith is *not* placed in a human religion, ideology, or philosophy. Faith is also *not* in achieving human righteousness through hard effort or right belief. Instead, faith holds to the gift of God's righteousness made possible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Titus 3:4–7).

As Simeon declared upon seeing baby Jesus in the temple, “My eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Your people Israel” (Luke 2:30–32).

This guide focuses on the major religions and (religious) philosophies of the world that differ from Christianity: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Judaism, and Islam. These major world religions were selected because of their large number of adherents, their enduring history over hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and their continued practice around the globe.

According to the World Religion Database, Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with about 32 percent of the world's population in 2020. Christians are located across the globe, and their largest concentration is in these countries: United States (244 million), Brazil (194 million), Mexico (128 million), Russia (118 million), and China (106 million).

Christianity remains a very large, global religion, with tremendous numerical growth in the Global South (Asia, Africa, and Latin America). As a global religion, Christianity is culturally diverse, but it can be generally categorized by its four main branches: Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Pentecostalism. For more on the differences in Christian denominations, consider *A Simple Explanation of Christian Denominations*, published by Concordia Publishing House.

This guide should serve as a starting point and reference for further study of each religion. For a more detailed explanation of many of the major world religions, consider *The Christian Difference: An Explanation and Comparison of World Religions* published by Concordia Publishing House. For more information on world religions today, see the World Religions Database and the Pew Research Center, which were used as the sources for the statistical and demographic data in this guide.

HINDUISM

HINDUISM IN TODAY'S WORLD

Hinduism is the third-largest religion, with approximately 1.1 billion Hindus in the world. The overwhelm-



ing majority of Hindus today live in India, but there are Hindu populations all across the globe, including 20 million Hindus in Nepal, over 15 million in Bangladesh, 4 million in Indonesia, and over 1 million in the United States and South Africa.

ORIGINS AND SACRED TEXTS

Hinduism traces its history back to the Indus Valley Civilization in 3000 BC. The concept of what it means to be a Hindu has evolved with time. The Vedas (“sacred knowledge”) are the oldest sacred scriptures of Hinduism. The Vedas consist primarily of liturgies, mantras, prayers, and chants used by priests in Hindu ritual practice. The Brahmanas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita are additional sacred texts.

KEY CONCEPTS AND TEACHINGS

Hindu gods and goddesses

Hindus worship many gods, and yet most Hindus also believe that all the gods represent one ultimate essence of the universe. The creator god is Brahma, but the three most popular Hindu deities are Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi. Hindu gods are said to appear over time as avatars like Krishna. The elephant-headed deity Ganesh is evoked as the god who removes obstacles.

The Hindu caste system

Hinduism has four classes of people: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors, kings), Vaishyas (artisans and merchants), and Shudras (laborers). The Harijans are people outside of the caste system, such as the Dalits (downtrodden) and untouchables.

Cycle of life, death, and rebirth

Hindus believe in a cycle of life, death, and rebirth called *samsara* (“wandering through”). The cycle is fueled by *karma* or actions. Individuals benefit from good actions and experience devastating consequences from bad actions. Some consequences for karma are experienced immediately, but ultimately karma will determine a better or worse rebirth. As a result, *samsara* is considered a burden or a trap. The goal is to be liberated from *samsara*. Hindus refer to this liberation as *moksha* (“to free, release”).

How to escape from rebirth and death

There are three ways to attain *moksha*. These are referred to as disciplines or *yogas*.

1. By pursuing moral and ritual action (*karma*), humans achieve *moksha*.
2. By pursuing the path of wisdom (*jnana*), humans achieve *moksha* by attaining knowledge that the essence of the divine is the same essence of the human.

3. By pursuing devotion to a Hindu god or goddess (*bhakti*), humans achieve moksha. Hindus will show piety to a deity with the hope that the god or goddess will respond favorably.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi was an inspirational Hindu leader in the twentieth century. Gandhi's life was deeply shaped by the Bhagavad Gita, a cherished sacred text in the Hindu tradition. Gandhi's advocacy of peaceful, nonviolent action to overcome political oppression led to the liberation of India from British colonial rule. Many non-Hindus were indebted to Gandhi's principles of nonviolent action, such as Rosa Parks, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero.

THE APPEAL OF HINDUISM

Hindus believe the problem with the world is *samsara* (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth). Hinduism offers three different ways for achieving a release from this cycle: action, wisdom, or devotion. As a result, Hindus achieve success in this life (and, they believe, in their reincarnated future) by following the sacred Hindu teachings and practices to produce good karma.