

Lesson 3: World Religions

Introduction:

By 500 B.C.E., the roots of the world's great religious traditions were emerging in the Middle East, India, and China. Judaism was well established in the Middle East, and later Christianity and Islam developed there. Hinduism and Buddhism arose in India. And China developed Confucianism, a philosophy that became a state religion.

All these religions are unique, but they also have key elements in common. They all set down basic ethical principles to guide human actions. They use sacred texts to teach moral values, often through stories or parables. They offer a universal message that appealed to people in different places and with diverse cultural backgrounds.



This broad appeal and emphasis on ethics made the new faiths different from earlier religions. Previously, most religions had been local, based on the worship of gods and spirits associated with particular places. They involved rituals, such as animal sacrifice, that were designed to appease the gods and win their favor. People looked to the gods to help them in their daily lives, to bring prosperity and protect them from their enemies.

In contrast, universal religions look beyond this world and its practical needs. They offer the hope of a better life and access to a higher truth. Because these religions are “portable”—because they can be practiced anywhere—they were able to spread to other parts of the world. In this way, they became world religions.

In this lesson, you will read about the six major world religions. You will learn about their origins, basic beliefs, and practices. You will also see how they spread beyond their lands of origin to influence human society around the world.

Themes

Cultural Interaction Religions spread cultural ideas and also changed as they expanded around the world. Their interaction with other cultures and belief systems was sometimes peaceful and sometimes not.

Political Structures World religions influenced rulers and political systems. Some religious institutions exercised great power.

Economic Structures Some religious institutions amassed great wealth. An emphasis on charity helped people in need.

Social Structures Religions influenced social systems such as families and schools. In some cases, they reinforced social classes. In others, they helped break down class barriers.

2. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

The world religions that arose in the Middle East—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—share some common traits. The most important is **monotheism**, the belief in a single, all-powerful God. They also believe in prophets, holy people who revealed the word of God. One important prophet in these religions is Abraham, known as the father of the Jewish people.

Judaism: Origins and Development The early history of Judaism is shrouded in the mists of time. Most scholars believe, however, that Abraham was a real person who was born some 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. According to Jewish scripture, God visited Abraham one day and made a sacred agreement, or **covenant**, with him. Abraham promised that he and his descendants would follow God's teachings and God promised to love them. Abraham's descendants were known as the Israelites, sometimes called the Hebrews. They were the ancestors of the Jewish people.

According to the **Torah**, Abraham and his family moved to Canaan, later called the Land of Israel, a region of land along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. His descendants later formed the twelve tribes of Israel. The tribes traveled to Egypt to escape a famine. The Torah says that they were enslaved by the Egyptians for generations and that God performed miracles to free them. On the return from Egypt, the prophet Moses had a vision of God while praying at Mount Sinai. There, according to scripture, Moses revealed God's laws on stone tablets. These laws, which included the Ten Commandments, would form the basis of Judaism.

The Israelites settled again in Canaan, which they regarded as their "promised land." By 1000 B.C.E., they established the Kingdom of Israel, led by kings who united the tribes of Israel. The second of these rulers, King David, made the city of Jerusalem the capital of the kingdom. His son, King Solomon, built the Temple, the most sacred place in Judaism, there.

When Solomon died, in about 930 B.C.E., the Kingdom of Israel separated into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Both were later invaded and conquered. The kingdom of Israel was conquered in 722 B.C.E. by the Assyrians. In 597 B.C.E., the Babylonians invaded Judah and attacked Jerusalem, then the capital of Judah. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. Most of the people of Judah, now known as Jews, were forced into exile. The Babylonian Exile was the start of the **Jewish Diaspora** (die-AS-pur-ruh). From this time on, the Jewish people were dispersed across the Middle East and beyond. Other invaders, including the Romans, later occupied their land and caused more Jews to leave. Nevertheless, the Jewish religion survived. Jews both within the Land of Israel and throughout the Diaspora maintained strong connections to their homeland, stressing its importance and facing toward Jerusalem in their daily prayers.

Jewish religious leaders called *rabbis*, which literally means "teachers," were crucial to the survival of Judaism. They preserved Jewish teachings and discussed ways to apply these teachings to new situations that Jews encountered. The early rabbis recorded Jewish traditions. This record eventually became the Talmud, which together with the Hebrew Bible forms the foundation of Jewish religious practice and ethical values. It includes some of Judaism's most famous quotes, such as "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah; all the rest of it is commentary; go and study it."

The Beliefs of Judaism The central teachings of Judaism are contained in the Torah, which makes up the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah contains the Ten Commandments, along with other teachings handed down by God to Moses.

The first commandment is central to Judaism. It says, "You shall have no other gods before Me." This law reminds Jews of their promise to worship only one God. Judaism transmitted the idea of monotheism to the rest of the world. It contrasted with the **polytheism**, or worship of many gods, which was typical of other religions at the time. Another commandment requires Jews to set aside a holy day each week, called the Sabbath, for rest and prayer. This requirement later became a custom among Christians, too.

Other commandments in the Torah lay down moral values. One says, "Honor your father and mother." Others forbid stealing, lying, or murdering. The Torah says that Jews have a responsibility to live by God's moral teachings and make them known to the world.

Judaism also stresses the importance of equality and social justice. It teaches that God considers all people equal and says that people should be treated fairly. One passage says, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor." Caring for less fortunate people in society is a basic value in Judaism.

The Spread and Influence of Judaism The troubles faced by the Jews as a result of the Diaspora threatened their survival as a people. Cut off from their roots in Israel, they had to find ways to maintain their traditions in foreign lands. For example, praying together in synagogues became a central feature of Judaism. At times, the Jews faced great persecution for their customs and beliefs.

Nevertheless, Jewish migration from Israel also helped spread the ideas of Judaism. Over the centuries, Jews settled in many parts of the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. They also made their way to Asia and, eventually, to the Americas. Although Judaism was not adopted widely among other cultures or peoples, Jews built strong communities around the world that helped preserve their culture and religion. They continued religious practices, such as studying the Torah and observing the Sabbath, that helped keep Judaism alive.

The teachings of Judaism have had a great impact on the world. The principle of monotheism influenced two other great religious traditions, Christianity and Islam. Judaism's moral teachings and its idea of a weekly day of rest were also important influences. The emphasis on ethical conduct influenced the development of law in many lands. Jewish ideas of justice and equality also helped nurture the concept of democratic freedoms.



Christianity: Origins and Development The second world religion to emerge in the Middle East was Christianity. The birthplace of Christianity was a territory at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The Romans called it Judea. It had once been a part of the ancient Kingdom of Israel. The first Christians were Jews and maintained many Jewish beliefs. They worshiped one God, valued taking care of the needy, recognized Abraham as a prophet, and believed the Hebrew Bible was holy. But Christianity soon developed its own doctrine and a much larger following.

The origins of Christianity lay in the life and teachings of Jesus, considered by Christians to be the Son of God. The story of Jesus is based largely on accounts in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Born in the Roman province of Judea about 6 B.C.E., Jesus was a Jewish teacher. When he was around 30 years old, he left home to travel across Judea and teach the word of God.

Jesus taught that God was merciful and loving and that people should love God and their neighbors. He said that those who lived according to God's will would be forgiven their sins and relieved of suffering. The Christian Bible says that Jesus healed the sick and performed other miracles. In the process, he gained many followers. Among them were twelve special disciples known as the apostles, who were given the task of spreading Jesus' message.

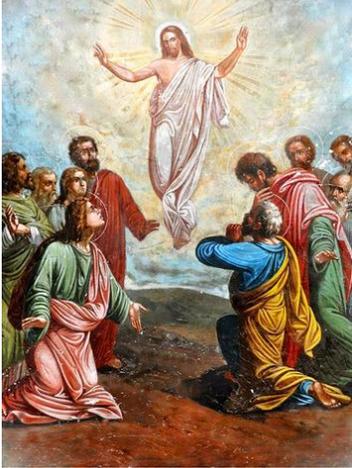
Soon, some people began calling Jesus the Messiah, or "anointed one," chosen by God to save humankind. He later became known as Christ, the Greek term for *Messiah*. The Roman authorities who ruled Judea saw Jesus as a troublemaker, however. They feared that he might spark a rebellion among the Jews. They arrested him and sentenced him to death.

The New Testament of the Christian Bible tells that around 30 C.E. Jesus was put to death by crucifixion, a common form of execution used by the Romans. According to the New Testament, friends placed his body in tomb. The New

Testament says that three days later Jesus rose from the dead and then appeared to his disciples. Christians call this event the **Resurrection**.

For Christians, the Resurrection proved that Jesus was a holy savior. They said that anyone who recognized him as the Messiah would enter the Kingdom of God. Although the Romans often persecuted Christians, Christianity gradually spread throughout the empire. Paul, who was named an apostle after Jesus' death, played a key role by bringing non-Jews into the faith.

Eventually Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Over time, the Roman Catholic Church became rich and powerful. The Christian faith later divided into Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant branches. But Christianity as a whole continued to expand.



The Beliefs of Christianity The Christian holy book is the Bible. It consists of two parts. The Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible, which Christians recognize as the word of God. The New Testament is a collection of stories and teachings written by various people who knew Jesus or played key roles in the early Christian church. The New Testament contains the Gospels, which are accounts of Jesus' life and teachings.

Christian doctrine is complex, with many different interpretations. But several key ideas are found among almost all Christians. One of these is the Trinity. According to Christian teaching, God consists of three beings in one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in a union known as the Trinity. Christians believe that God the father is the creator of the universe. They believe that God the son is Jesus, known to his followers as Jesus Christ. And they believe that the Holy Spirit is God's presence and power at work in the world today.

Christianity also teaches about the Resurrection and salvation. They believe that Jesus rose from the dead and lives in heaven. They also believe that God can save people from sin and grant them everlasting life after death. This belief is called salvation. Many Christians believe that salvation depends on God's grace, which is God's gift of love and divine assistance which absolves people of their sins. This gift is said to be open to all who believe in Jesus and ask for God's forgiveness.

Christians practice their faith by trying to follow Christ's moral teachings and by observing certain customs and rituals. Many go to church on Sunday to worship and pray. They may also perform sacred rituals called sacraments. One sacrament is baptism, which makes a person a member of the Christian church. Another is Holy Communion, the symbolic sharing of bread and wine. This ritual mirrors the Last Supper, the final meal the New Testament says that Jesus had with his disciples. Christians also take part in holidays and festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, which celebrate the birth and Resurrection of Jesus.

The Spread and Influence of Christianity By the first century C.E., Christianity had spread to many parts of the Roman Empire. In later centuries, it also gained followers in Persia, China, and India. Christian missionaries carried the faith to Africa and the Americas. Today, Christianity is the most widely practiced religion in the world, with some two billion followers worldwide.

The spread of Christianity was not always peaceful, however. Although millions of people converted to the new religion, others resisted. Conversion was sometimes accomplished by force. Christians and Muslims, in particular, clashed over their religious beliefs. In many cases, Christianity also adapted to local cultures. In Latin America, for example, Christian beliefs blended with native traditions, producing a faith that was more meaningful to the local population.



Over the centuries, Christianity has had a great impact on culture and society. As with Judaism, Christian ethics have influenced codes of law in many countries. Christian charity has helped millions of poor and suffering people. The power of Christian belief and institutions has also influenced politics and government. Throughout history, many rulers have depended on the support of Christian churches to gain and hold power.

Islam: Origins and Development Islam emerged in the Middle East in the 600s C.E., centuries after Judaism and Christianity. It grew rapidly, however, and soon became one of the world's major religions. Islam was taught by Muhammad, who was born in Mecca, in Arabia, in around 570 C.E. At the time, Mecca was an important trade center and pilgrimage site. A shrine in the heart of Mecca, called the Ka'bah, was filled with statues of local gods and spirits.

Muhammad became a successful and respected merchant. As the years passed, however, he was increasingly drawn to spiritual matters. One day in about 610 C.E., according to Islamic teachings, Muhammad was meditating in a cave when an angel appeared before him and revealed the word of Allah, or God. The angel told him he had been chosen as Allah's prophet, or messenger.

Around 613 C.E., Muhammad began to preach in Mecca. He called on Arabs to worship the one, true God. In Arabic, the word *Islam* means "to submit." Muhammad's followers became known as Muslims, meaning "those who submit to God."

Many local leaders saw Islam as a threat to their power and prestige, however, and began to persecute the Muslims. In 622, Muhammad and his followers left Mecca and traveled to the city of Medina. There, his teachings continued to gain a following among the Arab tribes. By 630, the Muslims were strong enough to retake Mecca and establish Islam as the dominant faith of Arabia. They destroyed the statues of gods in the Ka'bah and turned it into a holy shrine of Islam.

Muhammad died in 632. But the Muslim leaders who followed continued to win converts and expand the religion. By 750, Islam had moved beyond Arabia to become the main religion of the Middle East and North Africa. It also spread to Spain, Central Asia, and India.

The Beliefs of Islam Muslims recognize the Jewish and Christian prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But they regard Muhammad as the last and greatest prophet who revealed the complete message of God. They believe that the **Qur'an**, the Muslim holy book, contains the word of God as revealed to Muhammad.

Muslims also revere the **Sunnah**, the example Muhammad set for how Muslims should live. The Sunnah is recorded in a collection of stories called *Hadith*, which describe Muhammad's actions and teachings.

The required acts of worship for Muslims are called the Five Pillars of Islam. The first pillar is the profession of faith: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet." This pillar emphasizes the duty Muslims have to worship one God only.



The second pillar is daily prayer. Muslims are expected to pray five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and after nightfall. They kneel before God and recite verses from the Qur'an. Prayer does not have to take place at a mosque, or place of worship, but can be performed anywhere.

The third pillar is charity. Muhammad told the wealthy to share their riches with the less fortunate. Muslims are supposed to give at least 2.5 percent of their surplus wealth every year to the needy. The Qur'an says: "You will never attain righteousness until you give freely of what you love."

The fourth pillar is fasting. The Qur'an instructs Muslims to abstain from food or drink during daylight hours for the entire month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. Fasting is meant to encourage self-control and clear the mind so that it can be filled with the spirit of faith.

The fifth pillar is the pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, which takes place in the twelfth month of the year. This pilgrimage promotes fellowship and equality among believers. The Hajj is not required, but all Muslims are encouraged to undertake it at least once in their lifetime.

The Spread and Influence of Islam Islam continued to extend its influence over the next several centuries. It spread east across South Asia to the islands of Indonesia. It moved north into Turkey and the Balkans region of Europe. It also expanded rapidly along the east coast of Africa and into the African interior, south of the Sahara.

Islam was a missionary religion, seeking to win converts, particularly in areas where polytheism prevailed. Muslims sometimes waged "holy war," clashing with followers of other religions, including Christians. But they also respected Christians and Jews as people of faith and often lived alongside them in peace.

Today, with over a billion followers, Islam is the second largest religion in the world. More than a religion, however, it is a way of life. In Muslim lands, Islam has had a profound impact on culture, society, and politics. Shari'ah, Islamic law based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, provides guidance on all aspects of life, from clothing and food to education and finance. Shari'ah also forms the basis of legal codes in many Muslim countries.

3. Hinduism and Buddhism

Ancient India gave birth to two major world religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. Both had common roots in the Vedas, a collection of religious hymns, poems, and prayers composed in the Sanskrit language thousands of years ago.

Hinduism: Origins and Development The origins of Hinduism go back to the second millennium B.C.E. The religion had no clear starting point or founder, however. It developed over the centuries by drawing from India's many religious and cultural traditions. It incorporated ideas from the ancient Indus River civilization and from a nomadic people called the Aryans, who entered India from Central Asia sometime during the 1000s B.C.E.

Modern-day Hinduism is a very complex religion. Many beliefs, forms of worship, and deities, or gods, exist side by side, and often differ from place to place. The Vedas, to which Hinduism traces its early roots, remain sacred to many Hindus today.

Most scholars believe that the Aryans brought the first Vedas with them to India. Like most ancient peoples, the Aryans worshipped many gods. They used the Vedas—a form of sacred oral literature—to address the gods and sing their praise. They also performed elaborate rituals that were meant to please the gods and keep the universe in balance. The priests who carried out these rituals exercised great power and influence. As Vedic religion spread across India, it blended with local beliefs and customs. Over time, it evolved into what we now call Hinduism.



Vedic religion called for the division of society into four main social classes. The top class was the Brahmins, or priests. Next came the Kshatriyas (KSHA-tree-uhs), the rulers and warriors. The third class was the Vaishyas (VIESH-yuhs), the herders and merchants. At the bottom were the Shudras (SHOO-druhs), the servants, farmers, and laborers. This basic social structure would eventually develop into the much larger **caste** system of India, which includes thousands of sub-groups within these four main classes.

Sometime after 1000 B.C.E., religious seekers in India began to take Vedic religion in a new direction. They sought a more personal faith that did not require complicated rituals and the intervention of priests. They used meditation and other forms of spiritual practice to achieve a deeper, more mystical religious experience. These ideas—expressed in a new set of texts called the *Upanishads*—became an important element of Hinduism.



In addition, two epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, also appeared around this time. They told stories about Hindu gods, kings, and heroes. They conveyed religious and philosophical ideas and provided a model for Hindu life. These new works joined the Vedas and *Upanishads* as part of the body of sacred Hindu literature.

The Beliefs of Hinduism The Hindu belief system is highly complex. It does not conform to a uniform set of ideas or practices. Nevertheless, certain basic elements are common to most schools of Hindu thought.

One element is polytheism. Hindus believe in multiple gods and goddesses that control different aspects of the universe. Some people devote themselves to a particular god or goddess, saying prayers and leaving offerings in the hope of gaining divine help. Many Hindus believe that the various gods and goddesses are forms of a single, supreme, and divine force called Brahman. The goal of many Hindus is to unite their soul, or *atman*, with Brahman.

Hindus believe that time moves in a great circle, like a giant wheel. Events repeat themselves, just as the seasons do. Birth, life, and death are part of this cycle. When people die, their soul is said to be reborn in a different body. This cycle of rebirth, called reincarnation, is a key feature of Hindu belief.

Two other basic elements are dharma and karma. **Dharma** stands for law, duty, and obligation. Every Hindu has a dharma that reflects his or her caste in Indian society. People follow their dharma by performing their duties and living in an honorable way. Living honorably includes observing common social values, such as nonviolence and charity toward others.

Karma refers to a person's actions and the consequence of their actions. The law of karma says that people who live properly will have good karma and be reborn to a higher caste. Those who fail to live a proper life will have bad karma and be reborn to a lower caste, perhaps even as animals.

The ultimate goal of Hindu belief is to escape reincarnation entirely. Devout Hindus believe that by living a spiritual life, they can free themselves from karma and attain *moksha*, or release, thus merging their soul with Brahman and ending the cycle of rebirth.

The Spread and Influence of Hinduism Unlike Christianity and Islam, Hinduism did not spread far beyond its land of origin. Although its values are universal in many ways, Hinduism is strongly linked to Indian culture. Nevertheless, through trade and migration, Hindu beliefs and customs did spread to many parts of Southeast Asia. There they blended with local traditions and ways of life. Today, there are around 900 million followers of Hinduism, most of them in South Asia.

Hindu beliefs are deeply woven into Indian society. So are Hindu festivals and the devotion to Hindu gods. Many Indians make religious pilgrimages to holy sites, such as Varanasi, where they purify themselves in the waters of the Ganges River. At the same time, certain Hindu ideas and practices, such as yoga, have also gained a following around the world.



Buddhism: Origins and Development Buddhism embraced the ideas of karma and reincarnation. But it did not emphasize complex rituals, the caste system, or polytheism. Instead, it focused on the search for enlightenment, or pure wisdom.

Buddhism arose from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (si-DAHR-tuh GOW-tuh-muh), who became the Buddha, or “enlightened one.” Siddhartha lived from about 563 to 483 B.C.E. According to tradition, he was born into a ruling

family in northern India. As a youth, he enjoyed the privileged life of a prince. When he was 29 years old, however, he stepped outside his palace and saw the pain and suffering of the world. He was shocked by the reality of poverty, disease, and death. Soon after, he left his comfortable life to wander across India in search of a greater truth.

Like many Indian mystics at the time, Siddhartha sought to achieve a higher consciousness through meditation and ascetic practices. (To be ascetic means to give up worldly pleasures.) According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha fasted to the point of starvation. After several years, however, he had still not attained the release he was seeking. He concluded that the path to truth could not be found in either the life of a prince or an ascetic. He decided to seek a “middle way” to enlightenment between the extremes of pleasure and pain.

Buddhist tradition says that Siddhartha sat down under a large fig tree—known as a bodhi tree—and began to meditate. This went on for many days. Then one night, he reached a new level of consciousness. He envisioned his past lives and the effects of karma. He shed his desires and became enlightened. By morning, he had attained **nirvana**—a state of happiness and peace—and had become the Buddha.

Although he had attained his goal and could now rest, Siddhartha felt a duty to help others. He began to teach his ideas and soon gained a following. Gradually, Buddhism began to spread across northern India.



The Beliefs of Buddhism The basic teachings of Buddhism are known as the Four Noble Truths. These principles form the core of Buddhist thought.

The first Noble Truth says, “Suffering is present in all things, and nothing lasts forever.” Disease, loss, and death are inevitable. Ignoring or denying this truth only leads to more suffering. A Buddhist should recognize this reality and offer kindness and compassion to those who suffer.

The second truth says, “The cause of suffering is desire.” This means that the desire for pleasure, power, or possessions gives rise to suffering. Emotional attachment is another form of desire.

The third truth says, “Removing desire removes suffering.” Buddhism teaches that the only way to end suffering is to eliminate desire.

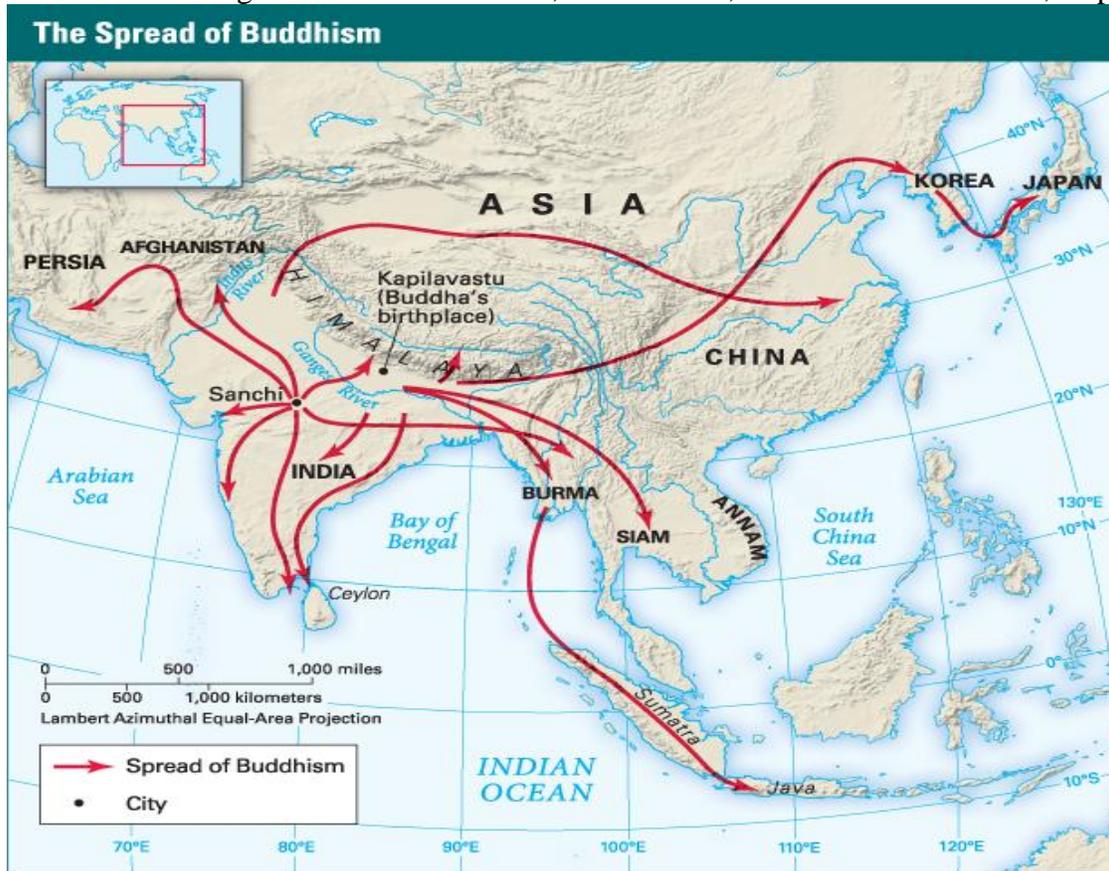
The fourth truth says, “The way to remove desire is to follow the Eightfold Path.” The Eightfold Path is a set of guidelines to achieve enlightenment. These are the eight guidelines:

1. Right understanding: Deeply understand the Four Noble Truths.
2. Right purpose: Live a life of selflessness, love, and nonviolence.
3. Right speech: Be careful and truthful in what you say.
4. Right action: Do not kill, steal, lie, or hurt others.
5. Right livelihood: Earn a living in ways that do no harm.

6. Right effort: Promote good actions and prevent evil actions.
7. Right mindfulness: Be aware of but not attached to your emotions, thoughts, or feelings.
8. Right concentration: Focus your mind with practices such as meditation.

At the heart of Buddhist teachings is the idea that all things change. Even when one finds pleasure in life, it does not last forever, and one suffers when it is gone. The Eightfold Path offers a way to end suffering and find peace. This path follows the “middle way.”

The Spread and Influence of Buddhism At first, Buddhist ideas spread slowly among religious seekers in India. In the 200s B.C.E., however, the Emperor Ashoka helped popularize Buddhism. Buddhist missionaries and traders carried the faith across South Asia and beyond. Although Hinduism remained dominant in India, Buddhism became the leading faith of Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and China. From China, it spread to Korea and Japan.

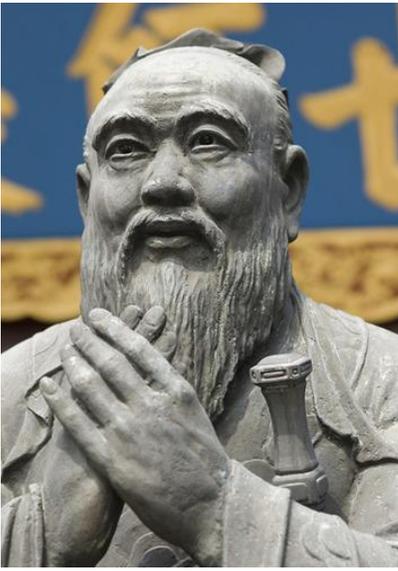


As it expanded, Buddhism took on new forms by adapting to local customs and traditions. It divided into two major branches, Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada thrived in southern Asia and represented a more traditional style of Buddhism. Mahayana, which developed in northern Asia, embraced newer ideas. One form of Chinese Buddhism evolved in Japan to become Zen Buddhism, a form that emphasized meditation.

Buddhism had a great impact wherever it went. Buddhists opened monasteries to promote the study and spread of Buddhist thought, which in turn influenced society and government. Many monasteries became wealthy and powerful through large donations of money and land. Faced with this growing power, Chinese rulers cracked down on the Buddhist faith in 845 C.E. But Buddhism continued to grow in other parts of Asia.

Today, Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world, with 350 million followers. Buddhist teachings on nonviolence and respect for the natural world have influenced social and political movements worldwide.

4. Confucianism



While Buddhism was emerging in India, Confucianism was taking root in China. In many ways, Confucianism was less a religion than a philosophy and way of life. Nevertheless, it became an official faith with a devout following among the Chinese people.

Confucianism: Origins and Development Confucianism is based on the teachings of Kongfuzi, whose Western name was Confucius (kuhn-FYOO-shus). Confucius lived from around 551 to 479 B.C.E., during the same era as the Buddha. Like the Buddha, he became a great teacher whose ideas influenced the lives of millions of people.

Confucius was born in the small state of Lu, in eastern China. At the time, China was in turmoil. The central government had lost control and civil wars ravaged the land. For many Chinese, this was a sign that their ruler had lost the **Mandate of Heaven**. According to this belief, a ruler held power with the support of heavenly spirits. If the ruler governed poorly, heaven withdrew its support and the ruler lost power.

As a young man, Confucius applied himself to learning, focusing on the classics of Chinese literature and philosophy. He believed that a revival of traditional Chinese culture would help restore order in society and promote harmony between earth and heaven.

Confucius became a famous teacher with a devoted following of student disciples. His main goal, however, was to influence government. He held several minor positions in the state of Lu, but he gained little backing for his ideas. During his fifties, he left Lu and wandered from state to state, seeking a wise ruler who would put his teachings into practice.

After 13 years and many hardships, Confucius returned home in disappointment. He continued to study and teach until his death, at age 73. Although he had failed to win official support during his lifetime, however, his ideas steadily gained favor after his death. Over the centuries, they had a profound impact on Chinese life.

The Beliefs of Confucianism The ancient Chinese worshiped many gods and spirits, including the spirits of their dead ancestors, who were said to look down from heaven. Confucius honored these beliefs. He said that his teachings came from heaven. But his focus was on human society and life on earth. As he put it, “If we are not yet able to understand life and to serve humanity, how can we understand death and serve spirits?”



Confucius believed that building a better, more harmonious society would bring humans closer to heaven. To do this, he said, people should follow ethical guidelines to improve their relations with others. The main guideline was to live a life of virtue. The most important virtue was *ren*, which means “benevolence” or “humanity.” Confucius urged people to treat others as they would like to be treated themselves, with respect and kindness. “What you do not want done to yourself,” he said, “do not do to others.”

According to Confucianism, there are five basic relationships in society: between parent and child, husband and wife, older sibling and younger sibling, friend and friend, and ruler and subject. The most important relationship is between parent and child. Confucius said that **filial piety**—respect of children for their parents—was critical to the social order. He said that people should respect and obey those with higher social status, particularly their elders. In return, people in authority, such as parents and rulers, should set a good example. They should be kind, honest, wise, and faithful.

Despite this emphasis on social categories, Confucius urged respect for all people, regardless of social class. He stood up for the rights of the common people and accepted students from all walks of life, rich or poor. He called for universal education to benefit all of society.

The Spread and Influence of Confucianism After Confucius’s death, his disciples collected his teachings in book called the *Analects*, which helped spread his ideas throughout China. Other scholars advanced the principles of Confucianism.

Chinese rulers later adopted Confucianism as a state **ideology**—a basic set of ideas, beliefs, and values. Knowledge of the Confucian classics became the basis of the state civil service exam. Confucian ethics became enmeshed in Chinese culture. School children memorized his sayings, and temples were erected in his memory. Some Chinese even worshipped Confucius as a god. In effect, Confucianism became a state religion.

Confucian ideas also spread to other parts of Asia. Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia were all strongly influenced by Confucianism. Today, Confucian ethics remain an important part of Asian culture.

5. The Impact of World Religions

The growth and spread of world religions had a great impact on society. Many effects were specific to particular cultures or regions, such as the influence of the Hindu caste system on India and Confucian ethics on China. But other effects were more global in nature. These broad effects cut across cultural lines to influence human society in general.

Global Effects on Society World religions helped shape society and culture in various ways. One key factor was the creation of large communities of people with shared beliefs. Before the rise of universal religions, most people had worshiped local gods in small communities. Because the new, universal religions had broad appeal and could be practiced anywhere, they produced much larger communities of believers.

These communities were linked by common belief systems and ethical values that helped people live together. They also brought economic and political benefits to their members. For example, Muslim traders did business with other Muslims in distant lands. They built large trade networks based on religious ties. Jewish communities provided strength and support, which helped Jews maintain their identity despite discrimination and periods of oppression. Early Christians helped each other survive in the face of Roman persecution.



World religions gave strength to people undergoing hardship and difficulties. They gave meaning to daily life and offered the hope of a better afterlife. Believers gained spiritual peace from prayer, meditation, and other religious practices. People in need also got aid and support from religious institutions. An emphasis on charity and caring brought comfort to the poor and afflicted in society.

World religions also influenced social and political structures. Rulers and religious leaders often worked together to uphold the existing social and political order. Religious establishments supported rulers in return for official backing and protection. Churches often counseled believers to accept their place in society. They told them that faith and patience in this life would bring rewards in heaven.

At the same time, religious ideas also prompted social and political change. People sometimes rebelled against rulers who failed to uphold moral laws. Religious ethics also gave rise to legal codes that applied to everyone, regardless of social class. The Judeo-Christian idea that everyone was equal in the eyes of God supported the principle of democratic equality. Women, who were often portrayed as inferior to men, even gained some rights through religion. Islam, for example, guaranteed women's property and inheritance rights. Christian monasteries provided a refuge for women.

Religion also had a strong impact on art and culture. It helped spread cultural ideas and values around the world. Many great works of art—from cathedrals and temples to paintings and music—were inspired by religious faith. Religion also promoted literacy by encouraging people to read sacred texts. In this way, it expanded education and learning. In addition, religion influenced many cultural celebrations, holidays, and festivals. These events often merged religious beliefs with local customs and traditions.



Cultural and Religious Interactions As world religions expanded, they came into contact with diverse peoples and cultures. In the process, they adapted and changed. As Buddhism spread across Asia, for example, it absorbed many local customs. Regional variations of Buddhism developed in China, Tibet, Japan, and Southeast Asia. In some places, Buddhists continued to worship ancient, pre-Buddhist spirits. Shrines to these spirits even existed inside Buddhist temples.

Christianity also evolved as it spread across the Roman Empire. It blended Greek, Roman, and Germanic customs with its Jewish heritage. The celebration of Christmas, for example, combined Christian and pre-Christian beliefs. Christmas day was set on the date of an ancient feast day and celebration of the sun.

As they expanded, world religions also came into contact with each other. Sometimes the result was conflict. During the Crusades, Christians and Muslims fought over control of the eastern Mediterranean, especially the city of Jerusalem, which both saw as holy. Muslims also attacked Hindus as idol-worshippers during their conquest of India. Often, however, world religions coexisted. Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in the Muslim Empire. Buddhist and Confucian ideas mixed in China. Hinduism and Buddhism mingled in Southeast Asia.

Summary

In this lesson, you read about the six major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. You learned about their origins and basic beliefs. You also learned how they spread to different parts of the world and influenced human society.

Cultural Interaction Religions spread new ideas and values as they expanded. They also adapted to local customs and beliefs. Religions also interacted, in both peaceful and violent ways. Religious beliefs and practices blended in many parts of the world.

Political Structures Religion and government often worked hand in hand. Religions influenced political systems by lending support to governments and rulers. Some religious institutions exercised great power in their own right. At times, religious believers also challenged rulers and rebelled against political authority. Religious ethics provided a basis for laws in many countries. Religions sometimes provoked conflict, violence, and wars, and other times they inspired cooperation, benevolence, and the quest for peace and justice.

Economic Structures Religions exercised economic power as well. The Catholic Church and Buddhist monasteries amassed great wealth and large land holdings. Religions also provided help to the poor and others in need. Charity toward others was a basic religious value. Religions have typically challenged the idea that the accumulation of wealth and possessions will by itself lead to human happiness.

Social Structures Religions helped support the social order by urging compliance with authority and the social class system. But religions also undermined class distinctions by emphasizing the basic equality of all believers. Religious ethics sometimes upheld the rights of women and the poor and other times preserved patterns of discrimination and oppression.