World Religions

How have religions influenced human society?

Introduction

The city of Jerusalem has holy sites belonging to three world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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

All of these religions are unique, but they have key elements in common. They all set down basic ethical principles to guide human actions. They use sacred texts to teach moral values, through stories, known as parables. They also offer a message that has appealed to people in different places and with diverse cultural backgrounds.
This broad appeal and emphasis on ethics made the new faiths quite different from earlier religions. Previously, most religions had been local and 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 to protect them from their enemies.

In contrast, world 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”—they can be easily 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.

1. Judaism

Judaism was the earliest world religion to arise in the Middle East. Unlike other religions of the time, one of Judaism’s core traits was monotheism, the belief in a single, all-powerful God. Those that practice Judaism also believe in prophets, holy people who receive the word of God and pass this message on to the people. One important prophet is Abraham, known as the father of the Jewish people.

**Origins and Development of Judaism** Most scholars believe that Abraham 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 and his descendants. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and that they would become a great nation. Abraham, in return, promised that he and his descendants would follow God’s teachings. Abraham and his children became known as Hebrews, and his later descendants were called the Israelites. These were the ancestors of the Jews.
Military defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and the Romans contributed to the exile of many Jews from their ancient homeland. By 200 C.E., Jewish communities could be found settled throughout the area of the Roman Empire, in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa.
This engraving shows King Solomon overseeing the building of the First Temple, which was completed around 957 B.C.E. The First Temple served as a center of worship and national identity for ancient Israel. The First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. The Second Temple was rebuilt in its place, although it too was eventually destroyed.

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. Jacob, one of Abraham’s grandchildren, and his sons traveled to Egypt to escape a famine. According to the Torah, they were enslaved by the Egyptians for generations and God performed miracles to free them. The prophet Moses led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom. According to the Torah, Moses led them to Mount Sinai, where he received God’s laws, including the Ten Commandments. These laws would form the basis of Judaism.

According to Jewish tradition, in exchange for the Israelites’ devotion and adherence to God’s laws, God blessed them with a Promised Land in Canaan. Around 1020 B.C.E., they established the Kingdom of Israel, which was led by kings who united the tribes of Israel. The second of these rulers, King David, conquered and made the city of Jerusalem the capital of the kingdom. His son, King Solomon, built the First Temple, which is still the most sacred place in Judaism.
The Kingdom of Israel separated into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, around 930 B.C.E. The northern 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. Many of the people of Judah, now known as Jews, were forced into exile in Babylon, including much of the leadership. During this period, Jews wrote down the sacred texts that had once been an oral tradition. These writings would eventually lead to the creation of the Hebrew Bible and the Torah. Other invaders, including the Romans, later occupied their land and caused more Jews to leave resulting in the Jewish Diaspora. Jewish sacred texts were carried to new communities and were preserved and studied by religious teachers and sages. 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, meaning “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 in the Mishnah. This record eventually became the Talmud, which together with the Hebrew Bible forms the foundation of Jewish religious practices and ethical values. It includes some of Judaism’s most famous quotes, such as advice from the first century B.C.E. Rabbi Hillel, when asked to teach the whole Torah while standing on one foot, answered, “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 in the Torah, which makes up the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah contains the Ten Commandments, which Jews believe were handed down along with other teachings 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 polytheism, or the 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. 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 to serve as an example to others.

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, “Open your hand to the poor and needy kinsmen in your land.”
Caring for less fortunate people in society is a basic value in Judaism.

**The Spread and Influence of Judaism** The troubles faced by Jews as a result
of the Diaspora threatened their survival as a people. Cut off from their roots in
Israel, they transformed their traditions to survive in foreign lands. Synagogues
replaced the centralized Temple, rabbis replaced Temple priests, prayers
replaced sacrifices, and Judaism became or portable religion. At times, 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 migrated to Asia and, eventually, to the Americas.
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 Judaism survive and thrive.

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 and worship were
also important influences. The emphasis on ethical conduct influenced the
development of laws in many lands. Jewish ideas of justice and equality also
helped nurture the concept of democratic freedoms including equal rights, belief
in rule of law, fair trials, the worth of every individual, and an emphasis on loving
your neighbor, human rights, justice, and charity.
As a result of the Jewish Diaspora, many Jews settled in Eastern Europe. A prosperous Jewish community developed in the Czech city of Pilsen, where the Great Synagogue, shown here, was built in the 19th century.
The New Testament says that Jesus was executed by the Romans, who ruled the province of Judea where Jesus lived. He was put to death by crucifixion, a method of execution the Romans commonly used. Because of Jesus’s death on the cross, the cross has become an important Christian symbol.

2. Christianity

The second world religion to emerge in the Middle East was Christianity. The birthplace of Christianity was a remote territory at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Referred to as Judea by the Romans, this area had once been ruled by King David and King Solomon when it was part of the ancient Kingdom of Israel. The first Christians were Jews, and followers of Christianity 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.

**Origins and Development of Christianity** 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 became 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 of 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’s 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.

According to the Bible, after a year or two of traveling and preaching, Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Passover, which celebrated God’s rescue of the Jews from Egypt. Every year, thousands of Jews traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Roman soldiers remained on watch for anyone who might start a demonstration against Rome.

While in Jerusalem, Jesus explained that his enemies would come together to destroy him and that he would be killed. After a final meal with his disciples, Jesus went to pray in the garden. Judas, one of Jesus’s disciples, then reported where Jesus could be found. As Jesus was led away under guard, the other disciples fled. His final meal with his disciples is known as the Last Supper.
One of the central beliefs of Christianity is that Jesus rose from the dead. To Christians, this is a miracle known as the Resurrection. According to Christian belief, Jesus ascended to heaven 40 days after he was resurrected. This fresco depicts the resurrected Jesus ascending to heaven as his disciples look on.

The New Testament of the Christian Bible says that Jesus was put to death by crucifixion, a common form of execution used by the Romans. After Jesus’s death, his friends placed his body in a 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’s 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’s life and teachings.

Christian doctrine is complex and has many different interpretations. But several key ideas are found among almost all Christians. According to Christian teaching, God consists of three beings in one—the Father, the Son, and the 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. Christians 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 that 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, which mirrors 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. Although millions of people converted to the new religion, others resisted. Conversion was sometimes accomplished by force. In many cases, Christianity was 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 on to power.

Christianity was spread to Latin America by European missionaries. As in other parts of the world, Christian practices and beliefs in Latin America were adapted to indigenous cultures. This photo shows an Easter Week procession in Oaxaca, Mexico.
These children are reading the Qur’an which is considered by Muslims to be the word of God. This book is central to Muslim belief and practices.

3. Islam

Islam is the third major religion that developed in the Middle East. Although it originated in the 600s C.E., much later than Judaism or Christianity, it spread quickly. Today, Islam is practiced all over the world, but the highest populations of Muslims are located in Central Asia, Indonesia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

 Origins and Development of Islam   Around 570 C.E., Muhammad was born in Mecca (Makkah), a city on the Arabian Peninsula. At the time, Mecca was an important and prosperous trade center. Most Arabs followed polytheism, so Mecca also served as an important religious center. A shrine in the heart of Mecca, called the Ka’bah, was filled with statues of local gods and spirits.

After Muhammed’s mother’s death, his uncle, Abu Talib, took charge of watching over him. When he was 12 years old, Muhammad accompanied his uncle, a
respected merchant, on trading expeditions. Soon, he became a successful merchant himself.

As the years passed, Mohammad became 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 that 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 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 him 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.
The fifth pillar of Islam encourages all Muslims to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, known as hajj, once in their lives. Here, pilgrims on hajj encircle the holy shrine called the Ka’bah at the Great Mosque, in Mecca. About two million Muslims perform the hajj each year.

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 called shahadah and is the profession or declaration 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 called salat, the daily ritual 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 zakat, or 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 *siyam*, or 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 *hajj*, or the pilgrimage to Mecca that 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 and sought to win converts, particularly in areas where polytheism prevailed. Although Muslims sometimes waged “holy war,” clashing with followers of other religions, they also respected Christians and Jews as people of faith and often lived alongside them in peace.

With more than a billion followers, Islam is the second largest religion in the world today. 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. Today, most Muslim countries apply some parts of Islamic law, but shari’ah continues to develop in response to modern ways of life and its challenges.
After Muhammad's death in 632 C.E., Muslim leaders and their armies continued to spread Islam throughout the lands that they conquered. Muslim armies did not usually force the peoples they conquered to convert to Islam, but over time, most people in these lands converted to the new faith.

4. Hinduism

Hinduism, which developed over thousands of years and spread across the world, is one of the most influential religions in modern India, and it is the third largest religion in the world. Hinduism, and the traditions that gave rise to it, have shaped Indian life, including diets and forms of exercise. It inspired art and literatures and has influenced leaders and thinkers around the world.
Origins and Development of Hinduism  Hinduism has no clear starting point or founder. It developed over thousands of years by drawing from India’s many religious and cultural traditions. It began in the Indus River Valley and spread throughout India. Some scholars think that beginning in the second millennium B.C.E. or earlier, nomadic people called the Aryans entered India from Central Asia. These people, who spoke Indo-European languages, brought to India their gods and rituals which would eventually develop into Hinduism. Other scholars, however, believe Hinduism developed in the Indian subcontinent among native groups and drew on local traditions.

The roots of Hinduism are found in the Vedas, which most Hindus believe contain eternal truths. The Vedas are a collection of sacred literature that contain verses, hymns, prayers, and teachings that address the gods and sing their praise. The teachings in the Vedas were passed down from generation to generation in Sanskrit, first orally and then in writing. Understanding of them expanded and spread to other parts of Asia, including Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. As Vedic religion spread across India, it blended with local
beliefs and customs. Over time, it evolved into what we now know as Hinduism.

The Vedic culture honors a number of deities (gods and goddesses) associated with nature. Priests and religious scholars, called Brahmans, became responsible for performing rituals to honor these deities. The Brahmans became an important part of Vedic practice. They were responsible for interpreting the Vedas and teaching their meaning to future generations. Sometime after 1000 B.C.E., religious seekers in India began to take Vedic religion in a another direction. They used meditation and other forms of spiritual practice to achieve a deeper, more personal religious experience. These ideas—expressed in the last book of the Vedas, the Upanishads—became an important element of Hinduism.

Modern-day Hinduism has been shaped by various cultures, traditions, languages, and populations. However, the ideals expressed in the Vedas unify the religion. The Vedas are sacred to nearly a billion Hindus worldwide. These texts explain the core concepts of Hinduism.

**The Beliefs of Hinduism**

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

Brahman manifests in the form of different deities. This belief in the existence of one divine force with diverse manifestations is called monism. The goal of many Hindus is to unite their soul, or *atman*, with Brahma.
Hinduism is polytheistic, so Hindus worship multiple gods and goddesses. This temple in Singapore is richly decorated with sculptures of many Hindu deities.

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 key elements are dharma and karma. Dharma stands for law, duty, and obligation. **Dharma** can include upholding values such as forgiveness, self-restraint, purity, knowing the difference between right and wrong, spiritual knowledge, and truthfulness. 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 governs what happens to a soul after death. For Hindus, 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 **samsara**.
Meera Bai’s devotional songs were sung throughout northern India. Much of her work can still be read today.

**The Spread and Influence of Hinduism**  
Unlike Christianity and Islam, Hinduism did not initially spread as far beyond its land of origin. As a result, 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. And can be visibly seen today, especially through art and culture.

During the medieval period, Hinduism changed, further influencing Indian society. Hindus began to focus their worship on a specific deity or deities. Separate sects focusing on specific deities also formed. For example, Vaishnavism, a sect devoted to Vishnu, and Shaivism, a sect devoted to Shiva, appeared during this period.

More permanent stone and brick temples replaced early temples of wood. The sects worshipped their chosen deity through prayers, poetry, devotional music, scriptural study, and stories. Devotional worship helped create a shared culture.
throughout India. After the Gupta Empire collapsed, regional kingdoms, often
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political power throughout India.

This movement emphasized forms of personal expressions of devotion (Bhakti) to
a personal deity over other paths to spirituality. It also challenged the caste
system by highlighting social and spiritual equality. Women played an important
role in the Bhakti movement and one prominent female poet-saint, Meera Bai, is
well known for her extensive devotional poetry and songs dedicated to the Lord
Krishna. Although she was born a princess, she lived as a beggar, faced regular
persecution, and threats to her life, rather than renounce her devotion to Krishna.
Female poet-saints such as Meera Bai continued to be revered for their work and
many of their teachings are followed by millions of Hindus.

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. Today, there are around 900 million
followers of Hinduism, most of them located in South Asia.
Buddhist tradition holds that Siddhartha Gautama achieved nirvana while meditating under a bodhi tree. He became known as the Buddha, or “enlightened one.” Statues of the meditating Buddha are a common feature of Buddhist ritual.

5. Buddhism

Buddhism also has its roots in the Vedas and embraced the ideas of karma and reincarnation. Unlike Hinduism, however, Buddhism emphasized a life based on simple teaching and a more personal approach to the search for enlightenment, or pure wisdom.

**Origins and Development of Buddhism**  
Buddhism arose from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, 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.

Siddhartha sought to achieve a higher consciousness through meditation and ascetic practices. (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 are suffering.

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.

Buddhists have established monasteries throughout the world. Buddhist monks renounce worldly possessions and dedicate their lives to contemplation. They live according to Buddhist principles, and strive to fulfill the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

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 inner peace and 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.
Buddhism began in northern India and spread throughout southern Asia. Ashoka, king of the Mauryan Empire in present-day India, spread Buddhism in his empire and beyond its borders. Buddhist missionaries and traders also helped expand the religion.
Confucius was a famous philosopher and teacher whose ideas about a well-ordered society spread throughout China. This statue of Confucius stands at a temple dedicated to the philosopher in Shanghai, China.

6. 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.

Origins and Development of Confucianism  Confucianism is based on the teachings of Kongfuzi, whose Western name was Confucius. Confucius lived from around 551 to 479 B.C.E., during the same era as the Buddha. Like the Buddha, he developed into a great teacher whose ideas spread, influencing 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, and he experienced firsthand the disorder that erupted when lords fought for power. 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.

Confucius deeply respected Chinese traditions, such as reverence for ancestors and learning, so he applied himself to the study of classic 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. However, he also realized that society and government needed to evolve if peace and order were to exist. Specifically, he believed that rulers needed govern wisely and that educated men of good character should serve society as honest and fair government officials.

Confucius became a famous teacher with a devoted following of student disciples. 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, 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?”
This is one of many temples constructed to honor Confucius. Here, emperors as well as civil servants would study the Confucian philosophy.

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. Under these teachings, all people must respect and obey those who are above them in status. 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. In return, people in authority, such as parents and rulers, should set a good example. They should be kind, honest, wise, and faithful. Confucius instructed; “Do not do to others what you would not want done to you.”
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 a book called the *Analects*, which helped spread his ideas throughout China. Other scholars advanced the principles of Confucianism.

Confucianism also had a very practical effect on the government, so 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. Values such as respect for elders, proper behaviors, and love of scholarship became deeply woven into Chinese society. People still refer to Confucian sayings to help guide their lives, such as the two listed below:

*Confucius said to his follower:*
*The gentleman first practices what he preaches and then preaches what he practices.*

*Confucius said to his student:*
*Shall I teach you what knowledge is? When you know a thing, say that you know it; when you do not know a thing, admit that you do not know it. That is knowledge.*
Confucius honored traditional Chinese religious beliefs, such as ancestor worship. In many ways, ancestor worship reinforced the basic Confucian value of respect for one’s parents and elders, known as filial piety. Such practices continue to this day. One example of this is Tomb-sweeping Day, when families visit the graves of deceased relatives.

7. The Impact of World Religions

The growth and spread of world religions has had a tremendous impact on societies throughout history. Many effects were specific to particular cultures or regions, such as 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 a number of 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 world religions had
broad appeal and could be practiced anywhere, they produced much larger communities of believers.

These larger communities 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. 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.
The Blue Mosque, built in Istanbul in the 17th century, is just one example of the human creativity that religion has inspired. The ornate interior is decorated with natural motifs and verses from the Qur’an, all made of small mosaic tiles.
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 was affected by 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.

As they expanded, world religions also came into contact with one another.
Sometimes differences in religious ideas led to conflicts both within a religion and between religions. 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-worshipers during their conquest of India.


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 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. 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.

Sikhism

The religion of Sikhism emerged in the Punjab area of South Asia. Today, the Punjab region overlaps India and Pakistan, with the eastern half of the region controlled by India and the western half controlled by Pakistan. Because of its location, both Hinduism and Islam heavily influenced the region in the 15th century.

Sikhism was founded by a man named Guru Nanak in 1469. Nanak was born into a Hindu family of the Indian mercantile caste. This meant that Nanak held a high social rank upon his birth. During his early life, Nanak studied both Islam and Hinduism extensively and began to question many common Hindu and Islamic practices. He also began to challenge the authority of Brahmins. One story about Nanak describes how he began to question the caste system. At the age of 11, most boys of his caste would begin to wear a sacred thread. Nanak, however, refused to wear the sacred thread because he believed that it could lead people to be distinguished by their castes. He believed that people should be distinguished by their actions and qualities rather than by their position in society.

Nanak believed that external forms of worship, like pilgrimages, penances, and poverty, were less important than personal spiritual growth through meditation and peaceful living. By 1500, Nanak had set out on a journey through India, Tibet, and Arabia to study and debate with scholars of many different religions. As he did, his ideas on how to reach spiritual fulfillment grew. He began teaching these ideas, and a new religion that was distinct from both Hinduism and Islam emerged.

People who followed Guru Nanak's teachings came to be called Sikhs, which means “learners.” Sikhism mixed many Islamic and Hindu beliefs together. For example, Sikhs believe that there is only one God, like in Islam. They also believe that humans go through a cycle of birth, life, and rebirth, which is similar to the Hindu concept of samsara. They believe that people can be liberated from this cycle by realizing their oneness with God through devotion. Sikhs can reach liberation by following the three basic principles of Sikhism.

The three basic principles of Sikh life are to pray, to work, and to give. The first of
these principles is called Naam Japna, and it means that Sikhs need to keep God in mind at all times. To fulfill Naam Japna, Sikhs sing hymns, chant, and meditate. The second principle is called Kirat Karna and requires Sikhs to earn an honest living. This means that Sikhs must work hard and avoid crime, gambling, and begging. The third principle is called Vand Chhako and means that Sikhs must give to the community. Sikhs might fulfill this by giving to charity or taking care of others.

In the centuries following Guru Nanak, Sikhism was led by a succession of nine other gurus. These nine gurus continued to teach and expand upon the beliefs set forth by Guru Nanak. These gurus developed five articles of faith, called Kakaars, that Sikhs must wear. These articles each have their own deeper meaning. The first article of faith is called Kesh, or uncut hair. Hair is viewed as a gift from god, and Sikhs must leave their hair uncut. They must also put their hair in a turban in order to protect it. The second article of faith is called Kanga, or comb. Sikhs must keep their hair clean and tidy and must comb their hair twice daily, in addition to wrapping their head in a turban neatly. The third article of faith is Kara, or bracelet. The bracelet is worn on the right hand of Sikhs and symbolizes restraint from evil deeds. The fourth article is Kirpan, or sword. The sword symbolizes the ideas of courage and self-defense, and encourages Sikhs to protect others from injustice. The final article is called Kachehra, or under-shorts. This article symbolizes a Sikh's restraint in pursuing desire or passion.

The tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, was the final human guru. Upon his death in 1708, he declared that followers of Sikhism would be guided by the teachings in a book called the Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs view this scripture to be as important as any of the ten human gurus. As a result, it is given just as much as respect as the gurus who established Sikhism. When Sikhs are unable to find answers in the Guru Granth Sahib, they are encouraged to solve issues as a community based on the principles they have learned.

With the formation of Sikhism, India was now the home to four indigenous religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. In addition, Islam was becoming a prominent religion in the region. Some of the Muslim rulers that controlled the Punjab region persecuted Sikhs, as they had Hindus and Jains. For example, the Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed by Mughal rulers because he refused to convert to Islam. However, Muslim rulers, most notably the Mughal ruler Akbar, encouraged the blending of Islamic beliefs, artistic forms, and architectural ideas with those held by the indigenous people.
Over time, Sikhism continued to grow in popularity. Today, it has nearly 25 million followers worldwide. The majority remain in the Punjab region, but Sikhs can be found throughout the world, including nearly 200,000 Sikhs in the United States.