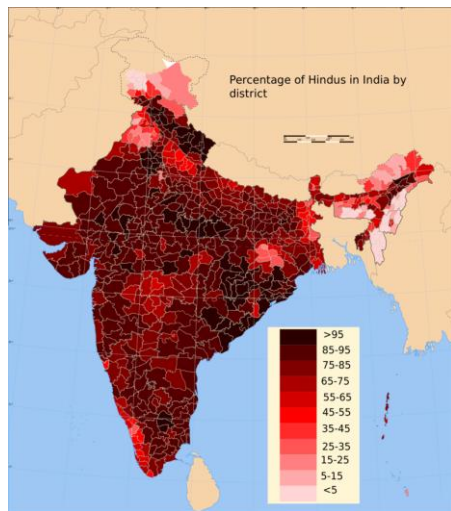


Hinduism:

Hinduism is the world's oldest extant religion, and with more than a billion followers, it is also the world's third largest religion. Hinduism is a conglomeration of religious, philosophical, and cultural ideals and practices that originated in India thousands of years before the birth of Christ. Hinduism remains the dominant faith practiced in India and Nepal today.

Unlike other religions, Hindus view their faith as an all-encompassing way of life with a complex system that comprises beliefs and traditions, an advanced system of ethics, meaningful rituals, philosophy, and theology. Hinduism is characterized by belief in reincarnation, called Samsara; one absolute being with multiple manifestations and related deities; the law of cause and effect, called Karma; a call to follow the path of righteousness by engaging in spiritual practices (yogas) and prayers (bhakti); and the desire for liberation from reincarnation, the cycle of birth and rebirth.



Basic Tenets

At its core, Hinduism teaches four Purusarthas, or goals of human life:

- Dharma (ethics and duties) - Most important because it leads to Moksha
- Artha (work and prosperity)
- Kama (passion and desires)
- Moksha (liberation from the cycle of samsara)



Major Deities

Adherents to Hinduism believe that there is only one supreme Absolute, called Brahman. However, Hinduism does not advocate the worship of any one particular deity. The gods and goddesses of Hinduism number in the thousands or even millions, all representing the many aspects of Brahman. Therefore, this faith is characterized by the multiplicity of deities. The most fundamental of Hindu deities is the divine trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer). Hindus also worship spirits, trees, animals, and planets.

Caste System

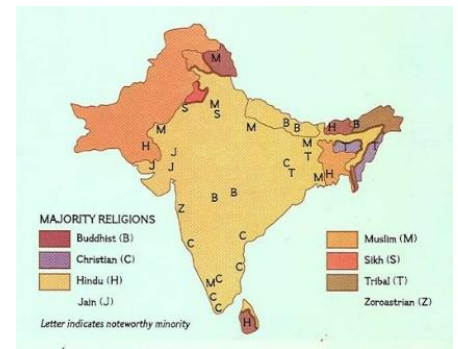
A caste system is a system which divides Hindus into rigid hierarchical groups based on their karma (work) and dharma (the Hindi word for religion, but here it means duty).

The system bestowed many privileges on the upper castes while sanctioning repression of the lower castes by privileged groups. India's constitution banned discrimination on the basis of caste, and, in an attempt to correct historical injustices and provide a level playing field to the traditionally disadvantaged, the authorities announced quotas in government jobs and educational institutions for scheduled castes and tribes, the lowest in the caste hierarchy, in 1950.



Buddhism:

Buddhism is a religion based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in the fifth century B.C. in what is now Nepal and northern India. He came to be called "the Buddha," which means "awakened one," after he experienced a profound realization of the nature of life, death, and existence. In English, the Buddha was said to be enlightened, although in Sanskrit it is "bodhi," or "awakened." For the rest of his life, the Buddha traveled and taught. However, he didn't teach people what he had realized when he became enlightened. Instead, he taught people how to realize enlightenment for themselves. He taught that awakening comes through your own direct experience, not through beliefs and dogmas. Buddhism then spread throughout Asia to become one of the dominant religions of the continent and is now the fourth largest of the world's religions.

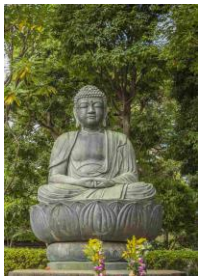


Buddhism Is Distinctly Different From Other Religions



Buddhism is so different from other religions that some people question whether it is a religion at all. For example, the central focus of most religions is one or many. But Buddhism is non-theistic. The Buddha taught that believing in gods was not useful for those seeking to realize enlightenment. Most religions are defined by their beliefs. But in Buddhism, merely believing in doctrines is beside the point. The Buddha said that doctrines should not be accepted just because they are in scripture or taught by priests. Instead of teaching doctrines to be

memorized and believed, the Buddha taught how to realize truth for yourself. The focus of Buddhism is on practice rather than belief. The major outline of Buddhist practice is the Eightfold Path.



Basic Teachings

In spite of its emphasis on free inquiry, Buddhism might best be understood as a discipline and an exacting discipline at that. And although Buddhist teachings should not be accepted on blind faith, understanding what the Buddha taught is an important part of that discipline. The foundation of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths:

- The truth of suffering ("dukkha")
- The truth of the cause of suffering ("samudaya")
- The truth of the end of suffering ("nirhodha")
- The truth of the path that frees us from suffering ("magga")

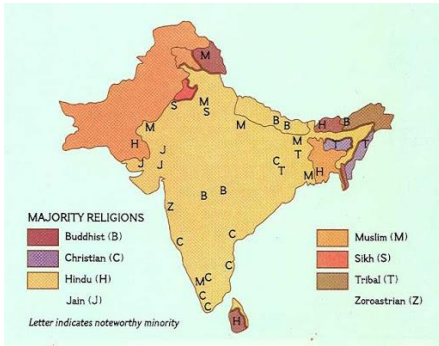


By themselves, the truths don't seem like much. But beneath the truths are countless layers of teachings on the nature of existence, the self, life, and death, not to mention suffering. The point is not to just "believe in" the teachings, but to explore them, understand them, and test them against your own experience. It is the process of exploring, understanding, testing, and realizing that defines Buddhism. Buddhists, like Hindus, believe in reincarnation. They believe that when we die, our souls are reborn in different bodies. We will continue this life and death cycle until our souls reach *nirvana*, or living without suffering.

Islam:

Islam is a major world religion, with over 1 billion followers worldwide (1/5 of the world population). It is considered one of the Abrahamic, monotheistic faiths, along with Judaism and Christianity. Although usually associated with the Arabs of the Middle East, less than 10% of Muslims are in fact Arab. Muslims are found all over the world, of every nation, color, and race. In South Asia, Pakistan is home to a majority population of Muslims.

Who Is Allah?



Allah is the proper name for Almighty God, and is often translated merely as "God." Allah has other names that are used to describe His characteristics: the Creator, the Sustainer, the Merciful, the Compassionate, etc. Arabic-speaking Christians also use the name "Allah" for Almighty God. Muslims believe that since Allah alone is the Creator, it is He alone that deserves our devout love and worship. Islam holds to a strict monotheism. Any worship and prayers directed at saints, prophets, other human beings or nature is considered idolatry.

What Do Muslims Believe About God, Prophets, the Afterlife, Etc.?

The basic beliefs of Muslims fall into six main categories, which are known as the "Articles of Faith":

- Faith in the unity of God
- Faith in angels
- Faith in prophets
- Faith in books of revelation
- Faith in an afterlife - If you have done more good deeds than bad you will enter "Jannah", or Paradise
- Faith in destiny/divine decree

The "Five Pillars" of Islam

In Islam, faith and good works go hand-in-hand. A mere verbal declaration of faith is not enough, for belief in Allah makes obedience to Him a duty.

The Muslim concept of worship is very broad. Muslims consider everything they do in life to be an act of worship, as long as it is done according to Allah's guidance. There are also five formal acts of worship which help strengthen a Muslim's faith and obedience. They are often called the "Five Pillars of Islam."

- Testimony of faith (Shahaadah or Kalima)
- Prayer (Salat) - 5 Times a day
- Almsgiving (Zakat) - Give to the poor
- Fasting (Sawm) - Taking a break from all food
- Pilgrimage (Hajj) - Visiting holy land (Mecca, Medina, & Jerusalem)

Sikhism:

There are 20 million Sikhs in the world, most of whom live in the Punjab province of India. The 2001 census recorded 336,000 Sikhs in the UK. Sikhism was founded in the 16th century in the Punjab district of what is now India and Pakistan. It was founded by Guru Nanak and is based on his teachings, and those of the 9 Sikh gurus who followed him.



The most important thing in Sikhism is the internal religious state of the individual.

- Sikhism is a monotheistic religion
- Sikhism stresses the importance of doing good actions rather than merely carrying out rituals
- Sikhs believe that the way to lead a good life is to:
 - keep God in heart and mind at all times
 - live honestly and work hard
 - treat everyone equally
 - be generous to the less fortunate
 - serve others
- The Sikh place of worship is called a Gurdwara
- The Sikh scripture is the Guru Granth Sahib, a book that Sikhs consider a living Guru

The tenth Sikh Guru decreed that after his death the spiritual guide of the Sikhs would be the teachings contained in that book, so the Guru Granth Sahib now has the status of a Guru, and Sikhs show it the respect they would give to a human Guru. Guru Gobind Singh decreed that where Sikhs could not find answers in the Guru Granth Sahib, they should decide issues as a community, based on the principles of their scripture.

God and the cycle of life

- There is only one God
- God is without form, or gender
- Everyone has direct access to God
- Everyone is equal before God
- A good life is lived as part of a community, by living honestly and caring for others
- Empty religious rituals and superstitions have no value

Sikhs focus their lives around their relationship with God, and being a part of the Sikh community. The Sikh ideal combines action and belief. To live a good life a person should do good deeds as well as meditating on God. Sikhs believe that human beings spend their time in a cycle of birth, life, and rebirth. They share this belief with followers of other Indian religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The quality of each particular life depends on the law of Karma. Karma sets the quality of a life according to how well or badly a person behaved in their previous life. The only way out of this cycle, which all faiths regard as painful, is to achieve a total knowledge of and union with God.