

Shinto

Background

Shinto, which means "Way of the Gods," is the traditional religion of Japan that focuses on nature. Many consider Shinto to be a form of Animism due to the many similarities found between them.

Basics

Established: Shinto was founded around the year 500 BCE.



Founder: Evolved from a mixture of tribal religions with similar beliefs.

Geographic Origin: Developed on the Japanese [archipelago](#).

Currently Practiced: Most common in Japan.

Significant Writings: *Kokiji*, or *Record of Ancient Matters* and *Nikong*, or *Chronicles of Japan*.

Places of Worship: Shinto shrines are usually dedicated near sites of impressive natural beauty (e.g., mountains, lakes, etc.), or of historical importance to Japan. The entrance to these shrines is usually indicated by the presence of a red gateway called a **torri**.

Significant Religious People: Traditionally, the **Emperor of Japan** was considered to be a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess who created the Japanese islands. Therefore, the Emperor was considered [divine](#) by the people who practiced Shinto. After Japan surrendered to the United States in WWII, Emperor [Hirohito](#) renounce his divinity and political authority.

Teachings and Beliefs

Shinto teaches that there is a sacredness of the whole universe and that humans can be in tune with this sacredness. Every mountain, river, plant, animal, and all the diverse phenomena of heaven and earth have spirits, or **kami**, which inhabit them. Reverence is paid to the ancestors through the practice of [ancestor worship](#).

Hinduism

Background

Hinduism is a **polytheistic religion** that was formed from a variety of different religious practices.

Basics



Established-Elements of the Hindu religion can be traced back to the ancient Indus River Valley **civilization** (approximately 3000 BCE) in modern-day Pakistan.

Founder-It has been theorized that Hinduism is a result of **cultural diffusion** that occurred between **Aryan** invaders and the native peoples of India sometime around 1500 BCE.

Geographic Origin-Developed on the Indian **subcontinent**.

Currently Practiced-Most common in India.

Significant Writings-**Vedas**, **Upanishads**, **Ramayana**, **Mahabharata**, **Bhagavad Gita**.

Places of Worship-While Hindu temples do exist, Hinduism is usually practiced in the home where there is usually a shrine dedicated to a favored deity.

Significant Religious People-Hindu priests carry out traditional religious practices in temples.

Teachings and Beliefs

In Hinduism, salvation is achieved through a spiritual oneness of the soul, **atman**, with the ultimate reality of the universe, **Brahman**. To achieve this goal, the soul must obtain **moksha**, or liberation from the **samsara**, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. As a result of these basic teachings, Hindus believe in **reincarnation**, which is influenced by **karma** (material actions resulting from the consequences of previous actions), and **dharma** (fulfilling one's duty in life). Because all forms of animal life possess souls, Hindus believe in **ahimsa**, or that all life is sacred and should not be harmed. In fact, one animal which Hindus consider to be extremely sacred is the cow. The peaceful and contented existence of cows is considered virtuous by Hindus and would represent a rewarding reincarnation for a soul. For this reason, most Hindus are vegetarians so that they do not harm other living beings. The belief in reincarnation, karma, and dharma also provides the religious justification for the existence of the rigid social structure known as the **Caste System**.

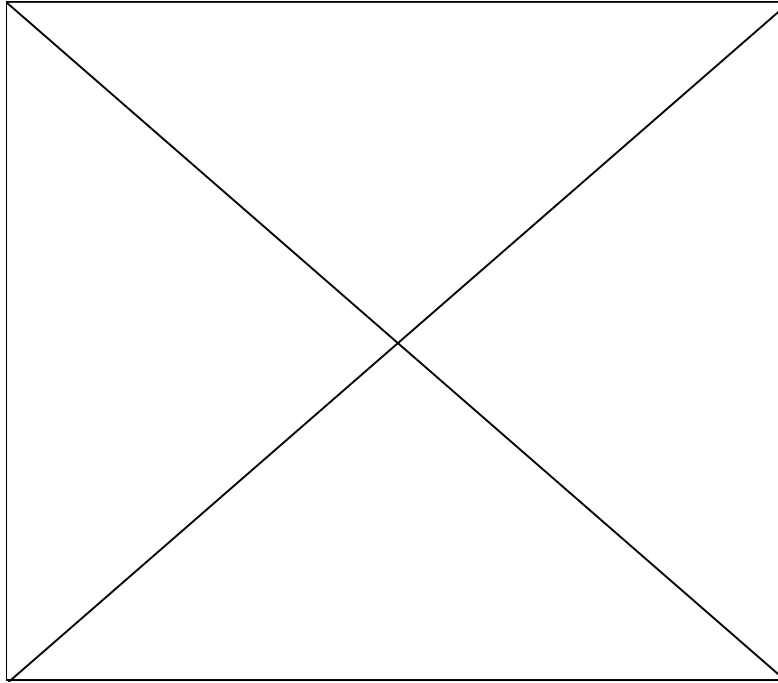
Samsara



Samsara, or **reincarnation**, is a central teaching of Hinduism. Rivers are sometimes thought to symbolize reincarnation because they constantly flow, yet follow the same course. Perhaps the most sacred river is the **Ganges**, which is used for spiritual cleansing, funeral rites, and other Hindu rituals.

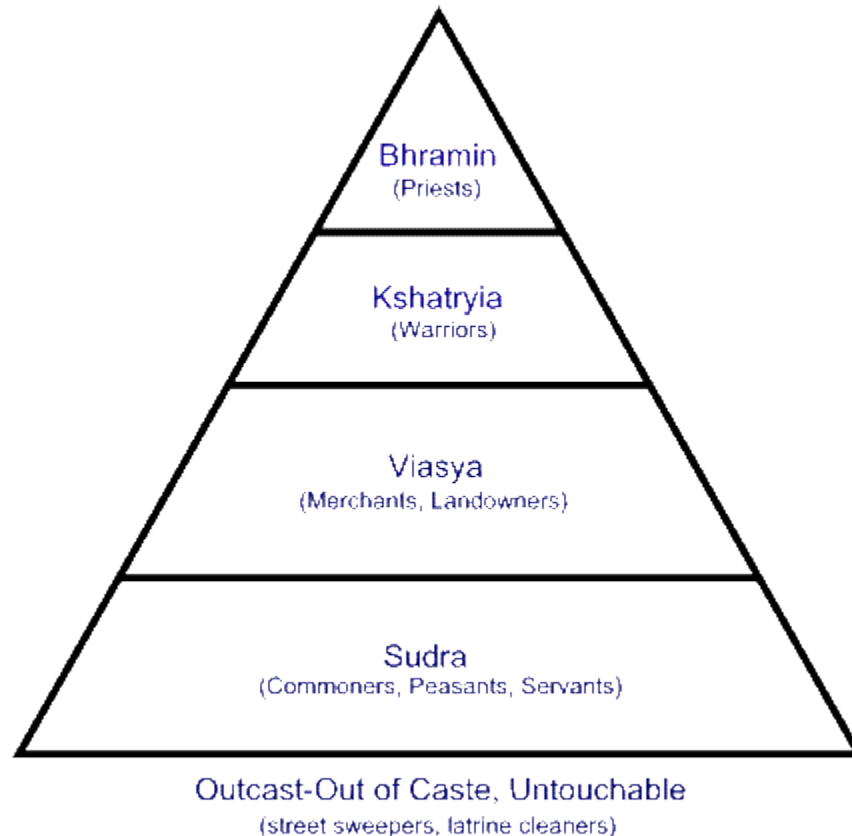
The concept of reincarnation can best be represented by the infinity symbol. When one is born, they are given life by **Brahma**, as they pass through life, they are

preserved by [Vishnu](#), until finally [Shiva](#) claims you in death. Then the cycle is repeated over and over again until one finally achieves **moksha**.



Caste System

The **Caste System** is a rigid class structure based on Hinduism which is found in India. It is believed that if one leads a good life, following good **karma** and **dharma**, then they will be rewarded by being reincarnated as a person belonging to the next highest level in the Caste System. However, if one is wicked during their life, they will be demoted, and possibly even removed from the Caste System altogether. **Outcasts**, or [Untouchables](#), are members of Hindu society thought to have been removed from the Caste System, with no hope of returning to it, due to their misdeeds in previous lives. Work that is deemed unclean for all other Hindus is reserved for these Outcasts.



After winning its independence from Great Britain in 1947, India adopted a national constitution which stated that "Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden." Since that time many Caste reforms have been enacted to diminish discriminatory practices in India. Today, the Caste System still exists in practice, despite the many laws designed to legally abolish it.

Buddhism

Background

Buddhism developed in India, and is based on many of the core concepts of Hinduism..

The Basics

Founder-[Siddhartha Gautama](#), or Buddha, which means "enlightened one."



Geographic Origin-Developed in India.

Currently Practiced-Most common in Southeast Asia and Japan..

Significant Writings-[Tripitka](#), or *Three Baskets of Wisdom*.

Places of Worship-Buddhism may be practiced individually, but temples and monasteries do exist.

Significant Religious People-The [Dalai Lama](#) is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan sect of Buddhism, and is considered to be the reincarnation of the bodhisattva, or "Buddha-to-be." Buddhist monks can be identified by their traditional orange robes.

Teachings and Beliefs

Siddhartha was born into the Brahmin caste, and by all account led a luxurious lifestyle. However, he was troubled by the human misery that he saw around him everyday. Upon reflection, he deduced that desire was the root caused of all suffering. This idea has been recorded as the **Four Noble Truths**.

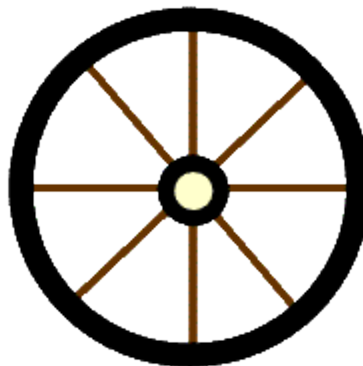
Four Noble Truths

Siddhartha's philosophy of the nature of human **suffering** and its relation to **desire** is articulated by these four statements:

1. Life is full of pain and **suffering**.
2. Human **desire** causes this **suffering**.
3. By putting an end to **desire**, humans can end **suffering**.
4. Humans can end **desire** by following the **Eightfold Path**.

Eightfold Path

The **Wheel of Life** is one of the most important symbols of Buddhism, as it represents the endless cycle of life through **reincarnation** and because each of its eight spokes represents one of the teachings of the Eightfold Path.



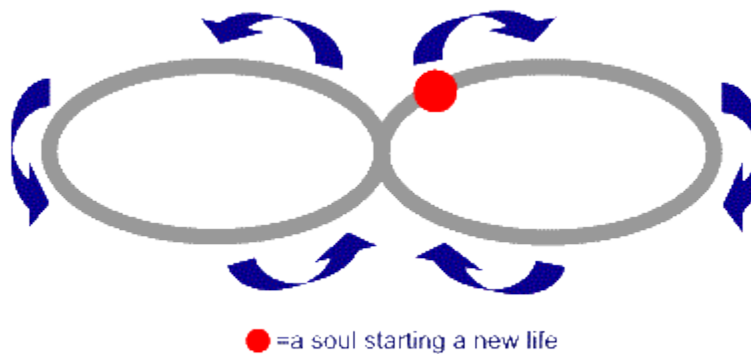
1. Know that suffering is caused by desire.
2. Be selfless and love all life.
3. Do not lie, or speak without cause.
4. Do not kill, steal, or commit other unrighteous acts.

5. Do not do things which promote evil.
6. Take effort to promote righteousness.
7. Be aware of your physical actions, state of mind, and emotions.
8. Learn to meditate.

Reincarnation

Buddhists believe in an endless cycle of reincarnation, or samsara, which is similar to beliefs of Hinduism. However, Buddhists do not believe that deities are responsible for the phenomenon. In addition, the **Caste System** is rejected by Buddhists who believe instead that one is reincarnated until they can achieve **nirvana**, best described as spiritual enlightenment.

The concept of reincarnation can best be illustrated using an infinity symbol:



Confucianism



Background

Confucius lived in China during the Chou Dynasty, when there was mass disorder and confusion and degrading moral standards. Confucius was appalled by what appeared to be the fracturing of Chinese society. He believed that the only cure was to stress a sense of social order and mutual respect, a **philosophy** that later became known as Confucianism.

The Basics

Founder-Kong Fu Zi, which was translated as Confucius by Europeans. His teachings were later refined and spread by **Mencius**.

Geographic Origin-Developed in China around 500 BCE..

Currently Practiced-Elements of this **philosophy** are still practiced in Southeast Asia.

Significant Writings-***The Analects***.

Teachings and Beliefs

Confucianism teaches that there is a natural social order to society which can best be explained through the **Five Relationships**:

1. Ruler to ruled.
2. Father to son.
3. Older brother to younger brother.
4. Husband to wife.
5. Friend to friend.

In these relationships, the second role is considered subordinate to the first. It was taught that if everyone knew their place in society, then order would prevail. There are several concepts which needed to be practiced in order to achieve an ordered society:

Jen-Human kindness should be shown towards one another.

Li-Proper etiquette should always be used, and one should strive to achieve perfect virtue.

Filial Piety-One should respect their elders.

Judaism

Background

Judaism is the oldest known **monotheistic religion** still practiced in the world today. Its fundamental teachings have been influential and are the basis for more recently developed religions such as Christianity and Islam.

The Basics



Founder-Abraham is generally recognized as the founder of Judaism due to his covenant with God. However, Moses is also considered a founder due to his role in the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt, and his delivery of the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai sometime around 2000 BCE.

Geographic Origin-Developed in the Middle East in and around the area that is currently Israel.

Currently Practiced-Worldwide, but the greatest majority of Jews reside in Israel, the United States, and the former Soviet Union.

Significant Writings-Torah and Talmud.

Places of Worship-Jews worship in temples called synagogues.

Significant Religious People-Rabbis are Jewish scholars charged with conducting religious services, ensuring that Jewish laws are observed, and serving as a spiritual guide for the community.

Teachings and Beliefs

Judaism teaches that there is one God who is the creator of all things. After the Hebrew exodus

from Egypt, many Hebrews began to lose their faith in God. During this time, Moses went atop Mount Sinai and returned with two stone tablets containing laws that all Hebrews needed to follow. These laws, recorded in *Exodus* 20:3-17, became known as the **Ten Commandments** and include:

1. **You shall have no other gods before Me.**
2. **You shall not make yourself any graven image**, or any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down yourself to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing mercy and steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.
3. **You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain**; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.
4. **Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maid-servant, your domestic animals, or the sojourner within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heavens and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.
5. **Honor your father and mother**, that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God gives you.
6. **You shall not commit murder.**
7. **You shall not commit adultery.**
8. **You shall not steal.**
9. **You shall not witness falsely against your neighbor.**
10. **You shall not covet your neighbor's house**, your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his donkey, **or anything that is your neighbor's.**

Christianity

Background

Christianity is currently the most popular religion in the world based on the number of worshippers found throughout the world. While this **monotheistic religion** developed from Judaism, there are several key differences in its teachings.

The Basics

Founder-Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples who helped spread his teachings.



Geographic Origin-Developed in Judea (now Israel), located in the Middle East bordering the Mediterranean Sea sometime around the year 30 CE.

Currently Practiced-Christianity is the dominant religion in North America, South America, Europe, and Russia.

Significant Writings-The *Holy Bible*, consisting of both the [Old Testament](#) and the [New Testament](#).

Places of Worship-Christians practice their faith in temples usually referred to as churches.

Significant Religious People-Priests and ministers are Christian holy men and women who are charged with conducting religious services, ensuring that Jewish laws are observed, and serving as a spiritual guide for the community. In addition, deacons, nuns, and monks are people

who have dedicated their lives to Christian service.

Teachings and Beliefs

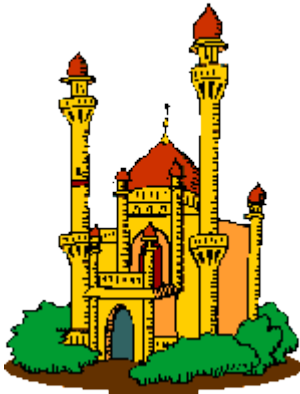
Because Christianity evolved from Judaism, there are certain concepts that these two religions share. For example, both Jews and Christians subscribe to the [Ten Commandments](#) found in the Book of *Exodus*. In addition, prophecies of Jewish prophets contained in several books of the Old Testament stated that God would send a **savior**, or [messiah](#), to the people of Israel. While Judaism clearly states that this event has not yet occurred, Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the **Son of God**, sent to redeem the world of sin. This has led the Christian faith to proclaim that there is a [Holy Trinity](#), formed by the Creator (Father), Redeemer (Son), and Sustainer (Holy Spirit). Christians believe that these three entities are all part of a single higher power.

Christians are expected to attend church services regularly, usually on Sundays and holy days such as Christmas and Easter. On these occasions Christians take part in [sacraments](#), which are religious practices such as baptism, and receiving the Eucharist.

Islam

Background

Islam, which when translated from Arabic, means "to submit to the will of Allah," is the youngest of the world's major religions. Worshipers of this **monotheistic religion** are known as Muslims, which means "one who submits to the will of Allah." Islam is currently the second most practiced religion in the world, and experts predict that it will overtake **Christianity** as the most popular religion in the world sometime during the 21st century.



The Basics

Founder-Islam was founded by the prophet Mohammed.

Geographic Origin-Developed on the Arabian **Peninsula** in the year 622 CE, and quickly spread to other regions.

Currently Practiced- Islam is most dominant throughout the Middle East, including Southwest Asia and North Africa.

Significant Writings-The teachings of Islam are collected in the ***Qur'an***.

Places of Worship-Muslims may gather to worship in temples called Mosques (see picture above).

Significant Religious People-The Caliph, or successor to the Prophet Mohammed; Imam, leader of prayers; and the Muezzin, or one who issues a call to prayer, causing the faithful to gather at the local Mosque.

Teachings and Beliefs

Mohammed received the word of God, or Allah, through the angel Gabriel while living in the city of Mecca. Townspeople soon became fearful of the Mohammed's preaching and he began to receive threats. As a result, he fled to the nearby city of Medina, where people began to believe in his message. The flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Median was instrumental to the founding of the religion of Islam, and is known as the **Hegira**. Thus, in 622 CE Islam was founded and this date became the starting point for the Islamic calendar.

Mohammed and his followers later returned to Mecca and declared a **jihad**, or holy war, after which he captured the city. Under Mohammed's leadership, the basic teachings of Islam were established, which are known as the **Five Pillars of Islam**. Every Muslim is expected to follow these rules in order to lead an ethical life:

1. **Confession of Faith:** The belief that "there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet."
2. **Prayer:** Muslims must pray five times per day, facing towards Mecca.
3. **Charity:** Muslims must give alms to the poor, and support the local Mosque by donating a portion of their income.
4. **Fasting:** During the **Ramadan**, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, all Muslims must fast during daylight hours, except the very young or sick.
5. **Pilgrimage:** If possible financially, each Muslim must make a **hajj**, or holy pilgrimage, to the city of Mecca.