World Religions

Almanac
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Religion influences the views and actions of many people in the world today in both political and personal ways. In some instances religious fervor compels people to perform selfless acts of compassion, while in others it spurs them to bitter warfare. Religion opens some people to all humanity but restricts others to remain loyal to small groups.

In general, religion can be described as a unified system of thought, feeling, and action that is shared by a group and that gives its members an object of devotion—someone or something sacred to believe in, such as a god or a spiritual concept. Religion also involves a code of behavior or personal moral conduct by which individuals may judge the personal and social consequences of their actions and the actions of others. Most of the time, religion also deals with what might be called the supernatural or the spiritual, about forces and a power beyond the control of humans. In this function, religion attempts to answer questions that science does not touch, such as the meaning of life and what happens after death.

Perhaps one of the most amazing things about religion is that there is no commonly held way of looking at it. Yet most of the world’s population participates in it in one way or another. Though hard to define, religion seems to be a universal experience and need. Of the nearly 6.5 billion people on Earth, only about 16 percent (about 1.1 billion) say they do not believe in a god or do not believe in a specific religion. The rest of the world’s population belongs to one of more than twenty different major religions.

Features and Format

*World Religions: Almanac* covers the history, traditions, and worldviews of dominant and less prominent religions and their sects and offshoots. This title examines the development of religions throughout history and into modern times: their philosophies and practices, sacred texts and teachings, effects on everyday life, influences on society and culture, and more.

The two-volume set features eighteen chapters on today’s prominent world religions and also explores ancient beliefs, such as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia; smaller movements like that of neo-paganism and Bahá’í; and philosophies, including those of ancient Greece and Rome, agnosticism, and atheism. In addition,
an introductory chapter, “What Is Religion?,” explores the concept of religion in more depth. Numerous black-and-white images illustrate the text, while sidebars highlight interesting people and fascinating facts connected with the world’s religions. The title includes a glossary, a timeline, research and activity ideas, sources for further reading, and a subject index.

World Religions Reference Library

World Religions: Almanac is only one component of the three-part World Religions Reference Library. The set also includes a two-volume set of biographies and one volume of primary source documents:

- **World Religions: Biographies** (two volumes) presents the biographies of fifty men and women who have played a critical role in the world’s religions throughout history. Among those profiled are Abraham, whose influence is seen in three of the modern world’s most influential religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Muhammad, considered the final and most important prophet by Muslims; and Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as the Buddha. Modern figures include the Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda and Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í faith. Women who made significant impacts on religion are also featured, including Mother Maria Skobtsova, an Orthodox Christian nun who worked to save many during the Holocaust.

- **World Religions: Primary Sources** (one volume) offers eighteen excerpted writings, speeches, and sacred texts from across the religious spectrum. The selections are grouped into three thematic chapters: Creation Stories and Foundation Myths; Characteristics of the Divine; and Religion as a Guide to Living. The first explores the creation stories of religions, such as those relayed in Islam’s Qur’an, and foundational myths, such as the one told in Black Elk Speaks, that provide a unifying cultural basis for many people. The second chapter, Characteristics of the Divine, explores the aspects and personalities of God or the gods as revealed through religious documents such as The Epic of Gilgamesh and Swami Vivekananda’s “Paper on Hinduism.” The final chapter examines how religion provides guidelines that people can use in their everyday lives. These include selections from the Christian Bible; the Avesta, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism; and Emma Goldman’s essay “The Philosophy of Atheism.”

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Comments and Suggestions
We welcome your comments on *World Religions: Almanac* and suggestions for other topics in history to consider. Please write to Editors, *World Religions: Almanac* U•X•L, Thomson Gale, 27500 Drake Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48331-3535; call toll-free 800-877-4253; send faxes to 248-699-8097; or send e-mail via http://www.gale.com.
Timeline of Events

10,000–400 BCE The span of the Jomon period in Japan, during which Shinto first emerged.

3500–2000 BCE Duration of religion in ancient Sumer.

3110 BCE–550 CE Duration of religion in ancient Egypt.

3102 BCE Emergence of Hinduism.

1700 BCE The Babylonians devise a new creation myth, the Enuma Elish.

c. 1353–34 BCE The pharaoh Akhenaten rules Egypt and enforces the worship of a single god, Aten. All evidence of his reign is wiped out after his death.

Tenth century BCE The Jewish Temple of Solomon is constructed in Jerusalem.

Seventh century BCE Beginning of the Milesian School of philosophy in ancient Greece.

600 BCE Official formalization of the Rig Veda, one of Hinduism’s most sacred texts.

586 BCE The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroys the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and drives the Jews into exile (the Babylonian exile).

563 BCE Siddhartha Gautama, who will become the Buddha, is born in present-day Nepal.

c. 551–479 BCE Life span of the scholar Kongzi, who is known in the West by his Latinized name, Confucius.
c. 540–c. 470 BCE Life span of Mahavira, considered the main founder of Jainism.

539 BCE Mesopotamian religion ends when Babylonia accepts Cyrus of Persia as king.

515 BCE The Second Jewish Temple is built in Jerusalem.

483 BCE Death of the Buddha.

c. 470–399 BCE Life span of the Greek philosopher Socrates.

c. 428–348 BCE Life span of the Greek philosopher Plato.


Third century BCE Period in which the major text of Daoism, the Dao De Jing, is likely written.

c. 273–c. 232 BCE The emperor Ashoka of Maurya, in present-day India, begins to spread Buddhism beyond the borders of India.

c. 6 BCE Jesus of Nazareth, also known as Jesus Christ, is born.

c. 30 CE Jesus Christ is put to death by crucifixion by Roman authorities in Jerusalem.

70 CE Roman troops crush the Great Revolt by occupying Jerusalem, massacring Jews, and destroying the Second Temple.

142 Revelations given to the holy man Zhang Daoling (also spelled Chang Tao-ling), who becomes the first of the great Celestial Masters in Daoism.

224–651 During the Sassanid Dynasty, Zoroastrianism spreads aggressively throughout the Persian Empire.

313 The Roman emperor Constantine converts to Christianity.

380 The emperor Theodosius I declares Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

610 According to Islamic belief, the prophet Muhammad begins receiving revelations and prophecies from the archangel Jabra’il (Gabriel).

632 The death of Muhammad marks the beginning of a long period of Islamic civil war and separation of Islam into Sunni and Shiite sects.
1054 The Christian church is formally divided into two distinct branches: the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

1095–1291 The duration of the Crusades, a series of military campaigns in which European Christians attempt to take control of the Holy Land from Muslims.

1391–1474 Life span of Gedun Drub, considered the first dalai lama in Tibetan history.

1469–1538 Life span of Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism.

1492 Jews are expelled from Spain.

1517 The German Augustinian monk Martin Luther launches the Protestant Reformation, which divides Christianity into two main denominations, or branches: Catholicism and Protestantism.

1817–92 Life span of Mirza Husayn ʿAli Nuri, later known as Bahāʾu’llāh, who was the founder of the Bahāʾí faith.

1844 The German philosopher Karl Marx makes his famous statement that religion is “the opium of the people.”

1867 Beginning of the Meiji Restoration in Japan, during which Shinto is made the official state religion.

1870 The British scientist Thomas Henry Huxley coins the term agnosticism to describe his own skepticism (doubt) regarding the existence of God.


1933–45 Some six million European Jews are killed during the Holocaust.

1948 The Jewish nation of Israel is established in Palestine.

1972 The neo-pagan Norse religion of Asatru is officially recognized as a religion by the government of Iceland.

1974 A number of Wiccans gather in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where they draft a statement containing the principles of Wiccan belief.
1978–2005 Reign of Poland’s John Paul II as pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the first non-Italian pope since the sixteenth century.

1989 The Dalai Lama wins the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on behalf of his homeland, Tibet, which has been under Chinese control since 1950.

2005 Benedict XVI is elected the 265th pope of the Roman Catholic Church.
Words To Know

acupuncture: Traditional Chinese medical treatment that uses needles inserted into the body at specific locations to stimulate the body’s balanced flow of energy.

adur aduran: The “fire of fires” that burns in Zoroastrian temples.

agnosticism: The view that the existence or nonexistence of God is unknown and is probably unknowable.

ahimsa: The principle of nonviolence, or not doing harm to any living creature.

Ahura Mazda: The supreme God of Zoroastrianism.

Akaranga Sutra: One of the sacred texts of Jainism, which contains the teachings of Mahavira.

Akhand Paath: Any occasion, such as a marriage or a death, when the Granth Sahib is read in its entirety.

alchemy: An ancient science that aimed to transform substances of little value into those of greater value, such as lead into gold.

Allah: The name of God in Islam, derived from the Arabic word al-ilah, meaning “the One True God.”

Amaterasu: The Sun-goddess.

Amesha Spentas: The “Bounteous Immortals,” aspects, or sides, of Ahura Mazda.

amrit: A solution of water and sugar, used in the ceremony when Sikhs are initiated into the faith.
Amrit Sanskar: The initiation ceremony for young Sikhs.
Anand Karaj: The Sikh wedding ceremony.
animism: The worship of trees, rocks, mountains, and such, which are believed to have supernatural power.
anthropomorphism: Attributing human shape or form to nonhuman things, such as the gods.
apathia: Stoic belief that happiness comes from freedom from internal turmoil.
apeiron: Anaximander’s term for the first principle, an undefined and unlimited substance.
archê: The beginning or ultimate principle; the stuff of all matter, or the building block of creation.
arihant: An enlightened person.
Ark of the Covenant: A cabinet in which the Ten Commandments were kept in the First Temple of Jerusalem.
artha: Prosperity and success in material affairs.
Asatru: A neo-pagan religion based on worship of the Norse (Scandinavian) gods.
ascetic: A person who practices rigid self-denial, giving up all comforts and pleasures, as an act of religious devotion. Jain monks and nuns are ascetics.
asha: Righteousness that derives from natural law.
Ashkenazic: Term used to refer to Jews of France, Germany, and Eastern Europe.
astrology: The study of the movement of the planets and stars in relation to one another in order to predict future events.
ataraxia: Serenity, tranquility, or peace of mind.
atheism: A disbelief in the existence of God or a belief that there is no God.
atomism: The belief that matter is composed of simple, indivisible, physical particles that are too tiny to be observed by human beings.
atonement: In Christianity, the sacrifice and death of Jesus to redeem humankind from its sins.
aum: Often spelled Om, the sacred syllable and symbol of Hinduism; a symbol of the unknowable nature of Brahma.
Avesta: The chief sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism.
baptism: A religious ceremony in which a person is dipped in or sprinkled with water as a sign of being cleansed of sin.

bar mitzvah: The Jewish coming-of-age ceremony for boys.

bat mitzvah: The Jewish coming-of-age ceremony for girls.

belief: A conviction of the truth of a proposition either by close examination or trust.

Beltane (Beltaine): Neo-pagan holiday on April 30.

benevolence: The tendency to do good and to be kind to others.

Bhagavad Gita: A Sanskrit poem regarded as a Hindu scripture; part of the epic Mahabharata, which means “Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty”; examines the nature of God and how mortals can know him.

bhakti: Devotion.

blasphemy: Disrespectful comments or actions concerning a religion or its God.

bodhisattva: A person who has attained enlightenment but, rather than entering a state of nirvana, chooses to stay behind to help others reach enlightenment.

Bon: An indigenous religion of Tibet.

Brahma: The creator-god.

The Buddha: The title of Siddhartha Gautama after he attained enlightenment.

caliph: One of Muhammad’s successors as leader of the faith.

Candomblé: A South American religion with many similarities to Santería, often used synonymously with Santería.

canon: The official, sacred texts of a religion.

caste: Social classes in Hinduism, the dominant religion in India.

Celtic: A term referring to an ethnic group that spread throughout Europe, particularly the British Isles, and is the source of many modern neo-pagan movements.
church: From the Greek, this word refers to the community of all Christians. It is also the place where Christians go to worship.

consciousness: The condition of being aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, and existence.

conservative: A movement in modern Judaism that tries to strike a balance between Orthodox and Reform Judaism.

conversion: A change in which a person adopts a new set of religious beliefs.

coven: A group of neo-pagans, such as Wiccans. Alternately referred to as circles, groves, kindreds, garths, hearths, and other terms.

covenant: In religion, a covenant refers to an agreement between God or a messenger of God and his followers.

creed: A statement of belief or basic principles.

crucifixion: The suffering and death by nailing or binding a person to a cross.

cuneiform: Sumerian writing, so-called because of its wedge-shaped marks.

daevas: Ancient Persian deities.

Dao: The path or way; the rhythmic balance and natural, flowing patterns of the universe.

di: Political power that is the result of a ruler’s virtue and honesty.

deity: A god or goddess.

dharma: Righteousness in one’s religious and personal life.

Diaspora: The scattering of the Jews throughout the world.

Digambara: Literally “sky-clad”; one of the two major sects of Jainism.

disciple: A person who accepts and assists in spreading the teachings of a leader. In the Bible, a follower of Jesus.

doctrine: A set of ideas held by a religious group.

druidism: A neo-pagan religion based in the Celtic region of the British Isles.

dynasty: A sequence of rulers from the same family.
Eightfold Path: The path of the Buddha’s teachings that can lead to the end of suffering.

Ek Onkar: The “True God” of Sikhism.

emanation: That which inevitably flows outward from the transcendent (spiritual, beyond human experience) central principle of reality, “the One,” in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus.

empiricism: Belief that knowledge comes through the senses.

enlightenment: The state of realization and understanding of life, a feeling of unity with all things.

Epicureanism: The philosophy of Epicurus and others that states that the highest good is pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

equinox: Either of two points during the year when the Sun crosses the equator and the hours of day and night are equal. The spring, or vernal, equinox occurs generally on March 21 and the autumn equinox occurs on or about September 23.

Esbat: Wiccan celebration of the full Moon.

ethics: The study of moral values and rules or a guide to such values and rules.

etiquette: Proper behavior; good manners.

Evangelical: Describing a Protestant group that emphasizes the absolute authority of the Bible and forgiveness of sin through belief in Jesus.

excommunicate: To exclude or officially ban a person from a church or other religious community.

faith: Belief and trust in God, accompanied by a sense of loyalty to the traditional doctrines, or principles, of religion.

Faravahar: A figure of a bird with its wings spread that is a chief symbol of Zoroastrianism.

filial piety: The respect and devotion a child shows his or her parents.

fitrah: An inborn tendency to seek the creator.

Five Classics: The original texts used by Confucius in his practices and teachings: Liji, Shijing, Shujing, Chunqui, and Yijing.
**Five Pillars:** The core of Islamic belief referring to declaring faith, daily prayer, charitable giving, fasting, and pilgrimage.

**folk beliefs:** The beliefs of the common people.

**Folk (Minzoku) Shinto:** Shinto that emphasizes folk beliefs, or common beliefs, of rural agricultural laborers.

**Four Affirmations:** A code of conduct by which Shintoists live, including emphases on tradition and family, nature, cleanliness, and worship of the kami.

**Four Books:** The most prominent of Confucian sacred texts, established by Zhu Xi: the Analects, the Mencius, *Da Xue* (Great Learning), and *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean).

**Four Noble Truths:** The foundations of the Buddhist religion: that all life is suffering, that desire causes suffering, that suffering can end, and that ending suffering happens by following the path of the Buddha’s teachings.

**Gahambars:** Seasonal festivals.

**Gathas:** A portion of the Zend-Avesta that contains holy songs; believed to be the words of Zarathushtra himself.

**God:** The supreme or ultimate being or reality; creator of the universe.

**Goddess worship:** Term that refers generally to any neo-pagan practice that elevates the status of goddesses over that of gods.

**Golden Temple:** The chief Sikh temple, located in the city of Amritsar in India; more formally, the Sri Harmandir Sahib.

**gurdwara:** A Sikh temple or place of worship.

**guru:** A religious teacher.

**Ha-ne-go-ate-geh:** The “Evil-Minded,” the evil spirit of the Iroquois nation.

**Ha-wen-ne-yu:** The Great Spirit of the Iroquois nation.

**hadiths:** The sayings of the prophet Muhammad recorded by his followers.
**Haj**: Pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

**halal**: Permissible activities for Muslims.

**Hanukkah**: The Jewish Festival of Lights commemorating the rededication of the First Temple.

**haram**: Prohibited activities for Muslims.

**heretic**: A person whose beliefs oppose his or her religion’s official doctrines, or defining principles.

**Ho-no-che-no-keh**: The Invisible Agents, or lesser spirits, of the Iroquois.

**Holocaust**: The systematic slaughter of Jews by the Nazi regime in Germany before and during World War II (1939–45).

**householders**: Laypeople; Jains who are not monks or nuns.

**I**:

**idol**: A statue or other image that is worshipped as a god.

**Imbolc**: Neo-pagan holiday generally held on February 2 to mark the lengthening of the days and the emergence of the world from winter.

**Immaculate Conception**: The principle of the Roman Catholic Church that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was conceived with a soul free from original sin.

**incarnation**: In Christianity, the belief that God took on bodily form through Jesus, making Jesus fully human and fully divine.

**indigenous**: A word that describes a people, culture, or religion that is native to a particular geographical region.

**indulgence**: In the Roman Catholic Church, the belief that paying money to the Church would allow a person to get into heaven or be forgiven for sins that were not yet committed.

**Izanagi**: The male figure in the Shinto creation myth.

**Izanami**: The female figure in the Shinto creation myth.

**J**:

**jinja**: Shrine.

**jinn**: Evil spirits that tempt a person away from dedication to Allah.

**jinn**: Literally, “conquerors”; the great teachers of Jainism who have conquered their earthly passions.
jiva: The soul.

junzi: A gentleman or superior man.


c

Ka’aba: The shrine built by the prophet Abraham in the holy city of Mecca and the focal point of pilgrimages to the city.

kama: Gratification of the senses.

kami: The gods or divinities of Shinto; the life force or spirit associated with places, natural objects, and ancestors.

kami-dana: A “kami shelf” or altar in a private home.

kara: A steel bracelet, worn by Sikhs as a symbol of God.

karma: The result of good or bad actions in this lifetime that can affect this or later lifetimes.

kasha: The white shorts worn by Sikhs as a symbol of purity.

kesh: Uncut hair, a symbol of Sikhism.

kevalnyan: Enlightenment.

Khalsa: The militant “brotherhood” of Sikhism, founded by Guru Gobind Singh.

Khanda: The emblem of Sikhism.

kirpan: A sword or dagger worn by Sikhs as a symbol of their willingness to fight to defend their faith.

Kojiki: The chief text of Shinto, a work that combines history, myth, and folk belief.

kosher: Dietary laws, referred to in Hebrew as kashrut.

kungha: The wooden comb used to groom hair, a symbol of Sikhism.

kushti: The sacred cord, or belt, that Zoroastrians wear.

kusti: The “holy path” one has to follow to be a Zoroastrian.

laity: Body of worshippers who are not members of the clergy.

li: The rules of behavior a person must follow to reach the Confucian ideal of correct living.
**Logos**: Word, logic, or defining pattern of the universe, similar to the Dao in Chinese philosophy.

**Lughnasadh**: Neo-pagan harvest festival on August 1.

**maat**: Divine order and justice; a central concept in the religion of ancient Egypt.

**Mabon**: Neo-pagan celebration of the autumn equinox; the completion of the harvest season.

**Magen David**: The so-called Star of David, a symbol of the Jewish faith and nation.

**magick**: The ability to focus mental and physical energies to affect the natural world or to achieve a goal.

**Mahavira**: The twenty-fourth tirthankara often regarded as the founder of Jainism.

**Mahavira jayanti**: Mahavira’s birthday, an important holy day for Jains.

**mantra**: A formula repeated over and over to create a trancelike state.

**materialism**: A belief that matter and the motion of matter constitute the universe. All phenomena, even those of mind, are the result of material interactions.

**matsuri**: Festival.

**Mecca**: A city in present-day Saudi Arabia, the holiest site of Islam, where the religion was founded.

**meditation**: Quiet reflection on spiritual matters.

**menorah**: A seven-branched candelabrum; at Hanukkah, a nine-branched candelabrum is used.

**Messiah**: The expected deliverer and king of the Jews, foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament; used by Christians to refer to Jesus Christ.

**metaphysical**: Having to do with the philosophical study of the nature of reality and existence.

**metaphysics**: The branch of philosophy that deals with explanations for the most general questions of being, such as what brought the world into being, and the nature of space, time, God, and the afterlife.
**WORDS TO KNOW**

**metempsychosis**: Transmigration of souls, or the migration of the soul into a different form, animal, or object after death.

**mezuzah**: A small case containing Torah passages that observant Jews attach to the doorposts of their houses.

**midrashim**: Stories that expand on incidents in the Hebrew Bible.

**Mishnah**: The written text of the Talmud.

**mitzvot**: The laws of Judaism contained in the Torah.

**moksha**: Salvation; liberation from rebirth.

**monastery**: A place where religious people such as monks live, away from the world and following strict religious guidelines.

**monotheism**: Belief in one supreme being.

**morality**: Following the rules of right behavior and conduct.

**Moshiach**: The expected Messiah in Jewish belief.

**muezzin**: The person who issues the call to prayer.

**murti**: Image of a god.

**Muslim**: A follower of Islam, from the Arabic phrase *bianna musliman*, meaning “submitted ourselves to God.”

**myth**: A legendary story, often with no basis in historical fact, that frequently tells of the actions of deities and helps to explain some naturally occurring event or some supernatural occurrence.

**mythology**: The collected stories of a culture or religion, especially those dealing with the origins, heroes, gods, and beliefs of a group of people.

**Naam Karam**: The naming ceremony for children.

**namaskar**: The basic prayer of Jainism, recited each morning and at night before bedtime.

**Neo-paganism**: A term referring to modern religions based on ancient pagan religions.

**nirvana**: The end of suffering, beyond time and space; the goal of all Buddhists.

**nivritti**: People who choose to withdraw from the world to lead a life of renunciation and contemplation.

**norito**: Prayers to the kami.
Offering of Eightfold Puja: An important Jain temple ritual in which the worshipper makes eight offerings to the tirthankara.

Olódumáre: The name of the supreme god in Santería.

Om: Often spelled Aum; the sacred syllable and symbol of Jainism (and Hinduism), used for purposes of meditation.

Oral Torah: Interpretations of the Torah and ways to apply their laws.

orders: Religious communities.

Original Sin: The sin that fell upon humankind when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden; this act, in turn, led to the separation of humans from God.

Orishas: Name given to the lesser gods of Santería.

orthodox: The name of one of the sects of Judaism, generally referring to traditional Jews who are conservative in their outlook.

Oshogatsu: The Shinto new year.

Ostara: Neo-pagan holiday held at the time of the spring equinox.

pagan: Pre-Christian or non-Christian; also referring to those who worship many gods.

pantheon: The class or collection of all gods and goddesses in a system of belief.

Parshva: The twenty-third tirthankara, who lived about 250 years before Mahavira.

Parsis (Parsees): Zoroastrians who live in India.

Paryushana: An eight-day festival, the most important holy observance for Jains during the year.

Pesach: The feast of Passover, commemorating the flight of the Jews from Egypt.

philosophical Daoism: A form of Daoism by which followers seek knowledge and wisdom about the unity of everything in existence and how to become closer to it.

philosophy: The study of morals and reality by logical reasoning to gain a greater understanding of the world.
polytheism: A religion worshiping many gods.

pravritti: People who choose to live in the world rather than withdraw from it.

prophecy: Prediction of future events.

prophet: A person chosen to serve as God’s messenger.

pu: Uncarved or unformed; the state of simplicity to which Daoists try to return.

puja: Worship.

purushartha: The four aims of Hinduism or “the doctrine of the fourfold end of life.”

Purva: The original Jain sacred texts, now lost.

pyramid: A stone tomb constructed to house a deceased pharaoh of Egypt.

qi: The breath of life or vital energy that flows through the body and the earth.

Qur’an: The sacred scriptures of Islam; contains the revelations given to the prophet Muhammad revealed to him beginning in 610.

ra’kah: A unit of prayer.

rationalism: Belief that knowledge can come exclusively from the mind.

reform: One of the sects of Judaism, generally used to refer to the less traditional branch of the faith.

Regla de Ocha: The formal name for the Santerian religion.

Rehit Maryada: The Sikh code of ethical conduct.

religious Daoism: A form of Daoism that recognizes gods, ancestor spirits, and life after death.

ren: Empathy, the ability to feel for and sympathize with others; the highest Confucian ideal.

Resurrection: The rising of Jesus Christ from the dead three days after his Crucifixion, or death on a cross.
Rig Veda: The central scripture of Hinduism, a collection of inspired hymns and songs.

Rosh Hoshanah: The Jewish “New Year.”

Sabbat: Holidays practiced by Wiccans throughout the year, including the summer and winter solstices, the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, and four additional holidays between these four.

sacrament: A sacred rite, or ceremony.

sadhana: Ascetic person.

saint: A deceased person who has been recognized for living a virtuous and holy life.

salat: Daily prayer.

salvation: The deliverance of human beings from sin through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross.

Samhain (Samhuinn): Neo-pagan holiday celebrated on October 31.

samsara: The ongoing cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth.

Samyak charitra: Right conduct; one of the Three Jewels of Jain ethical conduct.

Samyak darshana: Right faith, or right perception; one of the Three Jewels of Jain ethical conduct.

Samyak jnana: Right knowledge; one of the Three Jewels of Jain ethical conduct.

Sanskrit: An ancient Indo-European language that is the language of Hinduism, as well as of much classical Indian literature.

Santería: The “way of the saints”; an African-based religion practiced primarily in Cuba and other Central and South American countries.

Santero: A practitioner of Santería.

saum: Fasting.

sect: A small religious group that has branched off from a larger established religion.

Sect (Kyoha) Shinto: Shinto as it is practiced by a number of sects, or groups, formed primarily in the nineteenth century.

secular: Worldly things, of the physical world, as opposed to religious and spiritual.
Sedreh-pushi: The Zoroastrian initiation rite.

Sephardic: Term used to refer to Jews of North Africa, the Middle East, Spain, and Portugal.

Shahadah: The Islamic declaration of faith. It consists of the words “Ashahadu an la ilaha ill Allah wa ashahadu ann Muhammadar Rasulullah,” or “I declare there is no god except God, and I declare that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”

shaman: In indigenous tribes, an intermediary between the gods and the tribal members; also one who controls various spiritual forces, can look into the future, and can cure the ill with magic.

shamanism: A term used generally to refer to indigenous religions that believe in an unseen spirit world that influences human affairs.

shari'ah: Islamic law.

Shi'ite: One of the main sects of Islam; from the phrase Shi'at Ali, or the party of ‘Ali.

Shinbutsu bunri: The separation of Shinto and Buddhism when Shinto was declared the official state religion.

Shinbutsu shugo: The combination of Shinto and Buddhism.

Shinto: Literally, “the way of the gods” or “the way of the kami.”

Shiva: The destroyer god, embodying the erotic and sexual.

Shivaism: A major sect of Hinduism, which sees Shiva (“the Destroyer”) as the central god.

Shrine (Jinja) Shinto: The traditional, mainstream practice of Shinto, with emphasis on the local shrine.

skepticism: Doubt or disbelief toward a particular proposition or object.

Skepticism: A philosophical system that doubted the possibility of ever discovering real truth through the senses.

Socratic: Having to do with the philosopher Socrates and his method of asking questions of students to develop an idea.

solstice: The points in the year when the day is longest (the summer solstice, generally on June 21) and the shortest (the winter solstice, generally on December 21).

Sophists: A group of traveling teachers in ancient Greece who doubted the possibility of knowing all the truth through the physical senses.

State Shinto: Shinto as it was practiced after it was declared the official state religion in the late nineteenth century until 1945.
**Stoicism:** The philosophical system that holds that people should pursue the knowledge of human and divine things through the use of logical systems. It also says that humans may not be able to control natural events, but that they can control the way they react to them.

**stupas:** Originally a mound marking the spot where the Buddha’s ashes were buried. Rock pillars carved with the words of the Buddha are also sometimes called stupas.

**Sufism:** A trend in or way of practicing Islam; characterized by an ecstatic, trancelike mysticism.

**Sunnah:** The example of the prophet Muhammad, containing the *hadiths*, or sayings; provides guidance to everyday questions of faith and morality.

**Sunni:** The main sect of Islam.

**supernatural:** That which is beyond the observable world, including things relating to God or spirits.

**supreme being:** The central God responsible for creating the cosmos.

**sura:** Any chapter in the Qur’*an*.

**Susano-o:** The Shinto god of violence and the ruler of the oceans.

**Svetambara:** Literally, “white-clad”; one of the two main sects of Jainism.

**swastika:** A pictorial character that symbolizes the eternal nature of Brahma because it points in all directions; also used as the official emblem of the Nazi Party during World War II (1939–45).

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**takhts:** Seats of spiritual authority in Sikhism. The “Five Takhts” are gurdwaras located in India.

**Talmud:** Traditions that explain and interpret the Torah.

**Tanakh:** The chief Jewish scripture; the Hebrew Bible.

**tawba:** Repentance.

**theism:** Belief in the existence of gods or God.

**theocracy:** A form of government in which God or some supreme deity is the ruler. God’s laws are then interpreted by a divine king or by a priest class.

**theology:** The study of God and of religions truths.
Three Jewels: The Jain code of ethical conduct, consisting of right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct.

Tian: Heaven, or the principle of ordering the universe.

Tipitaka: The Buddhist sacred texts accepted by all branches of Buddhism.

tirthankara: Literally, “makers of the ford,”; those souls who have attained enlightenment and have been freed from the cycle of death and rebirth; the twenty-four leaders of Jainism.

Torah: The first five books of the Tanakh: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

tori: The gate that marks the entrance to a shrine. Its shape is regarded as a symbol of Shinto.

totem: Some sort of object or, perhaps, animal that assumes a spiritual symbolism for a clan or tribe.

transcendent: Going beyond the ordinary, beyond the universe and time, into spiritual dimensions.

Trinity: In Christianity, the union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three divine persons in one God.

Tsukiyomi: The Shinto moon-god and the ruler of night.

U

ujiko: A “named child” whose name is entered at birth at the local Shinto shrine.

Upanishads: The core of Hindu philosophy; collections of texts, originally part of the Vedas, that explain such core Hindu beliefs as karma, reincarnation, nirvana, the soul, and Brahman.

urvan: The soul.

V

Vaishnavaism: A major sect of Hinduism, which sees Vishnu (“the Preserver”) as the central god.

Vedas: The chief sacred scriptures of Hinduism; knowledge, wisdom, or vision.
Virgin Birth: The Christian belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and born of a virgin mother.

Vishnu: Also called Krishna; the preserver-god.

Vodou: An African-based religion practiced primarily in Haiti and in other Central and South American countries.

Vodouisant: An uninitiated practitioner of Vodou.

Wakan: The incomprehensibility of life and death for the Sioux.

Wakan tanka: The world’s motivating force for the Sioux.

wen: The arts of music, poetry, and painting.

Wicca: The name of a neo-pagan religion that generally worships the God and the Goddess.

wu wei: Nonaction, or deliberate and thoughtful action that follows the Dao.

Yahweh: One of the names for God in the Tanakh.

yazata: Guardian angel.

Yin and yang: Literally, “shady” and “sunny”; terms referring to how the universe is composed of opposing but complementary forces.

Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement.

zakat: Annual charitable giving.

ziggurat: A stepped foundation or structure that held a shrine or temple in the Mesopotamian religion.

Zionism: A movement that began in the nineteenth century to find a permanent home for Jews.
The following research and activity ideas are intended to offer suggestions for complementing social studies and history curricula; to trigger additional ideas for enhancing learning; and to provide cross-disciplinary projects for library and classroom use.

**Build a Model:** Build a scale model of the city of Jerusalem that shows some of the major sites in three of the world’s biggest religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The map should include the Western Wall (also called the Wailing Wall), important to Jews; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, important to Christians; and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, important to Muslims. Be prepared to explain to your classmates the importance of each site and the date on which it was constructed.

**Maps:** India is the birthplace of several major religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jainism. Also, Islam and Christianity, while they did not originate in India, have substantial followings in the country today. Draw a map of India that traces the origins of the four religions native to India and shows how they developed. In addition, note the number of followers of each religion in India today.

**Depictions in Art:** Most of the major figures in religious history have been featured in paintings and sculptures. Write a report in which you discuss how artists have treated key people throughout history. For instance, in Buddhism, artists have followed very specific rules for the depiction of the Buddha. Explain what these rules are and print out examples from the Internet or make copies from a book. In Islam, some Muslims believe that depictions of the prophet Muhammad are forbidden, while others believe that positive depictions are allowed. Explain the two sides of this argument and show an example of a visual depiction of Muhammad.
Politics: Religion has mixed with politics in many different ways throughout history. There have been governments in which religious leaders had supreme authority, such as the Islamic leaders in Afghanistan in the 1990s. And there have been others in which religion was discouraged or even forbidden, such as in North Korea. In other countries, religion has changed over time. In Japan, for instance, Shintoism was once the state religion. However, since World War II it has lost its religious status but is still practiced in daily rituals and holidays. Choose a country and research how religion in that country has influenced politics during the country’s history. Write a report that explains how the relationship between politics and religion in the country has changed over time.

Book Report: Nearly every major religion has key texts associated with it. Christianity has the Bible, Islam has the Qur’an, Hinduism has the Vedas, and so on. Go to the library and check out a copy of a sacred text from a religion other than your own. Write a report that you can share with your classmates. What did you learn about the religion from the sacred text? Was the text difficult to read or understand?

Religions on the World Wide Web: The Internet contains many sites devoted to various religions. Conduct Internet research on a religion other than your own, and write a student guide to resources for that religion that can be found on the Web. For example, you might focus on a single religion, such as Daoism (also spelled Taoism). Or you might try to find sites that feature aspects of many different religions. For instance, you might conduct a search on religious literature. Write a Web guide for your classmates that catalogs the literature sites that you find.

Historical Religions: Some religions existed only in the past and are no longer followed. For instance, the religions of ancient Greece and Rome are still studied today for their historical and cultural interest. However, those religions have no followers today. In the same way, the religion of the ancient Egyptians is no longer alive. Egyptians today instead follow Islam or Christianity, or they are atheist or agnostic. Choose an ancient religion and write a report in which you explain when the religion died and what replaced it.

War and Peace: Followers of different religions have differing attitudes toward warfare. For instance, Islam has the concept of jihad, which is sometimes translated in English as “holy war.” Throughout history, some Muslims have used this concept to attack other Muslims or
non-Muslims in the name of Islam. Christians have likewise sometimes used violent means to further their religion; during the Crusades, for example, Christians conducted military campaigns against Muslims in an attempt to take control of the so-called Holy Land, the region of Palestine and modern-day Israel. And Sikhs are required to carry a ceremonial sword at all times, as a reminder to fight against injustice and oppression. Jainism, on the other hand, forbids its followers to harm another living creature, even a bug. Write a report in which you compare and contrast the views on war and peace in two different religions.

**Biographies:** Studying the lives of important religious figures can be an excellent way of learning about different religions. Choose two religious figures, one from the past and one from the present. Write a report in which you discuss their lives. How are their religious beliefs seen in their actions? Include a photo or drawing of each figure. Figures from the past might include Zarathushtra, the founder of Zoroastrianism, or the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Modern figures might include Black Elk, the Native American who wrote about his life as a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe, or Malidoma Somé, who has written about his African religious heritage.
What Is Religion?

One of the most interesting aspects of religion is that nobody agrees about its meaning. In fact, people cannot even agree on the origin of the word *religion*. There is agreement that it comes from the Latin word *religio*, but there is some confusion about the origin of that word. Some say it comes from the Latin verb *relegare*, which means to “read again” or “go over again,” as in the repetition of scripture or holy writing. Others say the root is *religare*, which can mean “to reconnect,” but can also mean “to bind or fasten.” In this last interpretation, religion serves the state and society by binding its believers to social rules and norms.

Definitions of religion vary. Some are extremely broad, such as that of the American religious scholar Paul Tillich (1886–1965), who called religion anything that deals with “ultimate concern.” Some definitions are very narrow; such as those that claim religion is only a belief in God, or Allah, or the Buddha, or some other divine or spiritual being. Definitions can be so broad as to include even such “nonreligious” belief systems as communism (a political theory that people should live and govern communally, or as a group) and atheism (the belief that there is no God) or so narrow that they confine themselves to only one organized form of religion and leave out all other forms.

Even though people might disagree about what religion is, they show some agreement on what religion does and how it does it. In general, religion can be described as a unified system of thoughts, feelings, and actions that is shared by a group and that gives its members an object (or objects) of devotion, someone or something sacred to believe in, such as a god or a spiritual concept. Religion also involves a code of behavior or personal moral conduct by which individuals may judge the personal and social consequences of their actions and the actions of others. Most of the time, religion also deals with what might be called the supernatural or the spiritual, about forces and powers beyond the
control of humans. In this latter area, religion attempts to answer questions that science does not address, such as the meaning of life and what happens after death.

In addition, religion deals in one form or another with salvation. This can include saving the souls of humans either in a literal fashion, with a heaven after death as in Christianity, or in a more symbolic sense, as in reaching an end to suffering such as nirvana, as in some Eastern religions, including Buddhism. Furthermore, religion usually does its work through some form of organization and worship, as well as through sacred rites or rituals, sacred books, a clergy or priesthood that administers the religion, and places, symbols, and days that are sacred to the believers.

Even though there is no commonly held way of looking at religion, most of the world’s population participates in a form in one way or another. Though hard to define, religion seems to be a universal experience and need. Of the nearly 6.5 billion people on Earth, only about 16 percent (about 1.1 billion) say they do not believe in a god or do not believe in a specific religion. The rest of the world’s population, some 5.4 billion people, belongs to one of more than twenty different major religions. The world’s major religions range in size from Christianity, with 2.1 billion members, to Rastafarianism and Scientology, with about 1.5 million members each.

**WORDS TO KNOW**

- **deity**: A god or goddess.
- **monotheism**: A religion having one God.
- **myth**: A legendary story, often with no basis in historical fact, that frequently tells of the actions of deities and helps to explain some naturally occurring event or some supernatural occurrence.
- **pagan**: Pre-Christian or non-Christian; also referring to those who worship many gods.
- **pantheon**: The class or collection of all gods and goddesses in a system of belief.
- **polytheism**: A religion worshiping many gods.
- **shaman**: In indigenous tribes, an intermediary between the gods and the tribal members; also one who controls various spiritual forces, can look into the future, and can cure the ill with magic.
- **supreme being**: The central God responsible for creating the cosmos.
- **theology**: The study of God and of religious truths.
- **totem**: Some sort of object or animal that assumes a spiritual symbolism for a clan or tribe.
Origins of religion

There are essentially two different theories on the origins of religion. One is called the faith-based theory. It assumes that religions are the result of divine messages from one or more gods, or from prophets (messengers) of such a supreme being or universal consciousness or awareness. Believers accept that their religion began as a direct or indirect revelation from a deity, or god, or the cosmos. Orthodox Christianity, the set of beliefs and rituals followed by most Christians, says that Jesus Christ...
What Is Religion?

(c. 6 BCE–c. 30 CE) was both the son of God and God himself. Jesus, a man, had the authority of God within him and gave voice to God through his words. Christianity, like other organized religions, has at its center rules and doctrines believed to be supernaturally inspired. This means that these rules and doctrines are based on beliefs about what is beyond the observable world. Some deal strictly with spiritual matters, but often provide rules and guidelines for behavior meant to be followed here on Earth, such as the Ten Commandments. The Commandments provide ten rules that followers of both the Jewish and Christian faiths are told to follow.

A role similar to that of Jesus is taken by Muhammad (c. 570–632) in Islam. Muhammad is considered the true prophet and messenger of God to whom the Angel Jabra’IL (Gabriel) communicated God’s will. Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892) was the messenger for the Bahá’í faith, as was Moses (c. thirteenth century BCE) for Judaism. Even in natural religions, which grow out of human questions about the universe and the way it works rather than divine messages, the truths that are found and developed are considered universal and eternally present. These include philosophy-like religions such as Buddhism, developed by the Buddha (Siddartha Gautama [563–483 BCE]). In the faith-based theory, humanity discovers a spirituality that already exists.

In the second theory on the origins of religion, anthropologists (scientists who study human societies and human origins) take a different view. They suggest that humankind created spirituality in response to either a biological or a cultural need. Those who support the idea of a biological origin for religion believe that religion emerged from the human brain’s ability to think about the process of existence. In other words, it was the result of humankind’s becoming self-aware, being able to see far enough into the future to realize that they would eventually die. Religion, in this view, is a reaction to death and a search for a way to avoid it, or, failing that, a chance to go on to a better place. Anthropologists who support a cultural origin for religion note that all religions are associated with either a code of behavior or a set of rituals or both. Ritual is a coded form of behavior that has special meaning for members of the culture in which it originates.

Whether or not these theories about the origins of religion are true, evidence suggests that the practice of religion is very ancient. Prehistoric archaeologists, anthropologists who focus their studies on the remains and culture of prehistoric humans and their ancestors, have uncovered evidence
of burial rituals dating to about 13,000 BCE. In France and Germany, paleontologists have found burials by Neanderthals, a subspecies of modern humans who no longer exist. Paleontologists study life from past geological periods through fossil remains. These Neanderthals carefully laid their dead in prepared graves, along with tools and weapons. The care with which the Neanderthals prepared their dead suggests that they believed in some form of an afterlife, a step that implies some kind of religion. A famous painting known as “the sorcerer,” found on the wall of a cave called Trois Frères in France and dating about 18,000 years ago, shows a figure of a bearded being that is half man, half animal. Most anthropologists believe that this figure is a tribal shaman (an intermediary between the gods and tribal members), but he may also represent an early deity.

Anthropologists believe that early religion may have developed in part out of human beings’ attempts to control uncontrollable parts of their environment, such as weather, pregnancy and birth, and success in hunting. Scientists recognize two different ways that humans try to do this: manipulation, through magic, and supplication, through religion. Magic tries to make the environment directly subject to human will through rituals. An example might be drawing pictures of large numbers of animals on cave walls in hopes of assuring success in hunting. Hundreds of such paintings have been found all around the world. Religion, on the other hand, tries to control the environment by appealing to a higher power, gods and goddesses. “The sorcerer,” for instance, may represent a god who ruled the hunt, because he is shown with deer and bison.

Special deities began to develop in three particular classes: from nature, from ancestors, and as guards or protectors. The most common deities represented natural forces, such as the sun, moon, seasons, rivers, and fertility. Any force that could either benefit or harm humans was given spirit form so that humankind could pray to it and ask for special favors. The second form of deity to develop

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**Distinguishing Time**

The abbreviations BC and AD are Christian in origin and refer to a calendar based on the life of Jesus Christ. When a date is given as BC, it means the year occurred “before Christ.” When the date is given as AD, it means an event happened “in the year of Our Lord” (anno domini, in Latin), again referring to Christ. These dates did not come into common use until centuries after the life of Jesus, so they do not correspond exactly to the dates historians now assign to his birth and death.

In the twenty-first century, dates are most often given as BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (of the Common Era). This change takes the overt reference to Jesus Christ out of the calendar, without requiring a new calendar to date historical events.
was based on the spirit of the ancestor, either an actual human ancestor, as with the Chinese, or an animal totem or object that unified a clan. A totem is an object, or perhaps an animal, that assumes a spiritual symbolism for a clan or tribe. Even on a small scale, ancestor worship was a logical extension of the summoning of deities and spirits to help living humans control their environment. This belief not only reassured the living, but also gave them hope that someone they knew was waiting for them after death. The third type of deity was one that could provide some specific service or protection, such as the goddess of the home or the god of war.

Over time one god in this group of competing deities usually assumed more power than the rest. Sometimes this may have been because competing gods represented different cities or communities. When a city conquered one of its neighbors, its god was believed to have conquered the defeated city’s god. Something like this may have happened in ancient Egypt, where several different gods and goddesses occasionally had similar or complementary responsibilities. In some cases, such beliefs led to the concept of a supreme god or deity responsible for all creation. The hierarchy of the gods became organized and so, too, did religion itself. Shamans began to form a distinct class in the clan and tribe. These men and women became the first clergy, or priesthood, and were believed to have magical powers and to have the ability to cure illness, which was thought to be caused by spirits, or supernatural beings. This class of shamans began to organize the belief system and to create certain traditions and rituals, such as the sacrificing of animals to different gods.

**Early religious practices** It appears from archaeological evidence that one of the earliest organized religions may have been the worship of the Mother Goddess. Archeological evidence of Mother Goddess worship exists in several different ancient cultures, including Çatalhöyük in modern Turkey (c. 6,000 BCE), Carchemish in ancient Iraq (c. 2,000 BCE),
and Knossos in ancient Crete (c. 1500 BCE). One early example that may indicate an early fertility goddess is the 25,000-year-old Venus of Willendorf, a small limestone statue discovered in Austria in 1908. In these cultures it is believed that the Mother Goddess was worshipped for her role in promoting the fertility of both the land and the people. Over time, the Mother Goddess was largely displaced by patriarchal, or male-dominated, pantheons, perhaps as a result of a better understanding of man’s part in reproduction.

The ancient Minoan civilization has left a graphic and very beautiful record of its female goddess in wall paintings in archaeological ruins found on the island of Crete. The Mother Goddess was not only important in prehistoric Europe, but has been found in the traditions of ancient Canaan, Sumeria, Egypt and other African countries, India, native North America, western Europe, and Australia. These fertility-worshipping religions slowly gave way to more male-oriented belief systems. In Europe, invasions from the east in the fourth and third millennia BCE by warrior tribes from Central Asia introduced religions based on patriarchal beliefs.

With the development and spread of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the earlier pagan religions and their goddess worship were replaced with religions dominated by males. Nevertheless, at the time of Jesus’s birth, the worship of goddesses such as Demeter, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Cybele (also known as the Great Mother) was widespread throughout Italy, Greece, and the Middle East. Some historians of religion believe that the great admiration and respect held for Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, especially in the Roman Catholic faith, may be a holdover of this earlier form of goddess worship.

By the time the first civilizations sprang up in what is now Iraq, around 3,000 BCE, religion had become a very involved process. Ancient Sumerians, people who lived in what is now the south of Iraq about 5,000 years ago, had a complex pantheon, with many gods and goddesses. Stories of the adventures of these gods and goddesses, and the relations of human beings with them, had already been collected into epics. The most famous of these epics is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the story of a human hero’s search for immortality and the way in which the gods and goddesses foil his quest. Although the story survives only as fragments, there is enough of it to show how these ancient people viewed their religion, the universe they lived in, and their place in that universe.
Modern religions

Over the course of thousands of years, tribal totems, ancestor worship, and belief in guardian and protective gods led to increasingly complex belief systems. Myths, or stories about the creation of the world and tales of individual gods and goddesses, became a fundamental part of religion, as did certain rituals and rules of behavior, or things to do and things to avoid doing. The earliest historical religions, ones for which a written record exists, arose along the Nile River in Egypt and in the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia. An ancient form of Hinduism also emerged about the same time in what is now known as India. Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions were polytheistic, meaning they recognized more than one god. (Hinduism has many deities as well, but they are all understood as different aspects of one supreme being.) Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions influenced Judaism, which was one of the first monotheistic (having one God) religions. Judaism stretches back as far as 2000 BCE.

In Asia, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism rose to prominence beginning in about the sixth century BCE. All three are philosophies that do not worship a god. They are pantheistic, meaning they see all the universe or enlightenment as godlike. In the West, Greek and Roman religions, with enormous numbers of gods and goddesses, were dominant until Christianity replaced them in about the fourth century CE. Islam, closely related to both Christianity and Judaism, is one of the most recent major organized religions. It began in the seventh century CE. It has spread rapidly and widely from its Arabian base to include 1.3 billion believers around the globe, making it the world’s second-largest religion in the early twenty-first century.

Some scholars list ten to fifteen major religions. These include the five largest religions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as smaller but well-established organized religions such as Bahá’í, Confucianism, Daoism, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. Sometimes the indigenous (native) religions of the
Americas, Africa, and Oceania are added to these, as well as more recent forms, such as neo-paganism, which worships ancient Norse, Celtic, Egyptian, and other pagan (pre-Christian) gods.

**God has many names** As different religions developed over time and geographic regions, they all established one or more gods that the faithful could call upon and worship. The names of these gods differed across religions, although many shared similar characteristics. This is true in the monotheistic faiths that consider Abraham as a founder of their religion. These are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Jewish name for God is Yahweh, or YHWH. Another common variation on the name is Jehovah. Christianity refers to God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This refers to the Christian Trinity, in which God is believed to exist as Himself, within Jesus Christ, the son of God, and as a purely physical representation in the Holy Spirit. Islam refers to God as Allah. Muslims, the followers of Islam, have ninety-nine different variations of God’s name. The religion of Bahá’í grew out of Islam and came to call Baha (glory or splendor) its God. Zoroastrianism calls upon Ahura Mazda (“Lord Wisdom”) as its God.

Hinduism recognizes one supreme being, Brahma, but Brahma can manifest, or take form, in many different shapes. This includes taking shape as other gods or goddesses. Hinduism is not, however, considered a polytheistic religion (believing in more than one god) because all the Hindu deities are seen as forms of Brahma. Sikhism, which was founded in the same region as Hinduism, also has many different names for God. The main Sikh name for God is Sat Nam, or “true name.” In contrast, Jainism does not worship one god. Jains believe that those who are truly faithful can become individual gods when they end the cycle of death and rebirth by reaching perfection.

Other religions, including Shinto, Mahayana Buddhism, and religious Daoism, have even more names for the divine. Shinto kami, or nature spirits, may have individual names or be simply referred to as kami. Mahayana Buddhists recognize enlightened beings, such as the Buddha, and bodhisattvas, those who have become enlightened but remained outside their reward to help others, as godlike. Similarly, religious Daoism has many gods, including the popular Eight Immortals, who take on a role like that of the Buddhist bodhisattvas and help people find perfection in the Dao. Most major world religions have a central figure or concept that they turn to when seeking to approach the divine and the all-powerful.
Religion or Cult?

In the modern world there is much discussion of the danger of cults. People think of doomsday cults that keep members half-imprisoned and use mental pressure to ensure conformity. However, some say that one person’s religion is simply another person’s cult and that all the great world religions started out as cults.

There are ways of telling the difference between an established religion and a cult. Cults enforce obedience and discourage independent thought. True religions, in contrast, leave room for individual interpretations. Cults also attempt to cut believers off from their former life, including family and friends not involved in the cult, while religions generally embrace families as the cornerstone of society. At times, cults may also use physical threats to deal with their critics, while religions usually attempt to deal with such critics in a respectful manner. Size and age also have something to do with cult status. Usually cults are newly formed and small.

Despite the modern negative sense that the word cult has, its historical use was positive, or at least neutral. On the positive side, cult means a group that pays particular homage or worship to one thing or person. For example, the cult of Mary honors the mother of Jesus. A more neutral meaning is a small, recently created, religious organization that is often headed by a single charismatic (strong and appealing) leader. A cult may also be a spiritually inventive group, one that might challenge other larger and more dominating ones. A cult in this sense may simply be a new religious movement on its way to becoming a true religion. That was the situation with Christianity at its beginning as a breakaway sect of Judaism. The negative meaning of cult, involved with brainwashing its followers and abusing members, comes only from the second half of the twentieth century. So negative has the term become that the news organization Associated Press decided in 1998 to stop using cult to talk about a small religious group that is an offshoot of a larger one. Instead, they use the word sect.

Common characteristics of religions

Religions all share certain common traits. These include, but are not limited to: (1) the tradition and maintenance of the belief system; (2) the use of myth and symbol; (3) a concept of salvation; (4) sacred places and objects; (5) sacred actions or rituals; (6) sacred writings; (7) the sacred community and place of worship; (8) the sacred experience; (9) codes of ethical behavior; (10) a priesthood or clergy to lead the believers; (11) usually a god, goddess, or group of deities to which believers pray and worship; and (12) often a leader or founder who gains almost godlike status.

The similarity of such characteristics in most religions can be seen by comparing two religions, Christianity and Buddhism. Both use myth and symbol to describe the miraculous origins of their founders. One of
Christianity’s favorite stories centers on the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus to a young virgin. Likewise, the Buddha is said to have been conceived in a dream his mother had involving an elephant carrying a lotus. Following his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the desert resisting temptation from demons. The Buddha also struggled with demons and temptation before finally achieving enlightenment.

The Christian concept of salvation is rooted in the Redemption, or the forgiving of sins that the sacrificial death of Christ brought about, and in the form of an afterlife in heaven. In Buddhism, such salvation is the attainment of nirvana, a state free of wrong desires. Sacred places, objects, and rituals are basic to both religions. Pilgrimages to Rome or to Jerusalem are common for Christians, as are such trips to the Buddha’s birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal, or to other sites in India for devout Buddhists. Sacred objects include the bread and wine of the Christian communion and the prayer wheel, a form of meditation for Buddhists, especially in Tibetan Buddhism.

Christianity and Buddhism also share the concepts of a body of sacred scripture, rituals, and forms of meditation that separate believers from nonbelievers. The primary ritual for Christians is Communion, the symbolic meal that reenacts Jesus’s last supper on Earth, while for Buddhists meditation is a major form of prayer. Sacred writings include the Bible for Christians and the Tipitaka for Buddhists. For both religions, a distinct community of believers is basic. In Christianity this community is called the church, the body of the faithful. In Buddhism the sangha is the community of like-minded individuals who are also pursuing truth and spiritual rebirth. Christians worship in churches, Buddhists in temples. For Christians the sacred experience is the acceptance of Jesus as Lord, the son of God, at the same time both human and divine. For Buddhists, it is the desire to begin the journey and the ultimate end of the journey, enlightenment.

Both religions also share the concepts of moral codes that govern human behavior, an organized priesthood, roots in historic personalities, and reverence of divine or semi-divine founders. Christianity inherited the Ten Commandments, rules that guide human behavior, from Judaism, and added to them the stories and teachings of Jesus. Buddhism has the Five Precepts and the Eightfold Path for moral living. Priests, ministers, and other clergy lead the faithful in Christianity, while monks and nuns do much the same in Buddhism. Christians worship God the Father. Buddhism, though it has no supreme being, has
many deities in the Mahayana branch and also reveres the state of enlightenment, or Buddhahood, as godlike and at one with the universe. Jesus of Nazareth was the founder of Christianity, while Siddartha Gautama, who was known by the title of the Buddha or Enlightened One, was the founder of Buddhism. Christians acknowledge Jesus as the divine Son of God, and the Buddha, though he firmly denied being divine during his lifetime, has become godlike to many of his followers.

Such a brief comparison can be made for most major religions. Similar characteristics run through them all and separate them from philosophical or purely ethical systems.

The need for religion

One major theory about the human need for religion is that it grew both out of human curiosity about the big questions of life and death and out of the fear of uncontrollable forces. Eventually, religion transformed this human curiosity and fear into hope. Such hope involved several aspects: a desire for immortality or life after death, for a kind creator who would watch out for humanity, and for an ultimate meaning to life.

There are several other theories as to why religion is such a universal concern. Humans are social animals, and religion in practice brings people together. In fact, for many modern people who profess a religion, the social element may be even stronger than the spiritual element. Many attend religious services for the sense of community they might receive from this experience. They take strength in sharing a commonly held belief system with others and also enjoy the weekly, sometimes daily, routine that religious services provide. For many believers, in fact, the simple act of attendance at church or temple and participation in ritual is religion, rather than its spiritual element.

There are also scientific approaches. Psychologists, scientists who study the mind, argue that religion answers emotional and psychological needs in humans, such as the fear of death, or a need for a higher spiritual experience than is provided in the everyday world. Religion can thus give meaning and direction to a person’s life. Neuroscientists, those who study the brain and the nervous system, think that there is actually a part of the brain that has circuitry for an intense religious experience. In biology, the meme theory says that culture can be passed from generation to generation in the same way that genetic material, such as a gene for red
hair, is transmitted. Some scientists say that religion is actually a complex of memes, or inherited cultural traits, that is handed down from one generation to the next.

Religion, whatever its origins or its reasons for being, is a universal fact of life. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the rise of scientific and political theories (such as communism) that threatened the role of religion in daily life. However, religion has endured in all its various shapes. In the twenty-first century, religion is playing a more important role in world affairs than ever before.

**Religion or myth**

Myth is often at the service of early religion. According to the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary,* myth is “a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation.” Myths may or may not be factual, but they are always important to religion.

Myths often deal with gods and goddesses and attempt to explain a natural phenomenon or event, or even a way of looking at the world. Primitive cultures all over the world, for example, have some form of creation myth, such as how the world was created, or who put the sun and stars in place. Such stories can be very important for a society, because they give people a sense of how the universe works and what their place is in it.
Myth is not the same as religion, although it can be an important part of it. Some Christians believe the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ a myth: a story that aims to show how humans can be freed of their sins and brought into a heavenly afterlife. They believe that the Resurrection was not meant to be taken literally; instead, they see it as a symbol for finding new life or a new way of relating to the world when one believes in Jesus’s teachings. For other Christians, however, such Biblical stories are literal truth. They believe that Jesus died on the Cross and three days later he rose from the dead and spoke to his followers again before going to heaven. Both interpretations are possible, depending on how one approaches the reading of holy texts. One person’s myth can become another’s historical fact.

Religion and science
Science and religion are two ways of examining the world. The scientific method limits its examination to questions dealing with objective interaction with the world. It uses experiments and the process of trial and error to arrive at conclusions about the world. It tries not to make assumptions without a body of facts and evidence to support the assumptions. Science, in its many forms, can deal with many different types of questions, ranging from what makes people behave the way they do to what a distant star is made of.

Science, however, does not deal directly with questions of morality, such as how one should lead a good life or the nature of good and evil. Science can tell the reason for death, but not what happens after death. Religion, on the other hand, deals with what it calls absolute and eternal truth, and does so by generalization and by a leap of faith. This leap of faith, a belief in the unprovable, is perhaps the biggest distinction between science and religion.

Modern science has its roots in the Christian traditions of western Europe. For hundreds of years many of the truths of religions such as Christianity were largely accepted without question. By the mid-eighteenth century in Europe and America, however, critics had begun to question many of the biblical truths that were being interpreted, even by the faithful, as myths and fictions that were important on a symbolic or poetic level, rather than as historical fact. For example, early scientists and religious critics began questioning stories such as the Biblical account of the creation of the world. In 1650 an Irish bishop named James Ussher claimed that, based on the account in Genesis,
Earth was created on October 23, 4004 BCE. By the nineteenth century, geology (the study of rocks and natural structures) had developed enough to show that Earth was much older than the biblical creation story suggested. In 1859 naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published his influential work *On the Origin of Species*, which suggested that random acts, which he called natural selection, and not divine planning produced the many species on Earth. Darwin’s second work, *The Descent of Man* (1871) took this idea a step further, applying it specifically to humankind. This was seen as an assault on the Bible’s teachings that God created man in His image. So furious were the debates raised by these books that, by the end of the nineteenth century the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) could declare, “God is dead.”

Nietzsche’s declaration was premature; he was also speaking primarily of the West, Europe and the United States. In the twenty-first century, a large debate between science and religion, at least in the United States, continues to rage over evolution. Evolution is taught in schools, but many Christians believe that their belief should also be taught to students in science classes alongside evolution. Some Christians now argue for an intelligent design theory, with God as the designer and evolution the mechanism with which the design is carried out. The debate over whether intelligent design should be taught in science classes is one that many schools throughout the United States are dealing with in the early twenty-first century.

Despite such conflicts, however, there is no reason that both forms of thought, religious and scientific, cannot coexist. Science makes no claims to first causes. In their theories of the

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**Sacred Days: Christmas**

A religion often has as its sacred day the birth date or death date of its founder. December 25 is the day set aside for honoring the birth of Jesus in many, but not all, Christian traditions. The holiday is celebrated by many Christians as well as some non-Christians. But December 25 probably was not the actual birthdate of Jesus. Scriptural evidence suggests that Jesus was probably born in the spring or summer; that was the time the shepherds that Luke reports visiting the newborn Jesus would have been in the fields, watching over the young lambs.

December 25, however, was a powerful day to incorporate into the new Christian religion. It had been, from earliest pagan times, a time of celebration, since it falls close to the winter solstice, the shortest day in the year. For the ancients, this was a turning point in the year, signaling the lengthening of days and the return of the sun. Prehistoric tribes and clans throughout Europe constructed sophisticated and enormous rock timepieces in the landscape, such as Stonehenge in England, to measure the fall of light at the winter and summer solstices.

In many cultures this all-important seasonal change has been a major festival day. In ancient Egypt the god Osiris was supposedly buried on the solstice. In ancient Greece it was called Lenaea and sacrifices were made, while in ancient Rome the Saturnalia was a week-long celebration that managed to blend all manner of earlier pagan celebrations from across Europe into one. Judaism has the eight-day festival Hanukkah, and Zoroastrianism gave modern Iran Shabe-Yalda, which celebrates the rebirth of the Sun. The concept of the rebirth of light or the coming of longer days and the Sun was a powerful symbol. The appropriation of the winter solstice for the Christian celebration of Christmas was a valuable development in the spreading of that religion.
development of the universe scientists do not say how the universe and everything in it was initially created. Such separate spheres of thought leave room for both systems to exist.

**The value of religion**

Religion continues to be a vital force because it has value for people. For many, the value comes in the experience of something beyond the boundaries of day-to-day life. The religious experience is for them a valuable product of faith, linking them to a bigger universe and giving them hope of eternal life. Others find in their religion an opportunity for intellectual analysis of doctrines and teachings, while for others the value of religion comes in its teachings about leading a moral and ethical life.

Most religions teach some form of moderation, and this in turn puts limits on believers and makes society more stable. Part of this social control comes from the figures of authority in provided by each religion. Still others find comfort in the traditions of their religion, including architecture and music. In practical terms, religions have at times been responsible for founding educational institutions, hospitals, and charities, forming the backbone of social welfare networks throughout the world.

Religion also plays a large part in regulating acceptable moral behavior, and in implanting a sense of ethics, or proper behavior, and justice not only in the followers of that particular religion, but also in society as a whole. In fact, many observers divide a religion into two categories: its ethical teachings and its spiritual teachings. Examples abound for the moral teachings of religions. In the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which have a common source in the Prophet Abraham, there are similar codes of ethical behavior contained in basic rules, such as the Ten Commandments. Religions with their origins in Asia also have codes of moral behavior and right living, as seen in Buddhism’s Five Precepts and Eightfold Path.

In addition to instructions for proper living, religions have also been responsible, in part, for the rule of law in society. Religious law was one of the early inspirations for secular or nonreligious legal codes. The Code of Hammurabi, the eighteenth-century BCE Babylonian code of law, takes as its inspiration the gods who put Hammurabi in power. In some cultures, the secular legal system is still highly influenced by religious law. This is true in some Islamic states, where religious law, *sharia*, is practiced. Additionally, some religious historians believe that the development of
monotheistic religions led to the creation of strong, centralized nation states, ruled first by kings, and later by elected officials. Thus, religion has had a major influence not only on the moral and ethical codes of societies, but also on their legal and governmental structures.

For More Information

**BOOKS**


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Agnosticism and Atheism

Agnosticism and atheism are not like other formal systems of belief. Most prominent religions have a membership or body of believers, a set group of texts that state the beliefs and principles of the religion, and clergy or officials to perform the rituals and hold worship services. Atheism and agnosticism have none of these things. They deal with doubt or disbelief in the concept of God, a supreme being that created the universe and all that is in it.

While they are often grouped together, agnosticism and atheism are, in fact, two different concepts. Atheism is the belief that there is no God. Though the term atheism actually originated in the sixteenth century, atheistic beliefs can be traced back to the sixth century BCE in China, India, and Greece. In contrast, agnosticism is much newer. It came into being in the nineteenth century during the debates over the scientific theories of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin (1809–1892). (Evolution is a scientific theory in which species gradually change through a process called natural selection, so that descendents are different from their ancestors.) Agnosticism states that humans cannot know if there is a God. Such knowledge probably cannot be achieved. So, where atheists claim that there is no God, agnostics say that there is not enough evidence to know if there is a God or not.

Even though atheists and agnostics do not believe in a creator-god, they might otherwise be very religious. In faiths such as Buddhism and Daoism, for example, the personal creator-god or supreme being is replaced with a concept of universal cosmic rule that determines and orders the universe. Even in some forms of Christianity, with its strong sense of monotheism, or one supreme God, both atheists and agnostics have found a home. For example, Unitarianism Universalism is a liberal Christian denomination, or group, that does not require its followers to adhere to specific beliefs, including a belief in God. Its members seek spiritual growth and a sense of community. Humanistic Judaism and
Reconstructionist Judaism are movements within the Jewish faith that do not require a belief in God. Instead, they are movements that emphasize Jewish culture, history, and identity.

Some atheists and agnostics, just like Christians, Jews, Muslims, and members of other organized religions, feel a personal need for fellowship in a community of like-minded people. They enjoy the sense of togetherness in gathering with others at church services. They find strength and support in such a community. They enjoy the act of singing together in hymns or of acting out deeply held ideas in ceremonies and rituals. While these approaches may appeal to some atheists and agnostics, however, many also reject organized religion and do not participate in such things.

It is difficult to come up with an accurate number of atheists and agnostics, either worldwide or country-by-country. Both agnostics and atheists are often vague about their personal beliefs. Since most atheists and agnostics are not part of any defined organization, information about their numbers comes only from census records. These records are not collected often and can be confusing regarding religious beliefs. Many people, when responding to the census, do not know how to list themselves. When atheists and agnostics are combined with others in a
group referred to on surveys and in the census as “nonreligious,” however, their numbers are shown to be quite large. One estimate from 1993 put the number at 1.2 billion worldwide, ranking nonreligious as the third largest “religion” in the world after Christianity and Islam.

A 2005 estimate put the number of atheists, agnostics, and other people who do not believe in a god, into a smaller group than the census category of “nonreligious” at between 500 million and 750 million. The number of professed atheists and agnostics alone is much smaller. Worldwide, the number of atheists is estimated at between 200 and 240 million. Many of these are in China and the former Soviet Union, where religion, under communism, was discouraged. (Communism is an economic and political philosophy that tries to establish a society without rich or poor people in which all property is communally owned.) At the same time, it is also unclear whether such numbers include Daoists and Buddhists, who could very well be atheist and religious at the same time. As a result, it is not possible to obtain an accurate worldwide number of atheists and agnostics.

If general nonbelievers are added to the figures for atheists and agnostics (those who do not follow any faith), the numbers double or triple. Some countries, such as Japan, report two-thirds of their population in the category of nonbelievers. In the Western world the largest numbers of atheists are found in Europe, with about 41 million. Sweden, followed closely by Denmark and Norway, has between 40 and 80 percent of its population in the nonbeliever category. In the United States, where 13 percent represent themselves as nonreligious, only about 0.5 percent label themselves agnostic. Even fewer call themselves atheists.

**History and development**

Atheism and agnosticism are beliefs that are found around the world. Atheism may have had its historical beginnings in the Hindu religion of India. As early as 900 BCE the sacred texts known as the Vedas described a number of different gods who actually compete for supremacy (greatest power or authority), each having a different power and function. George Alfred James, writing in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, describes a concept called “religious atheism,” which is a rejection of the belief in a single supreme God, but not of the belief in religion. Religious atheists believe in an impersonal source that orders the universe. In the Hindu tradition this impersonal cosmic reality or oneness is called *brahman*. 
Texts dated to the seventh century BCE describe brahman in ways that make it clear that brahman is not a god. Instead, it is a characteristic of the universe, like gravity, or “the Force” in the Star Wars movies.

Religious atheism This same trend can be seen in China. During the Shang Dynasty (a period when the country was ruled by members of a single family, from about 1750 to 1100 BCE), the supreme god was known as Shangdi, “The King Above,” the organizer of human society. By the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty in 1100 BCE, belief in a more impersonal cosmic concept was taking hold. Tian, or Heaven, was assuming equal status with Shangdi. Ultimately, Tian took hold in Chinese philosophy as the ordering principle of the universe, while Shangdi became a supreme ruler and creator of the universe. Tian helped to not only determine humanity’s affairs, but also to set up a moral order and authority. It is this concept of Tian that led to dao, or “the way.” According to Chinese philosophers, this concept, unseen and unknowable, governs the world. Philosophers are those who seek moral and spiritual truths about the world and existence. All things originate from and return to Tian. Dao is the central concept of the religion of Daoism.

Confucianism, too, is a religion that does not rely on belief in a supreme being. Confucian thought teaches obedience to the way of Tian. A just society will be formed by following the universal rules of conduct and duty. Those rules are learned from the examples of wise kings of the distant past, from tradition, and from the moral order of Tian. Since the concept of a single supreme being did not appear in China until the arrival of Christian missionaries in the sixteenth century, early Chinese thought does not really qualify as atheism. Missionaries are people who try to convert, or change, the beliefs of others to their religion. Although Confucian thought does not directly reject one God, it does lead towards the concept of atheism.
In ancient India various religious sects (groups) appeared which did not rely on the belief in a single supreme god. Some historians describe these sects as atheistic. Unlike atheism, however, they include beliefs about the order of the universe and way of living. Jainism, Carvaka, and Buddhism all reject the rituals of Hinduism. Jainism and Buddhism contain some supernatural elements, but Buddhism in particular rejects the necessity of a single supreme God. The Buddha, who was born Siddartha Gautama (563–483 BCE), in particular spoke forcefully about followers trusting in themselves and not seeking salvation from a god or gods. For both Jains and Buddhists, nirvana (a release from rebirth or from suffering) and enlightenment (realizing the true nature of reality and how to end suffering) are central concepts. For these believers, the state of nirvana will connect them to the universal order.

Carvaka is also a product of sixth century BCE Indian philosophers. It differs from Jainism and Buddhism because its atheism is built on a materialist belief system, the concept that the universe consists only of matter and that spiritual things or events are actually the results of matter interacting with itself. The Carvaka sect felt that those who had written the Vedas were misguided, that the physical world alone is real, and that heaven means earthly happiness. For followers of the Carvaka doctrine, or set of beliefs, the idea of soul, which is central to most Western systems of belief, is wrong. Though an organized religion, the Carvaka sect comes close to the modern sense of atheism.

**Development in the West** In the East (the countries of China, Japan, India, and others in Southeast Asia), early atheistic thought was actually religious atheism. In the West, however, such thought came from outside of religion and was secular (worldly or nonreligious) in nature. The ancient Greeks worshipped a number of gods, with Zeus the leader among them. He was not a creator-god, but he did uphold the moral order, or the right and proper way of existence. The Greek pantheon, the set of all their gods and goddesses, was attacked as early as the sixth century BCE by the Greek philosopher Xenophanes (570–475 BCE). He thought that a group of hard-drinking and loose-living deities like the Greek gods were hardly god-like in their behavior. Xenophanes, however, was no atheist. He suggested instead that one god was directly connected to the world. His criticism of the Greek pantheon was important, though, because it showed that humans could question the existence of gods.
The ancient Greek philosophy of atomism made a more consistent argument against the need for God or gods. Atomists, like the Indian materialists, looked for a material explanation for the existence of the universe. Democritus (c. 460–370 BCE) suggested that all matter in the universe was made of eternal elements he called “atoms.” If atoms were eternal, Democritus reasoned, then the universe had always existed and would always continue to exist, and, as a result, there was no need for a creator.

Another early Greek philosopher, Anaxagoras (c. 500–c. 428 BCE), was exiled from the Greek city of Athens for stating that the stars, planets, and the sun were material objects and not heavenly bodies, or god-like spirits to be worshipped. Another thinker, Protagoras (c. 485–420 BCE), was banned from Athens for saying that he had no way to know if gods existed or not, which is the central idea of agnosticism.

Ancient Greece also provides an example of a movement that could be consistent with modern atheism. The Epicureans, or followers of the philosopher Epicurus (c. 340–c. 270 BCE), believed in a material universe, like the Atomists. They rejected the idea of divine wrath (anger) and retribution (punishment), refusing to believe that gods took vengeance on individuals who made them angry. Epicureans took great care, however, to avoid denying the existence of gods. Instead, Epicurus taught that the gods were physical beings, unconcerned with the lives of ordinary humans.

Belief in the gods was a requirement in many ancient societies, including Athens and Rome. The gods gave the state rulers their legitimacy (legal right to rule). Atheism was a charge brought against any person who differed from the beliefs of the state religions of Greece and Rome. The famous philosopher Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE) was tried and executed in Athens for being “atheos.” However, Socrates was not an atheist. He believed in certain gods, just not the right ones to save him from such a charge. Early Christians and pagans (followers of the Greek and Roman state religions) also accused each other of being atheists because they each believed the other had denied the existence of their gods.
The Western concept of monotheism (belief in one God) began with Judaism. While earlier cultures, including ancient Egypt, had concepts that shared characteristics with monotheism, Judaism was the first major religion in which monotheism was central to belief. Christianity inherited its monotheism from Judaism. With the rediscovery of works by the ancient Greek philosophers, however, Christian thinkers began wrestling with the problem of how to reconcile (bring together) pagan Greek and Christian views of the universe. Christian scholars, from Augustine of Hippo (384–430 CE) to Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), tried to find ways of making Greek thinking and Christian religious ideas work together. These thinkers attempted to prove the existence of God through logical arguments. For some of them, the existence of the universe and of life in it were proof of God’s existence. Others believed that religious experience is so widespread that there must be a God to inspire it.

The Reformation and Age of Enlightenment  Many of these arguments, however, were forgotten during the Reformation, a revolt in Europe against traditional Catholic teachings that began in the early 1500s and continued for a century and a half. Before about 1521 the Catholic Church was a dominant force in the West, both religiously and politically. The popes were not only the leaders of the Catholic Church, but rulers of a large portion of central Italy. As the Church became more and more concerned with politics, its spiritual reputation suffered in many places. During the Reformation this led to widespread criticism of both the Catholic Church and the Protestant sects that broke away from it. Though this period focused on politics more than on religious ideas, such as the existence or nonexistence of God, the Reformation paved the way for later criticisms of religion. The scientific discoveries of the Age of Enlightenment, an intellectual movement in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that emphasized reason and logic, reinforced the questioning of Church policy, both Catholic and Protestant.

During the seventeenth century, when philosophers began observing and classifying natural phenomena, they looked for secular explanations for what they saw rather than religious ones. These early scientists discovered that the universe appeared to follow rules that could be described using logic and mathematics. They noted that these rules did not match what the Church said about the Universe. The criticisms of these philosophers, however, centered on the power and abuses of the
Church, and not on the existence or nonexistence of God. Despite this fact, the French term *athéisme* came into use in the late sixteenth century as both an accusation and a description of scientists and other free thinkers who questioned established religion. In this sense, atheism does not refer to someone who denies the existence of God but to someone who is godless, in the sense of being without morals or honor. This very negative meaning of atheism has carried forward into the twenty-first century.

One seventeenth century scientist whose work found rational explanations for what was once attributed to God is Isaac Newton. English scientist and physicist Isaac Newton (1642–1727) revolutionized thought about the physical world with his law of gravitation, which described the movement of the planets, comets, and other bodies in space. The French astronomer Pierre-Simon de Laplace (1749–1827) verified Newton’s theory of gravitation and the movements of the planets as well as the rhythm of the ocean’s tides. The discoveries of Newton and Laplace provided an alternative explanation for the existence and behavior of the universe that did not rely on God as its designer.

During the Age of Enlightenment reason and logic were often ranked above faith. One of France’s most famous advocates of Enlightenment thought, Denis Diderot (1713–1784), was accused of atheism for his challenges to religion through his belief in materialism (the theory that physical matter is all that exists and everything can be explained through it). He explained this belief in his 1746 work, *Penseés philosophiques* (“Philosophical Thoughts”).

Philosophers during the Enlightenment also supported the idea of a material universe, rather than one created and directed by an all-powerful God. Philosophers are those we seek to use logical reasoning to understand reality. In his work, *The System of Nature*, Paul Henri d’Holbach (1723–1789), openly denied the existence of God. Other philosophers also questioned God’s existence, including David Hume (1711–1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, attacked the idea that order and the supposed perfection of the world was proof of the existence of a creator-God. Hume noted, in part, that if a well-ordered natural world needed a special designer, then God’s mind, which was itself well-ordered, also needed a designer. In that case, who designed the designer? Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, found no adequate arguments for the existence of God. For Kant, however, this did not prove that God did not exist. Kant believed that the
existence of God could neither be explained nor totally denied by scientific examination or rational thought.

**The Nineteenth century to the present** In the nineteenth century the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) argued that the concept of God is simply the projection of the highest ideals and standards that people can imagine. As such, God was not a subject for theology (religious study), but for anthropology (the study of human beings and their cultures). His work *The Essence of Christianity* influenced an entire generation of German thinkers, including Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx was the founder of Marxism, an economic system that views history as an ongoing struggle between the oppressed workers, or proletariat class, and the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie, or capitalists. Marx thought that the proletariat would rise against the owners and create a workers’ state and a classless society. For Marx, the concept of God and religion was just another way the ruling class had of keeping the proletariat under control.

For philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), God was also a human invention. However, for him God was the tool of the weak who wanted to keep the vital and strong in check. Nietzsche believed
in the heroic “superman,” a modern person who would reject all middle class values, including religion. This superman would create new values and a new moral order. Nietzsche wrote in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “God is dead.” By this he meant that the concept of God and religion had ceased to have an impact on the lives of humans.

Science advanced along many lines during the nineteenth century. British scientist Charles Darwin’s work in evolution questioned the very nature of the biblical account of Genesis, which states that God created the world in six days. Many Christians also believed, as stated by Irish bishop, John Ussher (1581–1656), that the Creation described in Genesis occurred in 4004 BCE. Discoveries in geology (the study of Earth’s history and its composition) pushed the age of Earth back millions of years, further challenging Christian concepts of Creation. Such discoveries served to make more and more people openly doubt the existence of God or even the need for God.

To describe the doubts of this expanding group of people, British scientist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) coined the term *agnosticism*. This view says that people do not have enough information or evidence to say that God exists or does not exist. Such a doubt-filled view of theism (belief in God) was as old as atheism. Yet it was not given an official name until 1870, when Huxley invented it to describe his own doubt about the existence of God. Huxley was a believer in Darwin’s theory of natural selection, which states that life becomes increasingly more complex over time randomly (by chance), not because of divine intervention from a supreme being, and that stronger types adapted and survived. A great advocate for science, Huxley was a powerful speaker and writer. His new term quickly became part of the language of religious discussion.

During the twentieth century organized religion in the West began responding to attacks on theism. Scholars found new ways to discuss the existence of God when science proved unable to resolve the question. Some of these arguments question the truth of science, proposing alternate theories about how life has evolved. The theory of intelligent design states that life is too complex to be a result of the random processes of natural selection, and that there has to be a first cause, or designer, to provide the engine that drives evolution. There are also theologians, people who study religious theory, in Protestant Christian thought who have broadened the concept of God from that of a personal human-like deity to more of a universal power, flow, and order. This is a concept also found in Eastern religions, such as Daoism. The theologian Paul Tillich
Thomas Henry Huxley

Thomas Henry Huxley was a renowned nineteenth-century scientist and writer who has been credited with advances in cellular biology (the study of the cell, the basic structural unit of living things) and in pioneering evolutionary biology, the study of how living things have evolved from simple to more complex forms. Huxley wrote and spoke widely on scientific subjects. He was also instrumental in transforming science from a hobby for the wealthy, as it had been up to the nineteenth century, into a true profession. Though he was the son of a schoolmaster, Huxley was largely self-educated in science. He became a doctor, earning early acclaim for his discovery in 1845 of a new membrane, or layer, in human hair. After joining the British navy, he served as chief surgeon on the HMS Rattlesnake for four years as it mapped regions of Australia. Huxley pursued his own research on these voyages, studying the anatomy, or structure and composition, of sea life.

Elected a member of the Royal Society (an organization sponsored by the British government to promote scientific research) in 1851, Huxley finally found a teaching position in 1854. Despite his early upbringing in the Anglican Church, Huxley became a skeptic regarding parts of Christianity, including the existence of God. He was a materialist and a supporter of the revolutionary theories of geologist Charles Lyell (1797–1875). Lyell suggested that the geological processes now seen on Earth shaped the planet very slowly over the course of millions of years. So geological change was in opposition to the literal biblical description in Genesis, in which God created the earth and all life on it in six days.

Huxley became a champion of Charles Darwin (1809–1892), who promoted natural selection as the way in which evolution works, both in print and from the speaker’s platform. Huxley largely agreed with Darwin’s theory that humans developed slowly over millions of years, evolving from simple life forms to increasingly complex ones through processes such as natural selection, in which stronger and better adapted types of life survive. In 1860 Huxley debated evolution with the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce (1805–1873). The debate was covered by newspapers and journals across England and earned Huxley the nickname “Darwin’s bulldog.” In 1870 Huxley coined the term agnosticism to describe his own beliefs about the existence of God.

(1886–1965), for example, moved away from a God-centered Christianity. For Tillich, the concept of God was more abstract. He called God the “ground of being.” Tillich suggested that God actually exists within each person. Tillich shocked many in the religious community by claiming that the old formal God did not exist.

Meanwhile, the twentieth century after World War II (1939–45; a war in which the United Kingdom, France, and the United States defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan) brought about state-sponsored atheism by the communist governments of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China. Many people stopped practicing religion or did so only in secret. While religion was not officially forbidden by communist governments, it was heavily controlled because it was seen as a threat to the person in power.
Communists also saw religion as a weakening influence, because it took resources away from the state. Only with the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 and 1990 was open religious practice restored in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Even in the early twenty-first century China continues to discourage religious activity, though Buddhists, Confucians, Daoists, and others are often able to worship quietly without repression from the state.

Agnosticism and atheism have long histories, perhaps as long as organized religions themselves. The concepts and those who hold them have survived for more than two thousand years. As a group they are very difficult to classify because their belief systems range from complete denial of any spiritual reality to a distrust and rejection of organized religion. Agnostics and atheists, however, together are considered a major presence in modern theology.

**Basic beliefs**

The terms *agnosticism* and *atheism* both come from Greek terms. The Greek prefix *a* means “not” or “without.” Atheism is a compound of *a* and *theos*, or God, and thus means literally without God or not God.

Atheism is divided into several categories. Strong atheists reject the entire concept of theism or of the existence of a God. They do not personally believe in God, and they also believe that those who do are mistaken in their belief. An absence, rather than a rejection, of a belief in a single God (which could include some polytheists and those who have had no exposure to monotheistic beliefs) is called implicit atheism. A conscious rejection of God’s existence is called explicit atheism. Some atheists also call themselves secularists, agnostics, or Bright. Bright is meant to take some of the historical stigma (mark of disgrace) away from being an atheist.

Agnosticism also blends Greek elements to form a new compound word. It mixes *a* with *gnosis* or knowledge, meaning without knowledge. Broadly speaking, the difference between the two concepts is that while atheists claim there is no God, agnostics claim not to be able to make statements one way or the other about the existence of God.

Agnosticism is a form of skepticism, or doubt, towards religious statements about the existence of God. Such questions, they say, are matters of faith rather than reason. Some agnostics leave the question of the existence or nonexistence of God open until further information can be found. Others say that there will never be logical, rational proof available.
The former belief is sometimes called weak, soft, or open agnosticism, while the latter is called strong, hard, or closed agnosticism. Agnostics base their skepticism about the existence of God on both the principles of logic and what can and cannot be said with language. For agnostics, the limits of language keep people from proving or disproving the existence of God.

A form of argument against the existence of God found in both agnosticism and atheism looks at people's motivation for believing in God. The theories of Ludwig Feuerbach influence this argument, as well as those of Karl Marx and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). This argument claims that humanity has created God because people need such an all-powerful father figure psychologically, or for their own mental well-being. God, for these thinkers, is an authority figure, someone a person can turn to in times of trouble for absolute answers and also for forgiveness of sins or wrongdoings. As such, God becomes a crutch for humans and an obstacle to accepting adult responsibility for one’s actions.

Sacred writings

Since agnosticism and atheism are not religions but belief systems, there are no sacred texts. However, certain writings have proved essential to the development of both belief systems. The Dao De Jing, one of the most translated books of world literature and of any religion, is the sacred text of Daoism. Parts of it were written as early as the sixth century BCE. It is one of the earliest coherent statements of a moral earthly order patterned not by an all-powerful God but by a metaphysical (spiritual) principle, the dao, a spiritual field that runs through everything and from which all things originate and return. The dao is the law of nature and not a God or gods. Other sacred texts in Eastern religions contain similar non-god elements.

In the Western tradition, influential titles include On the Nature of Things, a work from the first century BCE by the Roman poet and

Communist supporters in China march with a poster of Karl Marx. Marx stated that religion was another way for the ruling class to oppress workers and keep them under control. AP IMAGES.
philosopher Lucretius (c. 100–c. 55 BCE). This work is a defense of materialist Epicurean thought. Though not specifically atheistic, it does question the gods’ interest in humans and opened a discussion on the role of gods in humans’ lives.

One of the most influential atheist works, The System of Nature, by Baron d'Holbach comes from the eighteenth century. His book describes the world in materialistic terms, saying that all that exists is physical matter. For Holbach there was no soul and no God. Atheism was the only honest belief. Though not a scientist himself, Holbach attempted to use the latest scientific findings of his day to support his work. His attack on Christianity was important because it blended the work of many thinkers who had come before him.

The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach wrote several important works questioning the existence and reasons for God. These include The Essence of Christianity and Principles of the Philosophy of the Future. He argued that religion was, first of all, simply the product of the human desire for immortality or continual life. For Feuerbach, God was an invention of the human mind, a kind of father figure made up to comfort ourselves when we are overwhelmed by our insignificance.

Karl Marx also contributed to the discussion with Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: From this text comes his most famous statement about religion: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” By this, Marx meant that religion acted like a drug, hiding bitter reality from the mass of workers and keeping them under control. The “opium of the people” is one of Marx’s most famous quotes, and one that has been used by agnostics as well as atheists to describe religion and its possible negative effects.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis (a type of therapy used to treat mental disorders), also wrote about the existence of God in The Future of an Illusion, among other works. Freud wrote that religion is an illusion, an unreal vision, or perception, that humankind has created to ease the fear of death. In order for a person to be healthy and mature, Freud said, he or she had to be free of such fantasies as religion. Moving his patients toward an acceptance of atheism was an important part of Freud’s treatment.

Some basic texts for agnostics include David Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, and Thomas Henry Huxley’s essay “Agnosticism,” which first introduced the term. Two pamphlets by philosopher Bertrand
Russell (1872–1970): *Why I Am Not a Christian* and *Am I An Atheist or An Agnostic?* are also core texts. Russell thought that religion was just superstition, or blindly accepted belief, and that although there were positive aspects to religion, the negative ones outweighed the good. For him religion made people dependent and stopped the attainment of real knowledge. In *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Russell wrote:

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. . . . A good world needs knowledge, kindliness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after “desire for” the past or a fettering [repressing] of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men.

Darwin’s Beliefs

Charles Darwin’s work asserts that humans, rather than being made in God’s image, as the Bible says, are instead the descendants of other primates (evolutionary relatives of humans, a group that includes apes and monkeys). In his works Darwin implied that all life evolves from simpler forms and thus each form was not created individually by a master designer or supreme being. Though his work has been used as an argument for atheism, Darwin himself was not an atheist. He furthermore claimed that he thought of himself as an agnostic and found nothing inconsistent about believing in God and believing in evolution. In fact, Darwin did not give up Christianity himself until he was forty.

A careful man, Darwin discussed religion very little. His job was science, and his theory of natural selection was controversial enough without discussing it in the context of religion. There are, however, some indications in his writings about his feelings regarding the existence of God. In *The Descent of Man*, for example, he writes:

I am aware that the assumed instinctive belief in God has been used by many persons as an argument for his existence. The idea of a universal and beneficent Creator does not seem to arise in the mind of man, until he has been elevated by long-continued culture.

Later in the same work Darwin adds:

I am aware that the conclusions arrived at in this work will be denounced by some as highly irreligious; but he who denounces them is bound to show why it is more irreligious to explain the origin of man as a distinct species by descent from some lower form, through the laws of variation and natural selection, than to explain the birth of the individual through the laws of ordinary reproduction. The birth both of the species and of the individual are equally parts of that grand sequence of events, which our minds refuse to accept as the result of blind chance.

Because of his fame as a philosopher, Russell's words about religion strongly influenced modern thought.

Although it has nothing explicit, or outright, to say about religion, one other text has become a symbol of atheism and agnosticism: *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, which sets out the theory of natural selection. Darwin's work has been a lightning rod for the debate over the existence or non-existence of God since its publication in 1859. Darwin's theory basically challenged the Creation as described in the Bible. Though many Christians take that biblical description as a symbolic story, Darwin's work continues to cause controversy in religious circles, especially among literal readers of the Bible, or those who believe that the stories within the Bible are factually true.

**Influences of agnosticism and atheism**

Some Eastern religions created belief systems that do not rely on a personified supreme being, like the monotheistic God of Judaism and Christianity, but on universal concepts like nirvana and the dao. In the Western religious tradition, however, the influence of atheism and agnosticism has been two-fold. First, it has stirred debate within organized religion to revisit the literal reading of the Bible. Christians who read the Bible literally developed the principle of inerrancy, that is, that the Bible contains no errors or mistakes. Other Christian groups, however, chose to read the Bible as a collection of symbolic stories. Since the time of the Enlightenment, this discussion has continued in Christian religious circles. While literal Christians still insist that the Bible is truth word for word, others, both Catholic and Protestant, take such readings as metaphor (a figure of speech to suggest a resemblance between two things) and myth (a legendary story that explains events in the natural world).

Atheism and agnosticism have also helped move people away from organized religions. The secularization of society (making it nonreligious)
has been a trend since the late nineteenth century in the West. As a result, atheists and agnostics argue, there have been many beneficial results. Human beings are forced to take responsibility for everything they do, rather than blaming their actions on an all-powerful God. This in turn empowers them to do more things for themselves. Another positive result of the secularization of society is that, on the whole, religion no longer opposes scientific progress. Science has been freed from restrictions placed on it by religion. In the past, for example, the Catholic Church often rejected scientific advances because the Church thought these advances often conflicted with the idea of a creator-God, who was the source of all life on Earth. As a result of secularization, however, with its research into science, humanity has been greatly aided in areas such as medicine, technology, and electronics.

Religion itself has also benefited from a questioning of the existence of God, some agnostics and atheists claim. Christianity, for example, has become more democratic, ruled by believers, rather than by a hierarchy (chain of command, such as the different levels of leadership in a religion). For those who choose to practice religion, it becomes a personal choice and statement of belief, not a practice forced on them by social pressure. The net effect is to make religion stronger, because its membership is voluntary and more faithful.

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Agnosticism and Atheism


Organized religion had its beginnings in ancient Mesopotamia (in what is now modern Iraq) and in Egypt more than five thousand years ago. The religious systems in these areas blended political with spiritual elements in a type of government known as a theocracy, or rule by divine guidance. In such a government, deities (gods and goddesses) are the supreme religious and civic leaders. Their will is carried out by a priestly class or by a divine king. Mesopotamian theocracies took the form of city-states ruled by patron gods or goddesses. The god’s desires and wishes were interpreted by political leaders called ensi and by a priestly class. In Egypt religion and the state were also bound together. The national leader, the pharaoh, was considered a living god and was the vital link between humanity and the rest of the gods.

A major difference in outlook, however, marked the two religions. In Mesopotamia the forces of nature were more chaotic, more likely to cause catastrophes, such as disastrous flooding. As a result, the gods were seen as unpredictable beings of extraordinary power who had to be kept content by priests. People were at the mercy of the gods, so the job of humanity was to carry out their wills and make them happy. In Egypt, where nature was less destructive, the gods were seen as kind and generous and generally well-disposed toward humanity. Egyptians believed that their gods had created Egypt as a sort of refuge of good and order in a world filled with chaos and disorder.

Both religions were polytheistic, meaning they recognized many gods. These gods had certain similarities in both traditions. Many gods and goddesses personified elements of nature. In the Mesopotamian pantheon, or collection of gods, the most important were the trio of the sky god, An (or Anu); the god of storm and the earth, Enlil; and the water god, Ea (or Enki). These were followed in importance by a second triad comprised of the moon god, Nanna (or Sin); the sun god, Utu (or Shamash); and the goddess of fertility and war, Inanna.
In the later stages of Mesopotamian civilization, the local god Marduk became head of the pantheon. In Egyptian religion, the primary god was Amen (Amon or Amun), king of the gods. Next in importance was Ra (or Re), the sun god. These two were eventually joined in the cult of Amen-Ra. A cult is a religion considered to be outside the mainstream. Then came Osiris, god of the Nile and also god of the kingdom of the dead. His wife, Isis, was the moon goddess and mother of the universe. Their child Horus was god of the sky; Set, their brother, was the god of chaos and of the desert; and Thoth, the god of writing and knowledge. In addition to these was a vast array of other gods and goddesses that sometimes duplicated each other’s functions. The current pharaoh, as a living god, worked with all of these deities to create maat, or divine order and justice.

These ancient religions affected every aspect of life in the ancient Near East, from spirituality to farming, from medicine to the rule of society. As such, they were not simply a part of a person’s life but ordered and shaped that person’s life every day. Membership was not a choice as it is in modern religions. Rather, religion was a fact of life for everyone. Each person had favorite gods or goddesses to whom they prayed and sacrificed.

**WORDS TO KNOW**

- **anthropomorphism**: Attributing human shape or form to nonhuman things, such as the gods.
- **astrology**: The study of the movement of the planets and stars in relation to one another in order to predict future events.
- **cuneiform**: Sumerian writing, so-called because of its wedge-shaped marks.
- **deity**: A god or goddess.
- **maat**: Divine order and justice; a central concept in the religion of ancient Egypt.
- **monotheism**: Belief in one supreme being.
- **pantheon**: A collection of deities.
- **polytheism**: Belief in many gods.
- **pyramid**: A stone tomb constructed to house a deceased pharaoh of Egypt.
- **theocracy**: A form of government in which God or some supreme deity is the ruler. God’s laws are then interpreted by a divine king or by a priest class.
- **ziggurat**: A stepped foundation or structure that held a shrine or temple in the Mesopotamian religion.
History and development

Mesopotamia, a word made up from two Greek words meaning “between the rivers,” is an ancient name for an area encompassed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It stretches from the Persian Gulf in the south to the mountains of Armenia in the north and covers most of modern-day Iraq. Mesopotamia had a much different climate when it was first settled about eight to ten thousand years ago. At that time it was a land of marshes and grassland rather than desert as it is now. Humans began intensive farming in the area as early as 3,000 BCE. From the earliest times farming depended on irrigation, a way of watering crops that relied on bringing water to the fields through man-made ditches or canals. Anthropologists (scientists who study humans and their relations to various factors) believe that local tribes came together to dig the needed canals. The semi-nomadic (wandering) way of life the tribes followed was altered, and they settled in large communities near the canals. Eventually these communities became the first cities. City-states like Ur and Lagash had become powerful forces in the region by about the middle of the fourth millennium BCE.

Religion in Sumer

The first center of civilization was in the south, in what was called Sumer. There, farming villages became a series of a dozen powerful city-states, including Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Umma, Eridu, and Nippur. At times they were in competition with each other, and at other times they banded together to fight common enemies. The earliest written records of the first Sumerian societies also date from about this time (c. 4,000 BCE). It is significant that these records, written in the form of clay tablets, were about the operation of temples. Thus, already by the time of the first real towns and cities in human history, Mesopotamian religion had already become well organized. Various clay tablets have been found with details of the religion, as well as sacred vessels and architectural remains of temples. These all help to give an overview of the religion.

The environment of Mesopotamia largely shaped its religion. Unlike the Nile River in Egypt, which rises and falls slowly on a very predictable schedule, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers could and often did rise quickly and violently, causing disastrous flooding. Because of this, the Mesopotamians felt that nature was dangerous and far beyond the control of mere humans. The earliest Mesopotamian deities thus represented different aspects of nature and were honored in hopes of winning their favor.
For instance, Anu, the god of the sky, might have been worshipped to keep violent storms from damaging the crops. Hursag, the goddess of mountains and foothills, would be invoked by priests to stop an invasion of barbarian tribes. Deities were often represented as human beings and some symbolic natural object. Once given human form, a process called anthropomorphism, the gods were then grouped in families.

Mesopotamian gods were worshipped in temple complexes that formed the center of every city. Built of mud bricks, these tall, conical structures were stepped, or built in receding tiers on platforms of different shapes. These platforms were crowned at the top by a shrine or a temple. The whole complex was called a ziggurat, and averaged about 150 feet (45.7 meters) in height. Ziggurats stretched tower-like toward the sky, forming a bridge between Earth and heaven, like the mountains that were sacred to the Sumerians. Each Mesopotamian city had at least one temple complex, and each complex was dedicated to the worship of a single deity. The temple complex in Ur, for instance, honored the moon god Sin (also called Nanna by the Sumerians). The city of Uruk had both a temple to Inanna and a ziggurat dedicated to Anu. The complexes were managed by specialist priests, who were the only people allowed to worship the deities.

**The Akkadians** The development of religion in Mesopotamia followed the movement of peoples in the region. Historians say that the Sumerian civilization lasted from about 3500 to about 2000 BCE. Sargon the Great (reigned c. 2334–c. 2279 BCE), the king of Akkad, a territory to the north of Sumer, created the first great empire in Mesopotamia by conquering Sumer. Sargon brought many of his own Akkadian gods into Sumer with his armies. He did not, however, engineer the destruction of the Sumerian gods. Instead, a unique mixture of gods, part Sumerian and part Akkadian, formed a new pantheon.

The Akkadians did, however, make one important change in Sumerian culture. King Sargon and his successors took on tasks formerly divided between two different types of leaders: the *en*, a permanent religious and social administrator, and the *lugal*, a temporary leader in times of war. Strong rulers such as Sargon, however, merged these functions into one, taking power away from the priestly class. Naram-Sin, who ruled from about 2254 to 2218 BCE, took this trend to an extreme and proclaimed himself a living god.

In general the Akkadians incorporated elements of Sumerian religion. The original Sumerian pantheon of gods was never destroyed but instead
was added to and further refined. Through successive rulers, including Hammurabi (1792–1769 BCE) and a host of others, the religious system continued. There may have been new rulers, but the gods were eternal.

The names of the gods changed, however, as did the emphasis of religion. For example, Nanna was the Sumerian god of the moon. In Akkadian, the language of Sargon and his people, Nanna was called Sin or Suen. Inanna, mistress of heaven, became Ishtar in Akkadian. The direction of religion also changed over time. The early Sumerians believed that humanity, after it was created, was given a divine spark by the god Enlil. This not only made people the servants of the gods during their lifetimes, but also assured them an afterlife. The coming to power of the Babylonians in the second millennium BCE changed the emphasis of religion.

The Babylonians The Babylonians carefully preserved the literary and religious heritage passed down from the Sumerians, but their major concern was to integrate their main god, Marduk, into the existing pantheon. For the Sumerians, Enlil had been the protector of kingship; for the Babylonians this was Marduk's task. In order to make Marduk the most important god, the Babylonians devised a new creation myth, the Enuma Elish (“The Epic of Creation,” literally meaning “then up there”).

Ritual became more important after the arrival of the Babylonians. Priests increasingly relied on rituals to ward off evil spirits and to foretell future events to ensure the good will of the gods and to protect against demons. Astronomical (relating to the heavens) events took on major importance and astrology, the study of the influence of the stars and planets on human affairs, became nearly a science for the priests. Organized Mesopotamian religion collapsed after Cyrus of Persia, a Zoroastrian, conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BCE.

History of ancient Egyptian religion The official ancient Egyptian religion lasted from about 3110 BCE to 550 CE. The official beginning of the religion is the date that Menes (c. 2925 BCE), a king of Upper Egypt, is believed to have defeated a king of Lower Egypt and unified the nation. Menes set up a national religion in the process, worshipping the creator god Ptah at his new government center of Memphis. Historians believe that the story of the war between the god Horus and his uncle Set (the result of Set’s murder of Horus’s father Osiris) reflects the war between Upper and Lower Egypt, with Horus’s eventual victory reflecting the unification of the two countries by Menes during his sixty-two year reign.
Before this time, however, nature gods and animals had been worshipped for at least two millennia among the people who inhabited the Nile Valley. These animal deities later took human form, but their heads were still often depicted as that of an animal. Some gods even became associated with more than one animal. For example, Thoth, the god of the moon and of wisdom and protector of scribes, was depicted by the Egyptian ibis, a wading bird, by a baboon, and by a figure of the moon.

About the Ancient Religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia

- **Belief.** Mesopotamian religion saw humans as the servants of the gods, who had to be appeased for protection. Egyptians believed that the gods created all humans but were also controlled by the principle of *maat*, or order. Unlike followers of Mesopotamian religion, the Egyptians had a strong belief in the afterlife, which they expressed by building elaborate tombs such as the pyramids.

- **Followers.** Worshippers took their names from the numerous gods and the cults that honored the deities.

- **Name of God.** The major god for much of Mesopotamia was the sky god Enlil; later the worship of Enlil was replaced by the worship of the Babylonian god Marduk. For Egyptians, Amen-Ra was the most powerful deity, chief of the pantheon.

- **Symbols.** Statues of winged bulls were a protective symbol related to the god Sin Mesopotamia, while the ankh, a kind of cross with a loop at the top, was a prominent representation of life in ancient Egypt.

- **Worship.** Priests in both religions made daily offerings in the temples and held annual festivals open to the public. Personal gods were worshipped by people in their homes.

- **Dress.** Priests in both Mesopotamian and Egyptian religions wore no special costumes.

- **Texts.** The *Enuma Elish* tells the Mesopotamian story of creation and explains how Marduk became the chief of the gods. The Egyptian Book of the Dead was a guide for the dead, setting out magic spells and charms to be used to pass judgment in the afterlife.

- **Sites.** Ancient Nippur was the site of the chief temple to Enlil, while Babylon was the location of Marduk’s sanctuary. Thebes and the temple complex of Karnak were home to the worship of Amen-Ra. In the modern world the remains of these early religions can be seen in Egypt’s pyramids, tombs for the pharaohs, and in Mesopotamia’s ziggurats, temples to the gods.

- **Observances.** The New Year’s Festival was a major event in Mesopotamian religion, while Egypt’s most important festival was Opet.
In prehistoric times (before written history) the deities were local. They were worshipped in reed shrines with the local leader or king acting as the intermediary between the gods and the people. A reed is a type of tall, slender grass. The gods were thought to be housed in statues; these statues were purified, fed, and clothed daily, and annual festivals were held. The afterlife was also important for Egyptians from the earliest times, and pharaohs and queens were buried with material to make their lives easier after death. Early gods included Ptah; Anubis, the protector of the tomb; and Nit, the goddess of war.

Different cities in the united nation of Egypt held different creation myths, each centered on its own local creator god. Heliopolis, for instance, was a center near present-day Cairo where Atum was worshipped. Here, it was thought that Atum created himself out of the void, and then either spit or sneezed out Shu, the god of air, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. These two in turn gave birth to Geb, the earth god, and Nut, the sky goddess. From them came two pairs of siblings: Osiris and Isis, and Set and Nephtys. Eventually Ra, the sun god, took the place of Atum in the pantheon; later pharaohs, for instance, called themselves “sons of Ra.”
Another creation myth came from the city of Memphis, where Ptah was worshipped for creating the universe out of divine thought. Ultimately, however, the Ra-Atum creation story became the most popular and most widely accepted myth in ancient Egypt.

Religion during the Middle Kingdom During the period of the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BCE), Egyptian society built the great pyramids at Giza while working as a fully organized theocracy, a government with one god as the supreme leader. This theocracy reflected the role of the pharaoh, a living god whose word was divine law. During the Middle Kingdom (c. 2181–1786 BCE), however, the power of the pharaoh weakened and nobles (lesser royalty) began to take on more individual power. The priestly class also grew much larger. Though the sun god Ra was the official national god and was worshipped at Heliopolis, the cult of Osiris became stronger as the central government went into decline. Osiris was an early fertility god who, when killed by his brother Set and cut into pieces, was put back together again by his wife–sister Isis. He then became god of the underworld. Osiris became identified with the dead pharaoh. His son, Horus, became associated with the living pharaoh. Osiris eventually became a symbol of immortality and resurrection, or returning to life after death, and, as such, symbolized the annual renewal of fertility to the soil by the flooding of the Nile. A lengthy annual festival was held for him to celebrate this rebirth.

The Middle Kingdom came to an end with the Hyksos invasion of Lower Egypt, with the new invaders adapting Egyptian habits and gods. The New Kingdom (c. 1570–1085 BCE) began when Egyptian nobles drove the Hyksos out. During this period the god Amen came to prominence and was worshipped at Karnak, near Thebes. Amen incorporated aspects of earlier gods such as Ptah and Ra, becoming for a time the primary creator-god. The Amen priesthood grew impressively strong not only in religious power but also with political power. When Amen and Ra were combined into the godhead Amen-Ra, the temple at Karnak required the services of more than eighty thousand employees.

A short-lived experiment in state-sponsored monotheism (belief in only one god) occurred during the New Kingdom period. Amenhotep IV, who called himself Akhenaten (reigned 1379–62 BCE), declared that the only god was the one he himself worshipped: Aten, the god of the sun, and the solar disk, the Aten. Akhenaten’s experiment in monotheism had the effect of reducing the power of the priestly class.
and the nobility and reviving the power of the pharaoh. This experiment ended, however, with Akhenaten's death in 1336 BCE as the old gods were quickly brought back. All traces of Akhenaten were destroyed, from the inscription of his name on temples to his mummy. With the restoration of the old gods, the priests of Karnak and at another holy site, Luxor, regained their power at the expense of the monarchy. At the city of Thebes, the high priest of Amen became the first of a ruling class of high priests, while the pharaoh continued to wield power from a new city center, Tanis, in the Nile Delta.

During the course of the second half of the first millennium BCE the power and prestige of Egypt was reduced. Foreign conquerors inhabited the land, and various cults gained favor and then went out of favor. But Amen and Amen-Ra remained the major cult. The local goddess Neith became more popular and was later incorporated into Greek and Roman pantheons in the figures of Athena and Diana. Even after the introduction of Christianity, the ancient gods continued to be worshipped until about the sixth century CE.

**Sects and schisms**

Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian deities had cults that were popular in different places and in different times. Of note were two later Mesopotamian deities, Marduk and Ashur. Marduk was the national god of Babylonia, and the Babylonians went to great pains to rewrite the creation myth so that he would be the king of gods, replacing the Mesopotamian god Enlil. Such a replacement lasted for about one thousand years until the Assyrian god Ashur replaced Marduk as the primary god in the pantheon. Ashur was a warlike god and took Ishtar, the goddess of war, as his wife or consort.

The most notable schism in ancient Egyptian religion was launched by Amenhotep IV (c. 1371–c. 1336 BCE), who proclaimed the worship of Aten, the god and disk of the sun. In the fourteenth century BCE Amenhotep IV demanded that the worship of other gods be abandoned and that Aten be served by a cult in which he, himself, was the only priest. To show his dedication to Aten, Amenhotep changed his name to Akhenaten, meaning “He Who Is of Service to Aten.” Atenism, as it is called, was not a natural evolution of ancient Egypt’s religious practices. Akhenaten forced it on the people. As a result he faced resistance to this change, especially from the powerful priests of Amen-Ra in the capital of Thebes.
Further undermining the power of the traditional priesthood, Akhenaten set up a new capital city, called Akhetaten (modern-day Tell el-Amarna), which he dedicated to the Aten. Artwork from this period shows Akhenaten and his wife Neferetiti, or Neferneferuaten, worshipping the Aten, the sun disk. After Akhenaten’s death Atenism and Akhetaten were quickly abandoned and the old gods were revived. The new pharaoh, Tutankhamen (reigned 1333–25 BCE), moved the capital back to Thebes and placed the traditional priesthood back in power.

Basic beliefs

For early Mesopotamians the world was divided into heaven (\(\text{an}\)) and earth (\(\text{ki}\)). The earth was flat and floated in a freshwater sea, the \(\text{abzu}\). By serving the gods and by living a moral (good and honest) life, humankind would be rewarded with long life and many offspring. As for the afterlife, it was believed that a kind of ghost or double survived physical death. When a person died and his or her body was buried, his or her ghost descended to the underworld to join those already departed. The underworld was ruled by the god Ereshkigal. Later Babylonian religion also assumed that resurrection, or physical life after death, was possible. Babylonians believed in the “waters of life” and called their chief deity, Marduk, the “one who brings the dead to life.” Mostly, however, it appears that Mesopotamians believed that earthly life was all there was, and that death led to disintegration of the body.

Hundreds of gods were involved in Mesopotamian religion. In addition to being connected with some aspect of nature, they also had a responsibility for different spheres of human activity. For example, Shamash, the god of the sun, was also in charge of justice. Successive waves of settlers and conquerors in the region all brought their own gods and goddesses. These were mixed with those already found in Mesopotamia. The Sumerians had their city gods and harvest gods, but nomads who invaded Mesopotamia from the north or the east brought with them water gods and sand gods. People who came from high mountain regions brought gods of thunder and lightning.
The three chief gods in the Sumerian pantheon were An, the sky god, Enlil, the god of weather and storms, and Enki, god of wisdom and the abzu. Other important deities included the mother goddess, Ninhursag; Nanna, god of the moon who helped travelers find their way; Utu, sun god and the watchful eye of justice; and Inanna, the goddess of love and war and the one who guaranteed the kingship. Inanna in particular had a strong and lasting influence on Mesopotamian culture. She was featured in many fertility rites, but was also called upon in time of war. Over the course of time, with movements of new people into the area, the names of the gods changed. For instance, the Sumerian goddess Innana received the Akkadian name of Ishtar, just as Nanna later became Sin and Enki became Ea.

Beliefs in ancient Egypt Egyptians believed that the world was brought into being by Atum or Ra, whose descendants were Osiris, Set, and Isis. These, however, were just a fraction of the gods worshipped by Egyptians. Some estimates put the total number as high as one or two thousand different deities. What began as animal worship led to an immense pantheon. Amen or Amen-Ra became the most powerful of the gods, center of the national cult; the cult of Osiris was second most powerful. The worship of the sun god Ra led to the construction of immense pyramids for the pharaohs, sons of Ra. The pharaoh was considered a living god, appointed by Horus (son and avenger of Osiris).

For ancient Egyptians the gods were subject to the same sense of order and justice, maat, that mortals were. The universe had been created through maat as a replacement for the chaos that once existed. Interaction with the gods was intended to establish maat in society. It was the duty of the pharaoh to interpret the word of the gods in order to establish order and justice.

The ancient Egyptians also strongly believed in an afterlife. Much of their religion’s focus was centered on ensuring an afterlife, which contained all of the joys and pleasures of the living world. Egyptians believed in at least three different kinds of souls. When a person died one soul, the ba, left the body permanently, while a different kind of soul, the akh, remained with the body. The ka, a third type of soul, was a spiritual duplicate of the dead person, and left its body to journey to the underworld for judgment. The ka had to return to its body periodically during the time it was undergoing judgment. If the body was damaged or decayed during this period, the ka might lose its way and be lost, a kind of eternal damnation.
Mummification solved the problem of the ka by preserving the body after death, giving the spirit a familiar house to return to. The process of mummification, which could take up to two months to complete, was at first only used for royalty. Later the practice was opened up to include anyone who could afford the specialists and the expensive ingredients required for the process of preservation. By the Middle Kingdom the nobility and even some commoners (non-royalty) were being buried in elaborate tombs and having their bodies embalmed, or preserved.

Egyptians also worried about passing the tests they believed they would face in the afterlife. Elaborate manuals were written as guides to these tests. These included the Book of Amdurat, the Book of Gates, the Book of Caverns, and for those commoners wealthy enough to have a scribe make a copy for them, the Book of the Dead, also called Spells for Going Forth by Day.

The most important trial the spirit faced before being allowed into the afterlife was the Judgment of the Dead. The deceased began by making confessions and acts of atonement, or apology, to the gods. Anubis, the god of embalming, then led the person by the hand to the Hall of Maat. The deceased’s heart was weighed on a scale against the feather of truth, a symbol of the goddess Maat. If the heart was lighter than the feather, however, the goddess Ammut, Devourer of the Dead, consumed the deceased, destroying the soul forever. If the deceased passed the judgment he or she was led off by Horus to meet with Osiris and enter the Underworld.

**Fertility Myths**

Throughout the ancient Near East there were common myths of fertility, or tales of death and rebirth that can be read as a metaphor (or symbol) of the death and rebirth of vegetation during the seasons of the year. In Mesopotamian religion there is the story of Ishtar’s hunt for her husband, Tammuz, the god of the seasons and fertility. She descends to the underworld in search of him and returns with him triumphantly to Earth. Tammuz, however, can only spend spring and summer on Earth; the rest of the year he must remain in the underworld. In some traditions, Tammuz is Ishtar’s son; in others, he is her lover rather than her husband.

A similar regeneration myth lies at the heart of Egyptian popular religion. Ancient Egyptians believed that Osiris was god of the Nile River and of resurrection and vegetation before he became god of the underworld. Killed by his evil brother Set, god of chaos, his body was chopped into pieces and scattered. His loyal wife, the sky goddess Isis, found the pieces and put his body back together. She made herself pregnant from Osiris’s body, and their son Horus revenged Osiris’s murder, defeating his uncle Set in epic combat. Horus became the god of a unified Egypt, identified throughout Egyptian history with the divine right of the pharaoh.

**Sacred writings**

The primary sacred text for the Mesopotamian religion was the long epic poem dealing with creation, the Enuma Elish. The most complete copy that has survived dates from the end of the second millennium BCE and is
thus a rather late addition to the Mesopotamian religion. It is, in effect, an effort by the Babylonians to assert the power of their national god, Marduk. As such, the poem not only relates how Earth was created but also how the gods came to be.

The gods, according to this text, came before the creation of the world. This epic describes the fight between the forces of order, as represented by Marduk and the young gods, and the forces of chaos, as represented by Tiamat, Kingu, and the old gods. According to Leonard William King’s translation *The Seven Tables of Creation* (London, UK: Luzac and Co., 1902), it begins:

> When in the height heaven was not named,
> And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
> And the primeval Apsû, who begat [gave birth to] them,
> And chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both,—
> Their waters were mingled together,
> And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
> When of the gods none had been called into being,
> And none bore a name, and no destinies [were ordained];
> Then were created the gods in the midst of [heaven]...

Other texts important to this early religion include *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. This text tells of the mythical exploits of Gilgamesh, a king of Uruk, from about 2700 BCE and deals with the behavior of the gods towards him. Also important are myths such as the one told in the story “Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld.” In it, Ishtar, the goddess of war, travels down through the seven gates of the Underworld to find Tammuz, the god of the seasons and fertility.

Ancient Egypt’s main religious text seems to have been the Book of the Dead. The Book of the Dead is often referred to as the Papyrus of Ani, after the collection of documents in which it was found. Papyrus is an early form of paper made from reeds. The book is a collection of two hundred prayers, spells, and illustrations that provided a guide to the afterlife. The earliest Book of the Dead ever recovered dates from the mid-fifteenth century BCE.

The book was meant to ensure a happy afterlife. The spells included were meant to make the deceased pass various tests to prove his or her innocence of earthly sins, thus avoiding punishment by the gods and gaining access to a happy afterlife. It also included guidelines on how to navigate the dangers of the Underworld, such as being devoured by
The Book of the Dead, sometimes called the Papyrus of Ani, contains detailed instructions on how the deceased ancient Egyptians should act when facing the weighing of the heart against the feather of truth. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

an angry god, to reach the afterlife. One of the most important of these trials occurred at the start of the Judgment of the Dead. In the declaration of innocence prior to the weighing of the heart on the scales of truth the deceased declares that he or she has lived a good life without sin (“The Egyptian Book of the Dead,” chapter 125, TourEgypt.net).

Hail to you, great God, Lord of Justice! I have come to you, my lord, that you may bring me so that I may see your beauty, for I know you and I know your name, and I know the names of the forty-two gods of those who are with you in this Hall of Justice, who live on those who cherish evil and who gulp down their blood on that day of the reckoning of characters in the presence of Wennefer. Behold the double son of the Songstresses; Lord of Truth is your name. Behold I have come to you, I have brought you truth, I have repelled falsehood for you.

I have not done falsehood against men, I have not impoverished my associates, I have done no wrong in the Place of Truth, I have not learnt that which is not, I have done no evil, I have not daily made labor in excess of what was to be done for me, my name has not reached the offices of those who control slaves, I have not deprived the orphan of his property, I have not done what the gods detest, I have not slandered a servant to his master, I have not caused pain, I have not made hungry, I have not made to weep, I have not killed, I have not turned anyone over to a killer, I have not caused anyone’s suffering...
The Book of the Dead was found in tombs for commoners as well as royalty. All levels of Egyptian society were concerned about their afterlife and wanted to be prepared to meet it successfully.

**Sacred symbols**

The winged bull, a blend of sky god and earth god powers, is a strong symbolic representation of the Mesopotamian religion. The winged bull has the head of a man bearing a cap with two (and sometimes three) horns, the body of a bull or lion, and wings like an eagle. The horns on the cap symbolize the bull's godlike nature. Large sculptures of the creatures were found at three sites of ancient Mesopotamia, from a time when Assyria ruled the region (1350–612 BCE). These sites are Khorsabad, Nineveh, and Nimrod. They represent spiritual guardians that repel evil, and they always appear in pairs.

Assyrian kings often had pairs of winged bulls flanking the entrance to their palaces. The sculptures were sometimes accompanied by inscriptions that called upon the winged bulls to deter enemies and protect the king. The Mesopotamian moon god, Sin (also called Nanna), has a lapis lazuli beard and rides a winged bull. Lapis lazuli is a blue semiprecious stone.

A powerful and still popular symbol of ancient Egypt’s religion is the ankh. The ankh resembles a cross, but has an upside down teardrop shape at its top. In the ancient Egyptian written language of hieroglyphs, the ankh represents life. It is often present in tomb carvings and other artwork. It is associated with magical protection, or sa. Even those ancient Egyptians who could not read hieroglyphs knew the ankh symbol.

The ankh may represent the sunrise or rebirth. Many ancient gods carried ankhs and often “blessed” pharaohs with an ankh, symbolizing the act of giving them the breath of life. Among the gods often seen with ankhs are Osiris, Isis, Ra, Hathor, and Anubis. As a result the ankh not only represented worldly life but the afterlife. In fact, the ancient Egyptian term for sarcophagus or coffin was neb-ankh, meaning “possessor of life.” The ankh’s popularity has reached beyond Egypt's borders and around the world into the twenty-first century. Whether it is the appeal of an ancient symbol for life or an interest in ancient Egypt, the ankh remains a popular decoration.

**The remains of civilization** The most obvious symbols of both Mesopotamian and ancient Egyptian religions are their architectural remains.
While these are the historical remnants of great civilizations, they have also come to represent all that those civilizations entailed. Many of these ancient artifacts are, in fact, religious in nature. The ziggurat, or stepped temple, of Mesopotamia is an impressive structure dedicated to the worship of the gods. Each level of the ziggurat is smaller than the last, creating multiple terraces that reach up into the heavens. A ziggurat could have as few as two or as many as seven levels. At the top was a temple that could be reached by stairs or ramps. Archaeologists believe that many ziggurats were painted in various colors.

Among the most identifiable symbols of ancient Egypt and its religion are the pyramids. The Great Pyramid and its two smaller neighbors at Giza are the most well-known. Pyramids are tombs built for pharaohs. The pyramid had tall, sloping sides that typically ended in a point. Archaeologists believe this structure was a symbolic representation of the dead pharaoh climbing to the sky to live forever. It also represented the sun. The pharaoh was buried inside the pyramid with all of the items he would need in the afterlife. The tomb was then sealed.

About eighty pyramids have survived to modern times. Not all of these are in the classic shape of the pyramids at Giza. Another well-known pyramid is the step pyramid at Saqqara. The pharaoh Djoser (reigned twenty-seventh century BCE) had this tomb built with several layers, or steps, in its design. The structure of the step pyramid is similar to that of Mesopotamia’s ziggurats in this respect.

Worship

Both Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt had a large class of professional priests to care for the gods. The priestly class was very powerful because each religion played a dominant role in its society. Priests and priestesses served as the intermediaries between the common man and the divine. They held the responsibility for keeping the gods happy.
also gave personal worship to the gods. Religion was such a central part of Mesopotamian and ancient Egyptian life that each day involved some devotion or other action to the gods.

**Mesopotamian worship** Obedience to the gods was the primary job of humankind in Mesopotamian religion. The legion of gods all had to be cared for. That was the task of the priestly class. Statues to the gods were kept in temples, each of which was devoted to a different deity. The temples employed a vast staff of workers and priests. The temples were not simply religious centers, but also served as storehouses for the surplus harvest. In effect, they were banks of deposit for community wealth. Daily offerings to the deities were made in the temples, and cleaning and purification rituals took place. Offerings were made by royal and commoner alike, and these were taken by the temple personnel.

Each cult or worship of a deity had special festivals. For example, Inanna or Ishtar was, among other things, goddess of fertility and protector of the storehouses. Each year a ritual marriage took place between the goddess and the ruler at the time of harvest. Marduk was the deity at the center for the annual New Year’s Festival, held at the spring equinox. At these times, statues of the gods and goddesses were paraded through the streets for all to see. Normally, however, the sacred statues were kept in the temples.

Private individuals often had their own personal gods and had small shrines devoted to them in their homes. There, they would worship their favored god and ask for protection or relief. These private gods were often “fired” if the people felt they were not getting satisfaction and that their offerings were being wasted. They would adopt another personal god in the hopes of getting better results from their prayers.

Early on, the priests in Mesopotamian religion took charge of the temples and storehouses and also of the care of the gods. By the Babylonian period these priests had created elaborate rituals and ceremonies, including offerings and sacrifices. They were responsible for foretelling the future and created more elaborate rituals for such acts of divination, or reading of the signs of the gods. Wind, storms, rain, fire, eclipses of the sun or moon, the appearance of a lion, the shape of a sheep’s liver, and the movement of the stars all were signs from the gods according to Mesopotamian religion, and their priests could read such signs. They became experts in what is called extispicy, or the readings of organs of sacrificed animals. Marks on the liver or lungs could provide clues as to what would happen in the future.
Praise to the Gods

Like many modern religions, the religions of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia were highly organized. Certain classes of people were set apart to worship and care for the gods. In ancient Egypt, for instance, there was a large class of priests and priestesses entrusted with caring for the temples. Mesopotamian religion was divided in a similar way. Part of the Mesopotamian priesthood’s job included praising the gods in hymns and prayers. The two excerpts here, “The Exaltation of Inana” and “Hymn to Ra,” show how differently Mesopotamians and ancient Egyptians viewed their gods. The Mesopotamian goddess Innana (spelled Inana in this translation) is described by her priestess Enheduanna as fierce and capable of much destruction. The royal scribe Nekht associates the Egyptian sun god Ra (also spelled Re) with love and joy.

The Exaltation of Inana

Lady of all the divine powers, resplendent [dazzling] light, righteous woman clothed in radiance, beloved of An and Urac! Mistress of heaven, with the great pectoral jewels, who loves the good headdress befitting the office of en priestess, who has seized all seven of its divine powers! My lady, you are the guardian of the great divine powers! ... Like a dragon you have deposited venom on the foreign lands. When like Ickur [god of storms] you roar at the earth, no vegetation can stand up to you. As a flood descending upon (?) those foreign lands, powerful one of heaven and earth, you are their Inana.

Raining blazing fire down upon the Land, endowed with divine powers by An, lady who rides upon a beast, whose words are spoken at the holy command of An! The great rites are yours: who can fathom them? Destroyer of foreign lands, you confer strength on the storm. Beloved of Enil, you have made awesome terror weight upon the Land. You stand at the service of An’s commands....

“The Exaltation of Inana (Inana B): Translation.”

Hymn to Ra

Homage to thee, O thou glorious Being, thou who art dowered [with all sovereignty (power)]. O Tem-Heru-Khuti (Tem-Haramkhis), when thou risest in the horizon of heaven a cry of joy goeth forth to thee from all people. O thou beautiful Being, thou dost renew thyself in thy season in the form of the Disk, within thy mother Hathor. Therefore in every place every heart swelleth with joy at thy rising for ever. The regions of the South and the North come to thee with homage [respect, worship], and send forth acclamations [praise] at thy rising on the horizon of heaven, and thou illuminest the Two Lands with rays of turquoise-[coloured] light. ... O thou god of life, thou lord of love, all men live when thou shinest; thou art crowned king of the gods. The goddess Nut embraceth thee, the goddess Mut enfoldeth thee at all seasons. Those who are in thy following sing unto thee with joy, and they bow down their foreheads to thee, the lord of heaven, the lord of the earth, the King of Truth, the lord of eternity, the prince of everlastingness, thou sovereign [ruler] of all the gods, thou god of life, thou creator of eternity, thou maker of heaven wherein thou art firmly established.

Astrology, or predicting the future from the movement of the stars, also became a central practice of Babylonian religion. The Babylonians were the first to divide the sky into the twelve zones of the zodiac. They followed the movements of planets and stars with great care in an effort to foretell the will of the gods. Priests also made a good living in the sale of magic charms and formulas to drive away evil spirits.

**Egyptian worship** Egyptians also had cults that worshipped their own particular god or goddess. The priests made daily offerings to their gods through the statues kept in their temples. The gods and goddesses were charged with maintaining justice and order in the world, and were considered too important to be bothered with the everyday problems of common people. Priests made offerings to ensure that the gods fulfilled that function. Commoners had no contact with these gods except when the statues were paraded through the streets on special festivals.

There was no central text to tell people how to live a good life or to explain the doctrines or rules of the religion. Instead, the cult rituals surrounding each god made up Egyptian religion. Temples, called *hwt-ntr* (literally, “houses of god”), were supported by huge estates to help supply offerings for the gods. Strictly speaking, only the pharaoh, himself a god, could talk with the gods. But in practical terms, he appointed priests as his representatives to serve at the various temples. Initially, this priestly class was voluntary and was divided into four groups who served for one month and then returned to private life for three months. There were different levels of priests as well, from high priests down to the lowest class who carried water for drinking and for purification ceremonies.

As the rituals of national cults became more centralized, the priestly class became professional and a powerful force in the country. The image or statue of the god or goddess was the center of cult activity. Once made, the statue acquired a *ka* and a *ba* through a ritual called “opening the mouth.” The *ka* of the god lived in the statue in the same way that the *ka* of a person lived in that person’s body. Possessing these components, the statue came to be possessed with the spirit of the gods.

Daily rituals included clothing and cleaning the statues and offering food to the gods. Other rituals took place periodically to protect the statues. Hymns were sung and prayers spoken. Festivals were held throughout the year, at which times the public could approach the gods. During the rest of the year the common people could go to a small chapel built at
Priests in the Mesopotamian religion were in charge of temples and of taking care of the gods. They would oversee sometimes elaborate rituals and were called upon to foretell the future. © GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/CORBIS.

the rear of temples, the “chapel of the hearing ear,” to ask for advice and to pray to the gods.

**Observances and pilgrimages**

Religious celebrations in Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt combined public displays with private rituals. Many occasions had components of both. All displays were meant to affirm the greatness of the gods and usually the legitimacy of the ruler as well. In both cultures the ruler was closely associated with the gods. This was intended to justify
the ruler’s leadership and discourage others from seeking power. Festivals and pilgrimages also offered the public a chance to seek favor from the gods and celebrate their devotion.

**Mesopotamia** Major festivals in Mesopotamian religion included the New Year’s Festival and the Sacred Marriage. The New Year’s Festival was held at the spring equinox, or the start of spring. This festival celebrated the rebirth of the year. In later religious practice, this holiday was associated with the god Marduk’s main festival, called Aktiu. It lasted for eleven days and involved ceremonies of purification and a ceremonial reenactment of the battle between Marduk and the forces of chaos. Prayers and offerings of food and wine were made to the gods during the first three days. The fourth day was a high point of the festivities. Then the *Enuma Elish*, “The Epic of Creation,” was read or performed as a play for the public. This work celebrates the god Marduk. The next day, the people purified themselves, by bathing their sins away in water.

The king also participated in these festivities, but he did so in the temples. There, to show his loyalty to Marduk, the king was slapped in the face by the priests and made to promise to the statue of Marduk that he had committed no sins in the previous year. A priest would then slap the king’s face again, hard enough to bring tears. Tears showed that Marduk was pleased with the king. A bull was sacrificed, or killed, that evening. Not all the rituals have been recorded, but it seems there was also a parade through the streets of the city with the king holding the hand of the statue of Marduk.

Some historians suggest that the New Year’s celebration and the Sacred Marriage were combined. The Sacred Marriage brought together the king and the goddess Innana, likely represented by a priestess. The ritual recognized the divine authority of the king to rule by “marrying” him to Innana. It also promoted the king’s fertility through the symbolic consummation of marriage with the goddess.

Pilgrimage sites for Mesopotamians are not recorded. Historians suspect that the Nanna Ziggurat, a great temple complex at Ur to the moon god, was a major center for travelers who devoted that god. Similarly, the Inanna or Ishtar Ziggurat at Uruk made have been a pilgrimage site for that important goddess.

**Egypt** One of the most important festivals in ancient Egypt was Opet. It took place yearly at the temple of Luxor in Thebes. The festival brought
Preserving the Dead

The process called mummification helped preserve the bodies of ancient Egyptians, making them suitable for the afterlife. Moisture is needed for the decay of a human or animal body. In ancient Egypt, a very arid or dry land, the mummification process was accomplished by making the dead body very dry. The first mummies found date from about 2900 BCE, and the process improved slowly over time.

The basic technique of mummification involves taking all the organs out of the body and then treating the inside cavity or space with a mixture of drying chemicals. This mixture, natron, is made up of four salts: sodium carbonate, sodium bicarbonate, sodium chloride, and sodium sulfate. Sodium carbonate works as a drying agent, drawing the water out of the body. At the same time the bicarbonate creates a hostile environment for bacteria, the tiny organisms that cause decay.

After seventy days of being preserved in this large salty mixture (modern researchers think that up to six hundred pounds of natron might have been necessary to cover a body), the body would be completely dried out, losing about two-thirds of its weight. The natron was then cleaned out, and the empty cavity was rubbed with palm wine and packed with spices and packets of wood shavings. The outside of the body was also rubbed with a mixture of five oils, and then wrapped in bandages. Many of the organs were stored in jars and were buried with the mummy.

Mummies were buried in tombs or pyramids. At first, mummification was so expensive that only the kings and their families could afford it. Later in the history of ancient Egypt, more commoners were mummified as well. Even favored household or symbolic animals, such as cats or ibises, were mummified, so that the dead person would have companionship in the afterlife.

together the human and divine aspects of the pharaoh. In the earliest days of its celebrations, the festival lasted for eleven days. Many years later, however, it had grown to twenty-seven days. During the festival thousands of loaves of bread, cakes, and jars of beer were distributed to the public. Images of the royal family and gods were paraded, at first by foot and later by barge (boat), from the temple at Karnak to Luxor. Along the way, people asked favors of the gods through the statues. The pharaoh would merge his ka with the divine behind closed doors at the temple in Luxor. He would then emerge into public to cheers from the crowd, for whom it was now reaffirmed that the pharaoh was a living god. The rituals of Opet were quite different from the Sacred Marriage of Mesopotamia, but the purpose behind them was the same: to confirm the authority of the ruler.

Eight months after the Feast of Opet came the second major Egyptian festival, the Feast of the Valley. This was an opportunity for Egyptians to reconnect with those who had died. The image of Amen was brought out of the temple at Karnak into public view and was taken by barge across the Nile to visit temples in the west. Even though this was a serious occasion, music and dancing accompanied the procession of Amen on the royal barge. Amen would be taken into the major temples and also to a necropolis, a large graveyard to honor the dead. The Egyptians ate and drank large amounts during the Feast of the Valley, believing this brought them closer to their dead relatives and loved ones. Visits to important temples, such as those at Luxor and Karnak, were also important pilgrimages.

Abydos is an ancient holy place in Egypt. It was believed that the god Osiris’s head was sent to Abydos after he was assassinated and dismembered by his brother Set. Pilgrims began to
come to Abydos to pay tribute to Osiris. Parts of the story of his death at the hands of his brother, his wife Isis’s search for his remains, and his return to life were played out in public during the Festival of Osiris. Others were replayed by priests behind the closed doors of the temple. Common pilgrims made small offerings of statuettes or chapels. Pharaohs, such as Seti I (reigned 1318–04 BCE), built temples.

**Everyday living**

Religion affected every aspect of daily life in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. All important activities and occasions were presented to the priests to see if the time was right and if the gods were in favor of their happening. People in both cultures often engaged in some form of daily prayer and marked important stages in life, including birth, marriage, and death, with rituals of passage. Religion even affected the legal system.

**Daily life in Mesopotamia** In ancient Mesopotamia the growth of the first cities was directly related to the development of Mesopotamian religion. The temple complex serving a specific deity was located at the center of the urban area. The ziggurats became not only religious centers but also warehouses, where the year’s grain crop was stored. Because they were visible for miles around, they were a continual reminder to the ancient Mesopotamians of the power of the gods.

The city wall protected the temple, the royal buildings, and the houses of the common citizens from invasion by enemies. Outside the walls lay the houses and farms of those who worked the land and who kept the city running. There was also usually a wharf, or waterfront. Most of the large Mesopotamian cities were built along the great rivers of the region, the Tigris or the Euphrates.

Ancient Mesopotamia was basically a two-class society, consisting of the property owners and the vast majority of the population, who did not own property. Life was hard for most people, who survived on a subsistence (basic survival) income and had few luxuries to enjoy. The homes of poor farmers and laborers were very simple by comparison to those of wealthy property owners. These were simple one-story buildings with one or two rooms. Mud brick was the usual building material. Little is known about what kind of furniture homes might have, but in the homes of rich and poor alike were shrines to their favored deities. The people said daily prayers to these deities, asking for assistance in their lives, for a good crop or good health.
The many festivals and feast days of the religious calendar provided these people with release from their daily routine. The Mesopotamian calendar was based on the phases of the Moon, or the lunar month, and had twenty-nine or thirty days. Of these, six were regular holidays. There were also annual festivals. Other times of feasting and celebration came when the king led a victorious military campaign against enemy armies, and booty, or property taken from the conquered people, was shared with the citizens. At times such as these, the usual diet (barley, made into bread and beer) was enlivened with the addition of meats such as beef and mutton.

Recreation and sport also figured into these festival times, with celebrations of boxing, wrestling, dancing, and music. Hunting was also considered a religious matter, especially for the royalty and the wealthy. For them the hunt became a symbol of the battle of good over evil. When the king killed a lion, for example, he was not only showing his skill and bravery, but also his closeness to the gods who protected him in the hunt.

**Mesopotamian rites of passage** The major rites of passage for ancient Mesopotamians were the same as those for people in many other cultures: birth, marriage, and death. Families were nuclear, that is, they consisted of a father, mother, and children. The father was accepted as head of the household. Birth was an occasion for much religious care. Women giving birth wore special ornaments to scare off the female demon Lamassu, who was said to kill or kidnap children. The moon god, Nanna, was called upon to help the woman in labor. The earliest lullabies, or soothing songs sung to babies, were adapted from incantations, or sung prayers, to protect the infant.

The next major rite of passage, marriage, was both a religious and a legal matter. Law codes that survive show that marriage was celebrated in a ceremony that had five parts:

1. the engagement, in which parents agreed to the future marriage;
2. payments by both families of a dowry to the bride and a payment to the groom (the bride-price);
3. the wedding ceremony itself, which could last several days with feasting;
4. the arrival of the bride in her father-in-law’s house, where the couple would at first live; and
5. the consummation of the marriage (sexual intercourse).
The Gods

There were hundreds of gods in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian pantheons. The gods controlled all aspects of life, especially nature, which could often be cruel. Particular gods protected various city-states in Mesopotamia, and large temples were built in their honor at the city center. Sin’s main temple, for instance, was in the city of Ur. Smaller temples were available throughout city-states for people to make personal offerings to the gods.

Egypt also favored different gods. Worship of Amen-Ra was primarily centered around Thebes. Isis was popular at Philae. Individuals, too, chose personal gods from among the many hundreds to worship. Even pharaohs would differ about which god they preferred.

Gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon

Anu: The sky god. He is sometimes called the King of the Gods. At the beginning of time, Earth was separated from heaven, and heaven became Anu’s home. He can be sent to Earth to avenge the gods.

Ea: The fun-loving god of fresh waters, wisdom, and magic. Ea is also named Enki. In a Babylonian myth similar to that of the Judeo-Christian story of Noah’s Ark, Ea reveals to Utnapishtim that Enlil intends to destroy mankind in a flood.

Enlil: The god of air, wind, and storms. Enlil is one of the most important Mesopotamian gods. He guards the Tablets of Destiny, on which the fate of everything on Earth is written.

Ishtar: The goddess of love and war. She is also known as Inanna. Ishtar journeyed to the Underworld to retrieve her love, Tammuz. She is often described as very violent and is depicted holding several weapons and standing on a lion.

Marduk: The god of Babylon who later came to be the supreme god. Marduk fought an army of demons led by the goddess Tiamat. The New Year’s festival celebrates the king’s fitness to rule through a ceremony in which he bows to a statue of Marduk.

Sin: The moon god. He is also known as Nanna. He is lord of the calendar and oversees the seasons. Sin wears a beard of the blue stone lapis lazuli and rides a winged bull.

Gods of the Egyptian pantheon

Amen: Called the King of Gods. Amen, also spelled Amon or Amun, was often combined with Ra, or Re. Amen-Ra was an even more powerful god.

Anubis: The god of embalming, or of preserving the bodies of the dead. Anubis is depicted as a jackal or as a man with the head of a jackal.

Horus: The god of the sky. Horus is the child of Osiris and Isis. After Set killed Osiris, Horus fought Set for the rule of Egypt. He is represented by the image of a hawk or as a man with a hawk’s head. The pharaoh was considered to be the living Horus.

Isis: A protective goddess. Isis was important to Egyptians as the mother of the living Horus.

Maat: The goddess of truth and justice. She oversees harmony and justice. Her symbol is the feather, which she is often shown wearing on her head.

Osiris: The god of the dead and of resurrection, he is also the ruler of the Underworld. Osiris is married to Isis and is the father of Horus. He is shown as a mumified man, all in white.

Ra: The sun god. Ra, or Re, is one of the most important Egyptian gods. He is shown as a man with a hawk’s head, wearing a headdress with a sun disk.
Divorce was allowed, but usually only when requested by the man. In this case the woman's property had to be returned to the bride's family. Little is known about the actual ceremony of the wedding, but some archaeologists assume there was a strong religious component to it, with Inanna, goddess of fertility, the primary deity worshipped.

Death was the final rite of passage for ancient Mesopotamians, who believed that the gods had decreed the end to a person's life. After death, the corpse was washed and perfumed, then placed in a coffin. For poorer families, these coffins would be of simple wood or the body would be wrapped in a reed mat. More wealthy family used elaborate stone coffins. Personal items such as jewelry and weapons were buried with the dead. Wealthy families had tombs with household furnishings placed in them. The rich also had professional mourners, or those who cried and recited sad songs, or laments, at the burial.

After the funeral, the eldest son was responsible for giving regular funeral offerings to the deceased relative. During the month of August there was an extended period of celebration for the dead. At such occasions, food and drink was put at the place of burial for the ghosts of those dead people. Several times each year it was believed that the ghosts of the dead could leave the underworld and return to the land of the living above ground. Life in the underworld resembled life among the living, especially in its complex organization. A king, Nergal, and a queen, Ereshkigal, ruled there, and many smaller nobles were part of the power structure.

**Daily life in ancient Egypt** In Egyptian civilization, religion encompassed the full range of human activity. Law, ethics, medicine, philosophy, science, and the state were all combined in religion. In ancient Egypt it was virtually impossible to live a nonreligious, or secular, life, for religion was the very foundation of all ancient Egyptian ideas and actions. The everyday life of ancient Egyptians resembled that of the Mesopotamians. There was a strong two-class system of wealthy people, who owned property, and poor people, who did not.

But Egypt also had the beginnings of what in modern times is called a middle class. This is a class of society that is not wealthy, but also is not poor. This class in Egypt developed around people who held particular jobs. An artisan, or skilled worker, class helped to build and decorate the pyramids and royal or noble tombs. These workers were considered middle class.
**Egyptian rites of passage** Home life was important for the Egyptians. Children were seen as a blessing from the gods. Thus the first rite of passage, birth, was very important to the ancient Egyptians. If a couple did not have children, they made offerings of food and wine to their special deity, asking for the gift of fertility. After birth, the same deity was invoked to protect the infant from evil spirits. Young boys learned their father’s trade or skill, and young girls were trained for household duties by their mothers. If a family could afford it, the son was sent to school at about age seven, where he would become a scribe, learning religion, reading, and writing.

Marriage, the second major rite of passage, happened at an early age for peasant (poor farming) girls. They were usually married at about age twelve. Girls from wealthier families would marry in their mid-teens, as would most boys, both wealthy and poor. The engagement, bride-price (a gift presented to the family of the bride), and dowry (another gift, given to the bride herself, usually by her father or another member of her family) were also important in Egyptian society. The wedding ceremony could last several days, with feasting and prayers offered to various deities for a long and fruitful marriage. Divorce was possible, but not common. Barley was the staple in Egypt, as it was in Mesopotamia, and bread and beer were both common. Religion played a major part in the agricultural year, with the pharaoh himself, the embodiment of Amen, going to the fields at the time of planting to ensure a good harvest of grain.

Death was an immensely important religious event for the Egyptians. Mummification was, for the royalty and the wealthy (and later for the artisan class as well), the first stage in the funeral rites. Mummies were placed in tombs or pyramids with numerous personal items the deceased would need in the afterlife. These included everything from jewelry to weapons, furniture, and even (for the wealthy) their slaves.

The daily routine of work for the majority of ancient Egyptians was broken up throughout the year by a variety of religious observances. For some workers almost one-third of the year was set aside for religious observances and celebrations. The tomb makers’ eight-day work week, for example, had a two- or three-day weekend. Put together, these weekend days of rest accounted for about sixty days a year.

There were another sixty-five days of religious festivals, from full moon days to the celebration of the flooding of the Nile River, to such major festivals as the Feast of Opet. These occasions were opportunities not just for prayer at one’s home shrine or at the temple, but also for
the enjoyment of games such as boxing and chariot races. Other games that may have had a religious significance include a form of hockey and another resembling handball. Festivals were also times for dramatic public readings of legends and prayers, as well as for dancing and singing.

Influences of the ancient religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia

Both ancient Mesopotamia’s and ancient Egypt’s religions had influences that have long outlasted the worship of their gods. Religion played a role in the rise of the Mesopotamian city-state, and the religion’s reliance
on the stars to foretell events led to important developments in mathematics. From ancient Egypt, knowledge of anatomy and medicine greatly expanded thanks to the practice of mummification and the use of herbs to treat illnesses. These contributions have greatly aided later societies.

**Mesopotamian influences** Mesopotamian religion was one of the earliest organized religious systems. It had a formal structure, hierarchy (chain of command), and rituals for worship. It influenced all later religious tradition, not only with its gods (some of whom, such as Inanna, were adapted into later religious traditions), but also with its central myths. During the Babylonian period the state cult of Marduk was an important early step toward the nationalistic monotheism later developed by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although Marduk was only the foremost among a pantheon of other gods, his elevation to national god was a beginning in a gradual process toward modern national religions.

Other influences to come from Mesopotamian religions include advances in mathematics. Mathematics was often at the service of religion, in part because it was used to keep track of items stored at temples. The first written representation of numbers occurs in ancient Mesopotamia. Before about 3,000 BCE numbers were recorded using tokens that symbolized the items counted. But after 3,000 BCE these tokens were replaced by marks representing quantities. By 2,000 BCE the Sumerians had developed a complete system of mathematics. Similar wedge-shaped marks, called *cuneiform* by archaeologists and historians, formed the basis of the Sumerian system of writing, which remained in use for thousands of years.

Thousands of mathematical and economic tablets have been recovered from this time period. There are multiplication tables, tables of squares, square roots, and other mathematical figurings. There are also lists of problems for teachers to set and solutions given by students. The Mesopotamians used algebraic equations to solve quadratic problems, or those involving two unknown quantities. These problems usually involved finding lengths, widths, or diagonals of rectangles.

In Babylonian times, astrology, or the study of how the planets affect human lives, became an important part of religion. The movements of the planets had to be charted, and for this mathematical calculations were a vital tool. The observation of the stars and planets likewise led to the modern science of astronomy.
Ancient Egyptian influences  Egyptian religion passed on many of its deities to other religions. For example, Isis, in her aspect as the mother of Horus, also influenced the later Christian cult of the Virgin Mary. Like the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians also passed on additional products of their religion in the form of mathematics and medicine. For example, their numbering system was based on the number ten, as in the modern decimal system. The Egyptian calendar, based on the appearance of the star Sirius, held 365 days and was divided into twelve months of thirty days each. The remaining five days were given to festivals.

Herbs were in common usage for illness, as were magic potions and prayers. The Egyptians had a large number of recipes of herbs and other materials for different kinds of illness. Yeast, for example, was recognized for its healing qualities and was applied to leg ulcers (inflammations) and swellings. Yeast was also taken internally for stomach disorders and was believed to be an effective cure for ulcers.

The Egyptians were the first to use and record advanced medical practices. The Egyptians gathered their knowledge into large volumes, which were later adopted by the Greeks. An ancient medical text written by an Egyptian of Greek ancestry, named Hermes, survives in six books. The first of these six books was directly related to anatomy. The rest served as a book of herb and mineral recipes for various ailments or illnesses.

Egyptian architecture and building techniques have also been very influential. The pyramidal shape has been adopted by modern architects, including the Egyptian-inspired entrance to the Louvre Museum in Paris, France. Egyptians, like Mesopotamians, made use of canals for irrigation and became dam builders in order to control some of the unwanted flooding of the Nile River. Both of these influenced modern engineering. Art was also influenced through colorful and often realistic tomb decorations. This was especially true during the rule of Akhenaten when a style called Amarna Art was popular. The art during this period was surprisingly modern; it had a very natural look instead of the stiff poses usually found in royal paintings.

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BOOKS


WEB SITES


The Bahá'í faith is one of the world's youngest religions. It began in mid-nineteenth-century Persia (modern-day Iran). Its founder, Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), took the name Bahá'u'lláh ("Glory of God" in Arabic) and declared that he was a prophet, God's chosen messenger. Bahá'u'lláh's writings and teachings form the basis of the Bahá'í religion. The central belief of the Bahá'í faith is the oneness of all divinity, meaning that all faiths contain visions of the ultimate truth. Bahá'ís, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, also believe in the unity of all humankind. There is only one human race, and all humans should be treated equally.

There are more than seven million Bahá'ís worldwide. Followers can be found in 247 countries and include more than two thousand ethnic, tribal, and racial groups. While the United States and Europe were among the first areas outside the Middle East to have Bahá'í congregations (worshippers), the fastest growth in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been in Asia and Africa. By 2002 there were 3.6 million Bahá'ís in Asia and 1.8 million in Africa, with about 150,000 members of the faith in the United States, 15,000 in Canada, and 130,000 in Europe.

History and development
The Bahá'í religion developed over a period known as the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Faith, which lasted from 1844 to 1921. The Bahá'í religion emerged from an earlier faith, Babi (pronounced BAH-bee), a Muslim sect. (A sect is a small religious group that has branched off from a larger established religion.) The Babi sect was founded in Persia by Sayyid Ali Muhammad of Shiraz (1819–1850). In 1844 Ali Muhammad, a twenty-five-year-old merchant, proclaimed himself a messenger of God, taking the title the Bah, or "Gate" in Arabic. He considered himself
a gateway through which God could communicate divine truth. The Bab called for spiritual and moral reform, the equality of women, and help for the poor. His message was a powerful force in nineteenth-century Persia, which was torn between the competing influences of the Russian and British empires. In his most important work, Bayan, or Declaration, the Bab explained that he was only the first of two of God’s messengers. The second prophet would bring a new age of peace and justice to the world.

The Bab gathered eighteen disciples, or followers, making nineteen believers in all. This became a sacred number to the Babi and, later, for the Baha’i faith. The Bab’s message of love and compassion soon gained many other followers. A popular belief spread that the Bab was the Qa’im, a Messiah-like figure important in the tradition of the Shiite Islam practiced in Persia. (A messiah is a messenger from God.) Persian leaders began to worry that the Bab was gaining too much power and might lead a rebellion. Because of such suspicion the Bab spent much of the last years of his life either under house arrest or in prison. In 1848 revolts led by the Babi broke out and over the next three years they were brutally suppressed. The Bab was executed by firing squad in 1850. According to legend, the first round of shots left him unmarked and only cut the ropes that bound him. It took a second round to kill him. His remains were later transferred to the Shrine of the Bab on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

WORDS TO KNOW

blasphemy: Disrespectful comments or actions concerning a religion or its God.
covenant: In religion, a covenant refers to an agreement between God or a messenger of God and His followers.
excommunicate: To exclude or officially ban a person from a church or other religious community.
heretic: A person whose beliefs oppose his or her religion’s official doctrines, or defining principles.
orders: Religious communities.
prophet: A person chosen to serve as God’s messenger.
sacrament: A religious ritual that conveys spiritual blessing.
sect: A small religious group that has branched off from a larger established religion.
**The rise of Bahá’u’lláh** Two early followers of the Bab were Mirza Husayn ʻAli Nuri, son of a well-respected nobleman who held a position at the court of the king of Persia, and his half-brother Mirza Yahya (1830–1912), better known as Subh-i Azal. By 1845 Mirza Husayn, known for his charitable good works, had given up his social standing, assumed the name of Bahá’u’lláh, and joined the Babi religion. One of the movement’s most influential speakers, Bahá’u’lláh soon fell under suspicion.

Following the execution of the Bab in 1850, several Babis, working independently of the rest of the followers, tried to assassinate the king of Persia. The government responded with the massacre of thousands of Babis. Bahá’u’lláh was imprisoned in a dungeon in Tehran known as the Black Pit. There he received a vision from a Maiden from God, who told him that he was the prophet of whom the Bab had spoken. He kept this to himself after his release several months later and went into exile, along with other Babis, to Baghdad, in present-day Iraq.

Although Bahá’u’lláh knew that he was the one the Bab had said would come, he did not speak of his visitation and the leadership of the Babi religion passed to his half-brother, Subh-i Azal. The Bab’s will had recognized Subh-i Azal as his successor, but in Baghdad Subh-i Azal remained hidden in his house, allowing Bahá’u’lláh to make most of the public appearances to the Babi. Tensions grew between the two brothers when new followers to the religion and those visiting Baghdad recognized Bahá’u’lláh, not Subh-i Azal, as their spiritual leader. In order to avoid conflict, Bahá’u’lláh went into isolation in the mountains of Kurdistan far to the north of Baghdad. He stayed there for two years, coming into contact with members of Sufi orders, a mystical Muslim sect. He became known as a wise man of the mountains and wrote one of his first books, *Four Valleys*, during this time.

When Bahá’u’lláh returned to Baghdad he discovered that twenty-five people had already claimed to be the messenger from God that the Bab had predicted and that Subh-i Azal had had several of his opponents killed. Bahá’u’lláh spent the next seven years in Baghdad and his fame began to spread. He continued writing about his spiritual discoveries. Some of the most important of these texts were the Kitab-i-Iqan, or The Book of Certitude (freedom from doubt), and Kalimat-i-Maknuni, or The Hidden Words. With Kitab-i-Iqan completed in 1862, Bahá’u’lláh finished the Bab’s Bayan, which had been left incomplete, with only eleven of its proposed nineteen chapters written. In completing the Bab’s work, Bahá’u’lláh was also claiming leadership of the Babis.
In an attempt to strengthen his position as leader, Subh-i Azal also claimed to have completed the Bab’s work. Relations between the two brothers worsened as support of Bahá'u'lláh increased in Baghdad and in his native country, Persia. Persian leaders once again grew concerned about Bahá'u'lláh’s growing influence. They persuaded the Ottoman government, which controlled Baghdad and much of what is now Turkey, to banish the holy man from Baghdad, where he had attracted so many followers. In 1863, before his exile from Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh told a small group of followers about his visitation eleven years earlier, announcing for the first time that he was the long-awaited messenger of God. This declaration took place in the Garden of Ridvan, near Baghdad, and was later celebrated in one of Bahá’í’s main holy days, the Festival of Ridvan.

There are more than seven million followers of Bahá’í around the world. The religion’s largest growth in the twenty-first century is in Africa and Asia. 

©2006 Thomson Gale
The Bahá’í religion is born Bahá'u'lláh, along with his family and a small group of followers, traveled to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul, Turkey) and then on to Adrianople (modern-day Edirne, Turkey), where he publicly declared, in 1866, that he was the messenger of God and a prophet, as Muhammad and Jesus had been before him. He wrote official letters to world political and religious leaders, such as Pope Pius IX (1792–1878) and Queen Victoria of England (1819–1901), announcing his presence. This led to a complete break with the Babis and Subh-i Azal, who also proclaimed himself the messenger of God about whom the Bab had spoken. Not long after, Bahá'u'lláh was poisoned. Though he survived the attempt on his life, the poison left a tremor, or shaking, in his hand until his death. Suspicion fell on his half-brother, Subh-i Azal. The year 1866 saw the final split between followers of the two men. Those who sided with Bahá'u'lláh called themselves Bahá'ís, while followers of Subh-i Azal first referred to themselves as Azalis, then Bayanis. The Bahá'ís went on to become the thirteenth-largest religion in the world. In the early twenty-first century the Bayanis had only a few thousand believers, mainly in Iran.

In 1868 Bahá'u'lláh, his family, and followers were transported by the Ottoman government that controlled Edirne to the prison city of Acre in Palestine, now Akko, Israel. Bahá'u'lláh remained in prison for nine years, writing Kitab-i-Aqdas, or the Book of Laws, the most holy book of Bahá'ís. With the death of the old Ottoman sultan, or leader, Bahá'u'lláh was finally released from prison in 1877. He settled in nearby Bahji. He lived out the rest of his life there, continuing his writing and teaching. Bahá'u'lláh died of a fever in 1892.

Bahá'u'lláh's successors Bahá'u'lláh left a will and testament that named his son, Abdu'l-Baha (“Servant of Baha” in Arabic; 1844–1921), as his successor. Another son, Muhammad ʻAli, claimed that the will was a fake, and that he was the next rightful leader of the Bahá'ís. Muhammad ʻAli even took his claims to the Ottoman authorities. Abdu'l-Baha eventually excommunicated his brother, officially banning him from membership in the faith.

In 1908 a group of rebels known as the Young Turks led an uprising against the Ottoman Empire. After the successful rebellion, political prisoners were freed, and Abdu'l-Baha was permitted to travel to other countries to spread the word of Bahá'í. In 1910 he set out on a three-year tour that included Egypt, the United States, and Europe.
During his visit to the United States, the foundation stone for a Bahá’í house of worship was laid in Wilmette, Illinois. This was the first place of Bahá’í worship in the Western world. The Bahá’í faith had, in fact, begun in the United States as early as 1894, when a Lebanese immigrant, Ibrahim George Kheiralla (1849–1929), converted a group of Americans. Under Abdu’l-Baha, the Bahá’í faith became an international religion.

Abdu’l-Baha wrote many books and spoke widely. However, he was never considered a prophet, as was his father. Rather, he served as an interpreter of the words of Bahá’u’lláh. In 1920 Abdu’l-Baha was knighted, or granted a rank of honor, in Great Britain for his humanitarian work during World War I (1914–18; a war in which Great Britain, France, the United States, and their allies defeated Germany, Austria-Hungary, and their allies). Abdu’l-Baha died in 1921 and was buried in the Shrine of Bab on Mount Carmel, in Haifa, the city in modern-day Israel that has become the international center for the Bahá’í faith. In his will Abdu’l-Baha appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), as Guardian, or leader, of the Bahá’í religion.

**Heroic Age ends** Abdu’l-Baha’s death marked the end of the Heroic Age of the Bahá’í Faith. Shoghi Effendi, who was educated at Oxford University in England, carried on the work of the earlier leaders. He focused his efforts on the organization and administration of the religion. He also worked to establish an international structure to support and connect Bahá’ís around the world through a network of local and national spiritual assemblies. Although Shoghi Effendi died suddenly in 1957, a governing body called the Universal House of Justice, was established according to his directions in Haifa in 1963. The Universal House of Justice is the supreme ruling body of the Bahá’í faith worldwide. Its nine members are elected every five years by representatives of the National Spiritual Assemblies.

In addition to establishing the administrative system of the Bahá’í faith, Shoghi Effendi also translated many of the writings of the Bab, Bahá’u’lláh, and Abdu’l-Baha and helped to spread the religion around the world. When he became the Guardian in 1921, there were 100,000 members worldwide. At the time of his death in 1957, there were 400,000 members. In addition, he wrote *God Passes By*, which tells the story of the first century of the Bahá’í faith. His death caused a crisis in leadership, as the role of Guardian was meant to be a hereditary
About Bahá’í

- **Belief.** Bahá’ís believe in the oneness of all things: one world, one human race, one religion.

- **Followers.** Bahá’í is the thirteenth-largest world religion, with 7.5 million followers in 247 countries.

- **Name of God.** Baha, the Persian word meaning “glory” or “splendor,” is sometimes used to refer to God. More common usage is simply God. For Bahá’ís, all gods are merely various perceptions, or views, of the one God.

- **Symbols.** The nine-pointed star is the primary symbol of the Bahá’í faith.

- **Worship.** There is no clergy in the Bahá’í faith. Services are held at the first of the month in homes or simple buildings and in Houses of Worship around the world.

- **Dress.** Bahá’ís have no official dress.

- **Texts.** Kitab-i-Aqdas, the Book of Laws, written by the founder, Bahá’u’lláh, is the primary text for the religion.

- **Sites.** The Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh in Israel is considered the holiest site for Bahá’ís.

- **Observances.** The most important holy period for Bahá’ís is the Festival of Ridvan, held from April 21 and 29 through May 2. Naw-Ruz, or New Year’s Day, on March 21, is also an important holy day.

- **Phrases.** “Baha” is sometimes used by members to address one another.

one, passed on from one family member to another. But Shoghi Effendi had no children, and most of his immediate family had rebelled against his authority and had been excommunicated. Power thus passed for several years to a group of fifty-two people who had been selected to protect the Bahá’í religion, called Hands of the Cause of God.

Bahá’ís have faced persecution for their beliefs. Persecution is to mistreat others because of different beliefs or other characteristics. The Bahá’í faith grew out of a region dominated by Islam. For Muslims, the prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632) was the last of God’s messengers. Bahá’u’lláh’s claim to be a prophet is blasphemous, or an insult to the Muslim faith. Bahá’í persecution has been particularly harsh in Iran. In 1978 a Muslim government was established in Iran and hundreds of Bahá’ís were killed, while hundreds more were imprisoned. Although Bahá’ís respect all religions and their holy books, they have faced repression, imprisonment, and even death for professing their own faith.
Sects and schisms

The Bahá’í faith is itself the result of a schism, or separation, from the Babis, and that faith was itself an Islamic sect. Since the religion was established there have been several disputes over leadership. The first of these disputes occurred after the death of Bahá’u’lláh, who had established the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh. This Covenant was a promise to his followers guaranteeing the unbroken continuation of the Bahá’í faith by creating a clear transfer of leadership from one generation to another.

At his death Bahá’u’lláh named his eldest son, Abdu’l-Baha, the next leader of the Bahá’í community, or the Center of the Covenant. But another son from a second marriage, Muhammad ‘Ali, tried to claim leadership of the Bahá’í. He established a competing sect, the Unitarian Bahá’ís, though it attracted few followers. Finally, Abdu’l-Baha excommunicated his brother and most of the family from Bahá’u’lláh’s second and third marriages from the religion, calling them Covenant breakers, or heretics, people whose opinions oppose the religion’s defining principles. The term Covenant breaker has been used ever since to excommunicate those who have opposed the leadership of the Bahá’í faith.

Abdu’l-Baha, in turn, established a continuation of the original Covenant with the creation of a Guardian, who serves as the hereditary leader of the religion, passing control from generation to generation. Abdu’l-Baha named his grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, as his successor. Although he was young when he was named the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi was generally accepted by the faithful. His marriage to a Westerner, Mary Maxwell, a Bahá’í from the United States, and his growing international focus led to complaints from his immediate family, many of whom began disobeying him and marrying Covenant breakers. This did not result in the creation of more sects, but it did force Shoghi Effendi to excommunicate several family members.

With the death of Shoghi Effendi, the hereditary office of Guardian came to an end. Leadership was supposed to be passed to the oldest son, but Shoghi Effendi had no children, and other members of the family had already been excommunicated as Covenant breakers. For a time control fell to a small body of advisers, the Hands of the Cause of God, until the Universal House of Justice was established in 1963. In 1960 one of the members of the Hands of the Cause of God, Mason Remey, claimed that he was the Second Guardian because Shoghi Effendi had named him president of the International Bahá’í Council, a forerunner to the Universal House of Justice. He formed the Orthodox Bahá’í sect.
Although he was expelled from the mainstream religion, Remey managed to attract followers to his cause. By 2005 the Orthodox Bahá’í had established seventy-two local chapters. This sect, in turn, suffered several schisms, but most of those breakaway groups were short-lived.

Later disagreements in the Bahá’í faith have been mainly between the more liberal members of the religion in the United States, New Zealand, and Canada and the conservative national offices. A great deal of criticism has focused on the difference between the Bahá’ís’ stated belief in the equality of the sexes, while only allowing men to serve in the Universal House of Justice. Another point of criticism has been the requirement that a Bahá’í who wishes to publish something about the faith must first have the material reviewed by a Bahá’í committee. Much of this discussion and argument has been carried out publicly on the Internet, leading to the excommunication of some and the resignation of others from the religion. One result of this controversy was the creation, in 2004, of another sect, the Reform Bahá’í faith, by Frederick Glaysher.

**Basic beliefs**

The central belief of Bahá’ís is oneness. There is one God, all messengers of God and prophets have brought one message, and humankind is also united as one race. To Bahá’ís, all religions are really just one religion, which is evolving and changing over time. It is therefore necessary that prophets and messengers from the one God appear from time to time to bring updated messages to humans. Each messenger or prophet is merely a new representative of the one eternal religion. Bahá’ís see themselves within this cycle of continual change and evolution and recognize Bahá’u’lláh as one messenger among many that have come before, including Moses, the Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad. According to the Kitab-i-Aqdas, another new messenger will reveal a better way to live a spiritual life, but this will not take place “before a thousand years.”

This sense of continual transformation is a key element to the Bahá’í faith and one that is unique to the religion.

**Spiritual growth and social conscience** Bahá’ís believe that the purpose of human life is to know God and to develop one’s spiritual foundation in order to better advance civilization and bring about world peace. Concepts such as heaven and hell are, for Bahá’ís, only a matter of distance from God. When a person dies, his or her soul works through spiritual
levels to get nearer to an understanding of God. Although a person can never completely understand God, he or she can understand parts of the concept of a divine being through such divine qualities as wisdom and compassion. Education is thus extremely important for Bahá’ís, as it teaches these qualities.

Education is emphasized not just for the study of the Bahá’í faith but also for general knowledge. In fact, Bahá’ís believe that education should be required for all young people. They believe that there should be harmony between religion and science. They see no contradiction between reason and faith. Finally, Bahá’ís believe that it is the responsibility of each individual to seek the truth.

The belief in the oneness of religions leads to tolerance of other faiths. Bahá’í teaches that all forms of prejudice, such as those based on religion, gender, class, and national origin, should be abandoned. Prejudice is an opinion or judgment made without informed knowledge, often resulting in hostility towards a person or group. As an example of how this belief was put into action, in 1915 Abdu’l-Baha, the son of Bahá’u’lláh, advised members of the Bahá’í faith in the United States to arrange interracial or multi-ethnic marriages (marriages between people of different races and ethnic groups) to further this goal of the abandonment of prejudice. Bahá’ís promote the adoption of an international language to encourage the unity of all humankind, and they have become active members of the United Nations since its founding in 1945. The United Nations is an international organization formed to help nations resolve their differences peacefully.

As part of their belief in creating a global community, Bahá’ís also work with nongovernmental groups around the world for women’s rights, education, and the environment. They sponsor after-school projects, the building of orphanages and health clinics in rural areas, the

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**The Bahá’í Calendar**

The Bahá’í calendar consists of nineteen months, and each month is nineteen days long. Between the eighteenth and the nineteenth month, an additional four days (five days in leap years) are inserted to create a year of 365 days (or 366 days in leap years), the usual solar-calendar length. The Bahá’í new year begins on March 21, which is the first day of spring. The nineteen months have Arabic names given for an attribute of God, such as Knowledge, Power, Dominion, and Grandeur. Though the Bahá’í calendar maintains a seven-day week, each month consists of only about two-and-a-half weeks. Saturday is the first day of the Bahá’í week. Its translated Arab name is Glory. The rest of the days of the week, in order, are Beauty, Perfection, Grace, Justice, Majesty, and Independence. Each day of the week begins at sundown and lasts until sundown of the next day, rather than midnight, as in the Western tradition.

The calendar was created in 1844. March 21, 1844, marked the beginning of the Bahá’í Era, or BE. Thus, 1 BE lasted from March 21, 1844, to March 20, 1845. For the Bahá’ís, the year 2000 was partly 155 BE and partly 156 BE.
establishment of vocational programs, classes in health care, and tree-planting programs for the benefit of society.

Leadership and rituals Bahá’u’lláh did not trust ritual worship or a controlling clergy or priesthood. Thus, in the Bahá’í faith, there is no regular church service and no permanent clergy. Likewise, there are no initiation rituals to the Bahá’í faith and no sacraments, ceremonies that convey spiritual blessing.

The community is open to all who want to participate, but members have certain duties that must be performed. These include daily prayer, avoidance of drugs and alcohol, and the practice of monogamy, or having only one marriage partner. Parents must grant permission for a marriage before it can take place. Bahá’ís are expected to make financial contributions to the religion, but the amount is private and left up to each member. In addition, all healthy members between the ages of fifteen and seventy are expected to fast from sunrise to sunset for the nineteen days between March 2 and March 20 that precede the new year, which begins on the first day of spring.

Sacred writings
The central book of the Bahá’í faith is the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, or the Book of Laws. Written in 1873 by Bahá’u’lláh, it is also called the mother book of Bahá’í teachings. The book established the laws of the religion, such as the requirement of daily prayer, the lack of clergy, and dietary rules. It also discusses the administration of the religion and deals with ethical questions and prophecies, or predictions of the future. In this book Bahá’u’lláh describes the process of continual growth and evolution in religion. Each age needs a new message; even Bahá’u’lláh himself was to be followed by another of God’s messengers in one thousand years. Earlier works from Bahá’u’lláh include the Kitáb-i-Iqan (Book of Certitude), written in both Arabic and Persian in 1862, and, according to tradition, in only two days and nights. In this book Bahá’u’lláh continues the work of the Bab, explaining the continual unfolding of the religion and stating that all religions are related to one another.
Baha’u’llah wrote three more mystical works that are composed in short verses and provide spiritual truth. These include Kalimat-i-Maknunih, or The Hidden Words; Haft-Vadi, or Seven Valleys; and Chihar-Vadi, or Four Valleys. In The Hidden Words Baha’u’llah compresses the basics of spiritual knowledge into short passages or prayers, seventy-one in Arabic and eighty-two in Persian. Baha’u’llah wrote many more books and letters, and also spoke publicly on the faith’s principles and ideas.

Sacred symbols

Three symbols are typically associated with the Bahá’í faith. The primary symbol is the nine-pointed star. The importance of that number to the religion is partly due to the tradition in Arabic of attaching numerical values to words. The number value for Baha (Glory) is nine. There are also nine openings in the human body. (Nineteen is another sacred number for Bahá’ís, representing the number of original disciples of the Bab plus the Bab himself).

A second major symbol is an Arabic inscription, “Ya Baha’ul Abha,” meaning “O Glory of the Most Glorious.” This symbol is referred to as the Greatest Name and was created by a Bahá’í calligrapher, or letter designer. The nine-pointed star often has this inscription in its center. The third major Bahá’í symbol is the ringstone symbol, etched on rings worn by Bahá’ís. Designed by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, it features two stars, between which is a stylized version of the Persian word Baba.

Worship

Bahá’í has no permanent clergy or priesthood. Monasticism, or separation from the world, is forbidden. There are seven Houses of Worship, or Mashriqu’l-Adhkar, around the globe. Bahá’ís also gather in private homes or modest facilities for their services, which include the study of texts, prayer, and the recitation of passages from sacred works. Bahá’ís see no distinction between daily life and their religion, and part of their spirituality is performing useful work in the world.

The seven Houses of Worship are large and symbolic structures, each nine-sided and topped by a dome. Local materials and individual inspiration have determined each structure’s appearance, from the Bahá’í Temple in Wilmette, Illinois (near Chicago), which is made of cast
concrete and is of classic proportions, to the temple near New Delhi, India, completed in 1986, which resembles a lotus flower. This Indian House of Worship has attracted more than fifty million visitors since its completion, making it one of the most visited buildings in the world. Other Houses of Worship are located in Kampala, Uganda; Sydney, Australia; Frankfurt, Germany; Panama City, Panama; and Apia, Samoa. Around the world 120 sites have been identified as locations for future Houses of Worship.

Bahá’í Houses of Worship are open to all people and generally have a very plain interior so as not to distract from the worship of God. There are no statues, religious pictures, or stained glass. No sermons are allowed, and ordinary members of the community read from sacred texts. Prayers from many of the world’s religions are also recited, some put to music. Worshipers sit in rows of chairs or stand at various times during these informal services. Members are free to kneel or stand for prayers, as they wish.

**Observances and pilgrimages**

Bahá’ís observe eleven holy days during the year. The primary holy festival for Bahá’ís is the Festival of Ridvan, celebrated on three days: April 21, the First Day of Ridvan; April 29, the Ninth Day of Ridvan; and May 2, the Twelfth Day of Ridvan. This festival celebrates the historical event when Bahá’u’lláh told his followers that he was the messenger of God predicted by the Bab. This is the holiest and most significant of all Bahá’í holidays. On these days, Bahá’ís gather at community centers or at homes to read from Bahá’í religious texts, eat together, and enjoy the companionship of one another. During Ridvan they also elect new leaders. If possible, Bahá’ís do not work on these holy days.

Another important festival is Naw-Ruz, or the Bahá’í New Year (also the Persian New Year), which takes place on March 21, the

**The Shrine of the Bab in Haifa, Israel, houses the remains of the Bab, founder of the Babi faith. Bahá’í emerged from the Babi, as Bahá’u’lláh identified himself as the second messenger of God foretold by the Bab. AP IMAGES.**

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Bahá’í
first day of spring. Before this holy day, Bahá’ís fast, going without food or drink from sunrise to sunset for nineteen days. The celebration of Naw-Ruz includes feasting and praying, and there is no work on that day. In addition, at the beginning of each Bahá’í month is the Nineteen-Day Feast Bahá’í. The meetings that happen on these days are divided into three parts: The first part is dedicated to prayers and the reading of religious texts. The second part is an administrative session when reports are given about local Bahá’í activities and community issues are discussed. During these administrative sessions all members of the community are encouraged to talk and share their concerns. The third part of these monthly meetings is the meal shared by all community members. Food served is as varied as the congregations themselves, representing 247 countries worldwide. Such meetings take place in individual homes or in community centers when available.

The Bahá’í year includes seven holidays. The Declaration of the Bab, marking the date when the Bab announced the coming arrival of a new messenger from God, is held on May 23 and is a day free from work. May 29 is the Ascension of Bahá’u’lláh, marking the death of the founder of the Bahá’í faith. The death of the Bab, called the Martyrdom of the Bab, is celebrated on July 9 and is another day of rest. The birthdays of both the Bab and Bahá’u’lláh, on October 20 and November 12, respectively, are days of rest as well.

The Day of the Covenant, on November 26, marks Bahá’u’lláh’s promise that Bahá’í would be a permanent religion. The Ascension of Abdu’l-Baha, the day on which he died, is November 28. Both the Day of the Covenant and the Ascension of Abdu’l-Baha are working days for the faithful. Members are still required to come together in prayer and recitation of passages from sacred works, as is done on other holy days.

Pilgrimage destinations for Bahá’ís are primarily located in the Middle East. The holiest shrine for believers is the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh, located in Bahji, just north of Akko, Israel. It was there that Bahá’u’lláh died, on May 29, 1892. The Shrine of the Bab, located on Mount Carmel in Haifa, is the second-most-important shrine and landmark of Bahá’ís. Abdu’l-Baha is buried in the same shrine. Other popular places for Bahá’ís to visit include the Mansion of Bahji, where Bahá’u’lláh lived for a time.
Everyday living

The everyday lives of members of the Bahá’í faith are determined by the laws and rules established in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas of Bahá’ulláh. These laws include dietary rules (no alcohol or drugs are allowed unless prescribed by a physician, and tobacco use is discouraged). They cover the giving of money to the religion (a one-time 19 percent wealth tax is required, along with regular voluntary contributions) and rules about marriage and family. Marriage is only between men and women and with the consent of parents. Marriage between faiths is allowed, and marriage between different races is encouraged. Divorce is discouraged. Family life is considered the foundation of society. Education is important, and parents are required to provide for the education of their children. If finances are tight and only one child can be educated, it is recommended that a daughter be selected instead of a son, as she becomes the first person to educate her children, the next generation.

Bahá’ís are also required to pray and meditate daily. They are free to create their own prayers or use any of the ones created by the Bab, Bahá’ulláh, or Abdu’l-Baha. The one requirement of this daily prayer is that the faithful choose one of three Obligatory Prayers: the Long Obligatory Prayer, the Medium Obligatory Prayer, or the Short Obligatory Prayer. Such prayers can be spoken in a normal voice, chanted, or sung. The Short Obligatory Prayer states: “I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-subsisting.”

This prayer is to be said once every twenty-four hours, at noon. The Medium Obligatory Prayer and Long Obligatory Prayer have the same core message, but with more elaboration and explanation. The medium is repeated in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, while the long is recited once a day, at any time. The faithful are required to wash their faces and hands before and sometimes during the saying of such prayers. Followers of the Bahá’í faith are also expected to read from religious texts and meditate, or deeply think, on the message they learn twice each day. Such meditation is hoped to clear the mind and spirit of daily concerns and allow the faithful to look at their own spirit more closely.

Bahá’ís do not distinguish between their everyday life and their faith. For them, what they do in the world is an expression of their belief, and it
Bahá’ís sponsor many social projects, such as this advanced computer course offered at the Bahá’í Center in The Gambia. Such efforts support the Bahá’í belief in a global community. The nine-pointed star is displayed on the wall.

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is required that members do good work in the world. There is no particular uniform or style of dress for Bahá’ís.

Bahá’í’s influences

The Bahá’í belief in a united world ruled by peace has inspired members to become deeply involved in the United Nations (UN). Through the Bahá’í agency known as the International Community, Bahá’ís have achieved consultative status with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and with the World Health Organization (WHO), among other organizations. While many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including other major religions, have achieved such consultative status, none have been so long or deeply involved in United Nations activities as Bahá’í. A nongovernmental organization is a privately run organization, not associated with a government. Such organizations often work in areas of economic development, the environment, and social issues.

Bahá’u’lláh himself, well over a century ago, called for just such a system of international governance. He envisioned a form of world government based on the principle of collective security that would encompass all the nations of the world and lay the foundations for a lasting and universal peace. The United Nations was formed as an organization where
problems could be peacefully resolved so that wars such as those of World War I (1914–18) and World War II (1938–45) could be avoided. Bahá’ís were present at the founding of the United Nations in 1945. Two years later the Bahá’í communities of the United States and Canada were recognized by the United Nations Department of Public Information, and in 1948 the Bahá’í International Community was recognized as an international NGO. In 1967 Bahá’ís established a permanent office at the United Nations headquarters in New York City.

Among other joint UN projects, the Bahá’í International Community has worked with the United Nations Development Fund for Women to increase awareness of women’s issues around the world. Bahá’ís are also involved with nongovernmental organizations engaged in peace-building activities, women’s and human rights, education, health, and sustainable development (creating economic development without hurting the environment). Other efforts include helping to bring literacy to all populations, educating people about proper nutrition, and assisting with farming techniques. Bahá’ís are involved, for example, in hands-on projects planting trees in barren parts of Africa, in educating African farmers about proper agricultural techniques, and in providing health care workshops and vocational training to Indian women. By 2002 Bahá’ís operated more than 1,300 local development projects, from Mongolia to South America, and Africa to Australia. Such projects are a way to put the Bahá’í faith into action. For Bahá’ís, social action is a spiritual activity.

For More Information

BOOKS


PERIODICALS

WEB SITES
Buddhism is a religion based on the teachings of its founder, Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BCE). The Buddha, or the “enlightened one” as he came to be known, taught that a person could escape the pain and suffering of life by eliminating desire. The way of living he established is also considered to be a philosophy, or a set of ideas through which to gain a better understanding of values and reality.

The Buddha searched for six years to learn the meaning of life, and he gained many followers in his lifetime. Since his death, dozens of different sects, or subgroups, have formed in Buddhism. The religion has spread from its native India to the rest of the Far East and to the West (the countries in Europe and the Americas). The great majority of its followers are in Asia. Estimates suggest that there are about 350 million Buddhists worldwide, or about six percent of the world’s total population. It is the fourth-largest world religion, behind Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Countries with large Buddhist populations include Thailand with 95 percent, Cambodia at 90 percent, Tibet with 65 percent, and Japan with 50 percent. Eight percent of China’s population follows Buddhism, as does 0.7 percent of India’s population. Buddhist followers in the United States comprise 1 percent of the population and 0.5 percent in the United Kingdom. Less than one percent of populations in Africa follow Buddhism.

History and development

The early history of Buddhism is bound up with the life of its founder, Siddhartha Gautama. That Siddhartha Gautama was an actual historical figure is generally accepted. He was born into a noble family at Lumbini, a site in the southwest of modern Nepal. His mother’s name was Maha Maya. His father, Suddhodana, ruled over a small village and was part of the ruling Sakya clan. Most of what is known of the Buddha comes from later accounts rather than contemporary historical records made during
his lifetime. In 1996, however, a team of archaeologists (scientists who study the remains of past human civilization) discovered a marker honoring the Buddha’s birthplace set the by the emperor Ashoka in 250 BCE.

**Siddhartha journeys to enlightenment** According to Buddhist legend, the Buddha’s birth was no ordinary event: The story, which is similar to the story of the conception of Jesus Christ (c. 6 BCE–c. 30 CE) in Christian tradition, says that Siddhartha was conceived in a dream involving a white elephant carrying a lotus flower. This dream was interpreted as meaning that Maha’s son would become either a great ruler or a spiritual leader. The child was named Siddhartha, meaning “one who has realized his goal.” This name was combined with the family name, Gautama, and the clan name, Sakyamuni.

A week after his birth, Siddhartha’s mother died. He was raised by his aunt and heavily protected by his father, who promised himself that his son would neither witness nor experience further unhappiness in his life. Thus, Siddhartha grew up on the family estate, well educated and prosperous but ignorant of the usual sorrows of life. At age seventeen, he married his cousin Yashodora, and they had a son, Rahula.

Siddhartha, however, grew restless with his comfortable life. Despite his father’s efforts at shielding him from the realities of the world, he experienced four events that helped him understand the truth about the way the world works. Traveling through the town, he saw an old man, then a sick man, and then a dead man. These sights pained him and let him know that life was hard and full of suffering. His fourth encounter was with a beggar monk, a spiritual person who had given up all material goods. This man told Siddhartha that the way to deal with such sorrow and suffering is to become a beggar monk himself. So great was Siddhartha’s sadness and feeling of emptiness that he decided to leave his family and wealth behind and search for enlightenment, or understanding the true nature of life and how to end its suffering.

For the next six years Siddhartha sought out the teachings of the Brahmins, the priesthood of Hinduism. He began to live the life of a monk, sleeping on the ground at night. He practiced meditation (seeking spiritual truth inside oneself through quiet and stillness) and fasted, going without food for long periods of time. None of this, however, helped him escape his sorrow. Finally, he decided that this extreme self-denial and discomfort might not be the way to enlightenment just as his earlier life of luxury had not been. He instead developed the “middle way,”
avoiding extremes. By rejecting both extreme pleasure and extreme pain, he believed he might find true enlightenment.

One day Siddhartha seated himself under a banyan, or fig, tree. It is now called a Bo tree, short for bodhi (wisdom and enlightenment), for it was there that Siddhartha, after six years of searching, finally found enlightenment. According to legend, Siddhartha sat under the tree for seven weeks. Although he was tempted by the devil Mara he overcame the temptations and arrived at complete enlightenment. After this, he was called the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Sometimes he is also referred to as Sakyamuni Buddha, referring to his clan name, to differentiate him from earlier and later buddhas, or great spiritual teachers.

**The Buddha’s teachings** The Buddha came to understand that all of life is suffering and that suffering was caused by desire. By ending desire, one could end the cycle of suffering and achieve nirvana, the end of suffering.

**WORDS TO KNOW**

- **bodhisattva**: A person who has attained enlightenment but, rather than entering a state of nirvana, chooses to stay behind to help others reach enlightenment.
- **buddha**: A spiritual leader who has reached full enlightenment.
- **The Buddha**: The title of Siddhartha Gautama after he attained enlightenment.
- **dharma**: The collection of moral laws that govern the universe.
- **Eightfold Path**: The path of the Buddha’s teachings that can lead to the end of suffering.
- **enlightenment**: The state of realization and understanding of life, a feeling of unity with all things.
- **Four Noble Truths**: The foundations of the Buddhist religion: that all life is suffering, that desire causes suffering, that suffering can end, and that ending suffering happens by following the path of the Buddha’s teachings.
- **karma**: The result of good or bad actions in this lifetime that can affect this or later lifetimes.
- **laity**: Body of worshippers, as distinct from clergy such as monks and nuns.
- **monastery**: A place where religious people such as monks live, away from the world and following strict religious guidelines.
- **nirvana**: The end of suffering, beyond time and space; the goal of all Buddhists.
- **stupas**: Originally a mound marking the spot where the Buddha’s ashes were buried. Rock pillars carved with the words of the Buddha are also sometimes called stupas.
- **Tipitaka**: The Buddhist sacred texts accepted by all branches of Buddhism.
The way to achieve this was not through extreme denial or extreme indulgence, but by following a path of moderation, the middle way.

The Buddha decided to help others reach such awakening. He set out into the world of northern India to preach his message of the middle way. So powerful was his message of inner peace and harmony that in eight months the Buddha had won over twenty thousand followers. For the next forty-five years the Buddha and his growing group of disciples, or close followers, spread his message that suffering in life could be eliminated by following his teachings.

The core beliefs of Buddhism were developed by the Buddha largely in reaction to the dominant religious culture of the day, Hinduism, and to changing conditions in India. During the Buddha’s lifetime old tribal societies were breaking up and being replaced by new urban civilizations. The Buddha was one of several new thinkers who responded to this upheaval with a new approach. He preached a religion without authority, without ritual or examination of the meaning of life, without tradition, without a creator-god, and without mystery and spiritualism. Instead, he set out a step-by-step approach to leaving one’s feelings of sorrow and emptiness behind, called the Eightfold Path.

Buddhism formalizes as a religion After the Buddha’s death his followers began to establish a formal structure for Buddhism. The Buddha did not leave any formal records of his teachings or appoint levels of leadership to his followers. As a result, there was the possibility that those who took up the Buddha’s teachings after his death could reinterpret his message. Soon after his death in the fifth century BCE, a council was called to establish a commonly agreed-upon version of the Buddha’s teachings and his rules for monks. Those teachings and rules voted on by the monks became the basis for the central Buddhist text, the Pali Canon, which was originally written on palm leaves.

Differences soon emerged, however, between a group of more traditional believers, called the School of the Elders, and another, less traditional group. The School of the Elders focused on the personal pursuit of enlightenment. The other group believed in helping everyone to achieve enlightenment. This central difference ultimately led to a split between Buddhist followers. The more traditional group became known as Theravada, or “way of the elders.” The other group became the Mahayana, or “majority.” These divisions have remained throughout the history of Buddhism.
About Buddhism

- **Belief.** Buddhists believe that suffering is the central human condition and is caused by desire. *Nirvana*, or the end of suffering, can be reached by following a right course of action and thought in life. Buddhism’s founder, Siddhartha Gautama (also known as the Buddha), describes these in his teachings.

- **Followers.** Buddhism is the fourth largest world religion with 3.5 million believers worldwide, most of whom are in Asia.

- **Name of God.** The Buddha did not suggest that a god was responsible for the creation of the universe or of humanity. In later years, schools such as Mahayana Buddhism elevated the Buddha to a godlike status. In some instances, the word “buddha” is used in a similar way to “god.”

- **Symbols.** The Buddhist International Flag represents Buddhist ideals of compassion, the middle path, blessings, purity and liberation, and wisdom. Other major symbols include the dharma wheel, or dharmachakra, and the bodhi tree.

- **Worship.** Buddhists worship at temples, stupas (rock pillars), Buddhist centers, or in their own homes at small shrines. They may worship in a group or on their own.

- **Dress.** Buddhist laypeople do not wear special clothing, though shoes are normally removed in temples and teaching halls. Yellow robes are standard attire for monks. A heavier deep-red robe is also worn by modern monks, especially in Tibet.

- **Texts.** The primary text for all schools of Buddhism is the Pali Canon, also called the Tipitaka. It contains rules for monastic living, teachings of the Buddha, and explanations of philosophical questions. Another popular Buddhist text is the Dhammapada, a collection of the Buddha’s sayings.

- **Sites.** Lumbini, Nepal, is the birthplace of the Buddha and is one of the four most important pilgrimage sites for Buddhists. Other sites include Bodh Gaya, the place where he attained enlightenment; Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon on how to avoid suffering; and Kusinagara, where he escaped from this life into nirvana.

- **Observances.** Wesak is the most important holy day for Buddhists. Held on the full moon in May, it celebrates the Buddha’s birth.

- **Phrases.** *Om mani padme hum* is a mantra, or chant, prevalent in Buddhism, meaning “Hail the jewel in the lotus.” It refers to the symbology surrounding the Buddha’s miraculous birth.

**Spreads throughout Asia** The spread of Buddhism was enhanced by the work of the emperor Ashoka (also called Asoka) of Maurya, in present-day India, who ruled from c. 273 to c. 232 BCE. Ashoka converted to Buddhism after a bloody struggle to gain power. Thereafter, this powerful emperor decided to devote himself to peace. He had thousands of
rock pillars, or stupas, erected with the words of the Buddha inscribed on them, calling for respect for all life. Ashoka organized missionaries, people who dedicated themselves to preaching the truths of their religion to others, to spread Buddhism beyond the borders of India. Some of these missionaries reached as far as Egypt and Greece.

Ashoka’s son is thought to have brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka, and there the Theravada tradition has remained dominant ever since. The religion continued to spread throughout Asia, establishing strong footholds in China, Cambodia, Thailand, and Korea. China was first exposed to Buddhism in about 150 CE by missionaries from India. By the sixth century the religion had already gained two million followers. Buddhism spread to Japan in the thirteenth century CE, where it split into two major schools, Zen and Nichiren.

At about this time Buddhism also spread to Tibet, a region in the Himalayan mountains that is now part of China. It came to Tibet with Guru Rinpoche, the Indian master of what is known as Vajrayana, or Tantra, Buddhism. This is a form of Mahayana Buddhism that employs techniques, including meditation and chanting and other methods, to speed up the way to enlightenment. By the sixteenth century Vajrayana had become the dominant branch of Buddhism in Tibet under its leader, the Dalai Lama. Until the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1949, the dalai lama was both the spiritual and political leader of Tibet. The fourteenth dalai lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was born in 1935 and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Meanwhile, in India, the religion gradually declined in popularity, with the majority of Indians continuing to follow Hindu traditions. After the death of Ashoka, a new dynasty called the Sunga (185–73 BCE) came to power. The Sunga dynasty persecuted (mistreated) Buddhists, killing monks and destroying their monasteries. Despite this treatment, the religion flourished and reached its greatest numbers in India by the fifth century CE. Afterward, however, Buddhism declined in the Buddha’s native land. Following the Muslim invasion of India in the twelfth century, Buddhism in India virtually came to an end. By the late twentieth century less than 1 percent of Indians were Buddhists.

**Buddhism becomes known in the West** It was not until the nineteenth century that Buddhism became well-known and understood in the West. Philosophers (people who study questions of moral behavior and the meaning of life), such as the German Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), helped to bring the religion before the public. Schopenhauer’s
writings popularized the Buddhist idea of ending desire as a cure for emotional pain. Buddhism took root in small communities in England and also spread to the United States, where the arrival of Chinese laborers helped to popularize the religion. American writers such as Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), and the New England transcendentalists, who believed in the unity of all nature, were also influenced by Buddhist principles. Another milestone in popularizing Buddhism was the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Here speakers such as Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) helped introduce Theravada and Zen to the United States.

*Buddhism spread in many directions after its founding in India, going north, south, and east to other parts of Asia before eventually reaching the West.* REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THOMSON GALE.
Following World War II (1939–45; a war in which the United Kingdom, United States, and their allies defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan) interest in Buddhism was renewed in the West. Zen Buddhism became particularly popular in the United States during the 1950s. As U.S. servicemen returned from war in Japan and in Korea, they sometimes brought with them an interest in Asian culture, including Zen. They shared these interests once back home, contributing to the spread of Buddhism in the United States. The writings of scholar D. T. Suzuki and the work of philosopher Alan Watts (1915–1973) on Zen Buddhism influenced a new generation of people seeking answers to questions about life.

Tibetan Buddhism has become another very popular form of Buddhism in the United States in the twenty-first century. The spread of Buddhism has also been enhanced in the United States by waves of immigration from Buddhist countries in Asia. Despite its growing popularity, only 1 percent of the U.S. population is Buddhist. European nations also have a small presence of Buddhists, but their presence continued to increase slowly in the early twenty-first century.

Sects and schisms

Buddhism had already split into two main branches, or schools, by the first century BCE. In the early twenty-first century there exist three main types of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Theravada means “Doctrine of the Elders,” and it bases its practices and beliefs on the original teachings of the Buddha as gathered in the Pali Canon. It is sometimes referred to as the Hinayana branch, or Small Vehicle, but this is not considered to be a polite term for Theravada. Theravada has a strict interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings and places great emphasis on the final step in the Eightfold Path, right concentration. Meditation and contemplation (deep thought) are considered to be the best ways to attain enlightenment. Theravada is most popular in southeast Asia and is sometimes referred to as Southern Buddhism. Theravada is followed by 38 percent of Buddhists, or 124 million people, in the early twenty-first century. It is the main religious tradition in Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. It is also found in parts of China, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

The word Mahayana means “Greater Vehicle.” Mahayana Buddhism is sometimes called Northern Buddhism because it is most popular in
parts of Asia north of India, such as China and Japan. Mahayana Buddhists are less strict in their interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings. They also focus on teachings given later in the Buddha’s life. While Theravada Buddhists give reverence, or great respect, only to the Buddha, Mahayana Buddhists recognize many bodhisattvas, or enlightened beings who are like gods and help others on the path. Achieving enlightenment and nirvana, however, may take several lifetimes.

At the time of Mahayana’s development, people were accustomed to worshipping many gods. It was difficult for them to accept a belief system that did not have this feature. The Mahayana school responded to this need by saying that the Buddha was both a man and a godlike being, who used his enlightenment to help others. Many other deities (gods) and bodhisattvas populate the Mahayana faith, including Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion and mercy, and Wenshu, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Mahayana Buddhism is most commonly practiced in Nepal, Vietnam, Korea, China, Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia. It is followed by 56 percent of all Buddhists, or about 185 million people.

The third major school of Buddhism, Vajrayana, or “Diamond Vehicle,” is a sub-school of Mahayana. It is sometimes called the Tantric branch. Vajrayana developed during the fifth and sixth centuries CE. Its practices are intended to bring a person to quick enlightenment. Its teachings are based on texts called Tantras, which describe meditation and techniques for Buddhist practice. Some of these techniques include yoga (a physical and spiritual practice that can include holding difficult physical positions for some time), chanting or repetition of mantras, and the creation of mandalas (circular diagrams with spiritual significance, usually created with colored sand). Tibetan Buddhism is the most well-known form of Vajrayana Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhism is followed by 6 percent of Buddhists.

Smaller schools Within these three main schools, there are many sub-schools. Pure Land Buddhism developed in China. It tells of a fabled heavenly land in the West that is a midway point on the way to nirvana. This domain is ruled by the spirit of the popular buddha Amitabha. Those believers who do not have the ability to reach nirvana can call upon Amitabha at their death to be reborn in the Pure Land. Teachers there will help them to reach the ultimate goal of nirvana.

China also developed a meditation-centered branch of Buddhism called Ch’an. Ch’an spread in the twelfth century to Japan, where it changed into Zen Buddhism. Zen teaches that the way to become a
Indian Protestantism

Religious writer Huston Smith argues that Siddhartha Gautama was something of a “rebel saint.” Writing in The Religions of Man (1965), Smith noted that Buddhism “must be seen against the background of the Hinduism out of which it grew.” Smith went on to note that Buddhism was largely “a reaction against Hindu perversions—an Indian Protestantism.” By “perversions,” Smith was referring to the elaborate ceremonies and power of the priests, or Brahmins, in the Hinduism of Siddhartha’s time. The Buddha felt that these developments had sent Hinduism in the wrong direction, more interested in show and ceremony than in helping the common people.

Just like the Protestant revolt against Catholicism, Buddhism sought to cut through what it saw as hypocrisy, or falseness, in the older religion. Unlike Hinduism, with its Brahman priestly class, the Buddha preached a religion free of authority and free from a chain of command for leadership and power. Each individual, he said, should do his or her own religious seeking and not trust the word of some priest or preacher. This is illustrated in the Buddha’s words from the Dhammapada: “Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense.”

The Buddha also encouraged religious beliefs that did not focus on ritual and tradition. Hinduism had a large number of rites and prayers to the gods. The Buddha felt that such rituals served as worldly distractions that kept a person from enlightenment. Soothsayers and prophets, those who claimed to see into the future, played a large part in Hinduism. The Buddha thought such methods were only for those looking for easy answers to life’s difficult questions. Instead, the Buddha offered a religion very different from the Hinduism of the day. Buddha focused on the condition of the human mind rather than on metaphysics. He used experience and reason to arrive at his principles of living, and did not rely on ceremony or the words of ancient priests. He created a religion of social equals, rejecting the caste, or class, system in India.

Basic beliefs

Buddhism concentrates on the concept of dukkha, or suffering, and how to avoid it. In the Buddha’s first lesson, which came to be called “Setting
in Motion the Wheel of the Law or Truth,” he announced the Four Noble Truths. These provide the foundation for all of Buddhism. The First Noble Truth is that existence contains suffering, physical, emotional, and spiritual. The Second Noble Truth explains that suffering exists because of tanha, or desire. All desire in life leads to suffering. The Third Noble Truth then declares that to be free of suffering one must first be freed from desire. The Fourth Noble Truth states that release from desire and suffering can be achieved by following the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path consists of eight steps:

right understanding;
right thought;
right speech;
right action;
right livelihood;
right effort;
right mindfulness; and
right concentration.

Each step on the Eightfold Path can be followed by anyone willing to dedicate him or herself to it. Right understanding means to begin the journey by knowing the Four Noble Truths and the Buddha’s teachings. Right thought is to be dedicated to practicing Buddhism and caring for others. One practices right speech when one does not lie, speak harshly of others, or gossip. Right action consists of following what are called the Five Precepts. These are to not kill, not steal, not overindulge in activities involving the senses, not lie, and not drink alcohol to excess.

To follow right livelihood, a person should avoid working in jobs that are harmful to others, such as trading in weapons or alcohol, or in anything that shames or injures others. Right effort can be practiced by promoting positive qualities in one’s self, such as improving one’s knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings or completing an assignment on time. Right mindfulness is when one does something with one’s full attention. The final step on the Eightfold Path is right concentration, which means to focus the mind, usually through meditation.

The steps of the Eightfold Path are sometimes grouped into three categories: wisdom (including right understanding and thought), meditation (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration), and morality (right speech, action, and livelihood). Buddhists rely on their community, or
**Buddhism**

The Buddha’s birth is depicted with him as a young child, standing on a lotus flower and surrounded by devotees. A dream by his mother before he was born predicted that he would become a great ruler or a great spiritual leader. © LEONARD DE SELVA/CORBIS.

sangha, to help them on their paths. A person following these steps can learn to understand completely the Buddha’s teachings on suffering and impermanence and achieve enlightenment and nirvana. Nirvana is when a person stops the cycle of suffering and rebirth.

**All things are related, all things change** Among other central principles of early Buddhism is the concept of the nonexistence of a soul, or anatman. The Buddha declared that separate souls for individuals that remained distinct after death do not exist. Instead, he taught that each person is part of the rest of humanity, but in the most basic way, just as one candle flame is part of the general class of fire. Related to this is the concept of emptiness, or sunyata. The Buddha explained that sunyata meant that things do not exist on their own but are part of a larger universal network or web of all things and beings. The world exists as it is because of the presence of everything in it. The Buddha also noted that there were corresponding opposites in the universe. The Buddha determined that if there was suffering, there must also be no suffering.

Another major principle of Buddhism is the idea of the impermanence of all things, anicca. By failing to understand that existence is impermanent, people suffer. For the Buddha the idea of emptiness means that
Buddhism’s different schools  Early Buddhism was strict about maintaining the belief that there was no supreme being or god. When the Mahayana school formed, a number of deities, or gods, developed out of it. These deities, called bodhisattvas, assist Mahayana Buddhists on their paths.

Many schools of Buddhism have their own separate beliefs and practices in addition to such core principles. For example, Tibetan Buddhists believe in physical reincarnation, or the soul’s rebirth into another body, of buddhas. When a *lama*, or leader of Tibetan monks, who is thought to be a buddha dies, the members of his monastery begin searching for the child who is that lama reborn. In Japan the Zen school of Buddhism relies heavily on meditation to achieve enlightenment. Another school of Japanese Buddhism is Nichiren Buddhism, named after a thirteenth-century Japanese monk. Nichiren believed that all that was needed for enlightenment was knowledge of the Lotus Sutra, one of the most sacred writings in Mahayana Buddhism. Nichiren taught his disciples that chanting the mantra *Namu-myoho-reno-kyo* (or “homage to the Lotus Sutra”) would bring the seeker to enlightenment.

Although Buddhists worldwide have very different ways of attaining enlightenment, all of them share some core beliefs. These are best summarized in what is known as the Three Jewels. The jewels include a belief in the Buddha, a belief in *dharma*, or the universal moral law that the Buddha’s teachings reveal, and a belief in the *sangha*, the community of fellow believers. When one wants to become a Buddhist and enter on the dharma, one recites the following prayer to an ordained monk or nun: “I go to the Buddha for refuge / I go to the Dharma for refuge / I go to the Sangha for refuge.” Also central to nearly all schools of Buddhism is the practice of meditation.

Sacred writings  The oldest Buddhist sacred texts are called the Pali Canon and contain about four million words. They were written in the ancient Pali language and are also referred to as the Tipitaka, or “three baskets,” because they are divided into three parts. The first part of the Pali Canon is a section
on monastic law. Its 227 rules advise monks and nuns on how to handle certain situations and relationships between the sangha and the laypeople. The second Tipitaka tells the teachings of the Buddha. It details more than ten thousand sutras, or teachings, including guidance on behavior and meditation. The Dhammapada, a collection of the Buddha’s sayings and lessons, is part of the second Tipitaka, and is a much-used reference for many Buddhists across all schools. The third Tipitaka contains notes on how to search for wisdom and self-understanding. This section includes songs, poetry, and stories from the Buddha’s previous lives. The three sections of the Tipitaka are also called the Discipline Basket, the Discourse Basket; and the Higher Knowledge of Special Teachings Basket.

Theravada Buddhism uses the Pali Canon as its official sacred text. The teachings of the Pali Canon were determined during the First Buddhist Council, held shortly after the Buddha’s death. They were passed down orally for more than one hundred years before being written down around the third century BCE.

Mahayana Buddhism developed and revealed more than two thousand new passages to be added to the Buddhist collection of sacred texts. Mahayana tradition tells that many of these sutras were kept secret and only released when people were ready to hear them. They were written between 200 BCE and 200 CE. The Lotus Sutra, or Suddharmapundarika Sutra (“White Lotus of the True Dharma”), is the most popular Mahayana text. It includes discussions on the importance of becoming a bodhisattva and of realizing one’s essential Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is present in every person and allows them to grow and obtain greater understanding.

Another important Mahayana text is the Prajnaparamita, or “Perfection of Wisdom” sutras, which includes the “Heart Sutra” or “Diamond Sutra.” Only a few pages long, the Diamond Sutra contains some of the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism, including its view of emptiness, nirvana, human nature, and reality. Different Mahayana sub-schools use different sutras as their central texts. Among these writings are the Pure Land Sutra, in which the Buddha describes to his follower Ananda the heaven called Pure Land and how to be reborn there; the Mumon-kan (Gateless Gate), containing the most well-known Zen koan collections; and the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which informs Vajrayana Buddhists about the spiritual opportunities available immediately after death.
A further important text for Buddhists is a book called Mulamadhyamaka-Karika, which was written around 150 CE by the Indian monk Nagarjuna. The system of thought detailed by Nagarjuna discusses an important foundation in Buddhism. It is called Madhyamaka, or “the middle way.” The phrase “middle way” is often used to describe Buddhism. It illustrates the Buddha’s belief, as discussed by Nagarjuna, that one must avoid extremes in order to achieve enlightenment, including extreme severity or harshness and extreme indulgence or ease.

Sacred symbols

Buddhism is rich in symbols. Many of the different schools find value in different sacred images. Some of the most prominent symbols are the dhammachakra (dharma wheel), bodhi tree, Buddhist flag, vajra (thunderbolt), and mandala. The dhammachakra is one of the most well-known Buddhist symbols. It is an eight-spoked wheel signifying the Buddha’s turning of the Wheel of Truth, referring to the Buddha’s first lesson after he achieved enlightenment. The eight spokes on the wheel represent each step on the Eightfold Path. The center of the wheel is a circle that contains three pieces: a hub, a spoke, and a rim. The hub stands for the Buddhist principle of discipline; the spoke, for wisdom; and the rim represents concentration.

The bodhi tree and leaves from the tree are sacred items in Buddhism. At the time of the Buddha’s life, many people in India greatly
respected and even worshipped trees. They were seen as a symbol of wisdom and immortality. Hindu writings describe a divine tree with roots in heaven and branches in the underworld, connecting all beings. For Buddhists, the bodhi tree is held to be sacred because the Buddha achieved enlightenment after meditating under it. Influenced by the existing culture and dominant religion of the time, Buddhist followers began to see in the bodhi tree a representation of the Buddha and his teachings.

The Buddhist flag represents all of Buddhism. Developed in 1880 by American Henry S. Olcott (1832–1907), the flag has five colors that represent five different Buddhist principles. Blue represents universal compassion; yellow is for the middle path; red is blessings; white is purity and liberation; and orange represents wisdom. The colors appear vertically and are repeated horizontally in a single column on the right margin of the flag, with blue on top and orange on the bottom. The combination of these colors represents Buddhist unity worldwide. The flag was officially accepted by the World Buddhist Congress in 1952.

The vajra, or thunderbolt, is a sacred object to followers of Vajrayana Buddhism. It is usually made of brass and symbolizes that which cannot be destroyed. It looks like a vertical staff with two prongs each reaching out diagonally from the top and bottom.

Perhaps one of the most visually familiar Buddhist symbols is the mandala. It is often used by Vajrayana Buddhists. A mandala is an elaborate image constructed to help a Buddhist concentrate in meditation. The creation of a mandala can be a form of meditation all on its own. There are many different kinds of mandalas, and each teaches different lessons depending on the different objects it contains. Every object in the mandala has significance, reminding the meditator of a particular principle or idea. Such objects include images of deities and shapes, including diamonds, bells, vajra, dharmachakra, and lotus flowers. The center of every mandala represents the Buddha. Mandalas can be made of colored sand, paper, and fabric. They take several days to create and are destroyed a short time later. This process of creation and destruction is also symbolic. It represents the impermanence of all things.

**Worship**

Worship in Buddhism basically takes two forms. The first is the practice of veneration, or of showing respect and admiration, for the Buddha, other buddhas, and bodhisattvas. For followers of the Theravada branch,
the Buddha is the sole object of veneration, but for believers in Mahayana Buddhism, all buddhas and bodhisattvas are venerated. Such respect can be demonstrated by offering gifts to images of these revered ones in the forms of food, flowers, incense, or water in beautiful bowls. Such images might be paintings or statues at a temple or some relic or physical reminder of a buddha. For example, the temple of Kandy in Sri Lanka has a tooth of the Buddha and has become a holy place of pilgrimage for Buddhists as a result.

Another means of showing respect is by meditating on the qualities of enlightened bodhisattvas. For Buddhists, meditation is like prayer in other religious traditions. It focuses the mind and prepares it to understand or receive higher forms of knowledge or insight. There are two Mahayana Deities

Mahayana Buddhists believe in bodhisattvas, figures who have achieved enlightenment but have turned away from nirvana to help others. In Mahayana practice, bodhisattvas have become like minor gods and saints. The most powerful of them are awaiting reincarnation in heaven, which is not the same thing as achieving nirvana. Mahayana Buddhists direct their prayers for assistance to the bodhisattvas.

The most popular of the Mahayana bodhisattvas is Avalokitesvara, a god of compassion or sympathy. Able to take any form to help humans, this deity grants requests to people who chant his name. Avalokitesvara can be represented as either a man or a woman, and (s)he is shown in statues and paintings with several pairs of arms sprouting from his/her body. In the palm of each hand is an eye of wisdom. Legend has it that Avalokitesvara has a thousand arms in order to better help all those who ask for assistance.

In China, because compassion is considered a female characteristic, Avalokitesvara is pictured as a beautiful woman wearing a white robe and is called Kuan Yin. One legend of Kuan Yin says that she was the daughter of a cruel man who wanted her to marry a wealthy man. Kuan Yin was very religious, though, and wanted to be a nun at a temple. Her father made the monks give her difficult chores to discourage her. Kuan Yin, however, was so good that the animals around the temple helped with her chores and convinced the father to allow his daughter to keep her religious life.

Another popular deity is Maitreya, also known as the Laughing Buddha. Loving and friendly, this deity is based on an early Zen monk who was known for his kindness. He is known as the Laughing Buddha because he is most often shown with a round belly sticking out of his robes, and with a big smile on his face. Rubbing his belly is supposed to bring good luck.

A third prominent deity is Majushi, also known as Wenshu in China. This bodhisattva never grows old and comes to people in their dreams as a beggar to help them reach enlightenment. He is shown holding a sword of wisdom in his right hand and a book in his left.
basic forms of meditation for Buddhists: stabilizing and analytical. In stabilizing meditation, the person is attempting to develop his or her powers of concentration. A simple technique used in stabilizing is to focus on one’s breathing and then to clear the mind of all thought. Once the mind is clear, the person can focus on one Buddhist concept at a time. For example, a person might concentrate on the idea that life is impermanent and what that means to him or her.

Chanting a mantra or religious phrase is another meditation technique. Such mantras are generally in Sanskrit and are believed to be words used by a buddha when in deep meditation. The most frequently used mantra, especially in Tibetan Buddhism, is *om mani padme hum*, which is usually translated as “Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus.” The jewel represents the teaching of the Buddha, while the lotus is the symbol of wisdom. By clearing the mind, a person prepares for analytical meditation, which allows for insights or sudden understanding. Western psychologists explain such thoughts as coming from the unconscious. In Buddhism, these insights lead to enlightenment.

Meditation requires deep concentration and a lack of distraction. As a result, many Buddhists need to meditate somewhere quiet and private. In some countries with a Theravada tradition, such as Thailand, a layperson, typically a man, can actually join a monastery for a short period of time in order to build up his powers of concentration before returning to life outside the monastery. While in the monastery, these laypeople live by strict Theravada principles. This means that they try to remain pure in thought and deed and go on alms rounds with the monks, observing silence all the while. Alms are donations of food, drink, or other objects. Personal possessions are limited to one pair of underwear, two yellow robes signifying discipline, a belt, a razor, a needle, a water strainer, and a bowl for collecting alms. During their stay they are educated in the principles of Buddhism and given instruction by the monks in right living. Once back from the monastery, these laypeople maintain small shrines in their homes, may go to preaching halls rather than temples to hear teachings, and visit sacred sites on pilgrimages.

The second major form of religious practice and worship involves the concept of *dana*, or generosity. It also deals with the relationship between the lay community and the monks and nuns. Monks and nuns represent a higher form of spiritual achievement. They share this experience and knowledge with laypeople through their examples, by teaching lessons...
from the sacred texts, and by holding ceremonies throughout the year. In return, the Buddhist lay community supports the monks and nuns with offerings of gifts and food. Theravada lay Buddhists give food to monks daily when the monks go on their begging rounds, or *pindapata*. Laypeople also help out with chores at temples, cooking and washing for the monks, or putting fresh flowers on a shrine. Laypeople in some Theravada countries provide all the food, clothing, and medicine for the sangha. The concept of dana, of generosity and gift-giving, helps to unite the community of laypeople and monks and nuns in the monasteries.

**Where worship happens**  Veneration and the practice of dana are used on their own and also as part of rituals and celebrations throughout the Buddhist year. Unlike religions such as Christianity and Judaism, Buddhism does not have regular weekly services. The closest thing to such a weekly tradition comes in Theravada Buddhism with the *uposatha*, days in which to renew a commitment to the religion. These days come on the first, eighth, fifteenth, and twenty-third days of the lunar month, which are determined by the phases of the moon and not by the movement of the sun as in the Western calendar. On these days lay Buddhists, those who are not nuns or monks, will visit the temple or the local monastery. They listen to monks reading from a Pali sutra or delivering a sermon or lesson, and they make offerings of food and clothing to the monks and nuns. They will also meditate on the Five Precepts.

Buddhists can worship at home, at a temple, or at a stupa, a stone pillar or burial mound inscribed with sayings of the Buddha. A Buddhist worshipping at home generally maintains a small shrine in a private area with a statue of the Buddha, candles, and an incense burner. Tibetan Buddhists often also have a photograph of their spiritual teacher on the home shrine. Other Buddhists may place Buddhist texts or Buddhist symbols, such as prayer beads or a bell, representing the enlightened mind, on their shrine. Buddhists pray to the Buddha or other buddhas at their home shrine, depending on the tradition. They usually bow before the image of the Buddha or buddhas as they worship. Buddhists also make offerings of food, incense, and water at their household.
shrines, just as they would in a temple or at a stupa. By making such offerings, and by meditating and practicing dana, Buddhists build merit, or credit for good deeds. This merit helps to determine what kind of life the Buddhist will experience with rebirth, and how close he or she is coming to enlightenment.

**Temples and stupas** Buddhist temples, such as Cambodia’s Angkor Wat and the temples at Sukothai in northern Thailand, are built to symbolize the five elements: water, air, fire, earth, and wisdom. The base of such temples is square, symbolizing the earth, and comes to a point at the top, representing wisdom. Buddhist temples generally have statues and shrines to the Buddha or to buddhas and bodhisattvas. For the followers of Theravada, only images of the Buddha are used as aids to meditation, focusing on his virtue. But Mahayanists worship many different buddhas and bodhisattvas. Images and statues of these, especially in Tibet and China, are included in the temples and are thought to have miraculous or supernatural powers. In China and Japan, Buddhist temples are called pagodas and are built several stories high, with a curved roof and a tower on top.

Though most Buddhist temples are found in Asia, there are also Buddhist temples and centers in other parts of the world. For example, there are temples in more than one-half of the states in the United States. These temples often serve the dual purpose of both religious and cultural centers for the faithful. People must always remove their shoes before entering a Buddhist temple to show respect. While followers of Theravada typically go to the temple for uposatha and for festivals, in Mahayana Buddhism the faithful go to the temple whenever they choose, making offerings and praying to various images.

Stupas also serve as places of worship. Though once simple in form, stupas have become larger over the centuries, with some, such as the Shwedagon stupa in Rangoon, Burma (Myanmar), reaching one hundred feet in height. Many also are now decorated with beautiful carvings and gold. Outside the stupas the faithful either meditate on the teachings of the master buried there or walk around the structure three times to remind themselves of the three major elements of Buddhism: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.

**Observances and pilgrimages**

The most important holy days for Buddhists are New Year’s, Wesak, Dharma Day, Kathina Day, and Sangha Day. The dates of these festivals can vary not only between Theravada and Mahayana branches, but also
from sect to sect and from country to country. Moreover, since Buddhists (except those in Japan) use the lunar calendar, the schedule of such holy days can be confusing for Westerners. The Buddhist year begins with the New Year’s festival, symbolizing the death and rebirth of the year. In Theravada countries such as Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos, the New Year is celebrated for three days from the first full moon day in April. In Mahayana countries, the New Year usually starts on the first full moon day in January, and Tibetan Buddhists generally celebrate it in March. To prepare for the New Year, Buddhists clean their houses very thoroughly and perform cleansing rituals with water to drive out evil spirits. As with all the holy days of Buddhism, the three days of the New Year’s celebration include visits to the temple to bring offerings of incense, cloth, flowers, and money for the monks. There are also processions through the streets carrying images of the Buddha, as well as feasting, dancing, and sports events.

Wesak (also spelled Vesak) is the most important of Buddhist holy days, celebrated on the full moon in May for Theravada countries.
Wesak takes its name from the name of the Indian month in which it is held. In Japan it is celebrated in April and is called Hana Matsuri. While some Buddhists celebrate this day only as the Buddha’s day of birth, Theravada followers believe it also celebrates the day he became enlightened and died. Homes are cleaned and decorated, and lanterns are set out to symbolize enlightenment. In countries such as Cambodia and Thailand, large numbers of caged birds are set free and live fish are returned to rivers to symbolize the freedom that comes with enlightenment. In other Theravada countries religious processions circle the temple or stupa three times to symbolize the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. Plays that depict scenes of the Buddha’s lives are also presented. Many Buddhists visit their local temples for chanting and teachings, and offerings are given to the monks. Gifts of food and clothing are also laid at the feet of the Buddha statue in the temple.

Dharma Day celebrates the beginning of the Buddha’s teachings. Traditionally this celebration fell in the eighth lunar month and marked the time when the Buddha and his followers went into retreat for several months during the rainy season. The day is usually celebrated with teachings from the Buddha’s first sermon at Deer Park. The retreat months (August to October) are called Vassa. This is a time for Buddhists to renew their belief. The end of this period is marked by the festival of Kathina (held within a month of the end of Vassa). This is a time when new robes are given to the monks by the people of the community.

Sangha Day, also called Magha Puja Day, is held on the full moon day of the third lunar month (March). It celebrates the religious community, or sangha, and recalls the time when more than one thousand enlightened monks gathered to hear the Buddha’s first sermon, the Turning of the Wheel of Law or Truth. This sermon detailed the rules for monastic orders. In a tradition similar to Christmas, gifts are exchanged on Sangha Day.

**Pilgrimage** Buddhists have four main places of pilgrimage: the Buddha’s birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal; Bodh Gaya, a small town in India that is the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment; Sarnath, also in India and sometimes called Deer Park, where the Buddha gave his first sermon regarding the Four Noble Truths; and Kusinagar, India, where the Buddha died at the age of eighty. Lumbini, in modern-day Nepal, is the most significant of pilgrimage sites for Buddhists. Tradition tells that it was here that the Buddha was born in about 563 BCE. In 1996 a team of archaeologists
sponsored by the United Nations began excavations and uncovered what they declared was the birth room or chamber of Siddhartha. This discovery finally resolved a long-time dispute between India and Nepal over which country could claim the Buddha's birthplace.

The archaeologists uncovered a series of fifteen chambers buried about 16 feet (4.8 meters) beneath an ancient temple marking the site of the Buddha's birth. There they found a platform of bricks with a memorial stone on top that dated to 249 BCE. This was the year that Emperor Ashoka, who did much to promote the spread of Buddhism, was supposed to have placed a platform of bricks over the Buddha’s

Mudras

*Mudras* are sacred hand gestures. Mudras in Buddhism can commonly be seen in statues and other images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas. In these images, they are meant to symbolize the presence of the divine and to relay a particular significance. They are used in meditation to aid in concentration and are also present in Indian classical dance to convey meaning.

There are several different kinds of mudras. The *abhaya*, or fearlessness, mudra is made by raising the right hand to the shoulder, with the palm of the hand facing outward and the fingers extended straight and together. The left arm rests along the side of the body. The abhaya mudra is meant to eliminate fear and provide peace and protection.

Often performed at the same time as the abhaya mudra is the *varada*, or wish-granting, mudra. It is usually made with the left hand, with the arm hanging naturally at the side, the open palm facing forward, and fingers extended. The extended fingers represent the five perfections: generosity, morality, patience, effort, and meditative concentration. This mudra stands for compassion and charity.

The *dharmachakra*, or wheel-turning, mudra is formed by touching together the tips of the thumb and index finger on both hands. The circle made by this positioning represents the Dharma Wheel. The hands are held in front of the heart to show that the teachings are from the Buddha's heart. This mudra symbolizes the occasion of the Buddha's first sermon after he achieved enlightenment.

There are two different forms of the *dhyana*, or meditation, mudra. When the left hand is resting in the lap and the right hand is in another position, the dhyana mudra represents wisdom. When both hands are in dhyana mudra, they are usually resting at the level of the stomach or thighs, with the right hand above the left, palms facing upward, and fingers extended. In some instances, the thumbs of the two hands will touch the fingertips. This mudra is one of meditation and concentration.

The *anjali* mudra is made by placing the palms of the hand and fingers flat together, often before the heart. Sometimes the head is slightly bowed. This gesture can be found in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Statues of the bodhisattvas may display the anjali mudra, which indicates respect and worship. Hindus use this gesture in greeting, while Christians may position their hands in this fashion when they pray.

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Buddhism
The archaeologists discovered a stupa nearby, also built by Ashoka, with coins and a figurine of the Buddha. In 2005, sixteen countries, including Nepal, Japan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Korea, Singapore, and Thailand, agreed to create a World Peace City in Lumbini.

The great stupa monument at Sanchi in India also attracts many pilgrims, as does the Tibetan holy city of Lhasa, the Yun-kang caves of China with their giant carved buddhas, and the Sri Lankan ruined temple complex of Anuradhpura. There are also many local temples, shrines, and stupas that attract the faithful, such as the Temple of Kandy in Sri Lanka that displays a tooth relic of the Buddha.

Buddhists go on pilgrimages for many reasons. For some, it is one more discipline in their practice and one that can add to spiritual development. Others go on pilgrimages to fulfill a vow or pledge made to the Buddha or buddhas. For example, a person might pray to one particular Buddhist saint in order to recover from sickness or to deal with a particular problem. As part of their promise, they travel to a pilgrimage site dedicated to that saint and make offerings. Still others go on pilgrimages as a way of blending a vacation with their religious practice. Pilgrimage is an important practice for Buddhists, but not one that is required of them. There are no specific times of the year when such pilgrimages are made, though many visit Lumbini or one of the Indian sites for Wesak.

**Everyday living**

Buddhism’s central principle states that, in order to achieve nirvana, one must behave in a moral way, avoid harmful actions, and train and purify the mind. The Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts list measures that all Buddhists should honor in their daily lives. In order to respect the first precept, to refrain from harming living creatures, many Buddhists are vegetarians, meaning they do not eat food that comes from animals. Some Buddhists, following the precept about avoidance of intoxicating drink, do not drink alcohol. Others follow the Buddha’s own recommendation about taking a middle path in such matters, practicing not abstinence, but moderation in food and drink. Right work, also a part of the Eightfold Path, helps to determine one’s profession. Professions that help rather than harm people, such as teaching, construction of homes, and nature conservation, may be attractive to Buddhists.

The extent to which Buddhism affects one’s daily life, however, greatly depends on tradition and location. For example, in predominantly
Theravada countries, believers periodically spend weeks or months each year in a monastery. In Thailand, lay Buddhists recite prayers or meditate during the day and provide alms of food and clothing to monks on their pindapata (alms-rounds). Lay Buddhists await these monks on their alms-rounds, with rice, fruit, and even small packets of food wrapped in banana leaves. No verbal thanks are given by the monks, only a nod of the head. Buddhists believe that the act of giving is more perfect without thanks. After performing this act of dana, the lay Buddhists go to their jobs or homes, having started the day with a virtuous act.

In the United States and other non-Asian countries, some Buddhists choose to live together in a sangha and build their daily lives around Buddhist principles. Others go about their daily activities and meet with their sangha weekly or monthly. Some choose to dress in robes, although there is no official dress code for the Buddhist laity.

The Buddha did not organize his teachings into a formal structure. It was more important to him that believers follow the dharma to reach enlightenment. Buddhists are not required to attend temple or worship in a particular way. Certain practices, however, have developed to allow people to worship together and share a common experience. If not regularly attending a temple or observing at a shrine, Buddhists can still honor the Buddha’s teachings in their daily lives by following the Eightfold Path. Daily meditation is also a usual practice for devout Buddhists.

Rites at birth Buddhism is closely connected to the rites of passage of birth, marriage, and death. In some countries, including Malaysia, there are certain rites that can be performed when a woman is about to give birth. Usually the husband will recite certain sutras and prayers, including the Angulimala Paritta, named after the Buddhist saint, Angulimala, who took special care of women in childbirth. This prayer states, “Sister, since I was born, I (intuitively) know that I have not intentionally deprived any
living being of life. By this truth may there be well-being for you, well-being for the unborn child!"

After the birth of a child in Theravada countries, the parents take the child to the local temple to be given a name. Then the baby is blessed by monks and sprinkled with water. This is followed by a final ceremony with a candle. The lit candle is tilted so that drops of wax fall into a bowl of water and become solid again. This symbolizes the blending of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

**Rites at marriage** Marriage is considered a secular, or nonreligious, contract for Buddhists. But in addition to a civil ceremony, a Buddhist wedding ceremony can be held, with a monk presiding. In Theravada countries a wedding ceremony will include the symbolic joining of the entire community by wrapping a long piece of string or thread around a picture of the Buddha and then around all those present. The monk cuts two pieces from the string and wraps one around the wrist of the groom. The groom then wraps the second piece of string or thread around his bride’s wrist, symbolizing their unity. In Sri Lanka the wedding ceremony is called Poruwa Siritha, or Poruwa Ceremony. The Poruwa is a beautifully decorated wooden platform on which the traditional Buddhist marriage ceremony takes place. The bride and groom enter the Poruwa leading with the right foot. They greet each other with palms held together in the traditional manner of the *anjali* mudra. Instead of a ring, the groom places a gold chain around the bride’s neck and presents her with a white cloth, which she gives to her mother. This symbolizes the groom’s thanks to the bride’s mother for bringing up her daughter correctly.

In other countries the ceremony is simpler, with the bride and groom and family and friends gathered at a shrine of the Buddha. The couple makes offerings of food, flowers, and incense to the Buddha and lights candles. Then the groom and bride recite from the Sigilovdda Sutra. The groom first says to the bride, “Towards my wife I undertake to love and respect her, be kind and considerate, be faithful, delegate domestic management, provide gifts to please her.” Then the bride says, “Towards my husband I undertake to perform my household duties efficiently, be hospitable to my in-laws and friends of my husband, be faithful, protect and invest our earnings, discharge my responsibilities lovingly and conscientiously.”

Following this, the guests and parents recite various sutras and chants as a blessing. The Mangala Sutra is a typical text for this occasion.
It states, in part, “Not to associate with fools, to associate with the wise, and pay honor to those who are worthy of honor, that is the highest blessing.” The Vandana is another Pali chant used in some ceremonies: “Homage to the triple gems, homage to him, the blessed one, the exalted one, the fully enlightened one.” A wedding feast follows the ceremony.

Rites at death There are a number of Buddhist ceremonies connected with death and funerals. Even at the time of dying, Buddhists believe there is possibility for enlightenment. Some Buddhists wish to go to a monastery to die, while others bring monks and nuns to the home or hospital to pray and chant. In Tibetan Buddhism especially, the moment of death is a time for transformation or changing of a person’s consciousness. Tibetan Buddhists have a ceremony called phowa to aid in the liberation of the consciousness, or enlightenment, at the time of death. The phowa prayer is recited: “Through your blessing, grace, and guidance, through the power of the light that streams from you: May all my negative karma, destructive emotions, obscurations [withholdings], and blockages be purified and removed, May I know myself forgiven for all the harm I may have thought and done, May I accomplish this profound practice of phowa and die a good and peaceful death, And through the triumph of my death, may I be able to benefit all other beings, living or dead.”

Upon the death of a Buddhist, a monk is called in to say something about the person. The monk also recites the Five Precepts, a reminder of the changing nature of all living things. Then the monk or a relative pours water into an empty bowl until it overflows into a dish below. This signifies the merit gained by those attending the death. Then the following words are often recited: “Let the pure thoughts of goodwill be shared by my relative and may he/she be happy. As water runs from the rivers to fill the ocean, may well-being and merit within us pour forth and reach our beloved departed one.” The body is then cleaned and put into clothing for burial. As the dead person is already assumed to have been reborn, no jewels or possessions are put into the coffin for the deceased to take along into death.

In many Buddhist countries bodies are cremated after death. Friends of the family gather at this ceremony and offer what is called “incense money,” to purchase incense for the cremation. Feasts are generally served following a cremation and prayers said for the dead. In Tibet it is believed that forty-nine days must pass after the death prayers are
said before the deceased can enter a new existence. This period between
death and rebirth is called *bardo*. A photograph or image of the deceased
is burned at that time, to wish the person goodwill in his or her new life.

Chinese Buddhists also believe in the seven-week period between death
and rebirth. They offer prayers for the dead every seven days for forty-nine
days and also at the hundredth day after death.

**Buddhism’s influences**

With more than four million followers worldwide, Buddhism is consid-
ered to be one of the major world religions. In addition to its religious
influence Buddhism has also played an important part in the develop-
ment of many forms of art and architecture, and has even influenced
Western psychology (the science of the mind and its behavior).

**Buddhism impacts the arts**

Buddhist art has had a major impact on the
arts of Asia. For example, the image of the Buddha has played as signif-
ificant a role in Asian art as the image of Christianity’s founder, Jesus
Christ (c. 6 BCE–c. 30 CE) has in Western art. In early Indian versions,
the Buddha is generally portrayed smiling, which is meant to show his
experience of enlightenment and inner peace. The eyes are often closed,
and he is often portrayed seated on a lotus throne with his hands shaped
into mudras. This Indian style of representing the Buddha spread with
the religion across Asia. In China the Buddha was often portrayed in
golden robes with heavy folds. Over time, his eyes and face took on a
Chinese appearance. Depictions of the Buddha often were made far
larger than life size. In South Korea, at Sokkuram Grotto on Mt.
Toham, the Buddha image was carved out of the face of a mountain. An-
other giant Buddha was carved out of a cliff in Bamiyan, Afghanistan.
Called the Buddha Vairocana, it guarded the road to Central Asia for cen-
turies until it was destroyed by the Taliban government in 2001.

A different Buddha Vairocana was created in Japan in the eighth cen-
tury CE. It stood more than 50 feet high, weighed more than 200 tons,
and was decorated with 500 pounds of gold. Sri Lanka also has a mon-
umental Buddha sculpture, the Reclining Buddha. About fifty feet long, it
is carved out of granite at the Gal Vihara Temple in Polonnaruwa. Thus,
the image of the Buddha provided inspiration for the creation of great art
works throughout Asia, most of them created by monks who wished to
show their devotion and love for the Buddha.
Buddhism also influenced art in Asia beyond religious works. In Japan, for example, Zen Buddhism had a strong influence on many art forms. Simplicity and purity are traditionally part of Zen teachings, as is the calmness that comes with meditation. Zen painters were free to focus on subjects other than the bodhisattvas that dominated Mahayana art. The Zen art of portraiture was one of the earliest to depict humans in a realistic manner. The Zen Doctrine of Emptiness or the Void influenced nonreligious Japanese painters to leave parts of the canvas or paper empty. The viewer mentally fills in what the artist leaves out. In addition, Zen art influenced the painting style of *sumi-e*. In this simple style, black ink and a brush are used to produce many shades of gray. Such pictures may be only a swirl of lines to suggest a scene from nature. This depiction of nature by Japanese artists was influenced by the Zen saying, “The trees show the bodily form of the wind.”

Allied to the visual arts is Buddhist influence on the manuscript arts, including calligraphy (fine handwriting), block printing, and illumination, or book illustration. In China and Japan calligraphy became a true art form. In China such writing skill was a blend of dharma philosophy with the older Chinese tradition of landscape painting. Buddhist monasteries became safe libraries for beautifully illustrated Buddhist texts, just as Christian monasteries preserved illuminated holy works.

Buddhist architecture also influenced sacred building styles across Asia. Buddhist architecture began with the simple stupa, a mound originally covering the ashes of the Buddha. These became increasingly ornate (decorated) over the years. Once the stupa was exported to China it developed into a building called a pagoda. These tall, multistoried towers have upward-curving tiled roofs and were initially used just as the stupa, to enclose a Buddhist relic. Soon this building style spread with Buddhism to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. The pagoda also changed function. No longer was it just a closed tower for a relic, but a building for worship, a Buddhist temple. The pagoda has become a characteristic Chinese and Japanese building style in religious architecture.

**Buddhist influences on science** Nonreligious Buddhist influence has also been felt in the West. Psychotherapy, or treatment of mental and emotional disorders using psychological methods, has also long recognized the benefits of using some Buddhist principles. There are similarities between the two systems. Buddhism, like psychotherapy, attempts to help people discover why they are suffering so that they can then help to
heal themselves. Some also see a similarity in the idea of “taking refuge” in both systems. In Buddhism, the participant stays in a monastery to focus on personal growth. Similarly, in psychotherapy, the patient seeks refuge in the doctor’s office to try to work through his or her personal problems. Self-awareness is a Buddhist goal, and Buddhist practices from meditation to self-observation techniques are employed by Western psychologists and psychotherapists to help their patients. In particular, psychologists see the similarity between the Buddhist goal of enlightenment and the psychotherapist’s goal of freeing the unconscious mind.

Buddhism has influenced the world both religiously and in secular, or nonreligious, ways since its introduction 2,500 years ago. The scientist Albert Einstein (1879–1955) conceded the influence and importance of Buddhism when he wrote in *The Merging of Spirit and Science*, “The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. . . . If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.”

**For More Information**

**BOOKS**


**PERIODICALS**

**WEB SITES**
Christianity

Christianity is a religion built on the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth (c. 6 BCE–c. 30 CE), also known as Jesus Christ. Christianity is founded on the ideas of personal salvation (deliverance from sin) and eternal life for its followers. The Bible is its chief sacred text, and there are three main branches: Roman Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and Protestantism. Modern Christianity is further divided into an estimated twenty-two thousand different denominations (a group within a faith that has its own system of organization). In addition to being possibly the most divided religion in the world, Christianity is the world’s largest religion, with 2.1 billion followers. Believers live around the globe, but the heaviest concentration of Christians is in Europe and North and South America. The United States contains the most number of Christians, with 85 percent of the population, or 225 million people, who claim to be Christians. Other major areas of Christian population include Europe, with about 550 million; Latin America, with about 450 million; Africa, with about 350 million; and Asia, with about 310 million.

History and development

Christianity’s earliest foundations are based on historical events. The central event of Christianity is, as Huston Smith notes in The Religions of Man, “the life of a little-known Jewish carpenter who... was born in a stable, died at the age of thirty-three as a criminal rather than a hero, never traveled more than ninety miles from his birthplace, owned nothing, attended no college, marshaled no army, and instead of producing books did his only writing in the sand.” It was this man, Jesus of Nazareth, who so affected people that a religion was built around his words and actions. In the early twenty-first century Christianity now includes one-third of the world’s population as believers.
### WORDS TO KNOW

**atonement**: In Christianity, the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ to redeem humankind from its sins.

**baptism**: A religious ceremony in which a person is dipped in or sprinkled with water as a sign of being cleansed of sin.

**church**: From the Greek, this word refers to the community of all Christians. It is also the place where Christians go to worship.

**conversion**: When a person adopts a new set of religious beliefs.

**creed**: A statement of belief or basic principles.

**crucifixion**: The suffering and death by nailing or binding a person to a cross.

**disciple**: A person who accepts and assists in spreading the teachings of a leader. In the Bible, one of the followers of Jesus Christ.

**doctrine**: A set of ideas held by a religious group.

**Evangelical**: Describing a Protestant group that emphasizes the absolute authority of the Bible and forgiveness of sin through belief in Jesus.

**excommunicate**: Officially deprive a person of the rights of church membership.

**idol**: A statue or other image that is worshipped as a god.

**Immaculate Conception**: The principle of the Roman Catholic Church that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was conceived with a soul free from Original Sin.

**incarnation**: In Christianity, the belief that God took on bodily form through Jesus Christ, making Jesus at once fully human and fully divine.

**indulgence**: In the Roman Catholic Church, the belief that paying money to the Church would allow a person to get into heaven or be forgiven for sins that were not yet committed.

**Messiah**: The expected deliverer and king of the Jews, foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament; used by Christians to refer to Jesus Christ.

**Original Sin**: The sin that fell upon humankind when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden; this act, in turn, led to the separation of humans from God.

**Resurrection**: The rising of Jesus Christ from the dead three days after his Crucifixion, or death on a cross.

**sacrament**: A sacred rite, or ceremony.

**saint**: In Christianity, someone who is judged to be particularly holy and worthy.

**salvation**: The deliverance of human beings from sin through Jesus Christ's death on the cross.

**Trinity**: In Christianity, the union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three divine persons in one God.

**Virgin Birth**: The Christian belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and born of a virgin mother.
The historic Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus was a Jewish teacher and healer from the first century CE. Although Jesus is accepted as an actual historical figure, there is little known about him outside the stories found in the Bible. According to the Bible, Jesus was born in a stable in the town of Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, to a young woman named Mary and a carpenter named Joseph. Little is known of Jesus’s childhood or youth. According to the Bible, at age twelve he was taken on a trip to Jerusalem and became separated from his parents for a time. He was finally found in the temple, where he was listening to and questioning Jewish scholars.

By his late twenties Jesus began his teaching near his hometown of Nazareth in northern Palestine. He traveled all over Galilee, gathering disciples (persons who accept and assist in spreading the teachings of a leader), including the fishermen Simon (renamed Peter, or “rock” in Greek, by Jesus) and Andrew. Soon he had gathered twelve disciples who traveled with him as he spread a message of love, acceptance of others, and the power of God’s love for humanity. Jesus inspired in his followers a sense of mutual affection and joy and urged them to get rid of the selfish boundaries between people. As Jesus said in Matthew chapter 22, verses 37–40 (also referred to as 22:37–40), “You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” Jesus also preached that those who followed the word of God would have everlasting life.

In Matthew 6:14–15, Jesus spoke of the power of forgiveness: “If you forgive men their trespasses, our heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” For Jesus, love and forgiveness were the keys to salvation.

He soon attracted many followers. According to the Bible, Jesus also had the power to heal; he restored movement to the lame, sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf. His followers began to suspect that he was the Messiah for whom all Jews had been waiting. The Jewish Bible speaks of a Messiah, a person appointed by God to free the Jews from their enemies and then become King of the Jews.

Ultimately this popular new movement with Jesus as its leader attracted the attention of the authorities. Although the territory of Palestine, where Jesus lived, was technically under the control of the Roman
Empire, traditional Jewish leaders maintained quite a bit of authority. The ruling body at the time was a group of seventy-one Jewish elders called the Sanhedron. The Sanhedron felt threatened by Jesus's teachings and by the popular opinion that he might be the Messiah. They did not have the authority to eliminate Jesus, but they knew that the Romans did. The Romans did not want any mass movements in Palestine that might challenge their authority. Visiting Jerusalem for the Jewish holy days of Passover, Jesus held a final meal with his followers and announced that he knew that one of them would betray him. This dinner became known as the Last Supper.

Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot, one of his followers, and arrested by the Sanhedron. When Jesus refused to defend himself, the Sanhedron took him to the Romans, charging him with sedition, that is, encouraging people to rebel against the government. Again, refusing

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**About Christianity**

- **Belief.** Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that his Crucifixion (death on the cross) and subsequent Resurrection (rising from the dead) all make up for the sins of humankind. A belief in Jesus and his suffering leads to salvation.

- **Followers.** Christians number about 2.1 billion, making Christianity the world’s largest religion.

- **Name of God.** The Christian god is called God and is also known as the Lord or the Father. Jesus is believed to be the Son of God. The concept of the Trinity makes God a combination of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

- **Symbols.** The cross and the simplified sketch of a fish are two dominant Christian symbols.

- **Worship.** Religious services are held in churches. Most Christians pray and observe the sacraments, or rites, of baptism and Holy Communion.

- **Dress.** There is no special dress for Christians.

- **Texts.** The Bible, consisting of the Old Testament, of Jewish origin, and the New Testament, written after the time of Jesus, is the sacred text of Christianity.

- **Sites.** The Holy Land (the places in Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank connected with the birth, life, and death of Jesus) contains sites sacred to all Christians.

- **Observances.** Christmas and Easter are the two major holy days in the Christian calendar. Christmas observes the day of Jesus’s birth. Easter recognizes his Resurrection from the dead.

- **Phrases.** There is no single phrase that unites all of Christianity, though many would recognize and respond to a phrase such as “May the Lord be with you.”
to make any defense at his trial, he was sentenced to death by the Roman governor of the region, Pontius Pilate. Jesus suffered a painful death by crucifixion (execution by nailing or binding a person to a cross) and was placed in a tomb. Three days later it was discovered that the heavy stone that sealed the entrance to his tomb was moved and that his body was gone. According to the Bible Jesus later appeared to his disciples. He had risen from the dead. It was word of this miracle, known as the Resurrection, that the disciples spread.

In his death and Resurrection, Jesus proved to be an even more powerful figure than in life. Soon Jesus became known by a title coming from the Greek word chrīstos, or “anointed one,” a meaning similar to “messiah.” The form was shortened to Jesus Christ, and common use turned this title into his last name.

The rise of early Christianity Although it is not clear whether Jesus himself ever claimed to be the Son of God, his disciples did claim it. They began to write down their own interpretations of his life and words. His followers and believers called themselves an assembly. By the third or fourth century CE, this specific type of assembly took on the name church, from the Greek, kuriakon, which means “belonging to the lord.” “Church” came to mean not just the building where Christians worship, but also the group of believers. These early believers, including the apostles (Jesus’s twelve closest followers, or disciples) Peter, James, Matthew, John, and Thomas, preached the word of Jesus only to Jews at first. But soon the word of the Resurrection spread across the Mediterranean world.

The spreading of the religion outside the community of Jews was largely due to the work of a converted Jew, Saul of Tarsus (died c. 67 CE), who later became known as Paul or Saint Paul. Paul was not one of the original apostles. In fact, he had been involved in persecutions (campaigns of mistreatment aimed at stopping the growth of a religion) directed against disciples of Jesus. It was only long after the execution of Jesus that Paul had his conversion experience (or change of beliefs) and began his ministry. He was the first to begin preaching to the Gentiles (those who were not Jewish).

Through the writings and teachings of Paul, Christianity slowly began to separate itself from Judaism. The new religion adapted many of the forms of worship of the older Judaism, even incorporating its holy book, the Tanakh, into its teachings. Christians refer to the
Tanakh as the Old Testament. At the same time Christianity was developing its own texts. The four Gospels, written in the first and second centuries, detail the life of Jesus. Christians soon also developed two primary sacraments, or sacred ceremonies: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is a religious ceremony in which a person is dipped in or sprinkled with water as a sign of being cleansed of sin. In the Christian religion baptism also signifies that a person has been admitted to church membership. The Last Supper, also referred to as the Eucharist, is a remembrance of Christ’s last meal with his disciples before he died. The faithful met on Sundays, for it was on a Sunday that Jesus had risen from the dead. They said prayers together, reading from the Old Testament and from Paul’s letters.

Christianity has 2.1 billion followers around the world. The largest number of followers are in Europe and North and South America.
Soon the church began to organize. Members of the congregation (gathering or group) took on the jobs of preaching, leading the Sunday services, and collecting offerings from the believers. These tasks were later taken over by church officials. Bishops became administrators, overseeing the operation of the church in a city or district, while priests led worship. These offices slowly came to be officially separate from the laity, or regular members of the congregation. A ceremony called ordination gave a person holy orders or the duties of a priest.

Meanwhile, missionaries spread the gospel (a term meaning “good news”) of Christ, finding converts throughout the Roman Empire. (A convert is a person who changes their religious beliefs.) The first pope, or leader of the church, was established at the end of the first century. The New Testament was collected by about 130 CE, and this helped to spread Christianity.

**Persecution of early Christians** For the first few centuries of its existence, Christianity was a martyr’s religion. (Martyrs are people who sacrifice their lives for the sake of their beliefs.) Some of the worst persecutions of early Christians happened during the reigns of the Roman emperors from about 81 to 305 CE. The emperors made the new religion illegal and often executed believers who would not give up their faith. Such persecutions were the result of Christians refusing to worship the Roman state or its emperor. In ancient Rome, the emperor himself was considered a god. Worshipping the emperor and the gods of Rome was a sign that a person was a good Roman citizen. A religion like Christianity that taught there was only one God and whose believers could not worship the emperor was a threat to the emperor’s power.

Despite such difficulties, by the fourth century, Christianity had spread as far west as Spain and into both Persia (present-day Iran) and India to the east. In 313 the Roman emperor Constantine (d. 337; ruled 306–337) declared a policy of religious tolerance. He made Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire. Then in 380 Theodosius I (347–395) declared it the official religion of the Roman Empire. As of 410 Christians had the power to ban non-Christian religions from the empire. The church adapted parts of the Roman culture to its organization. It used Roman political districts to mark its own religious districts and allowed more state involvement in church affairs.

With mainstream acceptance came internal quarreling over doctrine (a set of ideas held by a religious group) and beliefs. From about 275 the church, especially in Asia Minor (the area of modern-day Turkey),
became involved in doctrinal arguments. For the next several hundred years, large councils of bishops (clergymen who rank above priests) met to decide matters such as the nature of the doctrine of the Trinity. Under the doctrine of the Trinity, God is united into a single figure with three sides: the Father (a creative side), Son (the earthly part), and Holy Spirit (the supernatural, or spiritual, aspect). Still, some believed that God the Father was more powerful than the other two parts. Councils in 325 and 381 decided that issue. They wrote the Nicene Creed, a statement of belief in one God with three aspects.

The first monasteries are formed During the fifth to tenth centuries the monastic system arose. This development was prompted in part by early hermits who had escaped Roman persecution by going off into the desert and living there in seclusion (alone). In this new system, a person could dedicate himself to a secluded and celibate (having no sexual relations) life of thinking about Christ and the Bible. These men were called monks. Buildings called monasteries became places of safety from persecution as well as places of spiritual contemplation (deep thinking) and learning.

The Benedictine Rule, or Benedictine Order, was one of the first such monastic orders, founded in 525 at Monte Cassino, Italy. Other monastic orders formed throughout the early history of Christianity, helping to preserve the traditions of the church. The orders kept the sacred texts in huge libraries and practiced the forms of religion and prayer as established by the early Christians.

The Eastern Orthodox Church is established The two centers of Christianity were Rome and Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey). These cities were also centers of the Roman Empire. With invasions from northern Europe in the fifth century and the loss of political power, Rome was placed in a much weaker position than Constantinople, the eastern capital of the empire. There were divisions between the two seats of power. The church in Rome by the end of the second century began using Latin as the language of worship and in religious texts. The church in the East, however, still used Greek. The bishop of Rome became the pope, or leader, of the church in the West (the countries of Europe and the Americas). The Eastern Church had a less centralized structure, with the patriarch, or district leader, of Constantinople as the unofficial head of that branch. Most real power in the East, however, lay in the hands of the emperor.
These differences intensified over questions of doctrine, particularly over the Nicene Creed. Finally in 1054 a formal separation took place, resulting in two distinct churches: the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Thereafter, the popes in Rome fought for secular, or political, power with the princes and kings of Europe. By 926, European states had loosely joined together as the Holy Roman Empire, with the pope in Rome as the spiritual head. The pope would in turn make one of the many princes in Europe the emperor. This system remained in place until 1806. However, there was continual competition between the popes and the princes for power.

Meanwhile the Eastern Orthodox Church extended its control over Asia Minor and over Christians in the Middle East. Constantinople became the center of what was called the Byzantine Empire. This empire ruled over what had been the eastern half of the Roman world, including Asia Minor, the Middle East, parts of North Africa, and some of Europe, including what is now northern Greece, from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries. This control, however, soon found new competition in the form of another religion, Islam.

**Early conflict between Christianity and Islam** In the eighth century the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Empire faced another challenge. Traditional Christian areas of North Africa, Egypt, and Palestine came under the control of the followers of Islam (a religion marked by belief in one God, Allah, and the acceptance of Muhammad as the chief and last prophet of God). The Catholic Church in the West also felt the power of Islam when Spain was invaded in the eighth century and Muslim, or Moorish, rule was established there.

Although in some instances the two religions managed to live peacefully side-by-side, relations were more typically hostile. Such hostility was a result of different beliefs about Jesus. Christians see Christ as godlike and part of the Trinity. But for Muslims, Jesus was just one more prophet or messenger of God, and Muhammad was the major prophet. Muslims also believe the Bible is not accurate. For them, the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam, is the final word of God. The religious differences between Muslims and Christians led to tension between the two groups.

This hostility led to the Crusades, a series of military expeditions undertaken by European Christians in the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries in an attempt to reclaim the Holy Land from the Muslims. (The Holy Land consists of the Biblical region of Palestine, which includes
sites considered sacred by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.) The Crusades were largely unsuccessful. Although those who participated in the First Crusade did retake Jerusalem in 1099, later Crusades could not maintain this foothold in what had become a Muslim-dominated region.

The Inquisition and humanism As the Roman Catholic Church gained power over the princes and kings of Europe in the Holy Roman Empire, it also created the Inquisition, a group formed to control heresy (opinions or beliefs that go against church teachings) by means of harsh punishments. The Inquisition began in the thirteenth century and by the sixteenth century it had become an official office of the Catholic Church. During the Middle Ages (the period of European history from c. 500–c. 1500), the Inquisition used forms of torture to get confessions of heresy from people. Those found guilty were burned at the stake.

In 1453 Constantinople, the center of the Eastern Orthodox Church, was conquered by the Muslim Ottoman Turks, a tribe that was creating a great Islamic empire in the Middle East and in Asia Minor. In time the Turks also took over Greece, causing many Christian scholars and
intellectuals to flee. These intellectuals arrived in Europe and joined a revival of classical art, literature, and learning in Europe that was slowly giving a new emphasis and focus to the way humans looked at the world and at God. This spirit of humanism, a philosophy based upon human reason, actions, and motives without concern for supernatural phenomena, was at odds with the elaborate form of religion practiced by the Roman Catholic Church.

**The Reformation gives rise to Protestantism** By the sixteenth century European explorers were spreading Christianity to the New World, both North America and South America. At this time, too, there was growing discontent with practices of the Church, such as the selling of indulgences. An indulgence was when people would pay money to the Church with the impression that they could buy their way into heaven or be forgiven for sins that were not yet committed. Critics thought that such practices distorted the original goals of the Church. Salvation should not be sold, these critics said. Rather, it should be earned by belief in Jesus Christ and by good works.

The German Augustinian monk Martin Luther (1483–1546) opposed such practices in 1517 by supposedly nailing his ninety-five theses, or propositions, onto the door of the local church. He was excommunicated, or removed from membership in the Catholic Church, because of his action. Luther went on to preach a reformed Christianity that emphasized individual faith as the most powerful ingredient in a person's salvation. Luther's proposed changes ending the selling of indulgences, and simplification of rituals drew new believers and inspired other reformers. Because the movement sought to reform church practices, it became known as the Reformation. Since it began as a protest against the perceived abuses of the Roman Catholic Church, the new sects that resulted became known as Protestant.

Catholics reacted to these reform movements with the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century. Led by conservative Catholics and Pope Paul III (1468–1549), the Counter-Reformation wanted to reform the church, but slowly and from within. They hoped their reforms would stop Protestant advances and preserve Catholic traditions.

Protestantism continued to grow, giving rise to new groups with different beliefs. Organized forms of Christianity, however, faced a new test with the revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment focused on the power of human
reason instead of divine wisdom and placed new focus on the logic of science over faith.

In the nineteenth century scientific discoveries and new theories about life’s beginnings led many people to feel that a literal reading of the Bible was no longer reasonable. The church’s influence over individuals and nations began to weaken. At the same time, however, many new Christian denominations appeared, stressing Adventist doctrines. These beliefs asserted that the Second Coming (or Advent) of Jesus Christ was near, that the world would be destroyed, and only the faithful would be with Jesus Christ in heaven. The North American group Jehovah’s Witnesses is an Adventist religion.

**Christianity in the twentieth century** Christianity continued to grow throughout the twentieth century. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was an attempt at reviving Catholicism. The council also hoped and worked for closer connections with other Christian branches and with Judaism. Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, which had prohibited many types of religious celebration, collapsed in the late 1980s. The political system of communism eliminates private property and gives the state control of goods and services. After communists lost control, the Eastern Orthodox Church in many central and eastern European countries and in Russia was able to hold services without fear of repression.

Another trend in the twentieth century was a decline in Europe of religious affiliation, or formal connection with an organized church. This was accompanied by a sharp rise in church membership in Asia and Africa. Changes in social values forced Christian churches to address issues once avoided, such as female clergy. Many Christians, especially those belonging to more conservative Protestant denominations, object to the changes introduced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They feel that these changes, like changing **AD** (Anno Domini, In the Year of Our Lord) and **BC** (Before Christ) to **CE** (Common Era) and **BCE** (Before the Common Era), is an example of the secular, or nonreligious, world taking power over religious life.

**Sects and schisms** There have been three major schisms, or divisions, in Christianity, resulting in three major branches: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. In addition, some scholars consider that there have
been four major schisms, with the fourth being the creation of the Eastern Rite Churches, or Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian Churches.

**Rise of the Eastern Orthodox Church**  Doctrinal disputes over the Trinity were at the heart of the disagreement between the Western Church, centered in Rome, and the Eastern Church, centered in Constantinople. In 1014 the Western Church included “filioque” in the Nicene Creed,
the statement of the chief beliefs or tenets of Christianity. That statement read, in part, “I believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . And in the Holy Ghost . . . Who proceedeth [comes or arises] from the Father and the Son.”

The addition of “filioque,” or “and the Son” to this fundamental declaration meant that such a spirit does not come solely from God but from God and the Son, Jesus Christ. This idea went against teachings in the Eastern Church. As a result, the patriarch of Constantinople closed all Latin-speaking churches in the city, the official language of the Western Church. This act led to countermeasures by Rome, until each church by 1054 had excommunicated the other, or forced them out of membership. Thereafter, the Eastern Church, claiming to be the legitimate, or official, version of Christianity, called itself the Eastern Orthodox Church. In turn the Western Church, claiming to be the universal version, called itself the Roman Catholic Church.

Although there was an attempt to reach peace between the two branches, both continue to use different versions of the Nicene Creed. There are many other differences as well. The Eastern Church is less centralized in its administration. Instead of an overall leader such as the pope in Rome, it has patriarchs or metropolitans, who do not rule the entire Eastern Church but only a portion of it. Neither is the Eastern Church the primary religious teaching authority, as it is in Catholic tradition. Moreover, priests in the Eastern Church are not required to be celibate, although their bishops are. Members of the church who are not clergy also have more power and responsibilities in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Salvation is more of a group concern in Eastern Church tradition, and the mystical element of the religion is emphasized. Eastern Orthodox tradition is the dominant religion in Bulgaria, Belarus, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and the Ukraine and is also found in Albania, China, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the United States.

The Roman Catholic Church after 1054 solidified its standing in Europe and then spread to the New World with voyages of discovery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Italy, France, Spain, Ireland, Austria, Poland, and Portugal in Europe are strongly Catholic countries, as is much of Central America and South America. The Catholic Church differs from the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity in its central organization. The idea of papal infallibility, meaning that the pope cannot make mistakes in matters of religious doctrine, is unique to Roman
Catholicism. The church is the teaching authority of the faith, and the pope has the final word about matters of faith or morals.

**Protestantism** The next major schism within Christianity occurred within the Western branch. By the sixteenth century the Roman Catholic Church had become top-heavy in bureaucracy and ritual. Purists, or those who believed in traditional standards, felt that the meaning of Christ’s suffering had become lost in all the rituals. Many rituals of the time were performed without any true feeling. Reformers such as Martin Luther wanted to return to a simpler form of the religion.

For such reformers, the Bible was the central authority, not the people who ran the church. They protested against practices such as selling indulgences. Men like Luther, John Calvin (1509–1564), Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), and John Knox (c. 1514–1572), believed in the idea of “justification by faith alone.” In other words, for these reformers faith was not simply a matter of accepting Christian doctrine and doing good works, but of actually and personally experiencing the presence of God. Good works do not necessarily lead to salvation, but they do follow from someone who already has faith.

**Protestant denominations** For Protestants, no priests or other people are needed to help a believer know God. These reformers believed in a personal faith founded on what came to be called the Protestant Principle: that a person’s devotion is to God and not to the trapings of religion or to the priests of religion. All the accessories of religion, such as ceremonies and icons (pictorial representations or symbols), should be examined and never placed on a higher level than a direct love of God. Protestants do use the accessories of religion, but they try not to rely on them more than on God.

The personal experience of God that the Protestant Reformation stressed and the Catholic Counter-Reformation diminished dominated much of sixteenth century history in the West. But this emphasis on the personal experience of God led to the multiplication of many Protestant sects. Most differed from Roman Catholicism primarily through the ways they ran their churches, but a few introduced important new ideas into their theologies. For instance, Calvin taught that humans are so wicked they can do nothing to bring about their own salvation and must depend solely on God’s grace and mercy. This idea opposed the theological idea that salvation could be “earned” through good works. This theological, or religious, idea called predestination, or the idea that
God sets aside some people to be saved and others not to be, is central to Calvinism, the religion founded by Calvin.

The Anabaptists, a group with its origins in Germany and Switzerland, believed only adults, those who could freely choose faith should be baptized. Anabaptists also were pacifists (people who believe in non-violence), who denied believers the right to use weapons even in self-defense. Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Convention are two North American branches of Anabaptists.

Another major division within Protestantism came from England. There, King Henry VIII (1491–1547) broke from Rome in 1534 over the pope’s refusal to grant him a divorce. The Anglican Church, or the Church of England, maintaining many of the rites of the Catholic Church, was formed as a result. Anglicanism gave rise in North America to the Episcopal Church.

Reaction against the authority of the Anglican Church led to the multiplication of Protestant sects in England. Puritanism was a sect that grew out of the Anglican movement. The Puritans wanted to further “purify” the religion from any of the practices associated with the Roman Catholic Church. The Baptist Church, founded by John Smyth (c. 1570–1612), grew out of one of many separatist movements in the Anglican Church. As the name suggests, Baptists take the sacrament, or holy rite, of baptism as a central belief and ritual. Quakers and Methodists also came from Anglicanism or reacted against it. George Fox (1624–1691) founded the Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends, in the mid-seventeenth century. Pacifism is a central belief for Quakers. They do not practice the sacraments but rather seek an individual experience of God within themselves. John Wesley (1703–1791) founded Methodism in 1739. This denomination also values a direct experience of God. Wesley taught the idea of perfectionism, a belief so high and pure that it cleanses the individual of Original Sin.

Christianity’s 2.1 billion members can be broken down by religion and branch: 1.1 billion Roman Catholics; 510 million Protestants; 216 million Eastern Orthodox; 158 million independents; and 31.7 million without a clear connection to a larger umbrella group, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

**Basic beliefs**

The central belief in Christianity is that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of humankind. By believing in Jesus’s death and Resurrection, people
can be saved. Their sins can be redeemed, and they can find eternal life in heaven after death. “I am the way,” Jesus said in John 14:16, “and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me.” These words took on new meaning following the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Primary Christian doctrines The words of Jesus were put down in writing during the century following his death in the first four books of the New Testament, called the Gospels. In addition to these books, there are also numerous creeds, or statements of belief, made by later followers in large church councils and not included in the New Testament. The life and deeds of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels are considered the heart of Christianity. These later creeds record the attempts of followers to make sense of the teachings of Jesus and to combine them in an organized body of thought and belief. Not all Christians agreed on all creeds, and this, among other differences, led to an array of Christian denominations. Three primary doctrines, however, are fairly standard across denominations: Incarnation, Atonement, and the Trinity.

The doctrine of Incarnation holds that Jesus was both man and God at the same time. According to this creed, God the Father became incarnate, or took on bodily form, for the sake of humanity. It was not that Jesus was half human and half divine. Rather, as the Council of Nicea decided in 325, Jesus was of the same substance as God the Father.

The doctrine of Atonement speaks of reconciliation between God and humankind, a settlement ending the separation between God and humans. This separation was caused, according to some interpretations, by Original Sin. (The doctrine of Original Sin says that sin, or disobedience to God, began when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.) This Original Sin had to be paid for, and it was the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross that redeemed humanity. Others see this separation in a more psychological (dealing with the human mind) manner. For example, the word sin has roots that are similar to the word sunder, meaning “to split” or “to divide.” In this interpretation Original Sin represents the sense of alienation, or distancing, that humans have from one another and from God. Through belief in Jesus people can erase sin and achieve a sense of oneness. For Christians, belief in the Atonement of Jesus is the way to salvation.

Related to salvation is the Christian concept of the afterlife. Although this may vary between denominations and individual Christians, the vast majority of Christians believe in some kind of heaven, in which believers enjoy the presence of God and the company of other believers after
death. Views differ as to whether those of other faiths or those of no faith will be in heaven. Concepts of what heaven will be like differ as well. Fewer Christians believe in the existence of hell, where unbelievers or sinners are punished. There is also no complete agreement as to whether hell is eternal and whether its punishment is spiritual or physical. Some Christians reject the notion of hell altogether.

The third major doctrine of Christianity is belief in the Trinity. While Christianity is monotheistic, it also holds the concept that the single, eternal God is composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This three-in-one concept of God stirred great debate in early Christianity, just as the idea that Jesus was wholly human and wholly divine at the same time did.

Added to these basic beliefs are others, not necessarily held by all denominations. Some hold a firm belief in the historical Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. Not all denominations believe in the virginity of Mary and thus in the virgin birth of Jesus. Some believe that Jesus was the messiah who was foretold by the Jews or that Jesus will return in the so-called Second Coming and will judge all humans and receive, or allow into salvation, those who are faithful. Many believe that the Bible was inspired by God but written by humans and is the first and last word of authority for Christianity. Christians believe more or less strongly in each of these doctrines, depending on their denominations.

**Sacred writings**

The Bible, composed of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, is the sacred book of Christianity. The word “Bible” is from the Greek word meaning “the books.” Christians largely believe that the Bible is the word of God as written down by men. The Old Testament is made up of parts of the Jewish Bible, the twenty-four books of the Jewish Tanakh. The Roman Catholic Church also includes parts of what is known as the Septuagint, or the Apocrypha, while the Eastern Orthodox Church includes still other Jewish texts. Protestants generally accept that the twenty-four books of the Tanakh make up the Old Testament.

The New Testament, concerned wholly with the development of Christianity, comprises twenty-seven books, originally written in Greek. These books come from the early Christian period, the earliest being the seven epistles, or letters, written by Paul between about 50
and 60 CE. Much of the rest of the New Testament was written in the succeeding fifty to one hundred years. The organization of the books in the Bible, however, does not reflect the chronology, or order in time, of its writing. Rather, the New Testament begins with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which tell of the life of Jesus and what he said and did. Then follow the Acts of the Apostles, a history of the missionary efforts of the apostles. This, in turn, is followed by the Pauline epistles (those written by Saint Paul), clarifying and enlarging on religious doctrines, and then by general epistles. In all, thirteen of the epistles have been attributed to Paul, accounting for about one-third of the New Testament. The final book of the New Testament is Revelation, which reveals the secrets of the workings of the heavenly world and foretells the Second Coming of Christ.

**Sacred symbols**

The primary symbol of Christianity is the cross, representing the suffering, Crucifixion, Atonement, and Resurrection of Jesus. The cross is a strong symbol in churches and often appears on their roofs and in homes. Its presence recalls the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The cross is also sometimes worn around the neck as jewelry.

Another early symbol of Christianity is the primitive drawing of a fish made of two curving lines, or arcs. In the early days of persecution, if two Christians met they could identify themselves to each other by this symbol. One would draw an arc in the sand, and the other would draw a reverse arc to fashion the shape of a fish. Two things make this a powerful symbol. One is the reference in the Bible to Christians as being fishers of men. The other is the fact that the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, also forms, in Greek, the first letters of the words “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” Thus, this simple symbol was a heavily encoded message.

While the cross and the fish are primary symbols of Christianity, the religion is filled with other icons and symbols. The dove is another
Christian symbol, especially when depicted with a halo of three rings. The dove is used to represent the Holy Spirit, while the three rings of the halo represents the Trinity. The image of a lamb similarly symbolizes Jesus, the “lamb of God” (*agnus Dei* in Latin).

**Worship**

The form of worship for Christians was established in the early days of the Church. At first some of the worship service was borrowed from Jewish forms, so that the faithful said prayers together, sang from psalms (biblical hymns), and read scripture, mostly from the Old Testament at first and later from Paul’s letters. As Christianity developed more of its own writings in the New Testament, the readings tended to come more and more from that section. Worship services were held on Sunday, considered the day of Jesus’s Resurrection. In addition, the early church had two main sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper, also known as Holy Communion or the Eucharist. The Lord’s Supper is a reenactment of the Last Supper, when Jesus and his disciples shared bread and wine on the night before his Crucifixion. At one time this Lord’s Supper was a community dinner after which the faithful received symbolic bread and wine. Now, it is a more symbolic gesture of drinking holy wine and eating a blessed bread wafer, representing the body and blood of Jesus.

Modern forms of worship largely follow this basic format. Services are held in churches and cathedrals, buildings that often double as community centers. Sunday school classes are often held for children to teach them church doctrine. No special clothing needs to be worn for services, though the faithful usually dress formally. Members of the congregation sometimes sit in pews, or rows of benches, and also stand at various times during the religious service or kneel with their hands held in front of them to pray. All branches of Christianity observe the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper with varying forms and meanings.

Besides baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church recognize other sacraments: confirmation, or formal acceptance of a person into the church; marriage; the taking of holy orders to become a bishop, priest, or deacon of the church; extreme unction, a rite that is meant to give spiritual comfort
to the sick and dying; and penance, during which sins are confessed and forgiven. Protestants, in general, have fewer ceremonies and rites.

**Mass** A part of the service in most branches of Christianity, however, includes a sermon or homily, a discussion by the priest or clergy about some aspect of the Bible or perhaps a topic of current social interest viewed in context with Christian teaching. In some denominations, laypersons are encouraged to speak, while in others, only the official clergy or priests conduct services. Music is often a part of services, with choirs and organ accompaniment.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Church the reenactment of the Last Supper is the central part of the worship service. Catholics call this celebration the Eucharist or Mass. In the orthodox tradition it is called the Divine Liturgy (liturgy is a public act of worship). For Anglicans it is the Holy Eucharist. In all three traditions a priest leads the service. In both Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, Sunday attendance is required of all members and is called a “holy day of obligation.”

There are two parts to the Eucharist or Divine Liturgy. The first part consists of hymns, prayers, Bible readings, and recitations of various teachings and prayers by the entire congregation. The second part is the actual celebration of the Last Supper, with the symbolic eating of a wafer and drinking of wine. Catholics also make the sign of the cross at various times during the service by placing the right hand to the forehead, to the breast and to the left shoulder and to the right shoulder, with the words: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Music and singing also forms a part of the mass.

A typical worship service in a Protestant church is led by a preacher or minister and focuses on a sermon or a teaching from the Bible. Some services are opened with prayers from the Bible. Though the Lord’s Supper, also called communion, is part of Protestant worship, it is not necessarily a weekly matter. Some Protestant denominations observe it monthly; others, every three months. The congregation sings hymns together and recites prayers, such as the Lord’s Prayer.

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**The Lord’s Prayer**

The Lord’s Prayer is one of the oldest prayers of the Christian Church. The Bible attributes it to Jesus himself, who taught it to his disciples. Versions of it appear in both the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and it continues to be used in most Christian denominations. Most Christian authorities consider it a central statement of belief.

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Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses; as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
Observances and pilgrimages

The primary holy days for Christianity are Christmas (celebrated on December 25 in the Western tradition) and Easter (celebrated in the Western tradition on the first Sunday after the first full moon in spring). Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, although it is not known for sure what time of the year he was born. Easter celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus. Although these holy days are commonly celebrated worldwide on the dates recognized by the Western tradition, in some areas, including parts of Eastern Europe and in the Middle East, they are often celebrated later. This is because some churches in the Eastern tradition continue to calculate the dates of Easter and Christmas using the older Julian calendar (established by the Roman Empire, establishing a 12-month year with 365 days) rather than the more modern Gregorian calendar (a 1582 revision of the Julian calendar).

Christmas takes its name from the old English Christes maesse, literally “Christ’s mass.” Christians have been celebrating Jesus’s birth on December 25 since at least the early fourth century. On this day, Christians attend a special mass. They will listen to a priest read the account of Jesus’s birth in the Bible and sing songs in praise. Even for Christians who do not practice their faith daily, Christmas is an occasion that will bring them back to the church.

In the weeks leading up to Easter, called Lent, Christians go without something notable in their lives to honor the sacrifice made by Christ when he died on the cross. They attend mass and hear special readings from the Bible.

Pilgrimages Pilgrimages for Christians are voluntary journeys; they are not required. People make them for a number of reasons. Some go in search of a miraculous cure. Others wish to renew their faith by visiting sites mentioned in the Bible or connected with the life of Christ. Such visits most often include the Holy Land (modern-day Israel), Jordan,
and the West Bank, where Christ was born and preached his message. Among the sites is Jerusalem, a city holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This is a site of many of the events in the life and death of Christ. The Via Dolorosa, or way of suffering, is traditionally believed to be the path Jesus followed on his way to his crucifixion. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher (tomb) is believed to be built on the spot where Jesus was crucified and near where he was buried. Also in the Holy Land is Bethlehem, birthplace of Jesus, and Nazareth, where he came of age.

Santiago de Compostela, in the northeast of Spain, has also long been a pilgrimage site for Christians. The remains of St. James, one of the original twelve disciples, are believed to be buried here. The medieval pilgrimage route of several hundred miles, the Way of Saint James, or Camino de Santiago, is still walked today by the faithful. Pilgrims also visit the church in the city and pray to St. James, hoping for a miracle to solve their problems or cure their illnesses. There are many holy shrines around the world associated with curing powers or with miracles. Lourdes, in southern France, is one such place, and Fatima, in Portugal, is another. Both are believed to be places where Mary, the mother of Jesus, appeared to young people who had prayed to her.

Throughout Europe there are shrines and cathedrals that have special importance for Christians. Many Catholics take a trip to Rome to visit Vatican City, the headquarters of their church and residence of the pope. Protestants often visit the Church of Martin Luther in Wittenberg, Germany. This is considered the center of the beginnings of Protestantism. Great cathedrals such as Notre Dame in Paris and the Cologne Cathedral in Germany draw millions of visitors, both religious and non-religious, each year. Such cathedrals, built over generations (and sometimes over centuries), represent for Christians a visible sign of belief and faith, and often hold relics of famous early Christians. Nonreligious visitors can appreciate the cathedrals for their beauty and art.

**Everyday living**

Many Christian denominations practice fasting (cutting food intake back to one full meal a day) and abstinence (avoidance of meat for the day) as part of their observance of holidays. During Lent, for instance, Roman Catholics are asked to fast on Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent) and Good Friday (the Friday before Easter). Certain days are also set
Christianity

One of several rites of passage in Christianity, baptism symbolizes that a person is a Christian. It is often carried out with a newborn child, whose head is splashed with water from a shallow pool before a supportive group of family and friends. AP IMAGES.

aside for abstinence. In the Roman Catholic tradition, each Friday during Lent is declared a day of abstinence, when the faithful are asked to avoid eating meat. The Church does not recognize fish as a type of meat, so observant Catholics may eat fish on these days.

There is no specific dress code or diet for Christians. The clergy of various branches, denominations, and orders do, however, have distinctive clothing. This includes the priest’s collar, the robes of some monks, the black attire and headpiece that nuns (women who have devoted their lives to God) used to wear, and the distinctive robes and circular hats worn in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In the Western tradition, the pope, the cardinals, and the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church wear hats or caps called mitres that are presented to them when they enter into their offices. Mitres are related to the ancient crown of the Roman emperors in Constantinople and are a sign of the authority these people hold.

Rites of passage Major stages of life, or rites of passage, are celebrated by the Christian church. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions make these rites into central sacraments. Protestant churches also celebrate them. The first rite of passage comes at birth with baptism. Since baptism is a sign that a person belongs to Christ and is a Christian,
the ceremony is also called a christening. The newborn usually has a few drops of water splashed on its head or is immersed in shallow pool. An official of the church, such as a priest or minister, carries out the ceremony, while saying “I Baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This service is attended by friends and family and by persons chosen by the parents to be godparents, who promise to help raise the child as a Christian. In some Protestant traditions, though, children are not baptized until their parents and other church members feel they are old enough to understand the commitment they are making in the ceremony.

The next major rite of passage for Christians is confirmation, or joining the church as an adult. This service basically “confirms” the promises of faith made at baptism. Some groups that do not practice infant baptism, such as Baptists and Pentecostals, have a separate adult baptism for this ceremony. Children in the Catholic religion receive penance and First Holy Communion at age seven or eight, which is considered the “age of reason.” Confirmation follows because they are now believed able to understand the promises made at their baptisms.

Before the service, candidates for confirmation usually study their religion in small groups. At the service, the young person answers a series of questions about his or her faith and promises to reject evil. Then, in the Catholic tradition, the bishop puts his hand on the person’s shoulder, says the person’s name (there may be a special confirmation name after a saint), and traces the sign of the cross on the forehead with holy oil to show this is a child of god. Methodist ministers also put a hand on the candidates. In the Baptist church everyone watching the confirmation extends his or her right hand. This shows acceptance and fellowship of the group. This ceremony formally accepts the candidate into the religion.

Weddings are another rite of passage in Christianity, as they are in many other religions. Christian weddings are usually celebrated in a church, but they can also be held at homes or even outside in parks or at the beach. Inside or outside, the groom usually stands in front of the minister or priest performing the service. Then the bride’s father will bring the bride to the groom, symbolically handing over his daughter to her new husband. A minister or priest generally reads from standard wedding vows in which the bride and groom promise to be true to one another in all circumstances. Many couples write their own vows, or
wedding promises. The couples also exchange rings, which they wear on the fourth finger of the left hand.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church the ceremony most often follows the traditional two-part model. First comes the betrothal, or engagement service, which is followed by the marriage service. In the betrothal service, the priest first blesses the rings the couple exchange, and places them on the fourth fingers of their right hands. Later comes the marriage ceremony. The priest gives the man and woman lighted candles to hold, signifying that the light of God will follow them through their married lives. A wedding crown, made of flowers or an actual crown of gold and jewels, is placed on the groom and then on the bride, and the two drink from a common cup to signify the life they will be sharing. Portions of the Bible, including the letters of Paul, are read at these services.

Finally, Christianity also provides for believers at their time of death. For Christians, death is not an ending, but a beginning. Christians believe that there is a life after death. This is stated clearly in the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints; the Forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and Life everlasting.” For Christians, death is a passage to eternal life. Just before death, if possible, ministers or priests will give a final sacrament to the believer. This is called the anointing (touching with oil) of the sick. The priest or minister touches the dying person with holy oil and says, “Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up. Amen.” Catholics also confess their sins to the priest so that they can go to heaven without waiting in purgatory.

After death, all Christian traditions follow a similar routine. There is a public announcement of the death, the body is prepared, there are funeral services at a church, a procession of cars to the cemetery, and then a burial, where the body is placed in a coffin into the ground, or a cremation, where the body is burned and the ashes placed in a container and later buried or scattered. Often, there is a viewing of the body. This is usually held at the funeral home after the body has been embalmed, or preserved with chemicals. The coffin lid may be open so that mourners, those saddened by the death, can see the dead person one last time. Funeral services include prayers, the singing of hymns, and speeches, or eulogies, in honor of the dead person. In Catholic tradition, there is a vigil service (where people come to grieve over the dead
person) at the funeral home or church. This is followed several days later by a funeral mass in the church, and then another ceremony, the rite of committal, when the body is buried.

In Eastern Orthodox tradition, the vigil service is called *parastasis* or *panikhida*, and is a time for thinking about death. The Eastern funeral service includes hymns, chants, and Bible readings. Burial is preferred but the Orthodox Church allows cremation if the law of the country requires it. Christian funerals are usually followed by a meal at the home of the deceased or dead person. This is a chance for friends and relatives to express their sadness over the death and release their emotions.

**Confession** Another rite that has an ongoing role in the lives of Catholics and Orthodox alike is the sacrament of confession. Confession, also

*Christian worship services are held on Sunday, considered the day of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. Christian influences are particularly strong in the West, where the work week and holidays are often set around important dates in the Christian calendar.*

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called penance, is a sacrament through which sins can be repented and absolved, or forgiven. For Catholics confession is officially called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Reconcile means to restore, and by confessing, Catholics believe they restore their relationship with God. This can be done sitting face-to-face with a priest and telling the sins one has committed. Confession also happens at regular times in a confessional, a kind of booth where the priest is shielded from the layperson by a screen.

Sins are of two types, minor, or venal, and major sins, or mortal. Examples of venal sins are gossiping, rudeness, and cursing. Examples of mortal sins are sex outside of marriage and divorce. The priest will forgive the sins and give the believer religious duties to perform, such as reciting the Lord’s Prayer many times. Catholics are required to confess twice each year. However, for Protestants, who believe that no intermediary is needed between humans and God, such confession of sins is a private matter. Anglicans (Episcopalian) have a voluntary private rite of confession similar to that of Catholics, but not all members of the faith use it. General confession during Holy Communion is more common. For all Christians such periodic confession is an important part of the faith.

**Christianity’s influences**

Christianity has been one of the most influential religions in world history. It has been a dominant force not only in theology, or the formal study of religion, but also in education, art and architecture, in the structure of Western society, and even in politics. The Christian church has, in large part, shaped societies in Europe and the Americas.

The very rhythms of life in the West are attuned to Christianity. For example, the workweek typically begins with Monday and ends with Friday or Saturday, with Sunday being a day of rest. The occasions of Christmas and Easter likewise shape annual rhythms. The concept of the nation and state grew with the Western church. The pope, at times, has proved a mighty leader of the West. Such leadership did not always result in the best outcomes: the long and bloody history of the Crusades, for example, and the harsh years of the Inquisition, are not high points of Christian history.

With its emphasis on helping the poor, the weak, and the ill, Christianity has led missions around the world to aid the sick and feed the hungry. Christians worldwide have spearheaded programs to bring social
justice (the idea that all people should have equal opportunities) and fair treatment to people who are oppressed, or mistreated, by their governments. Christians have also played an important part in opposing war and promoting global peace.

Christianity has had a long tradition in education. Some of the earliest universities in Europe were founded by the Christian church. Some of the greatest medieval thinkers, such as Italian Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), advanced philosophy through their close examination of religious questions. Christianity still plays a large role in education in the United States, where many schools from kindergarten through university are run by faith-based institutions. Many fundamentalists (people who believe in the Bible as a complete and accurate historical record and statement of prophecy) question scientific theories that conflict with Christian theology, such as the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), and put forward alternative theories to describe the way that life on Earth has evolved.

**Influence on the arts** Perhaps one of the most visible areas of Christian influence has been in literature. The Bible stands as one of the earliest and most popular texts in the world. Writers such as Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) have found inspiration in Christianity’s doctrines. His *Divine Comedy* describes the poet’s journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven. England’s Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1400) wrote his *Canterbury Tales* about a group of pilgrims traveling to a shrine, creating one of the classics of literature in any language.

Since the time of Dante and Chaucer authors of all nationalities have found further inspiration in Christianity and the Bible. Modern examples of writers influenced by their Christian beliefs include the poet T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. His poems and plays criticize the material world that has forgotten spirituality. The novels of the Englishman Graham Greene (1904–1991), such as *The Power and the Glory*, were strongly influenced by his Catholicism.

Christianity has also had great influence in art and architecture. Art in the Middle Ages was primarily religious in theme. Italian painters Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) made religious themes the subject of their most famous works. Michelangelo is remembered for his famous paintings of scenes from Genesis on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, part of the Vatican (the head of the Catholic
Church) in Rome. Leonardo’s fresco, or wall painting, in Milan, Italy, called the Last Supper is equally famous for its depiction of Christ and his disciples. It was not until the sixteenth century that Western painting began to move away from Christian themes.

Architecture was also strongly influenced by Christianity. During the late Middle Ages builders began designing and building Gothic (a style of architecture) churches that feature soaring vaults and pointed arches that make the faithful look heavenward. Western music also was heavily influenced by Christianity. Much of the work of the German composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), for example, was created for church services. From literature to architecture to music, Western art would not be what it is without the influence of Christianity.

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Confucianism

Confucianism is most simply defined as a philosophy of life based on the teachings of the Chinese scholar Confucius (c. 551–c. 479 BCE). A philosophy is an approach to understanding the values and reality of existence. The religion emphasizes love for humanity, the value of learning, and devotion to family, including ancestors. Confucianism teaches that there is a natural order to society, which relies on proper relationships. If these proper relationships are maintained through traditional rituals and etiquette, or *li* (good manners), society will also be well ordered. Another important aspect of Confucianism is the concept of *ren* (also spelled *jen*), or social virtue and empathy, the ability to feel for and sympathize with others.

In its early development Confucianism was primarily an ethical system, describing how to lead a good, moral life. After his death Confucius’s sayings were written down by his followers. His teachings increased in popularity until the time of the Han Dynasty, when Confucianism became China’s official state religion. (A Chinese dynasty is the period of reign by a ruling family, in this case the Han family [206 BCE–220 CE].) Although Confucius himself spoke little about spiritual matters, focusing instead on how to live a proper, moral life, later scholars added more mystical, or spiritual, concepts during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE). They borrowed from such Chinese religions as Daoism and Chan, or Zen, Buddhism. The religion remained the basis for ethical behavior in China for more than two thousand years. It also gained followers in Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan.

Scholars still differ on whether or not to call Confucianism a religion or a philosophy. Many followers of Confucius’s teachings refer to their practices as a moral code or world view and avoid labeling it a religion. Although many followers of Confucianism practice rituals such as veneration (a form of worship) of ancestors, belief in a god, and sacrifice to spirits, these practices date from before the time of Confucius and...
by themselves do not make Confucianism a religion. In a broader sense, however, Confucianism has much in common with religions: it is a belief system that promotes morality (a code of behavior), that has a specific view of humanity’s place in the universe, and that guides believers in their everyday lives.

In the early twenty-first century there were a reported 5.6 million followers in China alone. Because Confucianism is not an organized religion, however, it is difficult to count its followers. (An organized religion is one with a formal structure of authority and membership.) Confucian ideas have entered all aspects of Chinese society, and most Chinese recognize and practice some of the aspects of the system, including its emphasis on family and respect for elders. In that respect, much of the 1.3 billion people of mainland China still follow the fundamentals of Confucianism.

**WORDS TO KNOW**

- **benevolence**: The tendency to do good and to be kind to others.
- **canon**: The official, sacred texts of a religion.
- **de**: Political power that is the result of a ruler’s virtue and honesty.
- **dynasty**: A sequence of rulers from the same family.
- **ethics**: The study of moral values and rules or a guide to such values and rules.
- **etiquette**: Proper behavior; good manners.
- **filial piety**: The respect and devotion a child shows his or her parents.
- **Five Classics**: The original texts used by Confucius in his practices and teachings: Liji, Shijing, Shujing, Chunqui, and Yijing.
- **Four Books**: The most prominent of Confucian sacred texts, established by Zhu Xi: the Analects, the Mencius, Da Xue (Great Learning), and Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean).
- **junzi**: A gentleman or superior man.
- **li**: The rules of behavior a person must follow to reach the Confucian ideal of correct living.
- **metaphysical**: Having to do with the philosophical study of the nature of reality and existence.
- **philosophy**: The study of morals and reality by logical reasoning to gain a greater understanding of the world.
- **ren**: Empathy, the ability to feel for and sympathize with others; the highest Confucian ideal.
- **Tian**: Heaven, or the principle of ordering the universe.
- **wen**: The arts of music, poetry, and painting.
History and development

Confucius is the most famous philosopher in Chinese history. He was born Kong Qiu (or Kong Chiu; the family name is Kong) in about 551 BCE. (There are several other variations on his name, but he is most commonly known by the Latinized version, Confucius.) His parents were Shuliang-He and Yan-Zhensai and his birthplace was the city of Qufu in modern-day Shandong province. His father died before he was three, and Confucius was raised by his mother. Although he was poor, Confucius determined by the time he was fifteen that he would become a scholar, or a person who devotes his or her life to learning and study. As a young man he held various minor offices, such as keeping accounts of sheep and cattle. He also married early, to Qiguan-shi, and had, by some accounts, both a son and a daughter. His daughter later married one of Confucius’s closest disciples, or followers.

He focused his scholarly studies on the ancient Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BCE). Confucius lived during a time of great social disorder and uncertainty. He wanted to restore order to Chinese society and saw the Shang Dynasty, with its well-defined social classes, court and family etiquette (proper behavior) and rituals, and orderly government, as an ideal model. His studies of the past led him to believe that the problems of society had much to do with the quality of leadership, or lack of leadership, in government. Confucius was also disturbed by the new sense of individualism that was gaining popularity in Chinese culture. (Individualism focuses on the needs of the individual rather than the good of the community.) As a remedy to the social problems of his time Confucius began to define a set of principles based on traditional Chinese culture and its heavy reliance on the family as the foundation of a well-ordered society.

Confucius hoped to put into practice his new theories about the family. He also wanted to teach rulers to be informed and virtuous. In order to spread his teachings Confucius opened a school to help young men to learn ethical leadership skills. After the age of fifty, he traveled widely for thirteen years, along with a small group of disciples, teaching his doctrines (set of beliefs) of proper etiquette and ritual to maintain a correct life. He pleaded with rulers to follow his principles, but received little response. He escaped assassins and near-starvation. When he returned to his home state of Lu, he continued to teach his followers, who came from all social and economic classes, until his death in 479 BCE.
China during the time of Confucius

Confucius set out to reform government so that it could better look after the people. His philosophy was practical; he wanted to develop a system of ethics, of daily good behavior, by which people could regulate their lives. Confucius differed from other thinkers of the time, the Legalist, or Realist School, who wanted to organize society from the top down. Legalists believed in controlling society through threats and strict punishment. For them, laws were the organizing force of a society. People were at heart ignorant and had to be controlled by a complex set of rules and regulations.

Confucius, however, wanted to reform society from the bottom up, beginning with the family. He reasoned that if people learned respect for one another and love, trust, and loyalty within the family, then these relationships would extend beyond the family to society as a whole. Thus he placed great emphasis on five primary relationships that reach throughout society: those between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder and younger brother, between friends, and between ruler and subject. All these relationships were ruled by the idea of respect that a son must give to a parent, or what is called filial piety (xiao), and the loyalty (zhong) that a subject gives to his or her ruler. Women consistently ranked below men in the model hierarchy, or ladder of authority: A wife owed respect to her husband, sons (and daughters) to their mothers as well as their fathers, and so on down to the wives of the sons, who owed respect to everyone. The ideal ruler, for Confucius, should be the model gentleman, who rules by de, or political power achieved through virtue and honesty.

The ideas for Confucianism grew out of a troubled time in China. The centralized power of the emperor was breaking down, and society in general was suffering because of it. Confucius was born during a period known as the Zhou Dynasty. This dynasty lasted from the eleventh century BCE to the third century BCE. In 771 BCE, however, under pressure from invading tribes from Central Asia, the Zhou kings had to move their seat of government eastward to what is modern Loyang. The next several hundred years, 771–401 BCE, are known as the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history. Although the power of the central government was failing, this period was very rich in terms of philosophy and political theory (the organization and structure of government). In addition to Confucius, these years also saw the rise of the teachings of Laozi (b. c. 604 BCE; also known as Lao Tzu), the founder of Daoism in around the seventh century BCE.
All through this period China was divided into warring states. The Zhou emperors never became strong enough to unite the country or to control the warring feudal lords (members of prominent families who made their living from plots of land, called fiefs, assigned to them by the emperor). Invasions came from the west and south, and small kingdoms banded together for a time for mutual protection and then broke apart. It was a dangerous and lawless time, and Confucius, as well as other philosophers, looked for a way to make society better and more stable.

The period after the time of Confucius is called the Warring States Period (401–256 BCE) because of the violence and disruption of the time. The work of the philosopher Mengzi (also spelled Meng Tzu), known in the West as Mencius (c. 371–c. 289 BCE), further developed Confucianism. Mengzi comes from the Warring States Period. Because so many philosophers were at work, the period from 551 to 233 BCE is also referred to as the Period of the One Hundred Schools, or systems of thought.

**The slow spread of Confucianism** Confucius formed a school and had followers, teaching mainly through a question-and-answer technique and by providing stories from real life that had larger meanings. When Confucius died, his followers wrote down his sayings and teachings in the Lun Yu, also known as the Analects. Confucianism did not gain a large following very quickly. One reason for this is that Confucius took principles from an older age of Chinese civilization, when family ties, etiquette, and ritual regulated society. Because such traditions and rituals were breaking down in his time, Confucius became something of an anthropologist (a scientist who studies human behavior) of Chinese culture and studied the ancient ways. He then brought them back into Chinese life as a system for good behavior. This was a difficult task, for such traditions are hard to learn. Confucius’s attempts to reintroduce these beliefs were tasks that took longer than his lifetime.

Another reason Confucianism was slow to grow is that the generations following Confucius had to deal with the Warring States Period, a bloody era when little kingdoms battled one another for land and power. Following the death of Confucius, his school split into eight different schools, each of which claimed to be the authentic, official Confucian school. Confucianism also had competitors in the thoughts of such philosophers as Mozi (also spelled Mo Tzu and Micius; c. 470–391 BCE) and
Yang Zhu (440–c. 360 BCE). For Mozi, the problem with society was that people loved too selectively rather than giving their love universally, meaning to love everyone. Yang Zhu, meanwhile, preached a form of individualism and the promotion of self-interest.

Becomes state religion under Emperor Wu In 206 BCE the Han Dynasty began. By this time Confucianism already played a major role in the political life of the nation. The emperor Wù, who lived from 156 to 87 BCE, made Confucianism the official state religion. In 136 BCE Emperor Wù established what became the Imperial University, solely for the study of Confucian Classics, or the Five Classics. These are texts mostly from before the time of Confucius that were adapted to Confucianism in five different subject areas: metaphysical or spiritual, political, poetic, social, and historical. In less than seventy-five years enrollment at the university had grown to three thousand students.

It was also under Emperor Wù that Confucian books became the basic texts for all levels of education and that they were used for examinations for the civil service, once the reserve of privilege and family connections. Confucianism changed all that, basing entry into the bureaucracy, or government services, on merit (performance) rather than birth. By the midpoint of the Han Dynasty, in the year 58 CE, Confucianism had made such inroads into the state that government schools were required to make sacrifices to Confucius. The Five Classics were later inscribed on stone tablets for all to see.

Spiritual aspect develops Further development of Confucian principles came with the work of Dong Zhongshu (also called Tung Zhong-shu;
c. 179–c. 104 BCE), who introduced more spiritual elements into Confucianism. For Dong, human actions have results not only in the physical world but also in the spiritual world. He merged theories of spiritual forces from many different schools of thought, including native religions ranging from shamanism (belief in powerful nature spirits that a shaman, or holy man, can reach) to Daoism into his explanation of the Confucian way, emphasizing a love of the natural or cosmic order. In so doing, he further justified the role of the emperor as the living link between Tian and Earth, or the Son of Heaven.

Not all Confucians agreed with the direction taken in Dong’s philosophy, but the belief system continued to wield great power throughout the Han period. Soon all public schools in China were offering regular sacrifices to Confucius; the Imperial University enrolled thirty thousand students, and temples in honor of Confucius were built throughout the land. Together with the emperor and the godlike personages of Heaven and Earth, Confucius was fast becoming one of the most respected symbols of power and authority in China. Later, in 492 CE, he was made a saint; by the eleventh century he was raised to the rank of an emperor; and in the early twentieth century he was made a god.

Although spiritual matters in China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) were left largely to Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism coexisted well with them. In part this was because Confucianism deals primarily with how a person reaches personal perfection in this lifetime. By the time of the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), Confucianism had become central to Chinese tradition, just as Confucius had planned, but it had still another major leader to come. Zhu Xi (also spelled Chu Hsi; 1130–1200) helped Confucianism become a religion with not only an ethical program but also a metaphysical, or spiritual, one.

What came out of this work was a philosophy known as neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi added four more sacred texts to the Confucian canon, or group of accepted scriptures, including the Analects, Mencius, Doctrine of the Mean, and the Great Learning. These Four Books then became the central texts studied in school and in preparation for civil service examinations. Neo-Confucianism gained a higher status than both Buddhism and Daoism in Chinese society. It analyzed and interpreted the great works of the Confucian tradition. Although neo-Confucianism did build up the spiritual side of Confucianism, Zhu Xi also emphasized the rational and practical side of the religion. This encouraged future scholars to focus on law, politics, and economics.
Confucianism

Confucius developed his system of thought, later called Confucianism, during a time when China was in great unrest. He taught that respect, etiquette (proper behavior), and order would help bring about a stable society. HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES.

Spreads throughout Asia Following the development of neo-Confucianism, Confucianism spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and eventually became the dominant intellectual force throughout East Asia. The royal court of Korea accepted Confucianism by the fifteenth century, and by the seventeenth century the philosophy had entered Japan. Confucianism has continued to grow and be reworked by new scholars in new eras. For many, Confucianism reached its height in China during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). Qing rulers described themselves as great examples of Confucian kingship and also used the belief system as a form of control.
In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries China became increasingly open to Western influence, or influence from the nations of Europe and the Americas. As foreign powers invaded China, seeking influence and increased trade, Western ways and ideas also crept into Chinese society, making many people begin to question the age-old Confucian tradition of the importance of the group over the individual. Christian missionaries, people who preached Christianity among non-Christian people, also increased their presence during this period. Indeed, Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century first spread the words of Confucius to the West. These same missionaries gave the Chinese philosopher and wise man the name by which he is known in the West, Confucius.

Western ideas, including Leninism and Marxism (forms of communism, an economic and political system that emphasizes communal ownership of property and political power rooted in the working classes), took root in China. In 1949 the communist People’s Republic of China was created. The leaders of this movement, including Mao Zedong (also known as Mao Tse-tung; 1893–1976), suppressed Confucianism as much as they could, arguing that it was a belief system that held the people in chains. For the communists, Confucianism, with its emphasis on tradition and ritual, was an artifact of the past that would not work in the ideal communist future. Confucianism, however, has survived and remains a central tradition at all levels of Chinese society.

Sects and schisms
There were eight distinct schools of thought that developed shortly after the death of Confucius. His most prominent follower, Mencius, worked

Mencius
More than one hundred years after the death of Confucius, the second most influential figure of the religion was born. Mencius (372–289 BCE) preached a philosophy of benevolence, or kindness and caring, towards others. For Mencius, human nature is essentially good and perfectible. He also argued for introducing a class of scholar-officials, which ultimately led to the Chinese civil service, a class of employees who served the emperor in administering the empire, the longest-established human institution on record.

Mencius criticized the philosophy of Mozi and the Mohists for their indiscriminate (random or without limits) love for all people. For him, it was not right that a stranger should be entitled to the same degree of love as a parent. Equally, he found that the individualism of Yang Zhu led to political disorder. Instead, Mencius felt that the beliefs of Confucius could be used to train the common people and the ruling class. He taught that kindness was the most effective way for rulers to maintain their power.

Mencius also taught that by fully understanding one’s own heart and nature, a person can come to know Tian, or Heaven, a Chinese concept that there is a power or moral law that drives the universe. Mencius helped develop moral Confucianism to its highest form. His teachings were written down in a text called the Mengzi, also known as the Mencius.

Another follower of Confucius, Xun Zi (also spelled Hsun Tzu; c. 300–230 BCE) further developed Confucianism by emphasizing, in opposition to Mencius, his theory that human nature is not necessarily good and that citizens must be socialized by education and a continual quest for knowledge and wisdom. For Xun Zi, the real nobleman was one who keeps his instincts and desires in check for the public good.
from the same fundamental belief in the natural goodness of the human spirit. However, after Mencius, Xun Zi disagreed with this position, arguing that human nature was evil and that a human’s desires and passions had to be held in check by a strong state. The work of Xun Zi helped develop the Legalist school of thought, which was an offshoot of Confucianism. This school believed that laws are the only things that keep society from breaking down into chaos.

When Confucianism became the official state religion during the Han Dynasty, Scholastic Confucianism became the main branch of the religion. This school was based on the study of classic texts. But because there were different versions of such texts, Scholastic Confucianism soon divided into the New Text School and the Old Text School. The New Text School had a more spiritual and religious interpretation of Confucianism than did the more realistic, human-oriented Old Text School.

The next major Confucian school was neo-Confucianism, as developed by Zhu Xi during the Song Dynasty. This school incorporated bits of Buddhism and Daoism and also added new sacred texts to the religious canon, shifting the emphasis from classics of Chinese literature to more contemporary writings. A further reformed type of Confucianism appeared in China in the nineteenth century. It attempted to raise Confucius to the status of a divine being, like Jesus Christ (c. 6 BCE–c. 33 CE) in the Christian tradition. In the twentieth century, Confucianism lost its place as the official state religion and no longer formed the core of the educational program. Still, new schools of thought were developing, including New Confucianism, which led, in turn, to Modern Neo-Idealistic Confucianism and Modern Neo-Rationalistic Confucianism.

Outside China, there have also been distinct schools of Confucianism. In Korea the tradition is known as Yi Confucianism, and was built on the work of Zhu Xi. In Japan, Zhu Xi’s form of neo-Confucianism was introduced in the seventeenth century. There its followers reworked many of the principles of the Japanese religion Shinto in Confucian terms. The Japanese warrior class, known as the samurai class, adopted elements of Confucianism for their own code of conduct, called *bushido*.

**Basic beliefs**

Confucianism is a deliberate tradition based on five main principles. The first and most important principle is *ren*. This highest of virtues is similar to what the Western traditional calls empathy, or being able to feel what
others feel. Ren involves being able to feel love for another and realizing the dignity of human life. Ren also leads to the concept of reciprocity, or consideration for others. Confucius states in the Analects, “What you do not want yourself, do not do to others,” an idea that was later echoed in the Christian saying “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The second major principle of Confucianism is junzi (also spelled chun-tze), which translates as the “son of a ruler.” This concept characterizes the superior man, or the perfect gentleman. Such a person displays generosity of spirit, confidence (without arrogance or pride), openness, and honesty. The superior man is a moral guide to the rest of society. Furthermore, the junzi is the ideal partner in any relationship.

The third principle of Confucius’s tradition is li, or ritual and right conduct. This includes the idea of propriety, or the way in which things should be done. But li is not simply a ritual-like sacrifice to the spirits of nature and ancestors. Ritual in this sense is used to mean a whole set of morally binding social customs, or rules of decent and polite behavior, in a wide variety of circumstances. Here tradition determines just what is right and wrong in a particular social interaction. In addition, Confucius taught the Rectification of Names principle, which means that a father should behave like a father, a son like a son, and a ruler like a ruler. This means that people must know what both the words and these social roles imply, in order to act within proper bounds. Li also is important in the Doctrine of the Mean, which teaches that life should be a balance between extremes.

Li is also important to the Five Relationships, which Confucius defined as father and son, older brother and younger brother, husband and wife, older friend and younger friend, and ruler and subject (and, by extension, teacher and student and many other similar relationships). These relationships are strictly defined in Confucianism, with age (and gender) determining respect. With a husband and wife, the wife should
be supportive. When a ruler is kind, the subject should be loyal. Similar conditions are placed on friendships and sibling relationships. Three of these five relationships deal with family, the most important element in society for Confucius and for Chinese society over thousands of years. Thus, li also includes filial piety, the idea that children should respect and honor their parents.

The fourth principle of Confucianism is de (also spelled te), political power that is the result of a ruler’s virtue (goodness) and honesty. For Confucius, physical might was not the proper way to rule. Rather, a ruler should gain the support and loyalty of the people through his own virtuous behavior. The state depends on three things, Confucius said: a strong military, economic well-being, and the faith and trust of the people. The last was the most important. Without the confidence of the people, the state would fall. Leadership without virtue and honesty, Confucius said, is not true leadership. Rulers and kings need to control themselves first; they must rule their own passions before they can rule their people. They should be devoted to the public welfare.

The fifth Confucian principle is wen, which deals with the artistic side of a culture. These include art, poetry, and music, activities highly valued in Confucian thinking. Confucius believed that art is an excellent instrument for moral education and inspiration. The arts enrich not only a person but also the state, by making others want to follow the example.

The five principles of ren, junzi, li, de, and wen were the central points of Confucius’s program to reintroduce tradition to China. He taught that by following proper behavior, people would learn self-restraint, which would make for a peaceful and well-ordered world. The Confucian idea of ritual was not the empty performance of tired tradition, but an acceptance of the importance of ceremony in one’s life. By performing such rituals and behaving properly, one’s life becomes ordered. Such good manners would then extend beyond one’s family and friends and into the larger world.

**Importance of education** Confucius also emphasized the need for education. Real understanding, he believed, comes only through careful study. For Confucius, even those born in a low social class can rise through education and hard work. One of the new ideas introduced in Confucian thought was that of meritocracy, or social position based on performance rather than birthright. Through education in morality, government, and the arts, humans could improve themselves. Confucius, as a
teacher, also emphasized the Six Arts: ritual, music, archery, chariot riding, calligraphy, and computation, or mathematics. For him, however, the highest form of education was a moral education.

During his lifetime Confucius gathered together the core elements of the Confucian system. Confucius always claimed to be a transmitter, or spreader of news, rather than a creator. He was presenting many concepts and principles that had long been valued in Chinese society but had fallen out of favor over the years of social disorder and lawlessness. Collecting and utilizing traditions such as filial devotion, loyalty, respect for tradition and ritual, and an emphasis on knowing one’s role in the world, he transformed past ideas into a new system. His emphasis on the Five Virtues of benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, and sincerity were blended into guidelines for right living. For Confucius and his followers, right doing became right being. This was as true for the common person as it was for emperors. Confucius thought that by educating rulers in the Confucian way, all would be well with society. He sums up his bottom-up philosophy in this saying from the Analects:

If there be righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character.
If there be beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home.
If there be harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation.
If there be order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.

Sacred writings

There are three different groups of books that form the Confucian canon of sacred texts. Among these three groups there are overlaps, with certain texts being included on all three lists. The most prominent books in the official Confucian sacred texts are the Four Books, which were established as the primary texts of Confucianism in the eleventh century by the scholar Zhu Xi. They have remained the most important Confucian texts into the modern era. Zhu Xi’s texts include the Lun Yu, or Analects, sayings and teachings of Confucius written down by his disciples beginning about seventy years after his death; the Mencius, the teachings of Mencius; the Da Xue (also spelled Ta Hsueh), or Great Learning, written between 500 and 200 BCE; and the Zhongyong (also spelled Chung Yung), or Doctrine of the Mean, which is more mystical in its themes than the other books. The last two texts were adapted from chapters in an earlier book, the Liji (also spelled Li-chi), or Record of Rites, a description of religious practices from the eighth to the fifth century BCE.
The Liji and four other texts form what is known as the Five Classics, the original texts used by Confucius in his practices and teaching. In addition to the Liji, the Five Classics include the Shijing (also spelled Shih-ching), or Classic of Odes, a compilation of 305 songs from the Chou Dynasty; the Shujing (also spelled Shu-ching), or the Classic of Documents, a historical record dating back to the third millennium BCE; the Chunqiu (also spelled Ch’un-ch’iu), or Spring and Autumn Annals, a chronicle of the political and diplomatic doings of the Lu state during the time of Confucius and most probably writing by Confucius himself during his final years; and the Yijing, or Classic of Changes (sometimes referred to as the Book of Changes), the famous book of prophecy that uses sixty-four hexagrams, or patterns of six lines, that are interpreted as omens of coming events.

The texts that compile the Thirteen Classics were developed during the Tang and Song dynasties, after the introduction of the Five Classics and before the adoption of the Four Books. They are made up of the Five Classics as well as the Analects and the Mencius. In addition, these texts include three commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals and five other texts, including the Xiaojing (also spelled Hsiao-ching), or Classic of Filial Piety, and the Erh Ya, or Near to Correctness.

Perhaps the most important single Confucian text is the Analects. The book is filled with quotations from Confucius, including “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”; “I hear, I know. I see, I remember. I do, I understand”; and “Choose a job that you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” The Analects also provides important biographical information about Confucius, for he uses himself as an example in stories of everyday living.

**Sacred symbols**

Symbolism in Confucianism is rich and varied. In the religion’s early days the Five Classics themselves were taken as symbols for the followers of Confucius. Since Confucian texts are written in Chinese characters, many of the characters or words themselves have become important symbols of Confucianism for the Chinese faithful. For example, the Chinese character for ren, the idea of benevolence and empathy, is perhaps the most important single principle of Confucianism. It is made up of two other characters: that for “person” and that for
“two.” The combined character symbolizes the relationship between two individuals, a principle at the heart of the Confucian belief system. Another important symbol for harmony and righteousness comes from a stylized version of the Chinese word for “happiness,” written twice and connected by a line.

Confucianism also shares the Yin-Yang symbol with Daoism. This symbol represents the connectedness of opposing forces in the universe. It is a circle divided into two equal and curving parts, one black and one white, with a black dot in the white section and a white dot in the black section. This represents the two types of forces in the universe, the male or sunlike yang force and the female or receptive moon force of the yin. The symbol shows these two forces in balance and harmony.
Confucianism

Worship

Confucianism has no clergy and no traditional houses of worship. Instead, it is incorporated into every aspect of a person’s life. In the modern world perhaps the idea of ancestor worship or respect comes closest to a form of Confucian worship. Many Chinese and other believers have shrines to dead relatives in their homes. At these home shrines and altars, tablets listing all the ancestors’ names, as well as pictures of deceased relatives are kept. At special times throughout the year, and for some families on a daily basis, special food and drink are offered to the pictures of these departed ones by the father or oldest male of the family. This is done as a way to honor the deceased, as well as a way to remember those who have died. The neo-Confucian book Family Rituals was the primary source for how to conduct such family rites. It governed the rituals of filial piety toward ancestors from the thirteenth to the twentieth century not only in China, but also in Japan, Vietnam, and South Korea.

More public rituals sometimes occur at the Confucian temples built throughout China and East Asia. Although many of these temples have been converted into museums, offerings are still sometimes made in the spring and fall. Most prominent among these temples are the Temple of Confucius in his hometown of Qufu and the Temple of Confucius at Beijing. Outside of China, the ancient rites and traditions of Confucianism are still maintained at places such as the Confucian Temple of Literature in Hanoi, Vietnam; Chongmo, or the Royal Ancestral Shrine in South Korea; and the Confucian shrine at the National Confucian Academy in Seoul, South Korea. For example, at Chongmo on the first Sunday in May, people make offerings of wine, food, and incense to the royal spirits. This ceremony, carried out according to the Record of Rites, also involves dance and music. The Confucian shrine in Seoul and those around the countryside of South Korea are sites for honoring Confucius on his birthday, celebrated in late September or early October.

Confucian temples were once the sites of many offering ceremonies. Sometimes these were led by the emperor himself. For example, the emperor would perform the winter solstice (the shortest day of winter) ceremony in Beijing to celebrate the return of positive yang energy, wearing blue robes embroidered with dragons. At the Confucian temple, he would light a pile of sticks set onto the circular-shaped altar, signifying the shape of heaven. The rising smoke from this fire summoned the god Shangdi, the Supreme Lord, to the ceremony. The meat from a young bull would be served as an offering, all accompanied to the
music of gongs, flutes, and stones beaten like drums. The emperor would also lead the ceremony at the Temple of Agriculture at the beginning of the planting season, plowing a furrow in a sacred field.

Confucians also practice a form of meditation known as “quiet sitting,” which is described in the book Great Learning. Quiet sitting is much like meditation in religions such as Buddhism and Daoism and like them involves a clearing of the mind. Confucians may meditate on a moral lesson or simply focus on their breathing. Unlike meditation in Daoism and Buddhism, though, quiet sitting is not an attempt at reaching harmony with a greater reality. Instead, it is considered a preparation for learning and understanding.

**Observances and pilgrimages**

The primary festival for Confucians is the birthday of Confucius, celebrated on the twenty-seventh day of the eighth lunar month, which usually places the day in late September or early October. In some traditions, September 28 is set aside as the official date. Traditional followers of Confucianism make offerings to Confucius and visit temples. At his birthplace in Qufu, the locals have created the International Confucian Festival to celebrate the occasion. People dress in costumes typical of the time of Confucius. Performances of some of the more traditional rituals are given as well as readings from the Analects. The celebration attracts many tourists. In Taiwan Confucius’s birthday is celebrated as Teachers’ Day, a national holiday honoring all teachers who carry on the work of Confucius, who is considered the first great teacher.

Another Confucian festival is Ching Ming, on April 4 or 5, when families visit the graves of their ancestors. Families make offerings, including incense and paper likenesses of ancestors, and cook special foods, including chicken and pork, to eat afterward. The Chung Yeung Festival, or Autumn Remembering, is also a time to remember ancestors. Special offerings of rice cakes and wine are made at family shrines and altars, and the family visits the graves of their ancestors. This festival takes place in September or October.

Confucians also celebrate the Chinese New Year, usually in February. This several-day-long festival involves dance, costumes, and feasts. It is a highlight of the Confucian year. The dragon dance is held on the first day of the year, and represents the return of light, or of positive yang energy. Dragon dances can be performed on a stage or as part of a procession.
Is Confucianism a Religion?

Confucius had little to say about gods or spirituality. In the Analects, Confucius, responding to a question about how one should serve the dead and the gods, said, "You are not able to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?" Asked about death, he responded, "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" Confucius wanted to deal with relationships among the living, not between the living and God. His goal was the perfection of the living person and the existing society.

Confucianism has no clergy (priesthood), no organized body of followers, and no real discussion of what happens after death. There are Confucian temples, but many have been turned into museums to the life of Confucius and are not places of worship in the traditional sense. Confucius himself never claimed divine, or godlike, status. For these reasons, many people argue that Confucianism is not a religion at all, but rather an ethical and philosophical system.

Others say that Confucianism is a religion because it deals with the most important matters in life: how to live life well and fully, and how to heal the wounds of society. If religion is understood in its broadest terms, as a belief system that sets moral standards, talks about the appropriate place of humans in the universe, and answers questions about how to lead a good daily life, then Confucianism is a religion. Confucianism does have some things to say about the spiritual realm and Tian, the godlike principle by which the universe is ordered. Confucius, describing the passage of his life, explains in the Analects, "At fifty I understood the decree of Heaven." In other words, he felt that he had been appointed to his task by a spiritual power above his understanding.

Confucius also told his followers never to neglect the offerings due to Heaven. In fact, such rituals were part of the tradition he was attempting to preserve. The Chinese had for millennia made offerings and sacrifices to dead ancestors, to Heaven, and to the many and various gods of nature. Chinese folk religion (traditional beliefs) had a long tradition of two-way communication with the spirit world. People regularly made offerings to spirits: food and drink were presented at altars, incense burned, and prayers said. The spirits, for their part, communicated with the living by means of omens, or signs of things that are about to happen.

Confucianism is a belief system completely in harmony with such rituals. In fact, one of the classic Confucian texts is the Yijing (also spelled I Ching), an ancient text used to interpret omens. Confucius also says in the Analects, "He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray." Throughout the Analects, Confucius advises his followers to respect the spirits and to make offerings and sacrifices to them with care, thought, and sincerity.

In addition, the work of Confucius helped uphold the claim of rulers of the Zhou Dynasty that they had been put into power by the Mandate of Heaven, or by holy decree. When it became a state religion during the Han Dynasty, Confucianism helped the emperor legitimize the status of the rulers as decreed by Heaven. The scholars, or ru, those who had mastered the classic tradition and knew all the rituals, were in charge of state ritual offerings and sacrifices to various gods. For the people who believe in and practice Confucianism, this path is generally considered a philosophical and scholarly tradition, very much like religions such as Buddhism and Daoism.
through town. A string of participants is covered in a long dragon robe and they follow a young girl carrying a red ball or a light, which symbolizes yang power. Finally the dragon “swallows” the red ball, demonstrating a symbolic unity with the gods and an acceptance of the light. Family banquets are another high point of the New Year’s celebration, with several kinds of meat and fish served, along with special rice cakes. Red envelopes filled with money are passed out to younger members of the family as gifts.

The main pilgrimage site for Confucians is to the birthplace of Confucius in Shandong province. His hometown, Qufu, is the site of a temple complex, built in 478 BCE and reconstructed many times since. Extending over almost fifty acres, this complex contains several hundred halls and pavilions, each containing statues of prominent Confucians and pillars that have the sayings of Confucius carved into them. The center of this complex is the Dacheng Dia, the Great Hall of Confucius, set in a grove of trees. Its two roofs are supported by ten marble columns, each with intricate dragon carvings on them. More dragons appear, painted in gold, on the blue roof beams. Inside the hall are statues of Confucius and the four men who followed him during his thirteen years of wandering. Qufu is also the site of his grave and the graves of thousands of descendants (offspring). The Kung Family Mansion, where the descendants of Confucius lived, is a pilgrimage site in the same town. It consists of 152 buildings and was built during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Qufu is now a protected United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site.

**Everyday living**

Confucianism is a system for living that deals with the major relationships in a person’s life, and includes a code of conduct to accompany each situation. Thus, it deeply affects the daily lives of those who follow Confucian teachings. Li, or propriety and correct behavior, is a major principle in Confucianism. Some Confucian values are so deeply ingrained in Chinese culture that people are not consciously aware that they are behaving in a manner taught by Confucius. While such social rules are found worldwide, they are an especially strong and vital part of the etiquette system of East Asia. There is no official type of clothing that believers or followers of Confucianism wear, yet there is always the message of li to be appropriate and to act with moderation. Neither are
there special food restrictions for followers, but here, too, the idea of moderation and appropriateness comes into play.

**Rites of passage** Since the days of the Han Dynasty there have been four major rites of passage, or markings of stages in life, in Confucian tradition. Though the full rituals for these rites of passage are seldom followed in the modern world, bits and pieces of them are still found throughout East Asia. The first rite of passage is birth. Special ceremonies accompany a child’s birth, and a special diet as well as a month of rest is recommended for the mother. The first-, fourth-, and twelfth-month anniversaries of the baby’s birth are also celebrated.

A second major rite of passage takes place when a child reaches maturity. This occurs at age twenty for sons and, for daughters, upon her wedding engagement. This rite is sometimes referred to as the “capping” ceremony, because fathers, through a sponsor, present their sons with a square-cornered cap that represents maturity and give their sons a special name. The extended family gathers, and the young man is served chicken.
For girls this coming-of-age ceremony happens when she is engaged to be married, usually between fourteen and twenty. A pin is placed in the girl’s hair by a sponsor chosen by the mother, and an adult’s cap is placed over this. The girl then puts on adult clothing and receives a new name. This rite, however, is no longer very common.

A third rite comes at marriage. Confucian ritual controls various aspects of this ceremony: the proposal (and its appropriateness in terms of social class and standing); engagement; the dowry, or presents to the groom’s family from the bride’s family; the date of the wedding, the organization of the wedding ceremony and reception; and even the ceremony on the morning after the wedding, when the bride serves breakfast to the groom’s parents. This represents the changing of loyalties for the bride, from her own family to her in-laws. The third day after the wedding, the bride pays a visit to her birth family, but is no longer considered part of that family. She has become part of the groom’s family.

Death is the final Confucian rite of passage. Although the actual burial may be performed by a Buddhist, Taoist, or even Christian religious person, the rituals come from Confucian tradition. Tradition dictates the sorts of clothes to wear while grieving, as well as what will be said on special anniversaries after the death. White is the funeral color in China.

Zhu Xi established strict rules for every step of the mourning process and funeral, even the demonstration of grief or sadness. For example, if news of the death reached a person when he or she was away from home, that person was to cry when first learning of the death. Traveling home, the person could cry again whenever he or she felt sadness. Upon reaching the border of the home province, then of the hometown, and finally the door of the home, the person was required to wail and cry.

After the death, mourners put rice in the mouth of the deceased. Then the body was washed and dressed and sealed in a coffin, along with food, clothing, and gifts. The coffin would remain in the home for three months before burial. A “soul” seat and cloth were set next to the coffin, and food and drink were offered there for the next three months, as it was believed that the soul would remain in the house for that period of time.

For Confucians, there is no real concept of an afterlife. The soul or spirit might live on, but death was the end of bodily existence. After three months the body was finally buried and further offerings of food and
wine were made to the Tu Di Gong, the Earth God, one of the huge number of gods in the Chinese pantheon, or group of gods. The deceased’s name was added to the family list of ancestors on the ancestor tablet. If the deceased happened to be the head of the family, that name was not simply added to the list of ancestors. Instead, it became the first generation of ancestor to be worshipped, and the preceding generations were adjusted accordingly. Confucians were required to worship only five generations, so as ancestors reached the sixth generation, they would be taken off the reverence list.

Such strict funeral traditions are rarely followed in modern times, particularly after the People’s Republic of China was established and Confucian traditions were suppressed. Such religious suppression, however, has decreased and the old ancestor altars and tablets are making a comeback. Other modern changes have required some adaptation of these Confucian rites. For example, tradition holds that a male member of the family lead the ancestral rites. In modern times China faced an overpopulation problem, that is, there were too many people being born than the nation could support. As a result Chinese law now allows only one child per family, so it is often now a female who must lead the ancestral rites.

Confucianism’s influences
Confucian tradition has become so deeply rooted in Chinese society that it affects people’s everyday lives, whether they realize it or not. It also has influenced society in such nations as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The family rituals and respect for age and authority in Confucianism were especially appealing to Koreans, for family connections had long been an important part of Korean culture. Korean Confucianism also had an influence on the role of women in society. Before the arrival of Confucianism, Korean women had inheritance rights and also were not necessarily expected to leave their families to live with their in-laws. This all changed, however, when Confucianism, with its male-dominated philosophy, became dominant in Korea.

Japanese Confucianism deviated even more from the traditional Chinese version. In Japan the idea of filial piety and devotion was replaced by the concept of loyalty to the ruler as the most important of the Five Relationships. Most Japanese also held on to some Shinto beliefs, the native religion of Japan. The most important of these was the belief that the emperor was divine, or godlike. This was another
deviation from Chinese Confucianism, which holds that a ruler will be removed from power by Heaven if he does not act morally. Another difference was that the samurai (warrior) class was considered the highest class instead of the scholar-bureaucrat of Chinese Confucianism. All these changes had profound consequences over centuries of Japanese cultural development.

Confucianism had a strong influence on the code of the samurai. The samurai combined Confucian ethics in their study of military arts and redefined themselves as Confucian junzi warriors, noble and just. One of the greatest samurais of the period, Yamaga Soko (1622–1685), wrote down the code of the warrior, called bushido. He used numerous Confucian elements in the description of bushido, such as self-discipline, loyalty, filial piety, and belief in ritual and tradition. Yamaga’s work taught many samurai the code of the warrior. Among these was the leader of the legendary forty-seven ronin, or masterless samurai. These ronin were known for their selfless dedication and loyalty. They, in turn, have inspired numerous stories, plays, and movies in Japan.

In Vietnam, Confucianism appears to have had less of an influence than in Korea and Japan. The Vietnamese people did not take Confucianism as a whole; rather, they chose those aspects that fit with their
culture. For example, the male-dominated aspects of Confucianism were not adopted in Vietnam. As a result, women continued to work alongside their husbands in the field or in shops. If widowed, a woman could remarry.

**The Arts and education**  Further influences can be seen in the arts and scholarship. Confucian emphasis on wen, or the arts, has given a high social status to artists, while military people are usually ranked toward the bottom of the social scale. Many officials of the Chinese state through history have spent their spare hours as poets. A famous example of this is Wang Wei (701–761), a respected Tang scholar-official, who became famous for his nature poetry. For Confucius, knowledge of poetry was a requirement for being a gentleman. Confucius had his students memorize the several hundred verses in the Classic of Odes, and he also used the poems in his teaching because he thought that if one did not know poetry, one did not know how to speak. Poetry, for Confucius and his followers, was a means to help a person understand the truth, promote unity between people, and promote a better understanding of nature. Confucius also had a special love of music and dance, and both of these were incorporated into the life of the noble gentleman.

Moreover, Chinese landscape painting was influenced by Confucian ideals of harmony and balance. Chinese landscape painting paid special attention to tradition and li, or propriety. In painting li was demonstrated by a faithfulness to nature as well as conventionalized symbols for representation of rocks, vegetation, bark, water, and other aspects of the natural world. Li also governed the way a picture was put together: the size of the artwork, for example, or the type of brushes and style of stroke. Chinese painters of the tenth and eleventh centuries were interpreters of li, and landscape became the principal subject for their pictures. Korean art was also greatly influenced by neo-Confucian principles. Artist Chong Son (1676–1759) took from neo-Confucianism the need to depict not an imaginary Korean landscape but an actual one, creating a unique Korean tradition in landscape painting. This emphasis on art in Confucianism influenced the spread of artistic expressions for centuries thereafter.

Confucian ideals not only inspired art, they also became the subject matter of literature. Perhaps the most famous and greatest Chinese novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* from the eighteenth century, is filled with the ideas of Confucianism. Following the events in the lives of the
Jia family, the novel shows the son dominated by the father; the mother, a powerless woman; and the grandmother, commanding deep respect as the oldest in the family. The son is also busy studying Confucianism for the civil service exam and marries a woman his grandmother and father choose for him.

Finally, Confucianism has had a strong impact on education and scholarship throughout East Asia. The scholar-bureaucrat was a Confucian ideal, and knowledge is deeply valued in Confucian societies. Such an influence has lasted through the centuries, making the attainment of higher education a primary goal for young people in Asia. With its emphasis on this world and not the next, Confucianism encourages a person to attain the highest level of success he or she is able. The role of the scholar remains a respected one, and these scholars continue to build on the Confucian tradition.

The New Confucians, a group of East Asian thinkers, have worked since the 1920s reforming Confucianism to adapt it to life in the modern world. However, many aspects need no adapting. For example, democratic principles can be found in the Confucian belief, as stated by Mencius, that people have the right to rebel against an unjust ruler. Furthermore, these scholars agree that the Confucian ideals of education and self-cultivation are as meaningful now as they were in the time of Confucius.

For More Information

BOOKS


Confucianism


**PERIODICALS**


**WEB SITES**


Daoism

Daoism (also called Taoism) developed in China, perhaps as early as the sixth century BCE. It takes its name from the Chinese character dao (pronounced “dow”), which means “way” or “path.” For believers, called Daoists, the Dao is the rhythmic balance and natural, flowing patterns of the universe. The Dao orders the universe, nature, and a person’s life. Central to the idea of the Dao is wu wei, which is literally “inaction” or “nonaction” but is actually closer in meaning to “noninterference in the way of nature.” It describes the effortless action that arises from a sense of being connected to nature and other to people.

Along with Buddhism and Confucianism, Daoism is one of the three chief belief systems of China. It once had followers numbering in the hundreds of millions. A new government took over China in 1949, however, and suppressed all religions. Thousands of Daoist and Buddhist monks were sent to labor camps. Daoist monasteries and temples were converted for other purposes or destroyed. People were strongly discouraged from practicing any religion. Religion in China at the early twenty-first century is still not openly practiced. Many people worship in private or in secret, so it is impossible to determine the number of people in mainland China who are Daoists. The religion has spread to other parts of Asia, however, including Taiwan, where between twenty and thirty million people claim to be believers. Vietnam and Korea also have large numbers of followers, and in North America, Daoists number about thirty thousand.

History and development
According to Daoist tradition, the religion was first developed by Laozi (born c. 604 BCE), whose name is variously spelled Lao-tzu, Lao-tsu, Lao-tse, or Lao-tze. The name means “Old Master.” According to legend Laozi was conceived by a shooting star and born as an old man with a flowing white beard, after spending eighty-three years in his mother’s
Womb before birth. It was Laozi who authored the *Dao De Jing* (also spelled *Tao Te Ching*), often translated as "The Book of the Way and the Power (or Virtue)." This short text has been translated more than one hundred times and remains the central and most sacred Daoist writing.

Daoism originally began as a philosophy, or a method for seeking knowledge and wisdom. Its basic concepts and beliefs are established in the *Dao De Jing*, composed sometime between the sixth and third centuries BCE, and in the *Zhuangzi* (also spelled *Chuang-tzu*), or the "Book of Zhuang," which was written about 350 BCE. Philosophical Daoism continued as an independent belief system until the thirteenth century CE, when the various schools of philosophical Daoism were absorbed by what is called the neo-Confucian school of thought. Neo-Confucianism is a branch of Confucianism through which followers believe they can become wise through methods of both spiritual and

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**WORDS TO KNOW**

- **acupuncture**: Traditional Chinese medical treatment that uses needles inserted into the body at specific locations to stimulate the body's balanced flow of energy.
- **alchemy**: An ancient science that aimed to transform substances of little value into those of greater value, such as lead into gold.
- **canon**: Accepted group of religious texts.
- **Dao**: The path or way; the rhythmic balance and natural, flowing patterns of the universe.
- **de**: Virtue, virtuousness, and power.
- **dynasty**: The period of reign by a particular ruling family.
- **enlightenment**: The achievement of spiritual understanding.
- **folk beliefs**: The beliefs of the common people.
- **meditation**: Quiet reflection on spiritual matters.
- **philosophical Daoism**: A form of Daoism by which followers seek knowledge and wisdom about the unity of everything in existence and how to become closer to it.
- **polytheistic**: Worshipping more than one god.
- **prophecy**: Prediction of future events.
- **pu**: Uncarved or unformed; the state of simplicity to which Daoists try to return.
- **qi**: The breath of life or vital energy that flows through the body and the earth.
- **religious Daoism**: A form of Daoism that recognizes gods, ancestor spirits, and life after death.
- **wu wei**: Nonaction, or deliberate and thoughtful action that follows the Dao.
- **yin and yang**: Literally, "shady" and "sunny"; terms referring to how the universe is composed of opposing but complementary forces.
attempts at self-improvement. Confucianism in general focuses on respect and proper behavior to form a harmonious society.

In the second century BCE philosophical Daoism gave rise to religious Daoism, which also included ancient folk beliefs (beliefs held by the common people) involving the worship of dead ancestors, the belief in nature gods, and the search for immortality, or life after death. Religious Daoism is also known as Dao jiao (also spelled Tao chiao). One of the earliest religious Daoist schools was that of the Huanglao masters, who were devoted both to Laozi and to the first emperor of China.

Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor (259–210 BCE), established many of the basic elements of Chinese civilization and is very respected for his support of Daoist teachings. His name may come from his presumed homeland near the Yellow River, or from the color of the earth. The Huanglao masters formed a branch of Daoism called Huanglao Dao, or “The Way of the Yellow Emperor and the Old Master.” (“Old Master” refers to Laozi.) The Huanglao masters blended the ideas of *wu wei*, or effortless action, with spiritual techniques for achieving immortality. They became powerful advisers at the court of the Han Dynasty (c. 202 BCE–c. 220 CE), despite the fact that Confucianism had been declared the state religion. (A dynasty is the period of reign by a particular ruling family; in this case, the ruling dynasty was that of the Han family.)

The next major development in religious Daoism came with the revelations, or teachings that came directly from the gods, given to the holy man Zhang Daoling (also spelled Chang Tao-ling) in 142 CE. He became the first of the great Celestial Masters, and his religious movement became known as the “Way of the Celestial Masters,” Tianshi Dao. This religious movement also became known as the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice, so named because of a donation or household tax of that amount of rice given annually to the priests of the religion. When Zhang died, control of the religion passed to his family, who further developed it.

**Becomes official religion** The Celestial Masters continued to grow in power and number. In 215 CE, under the administration of Zhang’s grandson, Daoism found official recognition as a religion. By the end of the third century some of the most powerful families of north China had taken up Daoism. By this time the Celestial Masters had gained political power and were functioning as messengers between the ruler and the people. In some cases they also functioned between the...
ruler and heaven, or Tian, where the gods lived and where faithful believers in religious Daoism would go after death.

Over the next several hundred years religious Daoism continued to grow. Traditional magical practices were added, including alchemy, an ancient science that aimed to transform substances of little value into those of greater value, such as lead into gold. Religious Daoism also formed a concept of life after death (that believers ascend to heaven and become even closer to the Dao). The movement also developed an organized monastic system, where monks lived secluded from the world.

In the fifth century reforms in the Way of the Celestial Masters led to its acceptance by even more of the higher classes of Chinese society. The reforms brought the religion more into line with the level of organization that Buddhists, with their emphasis on order in daily life, practiced. This

### About Daoism

- **Belief.** Daoists believe in the rhythmic balance and natural, flowing patterns of the universe, called the Dao, and that by living in harmony with the Dao, one gains true understanding of reality and can even achieve immortality.

- **Followers.** It is difficult to calculate the true number of believers in Daoism because many Daoist followers in China practice in secret. There are between twenty and thirty million believers on Taiwan and about thirty thousand in North America.

- **Name of God.** For some faithful, the abstract concept of the Dao is godlike. Tian, or heaven, is also a godlike concept. The Jade Emperor, Yu-huang, is the most powerful deity for followers of religious Daoism.

- **Symbols.** The yin-yang symbol, a divided circle with equal parts of black and white, is the most important symbol in Daoism, representing the balance of opposites in the world.

- **Worship.** Religious rites are held at Daoist temples, but Daoists also worship at shrines in their homes and through meditation, or quiet reflection on spiritual matters.

- **Dress.** Daoists do not wear any special clothing when attending the temples, but they usually remove their shoes before entering.

- **Texts.** The Dao De Jing is the main philosophical and sacred text of Daoism.

- **Sites.** The Five Mountains in China are perhaps the holiest places of pilgrimage for Daoists.

- **Observances.** The Chinese New Year, in January or early February, is the primary holy day for Daoists, who call it the Day for All Gods to Descend to Earth.

- **Phrases.** There are no commonly used phrases that unite all Daoists.
organizational change helped make Daoism the state religion of North China for a time. Similar reforms happened in the south, with court ritual added to the religion to make it more acceptable.

The Tang Dynasty (618–907) marked a high point for religious Daoism. The founder of the dynasty, Li Yuan, claimed to be a descendant of Laozi. Daoist texts, along with those of Confucianism, were used for civil service examinations under the Tang. Monasteries multiplied, and the Dao De Jing was translated and reached India, Japan, and Tibet. In the early twelfth century the name of the Celestial Masters was changed to the Way of the Orthodox Unity.

Declines in practice After the thirteenth century Daoism went into decline. A popular rebellion in 1849 led to the destruction of Daoist and Buddhist temples throughout the country, including the temple complex at Dragon Tiger Mountain, where the Celestial Masters had their center of power. The New Life movement, begun in the early twentieth century by the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek (1897–1975), also suppressed Daoist centers. The movement was intended to return China to the path of reason and Confucianism. To this end, students were recruited to go

Laozi, the founder of Daoism, is said to have ridden a water buffalo towards the west, away from the lawlessness in China during his lifetime. At the border, however, he was stopped and asked to write down his wisdom. This became the Dao De Jing. © BURSTEIN COLLECTION/CORBIS.
out into the countryside and destroy Daoist temples, statues, and texts wherever they could find them. The huge Daoist canon, or group of religious texts, of more than five thousand volumes was almost lost during this time.

All religious practice in China was banned in 1949, after Mao Zedong (1893–1973; also spelled Mao Tse-tung) seized power and established the communist People's Republic of China. Communism is a political theory of a classless society where all people are equal and work for the benefit of the group. It believes that religion is a way to suppress the people to comply with the will of the state. Mao particularly targeted religion during the period called the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The communist leader called on young people to protect the communist state by violence and intimidation.

Mao’s critics, including religious leaders, were targeted as enemies. Monks were taken from monasteries, and the monasteries and temples were either destroyed or used for other purposes. Most Daoist holy sites and temples were ruined in this process. Beginning in 1982, under the new leadership of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), however, more religious tolerance was introduced. Daoism, as a respected part of China’s past, was once again looked upon favorably.

**Daoism in the twenty-first century** Numerous Daoist religious sects survive in China and on the island of Taiwan. Both countries have national Daoist associations, and all schools and sects of Daoism regard Zhang Daoling as the First Celestial Master. In the early twenty-first century, however, all Daoists followed the words of the current Celestial Master.

Daoism has spread to other Asian countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, and Korea, and has reached Europe and North America. Here its message of contemplation has found a home with many who have become disappointed with modern life. Moreover, the Daoist ideas of creative inaction and letting nature take its course are appealing to a new generation throughout the West (the countries of Europe and the Americas).

**Sects and schisms**
The major schism, or division, in Daoism, occurred between philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism. Religious Daoism attempted to discover a way to immortality (eternal life). The roots and traditions of religious Daoism go deep into the Chinese past and are linked to folk
religions, the traditional beliefs of the people. Such folk religions recognized the role that forces of nature played in the lives of humans. The ancient Chinese, most of whom were farmers, paid close attention to nature and searched for rhythms or unseen patterns that gave their lives meaning. They saw spirits in the mountains and trees and honored them.

Ancestor worship, or praying to the spirits of dead relatives to show respect, was also a major part of Chinese folk religion. The Chinese believed that the spirits of great leaders continued to live on after earthly death. They thought that by praying to such spirits, they could receive assistance in their daily lives. Chinese folk religions had also searched for ways to find longevity, or longer life and immortality, or eternal life. These searches took many forms, ranging from prayer and meditation (quiet reflection on spiritual matters) to taking drugs that were supposed to prolong their lives.

The Celestial Masters Religious Daoism further divided into other sects. The first major sect in religious Daoism was the Celestial Masters (also called Heavenly Masters), founded in West China in the second century by Zhang Daoling. The Celestial Masters advocated the confession of wrongdoings or sins as a way to heal illnesses and reach immortality. Various healing spells were also central to the early form of this sect.

The Celestial Masters sect remains the most important form of religious Daoism to this day. Followers honor the founder, Zhang Daoling, as an immortal, a spiritual being who has attained greater awareness and understanding of the Dao. An immortal is not born and does not die. He of she can travel around at will and cannot be easily harmed. Some immortals take up the role of

Laozi

The central figure in Daoism is Laozi. It is not known if he ever actually existed. Daoist tradition places his birth in 604 BCE, in a village in the eastern half of modern Hunan province. Laozi was supposedly the keeper of the archives, or histories, for the Zhou (also spelled Chou) Dynasty (1027–256 BCE) in their capital of Luoyang. Titled a shih, or historian, Laozi may also have worked as an astrologer to the court. (An astrologer studies the movements of the stars and planets, interpreting how these movements may affect events on Earth.) As Laozi’s fame as a wise man spread, he attracted visitors. One of these visitors was supposedly Confucius (551–479 BCE), the founder of Confucianism, who was more than fifty years younger than Laozi. Legend has it that Laozi found the younger man’s ideas about tradition and acceptance of one’s proper role in society rather silly.

Later in his life Laozi planned to leave China for good. He was tired of everyday life at the royal court and saddened by the lawlessness of his times. He rode a water buffalo toward the west but was stopped by a border guard, who asked the wise man to write down his wisdom before leaving his native land forever. This he did over the course of several days. The compilation of Laozi’s wisdom is usually called the Dao De Jing, although it is sometimes also called the Laozi after its author. After writing this text, Laozi reportedly left China, never to be heard of again. Later legends placed him in India.

Many believe that Laozi is actually a combination of several “old masters,” or Daoist leaders. Whether or not he was an actual person, the figure of Laozi has deeply affected the philosophy and religion of China. Chinese believers have made offerings and sacrifices to Laozi for two thousand years.
guide to men or women and aid them until they become enlightened and reach the Dao.

The major ceremonies of this early Daoist sect dealt with curing believers of illnesses by ceremonial means. Illnesses were thought to be a punishment for bad deeds. Believers prayed and made appeals to various heavenly agents to cure them and forgive their sins. The teachings of Laozi, as interpreted by the Celestial Masters, were central to religious Daoism. These teachings focused on right action and good works to ensure immunity from disease. In this respect they came close to the Confucian ideal of accepted social roles and social involvement than to the withdrawal from society and rejection of roles found in philosophical Daoism.

Laozi himself began increasingly to take on divine qualities for the Daoist religion. By 165 CE official sacrifices of slaughtered animals and offerings of food and drink were being made to him. Twenty years later a temple was built in his honor. After several centuries he became a god to many Daoists.

The Way of the Great Peace Toward the end of the second century CE a second Daoist religious movement was founded by a reformer called Zhang Zhue (died 184; also spelled Chang Chueh). This movement hoped to create a utopia, or a perfect society, in which the search for the Dao was the primary goal. Zhang Zhue used ancient tradition in his movement, recalling the glories of the rule of the Yellow Emperor. This ancient era was called Taiping, or “Great Peace,” and Zhang Zhue’s movement was called the Taiping Dao, or Way of the Great Peace.

Zhang Zhue told his followers that the era of the Han was almost over, and that his Daoist utopia would replace it. The symbol of this utopia was the color yellow, and Zhang Zhue’s 200,000 followers wore yellow turbans, or hats made from strips of cloth, as a sign of their unity. Eventually this band of followers rose against the Han in what is called the Taiping Rebellion, burning towns and destroying property. Government troops finally stopped the rebellion after a year of fighting.

Neo-Daoism and the Mao Shan Along with these religious sects came more reinterpretations of philosophical Daoism. The xuan xue (also spelled hsuan hsueh), or “dark learning,” explored the spiritual side of the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi texts. It is sometimes called Neo-Daoism. The leaders of this movement, such as Wang Bi (also spelled Wang Pi; 226–249), tried to bridge the differences between Daoism
and Confucianism, and stressed a form of Daoism that did not withdraw from the world but participated in an orderly society.

The fourth century saw the creation of two other powerful religious sects, which together are called the Mao Shan, or Mount Mao. These sects incorporated magical practices into religious Daoism, including alchemy and communication with the gods. The Mao Shan became very popular, lasting hundreds of years and attracting, for a time, more followers than the Celestial Masters.

Toward the end of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) numerous smaller sects formed, especially in the north. These groups included Supreme Unity, Perfect and Great Way, and Complete Perfection, or Quanzhen (also spelled Chuan Chen). Supreme Unity was a movement that emphasized magic in order to fight disease. It also promoted rules of good conduct. The Perfect and Great Way was best known for its teachings on ethics and morality.

Complete Perfection emphasized the importance of meditation and simplified many of the rituals that religious Daoism had developed. Complete Perfection became a strong monastic movement, with the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing as its center. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), Complete Perfection came to be a favorite of the ruling Mongols, and its chief priest was taken to Central Asia to preach to Genghis Khan (c. 1162–1227). This sect, and that of the Mao Shan, continued to be popular into the twentieth century. Orthodox Unity and Complete Perfection, however, were the two main strands of Daoism to survive the twentieth century.

Basic beliefs

The core of Daoism is the Dao, which maintains order and balance in the universe. There are several levels of the Dao. Among them are the Great Dao, the Dao of nature, and the Dao present in each person’s life. The Great Dao is the invisible force behind all creation. This constant Dao is the beginning of everything, and everything returns to the Dao in an eternal cycle. (In Daoism, time itself is cyclical, meaning that everything always comes back to its starting point. This is different from the linear Western concept of time, with one starting point and a different ending point.) This Great Dao is also mysterious and cannot be explained in words. Rather, it can only be felt. The Dao of nature is the controlling rhythm of the natural world. A third type of Dao is the way in which
each human being lives his or her life, meaning how the Great Dao affects each person.

The goal of Daoism is to become one with the Great Dao. The Dao De Jing states that humans are faced with the basic problem of knowing who they really are. By accepting that humans are all part of the Dao, they can live in unity with it. Nature, in Daoism, is not something to be conquered or controlled. Instead, people need to live in harmony with nature. By focusing on the Dao, people can awaken themselves to this eternal rhythm and reach enlightenment, or spiritual understanding.

The concept of de Throughout Daoist texts, moving water is used to represent the flow of Dao in people’s lives. The flow of water plays a key part
in the concept of de, translated as “virtue,” “virtuousness,” and “power.” De is the second element in the Dao De Jing, the Dao within people. Numerous chapters of that book are devoted solely to an explanation of how de works in people’s lives. Thus, de deals with informed action (conscious and aware choices) and virtuous behavior. Virtuous behavior is when one acts morally, with respect and consideration for others.

These give rise to another concept, wu wei. This is the sort of effortless action a person achieves when he or she is in harmony with the Dao. Like water in a stream as it shifts its form to go around rocks and other objects, wu wei smoothes the edges of those hard surfaces.

**The Three Jewels** Also associated with de are three types of virtue: compassion, or consideration of other people and their feelings; moderation, or self-control and restraint; and humility, or humbleness. These are called the Three Jewels. Daoists believe that people are kind and considerate by nature. If left to themselves, they will naturally develop into good human beings. By practicing the Three Jewels, a person can get closer to the Dao.

De can also mean “power.” In that sense the concept of qi (also spelled ch’i) is important. Qi literally means “breath” but refers to a vital, or necessary, energy that each person has and must preserve in order to be one with the Dao. As the Dao flows through people’s bodies, it is necessary to remove any blockages to that flow. One early group of Daoists developed specific techniques to accomplish this, blending meditation, a special diet including medicinal herbs, and breathing and movement techniques. The movement techniques developed into the martial art known as taijiquan (also spelled tai chi).

Unlike Confucianism, Daoism emphasizes following one’s own instincts to reach a true awareness and understanding of existence. Simplicity and spontaneity, or following natural impulses, are also important. To return to the Dao, a person needs to remove the clutter from his or her life. Someone who lives by wu wei lives according to his or her true nature, a state before that person was changed by knowledge and learning. Such a state is called pu in Daoism, meaning a clean slate or an uncarved block of stone.

**The Five Elements** Daoists believe that the human being is a microcosm, or a small model, of the universe. The five directions correspond to the Five Mountains (the holy mountains of China), to the sections of the sky, and the seasons. (In Daoist belief there is an extra season in addition to
The usual four; this fifth season is called late summer.) These are reproduced in the human body, with its five major openings, and five major organs (liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys). For Daoists, the Five Elements of water, fire, earth, metal, and wood are all interconnected, part of the Great Dao. The Five Elements theory is vital to Chinese medicine and the development of acupuncture, a Chinese healing tradition that treats bodily disorders as blockages of energy, using needles inserted at key points in the body to free the energy. Each of the internal organs is associated with one of the Five Elements and must be kept in balance for good health and to be in harmony with the Dao.

The search for immortality also plays a part in Daoism. Alchemy and magical practices were prominent in various sects of religious Daoism, as was an emphasis on astrology (the practice of foretelling the future by the movement of the stars and planets), breath control, hygiene (any practice, such as cleanliness, that preserves health), yin-yang balance, and the Five Elements.

Gods in Daoism Religious Daoism has its own temples, priests, sacred writings, rites, and gods. It is polytheistic, meaning it recognizes many gods, each of whom is worshipped for different functions. These include Laozi, who is considered a saint by some and a god, Lord Lao, by others. Primary among the major deities is Yuhuang, or the Jade Emperor, the ruler of Heaven and the strongest of all the gods. He monitors heavenly activity, and all the other gods must report to him. Heaven, in religious Daoism, is organized in a hierarchy, or with gods ranked one above the other.

Directly beneath Yuhuang in importance is the High God, Yuanshi Tianzong, or the First Principle. He existed before the universe and is eternal. Below the High God is San Qing (also spelled San-ching) the collective name of the Three Pure Ones (Jade Pure, Upper Pure, and Great Pure), describing the areas of Heaven where they are supposed to live. These three are usually seen as representing different aspects, or sides, of Laozi, and, as such, they are not rulers. Instead, they try to save humans with teaching and kindness.
Next in importance are the *San Guan* (also spelled *San-kuan*), the Three Officials who administer Heaven, Earth, and Water. San Yuan, the Three Primordials or Principalis, created the universe, and the Eight Immortals, or *Ba Xian* (also spelled *Pa-hsien*), are popular gods modeled on historical persons who reached worldly perfection. Religious Daoists believe that after death they may become important ancestors, just like those they worshipped during their lifetimes. There is also a form of hell, with nine different stages of punishment, each of which is ruled by a different demon king. Prayers, however, can help get a person out of hell. Magic rites, exorcism (or ridding the body of evil spirits), and communication with the spirit world are all duties of the Daoist priest.

It is important to understand, however, that Daoism, as it is viewed in the West, is mainly the philosophical branch of the belief system. The major themes of that sort of Daoism include quiet action, the power of emptiness or a sense of being at one with the universe, detachment (being apart from worldly concerns), openness and spontaneity, the strength of the yin aspects of life, and the belief that human values are not absolute, that individuals in different times and societies may find different and equally valid truths.

**Sacred writings**

The most important text for Daoists is the *Dao De Jing*. This book contains the major ideas of Daoism, including the concepts of the Dao itself and the importance of living one’s life in unity with the Dao. Daoist legend says that Laozi, who served a Zhou emperor, was so upset with the warfare and chaos of his time that he decided to leave China in search of a more peaceful kingdom. His writings were compiled as the *Dao De Jing*, a work of five thousand Chinese characters, divided into eighty-one chapters. It was originally intended as a handbook for the wise ruler but includes teachings that have also been adapted for all followers of the Dao.

Historians agree that this text was most likely written not by one person, but by several people. Until the time of the *Dao De Jing*, the term *Dao* was used for the way of thought of many schools, meaning simply their doctrine, or teachings. But with the *Dao De Jing*, an attempt was made to find a higher meaning for Dao, the ultimate unifying force of the universe.

Another important text is the *Zhuangzi*, written in part by the famous philosopher Zhuangzi (c. 369–c. 286 BCE). Where the *Dao De Jing* is
Daoist Gods

Religious Daoism has many gods and goddesses, as well as various levels of heaven. The gods live in a complex and structured land similar to that of the Chinese imperial system. This was an elaborate system with many levels of government and workers, from the emperor to his advisers near the top to the servants at the bottom. Among the most popular Daoist gods are the *Ba Xian*, or the Eight Immortals, as well as Xi Wang-mu, Mu Gong, and Zao-jun.

The Eight Immortals are symbols of good fortune. They are based on actual historical persons. Only one of the Ba Xian is a woman. Each represents a different condition of life, including masculinity and femininity, wealth and poverty, youth and old age, and nobility and the common man.

**Cao Guojin**: During the Song Dynasty Cao fled to live in shame as a hermit after his brother became a murderer. He then met Lu Dongbin, who taught him how to become an immortal.

**Han Xianzi**: He lived during the Tang Dynasty. Han is known for his temper and for his supernatural abilities. He received immortality after falling from a peach tree.

**He Xiangu**: The only female Ba Xian. He Xiangu spent her life as a hermit in the mountains. While she was dreaming she received instructions on how to obtain immortality. Afterwards she developed the ability to fly from mountain peak to mountain peak.

**Lan Caihe**: He lived as a beggar, dressed in rags and wearing only one boot. Then one day Lan suddenly disappeared into the clouds as an immortal.

**Li Tieguai**: He walks with an iron crutch, which was given to him by Xi Wang-mu or by Laozi after one of them healed his leg. Either Xi or Laozi then taught Li how to become an immortal.

**Lu Dongbin**: He received a magical sword from a dragon on Mount Lu. He used it to conceal himself in Heaven. Lu believes that compassion is the way to achieve perfection. He uses his sword to conquer ignorance and aggression.

**Zhang Guolao**: He lived during the Tang Dynasty. Zhang is a living form of ancient chaos.

**Zhongli Quan**: A military leader during the Han Dynasty, Zhongli Quan fled to the mountains. Daoist saints there instructed him on how to gain immortality.

Together, Xi Wang-mu and Mu Gong represent the balance of yin and yang. Xi Wang-mu is the goddess of immortality. She rules over the paradise of the immortals, where she keeps a nine-storied jade palace that is surrounded by a wall of gold. She is often referred to as the Royal Mother of the West. Xi Wang-mu is married to Mu Gong, the god of immortality. He is often called the Royal God of the East.

Zao-jun is more popularly known as the Kitchen God. He is protector of the family. Zao-jun’s story originates in Chinese folk beliefs. A mortal named Zhang Lang was married to good woman and lived a successful life. He fell in love with another woman, however, and left his wife. When this woman left him, Zhang went blind, lost his wealth, and became a beggar. One day he received food from a kind woman. He told her his story, after which his vision returned. Zhang saw that the kind woman was his wife and felt deeply ashamed. He jumped into the hearth (fireplace). Zhang’s wife tried to save him, but she was unsuccessful. She placed a plaque above the hearth and made offerings in his honor, beginning the veneration (or worship) of the Kitchen God.
compact and poetic, the Zhuangzi is rambling and often takes the form of a fable, or moral story. Less political in nature and dealing more with rules for living a private life, the book uses satire, or ridicule and humor, and nonsense to poke fun at Confucianism. It also tries to explain the Dao by using stories and poetry. Zhuangzi also introduced the concept of the fully enlightened person who lives apart from the rest of the world. These “supreme men” possess magical abilities, including the power of flight. This concept later gave rise to the principle of immortals that forms a large part of religious Daoism.

The Lie Zi is another significant text. It was written by a philosopher of the same name and is often translated as the “True Classic of Perfect Emptiness.” This book extended the spiritual roots of Daoism and attempted to bridge the gap between Daoism and Confucianism. The Taiping Jing (also spelled Tai-p’ing Ching), or “Classic of the Great Peace,” deals with immortality. It provides specific instructions on how to reach eternal life. The Huainanzi (also spelled Huai-nan-tzu) is a collection of essays by trained spiritual magicians, or fang-shih. The Yijing (also spelled I-Ching) is a book of hexagrams used to tell of future events. Though it was written before Daoism was established, the Yijing is employed in various Daoist rituals.

While these early texts form the core of Daoism, there are thousands of other texts that make up the sacred writings of both the philosophical and religious branches of Daoism. The entire collection of Daoist sacred, philosophical, magical and alchemical texts is called the Daozang (also spelled Tao-tsang), or the Daoist Canon. Many works of the canon, first printed in 1190, date back to the third century BCE. There are more than 1,500 works, divided into two main sections: the Three Grottoes and the Four Supplements. These sections include such works as the Dao De Jing and also texts from all the major Daoist religious sects.

Sacred symbols
The most recognizable symbol of Daoism is the yin-yang, a circle divided by a curving line into equal white and black spaces. Each of these halves, in turn, has a small circle of the other color in it. This symbol speaks of the balance between opposites in the universe. The yin is the softer element, the feminine, dark, and open aspect of the universe. The yang is male, light, and controlling. For Daoists, it is best to have yin and yang as balanced as possible.
The bagua (also spelled pa kua) is a related symbol. This symbol is made up of eight trigrams, or combinations of three broken or unbroken lines, from the Yijing that represent the ever-changing nature of the universe. These eight trigrams are arranged in an octagonal, or eight-sided, pattern around the yin-yang symbol.

The Chinese character for Dao is also a typical symbol of Daoism. This character basically means “path.” For Daoists, the symbolic path is the Dao, which we all come from and return to. Dao can also mean “way,” or method of doing something, as in the way of the universe, or the way of life Daoists follow. The character for Dao is built from two smaller characters, that for “head” and that for “foot.” The foot signifies the idea of path, while the head adds the concept of choice. Daoists also see a deeper significance in the use of these two characters, representing both a beginning and an ending, or the continuous cycle of the universe.

The Eight Immortals are popular Daoist gods who often get involved with humans to help them on their path to realizing the Dao. They are based on actual historical figures. © KEVIN R. MORRIS/CORBIS.
Among the hundreds of Daoist deities are the Ba Xian, or Eight Immortals, many of whom are depicted with symbols of their power. The Eight Immortals represented to believers eight aspects of daily life: men and women, young and old, noble and peasant, and rich and poor. Lu Dongbin (also known as Lu Yan), for example, is primary among these immortals. He is associated with medicine and also has charms that can control evil spirits. His symbol is the sword. Typical paintings portray him with a sword and flowing robes. Another Immortal, Li Tieguai (also known as Di Kuai Li), is also associated with medicine. Because he always fights for the poor and infirm, his pictures often portray him as a beggar with a crutch. Han Xiangzi, another Immortal, was a great poet and musician and is portrayed with a jade flute. These images are not very familiar to most Westerners, but they are well known to the faithful.

Worship

Daoist priests dress in colorful robes and wear rimless black caps. They conduct religious rites, which are ceremonial acts that occur according to particular instructions. Such rites include chanting, reciting of various ritual prayers, meditation, discussion of sections of the Dao De Jing, burning of incense, and issuing prayers to various gods and goddesses.

Rites often take place in Daoist temples, which can be filled with vibrant artwork depicting the various deities and immortals. In Asia such temples are often designed as pagodas. A pagoda is a building several stories tall, with roof tips that curve upwards. In Taiwan alone there are more than eight thousand such temples, with 33,850 Daoist clergy, or priests. The People's Republic of China has 1,500 Daoist temples.

The basic form of Daoist ritual is the jiao, or offering, done to pray for assistance from the gods. These offerings range from simple wine and food placed on a family altar to more complex ritual offerings that celebrate one of the many holy days of the Daoist calendar. Priests prepare for the more
elaborate offerings several days in advance by purifying all the robes, musical instruments, sacred scrolls, candles, and incense over hot oil.

On the first day of such typical offering festivals, the priests form a procession through the town and call on the Three Pure Ones to attend their ritual. A yellow banner is placed outside the temple to attract the attention of the gods. Priests sing and dance at such offerings, providing gifts such as tea, candles, or fruit to summon the gods. Ceremonies may include the Division of the Lamps, in which candles are lit in a darkened temple to signify the coming of light to the world. Such rituals may last for as long as three days, accompanied by fireworks, chanting, and music.

Priests may also perform occasional rituals of exorcism, driving out evil spirits. Such exorcisms can be done in homes or even outdoor spaces where it is thought evil spirits dwell. Priests use a variety of religious tools, including flags printed with scripture, blessed water, incense, swords, and even whips made of peach wood with which to fight the demons. Ritual words are chanted as the procession of priests passes through the home or outside area.

**Home shrines** Less elaborate rituals are also held throughout the year. Daoists are encouraged to worship on their own as well. Most Daoist families have a family shrine with a family tree of their ancestors and candles surrounding it. A shrine is usually a small area in or near the home where a person can worship instead of attending a larger temple. It may contain items that represent the deity or are offerings to the god. The shrine may have pictures of the worshipper’s personal god or of one of the major gods in the Daoist pantheon, or group of gods.

People light candles and burn incense at a shrine to call on the souls of their departed relatives or to call on certain gods to ask for assistance. Wine may be poured and food, including meat, rice, and cookies, are placed on the home altar or shrine. There are rites for health, prosperity, and long life, among many others.

Meditation is another form of home worship. Meditating on the Dao is considered the way to reach unity with it. Special breathing techniques are used, as are exercises such as taijichuan, which ensure that the flow of the qi in the body is not blocked or restricted.

**Temple services** The Daoist calendar provides many festivals throughout the year, but there are no regularly scheduled services at the temples as some other religious traditions. The shrines and temples are kept open
at all hours so that the faithful may come to light candles or incense and pray. They may also receive a prediction in the form of a slip of paper taken from a bamboo tube. People with urgent needs consult priests who can perform the proper rituals. Leaving offerings at roadside shrines is also considered a form of worship for Daoists.

Daoist temples also once served as a center for communal life, providing entertainment with fairs, puppet shows, storytellers, and opera. This secondary function has been greatly reduced since public expressions of religion were suppressed in mainland China in 1949. Temples in Europe and North America usually serve other purposes, such as office space or community centers, in addition to being Daoist houses of worship. These community centers often offer classes in Daoist philosophy, martial arts such as taijichuan, Chinese herbal medicine, and the classic art of feng shui.
Observances and pilgrimages

The Daoist calendar is filled with holy days honoring the birthdays or death days of various immortals or the name days of a range of deities. Many of these fall on or near the fifteenth of the month. Important among these days are the birthdays of the Eight Immortals, spread throughout the year. Offerings are made at temples on such days, and families also make offerings at home shrines to departed ancestors. The ninth day of the first lunar month is the birthday of the Jade Emperor. Usually, a grand ritual assembly, called the Jade Emperor Assembly, is held in temples to celebrate the day, while the people gather to burn incense. Some Daoists celebrate the traditional birthday of Laozi, on March 5.

Another, smaller festival is held on the fifteenth of August. This day celebrates the birth of the Earth God, Zhung Yuan. It is also a time to come to the assistance of lost souls, who are forced to wander aimlessly because they did not have a proper burial. A primary part of this festival is the ritual of the Floating of the Water Lamps. Following a summoning of the gods by priests, a member from each household accompanies the priests to a nearby river or stream. There each sets a small paper lantern with a lit candle in the water to float downstream. The candles are meant as a guide to the lost souls, liberating them and showing them the way upward to heaven. Sometimes the ritual of the Universal Salvation is also performed at this festival. In it a huge banquet is set up of cakes, bread, fruit, and any other delicacies that can be provided. The priest first blesses the food and then invites the lost souls to join in the feast. Finally, the priest tosses the food to the gathered faithful, symbolically sharing it with the lost souls.

Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year occurs in late January or early February and is one of the most important Daoist celebrations. Chinese New Year falls on the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month. The precise date varies from year to year because the Chinese follow a lunar calendar, which is attached to the phases of the moon instead of the 365 set days in the Western-style calendar.

The New Year is also called the Day for All Gods to Descend to Earth, and it is the primary Daoist holy day. Daoists believe that this day marks the rebirth of the positive force in the universe, yang. Before the New Year celebration takes places, however, there is a week-long period of reflection and reckoning, or assessment of deeds. Another widely
celebrated day is called the Day for the Kitchen God to Ascend to Heaven and Report the Good and/or Bad Actions of People to the Jade Emperor, Yu-huang. In order to make the Kitchen God report good things to the Jade Emperor, people will smear his lips with honey.

On the first day of the New Year festival, a procession winds through the streets of towns and cities, led by a long column of people covered in a dragon costume. This dragon follows a small child carrying a red ball, symbol of the return of yang, or positive energy. At the end of the procession, the dragon swallows the ball to bring long life to people and to symbolize unity with the gods.

In temples and private homes rituals are held welcoming the Three Pure Ones. Sweets are offered because the Chinese word for sweets and for Heaven is the same, tian. Wooden blocks are tossed like dice to tell when the gods have finished their meal and have granted the wishes of the faithful. Special offerings are made in the home to ancestors. The entire family gathers to have a large meal of fish, meat, and special cakes. Gifts are exchanged and red envelopes with money are given to children.

**Balance to the year** Religious Daoists divide the year into three parts. The first, the Reign of the Spirits of Heaven, follows the New Year and lasts for six months. To usher in this period, a banquet is served for the gods in the temple and then taken home by families and eaten. At the end of the Reign of the Spirits of Heaven, ceremonies are performed to give those who have not followed the Dao a second chance. The second part of the year is the Reign of the Forgiver of Sins, and the third is the Reign of the Water Spirits. Each begins on the fifteenth of the month and is welcomed by a banquet to the gods.

These three divisions provide a focus for religious Daoists. The first half of the year is a time for recommitting to one’s religion and for making prayers to the heavenly gods. The second period is a time to dwell on one’s sins and ask for forgiveness. And the third division of the year brings the faithful to think of water, one of the five basic elements, but also a symbol for the flow of the Dao and for the effortless action of wu wei.

**Pilgrimages** Many Daoist holy places in China have been disrupted and, in many cases, destroyed in modern times. However, many sacred sites
still remain, including the Five Mountains so highly praised by early Daoists. These mountains include:

- Tai Shan, the eastern mountain, in Shandong province;
- Heng Shan Bei, the mountain of the north, in Shanxi province;
- Hua Shan, the western mountain, also in Shanxi province;
- Heng Shan Nan, the southern mountain, in Hunan province;
- Song Shan, the mountain of the center, in Henan province.

The palace of Zhang Daoling, the Celestial Master Mansion, in Yintan, Jiangxi province, China, is the classic seat of the Daoist popes, or Celestial Masters. After Mao Zedong brought communism to China in 1949, the Celestial Masters abandoned their traditional home and moved their headquarters to Taiwan, an island off the coast of mainland China. The White Cloud Daoist Monastery in Beijing is also a holy site for Daoists, as is the Eight Immortals Temple in Shanxi province and the Purple Heaven Temple on Mount Wudang in Hubei province.

Daoists visit these sites for a variety of reasons. Many find a closer connection to their beliefs simply by being in one of the sacred or historic sites associated with Daoism. They go to meditate, pray, or make offerings. Some use such pilgrimages as a way to ask a favor of the gods; others use such visits to put them into closer contact with the Dao. Still others combine tourism or vacations with more religious reasons.

**Everyday living**

Daoists believe in selective, careful, and well-thought-out action. This concept of wu wei is applied daily in the lives of those who follow Daoism. Decisions, especially important ones such as marriage, choice of career, and family matters, are carefully considered before taking action. Often the Daoist priest is consulted before such decisions are made.

There is no special clothing particular to Daoists. Many follow a vegetarian lifestyle, resolving not to harm nature or to take the lives of animals. The Daoist interest in health and vitality, in preserving the qi, generally leads to a healthy lifestyle of moderation in all things.

**Meditative exercises** Meditation is another daily practice for Daoists. It promotes a more deliberate lifestyle, thoughtful and aware, as well as less hurried. The basic rule for meditation is given in the Dao De Jing, which states, “Empty your mind of all thoughts.” Such meditation is also referred to as “sitting and forgetting” in the Zhuangzi.
Daoist meditation has several levels, and only the most practiced students or masters ever reach the highest level. Breath control is part of meditation. Daoists try to guide the breath through the body, concentrating on inhaling, holding, and exhaling in rhythm. At first this is accomplished by actually counting the time for each part of the breathing process, but eventually such breathing can become second nature.

The breath is the qi, or energy of the body. Daoists attempt to direct the flow of qi by breath control. Visualization is also used in meditation. In this process, the person focuses on a god or on one of the heavenly bodies in order to push out negative thoughts, such as anger and jealousy. Many Daoists also practice the art of taijichuan in order to help channel qi. Taijichuan uses gentle movements to promote health and long life.

Feng Shui

One of the more well-known aspects of Daoism to those outside the religion is *feng shui* (pronounced FUNG shway). For many in the modern world, feng shui is simply a method for designing and decorating living or working space. But feng shui is much more than a system of interior design. It is actually a religion of its own that has been blended into Daoist practice. *Feng shui* means “wind and water,” and archaeological evidence (physical remains of the past) indicates it may be four thousand years old.

Feng shui discovers the qi, or energy of the Dao, as it runs through the earth and affects humans. Followers of feng shui believe that it is necessary to channel the qi to keep it from disturbing the lives of humans who live in it. Those who practice feng shui attempt to ensure that the qi flows properly in one’s living space and that a proper balance of yin and yang is found.

It also uses astrology, a form of telling the future from the positions of the stars and planets on one’s birth date. The Yijing (also spelled I Ching, or “Book of Changes”), an ancient Chinese text for telling the future by the placement of symbolic hexagrams (patterns of six lines), is also used in some schools of feng shui to help determine the correct environment. In its earliest form feng shui was used for finding the best gravesite. Later it came to be used to determine the best place to build an imperial palace. Over the centuries it was turned into a science and art for the common people as well. Even in the early twenty-first century many Daoists would not think of buying an apartment or redesigning their homes without consulting a feng shui master.

Feng shui is applied in everyday life to design interior space that allows for the healthy circulation of qi. Feng shui rules warn against having the foot of the bed facing the door, for example, for the flow of qi will disturb sleep. Rounded corners are preferred for pools. Windows should not slide up and down, for that way they do not allow enough qi in or out. Numerology, or the study of the spiritual power of numbers, also plays a role in feng shui. One should always have an even number of dining room chairs, for example. Odd numbers represent loneliness, while even numbers represent luck.
Its goal is to return the body and the mind to its original pure state. Daoist taijichuan uses a lot of stretching and turning in the 108 movements of the exercise.

From birth to death  Daoism figures into the major events of each person’s life. Babies in the womb are protected by the guardian spirit, Tai Shen, so pregnant women make regular offerings to that deity. After birth, further offerings are made to female spirits. These offerings are usually of baby clothes, for these spirits are considered to be mothers themselves. A Daoist adult is chosen as a godparent, and more offerings are made when the infant is four months old to ensure its health and safety. The child’s first birthday is celebrated with a banquet. Mother spirits are believed to protect the child as it grows, and as the children grow older they learn to chant parts of the Dao De Jing, perform the exercises of taijichuan, and practice calligraphy (beautiful handwriting). Good calligraphy requires concentration and skill, as the artist must control the amount of ink used in each brush stroke and the flexibility of the brush. It is considered by many to be a process that unites body and mind.

Weddings are also special events in the life of Daoists. Though the full rite, created over two thousand years ago, is no longer practiced, parts of that rite are still used. Often a Daoist specialist is consulted to make sure the bride and groom are compatible. The bride and her parents visit the shrines of their ancestors on the day of the wedding, and the groom performs a ritual at his ancestors’ shrine to remind him of his duties as a husband. The actual ceremony is brief and simple, but this is followed by an elaborate banquet where the bride and groom sign the document of marriage. The day after the wedding, the bride goes to her in-laws bearing gifts to show that she will soon have children. Three days after the wedding ceremony she returns to her own parents, no longer a member of that family, but now a visitor.

Daoists believe that a person’s body and passionate spirit are buried after death, but that the pure spirit lives on. Therefore, Daoist funerals are usually quite elaborate. The day of the funeral is determined by a Daoist calendar specialist. A Daoist priest may come to the person’s home to make sure preparations for the funeral are in order. Favorite belongings, food, and white papers with prayers, charms, and spells written on them are also placed in the coffin. Later, these pieces of paper are taken from the coffin and burned in order to send them to heaven. A banquet is served once the coffin is sealed.
**Daily details** Daoism affects all aspects of a believer’s life. A typical day for a Daoist might begin with an offering at the family altar or shrine. This could be food for an ancestor or perhaps the burning of incense for the Earth God to bless the day’s activities. The Daoist calendar might be consulted to see what is supposed to happen on that day, for Daoists are strong believers in the effects of the movements of the planets and various nature spirits on a person’s life. Many buildings, including homes, schools, and offices, may have been built and furnished according to the rules of feng shui. If the family feels out of balance, a Daoist priest might be asked to perform an exorcism to rid the home of evil spirits.

On his or her way to work, a Daoist might participate in or see others practicing taijiquan in the parks. If ill, the person might visit an acupuncturist or someone who practices herbal medicine. A Daoist procession might be passing along the street where a person walks, or a ritual might be in process in a temple. Back at home at the end of the day and as the family gathers for dinner, they are watched over by the Kitchen God, for every family usually has a picture of this deity in the kitchen, ready to report on their actions at the end of the year.

**Daoism’s influences**

Daoist thought has had a significant effect on Chinese life and culture. The basic principle of Daoism, to live in unity with the Dao, shapes the lives of millions. Practices such as breath control and taijiquan, for example, have become a part of the regular routine of millions. In any park in a major city of China or Taiwan, people can be seen practicing taijiquan, seeking the benefits of its control of qi, even if they are not aware of how the practice links them to a religious tradition. Similarly, the portrayal of nature in Chinese art evokes the Dao, with its simplicity, clean lines, and open space inspiring a feeling of calm and quiet. This is a direct result of the Daoist emphasis on living in harmony with the patterns and rhythms of nature and the Dao. The Daoist ideal of self-restraint and humbleness, parts of de (virtue) is valued by many Chinese people, whether they are practicing Daoists or not.

**Influences on medicine** Chinese herbal medicine is based largely on the work of early Daoists who were searching for immortality or concerned with maintaining a positive flow of qi in the body. Over the course of centuries, Daoists have discovered and recorded the medicinal uses of thousands of plants, including trees, flowers, fruits, herbs, and fungi.
Daoists have also long emphasized a balanced diet to maintain good health. Many experiments with plants and minerals are recorded in the sixteenth-century Daoist work, the *Great Pharmacopoeia*, or directory of drugs. Perhaps the earliest medical book is Daoist in origin, *The Yellow Emperor's Classic on Medicine*, more than two thousand years old and the product of a Celestial Master.

Daoist Sun Sumiao lived during the Tang Dynasty and practiced traditional Chinese medicine. He has been called the “king of medicine.” Sun contributed much to Chinese traditional medicine, and he shared this knowledge in several books. Among his works are the *Treatise on Alchemy* and *Inscription on Visualizing Spirits and Refining Vital Breath*. The *Inscription on Visualizing Spirits and Refining Vital Breath* discusses the relationship between body, breath, and spirit. It details how breath and spirit must be maintained in order to care for the body and describes how, through practice, one can achieve long life and realize the Dao. Daoists of the Tang Dynasty who wished to study the breath often referred to this book. The *Treatise on Alchemy* addressed food in much the way a modern doctor might. Sun suggested that “when a person is sick, the doctor should first regulate the patient’s diet and lifestyle.” If that treatment failed he recommended looking at additional therapies, such as acupuncture.

The Five Elements and yin and yang principles are important to Chinese medicine. When the qi is blocked, it can create pain or other problems in the body. The elements of yin and yang are used to identify and resolve these problems. While yin and yang are two opposites, they are always shown together. Ideally, each side will be equally balanced. When they fall out of balance, a person becomes ill.

The Five Elements of fire, earth, wood, metal, and air can also become out of balance, causing sickness. Each part of the body is related to a particular element. For instance, the heart is “fire” and the kidneys are “water.” If a person has a complaint about the kidneys, it is possible his or her “water” is not properly balanced. Determining which elements are imbalanced is very complicated and takes years of study.

Acupuncture and acupressure are techniques to help correct any imbalance between yin and yang or the Five Elements in the body. In acupuncture, thin needles are inserted into certain points in the body that have been determined to control the flow of qi. These points are not necessarily close to the affected part of the body, but they release energy to
that point to aid in healing. The depth of the needles in the skin and the twisting of them all determine the extent of the treatment. In acupressure, a similar release and direction of qi are accomplished with manipulation and pressure put on the same points, without the use of needles. The details of acupuncture practice, including the pressure points on the body, the benefits and side effects, and the ways to apply the needles, were gathered together from 475 to 221 BCE and published in the Yellow Emperor’s Classic on Medicine. Knowledge of acupuncture and its techniques grew rapidly into the fourteenth century. It has been widely practiced in China since this time.

Both acupuncture and acupressure were developed by Daoist masters. Acupuncture began to be noticed in the United States in the early twentieth century, but it was rarely practiced until the 1970s. Since then it has slowly become more widely used in the West. Western medical science, however, has had difficulties understanding how the principles of

Many Daoists practice taijichuan, or tai chi, to help keep their body and mind pure and balanced. The practice of taijichuan has become popular even with people who do not follow the religion. AP IMAGES.
yin and yang and the Five Elements, on which acupuncture and acupressure are based, fit into its very different approach to health and healing. Qi has no similar counterpart in Western medicine. Nevertheless, many Westerners increasingly seek out these Chinese therapies as an alternative to other medical treatments.

The Daoist emphasis on direct observation of nature has influenced the Chinese attitude towards science in general. For example, the Daoist herbalists made minute and detailed drawings of the plants they wished to record, and this in turn led to advancements in the science of botany, the study of plants. The herbalists helped to advance the classification and physical description of plants by their careful drawings.

**Influences on the arts**  This close observation of nature also made a deep impression on Chinese art. Historians point out that one of the high points of Chinese art in the seventeenth century came at a time when Daoist thought and influence were experiencing a renaissance, or rebirth and growth in popularity. Nature became the subject matter for painters; humans were included in such paintings but usually were portrayed as very small creatures against the vastness of nature. Such paintings were meditations in themselves, with each brushstroke the result of precise, planned effort. The paintings could take minutes, days, or years to complete.

Chinese calligraphy owes its development as an art in large part to Daoist monks and believers who practiced such printing as a form of meditation. As with paintings, calligraphy could take minutes or days to create. The final product reproduces Chinese characters, or written words, with ink and brush in a way of simple beauty. One of the most famous Chinese calligraphers was Wang Xianzhi (334–386 CE). Wang, a Daoist, lived during the Jin Dynasty (317–420). He worked in several government positions and eventually achieved a high rank. Wang studied calligraphy under his father, Wang Xizhi. Both were very skilled. Together they were known as *Er Wang*, meaning the Two Wangs. Wang Xianzhi experimented to form his own style of writing calligraphy, known for being bold and sophisticated.

Similarly Daoism has had a strong effect on Chinese literature, including the lyrical and concise verse of the *Dao De Jing* and the storytelling humor of the *Zhuangzi*. The same reverence for nature seen in the visual arts can be found throughout Chinese literature. Li Po (also spelled Li Bai; 701–761) was the author of more than one thousand poems, most
of which deal with nature in the life of a Daoist. Even a war poem, such as his “Moon over Mountain Pass,” which talks of the horrors of battle, begins with a lyrical vision of nature:

A bright moon rising above T’ien Shan
Lost in a vast ocean of clouds.
The long wind, across thousands and thousands of miles,
Blows past the Jade-gate Pass.

Writings of the popular Mao Shan religious sect influenced later Chinese texts, particularly in the Tang Dynasty. Li Po, one of the greatest poets in Chinese history, was a Mao Shan member. One of the central Mao Shan texts, Lives of the Perfected, inspired the Chinese classic, The Intimate Biography of Han Emperor Wu. This story relays the events that unfold when the goddess Xi Wang-mu, Royal Mother of the West, visits Emperor Wu. This, in turn, influenced Tang romantic literature.

Daoist thought influenced the Chinese language itself, with concepts of the Dao, de, and qi, assuming new and more complex meanings. Dao, for instance, came to mean a path to universal harmony and internal balance. De, which had originally meant raw power, came to represent power and strength through virtue. Qi now refers to the vital energy brought by breath.

Influences in and outside China Daoism influenced other religions, including Confucianism and Buddhism. While Confucianism defines social conduct, Daoism describes conduct that goes beyond society. For example, the sense of detachment Daoism teaches often leads to rejection of society and its influences. Daoism is about finding individual balance apart from the world, while Confucianism teaches that such balance is found only in society, by following the rules and rituals of society. Thus, the two systems are themselves representative of the idea of yin and yang. Daoist thought also has its social aspects, however, while Confucianism, with its regard for the mysticism of the Yijing, also has some occult features. In some respects, then, each religion borrowed from the other.

Daoist terms were used to interpret Buddhist principles, especially those regarding meditation. For example, after achieving enlightenment, the Buddha was described as having reached the Dao. Also, the Buddhist idea of nirvana (the end of suffering) was equated with wu wei.

Daoism has also had influence in the West. Daoist techniques of meditation have been incorporated into many forms of religion and
Daoism

into therapeutic (healing) schools. Daoist practices, including feng shui and taijichuan, have found a welcome home in the West, and the Daoist respect for nature has found its way into Western environmental movements. The concept of Dao has been adopted for use in book titles, from business management guides to cookbooks to the interpretation of quantum physics, as in *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, by Fritjof Capra. All these influences of Daoism indicate how strong the concept of the religion is in the world.

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Greco-Roman Religion and Philosophy

The ancient Greek and Roman worlds made important contributions to both religion and philosophy, the study of the nature of truth, knowledge, and moral values. In fact the word *philosophy* is of Greek origin, combining the words *philia* or “to love” with *sophia* or “wisdom.”

Greek and Roman religion was polytheistic; ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped many gods and goddesses. Devout members of both groups believed that there were gods who influenced all natural phenomena. Ancient Greeks developed elaborate myths, or stories that explained these phenomena in terms of how these deities behaved, their strengths and weaknesses, and their histories. Each Greek *polis*, or city-state (independent political units consisting of a city and the countryside around it) had its own set of important gods and goddesses and its own way to worship and honor them. Eventually most Greeks identified a pantheon (a group of all gods and goddesses) of twelve major deities.

The Greeks called this set of twelve gods and goddesses the Olympian gods, because they supposedly lived on Mount Olympus in northern Greece. They were led by Zeus and his wife Hera. The worship of these twelve deities was connected to the political life of the city-state, and all citizens were expected to participate in public worship as part of their duty to the state. The Romans, who greatly admired Greek culture, later identified their own deities with powers similar to the Greek gods. Many of the myths and other stories known about the Greek gods actually have come through Roman authors, who adapted the work of Greek writers or created stories of their own to fit their conception of the Greek deities.

Ancient Greeks and Romans were strongly affected by these gods and goddesses. They worshipped them daily, offering parts of each meal to the gods and taking part in special religious festivals and holidays. The major life cycle events of birth, marriage, and death were also
celebrated by religious rituals and ceremonies. The Greek myths, in turn, attempted to explain the mysteries of life and nature, such as the origin of the world and the creation of the seasons. However, Greek religion, and later Roman religion, had no specific rules of proper behavior. There was no set of religious beliefs or principles to follow. Each citizen was free to decide how he or she should behave, as long as he participated in the public official worship ceremonies.

As a result, in Greek secular (nonreligious) life there was room for discussion about what a good life meant, and even for wondering about how nature is constructed. Greco-Roman philosophy, the system of thinking established and used in ancient Greece and Rome, took over the discussion of these questions. In other cultures these questions were answered by religion. For this reason, Greco-Roman philosophy was revolutionary in the history of human thought. It relied on logical reasoning, established the first scientific vocabulary, and generally laid the foundation for much of future Western philosophy (the philosophy of countries in Europe and the Americas). From the sixth century BCE on, the Greco-Roman tradition served as the dominant religious and philosophical system of the western world until about the fifth century CE.

Greco-Roman philosophy focused on objective inquiry, asking unbiased questions that favor no particular outcome. It is often seen as humanity’s first attempt to provide rational explanations for the workings of the world, without mythological content (traditional legends or stories) or the use of gods to explain existence. The Milesian School (early philosophers who tried to explain how nature was made) searched for an underlying element, arché, constituting all matter. Later Socratic thought, which followed the teachings of the Athenian philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE) added social, ethical, and political theories to established philosophy. These philosophies later inspired Roman thinkers during the period of the Roman Empire (c. 31 BCE–476 CE).

Although many of the answers found by early Greek philosophers regarding the nature of the universe were later proved false, their use of logical analysis led to the rise of the scientific method. The scientific method is an approach to conducting research in which a problem is stated, data or pieces of information are gathered, a hypothesis or intelligent guess is made from these data, and this hypothesis is then tested through experiments. Socrates, for instance, developed a teaching
**Words to Know**

- **apathia**: Stoic belief that happiness comes from freedom from internal turmoil.

- **apeiron**: Anaximander’s term for the first principle, an undefined and unlimited substance.

- **archê**: The beginning or ultimate principle; the stuff of all matter, or the building block of creation.

- **ataraxia**: Serenity, tranquility, or peace of mind.

- **atomism**: The belief that matter is composed of simple, indivisible, physical particles that are too tiny to be observed by human beings.

- **consciousness**: The condition of being aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, and existence.

- **emanation**: That which inevitably flows outward from the transcendental (spiritual, beyond human experience) central principle of reality, “the One,” in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus.

- **empiricism**: Belief that knowledge comes through the senses.

- **Epicureanism**: The philosophy of Epicurus and others that states that the highest good is pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

- **ethics**: Branch of philosophy concerned with the evaluation of human conduct.

- **Logos**: Meaning word or logic, it is the defining pattern of the universe, similar to the Dao in Chinese philosophy.

- **metaphysics**: The branch of philosophy that deals with explanations for the most general questions of being, such as what brought the world into being, and the nature of space, time, God, and the afterlife.

- **metempsychosis**: Transmigration of souls, or the migration of the soul into a different form, animal, or object after death.

- **morality**: Following the rules of right behavior and conduct.

- **pantheon**: A collection of deities, or gods and goddesses.

- **philosophy**: The rational or logical investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct.

- **rationalism**: Belief that knowledge can come exclusively from the mind.

- **Skepticism**: A philosophical system that doubted the possibility of ever discovering real truth through the senses.

- **Socratic**: Having to do with the philosopher Socrates and his method of asking questions of students to develop an idea.

- **Sophists**: A group of traveling teachers in ancient Greece who doubted the possibility of knowing all the truth through the physical senses.

- **Stoicism**: The philosophical system that holds that people should pursue the knowledge of human and divine things through the use of logical systems. It also says that we may not be able to control natural events, but we can control the way we react to them.
method in which the student follows a logical path through questions and answers. Certain Greek scientific findings did prove accurate. For example, the concept of atoms as building blocks of matter, usually thought of as a nineteenth-century discovery, was actually first developed by two Greek philosophers in about 400 BCE.

Other Greek concepts come close to the worldviews of Buddhism and Daoism, which see all things in life as being interconnected. The Greeks attempted to view all aspects of the universe as parts of the same whole. Though often looked down upon in their times, the early Greeks and Romans made many important philosophical advances.

**History and development: Greco-Roman religion**

The origins of ancient Greek religion go back thousands of years. The Greeks took some of their ideas from the ancient Minoan civilization (c. 3000–c. 1000 BCE), located primarily on the island of Crete, and some from the Mycenaean civilization (c. 2000–c. 1100 BCE), centered primarily on the Peloponnesian peninsula of southern Greece. They also borrowed from Egyptian religions and from west-Asian civilizations. By about 900 BCE these numerous gods and goddesses had begun to be organized into the pantheon, or collection of deities, honored in ancient Greece.

**The Religion’s rise** Two writers are credited with this task of organizing the gods and the myths surrounding them: Homer (born c. 900 BCE), and Hesiod, who lived in about the eighth century BCE. Homer’s famous epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* give order to the chaos of all the separate myths that existed at the time. An epic poem is a long narrative poem that relays the story of heroic deeds. Homer explained the family relationships between the various gods, gave each one a title and a specific power or responsibility, such as Zeus, as the supreme god; Poseidon, the god of sea; or Ares, the god of war. He also gave them very human qualities. Homer is held responsible for raising twelve gods over the others and giving them Mount Olympus as their living place. This phase of Greek religion is called Homeric, after the poet.

While Homer’s gods could sometimes be cruel or selfish, they all demonstrated a basic moral code, or rules for good behavior. They were loyal to friends and family, honest, and brave. About a century later, the poet Hesiod, in his poems called the *Theogony* (a family tree of the gods) and *Works and Days* established the Olympian gods at the
center of Greek religion. Similarly, two Roman poets created a mixed Greco-Roman mythology and pantheon of gods by adapting the Greek myths. These two writers were Virgil (70–19 BCE) and Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE). Virgil was the author of the *Aeneid*, a kind of sequel to Homer’s *Iliad*, which tells the tale of Aeneas and the founding of Rome, while Ovid is best known for the *Metamorphoses*, an epic collection and expansion of Greek and Roman myths.

The Olympian gods remained at the center of Greek culture and religion for several hundred years. The climax of their power came during the middle of the fifth century BCE, in the polis of Athens. In 490 BCE Greece was invaded by the forces of the Persian Empire. Athenians (citizens of Athens) led the resistance to the Persian invaders and defeated their much larger army at the battle of Marathon. When the Persians mounted a second invasion ten years later, Athenian leaders were vital in driving them away. Because of its role in the Persian wars, Athens became the strongest polis in all of Greece, a leader in culture as well as in politics.

The writers Aristophanes (525–456 BCE), Sophocles (496–406 BCE), and Euripides (480–405 BCE) helped clarify the powers and the relationship of the Olympian gods to human beings and to each other in their plays. In much the same manner as Homer and Hesiod before them, the playwrights examined historical and contemporary events and attributed the causes of those events to the gods. Plays like Aeschylus’s *The Oresteia*, Sophocles’s *Antigone*, and Euripides’s *Elektra* emphasize the power of the gods and the uselessness of human effort in the face of divine indifference.

**The Religion's decline** The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) was one of the most widespread and damaging of the events the Athenian playwrights chose as the subjects of their plays. The war involved almost all of the Greek world in a long and bloody conflict. The primary combatants in the war were Athens and its major rival for power, Sparta. Athens lost this struggle, which brought an end to its Golden Age (c. 460–430 BCE). Warfare continued between other rivals in the Greek world for the next two centuries. When a king from the north, Philip II of Macedon (359–336 BCE), launched an attack on the city-states, the situation for the city-states worsened. Philip’s son Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) completed the conquest of Greece. The Olympian gods seemed powerless to help them. Ultimately, the Greek pantheon lost its influence in Greek life, and by the fourth century CE, Christianity had taken its place.
About Greco-Roman Religion

- **Belief.** Greco-Roman religion was polytheistic, believing in many gods. The twelve main gods formed a pantheon, or group. All the gods could involve themselves in human affairs and often acted very much like humans.

- **Followers.** All Greek and Roman citizens were obliged to follow the religion. This symbolized their obedience and loyalty to the state.

- **Name of God.** The main god in the ancient Greek religion was Zeus, who was known to Romans as Jupiter.

- **Symbols.** Images of the gods were often displayed in paintings and sculptures. The gods often carried objects that represented them and their powers. For instance, the arrow was a symbol of Artemis, goddess of the hunt.

- **Worship.** Ritual sacrifices were a common element of Greco-Roman religion. Daily prayers were offered privately in the home.

- **Dress.** Worshippers wore no special attire.

- **Texts.** The works of Homer, Hesiod, Ovid, and Virgil collected and organized Greco-Roman myths. Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* remain popular with modern readers.

- **Sites.** Delphi was a special location to Greeks, who would consult with its famous oracle.

- **Observances.** Each member of the Greco-Roman pantheon had festival days attributed to him or her, such as the Great Dionysia held each spring in Athens in honor of the fertility god Dionysius.

- **Phrases.** There is no common word or phrase that was shared between worshippers.

The gods of the Roman pantheon lost their influence in a similar process. From the reign of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE), Roman emperors were worshipped as gods after their death, and the cult of the emperor partly displaced the worship of the traditional gods. Constantine the Great (c. 288–337) became the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, and by the end of the fourth century Theodosius I (c. 346–395), also a Christian, officially banned the practice of the old Roman polytheistic religion.

**History and development: Greco-Roman philosophy**

Some believe the beginning of early Greek philosophy can be traced to contact with ancient Egypt and Babylonia. By the seventh century BCE Egyptians had allowed Ionian (from the west coast of modern-day Turkey) traders to establish a seaport on a branch of the Nile River
at the city of Naucratis. One theory holds that traders brought ancient Egyptian wisdom and practices home to the shores of Asia Minor. The prosperous center of Miletus, on the Ionian coast, was one place where many of these travelers gathered and distributed their knowledge to other traders throughout the Mediterranean world. Whether indigenous (native) or borrowed, the Ionian, or Milesian, School was the beginning of Greek philosophy.

**The Milesian school** The thinkers of the Milesian School described the nature of the universe and of change and motion by the use of reasoning. Writers and thinkers such as Thales (c. 636–c. 546 BCE), Anaximander (c. 611–c. 547 BCE), and Anaximenes (sixth century BCE) concentrated on the study of nature. They searched for the archē. They believed that this archē was the first substance or idea, which predated anything else in the universe. The Milesian philosophers thought that, if they could discover the archē, they would understand something important about the nature of the universe.

For Thales, the archē was water. Although many of his students rejected his ideas, the Ionian philosopher was still honored for the boldness and innovation of his ideas. Thales is also thought to have introduced geometry (a type of mathematics dealing with angles and lines, and with their measurement) to Greece. An able astronomer, he correctly predicted an eclipse of the sun (when light from the sun is blocked by the moon as it comes between the earth and sun) in 585 BCE. An astronomer is someone who studies the planets and stars.

Thales’s pupil, Anaximander, also attempted to give detailed explanations of nature. He defined the primary source of everything as the *apeiron*, or the unlimited and infinite. This concept in some ways is similar to the modern conception of space, in its idea of something without end. Anaximenes, the last of the Milesian School, believed that the primary substance was air or vapor. In his view, the thinning and thickening of air gave substance to life. Heraclitus (c. 535–c. 475 BCE) thought in much the same way as the earlier nature philosophers. He was also from Ionia, though from Ephesus and not from Miletus. Heraclitus believed in fire as the primary element. Therefore, he thought that all things came from and returned to fire. Even though everything was always changing, changes were structured by the Logos, the logic of the universe. The human soul, according to Heraclitus, was but one part of the universal fire.
A second major school of thought revolved around the mathematician Pythagoras (c. 582–c. 507 BCE), who believed that the universe could be explained in terms of numbers. Pythagoras was a native of the Greek island of Samos. He and his followers formed a religious/philosophical society in southern Italy that practiced secret rites and believed in metempsychosis, the doctrine, or set of beliefs, that states that after death the soul moves from one person to another, or even to an animal or an object. The unity of the world, as far as Pythagoreans were concerned, could be found not in a physical substance but in the relations of numbers, as seen in the regular progress of musical chords and harmonies. Pythagoras, for example, is credited with discovering the numerical relations of tones to divisions of a stretched string. He developed a numerical system to explain the harmony generated by these tones that is still in use in modern music. For the followers of Pythagoras, the aim of human life was to live in harmony with these numerical relationships.

Italy was also home to the Eleatic School, named for the location of its major thinkers in Elea, Italy. Some say the founder of this tradition was Xenophanes (c. 570–c. 480 BCE) of Colophon. Others give credit to Parmenides (born c. 511 BCE). Xenophanes was the first of the so-called pantheists, who found God in everything. For him, the deities of Greek religion and mythology were misrepresentations of the reality of the universe. God, he insisted, was in no way similar to the humanlike pantheon of Greek deities. Rather, God had no physical being and was eternal and universal. Parmenides, on the other hand, argued that being itself was the one and only constant reality. All changes were simply illusions of the senses. Therefore, only the use of reason, without the use of the senses, could bring humans close to an understanding of the real truth of existence.
Empedocles and the four elements

An attempt at compromise was proposed by Empedocles (c. 495–c. 435 BCE). He thought that the four unchanging elements of earth, water, air, and fire all combined to create the harmonious world of movement and variety experienced by the senses. His work led to a basic law of modern physics. His theory of elements remained in use until the modern era. More ideas about the mixing of elements to create all of matter came from Anaxagoras (c. 500–c. 428 BCE). With the rise of Anaxagoras, the center of philosophy moved from the fringes of the empire to Athens, in the heart of Greece. For this philosopher, everything was infinitely divisible into tiny particles of many kinds, which were mixed together by the organizing principle of *nous* or “mind.” This *nous* was not godlike. It did not create matter, but only organized it.

The work of the fifth-century BCE Atomists, who believed that all matter is made up of tiny, indivisible, and indestructible particles, marked a high point in the search for a rational explanation for the existence of the universe. Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BCE) believed that everything was made up of small primary bodies or elements, called atoms. He theorized that these atoms were in constant motion. Heavier atoms formed Earth, while lighter ones made up the planets and stars. He further stated that the senses see the collective presence (the “big picture”) rather than the separateness and diversity of atoms. Therefore, the senses could not be trusted to understand ultimate reality. Thought and the mind were the instruments to be used for such a goal.

One other important early school of philosophy was formed by the Sophists of the fifth century BCE. The Sophists were teachers in Athens who were skeptical about what the human mind could know. Protagoras (c. 490–c. 421 BCE) was one of the better-known Sophists. He believed that truth is relative, depending on perspective or point of view. He is famous for saying, “Man is the measure of all things.” Rather than rejecting the senses as tools to be used in the search for knowledge and truth, the Sophists believed that all knowledge was necessarily based on information gathered by the senses. Finding truth on both sides of an argument, because all truth depends on perspective, became a cornerstone in Western education.
Socrates and Plato

With Socrates (469–399 BCE), Greek philosophy entered a new period. The Sophists had already shifted discussions away from the substance of nature, or natural science, to the realm of morality and society. Morality is a system of acceptable human behavior. Socrates deepened and expanded the trend. He dismissed the material and physical theories of earlier thinkers to focus on the thoughts and opinions of individuals. This led him to inquire into the nature of such virtues as courage, justice, and morality. He developed an ethical system of behavior rather than attempting to explain origins or the afterlife. Socrates wrote nothing down, and what is known of him comes from his pupils, especially Plato (428–348 BCE).

Socrates is understood to have lived by the principles that he created. He famously stated that he knew nothing but the fact that he knew nothing. For him, questions of metaphysics were unimportant. (Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with explanations about what brought the world into being, and the nature of space, time, God, and the afterlife.) He believed that the soul was the source of a person’s consciousness and morality, and that true understanding should lead to the living of a good life. He emphasized that one could live a good life by questioning one’s own preconceived notions, particularly through a method of self-examination called elenchus. This method ultimately led to the well-known Socratic method called the dialectic, or finding the truth through questioning and considering opposing beliefs and then modifying one’s own beliefs. Socrates was brought to trial and executed in 399 BCE on the charges of disbelieving in the gods and corrupting the young people of Athens through his teachings.

The teachings of Socrates gave rise to many schools. Perhaps his most important student was Plato, whose teachings and writings, such as The Republic, have been among the most influential in Western philosophy. Plato’s writings consist primarily of dialogues, or conversations, usually with Socrates as one of the speakers. Plato wrote about moral virtue, how to lead a good life, and the nature of knowledge. He also wrote about the immortality of the soul. In fact, Plato was the first of the Greek philosophers to offer an extensive argument concluding that the soul was immortal. In many ways Plato blended much of the work that had come before. His conception was that humans wanted to become one with the bigger and eternal world of the Idea and the Ideal, of which the waking world was only a shadow.
Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was a student at Plato’s school, the Academy. Aristotle later opened his own school, the Lyceum, and became the tutor to the Greek king and conqueror Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE). He wrote about politics, art theory, nature classification, physics (the science of matter and energy and their interactions), and speech. For Aristotle, a person’s intellect was his or her most important quality. Aristotle did not try to discover any ultimate reality. Rather, his starting point was the world of reality that humans perceive. He taught that the intellect should be used in the observance of nature. In terms of ethics, he taught a balanced path, featuring the avoidance of extremes. The highest good for anything was the realization of its nature and purpose. Hence, for humans, the highest good was to exercise the specifically human skill of rationality (reasoned thought). Aristotle and Plato were perhaps the most influential of the classical Greek philosophers.

**Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism** Classical philosophy after Aristotle is sometimes called Hellenistic philosophy. The small, independent city-states of ancient Greece were incorporated into the empire founded by Alexander the Great and then later folded into the Roman Empire. New cities and centers of learning were founded, such as Alexandria, Egypt, with a library containing over 700,000 volumes. Indeed, even after the conquest of Greece by Rome in 146 BCE Greek schools of
thought continued to thrive. Alongside the followers of Aristotle, who continued to spread his ideas, three other major schools of thought were later developed: Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism. These lasted until the Roman Empire was dissolved in 476 CE.

Stoicism, founded by Zeno of Citium (c. 340–265 BCE) in about 300 BCE, got its name because the original thinkers met in a stoa, or a columned porch. Zeno adapted the Socratic ideas of virtue and blended them with a description of the physical universe as explained by Heraclitus and Aristotle. These ideas were later built upon by Zeno’s followers, in particular Chrysippus (c. 280–c. 207 BCE), who incorporated some of Plato’s theories. Stoics of the Roman period included Epictetus (c. 50–c. 138 CE) and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE). Epictetus said that happiness came from freedom from internal turmoil, or *apathia*, a concept similar to Buddhism’s *nirvana*, which is the end of suffering.

Basically, Stoics believed that a moral life should be lived on the principles of physics and ethics. That is, people should pursue knowledge through the use of logical systems of thought. Stoics further believed that all parts of the world were interrelated, part of a huge and unchanging chain of causation (producing an effect). The greatest good was therefore brought about when human and divine will were in harmony and when humans acted in agreement with nature. The ideal virtuous person would approach knowledge from this viewpoint. The Stoics held that although people cannot control what happens to them, they can control how they react to such happenings. In this way, unhappiness is caused, not by the world, but by the individual’s reactions to the world. In a sense, Stoicism proposed that people should meet life’s challenges with dignity.

The goal of Stoicism was *ataraxia*, or peace of mind. This was also the goal of Epicureanism, a philosophy founded by Epicurus (341–270 BCE). For Epicurus, philosophy was the art of making humans happy. All divine or spiritual elements were made secondary to ethical ones, and pleasure was considered the highest good. This concept of pleasure centered on the avoidance of pain and the attainment of ataraxia through intellectual, rather than physical pleasures. According to Epicurus, people were to live simply and not desire the wrong things. Acting justly and honestly was wise not because of some abstract idea of virtue, but because doing so would prevent a person from suffering any retribution from society. Indeed, Epicureans believed that the soul died with the body and, therefore, death was not to be feared.
The Skeptics formed another Hellenic school of thought, as founded by Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365–275 BCE) and expanded by the Roman Sextus Empiricus in about 200 CE. The philosophers of this school doubted the possibility of ever discovering real truth through the senses. As a result, they taught that people should reserve judgment on things and thereby gain release from the tyranny of theories. While they held that the nature of absolute ethical values could never be known, the Skeptics taught that living by the customs of society was wise.

The last of the great Greco-Roman philosophical systems, Neoplatonism, was developed by Plotinus (205–270 CE). An Egyptian of Roman descent, Plotinus traveled in the East and borrowed ideas and practices, such as breath control and meditation (focused thought with the goal of gaining spiritual understanding), from Indian religions. Plotinus added these Eastern ideas to the writings of Plato, and developed the idea of emanation. This idea held that the universe was created by a series of radiations that began in a divine source, like the ripples flowing out from a stone dropped in water. Neoplatonists called this original source “the One.” The concept of the One led to the concept of the Logos, or the divine order of things, sometimes called the Divine Mind. Beneath this was the World Soul. All three of these realities were linked together, and Plotinus believed that individuals wanted to return to the Divine Mind and then be absorbed back into the One. Sin was the result of being kept separate from the One. These concepts had a powerful influence on early Christianity. The idea of emanation is very close to the idea developed by Christian theologians to explain the concept of the Trinity, the union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three divine persons in one God. Moreover, Plotinus’s concept of sin is very close to the Christian concept. Sin, for Plotinus, came about from humans being separated from the One, just as in Christian theology sin arises from humankind’s separation from God.

**Sects and schisms**

Greek religion was both a public and private matter. But there were no written rules for the religion, no moral code, no dogma (established opinion) or church teaching. The mystery cults could not properly be called sects, as they were simply another way of honoring various gods. However, what could be called a schism or split in Greek religion came about when the Greek philosophers began to offer counter explanations to the myths about the workings of nature.

There were several instances where philosophy conflicted with religion, but the most famous was the trial and execution of Socrates.
When he was seventy years old, he was charged with impiety: corrupting young people, insulting the gods of Athens, and teaching about new gods. Socrates argued that Apollo, god of wisdom, had given him the duty to search for the truth and to encourage others to do the same. A jury of 501 Athenians (large enough to give a cross-section of Athenian society and too many to bribe) finally condemned him to death; the method was by drinking a poison made from hemlock. Socrates, a strong believer in the rule of law, took the poison. While Socrates may have broken the laws of Athens by teaching new ideas, his real crime was that one of his students betrayed the city during the Peloponnesian War and caused its defeat.

When the Romans adopted Greek religion, they took many of the gods and the myths and simply gave them new names. Like the Greeks, the Romans believed in many gods, each with a different power: some controlled love, others dealt with crops and fertility, and others controlled storms. There were, however, differences in the two religions. The Greeks believed that the gods and goddesses had come to give order to chaos. For Greeks, balance was an important principle. They felt that the gods helped humans to establish a balance between the forces of nature and the forces of law and reason. The Romans, however, were more interested in raw power than in balance. Rome incorporated other foreign gods into its pantheon. Among these were the goddess Cybele from the city of Pessinus in Asia Minor, and Mithra, the ancient Persian god of light and wisdom. Mithra offered the promise of individual salvation through the belief in the immortality of the soul. A mystery cult, Mithraism, grew up around this imported god.

**Basic beliefs: Greco-Roman religion**

Greek religion was dominated by the Olympian gods, who made their home on Mount Olympus in northern Greece. Even though most sources say there were twelve gods living on Mount Olympus, there are fourteen gods listed next. Hades did not live on Olympus, although most myths about him associate him with the Olympian gods, and Dionysius was a later addition to the pantheon:
Zeus was a sky god, but he also represented order. He maintained order in the universe and in the home, protected strangers who arrived asking for hospitality, punished people who broke their sworn word, and served as god of intellectual thought.

Zeus’s wife Hera was the goddess of marriage, childbirth, and women. She was also sacred to herders of cattle; Homer often called her “ox-eyed Hera.”

Aphrodite was the goddess of love and beauty.

Ares was the god of war. In warlike Sparta he was held in high regard, but in Athens he was worshipped in the same building where people were tried for murder.

Athena was the goddess of wisdom. According to Greek myth, she was not born the way that her fellow gods were born, but sprang

Heraclitus

While Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are usually considered the founders of modern Western thought, earlier thinkers also significantly influenced Western civilization. One of the most interesting of these thinkers was Heraclitus, who was born to a noble family in Ephesus in about 535 BCE. Though he came a generation later than the Milesian School, Heraclitus continued their tradition of looking for the fundamental substance of all matter. Unlike the other philosophers of Asia Minor, he claimed that everything came from fire. With such a volatile element as his core substance, Heraclitus went on to argue that change was the only reality in the cosmos and that stability was mere illusion. One of his most famous sayings is “We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not.” Although the universe was held to be in continual flux, the Logos, literally meaning “word” or “logic,” served as an ordering principle. This concept influenced not only Plato but also the Neoplatonists. According to Heraclitus, the soul was part of the cosmic fire, and only one universal soul truly existed. Heraclitus’s model of nature essentially underlies all modern physics and metaphysics.

Heraclitus has a dominant position in Greco-Roman philosophy despite the fact that little of his original writings still exist. Indeed, the 120 surviving pieces of his thought, in the form of short quotations, are referred to as the Fragments in various modern editions of his work. Because of the brief, mysterious nature of his prose, he was often called the “obscurer” or the “riddler.” His poetic statements have more in common with the lyrical Dao De Jing of ancient Chinese philosophy than with other early Greek philosophy. Many scholars have pointed out Heraclitus’s links with Eastern religions. For example, the idea of permanent flux or change is similar to the Buddhist concept of impermanence. The Logos is often equated with the Dao, or the Way, in Daoist belief.
directly from Zeus’s forehead. Because she was the protector and
defender of Athens, she is often depicted as armed.

Artemis, the goddess of hunting and wild places, was also a moon
goddess. She was Apollo’s twin sister, and young men and girls
held her sacred because she was a virgin.

Hermes was the messenger of the gods.

Apollo was the sun god and the god of music and prophecy, or pre-
dictions on the future. He also represented law and order, appearing
in court in Aeschylus’s plays.

Hephaestus was the god of fire and crafts requiring fire, such as met-
alworking. He was also the god of volcanoes.

Poseidon was the god of the sea, but he was also god of horses and
earthquakes.

Hestia was the goddess of the home and hearth. In that role, she
served as the protectress of order within the family. Although
she was worshipped in households throughout Greece, the center
of her cult was at Delphi, where her sacred hearth was kept.

Demeter was the goddess of agriculture and, some critics say, may
have been a version of the Earth Mother worshipped by prehis-
toric Europeans.

Hades was the god of the underworld.

Dionysius was the god of wine, fruit, fertility, and ecstasy (joy).

Dionysius’s myth is much more complex than that of the other
Olympians. As a child, the story goes, he was torn apart by
wild women and spent three years in the underworld. The wor-
ship of Dionysius played a significant role in the development
of Greek drama.

The Romans adopted this pantheon and gave many of them dif-
ferent names. The Roman gods were, in the same order, Jupiter,
Juno, Venus, Mars, Minerva, Diana, Mercury, Apollo, Vulcan,
Neptune, Vesta, Ceres, Pluto, and Bacchus. (In parts of the Roman
Empire, the emperor was also worshipped as a god.) These gods,
along with many minor deities who came to Earth to do the bidding
of the gods, controlled the fate of humankind. Zeus also appeared
in human form, or even in animal form at times, to father children
by mortal women. Some of his sons became the heroes of Greek
legend.
Protecting and serving the gods  For both the Greeks and the Romans, worship of the Olympian gods was both a civic responsibility and a personal choice. Although the gods could be approached by individuals petitioning for divine favor, it was much more important that the city or city-state as a whole benefit from the goodwill of the gods. Each city-state had its own protecting god or goddess. For example, Athens had Athena as its patron goddess. One of the most famous Greek temples, the Parthenon, was built to serve as Athena’s seat of power on Earth. Hera was the patron goddess of Argos, and Poseidon the patron god of Corinth. The patron goddess of Rome was Roma Dea, who was not one of the Olympian twelve but was nonetheless a very important goddess for Roman citizens.

Priests and priestesses took care of these temples and supervised the official sacrifices to the gods and goddesses. Some priestesses also served as oracles, persons who acted as a medium or messenger between the gods and humans. Greeks would go to oracles to receive messages from the gods in order to determine what they should do in the future. One of the most famous of the oracles was at the temple of Apollo at Delphi, which is located in central Greece.

The Greeks believed in a soul, which they called psyche, but beliefs varied as to whether it survived after death. The traditional belief was that both good and bad souls went to the underworld, Hades, escorted there by the god Hermes. There, those who were evil were punished in a place called Tartaros, while good souls lived in Elysium, a place of eternal happiness and sunlight in a portion of Hades. Others believed that the soul resided in the grave; still others felt that it left the body at death and floated in the sky.

Creation Both Romans and Greeks used myths to explain the creation of the universe and their place in it. For the Greeks, the original gods emerged from chaos and brought order to the universe. The earth goddess, Gaia, and the sky god, Uranus, had children, including Rhea and Chronos. Uranus, however, was afraid of his children’s power, and he kept them locked in a cave until finally Chronos challenged him and reestablished order in the universe. Rhea and Chronos then repeated the pattern: they had Zeus, Hestia, Hera, Demeter, Poseidon, and Hades. Chronos, like his father before him, was afraid of his children and swallowed them as they were born. His mother hid the infant Zeus, who later killed his father, cut his brothers and sisters out of the corpse, and then became king of all the gods, creating order from the madness of Chronos’s actions.
Though the Romans did not develop a separate myth about the creation of the world itself, they did attach great importance to the founding of Rome. In addition to Virgil’s story of the founding of Rome, the Aeneid, there is a second major myth that explains the founding of the city. Romulus and Remus were two brothers, sons of the god of warfare, Mars. They were separated from their mother as infants. They were rescued by a female wolf and then was raised by a shepherd and his wife. When they reached adulthood they discovered their true heritage and established a city on the river Tiber where the she-wolf had fed them. Later, though, they became enemies, competing with each other to be the leader of the new city. Romulus killed his brother and became the king, giving his name to the city he founded, Rome.

**Mystery cults** While the worship of the Olympian gods was a civic duty, there were other forms of worship that gave individuals a direct relationship with the divine. In ancient Greece the Eleusinian and Orphic mystery cults offered people the chance to come face-to-face with the god or goddess. A cult is a religion that is regarded as unorthodox, or untraditional; it usually has a small number of followers compared to other religions. Although their mystic rites were kept secret, it is known that they required elaborate initiations, including purification rites (rituals to clean the new members and make them pure), accepting occult or magical knowledge, and acting out a sacred drama.

Many of these mystery cults celebrated a cycle of death and rebirth. The Eleusinian mysteries, held at the sacred site of Eleusis near Athens, for example, reenacted for believers the myth of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The story tells that Persephone was so beautiful that Hades himself kidnapped her and carried her off to be queen of the underworld. Demeter, mourning for her daughter, caused all growing things to fade. This so alarmed the rest of the gods that they ordered Hades to release Persephone to her mother. Hades could not do so lawfully, however, because Persephone had eaten a tiny amount of food while she was in the underworld, tying her to it. The compromise worked out was that Persephone had to spend six months of the year with Hades in the underworld and six months with her mother. On one level this is a story about the seasons and fertility, but on another it is a story of death and resurrection, or rising from the dead. Historians believe that initiates to the mystery cults were given a chance to symbolically “die” and were then brought symbolically back to life.
The relationship between death and rebirth was also evident in another of the Greek mystery religions: the Orphic Mysteries, centered in Crete. Orpheus, the myth states, was the greatest musician in the world. His wife, Euridice, was killed by a snake bite and her spirit descended into the underworld. Orpheus followed her there, charmed the underworld with his music, and won the right to bring her back to the world of the living, but he was forbidden from looking behind himself on his way back to the surface. Orpheus was unable to keep from looking back and as a result lost Euridice forever. Just like the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Orphic Mysteries celebrated a process of death and rebirth, offering its initiates a chance at life beyond death.
While historians know of other mystery cults active in ancient Greece, such as the Pythagorean Mysteries, details are sketchy or missing. One exception to this was the cult of Dionysius. A fertility god, Dionysius was honored by rituals fully as unique as those of the Orphic or Orphic Mysteries. Dionysius was a relatively new god in the pantheon, not mentioned by Homer. By the fifth century BCE he had become one of the more popular gods. During the festivals honoring him, people sang, danced, and performed sacred plays. These plays later developed into classical Greek drama, which in turn influenced the structure of Western theater. In Rome the mysteries of Bacchus, the god of wine, were also observed in what is called the Bacchanalia. Though these celebrations of Bacchus began as religious celebrations, over time they became simply an excuse for drunkenness and immoral behavior and were banned in Rome in 186 BCE.

Basic beliefs: Greco-Roman philosophy

Three main features are found in all of Greco-Roman philosophy. The first is the attempt to understand the existence and function of the universe in natural instead of supernatural terms. The second is the desire to guide conduct by understanding the nature of reality and the place of human beings and human behavior in the greater scheme of things. The third is critical thinking. This involves a careful examination of the foundations upon which ideas rely.

Ancient Greek philosophy was the first system of thought to propose rational conceptions, or ideas, of how the universe came into being and how it is constructed. Until about 2,500 years ago thinkers attributed the existence of the universe to divine forces, such as gods. Beginning with the Milesian School, Greek philosophers searched for the basic substances that made up the universe and drove it. Early philosophers, such as Thales, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, believed that the ultimate basis of reality rested on a single kind of substance. This type of belief is now called monism.

Another question widely considered by the Greeks concerned how knowledge was gained. Some, such as Thales and Aristotle, felt that knowledge was attained through the senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste); these thinkers were called empiricists. Others, such as Parmenides and Plato, believed that the mind could gain knowledge without the aid of the senses; these thinkers were called rationalists. Aristotle
attempted to resolve the question of how knowledge is gained by categorizing knowledge based on the objects in question and how certain one could be about those objects.

Mathematics, for example, allows certain definitive truths, while human behavior does not. Aristotle proposed four causes that needed to be addressed: (1) the material cause, regarding the material from which objects are made; (2) the formal cause, regarding objects’ patterns of form; (3) the efficient cause, regarding how objects came into being; and (4) the final cause, regarding the goals or purposes of objects. The nature of change and stability were also central concerns of Greek philosophers. While Heraclitus, for example, thought the universe featured eternal change, Parmenides declared change an illusion. According to him, reality was constant and never changed.

**Ethics** Many of the Greek philosophers also dealt with ethics, a set of moral principles or values about what is right and what is wrong. Among the pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus taught that humans should not attempt to stop change because change is the way of the world. Therefore, it is wise to be able to adapt. Socrates was the first of the Greek philosophers to make ethics a primary concern. For him, all knowledge came at birth, and this knowledge only needed to be discovered by each individual. A human could never perform wrong actions knowingly. Instead, Socrates argued, immoral behavior was the result of ignorance. For Socrates, knowledge was also more essential than behavior. If a person knew about good and bad, then he or she would act for the good. Plato believed that just as a good society is ruled by a just king, so a good person is controlled by reason that has been nurtured by philosophy. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that ethical actions were not preordained or universal concepts. Rather, a moral action was one that had a moral outcome. The best life, according to Aristotle, was one following a moderate course, as guided by reason.

**Consideration of the supernatural** The question of immortality was also important for Greek philosophers. Heraclitus’s notion of the fire-soul comes close to addressing immortality, while the Pythagorean belief in the transmigration of souls (the belief that souls find another body to reside in after death) held that life continued after death, only in different forms. Plato made the first coherent statements about immortality. In fact, through a series of dialogues he sought to prove the immortality
of the soul. In his writings Plato repeatedly refers to the reward of the afterlife as an incentive to performing good deeds in the earthly life.

For Aristotle, on the contrary, the pragmatic world of the senses and the categorization of all things, from animals to the forms of drama, left little room for supernatural discussions. Others, such as the Epicureans, firmly denied an afterlife and said that obtaining pleasure on Earth was the sole purpose of life. Linked to this is the doctrine of eternal return, or the belief that everything that happens has happened before and will happen again, since both the universe and time are cyclical. This was a standard feature of Pythagorean and Stoic thought.

Sacred writings

There were no sacred texts in either Greek or Roman religion, but the works of Homer, Hesiod, Ovid, and Virgil do collect and give form to the ancient myths and also to the relations between the gods and goddesses. Homer, in the Iliad and the Odyssey, tells the story of the Trojan War (c. 1200 BCE), the tale of a war between the people of Greece and Troy, a powerful rival city on Asia Minor. In these works, Homer organizes the Greek pantheon of gods, carefully noting all the relationships between each of the gods and their individual spheres of power. He also gives order to the legends or myths of these gods, blending sometimes contradictory tales into a system of myths that have survived into modern times. The Homeric Hymns, thirty-four ancient Greek poems to the gods, have also been attributed to Homer, though it seems these were written over a large span of time by a number of different authors. They were meant to be sung during religious rites.

Hesiod furthered the process of collecting the myths and defining the gods with his Theogony, which supplies more information about the relationships between the gods and goddesses. Also, in his Works and Days, he provides a history of what he called the five ages of humans, from the Golden Age, ruled by the god Chronos, to the Silver Age of Zeus, the warlike Bronze Age, the Heroic Age of the Trojan War, and ending with Hesiod’s own time, the Iron Age.

Virgil and Ovid provided a similar service for the Romans. In his Aeneid, Virgil transforms the sometimes bickering and petty couple Zeus and Hera into the thundering and all-powerful Roman god Jupiter and the angry Juno. Ovid, in his fifteen-volume Metamorphoses, supplies a
Plato’s Allegory of the Cave

Plato created one of the most famous analogies (a comparison in story form) in Western thought with his discussion of how much, or little, humans perceive of actual reality. For Plato, reality was divided into a higher and a lower part. The lower part included the physical universe and whatever was learned and experienced through the senses. The higher part, the Ideal, included all of actual reality, eternal and unchanging. Plato explained the visible and constantly changing world as one that merely resembled the higher Ideal world. He said that there existed Forms, or unchanging megaconcepts. Therefore, truth as perceived by humans only approximated the Ideal, or the Form of Truth. Likewise, what humans may see as good is only truly good insofar as it resembles or comes close to the Form of Good.

Plato explained this theory in *The Republic* by comparing what humans see in their waking lives to what prisoners in a cave might see, the so-called Allegory (symbolic story) of the Cave. These prisoners are chained with their backs to the cave opening. The only images they see are shadows cast upon the wall of the cave by actual objects outside. Thus, what humans, trapped within physical bodies, experience through the senses is only a shadow of actual reality. Plato taught that at death, souls leave their bodies and enter the higher realm of the eternal Forms. There, each soul chooses a new body and life, thus forgetting the lessons learned in the higher realm. Over the course of a lifetime humans are sometimes able to recapture the wisdom hidden within.

History of the world, from creation to Ovid’s own age. In doing so, he uses various Greek myths to create his historical survey.

**Philosophical texts** While many of the early Greek philosophers, up to and including Socrates, either did not record their thoughts or wrote books and essays that were destroyed, the philosophers from the time of Plato onward did leave books of their teachings. These are essential for understanding the principles of the various philosophical schools. Among pre-Socratic philosophers, a part of Parmenides’s work is found in his *On Nature*. Heraclitus also left behind writing, usually referred to as the *Fragments* or sometimes the *Cosmic Fragments*. Several other early philosophers, including Empedocles and Anaxagoras, also left behind brief writings.

The first comprehensive works in Greek philosophy come from Plato. Important among Plato’s books are *The Republic, Phaedo, Symposium,* and *Timaeus*, in which he attempts to connect the soul, the state, and the cosmos. Aristotle wrote *Organum*, dealing with logic. He also wrote *Physics, Metaphysics, De Anima, De Poetica*, and other texts on natural science and physics. *The Meditations*, by Marcus Aurelius, deals with practical questions surrounding Stoicism.
Sacred symbols

There is no one powerful symbol that represents either Greek or Roman religion. Instead, various gods and goddesses have symbols attaching to them. Athena, the patroness of Athens, carried a shield, or *aegis*, representing her role as a divine protector of the city. The arrow was the symbol for the Greek gods Apollo and Artemis, as well as for Eros, god of love; for the Romans the arrow was the symbol of Cupid, god of love. The arrow was also used on Roman coins to represent the god Mithra. The lightning bolt was a symbol for Zeus and his Roman equivalent, Jupiter. It would be thrown by these sky gods to punish, water, or fertilize the earth or its creatures.

The Greeks also adapted the Egyptian sphinx, the lion with a person’s head. The sign or symbol of the sun was also worshipped by the Greeks and Romans as a life-giving source. This could be simply a circle or a stylized sun with rays. The frog was a symbol for fertility for the Romans, often representing Venus, their version of the Greek goddess Aphrodite.

Worship

The major form of worship for both Greeks and Roman was sacrifice and prayer. The Greeks felt that all human actions could be influenced by the gods, and it was important for humans to show their reverence or respect for the gods through their actions. They made daily sacrifices to their family or house god or goddess at a simple altar in the courtyard or at the hearth. These sacrifices were generally food or drink; Greeks and Romans would simply share part of each meal with the gods. Animals such as goats, sheep, and birds might also be sacrificed to the gods and the blood served in goblets. Ribbons of flowers were usually placed over the neck of the animal as it was led to the altar and then struck on the head before its blood was drained by cutting its throat. Both Greeks and Romans thought that the larger the offering, the more attention the gods would pay to their needs.

Sacrifices were also made at temples dedicated to the patron god or goddess. These sacrifices were not made inside the temple, but outside, usually on the eastern wall, at altars. These public sacrifices were conducted by priests or priestesses, who were not dedicated experts but officials carrying out their civic duties, like mayors presiding over modern cities. There were no regular services in Greek or Roman religion.
There were, however, many regular religious festivals, and then the priests would conduct ritual sacrifices. The highest religious officials in Rome were six women known as the Vestal Virgins. Their name comes from the goddess Vesta, spirit of the hearth and home, whom they served. It was their duty to keep the sacred fire lit in the temple of Vesta.

The daily religion of the people of Greece and Rome was largely conducted in private. Each person could pray to his or her personal god, asking for good health, riches, success, or good luck. Prayers were made standing up with the hands raised and the palms pointing toward the sky. If a person wanted to talk to one of the gods of the underworld, then he or she might stamp on the ground or point his or her hands toward the ground to get the god’s attention. In Rome the oldest man in the house usually led the family prayers. Flour and salt would be thrown into the cooking fire each day to keep the household gods happy. Janus, the Roman god of the door, was the most powerful of the household gods. He had two faces: one looking into the house and the other looking out. He let friends in and kept enemies out.

Both Greeks and Romans consulted specialists to learn about the future, priests or priestesses who acted as messengers between humans and the gods. In Greece these priestesses were called oracles, and the most famous of these was the oracle of Delphi. Even military leaders consulted the oracles to see what the future would hold for them. In Rome there were two types of these reporters or interpreters, of the future. The augurs were priests who could read the evidence of a god’s will by the flight of birds or by the way sacred chickens ate. Another group of interpreters were called baruspices (literally “gut-gazers”); they read signs of the will of the gods in the organs of sacrificed animals.

Observances and pilgrimages

In Greece, every city-state had its own patron god or goddess and its own schedule of religious festivals and celebrations. In Athens, for example, where Athena was most honored, there were seventy religious holidays each year. These were times for public displays of respect for the gods. There would be religious plays, music, dancing, parades to the temple, sacrifices at the sacred altars, athletic contests, and huge feasts. One the most important annual festivals in Athens was the Anthesteria, which was held in February and honored Athena. Even more important, however, was the Panathenaea, held every four years in honor of Athena. This
Plato’s Dialogues

Plato is considered one of the founders of modern Western thought. Most of his writings use Socrates’s method of seeking truths through questions and answers of opposing beliefs. This question-and-answer style is known as the Socratic method. In the passage below, Plato’s train of thought seeks to reason out how states and societies began. He begins with the question of whether humankind was destroyed in a flood and then tries to determine how survivors would have then ordered their lives to create a new society.

Laws was written in the fourth century BCE. It is interesting to note that Plato references a flood as being responsible for the destruction of humankind. This is similar to the biblical story of the Flood, in which Noah is warned that God will destroy humankind and builds an ark to house two of each animal. All of them survive a flood of forty days and forty nights. Another flood story is referenced in the ancient Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. In this story the Mesopotamian gods decide to destroy humankind, but Utnapishtim is warned in advance and is able to build a great ship, on which he allowed humans and animals. The flood of The Epic of Gilgamesh is said to have lasted six days and seven nights.

* * *

Laws

If a man wants to know the origin of states and societies, he should behold them from the point of view of time. Thousands of cities have come into being and have passed away again in infinite ages, every one of them having had endless forms of government; and if we can ascertain [determine] the cause of these changes in states, that will probably explain their origin. What do you think of ancient traditions about deluges [floods] and destructions of mankind, and the preservation of a remnant [remainder]? “Every one believes in them.” Then let us suppose the world to have been destroyed by a deluge. The survivors would be hill-shepherds, small sparks of the human race, dwelling in isolation, and unacquainted [unfamiliar] with the arts and vices [bad behaviors] of civilization. We may further suppose that the cities on the plain and on the coast have been swept away, and that all inventions, and every sort of knowledge, have perished [been destroyed].

After the great destruction we may imagine that the earth was a desert, in which there were a herd or two of oxen and a few goats, hardly enough to support those who tended them; while of politics and governments the survivors would know nothing. And out of this state of things have arisen arts and laws, and a great deal of virtue and a great deal of vice; little by little the world has come to be what it is. . . . In those days they were neither poor nor rich, and there was no insolence [disrespect] or injustice among them; for they were of noble natures, and lived up to their principles, and believed what they were told. . . . May we not suppose that government arose out of the union of single families who survived the destruction, and were under the rule of patriarchs [respectable men], because they had originally descended from a single father and mother? “That is very probable.”

lasted six days and included music, dancing, feasts, athletic contests, and a huge procession on the sixth day to the Parthenon for sacrifices to the goddess. People from all over Greece might attend one of these gatherings. These were both religious festivals and also times for the Greeks to enjoy themselves. Each spring in Athens the Great Dionysia was held. This was in honor of the fertility god, Dionysius, and dramatic contests were held at the theater named for him. A spring festival, it represented rebirth and new life.

Additionally, there were larger festivals held at various locations throughout Greece that honored the major gods and attracted people from not just one city-state, but from all over Greece. The largest and best known of these was the games at Olympia that celebrated the major god, Zeus. These have evolved into the modern-day Olympic Games. There were other similar religious athletic contests. The Pythian Games were held at Delphi and were dedicated to Apollo. These included musical competitions in addition to athletic ones. The Isthmian Games were held at Corinth and dedicated to Poseidon. Each of these festivals included sacrifices and prayers to the gods.

Initially, the number of religious holidays in Rome were small, but later in the Roman Empire so many festivals were adopted that there were more holidays than workdays per year. Among the more important of the Roman religious festivals were the Saturnalia, Lupercalia, Equiria, and Secular Games. The Saturnalia was celebrated for seven days, from December 17 to 23, during the period in which the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, occurred. All business was suspended, slaves were given temporary freedom, gifts were exchanged, and people generally enjoyed themselves with food and drink. The Lupercalia was an ancient festival originally honoring Lupercus, a country or agricultural god of the Italians. The festival was celebrated on February 15 at the cave of the Lupercal on the Palatine Hill, where the legendary founders of Rome, Romulus, and Remus, were supposed to have been nursed by a wolf. The Equiria, a festival in honor of Mars, god of war, was celebrated on February 27 and March 14, traditionally the time of year when new military campaigns were prepared. Horse races marked this celebration. The Secular Games, which included both athletic spectacles and sacrifices, were held at irregular intervals, traditionally once only in about every century, to mark the beginning of a new era.

**Pilgrimages** For Greeks, a visit to Delphi constituted a form of pilgrimage or holy journey. This was the site of the temple of the Delphic oracle,
the famous priestess who sat on a stool over a deep chasm. She would go into a dream state and begin to speak the words she heard from the gods. Only men, however, were able to approach her. Delphi may also have been the source of the Delphinios cult of Apollo.

Major festivals also served as pilgrimages, such as the Panathenaea, the Olympic Games, and the Isthmian Games. There were additionally numerous healing sanctuaries and caves throughout Greece where people would go to pray for good health. Similarly, attendance at events such as the Equiria and the Secular Games were forms of pilgrimage for the ancient Romans.

Everyday living
Religion, more so than the words of the philosophers, influenced the structure of the daily lives of the citizens of ancient Greece and Rome. The daily prayers and sacrifices gave routine and schedule to their lives. No major decisions would be taken in life without first consulting an oracle or other priest who was trained to interpret the future.

Rites of passage The large cycles of life, or rites of passage, including birth, marriage, and death, were marked by religious observances. Though there were no official baptism or marriage ceremonies, these major rites of passage were celebrated by giving offerings to the gods in hopes for a good future. Various hymns were sung for rites of passage in ancient Greece. A wedding hymn would be sung by the guests before a bride and groom went to their room for the night.

In ancient Greece funerals were especially important. Greeks believed that without a proper funeral, the soul of the dead person would wander forever by the River Styx, which separates this world with the Underworld. At funerals, everyone wore black, and relatives cut their hair short to show respect. The body was washed by family members and dressed in white, and a coin would be placed in the body’s mouth: this was the cost of passage on the mythical ferry run by Charon across the River Styx. After a short period of mourning at the house, the body was placed in a coffin and carried by cart or on the shoulders of family members to the graveyard, where it was either buried or burned. If burned, there would be a large fire, and afterwards ashes and bits of bone would be gathered and placed in urns or containers to be put in the family burial place. If buried, the coffin was
accompanied by belongings of the dead person to prevent him or her from returning to claim these possessions. The burial was usually in a family plot just outside the walls of the city, and graves were marked by marble columns or slabs. Female members brought offerings of perfume to the grave for several weeks after the funeral.

In Rome, at the birth of a child, men would hit the threshold of the house with tools to keep the wild spirits away. At puberty, or when a young boy started to mature, he would put away the bulla, or protective charm of childhood, and replace his boyhood toga or robe for the toga of manhood. The modern tradition of the bridal veil goes back to the Roman practice of veiling a young woman who was leaving the protection of her father’s home for that of her new husband. Similarly, the modern custom of the groom carrying the bride over the threshold of their house comes from ancient Rome. There she would be carried into her new home to avoid the bad luck that was supposed to come if she tripped over the threshold.

When someone died in a house, the corpse was removed feet-first to discourage the ghost from returning. At the Roman religious festival of the Parentalia, in February, the members of a family would make offerings of flowers, corn meal, and wine on the graves of their family’s dead. Funerals were major ceremonies for the Romans, with hired mourners and large tombstones erected. Sad songs were sung and played on instruments as the body was put into the ground. Later in Roman history, however, these funerals were held only at night so as to discourage too many people from attending. The souls of the dead were called lares, and the Romans believed that they watched over and protected the household.

**Greco-Romanism’s influences**

Greek and Roman mythology has had a lasting effect in the modern world, especially in literature and art. Without these sources, such works as the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) or the *Faerie Queen* by Edmund Spenser (c. 1552–1599), or even the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) would be unthinkable, for all of them borrowed themes from mythology. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, or the study of the unconscious mind, borrowed the Oedipus tale from Greek mythology for one of the central principles of his new science. In this myth, an abandoned son unknowingly kills his own father and marries his mother. Likewise, Renaissance
painting, such as *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli (1444–1510) would have lacked for inspiration. Mythical themes were the subject for painters from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The myths of ancient Greece and Rome have inspired operas, novels, and cartoons for children. The first superhero, Hercules, was a Roman adaptation of the Greek hero Herakles. From computer games using mythical characters, to company names such as Nike (named for the Greek goddess of victory), Greek myths continue to have an impact on modern life.

The philosophy that came out of ancient Greece and Rome had a resounding impact in all spheres of thought, not only in the West but also in the Near East, where Muslim scholars preserved the tradition after the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. It was largely through Arabic texts that the Greek philosophers were re-discovered during the Renaissance, beginning in about the fourteenth century. Greco-Roman thought established the foundations of critical thinking and reasoning characteristic of Western philosophy.

**Influences on religion** The Greeks and Romans greatly affected Christianity as well, especially the work of Plato, with his higher and lower realities. His Ideal is compared to the Christian notion of heaven. Plato was also extremely influential in early Christianity in defining the role and power of God. Before Platonic beliefs were blended into early Christianity, the role of God was not clear. With the mixture of Platonic belief, however, God became all-powerful and able to know everything. It was also from the Greeks that the Christian concept of geocentrism arose. This concept holds that the earth is the center of the universe, and that the sun, moon, and stars revolve around it. It was developed by the Greek mathematician and astronomer Ptolemy, who lived in the second century CE.

The Christian apostle, or follower, of Jesus, Paul (died 67 CE; also known as Saint Paul), was well trained in Platonic and other forms of Greek philosophy. Neoplatonism was also a strong influence on Christianity in its concept of Original Sin and the Trinity. Additionally, as Greek was the common language for much of the Middle East at the time of the beginnings of Christianity, early forms of the Bible appeared in Greek translation. Paul, writing in the Bible, at times warned against the dangers of free-thinking and philosophy. He also rejected the schools of Epicureanism and Stoicism, with their emphasis on the material world.
Later Christian leaders, however, blended the two schools of thought further. For example, the writings of Plato and Aristotle influenced such Christian writers and scholars as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in the creation of his influential *Summa Theologica* (a summary of theology or religious writings). Here he talks of God as being “infinite,” just as Plato and Aristotle had centuries before.

**Influences on science** Further, modern Western science would not exist without the foundation laid by Greek thinkers. The Atomists anticipated modern atomic theory, and biology is highly indebted to Aristotle and his classification systems. Many Greek philosophers, including Thales and Anaximander, made significant contributions to astronomy. Anaximander was also an early evolutionist, noting from a study of fossils that animals tend to develop from simpler forms into more complex ones. Mathematics was profoundly changed by the Pythagoreans’ work with numbers, such as the Pythagorean theorem. Likewise, physics owes much to the work of thinkers such as Empedocles.

The Greek desire to offer rational explanations also contributed to theories of atheism (the rejection of God), and agnosticism (the belief that humans cannot know if God exists or not). Anaxagoras, for example, was the first to present a systematic explanation of the origin and nature of the universe without using supernatural devices. The Skeptics also gave the modern world a distrust of absolute knowledge and a critical viewpoint when examining supposed facts. Much of Greco-Roman philosophy is, in fact, remarkably modern.

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