**Judaism**

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Judaism is around 3500 years old and is one of the oldest of the world's monotheistic religions—religions with only one god.  It's also the smallest, with only about 12 million followers around the world.  In ancient times Jewish people were called Hebrews or Israelites.  Jerusalem is their most holy city and the capital of Israel—the only nation where Jewish people are the majority of the population.

 Abraham is believed to be the founder of the Jewish people. Another important person in Judaism is Moses.  According to the Torah, Moses is the leader who freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt. According to Jewish writing, when Moses and the Hebrews left Egypt they traveled through the Sinai Peninsula.  One night he climbed Mount Sinai and it is believe that God gave him the 10 Commandments that eventually became part of the Old Testament.  The 10 Commandments provided the Jewish people guidelines of how to live their lives.

The most holy book of Judaism is the Torah, or what Christians call the Old Testament.  Another book called the Talmud provides instructions on how to follow Jewish teachings.

 Jews worship in synagogues (sin-uh-gogs). Men and women usually sit separately in the synagogues.  Men are required to cover their heads with a hat called ayarmulke (yam-moo-ka). In most cases, worship takes place in the Hebrew language.  The Jewish spiritual leaders are called rabbis (rab-eyes). Unlike leaders in many other faiths, a rabbi is not a priest and has no special connection with god.

The Old Testament says the "Messiah" will come to Earth and save the Jewish people.  Jesus was born into the Jewish religion.  There were certain things about Judaism that he thought were wrong, so he began preaching new ideas.  He was thought of as a rebel preacher, however some people thought he was the Messiah.  After Jesus was killed, his followers went on to start a new religion called Christianity.  That is why Christianity and Judaism share religious writing, characters, and beliefs.

      Part of Jewish life revolves around eating the correct food.  Kosher foods are those that follow Jewish law. This means no mixing of dairy and meat, no pork or pork products and no shellfish. There are special ceremonies when Jewish boys (aged 13) and girls (aged 12) become adults.  Bar mitzvah is for boys and Bat mitzvah is for girls. Traditionally, Jews say prayers three times daily, with a fourth prayer added on holidays.

 Yom Kippur is the most important Jewish holiday. This is a day of fasting and prayer, often spending most of the day in synagogue. Hanukkah is an 8-day holiday that celebrates the Jewish recapture of the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE. On Hanukkah, Jews light candles on a menorah and give gifts. Passover celebrates God freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. On Passover, Jews don't eat bread and have big holiday meal called a seder where they retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

**Christianity**

        Christianity is the world's biggest religion, with about 2.2 billion followers worldwide. It is practiced in much of North and South America, Europe, central and southern Africa, Australia, and parts of Asia. This monotheistic religion is based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth who later became known as Jesus Christ because his believers think he is the Son of God.

 Christianity originally developed as a part of Judaism.  Jesus was a Jew who was born in 1 CE in Bethlehem.  Jesus taught people many new ideas about God and salvation. Jesus was crucified around 33 CE in Jerusalem—a very important city to Christians. Old Jewish writings said a leader would die and rise from the dead to lead the people. Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his **disciples** (followers), which made him the Messiah (Savior) promised in the Old Testament.

Christianity didn’t just happen immediately.  For nearly 100 years Christianity was a denomination of Judaism, and a very unpopular one at that.  The few followers of Christianity were the family of Jesus and the few apostles that were still alive. The number of followers greatly increased when Romans began to convert to Christianity.

Many of Jesus's apostles were executed such as Peter who was crucified upside down in 64 CE or James who was crucified, then stoned, and finally beaten to death by wooden clubs.  Persecuted means they were treated badly or harassed.  However, by the year 391 CE Christianity became the most popular religion in Rome. The Roman Empire spread Christianity to Europe and over the next 1000 years Europe developed the most powerful kingdoms as Rome lost power.  These kingdoms such as England, France, and Spain explored the world and spread the Christian religion in the colonies they made such as in America, Africa, Australia, and South America.

The Christian place of worship is called a church. They are often built in the shape of a cross with the altar facing east towards the rising sun.  Christian spiritual leaders are called priests or ministers.  Christians believe priests have a special relationship with God.  The Bible is the Christian holy book.  It is divided into the Old Testament (Jewish book) written before Jesus and New Testaments.  Most versions of the New Testament have 27 "books" or parts.

There are different branches or denominations of Christianity because some Christians worship in different ways and believe in different parts of the Bible. There are 3 main denominations in Christianity--Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant.  Each denomination is further divided.  Methodists, Mormons, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Quakers are just a few of the dozens of Christian denominations.  They all worship in different ways, different times of the day, saying different prayers, and believing different things, but most believe in certain core ideas such as heaven, salvation, and the resurrection of Jesus.

The most important Christian holiday for all Christians is Easter, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus and Christmas which celebrate Jesus’ birth. Both holidays usually include going to church.

**Islam**  Islam is the second most popular religion in the world with over a billion followers. Islam is practiced in many parts of the world including the Middle East, parts of Southeast Asia, and North Africa. A Muslim is a follower of Islam. Islam is a monotheist religion which means followers believe in only one God.

This religion began about 600 years after Christianity. A man named Muhammad, born in 570 CE, believed he was visited by the Archangel Gabriel (believed in Christianity to have told Mary that Jesus was the son of God).  Gabriel told Muhammad the final message of God, which was written down in a book called the Koran (also spelled Qur’an).  The **Koran** is the Islamic holy book.  Muslims call God “Allah”--the Arabic word for god.

                The Muslim place of worship is called a **mosque**(mosk)**.**Very often mosques have a domed roof and at least one tall tower called a minaret. Muslims are called to prayer from the minaret. There is also very little furniture inside a mosque because Muslims use “prayer mats” to kneel on when they pray.  When people go into the mosque they take off their shoes. This is to keep it clean for prayer. Women do not usually pray in the same place as men.

Mecca is the most holy city and also contains the most holy mosque.  In the center of the mosque is a cube-shaped building called the**Kaaba** (Ka'bah).  All Muslims face the direction of the Kaaba during prayer.  Muslims are supposed to pray 5 times every day. Muslims do not have priests; they don’t believe they need a “middleman” between themselves and Allah (God).  An**Imam**(i-mom) leads local prayer and takes care of the mosque.

The month of Ramadan is the most important holiday for all Muslims; it is a time of sacrifice in an attempt to connect with Allah (God).  Another very important part of Islam is the 5 Pillars of Islam—similar to the 10 Commandments of Judaism and Christianity.  These are 5 things required of all believers of Islam.  They are:

**Islam Basics**

1.  **Shahadah--**is a statement of belief in monotheism and accepting Muhammad as God's messenger.

2. **Salah--**the requirement to pray 5 times a day at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night.

3. **Zakat--**is the practice of giving to charity; about 3 percent of your individual wealth.

4. **Sawm--**Muslims must abstain from food and drink from dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadan

5. **Hajj--**expectation to make a pilgrimage (religious trip) to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they can afford it.

**Hinduism**

[Hinduism](http://www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/Homework/religion/hinduism.htm) is considered to be the oldest “living” religion in the world, since it began at least four thousand years ago and people still follow it today. What we call Hinduism is a huge collection of belief systems that have been influenced and changed over history.  Unlike most other major religions, Hinduism has no single founder like Jesus or Mohammad or a central leader like the Pope—because of this, people worship in VERY different ways. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, with about 1 billion followers world-wide, most of whom live in India.  Hinduism provided the belief structure for all other South Asian religions that followed such as [Buddhism](https://sites.google.com/site/worldreligionsforkids/buddhism), [Sikhism](https://sites.google.com/site/worldreligionsforkids/sikhism), and [Jainism](https://sites.google.com/site/worldreligionsforkids/jainism). Just as Judaism provided the structure for Christianity and Islam.

Ancient writings teach the Hindu religion.  The [**Vedas**](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/india/religion/rigveda.htm) (holy books) are the most ancient Hindu holy books.  For hundreds of year, the Veda teachings were never written down—they were only spoken or sang.  The [**Upanishads**](http://www.hindukids.org/stories/upanishads/index.html) are another collection of holy writings.  The Upanishads were written down maybe 500 to 1000 years after the Vedas and contain most of the ideas about Hinduism and how to practice the religion.

Most Hindus believe in one supreme spirit called [Brahman](http://www.hinduwebsite.com/brahmanmain.asp).  Hindus believe God is all things in the world—not just a spirit in the sky.  Brahman does not just exist; it IS existence. Brahman can be worshiped in many forms, such as other “gods” such as[Vishnu](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/india/religion/vishnu.htm), [Shiva](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/india/religion/shiva.htm), [Ganesh](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/india/religion/ganesh.htm) or [Krishna](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/india/religion/krishna.htm), so many people think Hindus worship many gods, but actually all other gods represent Brahman in different forms.  This is similar to Christianity.  Christians worship Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit.  They call this the [Holy Trinity](http://www.ehow.com/how_2195414_explain-holy-trinity-children.html) in Christianity—not three different gods, but three forms of the same God.

Most Hindus believe in [**reincarnation**](http://www.kidspast.com/world-history/0112-reincarnation.php) ([rebirth of the soul](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWCUjx4nI98))—the belief that whenthe body dies, the spirit is reincarnated (reborn) into a new form.  The soul may be reborn in many different forms such as another human or an insect.  What they are reborn as depends on their [**karma**](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/india/religion/karma.htm)**.**Karma is the belief that everything that people do in life determines what will happen to them in the future.  If a person has good karma he or she will be reborn into a better form in their next life.

The ultimate goal for Hindus is to end their reincarnation cycle and reach [**Moksha**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/beliefs/moksha.shtml).  Moksha is a “one-ness” with God.  In Moksha Hindus finally end their birth, death, and rebirth cycle and become part of the spirit of Brahman.  One way Hindus work toward spiritual Moksha is through **yoga**.  Yoga is a combination of breathing exercises, physical postures, and meditation that try to discipline the mind.

Diwali is an important holiday in Hinduism. It is a Hindu festival of lights lasting five days. For many Hindus, Diwali is also New Year's Eve. Another important holiday is Holi. It is an annual festival celebrating spring. During this holiday Hindus lite bonfires and decorate themselves with colored powder. There are also lots of holidays linked with a particular Hindu god where followers fast and pray.

**Buddhism**

Buddhism focuses on the teachings of [Siddhartha Gautama](http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/storybuddha.htm) who was born around 563 BCE. With as many as 500 million followers, Buddhism is the 4thlargest religion in the world. Most people who practice Buddhism can be found in Central and Southeastern Asia.

Siddhartha was born a wealthy prince, but gave up everything to find a true understanding of the world.  He tried many different types of Hindu beliefs, but eventually he formed his own belief system and taught many others.  He was called “The Buddha”, or the enlightened one. His teachings were written in Buddhist holy books called [Tripitaka](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/texts/tripitaka.htm) or [Sutras](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/texts/sutras.htm).

Buddhism is a religion that is not based on the idea of God—it’s more of a way of life, so it is actually a philosophy, but most people still call Buddhism a religion.  Buddhists respect all life and encourage nonviolence and kindness.  Buddhism encourages its followers to reach [enlightenment](http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment_%28Buddhism%29)—understanding the true meaning of life and truth about the world.

Buddhists do not require a special building to worship, although there are two main types of Buddhist temples: [pagodas](http://www.fotosearch.com/photos-images/pagoda.html) and [stupas](http://connect.in.com/stupa/photo-gallery-more.html).  Buddhist worship is called *puja*.  It involves meditation, bowing, chanting, or making offerings--depending on the region. The religious leaders of Buddhism are called monks and practice a life of simplicity and meditation (do not marry, live with other monks, avoid worldly pleasures)

            During his time, Siddhartha viewed life as a time of great suffering. He basically said, 'life is suffering... but there is a path to end the suffering". The aim of Buddhist life is to put an end to the sorrow of life.  When someone understands the world’s reality (enlightenment), all of his or her suffering will end.  If a person can end the sorrow of life they will reach [Nirvana](http://library.thinkquest.org/28505/buddhism/nirva.htm). Nirvana is the end of all desire, ignorance, and sorrow. The spirit is freed from all possessions; it is the realization that all human desires are pointless. Nirvana is the end of reincarnation, so it is similar to heaven.  Buddhists also believe in reincarnation and karma .

  Buddhist believe the must understand the Four Noble Truths and follow the Noble Eightfold Path to reach Nirvana. The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Life is suffering

2. Suffering happens people want things they can’t have

3. The suffering people feel because they want stuff can be overcome

4. The Noble Eightfold Path is how one overcomes suffering

The Noble Eightfold Path includes doing what is right; right speech, right actions, right thought, right intentions, right livelihood (jobs), right effort (trying your best), right mindfulness, and right concentration. This is Siddhartha's idea of how to avoid the sorrow of life and eventually reach Nirvana.