

What Is Religion?

By Colleen Messina

People love to wonder. Can you remember how many questions you asked your parents when you were small? We wonder about the dark crevasses in the ocean floor, the nature of black holes, and what happens to us when we die. The five billion people of earth lead very different lives, but they are united in their ability to wonder.

Everyone has something special that they wonder about because people are naturally curious. Some people concentrate on the mysteries of the physical world. Benjamin Franklin boldly tied a key to a kite to understand lightning-and nearly fried himself in the process. Christopher Columbus bravely sailed to what many believed to be the edge of the flat earth to discover a new world. Other "explorers of the spirit" left kingdoms behind in order to discover more about the heavenly world. Their revelations and experiences became the cornerstones of the major world religions. All religions began with one person wondering about the meaning of life.



The word, "religion" comes from the Latin word religare, which means "to tie." People of all faiths believe that their religion ties them to a higher purpose. Some feel that religion ties them to a sense of community through shared values. Religion has also tied art, culture, and societies together for thousands of years. Magnificent buildings, beautiful works of art, and stirring books have been inspired by religious faith.

Religion helps people figure out the meaning of life and the mystery of death. Some faiths believe we only live once, while others, like Hinduism and Buddhism, believe that we reincarnate many times to fulfill our purpose. Long before any scribes scribbled on papyrus, religion has been important to men, whether they called it "religion" or not.

The oldest world religions are Zoroastrianism and Judaism, which began between three and four thousand years ago. Christianity grew out of Judaism, and Islam grew out of both Judaism and Christianity. Jewish teachings were being written down by scholars in the Middle East around the same time as priests in India were writing down the basic ideas of Hinduism. Buddhism and Taoism developed in China about 2,500 years ago. Within these major religions, there are smaller divisions. For example, within Christianity, there are about 22,000 different sects! There are also other religions that have fewer followers, such as Sikhism, Shintoism, and Jainism.

The major religions have some things in common. All of them have a founder or leader, and some of these men were inspired by mystical experiences. All major religions have a sacred scripture or texts. People of different faiths have special prayers, clothing, and symbols of their religions. For example, fire is the symbol of Ahura Mazda, the one god of Zoroastrianism. The yin yang is the symbol of Taoism. Religion gives a sense of purpose and comfort in times of trouble to its followers.

People also believe that religion can explain how the world was created. Many religions believe that the universe was created by a god. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism recognize just one god, which is called monotheism. Buddhism doesn't have a deity, or god, but Buddhists do recognize many spiritual beings, while Hindus recognize more than three hundred million gods and goddesses! This is called pantheism. Other people deny the existence of any deity. This is called atheism.

Most religions have their own rituals and traditions that center around its belief in a god or divine beings. Rituals can be serious, like the sacrament of Holy Communion in the Christian church. Other rituals are just plain fun, like throwing colored powder and water during the Hindu holiday of Holi. Many rituals celebrate life's important events, like birth, marriage, and death.

In addition to special rituals, all religions have their own festivals and holidays. The English word "holiday" comes from the words "holy day." The yearly cycle of holidays tell stories of the faith. Followers sing songs and

perform dramas to honor these events. Christians perform inspiring Christmas nativity plays. Taoists enjoy noisy, crackling fireworks during their New Year's celebration. Many of these festivals also commemorate an historical event of the faith. For example, Wesak celebrates Buddha's enlightenment, and Easter celebrates Christ's resurrection.

Many people think that food is the best part of any holiday! Think of your favorite holiday. Does some special food come to mind? Food is a way of enjoying company, and it can also symbolize something in a family's faith. Sweet foods often represent some element of the faith, while bitter foods remember hard times. Some religions have a platter of different foods that represent different parts of the faith. Zoroastrians have a platter with milk, wine, and fruit as well as other religious objects for their thanksgiving ceremony. Food feeds the body like faith symbolically feeds the soul.

Foods for religious festivals are as varied as the clothes that people wear. Buddhists often eat a delicious, gooey rice pudding to celebrate the Buddha's enlightenment, while Jews eat bitter herbs at their Seder meal to symbolize the slavery of their ancestors. At the end of Ramadan, a month of fasting, Muslims eat sugared almonds and chocolates. Crispy Christmas cookies are often made in the shapes of stars, bells, and angels to represent parts of the nativity story, and Christians also often enjoy sweet mince pies at Christmas. These pies were originally made in an oval shape to represent baby Jesus lying in a manger. Enjoying these special treats is part of every world religion.

The faith represented in the world's religions has sprung out of man's wonderings about life. This basic quest for a higher purpose is central to human nature, whether people belong to an organized religion or not. Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the independence movement in India, explained this perfectly when he said, "Religion is not alien to us...It is always within us; with some, consciously; with others, unconsciously. But it is always there."

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Questions

- _____ 1. What unites many people on earth?
- A. the same religion
 - B. the ability to wonder
 - C. a common faith
 - D. scientific discovery
- _____ 2. What does the root word of religion, religare, mean?
- A. to understand
 - B. to celebrate
 - C. to tie
 - D. to worship
- _____ 3. Which of the following are NOT a part of many religions?
- A. sacred books
 - B. a common calendar
 - C. a belief in god or gods
 - D. festivals
- _____ 4. What does monotheism mean?
- A. reincarnation
 - B. figuring out one's purpose
 - C. belief in one god
 - D. many ideas

