

Second Edition

Paul Gwynne

World Religions in Practice

A Comparative
Introduction

WILEY

World Religions in Practice

The new edition of *World Religions in Practice* has been expanded to introduce six of the world's major religions to students. This unparalleled introduction, exploring how religions are lived through their customs, rituals and everyday practices, now includes Daoism in addition to the religions covered in the first edition: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Innovative and accessible, the text goes beyond many traditional textbooks by adopting a directly comparative approach that allows for a greater understanding of the nature of religion.

Each chapter engages with an individual theme, such as birth, death, food, pilgrimage, sacred texts, worship, and ethics, exploring the rituals, customs and beliefs across a range of religions. With great clarity, Gwynne works through these key themes, describing the practices of each religion, at the same time providing a balanced and sympathetic discussion of the similarities and differences between each faith.

The new edition includes an increased range of student-friendly features. These include short readings from sacred texts and rites across different traditions, which allow students to engage directly with original sources.

Paul Gwynne lectures in comparative religion in the General Education Program of the University of New South Wales. He completed his doctoral studies in Rome and has taught theology and religious studies in Indonesia and at the Melbourne College of Divinity. His previous books include *Special Divine Action* (1996), the first edition of *World Religions in Practice* (2008, Wiley Blackwell) and *Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad: A Comparative Study* (2014, Wiley Blackwell).

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Preface

The second edition of *World Religions in Practice* retains most of the key features of the original edition. It remains a comparative study of a sample of major religions based on a set of practical themes. What is new in this edition is the inclusion of a sixth religious tradition – Daoism – and, consequently, a slight reduction in the number of themes in order to maintain the length of the book. The addition of Daoism means that the sample now includes one of the principal ingredients of Chinese religious culture, which is an eclectic mix of popular folk traditions and the “Three Teachings”: Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Whilst Buddhism has an Indian provenance, Daoism and Confucianism originated in China and, in introductory works on world religions, are often dealt with under the umbrella term “Chinese religion.” The decision to focus on Daoism alone, rather than include all elements of Chinese religious practice, is not intended as a value judgment on those other elements but simply to ensure that a manageable, working comparison is achieved.

The addition of this extra material meant that the chapter entitled Day has been omitted, although some of its time-related contents have been incorporated into the chapter entitled Year, which looks at the annual calendars. It also meant that, in each chapter, the original sections on the five religions have been trimmed to provide a more succinct presentation. Finally, the inclusion of Daoism has also affected the order in which the religions are covered in each chapter. As explained in the first edition, this order is not random. Rather, it has been designed to highlight similarities and connections between religions on the theme in question, thus producing a useful spectrum of comparative analysis each time. In other words, Daoism has now joined the “dance” of the religions across the themes. Hopefully, these changes have resulted in a tighter, more representative comparison of the fascinating interplay between six of the world’s major religious traditions.

Note on Scriptural References

The following versions of scriptural and traditional texts have been used:

Access to Insight: Readings in Theravada Buddhism, ed. John Bullitt, sutta translations by the Venerables Bhikkhu Bodhi, Acharya Buddharakkhita, Bhikkhu Khantipalo, Nanamoli Thera, Ñanavara Thera, Narada Thera, Nyanaponika Thera, Soma Thera, Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Phra Ajaan Geoff), and Sister Vajira; I. B. Horner, John D. Ireland, K. R. Norman, and F. L. Woodward. At www.accesstoinsight.org.

Babylonian Talmud, ed. Rabbi Dr Isidore Epstein. London: Jews' College. Also available at www.come-and-hear.com/talmud.

Bhagavad Gita, trans. Laurie L. Patton. London: Penguin, 2008.

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha. New York: Oxford University Press (1991). Copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Hadith, USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts, University of Southern California, at www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah.

The Holy Koran, trans. Mohammed H. Shakir. New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an Inc., 1983. Also available at www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah.

Translations of the Daode jing and other Daoist texts are taken from Louis Komjathy (2013). *The Daoist Tradition*. London: Bloomsbury.

The Pinyin system has been used for transliterations of Chinese words.

Words in **bold type** are included in the Glossary at the end of the book.

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Introduction

Few would deny that religion constitutes a vital piece of the jigsaw when it comes to fully understanding human societies and their members, both past and present. It is a key influence on a host of cultural activities around the globe, from weddings and funerals to public holidays and festivals. Religious belief is frequently a source of inspiration for works of literature, art and architecture, and can significantly shape everyday life at the level of diet and clothing. Even in highly secularized Western society, the legacy of centuries of religious tradition has left its distinctive and enduring mark on language, symbol and custom. Sadly, religious motives are also an ingredient in many political conflicts and even acts of terrorism that currently dominate the world stage. For better or for worse, religion is still very much a part of the human story and cannot be ignored if we hope to explain fully what makes individuals and communities think and act in the way that they do.

Moreover, the contraction of the world from an array of far-flung continents to a single global village has brought a wide spectrum of religious beliefs firmly within our horizon, wherever that may be. In Western societies, mass immigration programs have meant a reversal of colonial times and the arrival of large numbers of adherents of “other faiths.” The world has come to us and its religions are no longer exotic phenomena in distant lands, but the defining worldviews of neighbors and work colleagues. Conversely, the relative ease and affordability of travel provides an unprecedented opportunity for today’s tourist to visit cultures where ceremonies, festivals, artworks and buildings express religious ideas in both recognizable and unrecognizable ways.

In such a world, an appreciation of different religious traditions is arguably more pertinent than ever. Without diluting or compromising one’s own fundamental philosophical, spiritual or religious persuasions, an interested and respectful study of different religious systems affords an opportunity to complete the picture. The comparative study of religion provides the broader context into which more familiar faith systems can be situated and, thus, better understood. It can highlight the distinctive features that render each religion truly unique, while at the same time revealing fascinating areas of intersection between faiths.

This book is an attempt to explore those similarities and differences, hopefully contributing something to the quest for a deeper understanding and a more profound appreciation of the common ground between all religions. To this end, a phenomenological approach has been adopted. In other words, it is not primarily concerned with the veracity or credibility of the religious claims involved. Nor is it about demonstrating that one religion is more advanced or complete than another. Although absolute objectivity is an impossible ideal in any discipline, apologetic issues are deliberately set aside in an attempt to present each religion in a respectful and accurate manner.

The major religions dealt with in this book are Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The decision to restrict the study to these six in no way implies that the list is exhaustive. There are other religious and quasi-religious systems that could be considered global such as Confucianism, Sikhism, Jainism, Baha'ism and Zoroastrianism but the scope and approach of the book meant that a limit had to be imposed at some point. The six that have been chosen are frequently the subject of textbooks and courses on "world religions" and for good reason. Four of them represent the largest religious denominations according to approximate current statistics: Christianity (2.2 billion), Islam (1.5 billion), Hinduism (1 billion), and Buddhism (380 million). With about 14 million adherents, Judaism admittedly involves much smaller numbers, but it is included in the main six due to its significant age, widespread influence and fundamental links to the other two Abrahamic faiths, Christianity and Islam. Providing a meaningful figure for Daoism is more complex and messy. Although there is Daoist philosophy, Daoist rituals and Daoist priests and monks, it is unclear whether there are actually any "Daoists" in the sense of a community of believers who identify themselves as such in distinction from Confucians or Buddhists. On the contrary, it is more accurate to speak of drawing on Daoist, Confucian, Buddhist and popular folk traditions to various degrees as simply part of being Chinese.

The approach taken in this book is somewhat different from that of standard works in two ways. First, most introductory works on the world's major religions adopt a serial approach whereby the author outlines the key features of each religion in turn. Thus, chapters tend to be organized according to the religions themselves and the reader is escorted on a journey of discovery through various aspects of the faith system in question. The bibliography at the end of this book contains many such examples. The advantage is that a reasonably coherent overview of each religion is provided in discrete units. However, an alternative method has been used for this work. Rather than organizing religions in linear fashion and treating each one as a separate whole, a more lateral approach has been adopted whereby a range of general themes is explored across the religions. The result is a series of cross-sections that reveal how a particular theme, such as sacred writing or holy days, is expressed in each religion. Such an approach is able to generate greater levels of explicit comparison between the religions, uncovering not only the unique qualities that differentiate them, but also an assortment of interesting overlaps and connections.

Second, most books on the world's major religions tend to focus on either their historical development or their theological beliefs while (with a few exceptions) paying little or no attention to the actual living out of the faith. Several decades ago, Ninian Smart proposed that all religions contain, to a greater or lesser extent, seven fundamental dimensions: doctrinal–philosophical; experiential–emotional; mythical–narrative; ethical–legal; social–institutional; practical–ritual; and material. The themes chosen for this book belong primarily to Smart's last two categories (with one chapter devoted to the ethical dimension). Thus, we will be looking mainly at how the six religions are expressed in practice. Our principal interest lies more in customs than in creeds, in external actions than in inner attitudes. Nevertheless, an examination of the ritual and material dimension of these six religions inevitably touches on Smart's other dimensions, including the doctrinal–philosophical. A study of religious practices cannot avoid consideration of the theological foundations that underpin them. The practical features of religions, such as the use of images and texts in worship, the donning of special clothing, or the design of sacred buildings, reflect deeper doctrinal positions regarding the world and our place in it. In this respect, the old Latin adage rings true: *lex orandi lex credendi* ("the law of

praying is the law of believing”). In other words, the practical is a mirror to the theoretical. Religious custom is a reflection of religious belief and vice versa.

The 11 practical themes are themselves arranged and linked under an overarching motif: the sanctification of the ordinary. As Smart rightly pointed out, religion is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon that has proved to be notoriously difficult to pin down. This is clear from the myriad of definitions available (for a sample see Box 0.1). Some definitions stress the individual while others stress the social; some the psychological, others the cultural; some the moral, others the political. However, most definitions of religion contain the reference to a reality beyond time and space, which can be denoted in many ways: “the divine”; “the sacred”; “the supernatural”; “the spiritual”; “Ultimate Being”; “God”; “Allah”; “Brahman”; “the Dao”; “eternal dharma”; and so forth. Whether this reality actually exists or is merely the product of the human imagination is one of the most burning of all philosophical issues. But apart from the question of its factual or fictional status, faith in transcendent reality clearly has a profound impact on the way in which believers interpret and live out human existence. Whatever the designation, Hindus, Buddhists, Daoists, Jews, Christians and Muslims all see it as the answer to the most important questions of all: Where did we come from? Why are we here? And where are we going?

Box 0.1 Some Definitions of Religion

The belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship. (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*)

A belief system that includes the idea of the existence of an eternal principle that has created the world that governs it, that controls its destinies or that intervenes in the natural course of its history. (*Random House Dictionary*)

Homo religiosus always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real. (*Mircea Eliade*)

Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. It gives us the experience of the Holy, of something which is untouchable, awe-inspiring, an ultimate meaning, the source of ultimate courage. (*Paul Tillich*)

A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (*Clifford Geertz*)

Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant. (*Peter Berger*)

Religious ideas are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. Thus, the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order insures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place. (*Sigmund Freud*)


Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. (*Karl Marx*)


Consequently, belief in transcendent reality casts a new light on all aspects of life, even the most mundane. Ordinary realities such as food and clothing, birth, marriage and death, even time and space itself, are given a more profound, extraordinary meaning through the eyes of religious faith. Familiar objects, activities, moments and places become part of the provision of ultimate meaning and, thus, take on a sacred, transcendent quality.

The 11 themes are organized into three clusters which constitute the three sections of the book. Part 1 looks at two principal religious ways in which the reality that lies “beyond time and space” can be accessed: the visual image and the written or spoken word. The use (or non-use) of these two bridges to transcendent reality not only constitutes an important starting point for our comparison of practice but also reveals something about how each religion understands transcendent reality itself. Part 2 focuses on human existence “within time and space.” It opens with a brief survey of moral duty in each religion and then proceeds to examine three main rites of passage (birth, death and marriage) that are frequently marked by religious ritual. This section also takes the two most basic necessities of life (food and clothing) and examines how they are also given sacred meaning by religious faith. Part 3 looks at the very fabric of spatial–temporal existence, and explores how each of the six religions sanctifies time and space itself. Themes of the annual calendar, the sacred building and spiritual pilgrimage are examined in each religion. Of course, the choice of these 11 themes does not imply that the list is complete. There are other practical themes that could be added such as healing, initiation and prayer. However, these 11 themes resonate effectively across the six religions, thus representing a useful sample that serves well the comparative and practical purpose of the book.


Given the limited size of such a book, there is simply not enough space to delve into the intricate details of the chosen themes. The beliefs and practices discussed here are merely the tips of many icebergs that can be adequately fathomed only in more specialized works. Moreover, the six religions themselves are far from monochrome, consisting of a spectrum of subdivisions, sects and traditions whose beliefs and practices can vary significantly at times, especially in the case of Hinduism. Moreover, as we noted above, Chinese religious practice is an eclectic mix of Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and folk religion. Thus, the danger of generalization hovers constantly over such a project, including the inherent limitations of the term “world religion” itself. Consequently, the author has endeavored to focus on broadly typical characteristics of each major religion, accompanied by the acknowledgment of variations and exceptions where relevant. Admittedly a picture painted with broad brush strokes must ignore small things, but there is some value in stepping back at times and taking a more panoramic view. In short, this book is more concerned with forests than trees, especially what the forests look like from above and where their boundaries touch.

The primary audience of the book is the tertiary or senior secondary student in religious studies courses as well as the layperson who has an interest in major religions and their interrelationship. Although the book is introductory in nature, a basic familiarity with the six religions will be advantageous since each religion is encountered thematically along with others. Accordingly, a brief vignette for each religion has been provided at the end of this Introduction. The effect of the comparative approach is akin to a thematic tour, but the road is more reminiscent of a meandering track than a straight highway. The order in which we travel through the six religions will vary from chapter to chapter, depending on where the bridges seem to occur naturally. It should be noted that the particular order in which the religions are dealt with in each chapter is not intended to imply any kind of priority or superiority, nor is it the only possible one. The tour itinerary is not binding, but hopefully it is one that will provide fresh views and interesting landscapes.


HINDUISM 	
Key facts	
No. of adherents (approx.)	1 billion
Origins	Hinduism has no historical founder but its origins are usually linked to the Aryan invasion of the Indus Valley civilization around 1500 BCE, which resulted in a socio-religious caste system and the emergence of the Vedas as primary sacred texts.
Subdivisions	<p>Hinduism is a general term embracing a complex spectrum of religious sects. It can be subdivided according to the principal form of Brahman which is worshiped:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vaishnavism (650 million): worship of Vishnu and his incarnations such as Krishna and Rama; ● Shaivism (250 million): worship of Shiva; ● Shaktism: worship of Shakti (Mother Goddess) and her manifestations such as Parvati, Durga and Kali. <p>There are also many recent movements such as the Arya Samaj, which was founded by Dayananda Saraswati in the late nineteenth century.</p>
Transcendent reality	The term Brahman refers to the one absolute reality that embraces the entire cosmos. Brahman is beyond all finite categories but is manifest and worshiped in the form of different gods and goddesses such as Vishnu, Shiva, or the Mother Goddess. Thus, Hinduism is difficult to classify and is described variously as polytheistic, henotheistic or monistic .
Human existence	<p>Hindus believe in samsara (reincarnation) whereby the atman (soul) of the deceased is reborn into the world according to the law of karma. The cycle can last hundreds or thousands of lifetimes but it is hoped that all individuals will eventually be released from the cycle of rebirth and attain moksha (final liberation). For some Hindu philosophers, such as Shankara, moksha involves the dissolution of the atman back into Brahman. For others, such as Ramanuja, the liberated atman retains some degree of individual existence in perfect communion with Brahman and other beings. There are three main paths to moksha:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● jnana-marga: the path of knowledge and meditation; ● karma-marga: the path of moral action; ● bhakti-marga: the path of devotion and worship of a particular deity.
Sacred texts	<p>There are two main categories of Hindu sacred writings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● shruti (primary revelation): the Vedas and the Upanishads; ● smriti (secondary revelation): there are many works in this category of which the most prominent are the two great epics (the Mahabharata and the Ramayana), the poetic Puranas, and legal codes such as the Laws of Manu.
Key rituals	The 16 traditional life-cycle rituals (samskaras) include many prenatal and childhood ceremonies, as well as initiation into adulthood (sacred thread), marriage and funeral rites.

BUDDHISM 	
Key facts	
No. of adherents (approx.)	380 million
Origins	Siddhartha Gautama (c.560–480 BCE) was born into the royal family of the Sakya kingdom (near the current Indian/Nepal border). He married and had a son, but upon experiencing the Four Sights (old age, sickness, death and a holy man) left his family and spent seven years as a wandering ascetic. Meditating under a tree at Bodhgaya, he grasped the Four Noble Truths and became Buddha (Enlightened One). He delivered the First Sermon to his five companions at Sarnath and thereafter traveled around northern India, teaching and attracting followers until his death at Kusinagara.
Subdivisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Theravada (Way of the Elders) has about 150 million followers located mainly in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. It is sometimes called Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) by the Mahayana tradition. Theravada Buddhism stresses the importance of the monastic community and the need for self-discipline in order to attain nirvana. ● Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) has approximately 200 million followers located mainly in China, Mongolia, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. It has more readily incorporated elements from local cultures and stresses compassion, especially in the form of the bodhisattva, a holy person who postpones nirvana to assist others. ● Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) has about 20 million adherents and is the dominant form of Buddhism in Tibet. It is characterized by mystical rituals and elements including tantras, mantras and mandalas.
Transcendent reality	Buddha rejected the Hindu concepts of Brahman (transcendent being) and atman (soul). The main focus of his teaching is on personal liberation from craving (greed, hatred and ignorance) which binds us to the wheel of reincarnation. Thus, many argue that Buddhism should not be classified as a religion, although it has many features that are similar to other religions.
Human existence	<p>Buddhists believe in reincarnation according to the law of karma. However, the self is illusory and what is reborn each time is a reconfiguration of basic energies. Liberation from the wheel of samsara is attained by embracing the Four Noble Truths:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) suffering is universal; 2) the root of suffering is craving for transient things; 3) nirvana is the end of suffering and reincarnation; 4) the way to nirvana is the Noble Eightfold Path: right knowledge, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. <p>The Pancasila (Five Precepts) is the Buddhist list of fundamental ethical principles that should be followed.</p>


Key facts (Continued)	
Sacred texts	The Tipitaka (Three Baskets) is a threefold collection of the Buddha's sayings, the monastic rule, and a philosophical system. It is the most important text in Theravada Buddhism. Other texts are given equal or greater status in Mahayana and Vajrayana schools, such as Lotus Sutra and the Tibetan Book of the Dead.
Key rituals	Buddhism has no universal ceremonial system. Its rites of passage are profoundly influenced by local culture and custom. Monastic life involves ordination ceremonies, alms rounds and a range of meditation practices.

DAOISM 	
Key facts	
No. of adherents (approx.)	It is difficult to provide a meaningful number because Daoists do not self-identify as in other religions. Rather, Daoism, along with Confucianism, Buddhism and folk religion, is part of being Chinese.
Origins	The origins of Daoism are usually linked to the legendary figure of Laozi ("Old Master") who was a contemporary of Confucius (sixth century BCE). It is said that he was a court official who wrote a short treatise called the Daode jing , which he gave to the Guardian of the Pass, before disappearing from society. However, the first organized forms of Daoism only emerged in the first century CE (late Han Dynasty) with the deification of Laozi as Lord Lao, ritual practice and new movements such as the Tianshi (Celestial Masters) and the Yellow Turbans.
Subdivisions	<p>Today, the two main forms of Daoism in mainland China and among Chinese communities elsewhere are the Zhengyi and Quanzhen movements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Zhengyi (Orthodox Unity) movement dates to the eleventh century CE and was prominent in southern China. It is characterized by a married priesthood and community rituals such as exorcisms and healings. It is also called the Tianshi (Celestial Masters) movement since its highest authority is the Celestial Master who traditionally resided at Dragon Tiger Mountain until the 63rd Master fled to Taiwan in 1949. • The Quanzhen (Complete Perfection) movement was founded in the twelfth century CE. Historically dominant in northern China, it emphasizes asceticism, mystical experience and self-preservation practices. It has been heavily influenced by Buddhism and has celibate, vegetarian monk-priests. Its headquarters is the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing but the Quanzhen branch also has official jurisdiction over most Daoist pilgrimage sites in mainland China.

Key facts (Continued)	
Transcendent reality	The Daoist pantheon consists of a multitude of gods who form a heavenly, bureaucratic hierarchy. At the highest level are the Three Pure Ones (Sanqing) who presided over the formation of the cosmos, the appearance of yin and yang and the emergence of human civilization. Above and beyond the Three Pure Ones lies the elusive Dao (“Way”) – a term that signifies several ideas: unfathomable mystery; all-pervading divine presence; the absolute origin and destiny of all beings. A principal Daoist aim is to harmonize one’s thoughts and actions effortlessly with the Dao.
Human existence	In contrast to the reincarnational models of Hinduism and Buddhism, Daoism teaches that humans live only once. At physical death, the body decays but the person lives on as an ancestral spirit for a number of generations before being reabsorbed back into the cosmos. Many Daoist practices are aimed at enhancing one’s physical and spiritual health, as well as extending one’s lifespan in this life and the next.
Sacred texts	The Daozang (Treasury of the Dao) is a medieval collection of over 1400 sacred scrolls, organized into three sections (called “caverns”). Different Daoist schools prioritize different writings within this collection, but most schools acknowledge the importance of two of the earliest texts: the Daode jing (by Master Laozi) and the Zhuangzi (by Master Zhuang).
Key rituals	Daoism has many forms of official ritual including offering, petition, purification, initiation, consecration and ordination ceremonies.

JUDAISM 	
Key facts	
No. of adherents (approx.)	14 million
Origins	Judaism traces its origins to the covenant between God and Abraham (c.1800 BCE) who left his homeland in Mesopotamia and settled in the land of Canaan (Israel). The covenant was passed on to his son (Isaac) and his grandson (Jacob). The most important event in Jewish history is the miraculous escape (the Exodus) of the Israelites from Egypt (c.1250 BCE) under the leadership of Moses . The Torah (Law) was subsequently revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai . After 40 years in the wilderness, the people entered the land of Canaan and established an independent kingdom with priesthood and temple.

Key facts (Continued)	
Subdivisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Orthodox Judaism upholds the value of tradition, stressing the ongoing importance of biblical commandments such as those pertaining to diet and the Sabbath. It is the official form of Judaism in Israel. ● Reform Judaism is more liberal toward contemporary culture and, thus, more willing to adapt traditional teaching to new situations. For example, it allows vernacular language in worship and women's ordination. ● Conservative Judaism takes a middle position between the Reform and Orthodox movements. <p>There are also Jewish cultural streams such as Ashkenazi (from central and eastern Europe) and Sephardic (from the Iberian peninsula, northern Africa and the Middle East).</p>
Transcendent reality	Judaism professes faith in one, supreme, personal God who created the universe. God has revealed his will via Moses and the prophets , and has intervened at key moments in history to save his chosen people. God is infinite and utterly beyond human imagination; thus idolatry is a grave sin and a constant danger.
Human existence	Humans are created in the image of God, and their destiny is to share eternal happiness with their creator in heaven. Most Jews believe that human persons are born and die just once, after which everyone faces divine judgment although some accept a limited form of reincarnation (gilgul). Jews are required to keep the divinely revealed Law, especially the 613 explicit commandments found in the Torah.
Sacred texts	The Jewish Bible, or Tanach , consists of the 5 books of the Law (Torah), the 8 books of the Prophets (Neviyim), and the 11 books of the Writings (Ketuvim). The Talmud is a detailed commentary on Tanach composed in two main forms around 500 CE.
Key rituals	The main rites of passage are circumcision, bar mitzvah , marriage and the funeral service. The sabbath (Saturday) is set aside as a day of strict rest.

CHRISTIANITY 	
Key facts	
No. of adherents (approx.)	2.2 billion
Origins	Jesus of Nazareth (c.6 BCE–30 CE) is considered by Christians to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah and also the incarnate Son of God. In a short public life that began with his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus preached the imminent coming of the kingdom of God in which sinners would find divine mercy and forgiveness. He is said to have worked many miracles in the tradition of Moses and Elijah , especially healing the sick. His message and person aroused serious opposition from the religious and political leadership and he was condemned to death by crucifixion. Christians believe that he was raised from the dead and appeared to his followers, commissioning them to continue his message and work.
Subdivisions	The main subdivisions of Christianity are a result of two historical moments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eastern Christianity (centered on Constantinople) and Western Christianity (centered on Rome) formally separated in the Great Schism of 1054. The Eastern churches are now known collectively as Orthodox Christianity (300 million). • The sixteenth-century Reformation led to a further division of Western Christianity into the (Roman) Catholic Church (1.1 billion) and many Protestant churches (850 million) such as the Lutheran, Anglican, Calvinist and Baptist traditions.
Transcendent reality	Christianity is essentially monotheistic in that it professes faith in one, supreme, personal God. However, the belief that Jesus is the human incarnation of God led to the concept of the Trinity : three divine persons, or modes of existence (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in the one divine essence (God).
Human existence	Human persons are born and die once, after which they face divine judgment. The virtuous enjoy heaven, which is a state of perfect, eternal bliss in communion with God and other beings. The wicked are condemned to hell, which is a state of eternal alienation from the creator. Christianity accepts the ongoing validity of the Ten Commandments as a fundamental moral guide but interprets them as imitation of Jesus who is the supreme model for human life.
Sacred texts	The Christian Bible consists of the Jewish Tanach (renamed as the Old Testament) and the 27 Christian books of the New Testament . Catholic and Orthodox Bibles also include some books found in the ancient Greek version of the Jewish Bible (the Septuagint) but not in Tanach.
Key rituals	Catholic and Orthodox churches recognize seven sacraments that are considered to have been established by Christ : baptism , confirmation, the Eucharist , holy orders, marriage, reconciliation and anointing of the sick. Protestant churches tend to recognize only two such rituals as having an explicit basis in the New Testament: baptism and the Eucharist.