

RELIGIONS

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Overview The variety and importance of religion constitute a vital aspect of world history, throughout the human experience. Broadly speaking, religious history has moved from a common emphasis on local or regional polytheistic faiths and practices, to an emphasis on a larger spiritual or divine system that would displace or modify most polytheistic faiths, to a new period of competition with a variety of secular cultural options. But this is a very loose schema, with important regional exceptions at every point. And the success and adaptive capacity of religions in the contemporary period needs particular attention against overemphasis on the more secular societies.

Early Societies Hunting and gathering societies almost always worshipped divine forces in nature, with a religious explanation for the creation as well. Specifics varied greatly. Sometimes divine figures took animal forms, in other cases they were slightly more abstract. Worship of the sun as a divine force was often but not invariably involved. The divine forces needed to be propitiated, sometimes by sacrifice. Death rituals were often linked to the religion. The emergence of agriculture did not immediately alter the religious picture, except to encourage new attention to forces of fertility and to harvest thanksgiving. But agriculture did allow the development of a clear, separate priesthood. Religious stories or epics might become a bit more abstract, for example identifying more clearly a creator god amid a polytheistic pantheon. And religions often now attached to the state, as rulers invoked divine approval and helped organize the priesthood. Again, great regional variety prevailed. The Egyptian religion placed great emphasis on preparation for an afterlife, whereas Mesopotamian religion was more pessimistic, featuring among other things a story in which the gods tested mankind by sending a great flood. Migrations also generated new religious elements. As the Indo-Europeans fanned out, they brought a particular set of stories about gods and goddesses, including a god of war, that would be adapted into polytheistic systems in the classical Mediterranean, but also into the priestly religion that developed in India.

Beyond Polytheism Speculation about a single god, rather than polytheism, emerged in Egypt, but it did not catch on. The Jews, a Semitic people settling near the Mediterranean around 1200 BCE developed the first durable monotheistic system, incorporating also some Mesopotamian elements like the flood story. Judaism emphasized a single God who guided the destinies of the Jewish people; it generated ultimately a single basic religious book; it highlighted ethical principles as a central feature of the religion; and it organized a priesthood and massive scholarly literature and tradition. In China, along with Confucian philosophy, the Daoist religion emerged in the later centuries of the Zhou dynasty, stressing the harmony and mystery of nature and the importance of alignment with the divine order, through contemplation above all. Brahman religion in India generated increasingly elaborate epics, ultimately written down, that highlight a number of manifestations of the divine system, with specific godly forms representing various larger concepts. Hinduism gradually emerged from this source, emphasizing the emptiness of worldly existence, the importance of both ritual and meditation, and the centrality of reincarnation as a means of moving into higher spiritual planes of existence. The goal of this life was to serve one's social station satisfactorily, aiming at a higher spiritual plane in the next incarnation. Hinduism ultimately spread throughout India, with some outcroppings as well in Southeast Asia. In Persia, finally, Zoroastrianism emphasized conflict between forces of good and evil, though the religion was ultimately largely displaced by Islam. Obviously, a number of regions were developing particular religious signatures during the early classical period.

Buddhism and Christianity Two great missionary religions would emerge in turn from this framework. Buddhism began as a partial rebellion against aspects of Hinduism, from the 6th century onward. Prince Gautama, ultimately called Buddha, objected to Hindu emphasis on priesthood and ritual, and he rejected the caste system. He maintained focus on meditation, reincarnation, and increased the emphasis on the hollowness of earthly things, pains and apparent pleasures alike. Buddhism gained wide adherence for a time in India, but ultimately faded in favor of Hinduism; but holy missionaries spread the religion to China and through China to Korea and Japan, and also to southeast Asia and (for a time) central Asia as well. Christianity began as a reform movement within Judaism, but quickly became a religion in its own right, open to non-Jews as well. Christian monotheism included the idea of a divine trinity, in which Christ specifically served as a channel that would allow forgiveness of human sin and so the possibility of entering heaven. The religion spread widely in the Roman Empire, winning about 10% of the population despite periodic government repression; and then in the 4th century it was legalized by the Emperor

Constantine and began more rapid ascent, benefiting as well from increasingly chaotic conditions in the later empire that made belief in divine guidance and divine reward more essential.

The Missionary Centuries Christianity and Buddhism differed from the other religions in their ultimate belief that they were available to the whole of humanity, not just a particular region or people. Missionary activity became central, sometimes generating several variants of the basic faith (most notably with Buddhism). Christianity thus spread not only through much of the Roman Empire but also to Ethiopia and, later, to northern Europe including Russia. Two major branches of Christianity would formally split in the 11th century, with different beliefs about the priesthood and relationships with the state. Islam arose in the Arabian peninsula around 600 CE, building explicitly on Judaism and Christianity but adding a specific set of religious duties and an emphasis on the single God, Allah. Backed by Arab commercial and military success, but with extensive missionary outreach, Islam would spread through the Middle East and North Africa, but also to India where it became the second largest faith; to parts of sub-Saharan Africa; to Central Asia where it displaced Buddhism; and to southeast Asia. The postclassical period thus saw hundreds of thousands of people abandon or modify earlier polytheistic beliefs in favor of one of these new world religions. The religions increasingly dominated regional art and philosophy. They also generated new questions about religious toleration. Buddhists normally coexisted with other religions fairly readily. Christians, Muslims and Jews coexisted constructively as well, for example in Spain, and Islam was normally somewhat tolerant. But there were bitter clashes as well, and extensive Christian fear and scorn for its dynamic rival. Finally, a few regional societies stood out amid this extensive religious change, even aside from the Americas that were as yet unaffected. While sub-Saharan Africa was affected by Islam the majority did not at this point convert, and even Muslim groups retained some independent habits for example in the behaviors of women. China, also, did not fully enter this new religious alignment. Buddhism had a major impact, adapting to some Chinese beliefs about the family and the state, but it later encountered official disapproval; Confucianism, which was essentially secular, and Daoism retained great strength in Chinese culture.

The Early Modern Period Religious divisions increased during these centuries. Islam continued to spread in southeast Asia and also in the Balkans. More rigid divisions between Shia and Sunni versions of Islam – initially split over leadership succession after Muhammed – emerged as the Safavid and Ottoman empires took shape. On the southern fringes of the Ottoman Empire a new, strict Wahabi movement emerged, disputing control of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Islamic minority rule in India, in the Mughal Empire, began with impressive emphasis on tolerance and inclusion; but the later stages of the empire saw attacks on Hinduism and growing mutual animosity. Christianity spread rather rapidly in the Americas, often blending with native religious traditions; it gained some converts in coastal regions of Africa and also in the Philippines. In Japan, however, official attacks on Christianity stemmed some initial interest, and the spread of Confucianism was the more important development. Christian unity in Western Europe was shattered by Protestantism and several ensuing, bitter religious wars. The ultimate result was some increase in tolerance, by the 17th century, and some decline in religious intensity overall.

The Long 19th Century Missionary efforts continued in this new period. More substantial conversions to Islam occurred in Africa. But European imperialism also brought new Christian missionary work, both Protestant and Catholic. Eighty percent of all sub-Saharan Africans were still polytheists in 1900, but beliefs were beginning to change more rapidly. Christian missionary work in Pacific Oceania was also extensive, and a large minority of Koreans also converted. Elsewhere, for the most part, the earlier religious map held firm. In Europe, however, new secular beliefs, associated with the Enlightenment and the extensive conviction that people could reason out the knowledge they needed without relying on faith, began to cut into religious convictions and practice. Marxism and, sometimes, nationalism also provided alternative belief systems. Religion remained important in Western society – indeed, religious beliefs flourished in the United States, in part because of their importance in providing identities in an increasingly immigrant society. But the hold of religion declined overall, and disputes about religion for example in education, marked a new period in Western cultural life. Catholic leaders faced great difficulty in adjusting to some of the newer political movements, including the growing adoption of religious freedom; Protestants often struggled with the findings of science, such as the new idea of evolution. Judaism, in Western Europe and the United States, was also altered by reform currents that urged modification of Orthodoxy, with less elaborate ritual and more acceptance of modern political and scientific ideas.

The Contemporary Period Over the past century a number of societies have become effectively secular, extending earlier trends. Japan, already affected by Confucianism, also adopted nationalism, science and elements of consumerism; important Buddhist activity remained, but it was a minority current. Most of Western Europe largely

abandoned regular religious practice and belief – here too, only a minority persisted, joined in some cases by immigrant groups that retained commitment to Islam or Hinduism. Communist regimes in Russia and China worked actively against religion, with considerable impact. Some religious interest returned in Russia after the fall of communism, but the society remained largely secular. Chinese authorities struggled against a new religious movement, the Falun Gong, from the late 20th century onward; the religion featured some Buddhist elements in its emphasis on meditation, but it proved suspect for not stressing loyalty to the state. But secular gains were by no means the whole story. Missionary efforts continued in sub-Saharan Africa, and by 2000 most Africans were either Christian or Muslim with only a minority still polytheist. Latin America opened to new missionary efforts by Evangelical Protestants, who gained ground in parts of central America and in Brazil as Catholicism seemed too committed to the establishment. But many Latin American Catholic leaders themselves embraced a more populist message. The rise of fundamentalism affected many religions. Claims to return to earlier religious purity and rigor galvanized Evangelical Protestants, particularly in the United States; it also affected Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. Islamic fundamentalism gained followers in many parts of the Middle East and also Pakistan and Afghanistan, opposing more secular governments and also foreign cultural influences like consumerism and seeking greater implementation of Islamic law. Some Islamic fundamentalists also turned to more aggressive interpretations of jihad. In many areas, the rise of religious fundamentalisms reduced levels of tolerance, leading to new attacks on minority religions (including Islamic minorities in the West).

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And "Competitive Religious Entrepreneurs: Christian Missionaries and Female Education in Colonial and Post-Colonial India." By Tomila Lankina and Lullit Getachew. From *British Journal of Political Science*. Volume 43, Number 1 (January, 2013).
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Suggested Reading:

Religion in World History: The Persistence of Imperial Communion. By John C. Super and Briane K. Turley (Routledge, 2006).

Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853. By Elizabeth Elbourne (Mcgill Queens University, 2008).

The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America: From Conquest to Revolution and Beyond. By John Frederick Schwaller (New York University Press, 2011).

A classic in the field:

The Venture of Islam, Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam. The Venture of Islam, Volume 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods. The Venture of Islam, Volume 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times. By Marshall G. S. Hodgson (University of Chicago Press, 1977).

Discussion

1. Why was polytheism so common in early human societies? Why did polytheism decline?
2. Compare priesthoods in the major religious regions. What were the main similarities and differences?
3. What role did trade have in spreading religion? What regions were impacted most by this?
4. How did Buddhism become global? What types of people spread it?
5. Why did so much religious change occur during and right after the period of classical decline?
6. What are different interpretations of the Wahhabi movement? What is its historical impact?
7. How did religion and colonization serve the same purposes? What tensions were there between the two?
8. What options have particularly competed with religions in the contemporary period? How and why have results varied in different regions?