

WORLD RELIGIONS GUIDE

The world has come to our doorstep. With international travel, students studying in foreign lands, rapid immigration and especially Internet access, ideas from different religions have become increasingly accessible.

What is Samsara? Injil? Jihad? The eightfold noble path? These and other questions come crashing to the fore as you consider the religions of the world. At first glance, they can be confusing and overwhelming. And the deeper you dig, the more diversity you'll find.

Although there is much diverse thinking in this world, each religion must answer certain fundamental questions about life, reality and God. This guide is designed to be a helpful source to find the answers each religion offers to the biggest questions human beings all over the globe might ask.

What is prime reality - the really real?

Where do morals come from?

What is 'God' like?

What happens after you die?

What is the problem with the world? The solution?

Understanding the varying answers to these questions can help you understand a religion much more powerfully. So, this guide is designed to help you gain a deeper understanding of the five most influential 'religions' (or more accurately, world views) on Planet Earth. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are easily the four largest religions and Atheism is the largest non-religious world view.

Feel free to enjoy this guide as it is written - by question. Or, if you prefer, learn about a particular religion by bopping between sections and reading the relevant portion of that religion.

Happy Studies

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What is prime reality (according to different religions)?

Islam

- Allah is the creator of the world, alone and unequalled.
- Muslims believe in strict monotheism. To become a Muslim, you must declare the *shahadah*, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."
- God is just, holy, severe.
- A common Muslim saying is Allah *akbar* "God is great."
- There are 99 names for God and the most commonly used is "merciful." (Of these 99 names, not one is 'Father.')
- When Muslims talk about God, they describe a powerful but benevolent being: someone with great authority who could either cut off your head or send you on your way with unimagined riches — depending on how he felt.
- God has given no assurance of forgiveness, so you must follow his laws or pay the consequences. Still, he may surprise you with his mercy, and Muslims are counting on that mercy at the Day of Judgment.



• Carl Sagan said, "The universe is all there is, all there ever was and all there ever will be." This is the clearest and most concise statement on prime reality that the Atheist can make.

Atheism

- The physical world is the beginning, the end and everything in between.
- There is no supernatural force. Everything is natural.

Christianity

- Like the Muslims, Christians look to God as prime reality. Jesus agreed with the Jewish concept of God as creator and ruler of the universe (monotheism), but also urged us to think of God as "Abba" (Father or Daddy). Like a good father, God provides, protects, loves, guides.
- Jesus also taught we should look at him: He, Jesus, is the exact representation of what God's character is like. "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Hebrews 1). What Jesus is, God is; what Jesus loves, God loves; what Jesus hates, God hates, etc.
- Jesus (in addition to the Holy Spirit) is, in fact, as much prime reality as the Father.

Hinduism

- We are all divine, we just don't know it.
- God is the force behind the universe — the creative energy from which everything came into being.
- All religions have different names for the same God. He (It) may show up in various forms. There are actually many gods, the main three being Brahma (creator), Shiva (destroyer), and Vishnu (sustainer), but ultimately all these are one.
- We might refer to God as a person, but our personalities as well as his are an illusion (*maya*), everything is ultimately just part of the impersonal oneness that is the source of all.



Buddhism

- Interestingly, Buddha said nothing of God. He was either agnostic or he thought God did not play a major role in this world.
- Although there is no personal God, there is a sense of a 'great oneness' that is the ultimate reality.
- There is no "God" to be worshipped.



What is your source of ultimate truth?

Hinduism

- Truth is not in a book, it is found in experience.
- There is no authority other than what you find to be true.
- There are holy books in Hinduism (The Vedas, The Upanishads, and the very popular short work "Bhagavad-Gita") but nothing is as important as your own journey and experience. Use any source you want (Bible, Qu'ran, etc.) as long as it helps you experience God.



Buddhism

- The main holy books are the Tripitaka (Three Baskets, the "Dhammapadam" is a very popular excerpt). Buddhists will also point to 38 volumes of the Pali Canon — sayings of the Buddha and Buddhist teachers (recorded 500+ years after his death.)
- Like Hinduism, experience is the main teacher, not just the words of the Buddha or the holy books. In fact, toward the end of his life, Buddha is quoted as saying, "Be lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help." If something is true, you'll experience it in your life, and if it's not true, don't bother with it no matter who said it.

Islam

• The Qu'ran is the exact word of God, a copy of it, in Arabic, exists in heaven—eternally.

• Anything a true prophet says is also God's word, such as the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David and the Injil of Isa (Evangel of Jesus). The problem with all other "revelations" is that they've been corrupted over time, so in practice, everything is tested by what Muhammad taught—and rejected as deviant if it doesn't agree with the Qu'ran.



Atheism

- The Atheist does not look to a book for a revelation of ultimate truth. In fact, to depend on some kind of revelation flies in the face of the idea that there is no supernatural being.
- Atheists primarily look to reason, empirical evidence (science) and experience to guide each of them to their own understanding of truth.

WORD
ON THE STREET...

Christianity

- All truth is God's truth, but the Bible (the Word of God) is God's "living and active" authoritative message.
- Old and New Testaments together form a whole picture, preparing for Christ, experiencing him, then explaining him.
- The best known parts of the Bible are Jesus' teaching, but all the Scriptures point toward the same gracious God who pursues mankind with the offer of relating to him by faith/trust.



How was the world created?



Hinduism

• The Hindus believe that there is no end or beginning to God and his Creation.

• God creates and destroys this Universe in a cyclical pattern. The creation and destruction repeats in a cycle of four yugas (eras). These are:
Krita Yuga (1,728,000 years)
Treta Yuga (1,296,000 years)
Dwapara Yuga (864,000 years)
Kali Yuga (432,000 years)

• Our universe is now in Kali Yuga. It has been approximately 5,042 years since the beginning of Kali Yuga (according to Swami Dayananda). At the end of each of these four-yuga periods, there is a transition period that is characterized by rains and flooding. A thousand four-yuga periods comprise one day of the creator Brahma and another thousand four-yuga periods make one night for him. The Universe lasts for the duration of one creator's-day (4.32 billion years). The Universe stays unmanifested for the duration of his night. When he wakes up, the Universe is set in motion again.

Buddhism

• Many Buddhists would look to the teachings of Hinduism for their origins. However, in one Sutra, the Buddha said "There is neither beginning nor non-beginning".

• The only way to align with ultimate reality is to divorce yourself from thinking of anything as distinct (dualism), therefore it is not constructive to consider a beginning.

• Muslims and Christians both trace their roots of creation back to the story in Genesis.

• The clear story is that there is one God who created the Universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). God, who is the prime reality of everything, simply spoke it into existence.

• God is the uncreated creator and the intelligence behind the order and design of the Universe. Some people look to the 'days' of Genesis as 24-hour periods that happened roughly 6,000-10,000 years ago, while others see them as 'eras' that may have lasted a long time and originated billions of years ago.

• The Qur'an expands the creation account in Genesis with further clarification in 71:13, 21:30, 15:24, 32:7, 7:54.

Islam

Atheism

• The universe was created in a massive 'bang' about 13.7 billion years ago. It began when all matter and energy was condensed in a single point and exploded into being. Nothing is known about what caused this explosion, nor is there any answer for the question "why is there something rather than nothing?" It just is.



Christianity

• The Christian view is similar to the Muslim view. One key difference, though, is that Muslims view Genesis—and all of the Hebrew Scriptures—as corrupted, especially where it contradicts the Qur'an. Christians view the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative, without contradiction to the New Testament.

• The creation accounts in Genesis, Job, Psalms and Isaiah all give important clues about the nature of God and the Christian worldview.

Who is the founder of your religion?

Hinduism

•Hinduism does not have a clear founder, nor a clear founding date.

•Many Hindus will say that their religion traces back 7,000 years. However, most Hindu scholars these days will point to the emergence of Hinduism to roughly 1800 years B.C. in ancient India.

•It is at this point that we can note the beginnings of the writings of the Vedas and a notable spread of the ideology of Hinduism.

•Because Hinduism is so diverse, Hindus look to many different gurus, teachers or Avatars (Incarnations of Deity) as a person whom they most are willing to learn from.



Buddhism

•Siddhartha Gautama, born 560 B.C. was an Indian prince, protected from the evil and pain of this world in the castle where he lived. As a young man, he ventured out and was deeply bothered by the pain, suffering, and death that he encountered. He eventually turned to a life of meditation.

•One day, while meditating under a fig tree (known as the Bodhi tree), he realized the highest degree of God-consciousness called Nirvana.

•The teachings of the original Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) are respected to this day as the original teachings on Buddhism, although there are many interpretations and schools of Buddhism with their own founders as well.

Islam

•Islam traces its roots back through the 'prophets' associated with Christianity and Buddhism (including Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus).

•Muslims claim Abraham as a key founder, but teach that the blessing of God went through Ishmael, not Isaac. Therefore it rests today with the Arab people, not the Jews.

•The founder of Islam as we know it is Mohammed, who lived in the early 7th century. It was to Muhammed that the Qur'an—the Muslim Holy Book—was revealed.

Atheism

•Atheism has been around since ancient times.

•Until this century, it has not been an official dominant worldview of any culture (the Soviet Union and China have become the closest examples of Atheist countries). However, it seems as though you can find strands of atheist thought as a minority view in cultures throughout history.

Christianity

•Christianity traces its roots back to Judaism.

•It was founded by Jesus of Nazareth, also called the Christ (anointed one).

•Jesus was born (approximately) in the year 0. History is thus split in two and defined by his very life.

•Jesus claimed to be God in the flesh.

•He had amazing teachings about life, morals and the kingdom of God. His own moral life was impeccable. He predicted that his life would end with him being killed and then being raised from the dead.

•At the age of 33, Jesus was killed by crucifixion and he did, in fact, rise from the dead.

What happens to people after they die?

Can we do anything in this life to insure a better afterlife?

• The law of karma ("for every action there is an effect") states that whatever you've done in this life will be visited on you in your next reincarnation/rebirth. If you lived like a pig in this life, you'll come back as a pig. If you were kind and generous, you'll come back in a better state.

• The whole point is to work off as much karma as you can in each lifetime. Many generations from now, after successive rebirths, you may have eliminated your karma so you can rejoin with the great oneness.

• Being self-sacrificial, devoting oneself to a god, engaging in severe treatment of the body (fasting, celibacy, enduring pain, etc) and seeking knowledge are some of the many ways to improve karma.

• There is no eternal hell or even heaven; only separation, or oneness, and the continual striving after the latter.

• Two key analogies for life after rejoining the "One" are: a candle being snuffed out, or a drop of water falling into an ocean.

Hinduism

Buddhism

• Similar to Hinduism, although the Eightfold Path leads to enlightenment and Nirvana (Ultimate Union and Bliss) more quickly.

• Buddhism's main emphasis is on life now and in learning how to be detached from all your desires.

• Life on earth and reincarnation leads to one of ten realms of being. In order, they are:

Buddha

Bodhisattva (an enlightened being destined to be a Buddha, but purposely remaining on earth to teach others)

Pratyeka Buddha (a Buddha for himself)

Sravka (direct disciple of Buddha)

Heavenly Beings

Humans

Asura (fighting spirits)

Beasts

Preta (hungry ghosts)

Depraved Men (hellish beings)

These are not fixed, objective worlds, but mental and spiritual states of mind (i.e. all of them can exist simultaneously on earth).

• When you die, you will be judged in a bodily resurrection of humanity.

• All of your deeds are recorded in a book. If you've done good deeds, you'll be rewarded. If you've done evil deeds, you'll be punished.

• Paradise is full of sensual delights - gardens, fountains, couches and lovely-eyed maidens. For those who do not make it to Paradise, there is a hell.

• You must hope and pray that Allah will be merciful. You can never know for sure what your fate is because it's up to Allah. It would be presumptuous to think you'll make it to Paradise: "When did I ever sign a contract to let you in?" asks Allah. If you've done what Allah commanded, it's the best you can do and you must keep praying for mercy and hoping that what you've done is good enough.

Islam

Atheism

• After you die, there is nothing but the legacy you left on earth. Your body becomes worm food. Only the memory of you lives on.

Christianity

• At the judgment, after a bodily resurrection, those who rejected God will see and understand what they have done and will receive their justice: hell (separation from Him forever).

• Those who accepted God's gracious alternative—forgiveness—will receive life in heaven, not because they are better than anyone else, but because they acknowledged their hopeless condition and stopped trusting in anything they could do on their own. Instead they threw themselves on God's mercy. In this regard, they are similar to Muslims, except that according to Christianity, God says, "Here is my contract, written in the blood of my Son. Rely on it!"



What is humankind's biggest problem?

Hinduism

- Ignorance—Hinduism teaches you to realize that you are part of God.
- Our ignorance continues the cycle of death and rebirth (reincarnation/samsara).
- Bad karma keeps us coming back for another round of life.

WORD ON THE STREET...

Buddhism

- Suffering, caused by craving.
- You perceive pain, death and setbacks as suffering because you crave good things.
- Eliminate craving and you eliminate suffering.
- The way to eliminate craving is the eightfold noble path.



Atheism

- There is no problem. The physical world is all there is. Therefore it is what it is.
- Some will dedicate their lives to fixing the problems they do perceive: human injustice, global warming, species extinction or other issues.

Islam

- Lack of submission to God. Islam shows you the way to submit to God and honor his prophet Mohammad the way Allah expects.



Christianity

- Broken relationship with God because of sin. Humanity has 'missed the mark' of God's standards.
- Additionally, we have rebelled against his ways and have chosen to place our ways and opinions above his.

What is your basis of morality?

Hinduism

• The law of Karma determines our behavior. Hindus are motivated to do good, because they will receive good. They are motivated to avoid bad because the law of Karma dictates that they'll be worse off if they do so.

• Morals are determined by the 'path' that you choose to follow. They are determined by your place in the caste system (in some cases), the Vedas and Upanishads. In addition, morals vary from state-to-state and people-group to people-group.



Buddhism

• Buddhists' morality is governed by whether a certain action or speech is likely to be harmful to oneself or another.

• A Buddhist should cultivate good behavior by following the 'five precepts' that include:

To undertake the training to avoid taking the life of beings.

To undertake the training to avoid taking things not given.

To undertake the training to avoid sensual misconduct, including sexual, but also covering other sensual desires such as gluttony.

To undertake the training to refrain from false speech including—lying and any speech not beneficial to the welfare of others.

To undertake the training to abstain from substances that cause intoxication and heedlessness.

• Muslims follow the moral standards for humans as laid out in the Qur'an. In there you will find a comprehensive list of ways to live including government, inheritance, relationships, family life, religious practices, warfare, and business life.

• Because the Qur'an is considered the perfect revelation of God, the words within are literally God's commands for daily living and morality.

Atheism

• For the Atheist, there is no absolute moral standard. Because there is no transcendent power in the universe, there is nowhere to look for moral guidance outside of the human experience. This does not mean that Atheists are necessarily immoral, but that they vary greatly in what standards they use to determine morality.

• By far the most widespread is personal opinion: "I determine my moral standards out of my own wisdom." Others are more systematic. For example, one kind of atheist, a "Utilitarian" tries to bring about the most good for the most people.

• Some try to determine morality by figuring out what gives humanity the best evolutionary advantage.

• Others trust what their families taught them, or simply submit to the prevailing sociological climate.

Christianity

• Morality is based on the character of God. He is the ultimate standard of goodness.

• The Bible is the document that reveals who God is and how he wants us to live.

• Classic passages on Christian morality include the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

• God wants us all to live according to his standards, but offers forgiveness through Jesus when we fail.

WORD
ON THE STREET...

What is the solution to the problem of this world?

Hinduism

• First understand that you are God! You must overcome your ignorance of this fact. The world around you is an illusion; you must come to see who you really are.

• You do this through meditation, through prayer, through devotion, through good works, through learning...there are really many paths. Pick the one that's right for you.

• Once you come to understand this, you will be able to become detached from this illusion and live in supreme Truth. Gradually, over many reincarnations, you must work off your bad karma and rejoin with the One.

• It is entirely up to you to pursue this diligently, though we are all being drawn toward this ultimate merging with the One.

Buddhism

• There is hope you can progress to Enlightenment in this life rather than through the endless cycle of rebirths taught in Hinduism.

• The goal is not a relationship with God (who knows if he/she exists and what he/she is like?), but freedom from suffering and ignorance.

• You must become "Enlightened" (that is what "Buddha" means, the "enlightened one"). Enlightenment is reached through the eight-fold noble path and other means (such as meditation on koans) prescribed by various schools of Buddhism.

Islam

• You must obey Allah's commandments.

• You must first declare "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." This is the first of the Five Pillars of Islam which also include: Pray five times a day, Give alms (2 and 1/2 % of income), Observe the Fast of Ramadan and Make a Pilgrimage to Mecca once during your lifetime.

• Bring moral order by teaching Islam.

Atheism

• Atheists don't believe that there is an absolute standard, source of life or problem to overcome. Therefore, many of them are led to despair. Others begin a quest to help the human race. Still others become environmentalists to care for the global system.

Christianity

• The radical teaching of Christianity is that there is nothing you can do—the situation is hopeless because your sin separates you from God.

• "But God, being rich in mercy" came in the person of Christ to open up a way by faith. We don't get to God; he gets to us. All we need to do is receive the gift and follow.

• We enter the relationship with God by grace, then we cultivate it through cooperation. Like an adoption, we are proclaimed a child, then grow up to maturity.

• Our "maturity" doesn't save us, we aren't uncertain of our status, as if God will adopt us only if we're good enough. First, he adopts us, then we become obedient and seek maturity out of love rather than seeking merit or acceptance.

• This transaction is made possible by God's work that was done when Christ died on the cross and in an instant, supernaturally paid for the sins of all of humankind. It is a gift that is useless, however, if we refuse to accept the offer and pursue another path of our own making (or don't pursue any path at all).

• Man-made religion doesn't cut it. Jesus constantly railed on "religious" people with this problem. Only simple, childlike faith can take the gift.



Who is Jesus to you?

The religious population of the world

Hinduism

- One of many spiritual teachers.
- An avatar (god-man, like Krishna).
- In Hinduism, there's plenty of room for Jesus and any other teachers you want.

Buddhism

• Don't know, but quite sure he was only a man, maybe even an enlightened One, but not unique because many others have reached his level.

Islam

- Jesus, called Isa, was actually a good Muslim (Muslim simply means "submitted one").
- He was one of the thousands of prophets sent by God, similar to Mohammad (though Mohammad, being the latest, supercedes all the others).
- Definitely NOT the Son of God (a blasphemous concept to Muslims - "how could God, who has no equal, have a son?").
- Jesus didn't die on the cross, someone else (Judas maybe?) was crucified in his place and Jesus was taken up into Paradise, with no redemptive significance at all.

Atheism

- At best, a good Jew who taught the masses, at worst he was a deceiver or a deluded, but brilliant, teacher.
- Not really important who he was, but he was certainly not more than a man.
- Most respect him as an amazing moral teacher who has been the stimulus for much good in this world. Others criticize him for his claims of divinity and the exclusive claims he made.

Christianity

- Jesus is the Son of God.
- Jesus is the third person of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).
- Jesus is the Redeemer. Savior.

Christians (total)	1,955,229
Roman Catholics	981,465
Protestants	404,020
Orthodox	218,350
Anglicans	69,136
Other Christians	282,258
Muslims	1,126,325
Nonreligious	886,929
Hindus	793,076
Buddhists	325,275
Atheists	222,195
Chinese Folk Religions	220,971
New Religionists	106,016
Ethnic Religionists	102,945
Sikhs	19,508
Jews	13,866
Spiritists	10,293
Bahais	6,404
Confucians	5,086
Jains	4,920
Shintoists	2,898
Other Religionists	1,952

(In Thousands, based on the Time Almanac 2000, Bergna Brunner, ed. (Des Moines, IA: 2000), p. 404)

Parable

Once upon a time, a man fell into a ditch. He could not get out no matter how high he jumped, or how hard he tried to climb. He knew he would certainly die if left there.

Eventually, a Hindu wise man passed by and heard the man's cries. "Clearly, you are there because of your karma. You must meditate, and fast. The hole is just an illusion. Perhaps in your next life, you'll have it better." And he left.

Then came a Buddhist monk. "You are suffering because you want to get out of that hole. You must learn to not want to get out. Once you have overcome your desire to be up here, then you'll know bliss." He also then went on his way.

A Muslim Imam soon came by. "Allah has willed you there. Declare he is the only God, and that Muhammad is his prophet. Submit to him, and it may go well with you at the Judgment Day." He too, left.

A Jewish rabbi followed. "I'm giving you a copy of God's torah. Obey these 613 commandments, and everything will be fine."

But in the end, no matter what these people offered, the man was alone, still in the pit.

Then Jesus walked by. He saw the man, and came down into the pit with him. He lowered himself so the man could stand on him like a stool. He lifted the man out of the pit on his own shoulders.

The man was finally free.

Some final thoughts

In evaluating the world's religions, one key question to ask is about the credibility of the messenger. Why should you trust the Buddha? Why should you trust Jesus? Why Krishna? Why Mohammed? Why Carl Sagan?

When doing these kinds of evaluations, it is best to figure out what makes a religious messenger credible. I would suggest five criteria:

- 1) Teaching - How far-reaching is it? How universally understandable and life-changing? How profound? How accessible?
- 2) Morals - Did the teacher live up to his teaching standards?
- 3) Claims/Miracles - What kinds of supernatural claims did he make? Did he substantiate them with supernatural acts?
- 4) Death - How did he die? Was anything noteworthy or compelling?
- 5) Post-Death - Did anything supernatural happen post-death?

You might wish to add other criteria. This is totally fine. Just apply them universally to Jesus and other historical leaders and see how they stack up. As for me, I find Jesus to be the most credible in not one - but all five of the above categories. Here is how I get there:

1) Jesus' teachings are the most influential in the history of the world. He is more often quoted, lauded, followed, hated, loved and sung about than any other individual in world history. His sayings have been mainstreamed into common language. His commands have changed more lives than anyone in world history. The teachings are challenging enough to confound the most brilliant of scholars, yet are accessible to children and those hearing it for the first time.

2) Jesus' morals are simply unmatched in religious history. He claimed to be perfect. His disciples affirmed that he was perfect. Even his enemies could find nothing to accuse him of. He loved the unlovely, served the poor, brought those who were in spiritual darkness into the light and even forgave the very people who were crucifying him. Other religious leaders were above average and perhaps even 'very good' in their morals. But Jesus never did anything wrong - and it was confirmed by those who knew him best.

3) Jesus' claims about himself were outrageous. He claimed over and over that he was God in the flesh! His followers had better have a huge miracle/miracles to back up those claims. Jesus did dozens of miracles - healing, walking on water, turning water into wine, etc. in public, dramatic ways. His followers, detractors and enemies saw the miracles and thousands of people believed him as a result. No other spiritual leader makes the same level of claims that Jesus made and none has the breadth, quality or public nature of miracles that Jesus had to substantiate his claims.

4) It is easily argued that the most memorable, compelling, life changing death in history is the death of Jesus. More people know of, have been inspired by, and have had their lives changed by this act than any other in world history. His amazing sacrifice, his forgiveness of enemies, his demonstration of power under control, his personal pain on our behalf all set the bar for human behavior. Beyond that, his death is widely known as the substitutionary death for humanity - dying on our behalf, for our wrongdoing.

5) Not even death itself could beat Jesus, though. Sin was not strong enough. Satan was not strong enough. Jesus proved that he held the keys to life and death as well as power over sin by rising from the dead - physically and bodily. The historical and archaeological records indicate that this is indeed a fact of history. On the other hand, Mohammed died and stayed dead. The Buddha was buried. Carl Sagan had a funeral and was never heard from again. Just Jesus died and did not stay dead. His resurrection proves that he is the God he claimed to be and that he, more than anyone in history, is worth following.

God wanted to communicate to people what he is really like. He wanted to make it clear so that people could sort through the religions that were 'made up' by very smart people in order to satisfy a person's inner need for God and come to a knowledge of the truth. He cared so much that he showed up in person - in the person of Jesus - to show us what God is like, to love us, and to die for us. His concern is that people connect with God. And he tells us the only way to do that - by trusting and following Jesus.

WORD
ON THE STREET...