



RELIGION THE FACTS

What they believe

How much do the great religions have in common? Here's what they have to say on the big questions: where did we come from, where are we going and what's the meaning of life?

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		Who is God?
<p>Christianity 2.1 billion 2,000 years old Based in the west and Africa and, increasingly, in Asia</p>		There is one God, who consists of three "persons": the Father, the Son (Jesus, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament) and the Holy Spirit.
<p>Islam 1.2 billion Revealed to Muhammad in 610AD Based in the Middle East and Asia</p>		There is only one God, Allah, who is eternal, omniscient and omnipotent. Allah has no shape, form or sex and humans are forbidden to create images of him.
<p>Hinduism 900 million 3,000 years old Based in India</p>		The eternal God, Brahman, appears in humans as "atman", or the soul. He has three main manifestations: Brahman, who created the universe; Vishnu, who preserves it; and Shiva, who destroys it.
<p>Buddhism 708 million Founded 2,500 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama Based in South Asia</p>		Buddhism focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of deep insight into the nature of life, rather than a relationship between humanity and God.
<p>Sikhism 23 million A monotheistic faith founded over 500 years ago by Guru Nanak in the Punjab region of northern India</p>		There is only one God, who is the same for all religions. Guru Nanak preached this revolutionary principle at a time of great sectarian strife in India.
<p>Judaism 14 million 3,500 years old Most Jews now live in Israel or the US</p>		There is only one God, who has chosen the Jewish people to set an example of holiness and ethical behaviour to the world.
<p>Bahai 7 million Founded by Baha'u'llah in Iran in 1844</p>		One God progressively reveals his will through the prophets of every religion, culminating in Baha'u'llah.
<p>Jainism 4.2 million Ancient Indian religion still based in northern India</p>		Jains follow eternal, universal truths revealed in the teachings of humans who have gained enlightenment.
<p>Shinto 4 million Japanese animist religion that developed in the 6th century</p>		Millions of invisible spiritual beings called <i>kami</i> are identified with everything from war to rocks and trees.
<p>Zoroastrianism 2.6 million A dualist faith founded by Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) in Iran 3,500 years ago</p>		There is only one God: Ahura Mazda, the "Wise Lord".

How were we created?	What is prayer for?	What is goodness?	What comes next?	What's the meaning of life?
The Book of Genesis records that the earth and universe were created from nothing by God in six days and six nights.	Prayer involves praising God, surrendering to his will and recognising the need for his forgiveness. For Catholics it also involves petitioning the Virgin Mary or particular saints for intercession.	Christians must model themselves on Jesus's life and teachings, which emphasise the love of God and love of one's neighbour.	On the Day of Judgement at the end of time, devout Christians will undergo a bodily resurrection and enter God's eternal kingdom, which will descend from heaven to earth. Sinners – that is everyone else – will be cast into hell.	We must live by Jesus's teachings in order to reach God's kingdom, a place of peace and happiness with no sickness, grief or death.
Allah created the universe in six days, although "day" is widely regarded as an undefined period. Creation is an ongoing process with every new birth and development.	Muslims communicate with Allah through five assigned daily prayers and through recitation of the Koran. Men and women worship separately.	Muslims must follow the "five pillars": <i>shahada</i> , sincerely reciting the profession of faith; <i>salat</i> , ritual prayers; <i>zakat</i> , giving 2.5 per cent of annual wages to the poor; <i>sawm</i> , fasting during the month of Ramadan; and <i>Haj</i> , undertaking pilgrimage to Mecca.	<i>Al-akhirah</i> , or life after death, is a crucial part of Muslim belief. Paradise is a beautiful garden in which devout Muslims will enjoy rivers of milk, wine and honey, and men will marry 70 virgins or "pure beings", while women will remain with their husbands in life.	In order to reach this fabulous paradise, we must submit – "Islam" means "submission" – to the will of Allah during our lives.
Brahman is the eternal origin: the cause and foundation of all existence.	Images of the gods are worshipped either at home or in the temple. Worship is individual rather than communal, and consists of offering water, fruit, flowers, or incense to the deity.	Hindus believe in a natural hierarchy of existence, manifesting itself for humans in the caste system. Good Hindus must recognise and accept the position they have been assigned.	Existence is a cycle of birth, death and rebirth governed by karma, which shapes the next incarnation according to how the previous life was lived, and is impossible to avoid until we achieve liberation.	To reach liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth and enter into an indescribable state of bliss called <i>moksha</i> .
The world is timeless, but undergoes constant change and development. The mind and the five sensory organs create the world for each human being.	Prayer and meditation are intended to awaken strength, wisdom and compassion in ourselves rather than to petition another being.	Suffering is the beginning of spiritual purification, which leads to enlightenment, achieved when humans transcend their own egos.	Consciousness continues after death and finds expression in a future life.	Through meditation, we must stabilise our minds to achieve wisdom, compassion and, eventually, enlightenment.
Guru Nanak's message is "Ek Ong Kar": we are all one, created by the one creator of all creation.	Sikhism condemns rituals such as fasting, pilgrimage and idol worship, and concentrates on perfecting human behaviour.	All virtue is contained in love, which drives out the ego and is the source of selfless service to others.	Humans are caught in an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.	If we somehow manage to lead an exemplary existence, we will become one with God.
The earth and universe were created from nothing by God in six days and six nights.	Public prayer establishes an individual as a member of the Jewish community.	Virtue flows from faithfulness to God. Reverence for parents and the nuclear family is also extremely important.	There is little emphasis on the afterlife in the Torah – Jews believe this world is a priority – but it does exist. The soul is eternal and those who have led a good life will go to heaven.	Through pursuing justice in this world, we express our faith and give meaning to our lives.
God created everyone and everything out of nothing.	Prayer is a conversation with God and meditation is a conversation with one's inner spirit.	Bahais must know and love God through prayer, fasting and meditation.	After death human souls journey towards God – if they fail to develop, they remain far from him in a hell-like state.	We can only please God by making the world a better place for those who live in it.
The world is uncreated, without beginning or end.	Through the discipline of Jain worship, the individual must cultivate detachment from the world.	Jains adhere to five vows: non-violence, non-attachment, not lying, not stealing and sexual restraint or celibacy.	Jains believe in reincarnation, which is only escaped by enlightenment. In the Jain cosmos, there are eight levels of hell and seven levels of heaven.	By achieving enlightenment we can rid ourselves of karma and experience bliss.
The world and universe were formed in an organic process which also created the <i>kami</i> .	Worship is highly ritualised. Prayers are designed to please the senses and the mind and can be carried out at home or at shrines.	Shinto touches every aspect of Japanese life and culture, including ethics, politics, family life and art, as well as spiritual life.	Shinto has no concept of heaven or an afterlife.	All life is made possible by <i>kami</i> and therefore everything is worthy of respect.
Ahura Mazda created the world, but evil, sin and disease were created by his nemesis, Angra Mainyu.	Early Zoroastrians prayed using fire to represent God's light, but prayer is less important than basic ethics of "good thoughts, good words, good deeds".	The world is divided by a battle between good and evil. Humans must follow good to defeat evil and make the earth a paradise.	Following a traditional "sky burial" in which the corpse is devoured by vultures, the soul will enter heaven or hell depending on its deeds in life.	Life is a series of choices of good over evil that affect the soul's eternal destiny.