

irreligion—which refers to the absence of religion and which dominates numerically in many countries generally considered Christian, and also in many Far Eastern countries like China and Japan. The next largest religion in Table 14.1 is Sikhism. With approximately 23 million adherents, Sikhism has far fewer adherents than the “big five” (or six) religions.

Chinese syncretism is perhaps the most complicated of the major religious traditions. The Chinese have long exhibited a highly **syncretic** approach to religion, that is, one that combines elements of different religions, making their beliefs and practices difficult to classify. At one point, Chinese religious scholars articulated the “Unity of the Three Religions,” which taught that Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were all ultimately equivalent and complemented each other. Thus, people could mix the three traditions. The Chinese emperor typically employed Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian religious figures in his court simultaneously. Similarly, today many Chinese turn to a diverse set of sources, including folk religion and practices we might consider superstition, to attempt to manipulate luck and secure favorable circumstances. Thus, even as the Communist Party has attempted to repress or regulate it, religion remains for many Chinese something one does rather than something one is.

The 19 smaller religions of over one million adherents each are divided into five groups, the largest of which contains religions that are related to Christianity. Most, like the Mormons, have prophets or sacred books in addition to those of conventional Christianity. Note that there are no Islam-related religions listed. The Druze would qualify, but this sect has fewer than 1 million adherents.

The world did not begin with five, or even one, “big religions.” The big religions became so widespread relatively recently as history goes, mostly by sending missionaries backed by advanced scientific knowledge, or by military conquest or increased contact with foreigners through economic activity such as trading. Although there are 25 religions listed in Table 14.1, this number pales against the number of religions that ethnographers, archaeologists, and historians have identified as present prior to the consolidation of the major religions, not to mention the probably thousands of religions that existed prehistorically and for which we have never found a trace. To give some perspective on this, in 1800 the two small islands of Papua New Guinea held almost 800 separate tribes, each with its own language and probably its own religion.

Early Religious Traditions and Their Modern Variants

14.1.3 Compare and contrast the concepts of animism and paganism.

To get a sense of the full complexity of religious belief throughout human history, let us briefly consider the

concepts of animism and paganism. Neither of these were or are specific religions, but they are useful ways to designate whole classes of early religions, and we do not have the space to describe the many useful distinctions among types of early religions that have been discussed by anthropologists and other scholars.

Animism refers broadly to religions that ascribe human characteristics to animals, plants, and inanimate objects such as rocks and mountains; see “spirits” as present and active in the world; and/or believe in some underlying force that animates everything from the weather to human activity. These kinds of religious thinking, which often lead to ritual practices to appease the spirits or harness the forces, seem to be common in tribal cultures all over the world, although in wildly varying forms. Although it no longer dominates the world, animism has not died out. What are generally called “folk” religions such as those in China or Shinto in Japan, have large elements of animism, and various major religions such as Islam are combined with folk animistic elements in places like Indonesia, as is Christianity with animism in parts of South America.

Paganism is a term coined by early Christians to refer to the other, **polytheistic** religions—those characterized by the worship of multiple gods—of their times, with Roman, Greek, and Babylonian paganism being their major referents. These religions generally envision a set of gods and attendants who rule the world and can be appealed to through ritual, prayer, and sacrifice. Pagan religions often created representations of these gods in concrete forms, or idols, which were central to their rituals. Paganism generally reflected the more centralized ideas of the empires and large societies that integrated and conquered tribal societies.

It survives today in consciously “neopagan” religions such as Wicca, and perhaps most prominently in the large and varied collection of Hindu gods and avatars. Radical Protestants frequently disparaged Catholicism as “pagan” because of its “excessive” reverence (idolatry) for Mary, its many saints, and its omnipresent statues and religious images.

Religion as a Social Institution

14.1.4 Discuss the functions of religion as a social institution.

Modern religions of the world are so diverse, complex, and dynamic that one might argue that religion differs with every individual. Mr. Y’s Catholicism, which stresses the sense of belonging and the beauty of the liturgy, might be different from his wife’s, which stresses the importance of obedience to God’s laws and the sacredness of the family. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Y knows much or cares about the