

World Religions

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1 overview

six traditions account for most of humanity's religious life: hinduism, buddhism, judaism, christianity, islam and daoism. studied side by side they stop being a list of exotic facts and start being a set of answers to the same handful of questions — what is ultimately real, what is a human life for, how should we act, and what do we do about death.

a first cut at organising them:

tradition	adherents	founded	divinity	after death
hinduism	~1 b	~1500 BCE	brahman via many gods	reincarnation → moksha
buddhism	~380 m	6th c. BCE	non-theistic	reincarnation → nirvana
judaism	~14 m	~1800 BCE	one personal God	one life, judgment
christianity	~2.2 b	1st c. CE	one God, triune	one life, judgment
islam	~1.5 b	7th c. CE	one God (Allah)	one life, judgment
daoism	(unco...)	6th c. BCE	the Dao above a pantheon	one life, absorption

three clusters fall out immediately. the **abrahamic** religions (judaism, christianity, islam) share one personal creator God, prophets, a linear once-lived life ending in judgment. the **dharmic** pair (hinduism, buddhism) share the wheel of samsara, karma as the engine of rebirth, and liberation as the goal. daoism sits apart: a

these notes grew out of a comparative religion course i took as a gen-ed; the structure — themes cutting across traditions rather than one tradition at a time — is the most useful thing i kept from it

pantheon in front, an impersonal absolute — the Dao — behind, and harmony rather than salvation as the aim.

hinduism and daoism look polytheistic but both posit an infinite One behind the many — brahman and the Dao — which is why they get classed as monistic

2 the six, briefly

2.1 hinduism

the oldest of the six, rooted in the vedas (~1500 BCE). the absolute is **brahman** — one reality embracing the entire cosmos — worshipped through the forms of vishnu, shiva or shakti; which form you centre determines your sect (vaishnavism, shaivism, shaktism). the soul (**atman**) is reborn according to karma, and the hope across hundreds or thousands of lifetimes is escape: **moksha**, reached by three paths — knowledge (jnana-marga), moral action (karma-marga), or devotion (bhakti-marga).

sixteen life-cycle rituals (**samskaras**) run from prenatal ceremonies through the sacred-thread initiation to funeral rites. scripture splits into **shruti** (“heard”: vedas, upanishads) and **smriti** (“remembered”: the mahabharata — which contains the bhagavad gita — the ramayana, the puranas, and the laws of manu).

2.2 buddhism

siddhartha gautama (c. 560–480 BCE), a prince on the india/nepal border, left the palace, saw the four sights — old age, sickness, death, and a holy man — and after seven ascetic years grasped the **four noble truths** under the tree at bodhgaya: suffering is universal; its root is craving; nirvana is its end; and the way there is the **noble eightfold path**. he rejected both brahman and atman: no god to appease, no permanent soul to save — liberation is from craving itself.

the eightfold path groups into panna / samadhi / sila — wisdom

three vehicles: **theravada** (sri lanka, thailand; monastic, self-disciplined), **mahayana** (east asia; compassion-centred, home of the bodhisattva who postpones nirvana to help others), **vajrayana** (tibet; tantras, mantras, mandalas). the theravada canon is the threefold **tipitaka**; mahayana elevates texts like the lotus sutra.

2.3 judaism

begins in covenant: God’s agreement with abraham (~1800 BCE), passed to isaac and jacob, sealed in the exodus from egypt under moses (~1250 BCE) and the giving of the torah at sinai. one supreme, personal, **incorporeal** God — maimonides’ third principle — who acts in history to save his people. humans are created in the image of God, live once, and face judgment.

the canon is the **tanach**: torah (5 books), neviyim (8), ketuvim (11); the **talmud** (~500 CE) is its great commentary. observance is structured by 613 commandments, distilled in the **decatalogue**. modern subdivisions — orthodox, conservative, reform — differ over tradition and change.

2.4 christianity

the largest religion on earth. jesus of nazareth (c. 6 BCE – 30 CE), understood by christians as the awaited jewish messiah **and** the incarnate son of God: baptised in the jordan, preaching the kingdom of God, healing in the tradition of moses and elijah, executed by crucifixion, and — the claim on which everything turns — raised from the dead. the incarnation forces the **trinity**: three divine persons in one divine essence.

history split it twice: east and west in the great schism of 1054 (orthodoxy vs rome), then the west again in the 16th-century reformation (catholic vs protestant: lutheran, anglican, calvinist, baptist...). the bible is the jewish tanach rearranged as the old testament plus 27 new testament books. seven sacraments punctuate life from baptism to the anointing of the sick.

2.5 islam

muhammad (c. 570–632 CE), a merchant of mecca, began receiving revelations at forty — collected as the **qur'an** — and preached the absolute oneness of God against meccan opposition, migrating to medina in 622 (the hijra, year zero of the muslim calendar). mecca surrendered; its shrine, the **ka'bah**, became islam's centre. muhammad is the last and greatest in the line of prophets that includes moose and jesus.

practice rests on the **five pillars**: shahadah (profession), salat (prayer), zakat (alms), sawm (the ramadan fast), hajj (pilgrimage). the **hadith** — sayings of the prophet — complement the qur'an. the great division is over succession: **sunnis** accept abu bakr and the elected caliphs; **shi'ites** hold that leadership belonged to ali, muhammad's son-in-law.

*a quiz i sat got exactly this
wrong-footing question: ali
matters to shi'ites as son-in-law*

2.6 daoism

the tradition least interested in being one: daoists historically don't self-identify. the legendary founder **laozi** ("old master"), a contemporary of confucius, wrote the **daode jing** and disappeared westward; organised daoism emerges in the late han (1st c. CE) with laozi deified as lord lao. the pantheon is a heavenly bureaucracy crowned by the **three pure ones**, but above even them lies the **Dao** — the way, the unfathomable origin — and the daoist aim is to harmonise thought and action effortlessly with it (**wu wei**).

two living schools: **zhengyi** (south; married priests, exorcisms, healings) and **quanzhen** (north; ascetic, mystical, buddhist-influenced, headquartered at the white cloud monastery in beijing). the **daozang** collects 1400+ scrolls in three "caverns"; the daode jing and the **zhuangzi** matter to everyone.

3 themes across traditions

3.1 images of the divine

the sharpest possible contrast. **judaism** and **islam** forbid images of God outright — any finite image of infinite transcendence can only mislead, so aesthetic energy pours into calligraphy, geometry and ornament instead. **hinduism** takes the opposite bet: the **murti** is a consecrated statue — honey- and butter-purified, prayer-installed — through which the infinite (**nirguna**, beyond attributes) is made graspable (**saguna**, with attributes); worship before it is **darshana**, seeking a hearing. **buddhism** began aniconic — the wheel, the bodhi tree, the lotus stood in for the teacher, reportedly at his own request — until anthropomorphic buddhas appear in the 1st c. CE, their hand positions (**mudras**) encoding meditation, alms, temptation resisted, teaching. **christianity** splits internally: icons in the east (defended through the iconoclasm crises), statues in the catholic west, bare walls in much of protestantism.

*this is the aniconic tradition
the bazaar's own arabesque
aesthetic descends from*

3.2 food

hinduism ties diet directly to liberation: food affects karma, karma gates moksha. vaishnavas rank foods by the gunas — **sattva** (vegetables, fruit, dairy: “smooth, firm and pleasant” per the gita), **rajas** (meat, spice: excites passion), **tamas** (lethargy and dullness) — and the laws of manu are blunt: “meat can never be obtained without injury to living creatures... let him shun the use of meat.” ahimsa (non-violence) plus higher sattvic expectations make the brahmin class especially vegetarian, and the kitchen the purest room in the house. **christianity** dropped food law almost entirely on jesus’ authority — “whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile” (mark) — keeping only seasonal discipline: lent’s fasting, entered through mardi gras, “greasy tuesday”, the last blowout before austerity. **daoism** aims diet, like everything, at harmony with the dao and the cultivation of internal energy. (**judaism**’s kashrut and **islam**’s halal are the other great food codes — law persisting where christianity let it lapse.)

3.3 morals

arranged by where the moral law comes from. in **hinduism**, dharma is not decreed by a creator — it is a natural law intrinsic to the universe, split into **vishe-sha** dharma (duties of your particular station: caste, gender, age) and **sadharana** dharma (universal norms), catalogued in patanjali’s five yamas (restraints: non-violence, honesty, non-theft, continence, non-greed) and five niyamas (purity, contentment, perseverance, study, devotion). in **judaism**, by contrast, God personally imposes ethical integrity — through 613 commandments distilled into the decalogue: the first tablet governs the vertical relationship with God, the second the horizontal norms that underpin every human culture. the talmud adds the seven **noahide laws**, a pre-sinai moral floor for all humanity. **buddhism** relocates authority again — neither cosmos nor creator but the diagnosis of suffering itself: the four noble truths ground the eightfold path, whose practical core is the **pancasila**: refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, intoxicants.

set the yamas

3.4 pilgrimage

islam binds it tightest: the hajj is the fifth pillar, qur’anically incumbent on every muslim able to make it — “pilgrimage to the House is a duty owed to Allah by all who can find a way” — and mecca’s inner precinct has admitted only muslims since 632. **hinduism** pilgrimages (**tirtha-yatra**) for many reasons — answered prayers, gratitude, vows, purification — with bathing as the physical form of the last; the ganges, flowing in myth from the milky way through shiva’s hair, is the most sacred water, and to die at varanasi with your ashes in the river is held to grant instant moksha. **buddhism** walks the founder’s biography: lumbini (birth), bodhgaya (awakening), sarnath (first sermon), kusinagara (death). (**judaism** had the temple pilgrimage festivals; **christianity** its jerusalem, rome and santiago roads — devotional rather than obligatory.)

3.5 sun and moon

calendars are theology you can date things by. **christianity** runs solar — but on two clocks: gregory XIII’s 1582 reform corrected the julian year (365.25 days) to 365.2425, close to the true 365.2422; the east kept julius caesar’s calendar, the 10-day gap has stretched to 13, and orthodox festivals now trail western ones. **islam** runs purely lunar: twelve months of 29 or 30 days, decreed by qur’an 9:36, so every festival drifts through the seasons on a 33-year cycle — which muslims read as mercy, since ramadan’s dawn-to-dusk fast is not condemned to perpetual summer. **daoist**

festivals follow the chinese lunisolar reckoning, requiring, like islam's, an actual study of the sky.

4 a closing symmetry

the deepest split isn't east/west but **once** vs **again**: the abrahamic once-lived life aimed at judgment, versus the dharmic wheel aimed at release. yet the practical advice converges from both directions — restrain violence, appetite and dishonesty; make the journey; mark the milestones; eat as if it mattered. the religions disagree profoundly about **why** those things matter, and agree almost completely that they do.

*aristotle's "rational animal" is
doing quiet work here: the
species that asks why is the
species that builds religions —
every one of the six is an
answer to that question*