

Hot Topic Religion is also a hot topic. Open any newspaper on any day of the week and you will find a story having to do with religion. Sadly, it's mostly bad news. Suicide bombings, sectarian strife, genocide, hate crimes, and many other atrocities too numerous to mention, all perpetrated in the name of religion. The history of religion is full of violence and conflict. Just think about the Crusades, the Muslim conquests of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, the centuries of warfare between Catholics and Protestants in Europe, the Spanish Inquisition, the partition of India and Pakistan, the standoff between Israel and the Palestinians, and the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The list goes on and on.

What Religion? The problem is that each religion claims to be the sole revelation of truth, a complicated matter, because they all put forth

conflicting propositions. If only one of them is true, the others must be false by default. This inevitably creates tensions. On the other hand, it must be admitted that strong belief in a particular religion often motivates individuals to do good deeds. Much charitable work around the world is done by the faithful or run by religious institutions. Throughout history there have been great saints, people inspired by their religion, who have performed heroic acts of selflessness on behalf of others. And while religion is often a persecutor, it has itself suffered unjust persecution. In Communist Eastern Europe, for example, the practice of religion was severely restricted. Religion also gives a sense of comfort and a feeling of community to millions of people around the world. The vast majority of religious moderates want to co-exist with each other in peace. ■

TIME FOR STUDENTS TAKES A BRIEF LOOK AT FIVE OF THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT RELIGIONS: THE THREE GREAT MONOTHEISMS OR THE SO-CALLED ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS, **JUDAISM**, **CHRISTIANITY** AND **ISLAM**, AND THE TWO LARGEST EASTERN RELIGIONS, **HINDUISM** AND **BUDDHISM**.

Judaism



Judaism is one of the world's earliest **monotheisms** (belief in one God) and the oldest one still practiced today. The early Hebrews developed a belief in the ultimate coming of God's kingdom on earth, a time of peace and justice. Early Judaism

centered on animal sacrifices conducted in the Temple in Jerusalem by a priesthood. Following the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C., and their captivity in Babylon, Jews developed the idea of national restoration under the leadership of a Messiah. Following this period of exile began the practice of publicly studying the **Torah** (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Rome conquered Judea and Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., which eventually caused Jews to migrate to Western Europe and beyond.

As conditions of life worsened, Rabbinic Judaism, which evolved over five centuries from this time to about 500 A.D., replaced the Temple with the synagogue, the priesthood with the rabbi, and sacrificial ceremony with the prayer service. Judaism emphasizes

study of the Torah, the need for national restoration in the Promised Land, and the function of the world as preparatory for the world to come. **Anti-semitism** (hatred of Jews) has plagued Jews for millenia. After centuries of persecution, mainly from their Christian neighbors, in virtually all of their adopted homelands, the devastating catastrophe of the **Holocaust** (in which about six million Jews were murdered by Nazi Germany) led to the creation of the Jewish national state, Israel.

Christianity



Christianity grew out of Judaism in the 1st Century A.D. and is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. While today the religion is made up of many denominations and sects with varying practices and beliefs, all Christians accept that Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the **Trinity** (which includes the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and the savior

of mankind. This teaching is embodied in the Bible, particularly the New Testament, beginning with the four gospels. The religion was founded by Jesus' disciples and was rapidly spread, despite persecution, throughout the Roman Empire by missionaries, notably St. Paul. In 313 A.D. the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and declared it the official religion of the Empire. A breach gradually developed between West and East, leading to the creation of the separate Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church. In the West, the growing power and corruption of the Church led to the Protestant reformation, which splintered Christianity into numerous sects. The name **Jesus** means "savior" and **Christ** is the Greek word for "Messiah," meaning "anointed." Jesus is said to have been born to Mary, a virgin, and was crucified to atone for mankind's sins. His resurrection from the dead provides humankind's best hope for salvation. Surrounded by a small band of disciples who recorded his teachings, Jesus preached the coming of the Kingdom of God, often in parables, and called on his hearers to repent. He is also said to have performed miracles, such as raising Lazarus from the dead. One of the cornerstones of Christ's message is the so-called Golden Rule: To love others as one loves oneself.

Islam



The word **Islam** in Arabic means submission to God. Islam is the last of the three great monotheisms to appear, developing from Judaism and Christianity, and is the dominant religion throughout much of the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Its

holy book is the **Qur'an**, believed to be the final revelation of God (or Allah) to the prophet Muhammad. The central feature of Islam is submission to Allah, who is awesome, transcendent, almighty, just, loving and merciful. Muslims believe that there will be a judgment day at the end of the world, with heaven awaiting the faithful and hell the infidels.

There are five essential duties in Islam:

- 1) The Muslim must say, "There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet."
- 2) He must pray five times daily while facing Mecca.
- 3) He must give to the poor.
- 4) He must keep the fast of Ramadan in the ninth month of the Muslim year.
- 5) At least once in his life he must make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

There are also laws against drinking alcohol, eating pork, gambling and the making of images. In the first

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A BRIEF LOOK AT THE MAJOR RELIGIONS

Number of believers worldwide:

Countries with the most followers:

Sacred texts:

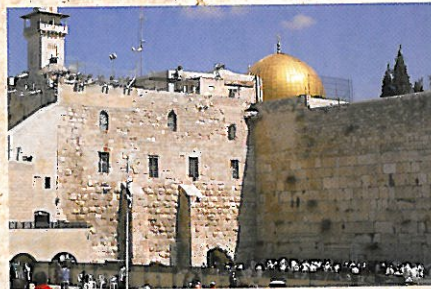
Major figures:

Main denominations:

Place of worship:

Important holidays:

Symbols:



☆ JUDAISM

13-18 million

Israel, USA, France, Canada, UK

The Hebrew Bible (Torah and Tanakh), the Talmud, the Midrash

Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform

Synagogue

Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), Yom Kippur, Passover,

Star of David



† CHRISTIANITY

1.5-2.1 billion

USA, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, China

The Bible (Old and New Testaments)

Jesus of Nazareth, the Virgin Mary, Saint Paul, the apostles

Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox

Church, chapel, cathedral

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter

Cross, fish, dove, lamb

Century of the Muslim era, a dispute over the succession to the **Caliphate** (the rulership of Islam) led to the fundamental division of the religion into Sunni and Shi'a.

Buddhism



Equal parts religion and philosophy, Buddhism was founded in India in the 6th and 5th Centuries B.C. by Siddhartha Gautama, called the **Buddha**, and spread all over Asia. It teaches the practice of meditation and the observance of

moral codes. Its basic doctrines are the "four noble truths:" **1)** Existence is suffering. **2)** The cause of suffering is desire. **3)** Suffering ceases with **nirvana** (total transcendence). **4)** There is a path that leads to the end of suffering, that of right views, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

The ideal Buddhist is the **bodhisattva**, the perfected one who postpones entry into nirvana until all others are similarly enlightened. A central concept of Buddhism is **karma** (also common to Hinduism), or belief

in reincarnation. The doctrine holds that one's state in life is the result of one's actions in past lives (or incarnations) and that present actions determine one's destiny in future incarnations.

Hinduism



Hinduism is a blanket term used to describe the religious beliefs and practices of innumerable sects to which the vast majority of people in India belong. It developed over a period of 4,000 years together with various religious and cultural

movements on the Indian subcontinent. Hindu belief is characterized by the **caste system** (ranked hereditary social groups) and acceptance of the **Veda** as the most sacred scripture. Like Buddhism, the goal of Hinduism is liberation from the cycle of rebirth and the suffering brought about by one's own actions. This can be achieved by following **spiritual yoga** (disciplines), practices leading to knowledge of reality and union with God. The repeating cycle of birth and dissolution of the universe is represented by the trinity of Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. ■



ISLAM

1.3-1.8 billion

Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Turkey

The Qur'an, Haddith (collections of Islamic traditions and laws)

Muhammad, Abu Bakr, Ali ibn Ali Talib

Sunni, Shi'a, Sufism

Mosque

Eid al-Fitr (marks the end of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting), Eid al-Adha (festival of sacrifice)

Star and Crescent

BUDDHISM

350-500 million

China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar

Tripitaka, Chinese canon, Pali canon, Tibetan canon

Gautama Buddha, disciples

Theravada, East Asian Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen

Vihara (Buddhist monastery)

Buddhist New Year, Vesak ("Buddha Day"), many festival days

Wheel of life, lotus flower

HINDUISM

900 million

India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka

The Four Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, Ramayana

Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), Shiva (the destroyer)

Shaivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism, Smartism

Mandir (Hindu temple)

Holi (festival of colors and spring), Mahashivarati, Diwali (festival of lights and Lakshmi), festival of Shakti, and many others

Aum, swastika, Sri Chakra Yantra, the lotus