

Judaism



Introductory profiles adapted from
*On Common Ground: World
Religions in America*

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Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

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"Star of David" by Knokton (2010) at Flickr Creative Commons.

Preface: How to Read These Profiles

In these religion profiles, our focus is on particular religious traditions with an emphasis on 1) their internal diversity, and 2) the ways that the traditions are always evolving and changing. Though we hope these profiles provide helpful introductions, this format is a bit misleading in that it can reinforce the idea that religions exist and develop in isolation from other social and historical forces, including other religions. While reading these profiles, please remember that religions always impact and are impacted by political, economic, social, and historical factors. Please see the Methods article for fuller explanation of these intersections and the Country Profiles for a demonstration of how to understand religious influences in particular social and historical contexts.

God, Torah, and Israel

Simply put, Judaism is the way of life of the Jewish people. In the English-speaking Western world, "Judaism" is often considered a "religion," but there are no equivalent words for "Judaism" or for "religion" in Hebrew; there are words for "faith," "law," or "custom" but not for "religion" if one thinks of the term as meaning solely the beliefs and practices associated with a relationship with God or a vision of transcendence. The Jewish tradition is much broader than this. As a way of life, it includes the social, cultural, and religious history of a widespread and diverse community, including people who do and do not think of themselves as "religious."

Judaism embraces the intricate religious and cultural development of the Jewish people through more than thirty centuries of history, stretching from Biblical times to medieval Spain to the Enlightenment, and then to the Holocaust and the founding of the modern state of Israel. The result is an experience that reflects the elliptical relationship between religious practice and peoplehood. From a religious perspective Judaism is a theistic system, but from a peoplehood perspective, it is also the group memory of the manifold communities and cultures formed by Jews through the ages. It consists not only of *Torah* (divine revelation)

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and *mitzvot* (divine commandments), but also the diverse cultures of the Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino languages. It includes not only the visible markers of religious observance, such as the *kippah* or the *payot* or the *tzitzit*, but also the communal structures of the *kehillah*, the *mellah*, and the *shtetl*. It includes politics—whether in Poland, America, or Israel. And it includes the whole range of Jewish education and family life, food and festival, music and dance, and custom and humor.



A girl carries a covered Torah, USCJ.Program.Pix (2007), Flickr Creative Commons.

Judaism is perhaps best conceptualized as a triad with three points of reference: God, Torah, and the people of Israel (that is, the Jewish people). None is central; all are interdependent, with varying degrees of emphasis at various times. God is the God of Israel, the God of all creation, the one God. Torah embodies Judaism’s intellectual culture, focusing on the study, understanding, and interpretation of sacred texts. Israel focuses on Judaism as a historical culture and the civilization of a particular people; the “peoplehood” of the Jews includes customs and foods, arts and music, dance and folkways that are part of a way of life. Judaism is critically concerned with the evolving relationship between God, Torah, and the Jewish people, a relationship described as a covenant. In the covenantal triad, God emphasizes the vertical relationship of the Jewish people to the Divine; Israel emphasizes the horizontal relationship Jews bear to one another, and Torah is both vertical and horizontal, for it defines the way of life of a whole people lived in relationship to God.

These three connotations of Judaism as a monotheistic system, as a literary tradition, and as a historical culture are sometimes viewed separately. For example, there are Jews who see themselves as culturally Jewish, but who are also non-religious or atheist, often identifying more strongly with Jewish “peoplehood” than with traditional understandings of God and Torah. Even so, all Jews would recognize that these three points of reference have shaped and guided Jewish experience through the ages.

The great symbols of God, Torah, and Israel have assumed varying positions of prominence throughout Jewish history, and our discussion of them necessarily unfolds within an ongoing historical framework. Such a historical approach is critical for an understanding of contemporary Judaism, for Judaism is a historical tradition—in which history is valued in and of itself. In many ways, Judaism has always been the sum total of all the history of its God, texts, and people.

God: Biblical Monotheism

The vision of a universal, singular God is arguably one of the greatest religious innovations of the Jewish tradition among the world’s historic religious systems. Between 1500 and 500 BCE, the Israelite people of the ancient Near East began to articulate a radical new understanding of divinity. The ancient Hebrews were most likely “polytheistic,” believing in numerous deities representing different forces of nature and serving various tribes and nations. Eventually, however, early Hebrew visionaries and prophets began to speak boldly of one God as the creator of all existence, a view we have come to call “monotheism.” Expressing the multivalent nature of divinity as well as an insistence

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upon the oneness of God, early Hebrew authors gave God names such as *Elohim* (“gods”), *Adonai* (“my lord”), and the unpronounceable YHWH, from the same root as the verb “to be,” the etymological source of the name “Jehovah.”

Through the visions and the voices of prophets, the God the Hebrews encountered was all-powerful and benevolent, merciful and just. Rejecting the anthropomorphic tendency of the time, the Hebrews did not represent God in any human form or earthly likeness, but as a universal God, engaged in a lasting relationship with humankind through the instruments of revelation, Torah, and a covenantal people, Israel. This emerging understanding of God would have profound implications for the history of Western religion.



A photograph of Yemenite Jews in Jerusalem taken by missionaries between 1898 and 1911. Palestine Exploration Fund, Flickr Creative Commons.

Geographical context, of course, was essential to the development of ancient Israelite monotheism. Living in the land of Canaan, situated midway between the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, the ancient Hebrews were exposed to the religious cultures of multiple world powers. While Mesopotamian deities, represented in the form of images, were numerous, Mesopotamian society was ordered by a permanent set of laws—the Code of Hammurabi—and not subject to the capriciousness of their many gods. Meanwhile, Egyptian religion posited an unchanging set of nature deities represented on earth by a divine ruler, the Pharaoh. The Hebrews, originating in Mesopotamia and enslaved for generations in Egypt, adopted elements of both world views. They rejected the idol worship of Mesopotamian religion while preserving the rational and just organization of its society, and rejected the human deification of the Egyptian Pharaoh while preserving the singularity of his rule: God alone is sovereign. Through negotiating the polytheism and idolatry of religious cultures at the time, the Hebrew concept of God drew in large part from the Israelites’ Near Eastern neighbors.

Despite these continuities, there was something quite new in the Hebrews’ understanding of God. Unlike the Mesopotamians or the Egyptians, the ancient Hebrews affirmed that their laws came directly from God. For example, God’s gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai became pivotal in the Hebrew people’s self-understanding. God was not an abstract concept or principle, but actively involved in history through revelation and covenant. Throughout Jewish history, the common thread has been God’s relationship with humanity. Every Jewish theological concept of God has implications for the nature of human existence: God’s creation of the universe, including the possibilities of good and evil, implies the existence of human free will and leads ultimately to a belief in human freedom and dignity. At the same time, God’s covenant with the Jewish people and involvement in human history implies that individuals and societies exist for a reason, unfolding along a purposeful plan.

These themes, initially developed through oral literature, were soon compiled into the written record of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jews today continue to pride themselves on the fact that the "ethical monotheism" of Judaism is the basic building block of Western religion. The idea of one God unites broad human communities historically, religiously, and culturally to the present day.

Torah: Covenant and Constitution

Torah is the one Hebrew word that may provide the best lens into the Jewish tradition. Meaning literally "instruction" or "guidebook," the Torah is the central text of Judaism. It refers specifically to the five books of the Bible called the Pentateuch, traditionally thought to be penned by the early Hebrew prophet Moses. More generally, however, Torah applies to all of Jewish sacred literature, learning, and law. It is the Jewish way.



"Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue Torah," Steve Garfield (2008), Flickr Creative Commons.

According to the Jewish rabbinic tradition, the Torah in its broadest representation is God's blueprint for the creation of the universe. More specifically, the Torah is also the constitution of the Jewish people, the historical record of origins and the basic legal document passed down from the ancient Israelites to the present day. Torah provides the basis for the Jews' relationship to God as well as their interactions as a socio-political cultural group.

First recorded as an oral tradition and written in fragments, the Hebrew text of the five books of the Torah was edited over a period of centuries (generally thought to be from 1000 to 500 BCE), and canonized in its final form during subsequent

generations. The first book, Bereshit, comes from the opening words of the text, "In the beginning." A later Latin translation called it Genesis. This collection of texts contains the story of God's creation of the world, the story of human origins, and the patriarchal narratives that comprise the story of Jewish origins. The subsequent four books are Shemot ("Names" or Exodus), Vayikrah ("And God called" or Leviticus), Bamidbar ("In the desert" or Numbers), and Devarim ("Words" or Deuteronomy). These books recount the story of the Jews' enslavement in Egypt, their liberation from Egypt under Moses, their sojourn in the desert, and their eventual return to the promised land, the land of Canaan.

The central event of these narratives, the climactic moment in biblical history, is God's gift of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. Besides containing the history of God's relation with Israel, these five books are interspersed with 613 divine laws (*mitzvot*, meaning "commandments"). This divine law informs both ethical and ritual behavior, forming the basis of all subsequent Jewish law.

In addition to the five books of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible contains two more collections, *Nevi'im* ("Prophets") and *Ketuvim* ("Writings"). *Prophets* consists of ten books, beginning with the historical narratives of Joshua, Judges, Samuel I-II, and Kings I-II, and concluding with the prophetic oracles of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a book of twelve minor prophets. These works span seven centuries, from the conquest of Canaan (c. 1250-1200 BCE) to the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon in the

sixth century BCE. The nine books of various genres which make up Writings are Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Megillot (the scrolls containing Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther), Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles I-II. In addition to its poetic and wisdom literature, Writings bring the history of the Jewish people into the fifth century BCE, the period of restoration, when the Jews returned to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. The Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim together comprise the Hebrew Scriptures, known by its Hebrew acronym Tanakh. With some revisions and rearrangements, the Tanakh was translated into Greek to become the Septuagint, the basis of the Christian "Old Testament." It is important to note that the Tanakh and the Old Testament are two different books with slight differences between them, primarily in the order and emphasis of the texts.

After the final compilation of the Torah, the book of Ezra notes that the first public reading of the text took place in 444 BCE, when Ezra the Scribe instituted the practice in Jerusalem. He also initiated a professional class of specialists in the transcription, illumination, and instruction of Torah. During the Roman Empire, these master teachers, now known as "rabbis," became the leaders of the Jewish community, and their seat of religious learning, the *yeshiva*, became a central institution of Jewish life. Jews have been reading, studying, and interpreting the text of the Torah ever since.



An Ethiopian Falasha Rabbi holds a Torah, Beany Wezelman (1966), The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, Flickr Creative Commons.

In Jewish communal worship today, the weekly Torah reading is the heart of the synagogue service. The scrolls of the Torah are kept in the holy ark, often covered with velvet, and when they are taken out to be read, they are lifted for all to see, carried with joy and reverence through the congregation, placed upon the reader's desk, and unrolled. Then weekly Torah portions are read by members of the congregation. Outside the synagogue, Torah study is an important activity of the Jewish school and home. Since it is considered by most religious Jews as the direct utterance of God and therefore sacred, study is as important as worship. For some Jews in the modern world, this commitment to study becomes pride in the vitality of intellectual life.

Israel: Jewish Nationhood

From the perspective of Jewish tradition, all Jews share a common ancestry descended from Abraham and his wife Sarah, and are therefore part of the same extended family. The Torah attributes this commonality to the patriarch Abraham: in his covenant with God, Abraham was promised that he would become the father of a great nation. Fulfilling the promise, they had a son, Isaac, whose own son Jacob was renamed Israel, literally "the one who struggles with God" (Genesis 32:29). Israel is the name of a person, a people, and a land.

The patriarch Jacob, renamed Israel, fathered twelve sons, the progenitors of the historic twelve tribes. First, they were known as *bnei yisrael* ("the children of Israel"). To this day, members of the Jewish community describe themselves metaphorically as a "tribe" and "family." Second, the children of Israel

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(*bnei yisrael*) became the nation of Israel (*am israel*), following their liberation from slavery in Egypt and the uniting of the Israelite clans by the decree of God. Third and finally, the pivotal stage in the biblical account of nation-building was the inheritance of the promised land of Canaan, which thereafter became known as *eretz yisrael*, the land of Israel.

From a historical perspective, however, it may be more appropriate to highlight the transformation of the Jewish people from a loose confederation of tribes into a unified nation in the period of the Israelite monarchy, beginning in the late eleventh century BCE. After a period of political and social flux, King David (c. 1000-960 BCE) united the kingdom of Israel around his capital city of Jerusalem. David's son Solomon (c. 961-922 BCE) built a Holy Temple in Jerusalem, thereby unifying the rituals and worship of the Israelite tribes as well. Following Solomon's death, however, his warring sons divided the kingdom between the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah.

In 722 BCE, the Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and its population deported. These were called the ten "lost" tribes ("lost" to the rest of the Israelite world). While tragic, the Assyrian conquest helped solidify those who remained into a more cohesive Israelite polity. The subsequent fall of the Kingdom of Judah ("Yehudah" in Hebrew, or "Judea") similarly encouraged the surviving Israelites to develop a stronger, more cogent sense of identity in the face of violence and deportation.

This identity would soon face a severe challenge. In the year 586 BCE, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the holy Temple, and exiled the majority of the population. In exile, the Israelite people responded by developing a sense of unity transcending geopolitical divisions (i.e., a strong sense of peoplehood). Israelite religious leaders of this period drew upon their situation to express much of the writings of the Tanakh, transforming their socio-political context in exile in Babylon into narratives of Israelite trials in slavery, oppression, and politics. It was during the period of the Babylonian exile, which lasted several decades, that the Israelites first came to be called Judeans ("Yehudim" in Hebrew, the etymological root of the words "Judaism" and "Jewish").



Amulets attached to a headband worn during circumcision rituals in Tunisia, 1983. The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, Flickr Creative Commons.

Therefore, from both traditional and historical perspectives, the bond of peoplehood has informed Jewish identity throughout the centuries. The familial element has remained strong, emphasizing birth as one's entrance into the Jewish community. A Jew is defined by some Jewish laws as someone born of a Jewish mother; though the principle of matrilineal descent has been challenged in recent decades, the notion that Jewishness derives from family background forms a key component in the Jewish self-image. Conversion to Judaism is possible, but the concept of family heritage remains paramount: the convert is welcomed as a new, adopted member of the family. The male convert reenacts Abraham's covenant for men, including the *b'rit milah* (the covenant of circumcision), and is thus considered to have joined the people, not simply adopted the religion. Meanwhile, a female convert will be

regarded as the mother of Jewish children. King David himself was the product of such foreign lineage, having descended from the convert Ruth.

Post-Biblical Religion

When the nascent Jewish community returned from exile in Babylon circa 515 BCE, the Temple was rebuilt and rededicated. The Second Temple stood for approximately 500 years. During the Second Temple period, the religious practices that emerged during earlier Israelite Biblical history (particularly the Israelites' slavery in Egypt, kingship in Israel and Judah, and conquest and exile by the Assyrians and Babylonians) became further developed and refined into a more formal, post-Biblical Jewish identity. The development of what we know as Judaism today took place late in this period, as the religious leadership of the rabbis emerged.

After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 CE and during the subsequent exile of the Jews from the land of Israel once again, the rabbis confirmed and remodeled Jewish practice into some of the systems more contemporary Jews may recognize today. Translating the laws of the Torah into a new cultural language, the rabbis established a comprehensive ethical system that ordered the entire life of the Jewish people. Rabbinic Judaism is therefore built upon the Torah's commandments (*mitzvot* in the plural and *mitzvah* in the singular), encouraging Jews to serve God in manifold ways both ritual and ethical. The *mitzvot* concern both one's relationship with God and with other people. As one of the early rabbis put it: "The entire world stands on three things: the Torah, the service of God, and acts of loving kindness" (*Pirkei Avot* [*Ethics of the Fathers*] 1:2).

The rabbis were deeply concerned with ethics and morality, drawing on the dictates of Torah and its prophetic calls for justice. An entire tractate of oral Torah tradition, the Mishnah, is devoted to rabbinic ethics. When Rabbi Hillel was asked to summarize the Torah, he wrote: "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and study." This famous advice, preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, invokes the Biblical exhortation "to love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

As a whole, the great religious innovation of the rabbis was to adapt the divine service of the priesthood for the use of the entire people, thereby democratizing the obligations and the experience of a life of holiness. By transforming Biblical precedents into a practical religiosity, the early rabbis succeeded in transferring the locus of Jewish religion from the Temple in Jerusalem into the synagogue and home. For a community frequently in exile around the world, even into the twenty-first century,



"Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur," Maurycy Gottlieb (1877), Wikimedia Commons.

Jewish holy time and space does not require the Temple itself, but exists in the framework of the *shul* (the Yiddish word for synagogue) and the observant Jewish home.



Interior painting of a synagogue in Isfahan, Iran. Horizon (2006), Flickr Creative Commons.

Given that a major contribution of the rabbis was to reconstruct Judaism and enable Jewish worship without its central Temple, a new institution was developed to take the Temple's place: the synagogue (*bet kneset*, or "house of assembly"). As a decentralized house of God open to all the people, the synagogue was a radical innovation in the history of religions, and eventually served as the model for both the Christian church and the Islamic mosque. Synagogues first arose in the Jewish Diaspora prior to the first destruction of the Temple and emerged as the main institution of Jewish life during the Rabbinic era. The synagogue's earliest function was as a meeting hall for the teaching of Torah, but the rabbis also developed the space for public worship and liturgy. As the synagogue replaced the Temple, the prayer service came to replace the sacrificial service of the Temple, both conceptualized as offerings to God.

Likewise, the holy space of the Temple was also replaced by the yearly cycle of Jewish holidays and the Jewish emphasis on sacred time. The major holidays during the Temple period were the three pilgrimage festivals of Sukkot, Pesach ("Passover"), and Shavuot. All originated as agricultural festivals, later reinterpreted to commemorate the liberation from slavery in Egypt (Sukkot and Pesach) and the receiving of the Torah at Sinai (Shavuot). Having lost the rituals of pilgrimage and sacrifice when the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis reimagined these observances for the synagogue and home. For Sukkot, they adopted and reinterpreted the folk custom of building outdoor huts, recalling the sojourn of the people of Israel in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. For Pesach, they formalized the family feast to include a ritual retelling of the Exodus story in the Passover seder. Other holidays soon became centered in the synagogue and home: the new year cycle of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Simchat Torah were all given extensive liturgical treatment. Rabbis developed additional holidays based on later historical experiences of the people of Israel: Purim celebrated the legendary rescue of Persian Jewry from destruction as described in the Book of Esther. Hanukkah was created to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over the Hellenists in the second century BCE. In these cases, the rabbis gave new spiritual meaning to already popular celebrations, turning merrymaking into the sacred fulfillment of *mitzvot*.



A Yemenite Jewish Seder in Tel Aviv, Israel. Kluger Zoltan (1946), Government Press Office, Flickr Creative Commons.

The *mitzvah* of Shabbat (keeping holy the Sabbath or seventh day of the week) is an expression of both the sacrality of the Jewish home and synagogue as well as the significance of Jewish holidays and time. The weekly holy day of rest expresses the distinction between holy and profane. Building upon the Biblical injunction of Exodus 20:8 to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy,” the rabbis instituted an elaborate set of laws designed to emphasize the separateness between the Sabbath (a day of spiritual reflection) and the rest of the working week. To highlight the holiness of the day, rabbinical authorities adapted the priestly prohibitions against doing certain kinds of work during the building of the Temple. On Shabbat, therefore, the most observant religious Jews refrain from traveling long distances, carrying large items, lighting fires (or today, using electricity), creating anything tangible, or doing any number of other mundane tasks. The day is marked by special synagogue services, the public reading of the Torah portion, independent Torah study, and family meals.

Rabbinic Text

Traditionally, Judaism today is conceived as a timeless and ongoing conversation between the Jews and God, based on centuries of religious development and voluminous writings. These legal and interpretative texts, arguably the sum total of the discussion, argumentation, and writings of rabbis through the ages, is commonly called “rabbinic” literature. Rabbinic literature is a religious textual compendium developed over the history of the Jewish people, particularly in the Second Temple period and afterward.

The rabbis designated their literature the Oral Torah, as opposed to the finalized canon of the Written Torah. While the Torah refers mainly to the five books of Moses, it also refers more widely to all of Jewish sacred literature. To ensure the durability and relevance of the Biblical tradition, rabbis drew a distinction between the written Torah dictated by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and the unwritten Torah dictated by God to Moses verbally. According to rabbinic tradition, this second tradition was passed down orally, eventually developed in writing by the rabbis of the third century CE in Palestine and becoming known as the Mishnah.

Thought to be modeled on the curriculum of the post-Temple *yeshiva* (a school for rabbinic study), the Mishnah is the basic code of post-biblical Jewish law. The text’s many sections concern the whole spectrum of individual and community life—laws of agriculture, prayers and benedictions, the observances of Sabbath and holidays, women and family law, property, inheritance, and criminal law, sacred things associated with the Temple, and ritual purity and impurity.

During the third to sixth centuries, the rabbis of the *yeshivas* in Palestine and Babylonia continued to study and debate the rulings of the Mishnah. Their deeply analytical discussions in the Aramaic vernacular of the day were preserved in the Gemarah (an elaboration of, or commentary on, the Mishnah). As a pair, the Mishnah and the Gemarah form the Talmud, of which there are two extant versions. The Palestinian Talmud was



Rabbi Capers Funnye, an African-American convert to Judaism, visits with Ethiopian Jewish children in Israel (2009), the Jewish Agency for Israel, Flickr Creative Commons.

finished in the early fifth century; the lengthier and more authoritative Babylonian Talmud was completed by the beginning of the sixth.

In addition to the Mishnah and the Gemarah, the Talmud contains material that could better be called folklore, history, ethics and philosophy. This is collectively called *aggadah* (or *haggadah*), constituting approximately one-third of the Babylonian Talmud. The rabbis also wrote complete works of biblical interpretation called *midrash*. The whole of the Talmud (the Mishnah and the Gemarah, as well as all of the Talmud's later appendices and elaborations) forms the bulk of rabbinic literature, or "oral Torah." This living tradition of scripture guaranteed the permanent relevance of the Torah and preserved the importance of the rabbi's role as scholar and interpreter of a living tradition for each generation. Rabbinic commentary on both the Torah and the Talmud continued throughout the centuries, and came to be incorporated into the study of the text.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the rabbis is the tradition of lifelong study. As the rabbis intended, the study of Torah and the Talmud are ongoing enterprises. Through study, debate, discussion, and appropriation by each generation, Judaism is indeed a living tradition.

Diaspora Community

Galut is the Hebrew word for "exile," and refers to the repeated exile of the Jewish people from their homeland in Israel. Some Jews have chosen to live outside Israel for centuries; in ancient times they formed communities in the Near East and eventually around the Mediterranean. But the Jewish community has also been driven into exile by force, notably to Babylonia (first after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and, later, in a far more devastating move after the Romans' near-total destruction of Judea in 135 CE).



Jewish children with their teacher in Samarkand (1910). Early color photograph from Russia, created by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, Flickr Creative Commons.

Exile in Babylonia gave rise to the first permanent Jewish community outside of Israel. Even after periods of restoration, most Jews chose to remain behind in Babylonia, having obeyed the instructions of the prophet Jeremiah, who advised the exiled community to "build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit, take wives and beget sons and daughters... and seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord on its behalf" (Jeremiah 29:5). The Jews assimilated into the culture in which they found themselves, while maintaining their separate identity as Jews and their adherence to Jewish tradition and culture. This interwoven pattern of assimilation and separatism would persist throughout the history of the Diaspora, a Greek term coined specifically for the dispersion of Jews throughout the Hellenistic (or "Greek-speaking") world.

Following the Hellenistic conquest of Palestine in 323 BCE, Jews flocked to Ptolemaic Egypt, especially the city of Alexandria, where a flourishing community would later produce the Septuagint (the Torah translated into Greek). The Alexandrian Jewish

philosopher Philo (25 BCE-40 CE) famously brought together much of Hellenistic and Jewish thought, lending a good deal of influence to Western theology and philosophy.

By 70 CE, following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish communities could be found throughout the civilized world. It is estimated that they constituted as much as 10 percent of the Roman Empire, and up to 20 percent of its eastern half. Major Jewish communities existed in Rome, Antioch (Syria), Ephesus (Turkey), and Sardis (Asia Minor). Living in such widespread locales, Jews entered numerous occupations, including farming and horse breeding, crafts and manufacturing, business and trade, civil administration and the military. After the final defeat of Israel at the hands of the Romans in 135 CE, the pace of emigration from Israel quickened, and Jews continued to establish new communities even farther afield.

The communal structure of the early Diaspora set the pattern for later Jewish communities elsewhere in the world: within sovereign states, larger Jewish communities often had their own internal administration. In Poland, for example, Jewish communities were governed by a quasi-autonomous body called the *kehillah* ("community"). Within sovereign cities, the Jewish community was often assigned a separate status and occupied a special quarter. Hence, the Jews of North Africa developed the communal district called a *mellah*, whereas the Jews of Central Europe were compelled to live in a confined area called a ghetto, so named after the first of its kind in sixteenth century Venice. Still later, the Jews of Eastern Europe created a new form of community, a predominantly Jewish town called a *shtetl*. Echoes of these diverse communal forms may be seen today in Jewish socio-political organizations and in the local ethnic neighborhoods found throughout the world.



Hasidic Jewish boys from Blazowa, Poland (1938), Saul Davis, Flickr Creative Commons.



A statue of the Jewish theologian Maimonides in Cordoba, Spain. David Baron (2012), Flickr Creative Commons

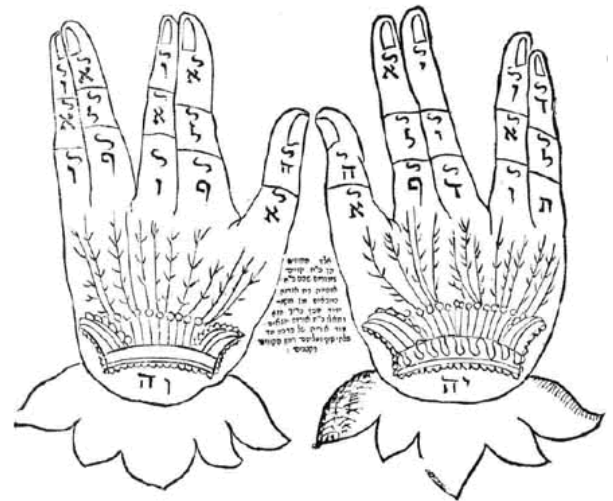
The communal expansion of the Diaspora also served to fragment world Jewry. Living apart in diverse regions over many centuries, Jews have taken on a multiplicity of cultural and even racial characteristics. Today, the most critical distinction is that between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, representing the two most historically significant communities. During the Middle Ages, the largest Jewish community in the world was in Spain under Muslim rule, arguably a Golden Age of Jewish life and freedom. This flourishing Jewish community was referred to by the Hebrew name for Spain, Sepharad. At the same time, the Jewish communities of France and Germany were developing a distinctive culture of their own in a community known as the Hebrew name for Germany, Ashkenaz.

Following the Christian reconquest of Spain and the ultimate expulsion of its Jews in 1492, Sephardic exiles spread throughout the port cities of the Mediterranean, Palestine, and northern Europe. In this new Sephardic Diaspora, Jews often came into contact with their Ashkenazi counterparts, also victims of expulsions and other forms of persecution. Both groups

maintained their own communities, strengthening their separate communal identities. Language was a key factor in creating the separation: Sephardic Jews preserved their culture in the Judeo-Spanish language of Ladino, while Ashkenazic Jews remained loyal to Judeo-German, or Yiddish. The split between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry has only begun to be blended in the melting pot of the modern state of Israel, where Jews of various cultural and linguistic groups have begun to merge into one Israeli Jewish society. The establishment of modern Israel has ended nearly 2,000 years of Jewish exile and genocide, although not without controversy of its own regarding tensions with Palestinian peoples who lived for centuries on land that is now designated as belonging to Israel.

Kabbalah and Hasidism

Kabbalah is the term for the mystical tradition within Judaism. Mysticism may be broadly defined as an experiential, spiritual endeavor to encounter and invoke God in this world. Kabbalah also has a more specific meaning in Jewish history: it is an esoteric Jewish subculture running within and among the mainstream cultures of rabbinic Judaism, medieval Jewish philosophy, and modern rationalism. Kabbalah is primarily a mystical method of reading Jewish texts and practicing Jewish law, but Kabbalah also contains a messianic thread, incorporating the idea of a salvific God and a messiah figure. Messianism has existed as a religious subculture from the early rabbinic period and given rise to numerous messianic movements; messianic spirituality has remained a stream of Jewish tradition ever since.



The Shefa Tal or "Priestly Blessing," with references to Kabbalah, Wikimedia Commons.

Although Kabbalah's mystic tradition reaches back as far as the early rabbinic period, Kabbalah's central book, *The Zohar*, was written by Moses de Leon of Castille, Spain in 1286. After the end of the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry and the tragic expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, many Jews sought an explanation for their suffering in *The Zohar*, bringing Kabbalah to a new level of popularity.



"The Entrance to the Wailing Wall," Tivadar Kosztka Csontváry (1904), Wikimedia Commons.

In the late eighteenth century, *Hasidism* was founded in Eastern Europe partially as a response to earlier forms of Kabbalah. The founder of the movement, Israel Baal Shem Tov ("master of the good name"), was an itinerant preacher and mystic who reinterpreted earlier, more radical representations. The Baal Shem Tov and his disciples created a new Jewish religious culture in which prayerful communion was exalted over talmudic study, spiritual intention over ritual detail, and joy over melancholy. Hasidism, from the Hebrew word *hasid* ("pious follower"), was a movement of the common folk, stressing populism and social welfare at a time when

Adapted from On Common Ground (www.pluralism.org/judaism)

the official Eastern European Jewish community, the *kehillah*, was corrupt and declining. The Hasidic community was headed by a new type of rabbinic leader, the *tzaddik* or *rebbe*, who led by personal example, storytelling, and moral authority. Certain Hasidic leaders, such as the late Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994), are claimed by some of their followers to be the messiah.

The mystical tendency in Judaism continues to resist the rationalist bias of modernity, with the perseverance of Hasidism today and recent resurgences of Jewish spirituality. The messianic aspect of the kabbalistic tradition has become part of modern Jewish life through the deep conviction that history, exile, and personhood has meaning and direction. For example, for some, contemporary Judaism's relationship with Israel is viewed as representing a fulfillment of messianic hope. Taken together, the kabbalistic idea of *tikkun olam* (repairing the broken elements of holiness in the world) finds its modern voice in Jewish movements of political, economic, and social change. Due in part to the influence of these mystical and messianic traditions, Jews joined cultural revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century in force. Today, many of the modern-day radicals who have attempted to fix the world have been Jews, from Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky to Emma Goldman and Abby Hoffman.



American anarchist activist Emma Goldman, 1910. Wikimedia Commons.

Modern Jewish Culture

The philosophical endeavor to reconcile traditional religion with modern culture has long had a place in Jewish history. Philo of first-century Alexandria, Rav Saadia Gaon of tenth-century Babylonia, Maimonides of twelfth-century Spain and Egypt: many great Jewish thinkers have taken pains to integrate the Judaism of the Torah and the Talmud with the best of contemporary thought. Maimonides not only codified Jewish Law in his monumental work the *Mishneh Torah*, he also wrote *Guide for the Perplexed*, which addresses an educated audience perplexed by the contradictions of the Torah and Aristotelian philosophy. The book had a great influence on the development of Jewish intellectual traditions.

By the modern period, ideological syncretism became the norm for Jewish laity and scholars. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in cosmopolitan centers such as Amsterdam and Venice, many Jews began to participate in the life of the majority culture. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the promise of civil equality was held out to Jews in France, Germany, and other European nations on the conditions that they would assimilate into modern, mainstream customs. The argument was made that if only Jews would shed their particular customs and become members of Enlightenment society, they would finally find acceptance among the peoples of Europe.

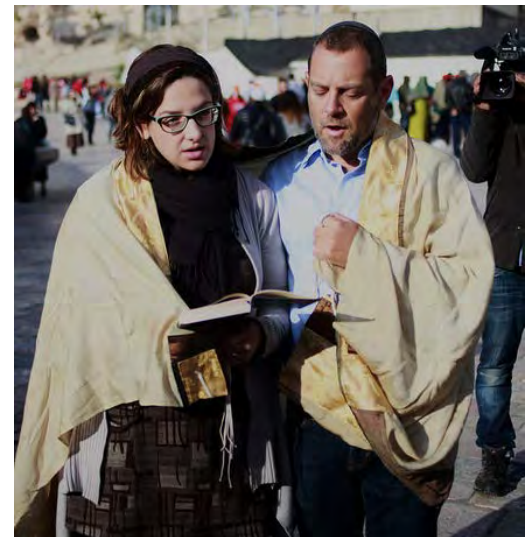


A 19th century German Jewish family, from the Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews and Jewish History, Yivo Institute for Jewish Research.

Hence a new movement was born for the improvement of the Jews: the *Haskalah* (“the Jewish Enlightenment”). Centered in Berlin and fathered by the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the *Haskalah* was one of the first important movements of Jewish modernity. While preserving the essentials of Judaism, it sought to change the public image of the Jew through secular education. Its motto, “Be a Jew at home and a German in the street,” became the underlying ethos of modern Jewish acculturation. Out of the Berlin *Haskalah* emerged the academic group *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“the science of Judaism”), which hoped to improve the image of Judaism through scientific research and objective analysis of Jewish sources. The *Wissenschaft* movement was the fountainhead of all contemporary academic Jewish studies. The *Haskalah* and *Wissenschaft* movements soon altered the nature of Judaism itself, and a third movement was born: Reform Judaism.

Reform Judaism originated in Germany in the early nineteenth century and has served as the foundation for many subsequent Jewish responses to modernity. In Hamburg in 1818, a group of reform-minded Jews started a synagogue which they called a temple, a name once reserved for the Temple in Jerusalem in the expectation of return, but now applied to a place of worship in Germany where Jews had put down roots as citizens. By mid-century, the Reform movement gained the leadership of more radical German Jews like Rabbi Abraham Geiger and Rabbi Samuel Holdheim. The more moderate Historical School (today called Conservative Judaism) was founded by Zecharias Frankel; the neo-Orthodox trend (today’s modern Orthodox Judaism) was first championed by Samson Raphael Hirsch. Even the Hasidic world found a modernizer in the Musar movement of Israel Salanter. To varying degrees and in diverse ways, they all represent the attempt to reshape traditional Judaism in order to conform more closely to the universalist ethos of Enlightenment-influenced Western Christianity, so that Jews might integrate more easily into the modern nation-state.

Other Jewish responses to the modern world include new cultural and political ideologies. As the *Haskalah* spread eastward, for example, the movement took on a more literary character. The spread of modern Jewish literature in Hebrew and Yiddish literary movements was one outgrowth of the Russian *Haskalah*. Another was the rise of new forms of political Jewish expression, including *Zionism*, *Diaspora Nationalism*, and *Bundism*. Zionism referred to the idea of the restoration of the Jewish homeland in Palestine. The theory of Diaspora Nationalism held that the Jews of Eastern Europe might form their own autonomous polity based upon the Yiddish language and secular political principles rather than traditional Judaism. Bundism was the Jewish socialist movement born in response to the anti-Semitism of “internationalist” socialism. While Diaspora



Women are challenging gender segregation at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Tal King (2013), Flickr Creative Commons.

Nationalist and Bundist movements would not have the same success as Zionism, they were important expressions of a distinctively Jewish secularism. Secular Jewish culture lives on today in phenomena such as the Yiddish revival, Klezmer music, and many other areas of Jewish arts and letters.

Zionism and Israel

The Jewish tradition of peoplehood, in combination with the age-old yearning to return to *Zion*, have produced the modern ideological movement of Jewish nationalism: *Zionism*. Its great achievement has been the establishment of a modern Jewish state in Israel. Zion (the ancient Hebrew name for the holy mountain top in Jerusalem) came to symbolize the cherished homeland of Israel, and Zionism became the modern coinage for the new politics of Jewish national revival. Indeed, for many Jews the modern rebirth of Israel is the fulfillment of centuries of remembrance. We see this remembrance expressed in Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there, we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
'sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

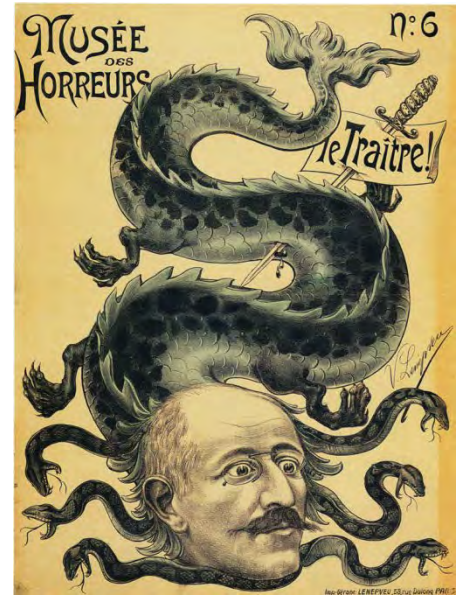
How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!



Engraving by Ephraim Moshe Lilien, for the 5th Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1901. The Hebrew inscription at the bottom is the prayer "May our eyes behold your return in mercy to Zion." Wikimedia Commons.

Every year, the ritual Passover *seder* concludes with the acclamation, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Throughout Jewish history, the overwhelming majority of the global Jewish community has lived in the Diaspora, but Jews from around the world have made pilgrimages to Israel, and there has always been some Jewish presence in the land of Israel. As a religious movement, Zionism emerged from traditional Jewish commitments and religious passions. As a modern political ideology, Zionism can be described as the secularization of the religious value of Jewish peoplehood.

The birth of “Political Zionism” is often dated to the 1896 publication of playwright and journalist Theodore Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat* (“*The Jewish State*”). An assimilated Austrian Jew, Herzl was shocked into recognizing the Jewish problem in Europe by the anti-Semitic Dreyfus Affair, which saw French army captain Henry Dreyfus, a nominal Jew, tried and imprisoned in 1894 for selling French military secrets to the Germans, even though it became clear he was convicted on “evidence” of a forged document. Herzl’s timely manifesto motivated the convening of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. Subsequently, several waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine succeeded in creating a societal infrastructure of settlements there. The youthful immigrants included many pioneers of the Labor Zionist wing of the movement, who hoped to establish a new Jewish utopia based on communitarian and socialist ideals. These founders of the state were the predecessors of contemporary Israel’s Labor Party and other leftwing groups. Opposed to them were the more nationalistic and militarist Revisionists, predecessors of the modern right-wing Likud party.



An anti-Semitic lithograph of Alfred Dreyfus created by V. Lenepveu in 1900. MCAD Library, Flickr Creative Commons.

Britain’s Balfour Declaration of 1917 gave Jews the world over hope for a state of their own. The British promise of statehood set off a renewed burst of Jewish immigration and political activity, arousing the resentment and opposition of the native Arab population. Fearing greater hostility, the British government began to restrict Jewish immigration. The cause of Zionism then became the fight to subvert the British through illegal immigration and other underground activity. As anti-Semitism escalated in Europe through the 1930s, the cause took on an ever greater sense of urgency.



Soldiers in the first Arab-Israeli War (1948). Muni Hod Hasharan, Wikimedia Commons.

In the years following the end of World War II, a series of dramatic political and military events led to the establishment of Israel: the United Nations partition plan of November 1947, the outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli war and Israel’s victory, the Declaration of Independence of the new state on May 14, 1948, and the United Nations’ vote of recognition in 1949. Yet these were only the highlight acts of a much greater Jewish moment.

The establishment of Israel was more than a political event; it was a cultural watershed. One of the great achievements of the Zionist movement was the regeneration of the Hebrew language. For centuries, Hebrew had been preserved only as the classical language of the scriptures and the liturgy (*siddur*). Its revival as a modern, spoken language was a

significant achievement. When the exiles gathered in their newly established state, Jews from many nations found a common culture and a common language in place to welcome them. The establishment

of Israel had at long last created a haven for Jews in danger. Holocaust survivors, Jews from Arab countries, Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews, and many other refugees found both safety and unity in the new homeland. Moreover, the creation of a modern Jewish state re-established the reciprocal relationship between the Diaspora and Israel that had existed in ancient times.

Now, as then, Jews around the world continue to live in their adopted countries while looking to Israel as their spiritual center. Contemporary Jews' relationships with Israel are complex, however, particularly on the subjects of Israel's foreign policy and recognition of Palestinian concerns in the region. Many Jews within Israel and throughout the world support Palestinian sovereignty and a two state solution and have vigorously criticized Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and other measures that diminish Palestinian self-determination. Many other Jews support Israeli control of the region and justify this stance through ancient claims to homeland and/or as necessary for security and self-preservation in light of Palestinian protests and longstanding tensions with Iran. Even in the face of these internal differences, Jews around the globe maintain a vibrant love of Jewish peoplehood and seek to find meaningful and sustainable political solutions to a secure Jewish homeland.

Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust



"The Eternal Jew," an anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda film (1940), James Vaughn, Flickr Creative Commons.

Though external to the Jewish tradition, the phenomenon of anti-Semitism is central to the Jewish experience. In the early Diaspora, Jews' unusual monotheism, iconoclastic approach, and communal coherence often evoked social tensions with neighbors in the ancient world. With the rise of Christianity—first an offshoot of Judaism, then a more formal competitor in the Roman world—anti-Jewish hostility was given strength through some interpretations of New Testament writings, including the Gospels of John and Matthew (in John 19:15, for instance, the chief priests and the Jews cry out for Christ's crucifixion and in Matthew 27:25 the crowd calls for Christ's death saying, "His blood be on us and our children!"). Such writings, although unique to their own context, authorship, and socio-political perspective, would lay the foundation for centuries of negative stereotyping. The image of the Jew as a traitorous sinner and killer of Christ was later embellished with ethnocentric and racist accusations of Jewish economic exploitation, well-poisoning, child-killing, sexual depredation, conspiring for world domination, and other heinous claims.

The equating of Jews with evil practices continued through the European Enlightenment and the post-Emancipation period. In response to the civil equality granted the Jews, anti-Jewish reactionaries questioned the wisdom of opening the doors of society to such a non-assimilated community; they accused the Jews of disloyalty and of creating a state within the state. How to incorporate the Jews into the modern state, or whether to do so at all, became the "Jewish question" of nineteenth-century European politics. Toward the end of the century, a new political movement gave an extreme answer: the Jews must be eliminated from society. This movement was termed anti-Semitism, influenced in its most extreme form by pseudoscientific theories of race and eugenics which labeled Jews the inferior "Semitic" race. The movement reached a climax at the end of the nineteenth century with the Dreyfus Affair in France and the publication of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a Russian forgery circulated

as the minutes of a meeting in which Jews conspired to take over the world. Though anti-Semitic fervor declined for a time at the beginning of the twentieth century, anti-Semitism would soon return with greater force.

The defeat of Germany in World War I and resulting submission at Versailles created a degraded German economy and struggling society. Anti-Semites in Germany soon began to lay the weight of these plights at the feet of the German Jewish community. These accusations quickly built the foundations of the anti-Semitic National Socialist German Workers' Party, abbreviated in German to "Nazi." Led by Adolf Hitler and quickly rising to assert control over German politics and law, the Nazis' anti-Semitic bigotry and ultra-conservative fascism raised the stakes of anti-Semitism higher than ever before, producing the most horrifying results. Throughout their history, Jews had suffered periodic persecutions, expulsions, and even massacres, but nothing could prepare them for the Nazi onslaught.

During the 1930s the new German regime enacted a series of debilitating anti-Jewish laws, essentially revoking the European emancipation of the previous century. On November 9-10, 1938, hundreds of synagogues and Jewish stores were destroyed by German mobs in a rampage that came to be called *Kristallnacht*, the "Night of Broken Glass." Following their invasion of Poland, the Nazis began the systematic destruction of European Jewry, first through imprisonment in ghettos that led to widespread starvation and disease, then through mass shootings and gassings, and finally through the construction of death camps throughout German territory in Europe. In the end, over six million Jews were killed, roughly two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe or one out of every three Jews in the world. In Poland and Lithuania, where centuries of Jewish life and culture came to an abrupt end, 90 percent of the Jewish community was killed. The enormity of the genocide is expressed in English as the *Holocaust* (from a Greek word meaning "all-burned") and in Hebrew as the *Shoah* ("catastrophe").

While many economic, social, and political factors influenced the rise of the Nazi party and the widespread genocide of the Holocaust, European anti-Semitism played a key role. Jews today continue to live with anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, which has reached a central place in Jewish history and belief. To the biblical commandment "Thou shalt have no other God before you" (Exodus 20:2), many Jews have added another: "Never forget." Jewish scholars have reevaluated the Jewish relationship to God, Torah, and Israel in light of the modern experience. Historians of Judaism and European history have written countless texts and arguments interpreting the Holocaust. Jewish community leaders and politicians are vigilant in fighting contemporary manifestations of anti-Semitism, so that such a cataclysm will never happen again. Even non-Jewish social activists apply the lessons of the Holocaust to other cases of inhumanity in the world today. And countless Jewish homes and synagogues balance



In 1933, Adolf Hitler announced a boycott of Jewish businesses in Germany. Rachel Esther, Flickr Creative Commons.

remembrance of the Holocaust with the joy and celebration of building a renewed spiritual life around the rich customs and traditions of the Jewish community.

A complicating factor in identifying contemporary representations anti-Semitism, however, is that some people (Jews and non-Jews alike) readily associate criticism of Israel's policies regarding Palestine with anti-Semitism while other Jews and non-Jews vigorously challenge that assessment and assert that Israel (like other nation states) must be held accountable for alleged human rights violations. Sadly, what is beyond dispute is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is exacerbating tensions across the globe as communities, factions, and nation states declare allegiances in this longstanding and seemingly intractable struggle that cannot be divorced from the long history of anti-Semitism and the complex consequences of colonialism.

Christianity



Introductory profiles adapted from
*On Common Ground: World
Religions in America*

Pluralism Project, Harvard University
Religious Literacy Project, Harvard
Divinity School

February 5, 2015

"Cristo Redentor," Mark Menzies (2009),
from Flickr Creative Commons.



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Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University

The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School

"Tigray" by Evgeni Zotov (2009) at Flickr Creative Commons.

Preface: How to Read These Profiles

In these religion profiles, our focus is on particular religious traditions with an emphasis on 1) their internal diversity, and 2) the ways that the traditions are always evolving and changing. Though we hope these profiles provide helpful introductions, this format is a bit misleading in that it can reinforce the idea that religions exist and develop in isolation from other social and historical forces, including other religions. While reading these profiles, please remember that religions always impact and are impacted by political, economic, social, and historical factors. Please see the Methods article for fuller explanation of these intersections and the Country Profiles for a demonstration of how to understand religious influences in particular social and historical contexts.

A Worldwide Tradition

Christianity is a worldwide religious tradition with diverse representations, beliefs and practices. But its common source is one: the life, the teachings, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. This man, whom Christians call the [Christ](#), the [Messiah](#), or the expected one, was born in Roman-occupied Palestine about 2,000 years ago. He lived his life as a [Jew](#) in a region ruled by Roman authorities. Like many prophets before him, he spoke of the urgent need to turn to God and he taught a message of love and justice. His active ministry of teaching was, at most, about three years long. Still in his thirties, he was charged with treason and put to death. His followers reported that he was resurrected from the dead and that he appeared before them.

Jesus left no writings, nor did others write about him until decades after he died. However, the small number of [disciples](#) that experienced his resurrection were inspired with an energy that led to the creation of communities of faith throughout the Mediterranean world and, eventually, throughout the whole world. It was in Antioch, now in modern-day Turkey, that they were first called "Christians," followers of the way of Christ. In the first three centuries, Christianity spread throughout the Greco-Roman world, which extended from the Iberian to the Indian coast. From

Adapted from On Common Ground (www.pluralism.org/christianity)

the fifth to the seventh century, Christian outreach spread throughout northern Europe. Syrian Christians even [missionized](#) in China during this time. In the tenth century, [missionaries](#) from Constantinople brought Christianity to Russia.

Today Christianity has three major streams, each possessing its own internal pluralism — the Catholic Communion, the Orthodox Christian Churches, and Protestant movements. Some would now argue that Anglicanism, which followed the course of the British Empire, and the [Pentecostalism](#) sweeping the globe constitute other major streams of the Christian tradition. But these broad categories hardly do justice to the hundreds of particular churches and denominations that have come into being through the centuries and that continue to be born today. In the early twenty-first century, Christianity has more adherents than any other religious tradition on earth. One third of all humans call themselves Christians. The Christian scriptures have been translated into a multitude of languages in cultures throughout the world. The great diversity of Christianity is one of its most striking characteristics.

Christianity has continued to grow and change in the twenty-first century, with the rapid multiplication of Christian churches in Africa, including many vibrant independent churches. In Latin America, four centuries of Roman Catholic dominance is now being challenged by the rapid growth of Pentecostalism. By the late twentieth century, the majority of the world's Christians lived in the southern hemisphere. While Christianity is growing most rapidly in Africa and Latin America, it is still the dominant religious tradition of Europe and North America.

The Life and Teachings of Jesus



The story of Jesus, as Christians know and tell it, comes from that part of the Bible called the [“New Testament.”](#) The first four books—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are known as the “gospels,” meaning “good news.” They were all written between approximately 70 and 100 CE, about two generations after the death of Jesus, and are based on stories of Jesus told and retold by his followers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the [“synoptic” gospels](#), because they present a “common view” of Jesus through many common sayings, [parables](#), and events. Both Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark’s gospel in writing their own accounts. John’s gospel has a distinctive voice, focusing more on the divinity of Christ in the context of a cosmic worldview. The gospels come out of early communities still struggling with their identity in a Jewish context. The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, is most conscious of the debates within Judaism after the [destruction of the Temple in 70 CE](#), while the Gospel of John shows signs of Christians being expelled from synagogues. Although the gospels differ in their accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, sometimes in significant ways, the early church did not

“Born in those who desire him,” (Detail from an wool embroidered banner in the convent of the Dominican sisters of Stone, Staffordshire, 2008). Lawrence OP, from Flickr Creative Commons.

blend them into one account but preserved these four distinct gospels with their differences. Together they provide four views of the life and teachings of Jesus.

According to the traditions of Luke and Matthew, Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea in the lineage of King David. There is a story in which the ordinary and the miraculous intertwine. The mother of Jesus is said to be Mary, who conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit (an act of the divine) while she was still a young unmarried virgin; Joseph, her betrothed, was a carpenter from Nazareth. Luke's story is familiar to Christians throughout the world: The couple traveled to Bethlehem to be counted in the census and, finding no room at the inn, they had to stay in a stable. Jesus was born that night, his first bed a manger filled with hay. Nearby shepherds with their flocks heard angels singing and hurried to see the newborn child. Matthew says nothing of the stable or the shepherds, but tells of wise men or astrologers, who saw the light of a star and came from the East bringing gifts to honor the child. Mark and John omit the birth story altogether, Mark beginning his account with the baptism of Jesus and John with the creation of the cosmos.

There is little recorded of the childhood of Jesus, except Luke's story of how, at the age of twelve, Jesus' parents found him teaching the rabbis in the temple in Jerusalem. All four gospels, however, speak of the critical event of Jesus' [baptism](#) by [John the Baptist](#). The gospels do not mention his age, but historians say that Jesus was about thirty. John's message was one of radical repentance and transformation. It was a time of political turmoil and religious expectation; there were many Jewish movements that looked forward to a new age, the coming of the Kingdom of God and the long-promised Messiah, the "anointed one."

John the Baptist looked to the new age, announcing that the Kingdom of God was near and baptizing people by the thousands in the River Jordan as an initiation into the kingdom to come. One of those he baptized was Jesus of Nazareth. Mark's gospel begins with this account of Jesus' baptism: When Jesus came up out of the water, the skies were torn open and the Spirit, like a dove from heaven, descended upon Jesus with the words, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. He was accompanied by a group of followers, some of them fishermen who left their nets and their families, and some of them women whose presence can be seen throughout the period of Jesus' ministry. Jesus attracted large crowds as he began to teach in Galilee. His message of repentance and turning to God was coupled with a message of God's generosity, forgiveness, love and justice.

The gospels describe miracles performed by Jesus: healing the sick, casting out the demons of mental illness from the tormented, and even bringing the dead back to life. They also portray a powerful teacher whose parables made their point in surprising ways. Yes, one should love one's neighbor, but who is the neighbor? In one parable, a man is robbed,

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"Depiction of Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist," Yesus Church, Axum, Ethiopia (2013), Adam Jones, from Flickr Creative Commons.

beaten, and left on the road. Many pass him by without giving him help, including respected members of his own community. The one who stops to help him is a Samaritan, a person from Samaria considered a foreigner and an outsider. Jesus insists that the “great commandment” to love one’s neighbor as oneself crosses all ethnic and religious barriers.

In his ministry, Jesus crossed many social barriers as well, mingling with the tax collector, the adulterer, and the prostitute. He warned critics to remember their own imperfections before condemning others and invited those who were wholly without sin to cast the first stone of condemnation. The great commandment is not to judge one’s neighbor but rather to love one’s neighbor, for judgment is God’s alone.

Jesus taught that the expected Kingdom of God was close at hand. It would not be an earthly political kingdom, but rather a new reign of justice for the poor and liberation for the oppressed. Those who would be included first in the Kingdom were not the elites and the powerful, but the poor, the rejected, the outcasts. Jesus likened the coming of the Kingdom of God to the growth of a tiny mustard seed, growing from within to create a new reality. His disciples and many who heard him began to speak of Jesus as the long-awaited redeemer, the Messiah, who would make the Kingdom of God a reality. When the term “Messiah” was translated into Greek, the word they used was *Christos*, the Christ.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

As Jesus traveled and preached, he angered the Roman rulers, who feared that he was provoking unrest among the people and planning a revolution. He was also feared by Jewish leaders because of his challenges to traditional authority and teachings. Jesus named hypocrisy where he saw it and urged his community to claim a new prophetic vision. Those who opposed him saw him as a dangerous upstart who wanted to form a cult around himself. Jesus was well aware of these charges against him by political and religious authorities, and he predicted that he would be attacked and persecuted.



“Good Friday observance in Barangay (barrio), San Fernando, Pampanga,” Philippines, 2011, Marco Repola from Flickr Creative Commons.

After a teaching ministry of perhaps three years, Jesus went to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish season of [Passover](#). There he warned those closest to him of his coming death and gathered them together for a meal that would be their last supper together. He was then betrayed to the Roman authorities by [Judas](#), one of his own followers, and captured. He was denounced by the Jewish high priest as a [blasphemer](#) who claimed to be the Messiah. Taken before the Roman authorities, Jesus was charged with sedition and executed by the Roman practice of [crucifixion](#), being nailed to a cross. It was Friday and burial rites would have to wait until the [Sabbath](#) was over.

Early Sunday morning, according to all the gospel accounts, some of the women who had followed and loved Jesus went to his tomb to prepare his body for a proper burial. When they arrived, they discovered that the stone at the entry to the tomb had been rolled away and the tomb was empty.

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According to the [synoptic gospels](#), a figure in dazzling white appeared and told the women that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In John's account, a man who seemed to be the gardener appeared to Mary Magdalene (a follower of Jesus) and spoke to her by name. It was Jesus. Although their accounts differ, the gospels report that in the following days, many of the disciples saw Jesus and experienced his presence. This experience of the living Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith.

Those who have adopted the Christian faith through the centuries have understood the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as a profound affirmation of God's presence in the midst of humanity. The "Christ event," according to many Christians, cannot be understood in the context of the first century alone: It is as much a twenty-first century event, repeated and renewed daily in the lives of those who take this as the story of their own faith.

Birth of the Church

Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples were together in Jerusalem. It was then at the time of the spring harvest festival of [Shavuot](#), seven weeks after the feast of [Passover](#), that they experienced the empowerment that would make them a new community. That day became known as [Pentecost](#) in the Christian church and celebrated as the "birthday of the Church." In the New Testament, the [Acts of the Apostles](#), written toward the end of the first century by the author of the *Gospel of Luke*, tells the story of the early church, beginning with this event. There in Jerusalem, where people gathered from many lands for the festival, the new community experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, described as tongues of fire settling on their heads and enabling them to speak the good news of Jesus in all the languages on earth (Acts 2:4). It was an experience of empowerment which transformed a fearful and somewhat confused group of disciples into [apostles](#), those who literally are "sent" to give testimony to their faith.

The expansion of the early church was also given energy by the conversion of a Jewish tentmaker named Saul. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Saul had been a persecutor of Christians until he experienced the blinding light of God's presence as he traveled on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. He became baptized as a Christian. For the rest of his life, he traveled the Mediterranean world nurturing small communities of Christians until he finally brought the gospel to Rome. He spoke in synagogues and to communities of Jews, affirming his faith in Christ as Messiah. However, he also spoke to [Gentiles](#)—to those who were not Jews—convinced that the message of new life in Christ was not for his people alone, but for men and women everywhere. As an apostle to the Gentiles, he is known by the Roman form of his name, [Paul](#).

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"Pentecost," El Greco (1596), from WikiArt.

Paul's controversy with [Peter](#) and the community in Jerusalem was of utmost importance for early Christianity, as it gradually became differentiated from its Jewish roots. While Peter believed that Gentiles needed first to be [circumcised](#) and convert to Judaism before becoming Christian, Paul insisted that new Greek converts could become Christian directly. The [Council of Jerusalem](#) (about 50 CE) decided, with Paul, that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews first. With this, the door was open for a new kind of Christian community. Paul's letters to the new churches of the Hellenistic world have become an integral part of the New Testament.



"Communion during Assembly 2014 in Louisville" Paul Jeffrey for United Methodist Women, from Flickr Creative Commons.

The Christian community is called the "church." The word in Greek was *ecclesia*, those who were "called out." They were called out of their former lives into a new community. The Book of Acts (2:44-47) describes the life of the first Christian community: "All who believed were together and shared all things in common, sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day attending temple together, breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

In its largest sense, the church is universal—the community of all people who profess faith in Christ. This is what is meant by the term "catholic," which simply means "universal." In its most intimate sense, the church is "wherever two or three are gathered" in the name of Christ (Matthew 18:20). Whether universal or a gathering of two or three, the church is a community of people. The images of community in the New Testament are powerful, organic images of belonging. Most important, the church is described as "the body of Christ." As Paul puts it, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (I Corinthians 12:12). Not all parts of the body of Christ, the church, have the same function but all parts are connected and all suffer and rejoice together. This powerful metaphor is extended through the central ritual of the community, the blessing and sharing of bread and wine. The bread is called the "body of Christ," and the wine "the cup of the new covenant." As the bread and wine are one, so do those who share them affirm their oneness (I Corinthians 11:23-25). (See "The Christian Experience" for more information on this ritual.)

Through the preaching of Paul and other missionaries, the new Christian faith grew quickly, spreading throughout the Mediterranean world. Its primary competitor was not the sects nor the mystery religions of ancient Greece and Rome, but the [cult of the emperor](#), to whom all were required to do honor. For Christians, the "Lord" was Christ alone, and worshipping the emperor as Lord was impossible. The new Christian community was seen as subversive because of its refusal to participate in the cult of the emperor. Christians were persecuted and [martyred](#) for their faith throughout the Roman empire. Thus, it was a new day entirely

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when the [Emperor Constantine](#) himself became a Christian early in the fourth century. Beginning with his reign, Christianity was not only made legal, but would become the official religion of the Empire.

Credo: “I Believe...”

One of the distinctive features of Christianity is its emphasis on a creed, a summary statement of faith. The term *credo* is often translated today as “I believe...” but it is important to remember that its literal meaning is, “I give my heart...” It is language of the heart, a profound expression of commitment, not simply a list of statements to which one gives intellectual assent. When the early church was being persecuted, commitment to the way of Christ was often dangerous, requiring real courage.

Creeds came into use as part of the rite of baptism. In this rite of initiation, a man or woman would take off old clothes, put on new white baptismal clothing, and become a Christian by a ritual bath and the affirmation of commitment to the Christian faith. The credo or creed expressed that commitment. Among the oldest creeds of the church is the [Apostles' Creed](#), composed about 150 CE and used ritually at the time of Christian baptism, beginning, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord...” Through baptism, one was spiritually “born again.” While the term “born again” has acquired the resonance of a dramatic and often emotion-laden conversion in modern American Christianity, it has a much wider and older significance for the church. To be born again is what it means to be a baptized Christian.



“Apostles Creed,” Plaque on the wall of St. Just in Roseland, Cornwall, John Kroll, Flickr Creative Commons.

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Christians in the early church had to answer for themselves the question Christ asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” In the councils of the early church, leaders met to come to a common mind about their faith. The [Council of Nicaea](#), called by the Emperor Constantine in 325, was the most important of these early councils. In the previous centuries, some had proposed that Jesus Christ was not really human at all, but was God appearing to be human; others had proposed that he was not really divine, but only a human being. The early church rejected these views as it worked together to articulate its faith: that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. The council also worked to express the meaning of God as threefold, a trinity, encompassing three aspects or “persons”—the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. At Nicaea, the church articulated the complexity of the divine mystery: that the One God is the transcendent Creator, the fully human Christ, and the indwelling energy, fire, and breath of the Spirit. This understanding was represented in the [Nicene Creed](#).

While the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are the oldest and most universal creeds of the church, the process of articulating what it means to give one's heart to Christ has

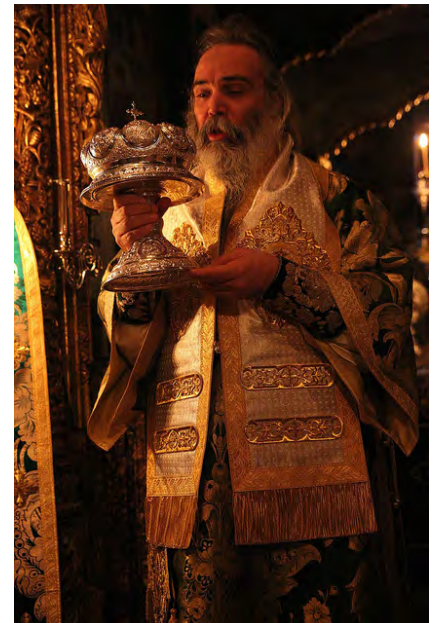
continued to the present. New creeds are written in each new era. For example, the United Church of Christ in the U.S.A. puts its belief in Christ this way: “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to yourself.” In El Salvador, Christians affirm their faith in Christ, tested in the fires of economic and political struggle: “We believe in Christ, crucified again and again in the suffering of the poor...” Mormons affirm thirteen articles of faith, including: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.”

Through the ages, there have been many doctrinal controversies, but the act of confessing one’s faith has remained constant. For Christians to say “I believe...” is not only an articulation of fundamental doctrines, but also a personal commitment to the way of Christ.

Orthodox Christian Churches

The Eastern family of churches, today called the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches, go back to the very earliest days of Christianity. During the first four centuries of the Common Era, Christianity had spread not only into the Roman and Byzantine Empires, but also into the present-day Middle East, North Africa, and India. They were united through a [pentarchy](#) that revered [patriarchal sees](#) in Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Rome. Following the Council of Chalcedon in 451, however, the [Christological controversies](#) led by [Nestorius](#) and [Cyril](#) influenced the first major schism in the Church. A group of communities that eventually became known as comprising the Oriental Orthodox Church rejected the decree that the nature of Christ was united as one and instead promoted the idea that Christ’s human and divine natures remained distinct. Christians of Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, Armenia, India, Iraq, and Iran either formally followed these men into schism or quietly fell off the Greco-Roman radar due to vast distances and difficult terrain. Furthermore, in the centuries that followed, the growing estrangement between the Roman and Greek Christians eventually led to the second major schism of 1054, which culminated in a crisis as the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople [excommunicated](#) each other. The institutions headed by each became known respectively as the (Roman) Catholic Church and the (Eastern) Orthodox Churches.

The distinctive theologies and liturgies of the Orthodox churches have continued to develop into the twenty-first century. One particularly characteristic theological stance of the Christ event from an Orthodox perspective is the emphasis on the incarnation of Christ as a means to raise human nature to the Divine. As [Athanasius](#) put it in the fourth century, “the Son of God became man so that man might become God.” This emphasis on theosis, “becoming divine,” stands in contrast to the heavy emphasis on human sinfulness present in much of the theology of the Western churches.



Russian Orthodox Archbishop Ambrose of Peterhof visited the Holy Mount Athos, 2014, St. Petersburg Orthodox Seminary, Flickr Creative Commons

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St. Anthony of Egypt, Burgos Cathedral, Burgos, Spain. Lawrence OP, Flickr Creative Commons.

[Monasticism](#) was an important part of the early church tradition, as devout men and women left urban life and the growing institutions of the church for a life of devotion to God in prayer and simplicity. Monastic life began as early as the fourth century, with St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers of Egypt, in whom both Eastern and Western traditions of monasticism find their source and inspiration. As Eastern monasticism developed, it included both communal and solitary religious life and emphasized physical austerity. From these early centuries onward, the Eastern traditions also developed practices of inner contemplative prayer called the “prayer of the heart” or the [“Jesus prayer”](#). These forms of concentration and breath-centered prayer have been preserved in the spiritual treasury of the church to the present day.

As part of a rich spiritual and liturgical tradition, the Orthodox churches also developed the distinctive use of pictorial [icons](#) of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. These icons were understood to be windows into the sacred meaning and presence of these figures, not mere representations of them. The [second council of Nicaea](#) in 787 affirmed the role of icons in the face of virulent criticism from those who objected to any visual images in worship.

During the seventh century, Christianity encountered the challenge of Islam, a new religious tradition which gained ground in Palestine, Syria and Egypt, and from Anatolia to Spain. The great Dome of the Rock mosque was completed in Jerusalem in 692. Eight centuries later, the [Byzantine Empire](#), centered at Constantinople, fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The great centers of Orthodoxy, including Constantinople, became centers of Islamic rule, and its great churches became mosques. For hundreds of years, the encounter with Islam has been of significance and immediacy for Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches.



“Παναγία η Γαλακτοτροφούσα,” 2012, Michael Hadjimichael, Flickr Creative Commons.

Today, the Eastern Orthodox churches constitute a family of related churches, including the Greek, Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Syrian churches, each with a rich history and distinctive [liturgical](#) forms. Oriental Orthodox churches include the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Ethiopian Church, the Eritrean Church, the Church of St. Thomas in India, and the Jacobite Syrian Church of Antioch. In 2001, a council of bishops representing both the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches declared their Christologies effectively consistent, citing linguistic and political factors for the historical disagreement. While the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental churches are not yet fully reconciled they, like

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the Eastern Catholic churches (those who are in communion with Rome but who follow Eastern traditions of worship) share very similar theology and practices. Reconciliation efforts continue today.

The Roman Catholic Church and the Catholic Communion

The early church spoke of its fellowship of believers as “catholic,” a word which means “universal.” Today, the whole Christian church still affirms “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church” in the Nicene Creed. However, the term Catholic with a capital “C” also applies in common parlance to the Churches within the Catholic Communion, centered in Rome. The Church of Rome is one of the oldest Christian communities, tracing its history to the apostles Peter and Paul in the first century. As it developed, it emphasized the central authority and primacy of the bishop of Rome, who became known as the Pope. By the eleventh century, the Catholic Church broke with the Byzantine Church of the East over issues of both authority and doctrine. Particularly in response to this division, several attempts were made to restore union and to heal the wounds of division between the Churches.



Pope Francis, 2013, Catholic Church England, Flickr Creative Commons.

During the early 15th century, many in the Roman Church regarded the impending Turkish invasion of the Byzantine Empire as a “work of Providence” to bind divided Christianity together. In response, the [Council of Florence](#) envisioned union on a grandiose scale not only with the Greek Byzantine churches, but also with the Copts, Ethiopians, Armenians and [Nestorians](#). Despite the presence of nearly 700 Eastern representatives and 360 Latin representatives and the energetic debates that ensued, reunion was not achieved.

Though disappointed with the failure of the Council of Florence, the Roman Church began to pursue an attractive alternative inspired by the unexpected union with the [Maronite Church](#) in the twelfth century. This alternative consisted in the creation of [Uniate churches](#) – Eastern in ritual and law but Roman in religious allegiance. Though the term “uniate” has some derogatory connotations, the reconciliation that this term signifies is an important historical development.



Detail of Benedictine Monks, Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (d. 1549), Tuscany, Italy, Jacqueline Poggi, Flickr Creative Commons.

Meanwhile, the predominantly Roman church continued to develop strong traditions of monasticism that began with Benedict (480-550) who wrote the “Rule of St. Benedict” where he described the principles of prayer, work, and study essential to the monastic life. Even in the early 21st century, this document continues to be foundational for the life of Benedictine communities all over the world. Many of the missionaries of the church were monks, such as the Venerable Bede (673-735) who brought spiritual

Adapted from On Common Ground (www.pluralism.org/christianity)

leadership to the early church in England and Boniface (680-754) who was the “apostle of Germany.” In the early Middle Ages, Benedictine monasteries became large landholders and powerful forces in the local economy. Through the chaos of the Middle Ages, after the fall of the Roman Empire, they played an essential role in preserving the spiritual, artistic, and intellectual life of the church.

In the twelfth century, other orders developed that rejected the cloistered and sometimes wealthy life of the monastery, set apart from society, preferring more engaged models of Christian community. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and the Franciscan order emphasized both individual and communal poverty, simplicity, and service—not apart from the people, but among them. Dominic (1170-1221) and the Dominican order emphasized education, preaching, and teaching. Members of these orders were often reformers as well, calling for a renewal of monasticism and the church as a whole.

In the sixteenth century, one of those reformers, the [Augustinian friar](#) Martin Luther (1483-1546), broke with the church entirely and launched the Protestant Reformation. The [Council of Trent](#) (1545–1563) followed with its own reform of corrupt practices within the Catholic Church. Part of a movement known as the “Catholic Reformation” or the “Counter-Reformation,” the Council of Trent reasserted the visible, hierarchical, and structured authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This period of Catholic renewal reinvigorated the educational and missionary zeal of the church with the establishment of the Society of Jesus, also called the Jesuits, founded by Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). Especially with the colonization and conversion of Latin America and with its missions to Asia and Africa, the Roman Catholic Church became a worldwide church. Unfortunately, the strong reaction to the Protestant movement would have a negative impact upon the Eastern Catholic churches as conformity to the Roman standard became the norm. Only the [Second Vatican Council](#) would begin the process of correcting this mentality.



Catholic woman in Indonesia, Henri Ismail, 2007, from Flickr Creative Commons.

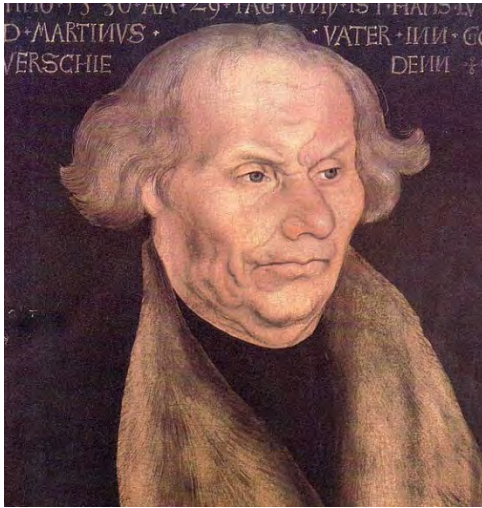
Today, the Catholic Communion is centered at the Vatican in Rome, but its [synods](#), [councils of bishops](#), and local [parishes](#) carry on the life and work of the church on every continent. More than half of the world’s Christians are Catholic. The Second Vatican Council considered seriously the new role of the church in the modern world. Among the many decisions of the Council was to abandon the predominantly Latin mass in favor of worship in the language and in the cultural forms of the local community. Another focus was on a new openness to other religious traditions as represented in the document *Nostra Aetate (In Our Time)*. A third focus was on how the church should emphasize not only preaching and [sacraments](#), but a vigorous mission to the poor and those in need.

This emphasis helped give rise to a movement known as “liberation theology” that began in Latin America in the 1970s and spread throughout many parts of the world. Liberation theologians such as the Peruvian Dominican Gustavo Gutiérrez were initially focused on economic injustices. He interpreted the Gospels as promoting a “preferential option for the poor” and declared structures of oppression that perpetuated cycles of poverty and despair as sinful. This movement spread throughout much of the global south and eventually inspired other

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emancipation theologies in the United States and elsewhere such as Black Liberation Theology, Feminist Liberation Theology, and Womanist Theology. These latter movements were often led by Protestants and included members from many other religious traditions (and none).

The Protestant Movement



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1527 from Wikimedia Commons.

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was sparked by Martin Luther, a German monk whose studies of the Bible led him to attack the leadership of the Catholic Church in his day. First, Luther insisted that religious authority lay not primarily in church traditions, nor in the hierarchy of bishops and popes, but in the Bible alone. The teaching of the church and its leaders must be judged by the standard and teaching of the Bible, which is the sole authoritative source of the Christian faith. Further, Luther insisted that the Bible and the worship life of the church be translated from Latin into the language of the people, so that all might hear and understand it.

From his reading of the New Testament, Luther also concluded that salvation is by God's grace alone, not by virtue of anything one might do to merit it. And salvation is by faith alone, by the disposition of the heart, not by any penance a priest may prescribe. Luther especially objected to what were known as "[indulgences](#)" sold by the church to assure one's own well-being in the afterlife or the well-being of those who had already died. Luther preached that salvation cannot be earned, much less bought, for it is a gift. In his break with Rome, Martin Luther left the monastic life and married, thus establishing the precedent for married clergy in the Protestant churches. He emphasized the faith of the laity, the Christian life within society, and the "priesthood" of all believers. Luther was [excommunicated](#) from the Roman Catholic Church in 1521.

The Protestant Reformation marked the beginning of what would become a new movement in the Christian tradition. Its leaders and forms were many, but the spirit of the Protestant tradition continued to emphasize the importance of personal faith, the gift of grace, and the authority of the Bible. In Germany, the Lutheran tradition built on Martin Luther's heritage. Lutheran national churches also developed in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland. The Lutheran churches of America today include descendants from all of these churches.



"Quaker witness for peace & justice in front of the San Francisco Federal Building," Steve Rhodes (2008), Flickr Creative Commons.

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The “Reformed” churches have their roots in Switzerland, where Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) launched a movement of church reform in Zurich in 1522. At the same time in Geneva, John Calvin (1509-1564) led a movement that helped found Reformed churches in the Netherlands, Hungary, England, and Scotland. The Presbyterian churches are also part of this Reformed tradition, and developed initially under the leadership of the sixteenth-century Scottish reformer, John Knox (1514-1572). Today’s Baptists and Congregationalists trace their lineage back to the ideas of Zwingli and Calvin as well.

The more radical Anabaptists took issue with Zwingli and the reformers in Zurich over two issues: the establishment of a state church and infant baptism. They held that Christian faith is a conscious and voluntary commitment of the heart. Thus, they rejected the coercion of any state church and also rejected infant baptism in favor of the baptism of adult believers. The Anabaptists also shaped the formation of the Baptists churches as well as the historic “peace churches,” such as the Quakers and the Mennonites.

The English Reformation began in the sixteenth century when King Henry VIII declared the independence of the Church of England from the authority of the Pope. Some Protestants in England went even further than Henry and called for a complete purification of the church. Later known as “Puritans,” these radical dissenters in the Church of England set out for North America in the early 1600s. They envisioned establishing a Christian community, a “holy commonwealth” in the new world. In the 1700s, John Wesley (1703-1791), a priest of the Church of England, launched an energetic devotional reform movement, emphasizing the forgiveness and grace of a loving God. This movement eventually became known as Methodism. Those who remained within the Church of England spread their version of Christianity as the British Empire encircled the world. After the Empire’s dissolution, those churches banded together as the Worldwide Anglican Communion.

Evangelicals have also played a key role in ongoing reformation efforts. Originally, the term was used to describe the 18th-19th century religious reform movements and denominations that resulted from the revivals that swept the North Atlantic Anglo-American world. These revivals were led by figures like John Wesley, the itinerant English evangelist George Whitefield (1715-1770), and American preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). By the 1820s, Evangelicals dominated the American Protestant scene, and played a major role in reform movements such as [abolitionism](#) and [prohibition](#). In the early twentieth century, conservative Evangelicals (known as [Fundamentalists](#)) who rejected [Darwinism](#) and [modern biblical criticism](#) would retreat from public life after the [Scopes Trial](#) in 1925, only to re-emerge on the national political and social scenes decades later.



Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In the 1960s and up to the present day, emancipation movements throughout the globe have been and continue to be heavily influenced by Protestants. Sometimes linked to liberation theology movements and other times independent of them, figures who are motivated by their faith to promote human rights include Desmond Tutu (1931-) in South Africa, Naim Stifan Ateek (1937-) in Palestine, Hisaku Kinakawa in Japan, and

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Ella Baker (1903-1986), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz (1943-2012) and Beverly Harrison (1932-2012) in the United States.

During the Reagan era in the United States, conservative organizations like the Moral Majority and Concerned Women for America were motivated by what they perceived as a loss of traditional family values. As a result, many Evangelicals focused on issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and the direction of mass media. Other movements within Evangelicalism included Sojourners, a group committed to promoting peace and social justice since the 1970s and intentional communities like the Simple Way in Philadelphia which seeks to reform the faith by adapting traditional monastic practices for a modern context. The Simple Way focused on issues like environmental sustainability and challenging systems that oppressed the poor and marginalized.

The Protestant Reformation, therefore, launched not a Protestant Church, but a Protestant movement—a dynamic movement of many churches, engaged in energetic and ongoing reformation, even today.

Mission to the World

The history of Christian missions is as old as the church, inspired by the commission Christ left his followers to “make disciples of all nations.” Such zeal was seen in the early Syrian Christians who missionized as far as India and China in the early third to seventh centuries. It was also the mission of early Roman monks that first planted churches in Ireland and England, Germany and Northern Europe, Russia and Eastern Europe. However, the sixteenth century, which saw both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic “Counter-Reformation,” was also the beginning of European colonial expansion and with it, church expansion. The Spanish conquered and colonized in the lands of South America, Mexico, and the Philippines. The Portuguese planted colonies in Brazil, Africa, India, and China. The British Empire included territories in India, Ceylon, Burma, Africa, Australia, and North America. The Dutch were in Indonesia and Africa. The French had colonies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and North America.

The spread of Christian churches followed in the tracks of empire, trade, and colonization. At times, the churches and missionaries were involved or complicit in the exploitation and oppression of colonized people. It is also true, however, that missionaries were among the strongest critics of colonial excesses. Many were the first scholars to study the religious and cultural traditions of the peoples among whom they worked. Especially in Asia, missionaries were also the first to challenge the exclusivist teachings of the church, for they saw what they understood to be evidence of God’s living presence in non-Christian faiths.

The order of Jesuits or the Society of Jesus, founded in the sixteenth century, was influential as a Catholic missionary order, sending Jesuits to such places as India and China. Later, Protestant missionary societies were formed to link the Protestant churches of Europe, and later the United States, with the new churches established in Asia and Africa.

With the end of the colonial era, the mission churches began to develop strong voices and leadership of their own. Today,
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much of the dynamism and energy of the Christian churches worldwide comes from the churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The last few decades have seen a renewed emphasis on the expression of the gospel in every culture and language. In the post-colonial era, churches in all parts of the world have moved away from European or American expressions of Christianity and have claimed their own culture, music, and arts in order to shape their own forms of Christian worship and community.

Today, many of these new cultural and ethnic expressions have come to America with the new immigration. As with first-generation immigrants in the past, these immigrants have maintained their own congregations—Korean, Samoan, Ethiopian, South Indian, or Chinese—and have brought an astounding new diversity to the face of American Christianity.

The Modern Era

The modern period, heralded by what is known as the Enlightenment, began in the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the end of the religious wars that had torn Europe apart. In the wake of years of bloodshed over religious doctrine, eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers emphasized religious toleration and the need to separate religious life from political power. The role of reason in religious thinking—that people should be free to use their intellect to make up their own minds about what they believed—was reaffirmed. A current of thought called Deism, for example, stressed “natural religion,” a creator God, and a common moral and ethical ethos, without many of the supernatural elements that, they believed, confounded the principles of reason. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, so prominent in framing the American Constitution, were influenced by this movement. During the last two centuries, the role of reason in the realm of faith has continued to inspire Christian thinkers.

The Enlightenment was also influenced by the scientific revolution that began to transform assumptions about the natural world, beginning with Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, the work of Charles Darwin challenged the biblical story of creation with his theories about the development and evolution of species as published in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). In the modern era, Christian thinkers of each succeeding generation have had to claim and articulate their faith anew in the light of a wider worldview, informed by the expansion of science. Does faith today occupy the shrinking area of mystery diminished by the growing body of scientific knowledge? Or is faith an orientation to all of life that is not threatened by science but rather consonant with it?

Biblical scholarship has also posed challenges to faith in the modern era. The text of the Bible has been laid open to study by methods of critical and historical analysis. What is the Bible? How did this particular collection of writings come into being? Is each word the revelation of God or is it a collection of inspired writings that may be studied and interpreted as products of particular historical contexts, with their own historical concerns? In the early twentieth century, a movement known as [Fundamentalism](#) arose in opposition to many trends in modern biblical scholarship. Fundamentalist Christians have been concerned with protecting the literal interpretation of the Bible from what they consider to be the undermining effects of Biblical scholarship. More liberal Christians, on the other hand, generally do not find the intensive scholarly study of the Bible a threat to their faith, but rather an enhancement of their understanding of it.

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The second half of the twentieth century saw new currents of confluence, bringing together once again the divided streams that have characterized Christianity for nearly a thousand years. This trend is called the ecumenical movement, from the Greek term “oikoumene” which means “the whole inhabited earth.” The most prominent expression of this ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC), formed in 1948. Today it is a fellowship of over three hundred Protestant and Orthodox churches committed to growing together in faith and working together on shared issues of justice, peace, education, and emergency relief. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council also made far-reaching contributions to Christian ecumenism, opening the door to closer cooperation between the Roman Catholic and other Christian churches. Toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople removed their one thousand year old mutual excommunication and embraced.



"First Ordained Woman," Messiah Lutheran Church, Flickr Creative Commons.

The convergence of churches today is visible in many ways. National, regional, and local councils of churches throughout the world are another expression of the ecumenical movement. While old divisions are beginning to heal, new areas of tension and fission are opening in the Christian churches of the early twenty-first century. The interpretation of the Bible, the ordination of women, attitudes toward gays and lesbians, and the ethics of abortion and reproduction are all issues that have opened new fissures both between and within denominations.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the resurgence of evangelical Christianity worldwide is sometimes called a “third force” in the Christian ecumenical movement, along with the Vatican and the World Council of Churches. The National Association of Evangelicals, founded in 1942, describes itself as being a “united voice” for evangelicals. Despite their differences, evangelicals today base their theology on a strong commitment to the Bible as the only infallible and authoritative word of God. There is also emphasis placed on personal faith, expressed by “accepting Christ” into one’s own life, and on evangelism, or the sharing of that faith with others in mission. The worldwide ministry of Billy Graham (1918-), with his huge rallies and revivals, is an example of how mid-twentieth century evangelists made effective use of the television communications revolution. Graham was also the first to help steer a new evangelical movement away from the stricter dogmatic line of the early fundamentalists.

The soaring growth of [pentecostalism](#) is a significant part of the new evangelical wave of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Pentecostal worship emphasizes the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” including [“speaking in tongues.”](#) reliving, in a sense, the experience of the early church on the first Pentecost. This movement is especially strong in the growing cities of Latin America, Africa, and the U.S. where the



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pentecostal style of spirit-filled worship has created vibrant new Christian communities.

"School for midwives in El-Daien," Sudan, UNAMID, 2012, Flickr Creative Commons.

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Islam



Pluralism Project and Religious Literacy Project, Harvard University, 2016.

"China," Aftab Uzzaman (2013), a Muslim Chinese girl from Kashgar, China, from Flickr [Creative Commons](#).



“Kaaba 2,” Zakaryaamr at the English language Wikipedia, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Preface: How to Read These Profiles

In these religion profiles, our focus is on particular religious traditions with an emphasis on (1) their internal diversity, and (2) the ways that the traditions are always evolving and changing. Though we hope these profiles provide helpful introductions, this format is a bit misleading in that it can reinforce the idea that religions exist and develop in isolation from other social and historical forces, including other religions. While reading these profiles, please remember that religions always impact and are impacted by political, economic, social, and historical factors. Please see the Methods article for fuller explanation of these intersections and the Country Profiles for a demonstration of how to understand religious influences in particular social and historical contexts.

A Worldwide Tradition

“Islam” is commonly used as the name of a religion whose followers are referred to as Muslims. In Arabic, however, the word *islām* literally means “submission (to God)” so that *muslim* refers to “one who submits (to God).” Another cognate of the word Islam is the Arabic word for peace, *salām*.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam emerged in the Middle East, but is now truly a world religion. There are more than one billion Muslims across the globe: from Bosnia to Zanzibar and the United States to China. Given its long history and its rich geographical and cultural diversity, any single portrait of Islam would necessarily be incomplete. The diversity of Islam is a part of and a testament to its strength: its message has proven viable and adaptable across the boundaries of time and culture.

Fundamental to Islamic belief is the concept of one God, who, throughout history, has sent many prophets and messengers to peoples of every culture and nation so that they may guide them to live in accordance with God’s will. According to the vast

majority of Muslims, God's final prophet and messenger was Muhammad, and God's final revelation was the Quran, regarded as the verbatim word of God. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, communities of faithful Muslims have responded to God's word, interpreting the teachings of Islam in each new century and within many cultural contexts.

Quran: The Word of God

The Quran, the holy book of Islam, begins with a short *surah* (chapter) called the *Fātiḥah*, [The Opening]:

In the Name of God,
The Merciful, the Compassionate.
Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds,
The Merciful, the Compassionate,
Master of the Day of Judgment.
It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help.
Guide us on the Straight Path: the Path of those You have blessed,
Those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.¹



Bismillāh-ir-rāḥmān-ir-rahīm
Al-ḥamdu li-llāh-i rabb-il-‘ālamīn
Ar-rahmān-ir-rahīm
Mālik-i yawm-id-dīn
Iyyāka na‘budu wa iyyāka nasta‘īn
Ihdinā-ṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm
Ṣirāṭ alladhīna an‘amta ‘alayhim
Ghayr il-maghḍūb-i ‘alayhim
Wa lā-dh-dhāllīn

A Quran page showing the first surah,
Habib M'henni, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Many Muslims recite the *Fātiḥah* as part of their prayers every day. According to a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, this *surah* contains the essence of the teachings of the Quran. The

word for God in Arabic is "Allah," which is the same word used by Arabic-speaking Christians to refer to God. Most Muslims understand God to be the Creator and Ruler of the entire universe, the ultimate Judge of all human beings, and to be characterized above all by the qualities of compassion and mercy. God also guides humanity to the path of righteousness through messengers and prophets. According to the Quran, "There is a Messenger for every community" (Quran, 10:47), and legend has it that there have been 124,000 prophets sent to humanity. Some of these have received revelation in the form of a scripture: to David (*Dāwūd*) was revealed the *Zabūr* or Psalms; to Moses [*Mūsā*] was revealed the *Tawrah* or Torah, Jesus [*‘Isā*] received the *Injīl* or Gospel, and Muhammad received the Quran. For this reason, Muslims refer to Christians and Jews as "People of the Book," for they received a message that was fundamentally the same as that of the Quran. In certain geographic and cultural contexts some Muslims have also included Zoroastrians and Hindus in this category as they consider them to have also received revelation in the form of scripture.

¹The Quran: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

The word Quran literally means “recitation.” Muslims believe that the words of the Quran were originally revealed by the Angel Gabriel [*Jibrīl*] to Muhammad in Arabic, and he then recited them to his followers. In this regard the Quran originally functioned as an aural/oral scripture that was meant to be recited, heard and experienced. The recitation of the Quran [*tilāwah*] is a science, an art, and a form of devotion, governed by *tajwīd*, the rules of pronunciation, intonation, and approach. Competitions and performances of Quranic recitation are held throughout the world. Many Muslims find the aesthetics of the recitation to be a powerful medium that helps them transcend the material and contemplate the spiritual.

Some years after the Prophet Muhammad’s death, the verses of the Quran were compiled into a written text, arranged in 114 *surahs*, generally in decreasing order of length, with each surah representing a chapter or division of the Book. Readers can find a range of themes in these chapters: prayers and praise of God, a recounting of God’s signs in creation, stories of the messengers before Muhammad, passages about the Day of Judgment, legal matters, and representations of righteous behavior, such as looking after one’s parents, the poor, the sick, the needy, and orphans. Quranic teachings are considered to be the core of the Islamic tradition and hence the text has been the subject of many voluminous commentaries by religious scholars. While it is possible to translate the Arabic text of the Quran into other languages, Muslims generally consider translations to be interpretations and not the Quran itself. It is important to note that no one translation can claim to present the Quran exactly as found in Arabic; translations can change meanings, gloss over complexities that are found in the original, and are unable to transmit the aesthetic dimensions of the text

Muhammad: The Messenger of God

For Muslims worldwide, the Prophet Muhammad is a messenger of God and a paradigm of the life of faith. As a result, he and his family are deeply loved and respected. Born in the city of Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula in 570 CE, he was raised an orphan in his uncle’s house. He married an older woman, the widow Khadijah, a businesswoman for whom he had worked in the caravan trade. As a merchant, he was known by reputation as *al-Amīn*, the trusted one. Muslims believe that when Muhammad was forty years old, he was selected by God to receive revelation that ultimately established the Muslim faith.

Muhammad would retreat each year to the cave of *Ḥirā’* in a mountain outside of Mecca for periods of quiet reflection. Muslims believe that one night during the lunar month of Ramadan, while Muhammad was in the cave, he was overwhelmed by the presence of the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel commanded him, “Recite!” and twice Muhammad,



Miniature of the Prophet Muhammed. Turkish, 16th Century, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

whom the angel embraced and squeezed until he could bear it no more, said, "I cannot recite." The third time the angel declared: "Recite! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Recite! And your Lord is the Most Bountiful, who taught by the pen, who taught man what he did not know" (Quran, 96:1-5).² Muslims believe that Muhammad recited this, feeling from that time on "as though the words were written on my heart."³ He ran down the mountain, but heard a voice from the sky: "Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." Looking up, Muhammad saw an angelic form standing astride the horizon, repeating the message.

Muslims believe that, for some twenty years, Muhammad continued to receive revelations, which he first recited to his wife and followers as a small group of believers began to grow in Mecca. The message he received was a warning of divine judgment and an invitation to return to the monotheism of the earlier prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. These revelations challenged the foundations of seventh-century Meccan society. Although Mecca was the center of pilgrimage for the polytheistic Arabian religion, the region was also home to Christians and large communities of Jews. At the center of Mecca was the Kaaba, a cube-shaped structure believed to have been first built by Adam

and rebuilt by Abraham as the house of the one God, but which had been turned into a house of numerous idols. In this polytheistic world, Muhammad spoke of *tawhīd*, the unity and oneness of God. Where tribal bonds and blood feuds pervaded the social structure, the Prophet spoke of a universal community, or *ummah*. The revelation the Prophet Muhammad received demanded social justice and reform; alongside exhortations to prayer and the remembrance of God, believers are reminded of the need to care for the poor and the weak.



The Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia, Shabbir Siraj, 2005, [Flickr Creative Commons](#).

Muhammad and the growing number of individuals who followed him met with harsh and continual persecution from the Meccan aristocracy because they were perceived as a threat. In 622 CE, the Prophet and his followers emigrated north from Mecca to the city of Yathrib. This event, known as the *hijrah*, marks the establishment of the model Islamic community and thus the beginning of the Muslim hijri calendar. On the basis of the general consensus of the leading tribes of Yathrib, the Prophet became the leader of the town, establishing order and unity in a town suffering from political turmoil. The name of Yathrib was later changed to Medina, short for *Madīnat an-Nabī* "the City of the Prophet." Muslims believe that Muhammad continued to receive revelations from God in Medina, and the message spread. In 630 CE, after a series of military battles and negotiations with

enemies in Mecca, Muhammad returned to the city victorious, pardoning those who had oppressed the early Muslims and who had waged war against them. Many Meccans embraced his teachings and he rededicated the Kaaba to the worship of the one God. By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 CE, much of the Arabian Peninsula had embraced his message.

² *Ibid.*, p. 428.

³ Herbert Berg, *The Blackwell Companion to the Quran*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 187–204.

After Muhammad died, his community preserved the memory of what he did and said as the best example of how to live in accord with God's will. The records of the Prophet's words were later collected in books of tradition, or *ḥadīth*; these are a part of the *Sunnah*—the “custom”—of the Prophet, which include his words and practice. The Sunnah serves as a guide for Muslims to follow God's will in daily life. Most Muslims are careful to insist, however, that “Muhammad is only a messenger” (Quran, 3:144), and not a divine being. When Muslims refer to the Prophet Muhammad, to show reverence, his name is often followed in Arabic or English by the salutation, “Peace and blessings of God be upon him.” They recite similar salutations after the names of other Prophets including Moses and Jesus.

One *Ummah* with Many Views

“You who believe, obey God and the Messenger, and those in authority among you. If you are in dispute over any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day: that is better and fairer in the end” (Quran, 4:59).

Muslims are united in one *ummah*, or community, by their common testimony to the unity of God and the prophecy of Muhammad. Within this unity there is also diversity, reflecting differences of interpretation of Quran and *ḥadīth*, which led to debates about the nature of political authority, spiritual leadership, and the development of various schools of jurisprudence. Muslims have interpreted the paradigm of the Prophet in many ways, each emphasizing particular aspects of his life and teachings. These traditions both complement and sometimes contradict one another, thus weaving the rich tapestry of Muslim piety.

Perhaps the most significant division of Muslims is between those groups known as Shi'a and those known as Sunnis. The initial split involved a dispute over who should assume Muhammad's role of leading the community after his death, what type of authority this person should have, and what its scope and basis should be. These differences led to the initial development of varying systems of law and theology.

Drawing on the model of Muhammad's close relationship with God and his mystical experiences and devotional practices, a crystallization of the mystical and esoteric dimension of Islam also emerged in the early centuries of Islam. Known today as Sufism [*taṣawwuf*], this movement became instrumental in the spread of Islam to all parts of the world. Sufism transcends many of the divisions in Islam, its organizations and artistic expressions inspiring Muslims to greater spiritual awareness.

An important stream of Islamic tradition developed around the model of Muhammad as interpreter of religious and legal doctrine, which came to be called *sharī'ah*, the “path” or “way.” *Sharī'ah* represents the moral and ethical values that enable Muslims to follow the will of God in accordance with the paradigm of the Prophet. After the death of the Prophet, a group of scholars, or *ulamā*, emerged. Some of these scholars established major



[A boy taking Quran classes in Lanzhou's biggest mosque, Gansu province, China, Kevin Schoenmakers, 2011, Flickr Creative Commons.](#)

schools of *fiqh* [jurisprudence], the laws derived from the *sharī'ah* that determine how those moral principles should be applied.

Shi'a and Sunni Interpretations



A devotional portrait of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Ahmad al-Shahman, 1990, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The *Shī'at 'Alī* ("the party of Ali," for which Shi'a is an abbreviation) considered certain designated descendants of the Prophet to be the only legitimate successors to Muhammad as political as well as religious leaders of the *ummah*. They believed that Muhammad's *wilāyah* [proximity to God, spiritual grace and authority] and special knowledge to interpret the inner meaning of Quran had been given to Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, who was therefore the most qualified to lead the community. Shi'a Muslims believe that leadership was passed on by the designation of a successor (known as the Imam) within the Prophet's family. According to the Shi'a, a community without the direct revelation of a prophet must always have an Imam who will maintain the revelation and guide the community in applying it to new situations.

The majority of Shi'a, known as "Twelvers," recognize a line of twelve Imams, the last of whom disappeared in the late ninth century CE.

Most "Twelvers" believe that the last Imam was identical to the Mahdi [the Rightly Guided] awaited by nearly all Muslims and who is expected to return in the Last Days to establish truth and justice on earth. Other Shi'a groups, such as the Zaydis and Isma'ilis, trace the succession differently. Most Zaydis identify themselves as following Zayd ibn 'Ali, the Prophet's great-great-grandson, who considered it incumbent on the Shi'a to rise up against unjust rulers. Most Nizari Isma'ilis trace their spiritual succession from Isma'il to the current, living Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan, who is their 49th Imam in direct lineal descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter and son-in-law Fatima and Ali, though there are also significant Isma'ili groups that affirm a different lineage.

During the course of their history, the Shi'a and their Imams have faced a great deal of persecution from their opponents. The lives and the sufferings of Shi'a Imams are commemorated in story and ritual, as can be seen in the 'passion plays' performed on *'Āshūrah*, the tenth day of the lunar month of *Muḥarram*, to recall the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Husayn, the third Shi'i Imam. Husayn and a small group of family members and loyal supporters were slaughtered in 680 CE at Karbala in modern day Iraq by the troops of the Umayyad ruler, Yazid I, after Husayn refused to accept his authority. The words of their Imams are also a source of law and spiritual guidance for Shi'a Muslims, in addition to the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet.

In contrast to the Shi'i perspective, the majority of the early community as represented by tribal leaders came to recognize Abu Bakr as-Siddiq to be the *khalīfah*, otherwise known as the caliph, or successor of Muhammad. Over time they came to insist that Muhammad had given his authority to the whole community, which could then choose its own leaders. For them, the sources of religious authority were the Quran, the Sunnah or custom of the Prophet, and *ijmā'*, the communal consensus of Muslims. This community thus became known as *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*, "the people of the Sunnah

and the community” or “Sunnis.” The Sunni caliphs expanded the borders of the early Muslim empire; the Umayyad dynasty assumed the *khilāfah*, or caliphate, after 661 CE and ruled from Damascus. At first the caliphs had authority in both political and religious spheres, but gradually a distinct class of scholars, or *ulamā*, would guide the legal and theological life of the Sunni community.

Sufism: Seeking God

Sufism [*taṣawwuf*] is not a separate sect of Islam, but rather a stream of interpretation emphasizing the interior path of mystical love and knowledge of God. A tradition describes the Prophet’s spiritual journey, the *mi’rāj*, in which a celestial steed carried him to Jerusalem, from where he ascended into the highest heavens and came face to face with God. Taking the *mi’rāj* as an archetype of the spiritual journey, Sufism began as an imitation of Muhammad’s simplicity and spiritual life in a time when the Umayyad caliphs (661–750) lived extravagantly. Many attribute the origins of the name “Sufi” to the coarse wool [*ṣūf*] garment worn by early ascetics. Others suggest the term derives from the Arabic word for purity [*ṣafā*].

Rabi’ah al-‘Adawiyya (d. 801), a woman from the city of Basra, Iraq, is remembered as an important early figure in this tradition whose mystical devotion and love of God were exemplary. There are stories of her walking through the streets of Basra carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other, declaring: “I want to pour water into Hell and set fire to Paradise so that these two veils disappear and nobody worships God out of fear of Hell or hope for Paradise, but only for the sake of His Eternal Beauty.”⁴



Sufi gathering in Lahore, Pakistan, Usman Malik, 2012, Flickr [Creative Commons](#).

Sufi rituals focus on the remembrance of God, or *dhikru ‘Llāh*. Dhikr has a variety of expressions, including the chanting of God’s Names and short surahs from the Quran, but also music and dancing. Many of these practices are communal; the term “whirling dervish” for example refers to a member of the Mevlevi Order, followers of the Sufi saint Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), who perform one such communal ritual, which involves a spinning dance combined with inner concentration on the presence of God. Sufism infuses Islam with a spirit of deep devotion and inner piety. Though the majority of Sufis throughout history have followed the *sharī‘ah* with dedication, many Sufis also offer a critique of the emphasis on the legalistic aspects of Islam alone—which Rumi argued were empty without spiritual reflection, as demonstrated by these lines from the his widely influential poem, *The Mathnawī*:

“He observes obedience and fasting and prayer
And devotions and almsgiving and so on
Yet never feels the least expansion of soul.
He performs the devotions and acts enjoined by the law
Yet derives not an atom of relish from them.”⁵

⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 105.

⁵ *The Masnawi*, translation by E.N. Whinfield ((New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), p. 104.

Various orders (sg. *ṭarīqah*) developed around prominent Sufi teachers from the twelfth century onward, offering paths and guides for the soul's journey to God, which reflects the Prophet's celestial journey, some emphasizing austere discipline while others encouraging ecstatic devotional practices. Within the spiritual life of the orders, the role of the spiritual master (*shaykh* in Arabic, *pīr* in Persian) has always been paramount, as he or she would complement the method and doctrines of the order with individually tailored advice, based on insight into the particular state of the disciple's soul. Strict adherence to the instructions of the master was the norm, as the disciple endeavored to overcome the limitations and desires of his or her ego and totally submit to God.

The orders also became important ways for Muslims to organize themselves in society, establishing hostels (*zāwiyah* in Arabic, *khānaqah* in Persian) throughout the Muslim world, and taught their neighbors the way of devotion to God. It was through the influence of either particular charismatic Sufi masters and their disciples or the general influence of Sufism on culture that Islam spread throughout East and West Africa, South and Southeast Asia.



Mevlevi dervishes at the tomb of Jalal al-Din Rumi in Konya, Turkey, 2006, Mladifilosof, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Today some Muslims challenge the legitimacy of Sufi beliefs and practices, such as the level of authority given to Sufi masters, and claim that they are not true representations of Islam, but rather “innovations” that deviate from the original teachings of Muhammad and his companions. Sufism, however, continues to appeal to many Muslims throughout the world, to bring new Muslims into the *ummah*, to shape Islamic intellectual traditions, and to provide a vehicle for popular expressions of Islamic devotion. Many Sufis perform pilgrimage to shrines of Sufi masters, praying for intercession, aid and closeness to God. This has been controversial to some non-Sufi Muslims who take issue with the idea of requesting anything from the physically deceased. Such disputes regarding Sufism represent one dimension of the internal diversity of the tradition.

Shari'ah: Following the Straight Path

The Prophet Muhammad was the interpreter of religious doctrine *par excellence* for the Muslim community. In the centuries after the Prophet's death, Muslim rule extended from Spain to the borders of China, and some thought that these rulers had abandoned the ideals of Muhammad's community at Medina. During the life of the Prophet, people began to collect *aḥadīth* (pl. of *ḥadīth*), the sayings of the Prophet as transmitted by his companions. *Ḥadīth* collections form an important part of the Sunnah, the example of the Prophet. Many critics of Muslim rulers were authorities on the Sunnah and respected interpreters of the Quran. These learned persons, collectively called the '*ulamā*', derived legal interpretations [*fiqh*] from the divine plan for humans known as *shari'ah*. If *shari'ah* is the totality of God's will regarding human action as represented in the Quran and Sunnah, then *fiqh* is the human endeavor to interpret it. Muslims, seeking to follow God's will in accordance with the example of the Prophet, look to these interpretations in order to best understand how to prepare for and perform

devotional acts, regulate marriage and business contracts, and care for the poor. Contrary to popular perceptions of Islamic law, only a small percentage addresses criminal law; the vast majority of *fiqh* is related to ritual law and devotional practice.⁶



A man prays in a mosque in Kabul, Afghanistan, [United Nations Photo, 1988](#), [State.gov, 2015](#),

The legal methods and rulings of leading Sunni '*ulamā*' came to act as precedents for the community of scholars and judges, and there gradually developed a number of accepted schools of interpretation of the *sharī'ah*, of which four in the Sunni world remain. Named after the great scholars whose legal precedents they take after, they are the *Ḥanafī*, *Mālikī*, *Shāfi'ī*, and *Ḥanbalī* schools. The basic sources of *fiqh* are the Quran, the Sunnah, *ijmā'* [the consensus of the community], and *qiyās*, or reasoning by analogy. The Shi'a developed their own schools of interpretation, the most prominent of which is the *Ja'farī* school. The Quran and Sunnah, as interpreted by their Imams, are important sources for their *fiqh*. In addition, they emphasize '*aql*, or intellect, as a source.

The '*ulamā*' arose as a creative and corrective force, addressing the moral, ethical, and social problems of their day. They later established traditional schools (*madrasah*) throughout the Muslim world for advanced study of law, philosophy, theology, arts and sciences. These became models for the European university system. One of the most famous is the tenth century al-Azhar university in Cairo, which continues to serve as an educational center and source of religious authority for Sunni Muslims around the world. Other important madrasas include Zeitunah in Tunisia and Nizamiyyah in Iraq. Shi'i '*ulamā*' acquire their training and knowledge at a *ḥawzah*, or a Shi'i center of higher theological learning. The most renowned of these *ḥawzahs* are in Qom (Iran) and Najaf (Iraq).

Fiqh, or the human endeavor to understand the *sharī'ah*, is in a constant state of change as Muslims pose new questions to jurists. According to many Sunni legalists, while less emphasis is placed on independent interpretive reasoning [*ijtihād*], since major issues have been resolved by earlier '*ulamā*', scholars today provide religious rulings to make sense of new contexts, such as, "Is it permissible to work as a waiter if I must serve alcohol?" or "Is it permissible to become an organ donor?" Shi'a schools, however, place a high value on independent reasoning, and the Shi'a scholars arguable play a much more significant role in interpreting *sharī'ah* in their communities, as Twelver Shi'a in particular believe that it is necessary to follow the interpretation of a living scholar. This helps to explain certain divergences between Sunni and Shi'i *fiqh*.

Continuously, Islamic law is culturally and historically interpreted, and "proper" interpretation is itself often debated within and among Muslim communities across the globe. For example, in many parts of the Ottoman Empire Christians and Jews often chose to use Islamic courts to adjudicate domestic disputes, believing that they would get a fairer hearing there than they may through the alternative

⁶ Intisar Rabb, "Fiqh," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World* (Online Resource), 2015, accessed March 18, 2015 <<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e1150>>

legal systems available. Diverse legal opinions and perspectives were one factor that contributed to the spread of Islam, as well as its adaptivity among divergent cultures.

In contemporary times, Islamic law continues to shape the devotional lives of many Muslims and regulate marriage, divorce, banking and other social and business contracts. In some countries, it has been interpreted as a rigid set of religious laws that serves as an influence within the national legal system or operates as an independent, parallel court system, and in some contexts it has been problematically adopted and imposed by non-state actors. Ultimately, it remains diverse and sometimes greatly contested. For example, some women and men in Saudi Arabia challenge interpretations of the *sharī'ah* that have been codified as laws barring women from driving cars. Most Muslims decry the interpretation of the *sharī'ah* that the Taliban imposed in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and that the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have practiced beginning in late 2014. In Malaysia, a group called the Sisters in Islam is actively challenging the interpretation of the *sharī'ah* practiced there as one that is biased against women and families and not an accurate representation of the Quran and Sunnah. These are some examples of efforts to revisit *sharī'ah* to address new situations.

Beliefs and Practices

Muslims engage in a variety of devotional practices to increase their God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and to discipline their attitudes toward others. Sunni Muslims have identified what they call the “five pillars of Islam” as a focus for their ritual practices, with some variation in how they are prescribed across Islamic legal schools. They are based on the Quran and Sunnah and were given their defining interpretations by the *‘ulamā’* in the first three centuries of Islam. The five pillars are: the *shahādah* [the testimony of the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad]; *ṣalāt* [canonical prayer]; *zakāt* [alms]; *ṣawm* [the fast of Ramadan]; and *ḥajj* [pilgrimage to Mecca. Although categorized in different ways, most Shi’a accept these very same pillars, and many add that the acceptance of the authority and sanctity [*wilāyah*] of the Imams is also a pillar.

Although the canonical prayers, alms, pilgrimage and fast of Ramadan are almost universally shared among Muslims, there is nonetheless much room for diversity in Islamic practice. The canonical prayers can be performed individually or in congregation at the mosque or literally anywhere else. The Friday prayers are a weekly gathering in which Muslims listen to a sermon and pray together. At homes and in the mosque, the sight of Muslims reciting the Quran or using prayer beads for the invocation of sacred litanies or particular praises of God or the Prophet is common. However, mosques are not the only places that Muslims gather to worship, as diverse communities have meeting places suited to their particular needs, including Sufi lodges (*zāwiyah*, *tekke* or *khānaqāh*) and shrines [*maqām*, *dargāh*, *mazār*], Ismaili



Prayer at the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Scott D. Haddow, 2010, [Flickr Creative Commons](#)

houses of congregation [*jamā'at-khanah*] and Twelver Shi'ite *husayniyyahs* and *imāambaras*, which supplement or sometimes replace the activities of the mosque.

Worship is of course not limited to any particular space or time, and personal supplications [*du'ā*] are typically made throughout the day regarding both worldly and spiritual topics, and there is a wide range of formalized supplications passed down from the Prophet, the Imams, or other holy figures. Many practice the invocation of a sacred formula, often a Name of God, verse of the Quran or the testification "there is no god but God." This invocatory practice, called *dhikr*, is the central mystical rite of Sufis, who under the guidance of the Sufi master [*shaykh*] use this practice to cultivate constant remembrance of God. In some Sufi orders, communal practices of invocation are accompanied by music and ritual forms of dance, known as *samā'* or *hadrah*. Although *dhikr* is most popularly associated with Sufism, it is a common form of worship in many Muslim communities.

Throughout the year, a number of festivities are held, such as the *'Eid al-Adḥa*, which celebrates the Prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his lineage in service of God and is the culmination of the *ḥajj*. In Shi'i communities, certain days throughout the year are dedicated to particular events in the lives of the Imams and commemorated through practices such as fasting, charitable acts, and prayer; the most important of these as mentioned above is *'Āshūrah*, which commemorates the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Husayn, in 680 CE. The attention to sacred times in the Islamic calendar is complemented by the importance of sacred space. Many visit the shrines of prophets and holy figures, as well as sites at which some event in their tradition's sacred history had transpired, seeking a prayer answered or the contemplative ambience of the sacred. This practice is commonly known as *ziyārah*. For most Muslims, the most important *mazār* (place of visitation) is the Prophet's own mosque and tomb in the city of Medina.

Islamic creed has been formulated in many different ways within the Islamic tradition; on many issues there are diverse points of view, yet there is also consistency on many fundamental beliefs. The shared foundations of the Islamic creed include belief in the oneness of God, affirmation of the prophethood of Muhammad as the last messenger sent to mankind, and the expectation of the final return to God. On the basis of Quranic teachings, Islamic belief also recognizes that we inhabit a living spiritual cosmos, containing angels and *jinn*, which interact with humans and have the capacity to worship God. The Quran sees its message as the affirmation of the many revelations that have preceded it; for each civilization there has been a revealed religion that includes both a revelation and a messenger. These central points of Islamic creed are summarized in the Quranic verse: "The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and so have the believers. All of them have believed in Allah, His angels, His books and His messengers, [saying], 'We make no distinction between any of His messengers.' And they say, 'We hear and we obey. [We seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the final destination'" (2:285).

The Islamic tradition has fostered a wide variety of approaches to understanding and conclusions about the nature of God, the world we live in, and the nature of humanity. Various disciplines have emerged that deal with these questions, including a wide variety of theological, philosophical and mystical schools. Over the centuries there has been much discussion of revelation, reason and mystical insights as sources of knowledge, leading to rich traditions of inquiry in both prose and poetry questions such as freewill, the relation of God and creation, and the possibility of a finite being knowing the Infinite. Muslim intellectuals have also engaged in the natural sciences, seeing no conflict

between belief in God and study of the natural world, which the Quran declares to be filled with the signs of God. Although the technical discussions of theology, philosophy, and mysticism in Muslim cultures required a great deal of specialized training, all strata of society participated in questions of the nature of reality, humanity and the cultivation of character through the composition, recitation and performance of diverse literary forms, in Arabic, Persian and the many vernacular languages of Muslim communities.

The Expansion of Islamic Civilization

One of the distinctive features of the Islamic tradition is its rapid expansion into a large and diverse civilization, soon becoming divided into several centers of political authority. Although the Prophet's activities were mostly limited to the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant, after his death the first four "Rightly Guided" caliphs sent armies to conquer Syria, Egypt, Iraq and parts of Persia, which were then within the declining Byzantine and Persian empires. The Umayyad caliphs, ruling from 661–750 CE in Damascus, then further expanded the boundaries of Muslim rule to Spain in the West and to India in the East. Muslim rulers, soldiers, traders, Sufis, scholars, poets and architects all contributed to the shaping of distinctive Islamic cultures in North Africa and Spain, Persia and India.

The Abbasid Dynasty overthrew the Umayyads in 750 CE and ruled from Baghdad until the 13th century. Though its political power declined after the ninth century, the caliphate remained an important symbol of Muslim unity. Classical Islamic civilization—the major *ḥadīth* collections, legal schools, theological debates, Sufi orders, and traditions of Persian and Arabic poetry—flourished under the Abbasids.

The Fatimids established their dynasty in North Africa in 909 CE, conquering Egypt in 969. From their newly-established capital city of al-Qahira [Cairo], the Isma'ili-Shi'a Fatimids, who rivalled the Sunni Abbasids in Baghdad, created educational and cultural institutions, such as al-Azhar, and established themselves in trade. At its peak, Fatimid influence reached from the borderlands of India in the East to the Atlas Mountains in the West.

In 1258 The Mongols from Central Asia swept across the eastern Islamic heartland to Syria, ending the Abbasid *khilāfah* at Baghdad. Many of the invaders adopted Islam and the Persian language. Their descendants ruled Persia and central Asia for centuries, developing Persian culture and art. In the aftermath of the Mongol invasion, new empires emerged.

The Ottoman Turks, based in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) after 1453, established a vast empire that lasted from the fourteenth century until World War I. Supporters of Sunni Islam and Sufi orders,



Sayyida Roqiya Niase, daughter of the West African Sufi leader Ibrahim Niase, Joseph Hill, 2009, [Flickr Creative Commons](#)

they were known for both military and architectural achievements. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Mughals ruled northern India, where the flourishing Indo-Muslim culture produced beautiful architecture, painting, and Sufi poetry. The Safavids championed Shi'ism in Persia from 1499 to 1722, encouraging Islamic art and philosophy.

Under each of these empires, transregional Islamic culture mixed with local traditions to produce distinctive forms of statecraft, theology, art, architecture, and science. Many scholars argue that the European Renaissance would not have been possible without the creativity and myriad achievements of Muslim scholars, thinkers, and civilizations.

In the course of its history Islam spread beyond the Middle East to other regions of the world, most notably South and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa through merchant communities and Sufi orders (sing. *tariqah*), with Muslim empires arising as native rulers converted to Islam and sought to expand their borders. Reform movements that linked together religious and social concerns were particularly instrumental in spreading Islam, which became especially significant in the eighteenth century through the contemporary era.

The Rise of European Colonialism



"The Reception," John Frederick Lewis, 1873,
[Wikimedia Commons](#).

During the period of European colonial expansion, from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, non-Muslim merchants and missionaries, soldiers and colonial administrators came to dominate much of the Muslim world. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British, and French all developed colonial empires, and the Chinese and Russians also expanded their territories into Muslim-majority regions.

By the twentieth century, only frail Ottoman and Persian dynasties maintained power, and only a few areas such as Afghanistan and central Arabia avoided colonial domination. The French ruled much of North Africa and parts of West and Central Africa. The British controlled Muslim areas of Africa (including Egypt) and of Asia (including India with its large Muslim minority) and parts of Southeast Asia. The Dutch ruled most of present-day Indonesia, while the Spanish controlled parts of North Africa and the Philippines. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dismembered and parceled out to Britain (the Persian Gulf region, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq) and France (Syria, Lebanon).

Such foreign domination was not only humiliating for many Muslims, particularly social elites, but also threatened the very foundations of Islamic society, as European rulers replaced traditional Muslim educational, legal and governmental institutions with Western ones. Europeans undermined the religious ethos of Muslim territories by privileging Christian-influenced, secular and materialistic cultural values and by encouraging ethnic, national, and religious divisions in the *ummah*.

The new conditions of the experience of the dominance of the European colonial powers had a significant impact on a number of very different movements of reform and revival in the Islamic world,

redefining what it meant to be Muslim in this new context. The struggle to understand how God would allow Muslims to become subjugated to foreign, non-Muslim powers contributed to the emergence of three major perspectives: Salafism, modernism and messianism.

Even before the arrival of colonial powers into the Islamic world, some scholars from diverse backgrounds were arguing that the faith and practice of Muslims had become distanced from the original message of the Quran and the Prophet, as the masses had adopted devotional practices, of which the devotion to saints is the most commonly mentioned, that they saw as unjustified innovations. They also felt that scholars had begun to give more importance to the centuries of scholastic tradition than to the original texts of the religion. For many, the failure of Muslim societies to resist colonialism was a sign of God's displeasure in the corruption of the last religion, and therefore the correct response was to return to the era of the first Muslim community. Now referred to as "Salafis," a reference to the *salaf* or early companions of the Prophet, those who hold this perspective are interested in the "correct" practice of Islam and reject anything they perceive to be innovations inconsistent with their interpretation of the model of the early Muslim community, focusing on Sufism and Shi'ism in particular. Such reformers often look to the Quran and Sunnah as the only authoritative sources for Islamic law, but, to varying degrees, they ignore the inherent pluralism and the continued discourses of the *shari'ah* system in favor of a single interpretation of those sources. Some examples of these diverse movements are the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia, and the Jama'a-i Islami of Pakistan.

In contrast to the Salafis, others saw western dominance to be the result of a technological and cultural progress that was worthy of imitation. Colonial rule introduced Western education, nationalism and certain technologies to much of the Muslim world, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many Muslims travelled to Europe to study in Western universities. However, many modernist Muslim reformers did not idealize the West, lamenting the changes in their societies that they attributed to western materialism, yet also being frustrated with what they considered to be a failure on behalf of the traditional '*ulamā*' to provide a meaningful response. Scholars such as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) argued for greater emphasis on reason, in the modern western sense of the term, in developing an interpretation of Islam that could adapt to the needs of the times. Despite differing attitudes towards the modern West, the revivalist interests of modernists and of Salafis, along with their criticisms of the centuries of Islamic scholarly tradition, led to considerable overlap between these trends.

The dominance of the colonial powers had another meaning for several charismatic Muslim leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, heralding the end of the world described vividly in the Quran. A number of individuals claimed to be the awaited Mahdi, and thus to be the representative of the Prophet that would lead the world to justice, including the Sudanese Muhammad Ahmad (d. 1885), whose movement was eventually quelled by the British in 1898, and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) in British-ruled India, whose followers today, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, number in the millions.

Salafism, modernism and messianism have led to great changes in what it means to be Muslim for large numbers of people around the world. However, this is not to say that all Muslims fit into these three categories. Indeed, the beliefs, ways of life, and scholarly traditions of traditional Islam continue to exist across the Islamic world, no doubt adapting to the changing conditions of the modern world yet maintaining a greater continuity with their past than any of these three trends. In response to these

three trends, many conservatives and traditionalists reasserted the authority of the *'ulamā'* and the need for recourse to tradition.

In the early twentieth century, further changes in the understanding of what it meant to be Muslim were brought about by the rise of nation states in the wake of independence movements in many Muslim countries, inspired to varying degrees by both the revival of Islamic principles and institutions and by Western-style nationalism. Muslims have adopted many different models for their post-colonial states, with the founders of each state coming up with their own approach to the role that Islam should play in a modern polity. The early leaders of modern Turkey, primarily Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938), declared a secular state in 1923 in which Islam would not play any role, abolishing the caliphate, replacing the Islamic court system and legal interpretation with a European-style law code, and outlawing Sufi orders. In contrast, after World War II, Pakistan was created as a homeland for the Muslim minority communities of the Subcontinent, initially welcoming diverse ways of practicing Islam and other faiths, but becoming an Islamic republic promoting a single interpretation of Islam in the 1980s under the military regime of Zia ul-Haq. Some Islamic reform movements have adopted an ideology of political revolution, fusing particular interpretations of Islamic tradition with modern ideologies and political structures. The revolution in Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 is one example of this type of movement, and drew on influences including Shi'i theology and Marxism. It is important to note that these movements are not monolithic but location-specific. However, in general the modern nation state has emerged as a new type of authority that has a role in defining what Islam means.

Resurgence and Migration: The Muslim World Today

Muslims today listen to and interpret the divine word of the Quran, and strive to live their lives according to the *shari'ah* and a diverse set of ritual practices. Muslims also follow the model of the Prophet, and some pursue the inward path of Sufi teachings. These are the facets of traditional Islam largely held in common across time and place in the Muslim world. Today in the post-colonial era, the Muslim world is expanding and experiencing the challenges of both resurgence and worldwide migration.

Whereas in the twentieth century Islam had played an important role in the development of nation states in the Islamic world, in the last few decades certain groups have begun interpreting Islam as a transnational ideology in ways that undermine the nation state. Some of these groups such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) have dominated global headlines with terrorist acts perpetrated against Muslims and non-Muslims alike. They typically conceive of the world in terms of a "clash of civilizations," in which they serve as the vanguard of Islam against an unjust, corrupting, and materialistic West, although individual reasons for joining such groups vary widely. Their actions have been roundly condemned by governments, religious groups (including most Muslims), and citizens across the globe, though many urge attention to the conditions that have given rise to these groups, including the legacies of colonialism, the lingering tensions between Israel and Palestine, and the negative consequences of globalization.



Abida Parveen, renowned singer of Muslim devotional poetry, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

However, such radical groups only represent one approach within a wide spectrum. At the other end of the spectrum, Sufi orders continue to serve as important social institutions which exert spiritual as well as political influence. In Senegal for example, it has been estimated that 90 percent of the Muslim population (which makes up around 92 percent of the total population) belong to a Sufi order, and leaders of the *Murīdiyyah* order in particular have a significant, though often indirect, influence in the sphere

of government. Additionally, prominent transnational orders, such as the *Bā'Alawīyyah* based in Yemen, connect thousands of Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula to Indonesia and the United States with a transnational identity and a message of devotion and love for God and the Prophet.

In the post-colonial context, migration has also reshaped the Islamic world. The number of emigrants from predominantly Muslim countries to Western Europe and the Americas has increased significantly in the past thirty years, with the exodus including highly-educated professionals, laborers, students and political refugees. There are now thriving Muslim communities and magnificent mosques in Paris, London and Rome, as well as New York, Vancouver and Mexico City. Immigrant Muslims, however, have often faced considerable hostility, the product of both racial and religious prejudice in their new homes.



A fast-breaking meal (iftar) in North Carolina, 2012. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In the United States, recent immigrants of all backgrounds mix with second and third generation American Muslims, converts from other faiths, and an African American Muslim community with historic roots that go back to transatlantic slavery. This mixing is encouraging the growth of a uniquely American expression of Islam, which in turn mixes with other expressions as ideas, opinions, and knowledge is exchanged—an experience as true of Islam today as it was in the age of Islamic empires.

Despite the myriad political, social, cultural, economic and other challenges faced by Muslims today, the “Muslim world” continues to expand; Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion. The adage, “Islam is one, Muslims are many” is clearly evident. Muslims of every sect, nationality, and school of jurisprudence are represented in regions throughout the world, together creating the ummah of the faith.

Hinduism



Introductory profiles adapted from
On Common Ground: World
Religions in America

Pluralism Project, Harvard University
Religious Literacy Project, Harvard
Divinity School
March 26, 2015

Kirk Siang, "Temple Dome Figurines,"
Singapore (2007), Flickr Creative
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Religion profiles are adapted from On Common Ground: World Religions in America, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School

Tian Yake, " Arulmigu Subramaniam Temple, Nilai, India (2009), Flickr Creative Commons, <http://bit.ly/1VXKPn3>

Introduction

What we have come to know as “Hinduism” is a rich mosaic of a broad range of religious ideas, practices, and communities native to South Asia that has evolved over more than three millennia interweaving threads from many cultures and worship of the divine in diverse forms. It is one of the oldest world religions. The ideas and practices that form Hinduism spread in parts of Southeast Asia in the first millennium. Since the nineteenth century, Hinduism has reached many parts of the globe with Indian migrants and new followers who embraced it in these lands.

Although it is difficult to characterize core beliefs or practices to which every Hindu adheres, most Hindu communities acknowledge explicitly or implicitly the authority of a vast scriptural corpus known collectively as the Veda. Most also share the concept that the divine manifests in a diversity of ways and believe in the eternity of the soul reborn in body after body, life after life, guided by *karma*, the moral repercussions of human action. Around these broadly shared views, a rich network of thought and practices has developed over millennia with enduring contributions made in each era by different communities.

The precise origins of Hindu thought and practice remain unknown and are much debated in scholarship. Many scholars associate their origins with the nomadic tribes arriving in India from central Asia. Some trace the beginnings of the Hindu tradition to the archaeological remains of the Harappan Civilization, whose cultural centers flourished along the Indus River in the second and third millennia BCE. These latter scholars propose that the large public baths, clay seals depicting yogis, and terracotta figurines of the Harappan centers suggest early gestures toward the gods, temples, and social structures that developed in later periods and form important components of Hinduism today.

The Emergence of Texts and Development of the Tradition

The Vedas

The causes behind the disappearance of the Harappan Civilization in the early second millennium BCE remain an enigma and Hinduism's link to that civilization remains a matter of debate. However, by the mid-second millennium BCE there emerges clear evidence of the Vedic texts and traditions that consisted of recitation of hymns, chanting of mantras, and ritual sacrifices with offerings made to a wide array of deities both for personal favor and for reinvigorating the order of the cosmos. In view of most Hindus, the Vedic texts are revealed or heard (*śruti*) and not composed by humans. The earliest and the most revered of them is the *Rig Veda* (ca 1500 BCE), a collection of hymns that were recited at ritual performances. Along with praises of deities, many of whom represent natural elements, a sense of wonder about the nature and source of creation permeates a number of *Rig Veda* hymns. The famous *Nasadiya* hymn (*Rig Veda* 10.129), for example, expresses wonder at how the creation emanated from the time before time when there was "neither existence, nor non-existence." "What stirred?" the poet asks, and then proceeds to suggest that it was perhaps desire or poetic imagination. But in the end he concludes that no one can claim to know the process of emergence of the entire cosmos, perhaps not even the One looking down from the highest heaven.



A Vedic fire sacrifice in London, England (2012). Jason Khoo, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1UR5mau>

The religious orientation of the early Vedic culture was toward orderly functioning of the cosmos and the well-being of life on earth. Sacrifices were considered not just religious acts, but also efficacious operations for desired results such as getting proper rains. For this reason, their meticulous transmission of its knowledge was seen as critical. In this predominantly oral culture, hundreds of texts were transmitted orally in a meticulous manner by teachers to their disciples. While many features of the early Vedic tradition are not found in contemporary Hinduism, a link to it can be found in a number of Hindu practices today, especially in life cycle rituals, which continue to be focused on making life within the world sanctified and auspicious.



A Hindu holy man in meditation, Wikimedia Commons, User: Wise Druid <http://bit.ly/1Y3U1lz>

Later sections of the Vedas, known as the Upaniṣads, introduced new concepts that have proven critical to the development of Hindu thought and practice since that time. The most important contribution of the Upaniṣads is a striking vision of human personhood as an eternal and immutable soul (*ātman* or *jīva*), which in its essence is identical with the Ultimate permeating all existence, known as Brahman. In Chandogya Upaniṣad for example, a sage explains that just as salt permeates every drop in a bowl of salty water, even though we do not see it, Brahman permeates all existence and every soul as its essential reality. *Ātman* is trapped in an endless cycle of rebirths guided by ignorance and the ethical repercussions of action (*karma*) in spite of its essential unity with Brahman. From this perspective, the goal of

human life becomes *mokṣa* or liberation of the soul from entrapment in a succession of bodies through disciplinary practices of body and mind such as yoga and deep mediation. Such disciplinary practices lead the practitioner to an experiential knowledge (*jñāna*) of the essential unity of *ātman* and Brahman. Hindu holy men and many lay practitioners incorporate yogic practices in their daily lives. The concept of Brahman as the foundation of the unity of all existence with its immense multiplicity of forms is closely linked to the idea of “many and One,” a well-known feature of the Hindu tradition through which worship of diverse manifestations of the divine is explained.

Post Vedic Traditions and the Caste System

In the post-Vedic era, thinkers and commentators outlined an ideal life for the Vedic ritual practitioner based on his life stage and social group. Based on the concept of *karma*, the society was classified in four broad hereditary social groups called *varṇas*: priests (*brāhmaṇs*), warriors (*kṣatriyas*), merchants (*vaiśyas*) and servants (*śūdras*). These were organized in a hierarchical order. It was propounded that a person is born in a specific group because of their actions in past life. Each group was associated with a distinct occupation and moral codes (*dharma*). Codes of proper behavior were also laid in accordance with stage of life (*āśrama*). A Vedic follower’s life was divided in four stages - student, householder, forest-dweller, and full renouncer leading an ascetic life. This hierarchical classification of society became the basis of the complex Hindu caste system comprised of literally hundreds of castes. In this hereditary system, occupations were organized on a hierarchical scale based on the criterion of ritual purity. Priests or *brāhmaṇs* who studied sacred texts and performed rituals for others were given the highest place in the hierarchy. Officially their status was not associated with political or material power and this was often the case. However in many instances, religious status and political/economic power were mutually reinforcing. On the other hand, those associated with occupations that were considered polluting were marginalized in lower social-economic rankings. Some occupations were viewed as so polluted that those representing them became “untouchable” (now termed “Dalit”) for higher castes. Indeed, the practice of untouchability put many groups to a great disadvantage socially and economically for centuries. While the system remained unbending in

stratification at the highest and the lowest ranks (*brāhmaṇs* and Dalits), there was some flexibility in terms of upward movement for the middle castes. The worst impact of the caste system has been on the Dalits. A number of modern reform movements have sought to end the practice of untouchability.

The Epics and the Puranas

In the early centuries of the Common Era, new Hindu voices and new religious visions began to emerge. These were inspired by the growing popularity of epics such as the *Mahābhārata* (the story of a cataclysmic war between two sets of cousins) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (the story of a great prince who battled a demon to rescue his abducted wife) as well as a new genre of texts called the *Purāṇas*, which contain elaborate mythology of deities. The deities who emerged as the most popular during this time were Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the great goddess, each of whom have multiple manifestations. In the epics and the *Purāṇas* the deities began to take on new roles and intervene more directly in the lives of human actors. The epics also offer models for dealing with complex moral dilemmas. Rāma, the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for example, is an incarnation of the great divine being Viṣṇu. Both as an ideal son and an ideal king he makes choices that are for larger good in moments of moral dilemma and establishes a kingdom based on righteousness. Krishna, another incarnation of Viṣṇu, advises the warrior hero Arjuna at a critical point in the *Mahābhārata* when he wishes to withdraw from the war against his wrongful relatives. Krishna's advice to Arjuna forms the most celebrated section of the *Māhābhārata* known as the *Bhagavad-gītā* or "The Song of the Lord." Here, Krishna identifies himself as the Brahman of the Upaniṣads, the underlying, unified being that underlies all phenomenal existence and advises Arjuna to perform his duty without getting attached to the consequences of his actions. He also introduces an entirely new path to liberation. This is *bhakti* or devotion to a loving god, a path open to all, not just the priestly custodians of the Vedas.

In the centuries following the composition of the epics and the *Purāṇas*, texts, practices, and institutions focused on devotion to various manifestations of the deities began to dominate the religious landscape of India. Images of deities began to be worshipped by priests in temples built by wealthy patrons or devotional communities and by individuals in their homes. These forms of worship became the core of religious life for most Hindus, just as the fire sacrifices formed the core of religious life in Vedic times. Pilgrimage sites and festivals associated with mythology also gained popularity and gave rise to a vibrant religious ethos inscribing space, yearly calendar and ritual life. In many ways, this ethos continues to define the Hindu tradition today.



A performance of the Ramayana epic by traditional Indonesian dancers, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (2013). Ridho Nur Imansyah, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1Lu8AvC>

Devotion in the Vernacular



A group of women sings devotional songs in Gujarat, India (2010). Nevil Zaveri, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1VY0cf6>

Even as the elite courtly and temple cultures continued to produce philosophical, theological, ritual, and literary works in Sanskrit, the pan-Indic language of religion and learning, another development that deeply influenced the Hindu ethos in India was an outpouring of devotion in vernacular languages in new poetic and narrative styles. Devotional songs and sacred narratives in regional languages were made popular among the masses by saintly poets and itinerant performers.

Beginning in the Tamil-speaking south in the late centuries of the first millennium of the Common Era and spreading gradually throughout the entire subcontinent, the vernacular expressions of devotion in poetic, musical, and narrative genres were eagerly incorporated in their religious lives by common people. Through these genres, philosophical concepts of the Upaniṣads, sacred narratives from the epics and the *Purāṇas* as well as teachings about moral duty and compassion became accessible to people with new interpretations.

For example, a hymn by a fifteenth century poet-saint of Gujarat named Narasinha Mehtā defines a religious person in terms of compassion and humility. This hymn and the poet's sacred biography containing narratives about his association with Dalits were deeply inspiring to Gandhi. Such songs and narratives remain some of the most beloved religious expressions in various regions of South Asia and among diaspora communities migrating to different parts of the world today. The development of vernacular devotional expressions coincided in many parts of South Asia with the encounter with Islam resulting in a mutual creative exchange. *Bhakti* songs and narratives share a number of culturally embedded images and motifs with Islamic mystical Sufi literature in South Asia.

Modern Hinduism

A new chapter in the history of the Hindu tradition was added as a result of the encounter with European communities that arrived in India first for trade and later competed for establishing reign. The interactions with Christian communities and missionaries led to a period of introspection and reform among Hindus in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. During this period, a number of reformers led movements against "untouchability" and for greater equality for women in all areas of family and public life. At the same time, the encounter with modernity in the context of colonization also led to a sharpened sense of distinctive identity and defensive attitude among some groups. Both the spirit of reform and the sharpened sense of identity kindled during the nineteenth century continue to inform life of Hindu communities today with far-reaching social and political implications. While Hindu traditions had reached parts of South East Asia centuries ago, the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries also saw migration of large groups of Hindus to various parts of the world. A

number of early migrants left South Asia as indentured laborers; many in the late twentieth century migrated as professionals. Large Hindu diaspora communities have settled now also in UK and the US.

Drawing from various layers of its long history, “Hinduism” today includes many diverse strands of thought and practice both in India and throughout the world. Some Vedic rituals are still performed, both domestically and publically; rites of worship performed in large temples or before an image of the deity on a small domestic altar also continue to be performed. Hindu practices have been democratized to a great degree since the mid-twentieth century. Even though instances of discrimination are reported, the law that forbids barring any Hindu from full participation in temple worship on the basis of caste is gradually being implemented, and women have begun to assume roles ranging from gurus and scholars to temple priests.

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The Many and the One – Unity and Diversity

The Hindu tradition is remarkably diverse not only in terms of languages and cultures of its followers, but also in terms of the objects and ways of worshipping as well as authoritative sacred texts. This internal diversity is held together philosophically through the concept of Brahman as the underlying reality of all existence. Thus, multiple divine forms worshipped by various communities are viewed as manifestations of one Ultimate. In addition to popular deities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Durgā (a form of the great goddess) and elephant-headed Gaṇeśa, natural elements like the sun and rivers are viewed as divine forms worthy of worship.



Women make offerings on the bank of the Ganges River in Varanasi, India (2007). Wikimedia Commons, Dennis Jarvis <http://bit.ly/1OQTC5W>



Shiva as Nataraja, "The Lord of Dance." Tamil Nadu, India, c.950-1000. In the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Flickr Creative Commons, Mark6Mauno <http://bit.ly/1gmFHIZ>

The ways of worshipping also vary greatly among Hindus. Depending on the inclination of an individual, various channels of religious experience are recognized as valid within the three broad religious paths – knowledge (*jñāna*), devotion (*bhakti*), and action (karma). It is not uncommon to find one person devoted to study of sacred texts, another to meditation, a third to daily worship of images of the divine and the fourth dedicated to serving people or animals in a single family. Other popular devotional acts include pilgrimage to sacred sites that are associated with religious narratives, fasting on certain days of a week or month, and feeding holy people as well as the poor. Art is also a vital channel of religious expression in the Hindu tradition. Music, dance, and painting are pursued as paths for approaching the divine not just by the specialists; they are incorporated in religious lives of communities in acts such as singing of devotional songs in community gatherings, festival dancing, and drawing colorful designs at one's door steps daily. Supporting aesthetic expressions of devotion, many Hindu deities themselves are depicted engaging in artistic acts in myths and images.

A corollary of the immense internal diversity within the tradition has historically been acceptance of diversity within a cultural milieu. Hindu communities have shared common ground with followers of other religious traditions since ancient times. In the fifth century before the Common Era arose Jainism and Buddhism in the heartland of the Vedic culture; a small Christian community has flourished in South India since the early centuries of the Common Era; and Islam arrived in India in the early phase of its spread. While the Hindu nationalist groups of India in more recent times have engaged in conflicts with non-Hindu communities, at times turning violent, the long history of the tradition has generally been that of coexistence with acceptance of difference.

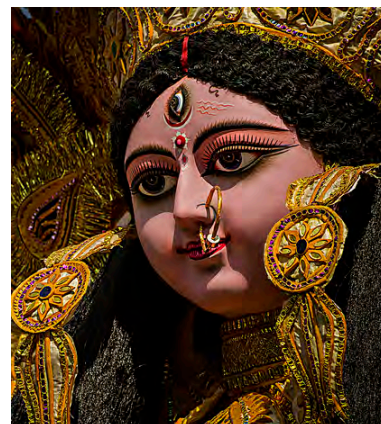
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Eck, Diana. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Columbia University Press. 1998.

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The Divine and the Human Feminine

Like all other aspects, the perspective on the feminine in Hinduism is also complex and layered. One often finds contradictory currents in the tradition. Traditionally the Hindu society has been patriarchal. Yet it is also the world religion with remarkably strong presence of female deities. Some goddesses like Lakṣmī and Pārvatī are consorts of major deities like Viṣṇu and Śiva; some are powerful independent goddesses who can turn fierce and destructive, especially against evil-doers. Some are worshipped widely in India with major temples and festivals; others



An image of the goddess Durga in Calcutta, India (2012). Rajarshi Mitra, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1NwX7jb>

are regional goddesses worshipped as protectors of the specific locale. All are viewed as manifestations of the great goddess praised in the *Purāṇas*. They are given the title of “mother” and are associated with different aspects of life. Lakṣmī, for example, is associated with prosperity; Saraswatī with knowledge and the arts; and Durgā with protection. Many are honored with elaborate festivals with distinctively regional aspects in various parts of India. The nine day festival for Durgā for example, is celebrated in Bengal in eastern India enthusiastically with elaborate structures raised at street corners. In Gujarat, western India, the same festival is celebrated with group dancing in open spaces for nine nights.

The power and status of female deities however, does not translate directly in the empowerment of women in the Hindu society. In sacred texts, often contradictory injunctions and references to women are found, at times in the same text. In some places women are praised as worthy of veneration and men are asked to always keep them happy; in some others women are referenced as full of vices and unworthy of any freedom. In traditional patriarchal milieu women’s lives have been carefully regulated in their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. Loyalty to one’s husband has been considered so central to a wife’s role that in higher castes, widows were not allowed to remarry and in a few contexts even encouraged to climb the funeral pyres of their husbands (in an act called *sati* which was much publicized in European writings during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries).

At the same time, Hindu women’s lives have not been without religious agency. Women have been important participants in household rituals and life-cycle ceremonies. They observe many rituals on their own using texts in their regional languages. Numerous examples of women poets and saints (Āṇḍāl 8th century, Mīrā, 16th century) as well as queens and warriors (Laksmibai of Jhansi, 19th century) are also found in the long history of Hinduism. These women are honored by the Hindu society today and seen by young women as inspiration. Since the nineteenth century, numerous Hindu women have made strides in all areas of knowledge and public life, even though in conservative circles women’s lives continue to be regulated by restrictive norms.

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Women at prayer in Varanasi, India (2012). Sergio Carbajo, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1UUPrYx>

Pintchman, Tracy. Ed. *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*. Oxford. 2007.

Cycles of Time – Cosmic and Earthly

A notable feature of Hinduism, which it shares with other Indic traditions, is an understanding of time as cyclical rather than linear. According to Hindu understanding, the creation goes through cycles of existence and dissolution. The vast duration of time when the creation is in existence – spanning trillions of years – is followed by dissolution when the universe is reabsorbed in Viṣṇu who sleeps on primordial waters. When Viṣṇu awakes and creates out of himself Brahma, the deity who creates the world, a new cycle of creation starts. There is no end of time and nothing is really completely destroyed forever. Both creation and dissolution are alternate states in an unending cycle.

The vast spans of cosmic time are balanced by division of earthly time in small units within a lunar calendar. Days are divided in auspicious and inauspicious blocks; specific days of lunar cycles are marked for fasting and ritual performance, seasons are marked by festivals that are linked to mythology and have regional flavors. The festival of Holi during the spring, for example, is celebrated in many parts of north India with people throwing colors at one another and singing songs. The festival also has a myth about a devotee of Viṣṇu associated with it. Most festivals have motifs of dissolution and re-generation incorporated in them. During the goddess festival, for example, an image of the goddess is installed on the first day and submerged in a body of water on the last. Conceived in terms of cycle of re-births, human life too is regulated with rituals. The three most commonly observed life cycle rituals are giving of name, wedding, and cremation at death.

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The Invention of Traditions

While communities following Hindu thought and practices discussed above have flourished on the Indian subcontinent for at least three millennia, the concept of “Hinduism”—as a world religion, as a unitary, coherent package of beliefs and rituals—emerged only in the nineteenth-century colonial context via processes that have been much-debated in scholarship over the past three decades.

The term “Hindu” is derived originally from a Persian word indicating those who live “beyond the Indus River.” It came to be associated with various regional, cultural, and religious identifications over time. With the arrival of the British East India Company to Indian shores in 1608, and the gradual expansion of Company control over trade, political rule, and education in subsequent centuries, however, the meaning and significance of “Hindu” among European officials, missionaries, scholars, and Indian intellectuals grew increasingly complex. In the late eighteenth century, the newly emergent evangelical British Christian denominations took aim at the “idolatry” and “savagery” of “Hindoo” practices, as missionaries failed to understand the significance of divine images or rituals of animal sacrifice. Such contemporary visions of “excess” were countered by early Orientalist scholars such as William Jones (1746-1794) with accounts of sophisticated philosophical wisdom from ancient Sanskrit texts and H. T. Colebrooke (1765-1837) with exploration of Sanskrit works to understand the logic of Hindu ritual life. Indian scholars such as Rammohan Roy (1772-1833)—influenced by his knowledge of Islam, contact with British Unitarians, and his reading of Hindu texts—interpreted the Vedas and the

Upaniṣadic Brahman from a monotheistic perspective, called for rational religious forms of worship, and actively engaged in social reform. He was the first to use the term “Hinduism,” in 1816, to refer to a coherent, pan-Indic set of religious ideals and practices.

Throughout the nineteenth century—and particularly following the transfer of power over much of the Indian subcontinent from the East India Company to the British crown in 1858— terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” were increasingly incorporated in public discourses and nationalist movements. Two very different approaches to Hinduism as it emerged in the nineteenth century are represented by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who represented Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), the founder of the Arya Samaj movement. Drawing on the ideas of Upaniṣads, Vivekananda interpreted Hinduism as a religion of universal acceptance to Western (mainly American) audiences and in India preached service to the impoverished millions of the country. Saraswati also taught about equality of all human beings but he sought to define India as a Hindu nation with its social and cultural forms rooted in the teachings of the Vedas. Saraswati’s exclusive focus on the Vedas and Sanskrit provided a precursor to the twentieth-century Hindu nationalist movements that interpreted “Hinduness” not simply in religious or cultural terms but associated it emphatically with Indian nationhood.

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Pennington, Brian K. *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and Colonial Construction of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

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Interpreting Tradition and Redefining Identity

In the period following Vivekananda and Saraswati, with the term “Hindu” firmly established in public discourses as a set religious system, the trends of interpretation, reform, and revivalism of pride in ancient roots continued. The scathing criticism of “Hinduism” by European officials, missionaries, and scholars who were steeped in enlightenment ideas of personhood and society and were often not familiar with the underlying cultural presumptions of the Hindu society jolted many among those who identified as Hindu into self-examination and/or defensiveness. The first led to social reforms; the latter contributed to what is known as revivalism, leading eventually to Hindu nationalism.

The portrayal of Hindu social system as grossly unjust and its treatment of women as brutal led many reformers to launch movements opposing practices such as “untouchability” and *satī* as well as advocating widow remarriage, women’s education, and their participation in public life. Some also rejected image worship and embraced monotheism. Many leaders interpreted Hindu thought and

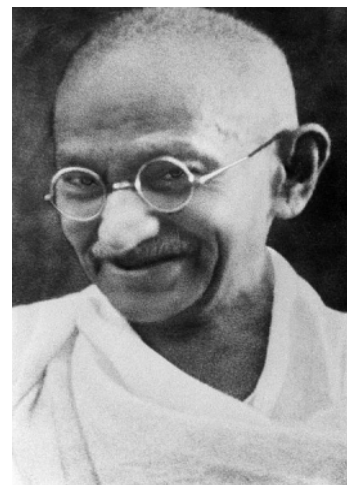
practice to align them with “modernity” as they perceived it in their encounters with Europeans. The reforms initiated in this manner have been beneficial to the Hindu society to a considerable extent. By the early twentieth century, a class of educated women had entered public life. Even though there is still a long road ahead, a large number of Hindu women have made strides in social and political spheres. In the religious sphere too, female spiritual teachers and priests have been getting recognition. Similarly in the area of caste discrimination, while there is still a great deal to be desired in the area of eradication of “untouchability,” caste hierarchy is gradually loosening, especially in the cities.

In addition to reform, a corollary of interpretation of Hinduism as a tradition in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century India was a sharpened sense of distinctive religious identity among its followers. In the millennia prior to widespread Euro-American contact and colonial rule, religious identities throughout South Asia tended to be particular, context-sensitive, and fluid to an extent. While most available sources for the study of precolonial India are overwhelmingly *brāhmaṇ*—presenting the views of elite males for the consumption by elite males—much evidence suggests that “Hindu” identities were far less fixed than they would later become. To be a devotee of Śiva, for example, marked one a “Śaiva,” but did not imply in any way that Viṣṇu, the goddess, and other divine beings were irrelevant. The medieval *bhakti* poet-saints sing the praises of multiple deities, even while recognizing their favorite as supreme. Large temple complexes contain shrines to all major divine beings—often including the Buddha and the Jina (Jain teacher)—and the medieval inscriptional record reveals patterns of royal patronage that cut across religious boundaries without notice.

In the colonial context of encounter with European powers steeped in Enlightenment ideals of personhood, separation of church and state, and democracy, forms of identity began to change, and new forms began to emerge. In the mid-nineteenth century, when the new British Raj (empire) sought to enumerate colonial subjects on the basis of religion, specifying their religious identities caused great confusion. A number of people checked both “Hindu” and “Mohammedan” in early versions of the census. Gradually however, the term “Hindu” as an identity marker grew stronger during the struggle for independence from the British rule.

The British Partition of Bengal in 1905 into Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority areas generated a merging of religious and national identities. The All-India Muslim League was founded the following year – 1906 – to promote Muslim interests. In 1914 Hindu Mahasabha, a political organization to promote Hindu interests was established. From 1920s onward when the freedom movement picked up momentum, many Muslims feared that an independent India would be dominated by Hindus and the seeds for the 1947 Partition of the Subcontinent into the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan were sown.

Three figures with Hindu backgrounds played significant roles in the religio-political discourses during this period and have had far-reaching influence in shaping independent India: 1) Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), 2) Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), and 3) Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956).



Mahatma Gandhi, photographer unknown. Wikimedia Commons <http://bit.ly/1F2xANO>

Gandhi, perhaps the most globally celebrated Hindu of the twentieth century, honored by the title Mahatma or “Great Soul” (1869-1948) by many, invoked explicitly Hindu rhetoric throughout his public career as an advocate for non-violent resistance to the British rule and an independent India focused on the needs of the poorest and most disenfranchised. His *satyāgraha*—literally “grasping for truth”—campaigns promoted a vision of relative truth (*sat* or *satya*) rooted in the needs to those whom he sought to help; for Gandhi, such political activism was simultaneously a religious endeavor, involving firm commitments to the Hindu values of *ahimsā* (non-violence) and self-suffering (*tapas* or *tapasya*). Always ecumenical in his quest for an independent India focused on democratic and economic self-sufficiency, he sought to transform Hindu society from within by promoting the causes of the marginalized. Under his leadership, women and members of non-elite castes entered public life in large numbers. He also strove to end the practice of “untouchability” and was often bitterly opposed by high-caste Hindus including some of his close relatives. While drawing on Hindu rhetoric in his speeches, Gandhi held to an inclusive understanding of Hinduism. In his ashrams (communes), hymns from diverse religious traditions were sung. He envisioned an independent India where many religions would coexist as branches of a single tree. Soon after India’s independence, on January 30th 1948, Gandhi was killed by an associate of the Hindu nationalist organization RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) who saw him as endangering Hindu interests and favoring Muslims.

Since Indian Independence, many Gandhi-inspired religious and cultural organizations have continued to advocate for peace and social justice using the techniques of *satyāgraha* and *ahimsā*. The Chipko Andolan began using Gandhian methods in the early 1970s to protest rampant deforestation in the Himalayan foothills. Its participants literally hugged trees to protect them from being felled. The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), founded as a women’s trade union in Ahmedabad in 1972, continues to employ Gandhian principles of non-violence and economic self-sufficiency in its many programs for poor women. Gandhian techniques of nonviolent resistance and his advocacy for peace have inspired activists not only in India but in many parts of the world.

During the early twentieth century (alongside national independence movements informed by ecumenical views of leaders such as Gandhi) Hindu nationalist movements flourished in which Vinayak Damodar Savarkar emerged as an important leader. His influential 1923 pamphlet “Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?” introduced the notion of Hindutva or “Hindu-ness” into Indian public discourses. Here Savarkar argues for Hindutva as a unifying cultural and political force that unites the people of India and forms the basis of its authentic nationhood. Savarkar’s use of Hindutva to encompass all of Indian culture, religion, and politics is championed today by a closely allied set of political and cultural organizations known as the Sangh Parivar. In public discourses on religious conflicts in India, the ideology of Hindutva is often a key contributor.

In addition to the movements for freedom and social reform led by members of Hindu high-castes, a number of Dalit communities also sought to gain social recognition and economic rights for themselves. Some gained them through education made available to them by Euro-American Christian missionaries. Some acquired them



Ambedkar as a student (1911),
photographer unknown. Wikimedia
Commons <http://bit.ly/1Nx3Cm9>

through legal means. The most well-known Dalit leader of pre-independence India was B. R. Ambedkar. Even though he had the privilege of elite education at Columbia University through scholarships (one of which was offered by an Indian king) he remained dedicated to the rights and dignity of the members of “untouchable” communities all his life. After independence, as the first law minister of India and the chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee, Ambedkar contributed greatly to the guarantees it offers for basic human rights to all Indian citizens. The Indian constitution gives freedoms of religion and expression; and it renders illegal “untouchability” or any form of discrimination on the basis of caste. It is important note that close to his death in 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with his followers initiating a new chapter for that tradition in India.

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Post-Independence India

The day of independence for which literally hundreds of thousands of Indians had fought, came with unimaginable tragedy and pain when the British left an India partitioned into two nations - the Islamic State of Pakistan and secular India. This was the second major fragmentation along religious lines after the 1905 partition of Bengal within the British Empire. The mass migration of an estimated fourteen million people was unprecedented in human history and the violence that ensued took the lives of between 200,000-500,000 people. The sad and complex effects of the event continue to unfold in both India and Pakistan, often in the form of religious violence. With India and Pakistan maintaining a tense peace, and violence couched in terms of Hindu-Muslim riots or Hindu-Christian clashes often dominating global media headlines, it comes as a surprise that such religiously infused large scale communal conflict was hardly known on the subcontinent before the colonial period. In the encounter with European colonial powers, notions of religion and identity shifted dramatically to create the tense sectarian landscape of modern South Asia.

Within India, Hindu nationalist ideology has gained currency in some groups with important political implications. For example, followers of Hindu nationalist ideology destroyed the Babri Masjid (built by the Mughal Emperor Babur in 1528) in Ayodhyā in 1992 because they



Children celebrate Holi in India (2011), Wikimedia Commons, User: Patrick <http://bit.ly/1LNQPax>

claimed that the mosque stood on the site of the Hindu god Rāma's earthly birth. This act led to Hindu-Muslim violence in cities throughout India. In 2002, communal violence in Gujarat in western India took hundreds of lives; a majority of them of Muslims. In the wake of these incidents of violence, the definition of "Hinduism" as a tradition with distinct boundaries that developed during the colonial period and informs the Hindutva rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar has grown increasingly exclusive in some sections of the Hindu society. Yet as many academics point out, the actual events mask the complex undercurrents of socio-economic rivalries reinforcing and politicizing the boundaries of identities. Participants in the destruction of the Babri mosque, for example, were mobilized through rallies across India to collect bricks to build a temple to Rāma at the mosque site in Ayodhyā. A number of these participants tended to be urban, young, male, relatively high caste, under-employed, and frustrated. They were keenly aware that with the legal provisions of affirmative action for the underprivileged communities in education and employment, they were on uncertain and not privileged grounds. The incidents demonstrate how insecurities of groups in a given context play an important role in shaping their attitudes toward those whom they identify as the "other."

An important challenge for Hindus in India today is to retrieve for contemporary times helpful resources from its rich history of acceptance of diversity. Another is to make its contribution in ensuring the implementation the provisions for equality of all – regardless of caste, gender, and religion – incorporated in India's constitution. At this time, these remain ideals to be achieved fully. Yet in India's multi-cultural milieu, a number of Hindu festivals and aesthetic expressions offer opportunities for people of diverse background to come together forgetting the social barriers to a great degree in the moment. These moments offer opportunities to build bridges.

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"Hinduism in Ghana, 2012," YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Zq-3A4xnxs>

Hinduism Beyond India

Beyond the shores of India, Hinduism has flourished in South East Asia in Bali as a majority religion for centuries. During the colonial period, a sizable number of Hindus migrated to parts of the British Empire – Africa, Caribbean islands, Fiji - as clerks, soldiers, merchants, and indentured (bonded) laborers. While



A Vedic fire ritual (2012), Mahat Tattva Dasa, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1MrEfnf>

those with resources were able to keep ties with their communities and returned home after a period, few indentured laborers had this hope. Many of them retained their religio-cultural heritage, but radically transformed Hindu practices in their new homelands. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, Hindus from various regions of India have migrated in large numbers to the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. While they have necessarily modified their tradition in accordance with their new environments, they have also added to the richness of the cultural milieu of their new countries. Some festivals and religious expressions that bring together diverse people in India, also do so on these new shores. In addition to native Indians, a number of Westerners have been following the Hindu tradition in various forms in different parts of the world. In recent years, a few groups in some African countries have also accepted Hinduism as their faith expanding the horizons of the Hindu world.

Buddhism



Introductory profiles adapted from
*On Common Ground: World
Religions in America*

Pluralism Project, Harvard University
Religious Literacy Project, Harvard
Divinity School
March 26, 2015

Lay people, monks, and nuns participate in
a ceremony at the Tharlam Monastery of
Tibetan Buddhism in Kathmandu, Nepal.
Wonderlane (2007), Flickr Creative
Commons.



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Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School

"Ladakh, Likir monastery" by Dietmar Temps (2013) at Flickr Creative Commons.

Preface: How to Read These Profiles

In these religion profiles, our focus is on particular religious traditions with an emphasis on 1) their internal diversity, and 2) the ways that the traditions are always evolving and changing. Though we hope these profiles provide helpful introductions, this format is a bit misleading in that it can reinforce the idea that religions exist and develop in isolation from other social and historical forces, including other religions. While reading these profiles, please remember that religions always impact and are impacted by political, economic, social, and historical factors. Please see the Methods article for fuller explanation of these intersections and the Country Profiles for a demonstration of how to understand religious influences in particular social and historical contexts.

The Path of Awakening

In the sixth century BCE, a prince of India named Siddhartha Gautama is said to have given up his throne, left behind his family and his palace, and set out into the forest to seek answers to the haunting questions of suffering, disease, old age, and death. Through this ardent search and his deep meditation, he gained great insight. He became known as the Buddha, an honorific title meaning the "Enlightened One" or the "Awakened One," and is considered by many to be one of the archetypal spiritual pathfinders of history.

Within his own lifetime, the Buddha attracted a considerable following in India with his understanding of the suffering of living beings and his teachings about overcoming suffering through moral living, meditation, and insight into reality. Some followed him in the path of renunciation and became monks and nuns. Others remained as laity, learning from the Buddha's teachings, honoring the Buddha, and supporting the monastic community. While Buddhism has its roots in India, reverence for the Buddha and adherence to his teachings spread throughout Asia, and today the entire world. Buddhism can thus be considered a world religion in

that it is not specifically tied to a particular people or land.

There are currently two major streams of the Buddhist tradition: the Theravada tradition of South and Southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos; and the Mahayana tradition of China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. The Vajrayana tradition of Tibet, a subset of Mahayana, is large enough that it is sometimes recognized as a third major stream. While these streams are distinct, they are not entirely separate and have continually interacted in Asia.

Prince Siddhartha: Renouncing the World



An Indian Buddha at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, InSapphoWeTrust (2011), Flickr Creative Commons.

What we know about the life of the historical Buddha can be sketched from legends. One of the most beautiful literary renderings of the story is told by Ashvaghosha in the first century CE. Prince Siddhartha Gautama is said to have been born in the royal Shakya family, some say in the year 563 BCE, in a place called Lumbini, which is located in present-day Nepal, at the foothills of the Himalayas. At the time of his birth, seers foretold that he would either become a great king or an enlightened teacher. If the prince were to see the “four passing sights”—old age, sickness, death, and a wandering ascetic—he would renounce his royal life and seek enlightenment.

His father, the king, was determined that his son become a great ruler and tried to shield Prince Siddhartha from these four realities of life. However, at age 29, Siddhartha, with his charioteer, went out of the protected palace grounds and, for the first time, encountered suffering, which he understood to be an inevitable part of life. He saw four sights: a man bent with old age, a person afflicted with sickness, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic. It was the fourth sight, that of a wandering ascetic, that filled Siddhartha with a sense of urgency to find out what lay at the root of human suffering.

Siddhartha left the luxury of the palace. He studied and lived an austere life in the forest with the foremost teachers and ascetics of his time. Yet, he found that their teachings and severe bodily austerities did not enable him to answer the question of suffering or provide insight into how to be released from it. Having experienced the life of self-indulgence in the palace and then the life of self-denial in the forest, he finally settled on a “middle way,” a balance between these two extremes. Accepting food from a village girl, he recovered his bodily strength and began a journey inward through the practice of meditation.

Becoming the “Buddha”: The Way of Meditation

According to tradition, Siddhartha seated himself at the foot of a tree, which has since been called the Bodhi Tree, the tree of enlightenment. He vowed to sit beneath that tree until he had attained deep insight into suffering. As he sat through the night, a profound stillness settled upon his mind, like that of a lake on a windless day. This stillness enabled him to see ever more deeply and clearly into the cycle of grasping, clinging, and egotism found at the root of suffering.

The demon Mara rose to tempt him and to attack him with arrows of passion. Desire, fear, pride, and thirst rose to challenge his clear concentration of mind. But Siddhartha placed his hand on the earth, calling earth itself to witness his firm resolve. When the morning star appeared, Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, literally the “Awakened One.” He had woken up to the nature of the changing world and the causes of suffering. This state of awakening was also called nirvana, literally the “blowing out” of the fires of ego-centered attachment which are the source of suffering.

Siddhartha is called Shakyamuni Buddha, the “Sage of the Shakya clan” to make clear that this awakening is not uniquely his. Over time, there have been other individuals who have awakened to the truth and gained enlightenment, thereby becoming Buddhas. Among the most well-known and widely venerated are Amitabha (Amida) Buddha, Vairochana Buddha, and Bhaishajya-guru (better known as the Medicine Buddha). Indeed, sometimes Buddhas are depicted by the thousands, for the “Buddha nature” is the true awakened nature of all beings.

It is said that, out of great compassion, the newly enlightened Shakyamuni Buddha set out to show others the path he had followed so they might set foot on that path as well. After his awakening, the Buddha taught in the cities and villages of North India for some forty-five years.

The Dharma: The Teachings of the Buddha



A 2nd-3rd century statue of the “fasting Siddhartha” from the Swat Valley in current day Pakistan, British Museum, Wikimedia Commons.

The Buddha's sermons and teachings pointed toward the true nature of the universe, what is known within Buddhism as the Dharma. He gave his first sermon on the outskirts of the city of Varanasi at a deer park called Sarnath. This first sermon presents an overview of suffering and the way out of suffering. It is called the “Four Noble Truths.” The Buddha is often described as a physician who first diagnoses an illness and then suggests a medicine to cure the illness. The “Four Noble Truths” follow this pattern:

1. Life involves suffering, *duhkha*.

The “illness” that the Buddha diagnosed as the human condition is *duhkha*, a term often rendered in English as “suffering” or “unsatisfactoriness.” The Buddha spoke of three types of *duhkha*. First, there is the ordinary suffering of mental and physical pain. Second, there is the suffering produced by change, the simple fact that all things—including happy feelings and blissful states—are impermanent, as is life itself. Third, there is suffering produced by the failure to recognize that no “I” stands alone, but everything and everyone, including what we call our “self,” is conditioned and interdependent.



A Thai woman meditates in Bangkok, longtrekhome (2007), Flickr Creative Commons.

2. Suffering is caused by desire and grasping.

The Buddha saw that the impulse to crave, desire, or grasp something one doesn't have is the principal cause of suffering. Because of the impermanence and continuous change of all that we call "reality," the attempt to hold on to it is as doomed to frustration as the attempt to stake out a piece of a flowing river.

3. There is a way out of suffering.

This is the good news of the Dharma. It is possible to put an end to ego-centered desire, to put an end to dukkha and thus attain freedom from the perpetual sense of "unsatisfactoriness."

4. The way is the "Noble Eightfold Path."

To develop this freedom one must practice habits of ethical conduct, thought, and meditation that enable one to move along the path. These habits include:

- Right understanding. Really knowing, for example, that unwholesome acts and thoughts have consequences, as do wholesome acts and thoughts.
- Right intention. Recognizing that actions are shaped by habits of anger and self-centeredness, or by habits of compassion, understanding, and love.
- Right speech. Recognizing the moral implications of speech. Truthfulness.
- Right action. Observing the five precepts at the foundation of all morality: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not clouding the mind with intoxicants.
- Right livelihood. Earning a living in ways that are consonant with the basic precepts.
- Right effort. Cultivating this way of living with the attention, the patience, and the perseverance that it takes to cultivate a field.
- Right mindfulness. Developing "presence of mind" through the moment-to-moment awareness of meditation practice, including mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of walking, and mindfulness of bodily sensations.
- Right concentration. Developing the ability to bring the dispersed and distracted mind and heart to a center, a focus, and to see clearly through that focused mind and heart.



The wheel with eight spokes represents the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhist art; a sculpture in Kanark, India (2012), saamiblog, Flickr Creative Commons.

The Sangha: The Buddhist Community



Paying respect to a monk in Thailand, Roberto Trm (2012), Flickr Creative Commons.

Those who followed the Buddha came to be called the Sangha—the community of monks (bhikshus) and nuns (bhikshunis). Those who became monks and nuns underwent an ordination ceremony of shaving their heads and donning robes to symbolize world-renunciation. They entered into the homeless life of wandering monastics who settled down in monasteries only during the months of the rainy season.

For some, the Sangha is the whole community of the Buddha's followers. From the beginning, the Buddha's disciples included laypeople who followed the Buddha's teachings but remained householders.

Both the ordained and the laity followed the five precepts of basic ethics that are the foundation of religious life. In addition, a more extensive code of monastic rules, the Pratimoksha, eventually developed to govern the conduct of ordained persons.

The monastic and lay communities are interdependent. Even today, the laity receive teachings and guidance from monastics, while the monastics receive food, clothing, shelter, and in some cases all of their material requirements from the laity. Providing food and supplies to the monks is considered by many lay Buddhists to be an act of “merit-making,” earning good karma for oneself or loved ones.

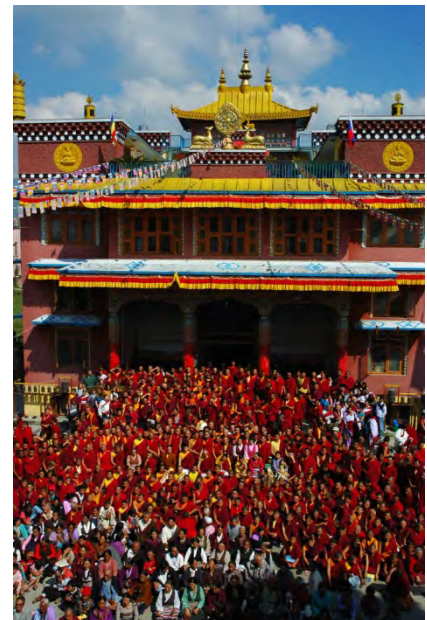
The Three Treasures

The “Three Treasures” of the Buddhist tradition are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Throughout the Buddhist world, Buddhists have these Three Treasures in common. To be a Buddhist means “taking refuge” in the Three Treasures, that is, to put one's trust in them. Buddhists see as central to their lives the Buddha as well as enlightenment in general, the teachings of those who are enlightened, and the community that follows these teachings.

In the ancient Pali language the words of “taking refuge” are these:

- Buddham saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Buddha.”
- Dhammam saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Dharma.”
- Sangham saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Sangha.”

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha continue to provide inspiration to Buddhists, but they are not understood in exactly the same way everywhere. A Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist might insist that the Buddha was a human pathfinder, nothing more. A Chinese Pure Land Buddhist might chant the name of Amitabha Buddha, seen as the eternal Buddha of Endless Light, with a prayer



Monks gather at Tharlam Monastery, Kathmandu (2007), Wonderlane, Flickr Creative Commons.

to be reborn in the Pure Land after death. A Japanese Zen master might shock one with the words, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!” in recognition that grasping for the security of the Buddha creates as much suffering as any other desire.

The Expansion of Buddhism

In India, Buddhism began to wane in the sixth and seventh centuries CE when devotional Hinduism replaced Buddhism in the south and Hephthalite Huns invaded and sacked monasteries in the north. By the thirteenth century, repeated invasions by the Turks ensured that Buddhism had virtually disappeared. By this time, however, Buddhism was flourishing in many other parts of Asia. As early as the third century BCE the Indian emperor Ashoka, a convert to Buddhism, is said to have established the tradition on the island of Ceylon, or Sri Lanka. By the fifth century CE Buddhism had spread throughout what are now Myanmar and Thailand. By the thirteenth century, one of the early Buddhist schools, called the Theravada, “the way of the elders,” had become the dominant tradition of South and Southeast Asia.



A Zen Buddhist “sand” garden in a Japanese monastery, Kyoto (2010), Lars K, Flickr Creative Commons.

As early as the first century CE, Buddhist monks made their way over the “Silk Road” through Central Asia to China. By the seventh century, Buddhism had made a significant impact in China, interacting with Confucian and Daoist cultures and ideas. By this time the tradition was also firmly established in Korea. In the sixth century, the Buddhist tradition was also introduced into Japan, where it developed in a milieu shaped by both Shinto and other indigenous traditions. This form of Buddhism that first developed in India and later flourished in East Asia is known as the Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle.”

In the eighth century, Buddhism, shaped by the Tantric traditions of northeast India, spread to the high mountain plateau of Tibet. There, in interaction with the indigenous Bon religion, and with forms of Buddhism that had traveled to Tibet from East Asia, a distinctive and vibrant form of Mahayana Buddhism emerged known as Vajrayana, the “Diamond Vehicle.”

These streams of Buddhism are differentiated to some extent by their interpretations of the Buddha and the Buddha’s teachings, the scriptures they hold in special reverence, and the variety of cultural expressions they lend to Buddhist life and practice. It would be a mistake, however, to identify these streams of tradition too rigidly with either specific ideas or specific geographical areas.

Theravada: The Way of the Elders

The Theravada, literally “the way of the elders,” is the school of Buddhism most prominent today in the countries of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. As the name suggests, it regards itself as the school most faithful to the teachings that have been passed down through the generations. In the United States, Theravada Buddhism has had its greatest growth since the 1960s when Euro-Americans started practicing vipassana, or “insight meditation.” At the same time, large numbers of immigrants from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and other traditional Theravadin countries traveled to the United States. The major characteristics of the Theravada can be summarized as follows:

1. The Pali Canon, comprised of scriptures and commentaries written in the ancient Pali language, is regarded as the most accurate source of the teachings of the historical Buddha. While other schools have various other versions of the canon or a broader interpretation of what the canon includes, the Theravadins believe that the Pali Canon is definitive.
2. The human and historical Buddha, the spiritual pathfinder, who lived 2,500 years ago in India is emphasized. While other schools of Buddhism might focus on the teachings of another Buddha or venerate multiple Buddhas, the Theravadins see Shakyamuni Buddha as central.
3. The ideal spiritual model of Theravada Buddhism is the arahant (arhat). Arahants, literally “worthy ones,” are Buddhist practitioners who attain nirvana and have perfected their discipline such that defilements and desires are extinguished.

Mahayana: The Great Vehicle

By around 200 CE, the beginnings of a new stream of the Buddhist tradition were visible within Indian Buddhism. This stream can be called the Mahayana, literally the “Great Vehicle.” In general, this movement of monks, nuns, and laity can be characterized as follows:

1. As the name implies, the Mahayana came to think of itself as “great” both in its interpretations of the Buddha’s teaching and in its openness to a broader group of people, especially lay people. The word yana means vehicle or raft which evokes the image of Buddhist teaching as a raft or vehicle that can help one cross over the river of suffering to the “other shore.” The Mahayana is, thus, the “Great Vehicle.”
2. The Mahayana tradition is more flexible about the orthodoxy of scriptures, regarding many new scriptures composed in the early centuries CE as authentic teachings. A number of new scriptures—the Lotus Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, and the Pure Land sutras—focus on teachings such as the emptiness of all phenomena (shunyata), the importance of compassion (karuna), and the universality of Buddha Nature.
3. The ideal religious figure in the Mahayana tradition is the bodhisattva, an enlightened being engaged in helping others become free from suffering. The bodhisattva is motivated entirely by compassion (karuna) and informed by deep wisdom (prajna). The bodhisattva ideal is often contrasted with the monastic arahant (arhat) ideal, characterized by some Mahayana schools as being directed toward self-liberation and thus as too egotistical.

Mahayana Buddhism was the first major stream of Buddhism in the United States, brought by the Chinese and Japanese immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth century. Today, the two main expressions of the Mahayana tradition, Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, have both Asian-American and Euro-American practitioners. In addition, Korean and Vietnamese immigrants introduced their cultures' expressions of Mahayana Buddhism in late twentieth century America and have steadily gained their own followings.



Joan Halifax, an American Zen Buddhist teacher in California, *On Being*, (2007), Flickr Creative Commons.

Vajrayana: The Diamond Vehicle

In the seventh century, a major movement within Mahayana Buddhism arose. This stream of Buddhism, called the Vajrayana, is most prominent in Tibet and its surrounding regions, although forms of it are found in China and Japan. The Vajrayana, literally the “Diamond Vehicle” or the “Thunderbolt Vehicle,” understands itself to be an esoteric form of Mahayana Buddhism with an accelerated path to enlightenment.

This Tibetan tradition sees itself as embodying both the teaching and meditation practice of the Theravada monks, as well as the teaching of the “emptiness” of all conditioned things that is distinctive to Mahayana philosophy. Vajrayana is also called Tantrayana, because it is based on the tantras, the systems of practice which emphasize the indivisibility of wisdom and

compassion, symbolized as the union of male and female.

Three terms characterize the practice of Vajrayana, each one of which has overt ritual meanings, inner psychophysical meanings, and secret transcendent meanings:



Musicians at Tharlam Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal (2007), Wonderland, Flickr Creative Commons.



A mudra displayed on a statue of the Buddha at the Chuang Yen Monastery in New York (2011). Dafyd Jones, Flickr Creative Commons.

Mantra—a syllable or phrase for chanting or meditation, containing within it the sacred power and cosmic energies of a Buddha or bodhisattva. The mantra literally “protects the mind” from negative mental states by invoking these divine energies within oneself.

Mandala—a “circle” or cosmic diagram for ritual or interior visualization, representing various realms of Buddhas and bodhisattvas and their cosmic energies in two- or three-dimensional forms.

Mudra—a “symbol” or “ritual gesture,” made by the position of the hands or body, and signifying the qualities and presence of various Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Vajrayana ritual.

Since the Tibetan uprising in 1959, more than 100,000 Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists have become refugees in India and around the world. The Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso is head of one of the four major lineages of Tibetan monks and led the Tibetan government in exile in north India until 2011. At that time, the Dalai Lama proposed that the political leadership of the Tibetan people be separated from the spiritual leadership and that the political leader should be elected. A Harvard trained Tibetan legal scholar named Lobsang Sangay won the election and became Prime Minister in August of 2011.

Global Buddhisms

The Dalai Lama is undoubtedly the most famous face of contemporary Buddhism and is considered a spiritual leader among Buddhists from many different schools and traditions. Tenzin Gyatso has traveled widely as a teacher, scholar, and statesman promoting peace and nonviolence to a world audience. The annexation of Tibet by the Chinese in the 1950s and the subsequent establishment of the Tibetan Government in exile in Dharamsala, India have inspired Free Tibet movements around the world. Though the Chinese dispute this version of history, global admiration and support of the Dalai Lama and his message of peaceful coexistence is widespread and pervasive, leading many to associate Buddhism with a universal and uncompromising understanding of nonviolence. Other well-known Buddhists representing a nonviolent understanding of Buddhism are the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhất Hanh who protested against the Vietnam War and continues to promote peaceful coexistence through his Center in France known as Plum Village, and the American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön who teaches about paths to individual spiritual enlightenment.



The Dalai Lama (2009), Michael Thibault, Flickr Creative Commons.

Other contemporary representations of Buddhism challenge the widespread association of Buddhism with nonviolence. For example, the Buddhist 969 Movement in Myanmar has targeted the ethnic Muslim Rohingya who are not recognized by the government and who comprise nearly one sixth of the Muslim population there. The leader of the 969 Movement is a monk named Wirathu. He justifies the ethnic cleansing campaign as a necessary protection of Buddhism, which is culturally aligned with ethnic Burmese nationalism in a nation that has long struggled with power imbalances between the dominant Burmese and other, smaller ethnic groups seeking integration or independence.

In Sri Lanka, a new form of Buddhist nationalism known as the BBS (Buddhist Power Force in Sinhalese) has recently emerged following the end of the nearly 30-year civil war with the separatist Tamil Tigers. Its leader Galagodaththe Gnanasara likened the defeat of the separatists to an ancient Sinhalese victory and justifies ongoing violence in defense of (Buddhist) Sri Lankan culture. In this same vein, he also promoted anti-Muslim rioting in 2014 in the southern villages. In both Myanmar and Sri Lanka there are Buddhist monks and lay leaders who are challenging the violent expression of Buddhism, but they are currently marginalized by other factions that are in positions of power. These examples demonstrate how Buddhism, like all religions, is internally diverse and interpretations of the tradition justify the full range of human agency.