**Christianity at a glance**

Gothic stone facade of Westminster Abbey, a Christian place of worship

Christianity is the most popular religion in the world with over 2 billion adherents. 42 million Britons see themselves as nominally Christian, and there are 6 million who are actively practising.

* Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.
* Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
* Christians believe that God sent his Son to earth to save humanity from the consequences of its sins.
* One of the most important concepts in Christianity is that of Jesus giving his life on the Cross (the Crucifixion) and rising from the dead on the third day (the Resurrection).
* Christians believe that there is only one God, but that there are three elements to this one God:
* God the Father
* God the Son
* The Holy Spirit
* Christians worship in churches.
* Their spiritual leaders are called priests or ministers.
* The Christian holy book is the Bible, and consists of the Old and New Testaments.
* Christian holy days such as Easter and Christmas are important milestones in the Western secular calendar

**Islam at a glance**

Minaret of the East London Mosque in Whitechapel, topped with crescent moon

The word Islam means 'submission to the will of God'.

Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over 1 billion followers. The 2001 census recorded 1,591,000 Muslims in the UK, around 2.7% of the population.

* Muslims believe that Islam was revealed over 1400 years ago in Mecca, Arabia.
* Followers of Islam are called Muslims.
* Muslims believe that there is only One God.
* The Arabic word for God is Allah.
* According to Muslims, God sent a number of prophets to mankind to teach them how to live according to His law.
* Jesus, Moses and Abraham are respected as prophets of God.
* They believe that the final Prophet was Muhammad.
* Muslims believe that Islam has always existed, but for practical purposes, date their religion from the time of the migration of Muhammad.
* Muslims base their laws on their holy book the Qur'an, and the Sunnah.
* Muslims believe the Sunnah is the practical example of Prophet Muhammad and that there are five basic Pillars of Islam.
* These pillars are the declaration of faith, praying five times a day, giving money to charity, fasting and a pilgrimage to Mecca (atleast once).

**Buddhism at a glance**

Buddhism is a spiritual tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. There are 376 million followers worldwide.

Buddhists seek to reach a state of nirvana, following the path of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who went on a quest for Enlightenment around the sixth century BC.

There is no belief in a personal god. Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent and that change is always possible. The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, meditation and wisdom.

Buddhists believe that life is both endless and subject to impermanence, suffering and uncertainty. These states are called the tilakhana, or the three signs of existence. Existence is endless because individuals are reincarnated over and over again, experiencing suffering throughout many lives.

It is impermanent because no state, good or bad, lasts forever. Our mistaken belief that things can last is a chief cause of suffering.

The history of Buddhism is the story of one man's spiritual journey to enlightenment, and of the teachings and ways of living that developed from it.

**The Buddha**

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born into a royal family in present-day Nepal over 2500 years ago. He lived a life of privilege and luxury until one day he left the royal enclosure and encountered for the first time, an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. Disturbed by this he became a monk before adopting the harsh poverty of Indian asceticism. Neither path satisfied him and he decided to pursue the ‘Middle Way’ - a life without luxury but also without poverty.

Buddhists believe that one day, seated beneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening), Siddhartha became deeply absorbed in meditation and reflected on his experience of life until he became enlightened.

By finding the path to enlightenment, Siddhartha was led from the pain of suffering and rebirth towards the path of enlightenment and became known as the Buddha or 'awakened one'.

**Schools of Buddhism**

There are numerous different schools or sects of Buddhism. The two largest are Theravada Buddhism, which is most popular in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma (Myanmar), and Mahayana Buddhism, which is strongest in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia.

The majority of Buddhist sects do not seek to proselytise (preach and convert), with the notable exception of Nichiren Buddhism.

All schools of Buddhism seek to aid followers on a path of enlightenment.

**Key facts**

* Buddhism is 2,500 years old
* There are currently 376 million followers worldwide
* There are over 150,000 Buddhists in Britain
* Buddhism arose as a result of Siddhartha Gautama's quest for Enlightenment in around the 6th Century BC
* There is no belief in a personal God. It is not centred on the relationship between humanity and God
* Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent - change is always possible
* The two main Buddhist sects are Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, but there are many more
* Buddhists can worship both at home or at a temple
* The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, meditation and wisdom.

**Judaism at a glance**



Judaism is the original of the three Abrahamic faiths, which also includes Christianity and Islam. According to information published by The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, there were around 13.1 million Jewish people in the world in 2007, most residing in the USA and Israel. According to the 2001 census 267,000 people in the UK said that their religious identity was Jewish, about 0.5% of the population.

* Judaism originated in the Middle East over 3500 years ago
* Judaism was founded by Moses, although Jews trace their history back to Abraham.
* Jews believe that there is only one God with whom they have a covenant.
* In exchange for all the good that God has done for the Jewish people, Jewish people keep God’s laws and try to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives.
* Judaism has a rich history of religious text, but the central and most important religious document is the Torah.
* Jewish traditional or oral law, the interpretation of the laws of the Torah, is called halakhah.
* Spiritual leaders are called Rabbis.
* Jews worship in Synagogues.
* 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust in an attempt to wipe out Judaism.
* There are many people who identify themselves as Jewish without necessarily believing in, or observing, any Jewish law.

**Mormons at a glance**

White walls and domes of a Mormon church in Salt Lake City, Utah

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded in 19th century America and has 13.5 million members world-wide (LDS 2008 Statistical Report).

Mormonism has been present in the UK since 1837 and has 190,000 members (LDS 2008 figures).

* The church is called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or The Church of Jesus Christ.
* Mormons believe their church is a restoration of the Church as conceived by Jesus and that the other Christian churches have gone astray.
* The church was founded by Joseph Smith (1805 - 1844).
* It was then developed by Brigham Young who migrated with the new Mormons to Salt Lake City in 1847.
* Mormons believe that God has a physical body, is married, and can have children.
* They also believe that humans can become gods in the afterlife.
* Mormons are strongly focused on traditional family life and values.
* They oppose abortion, homosesxuality, unmarried sexual acts, pornography, gambling, tobacco, consuming alcohol, tea, coffee, and the use of drugs.
* One of the more common misconceptions is that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints advocates polygamy. However, this was discontinued over a century ago and the Church excommunicates anyone who practices it.



**Unitarianism at a glance**

Three rings with one isolated

There are about 7,000 Unitarians in Great Britain and Ireland, and about 150 Unitarian ministers. There are about 800,000 Unitarians worldwide.

Unitarianism is an open-minded and individualistic approach to religion that gives scope for a very wide range of beliefs and doubts.

Religious freedom for each individual is at the heart of Unitarianism. Everyone is free to search for meaning in life in a responsible way and to reach their own conclusions.

In line with their approach to religious truth, Unitarians see diversity and pluralism as valuable rather than threatening. They want religion to be broad, inclusive, and tolerant. Unitarianism can therefore include people who are Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Pagan and Atheist.

* Unitarianism has no standard set of beliefs
* Unitarians believe that religious truth is not necessarily or primarily laid down either in scriptures, by a holy person or by a religious institution
* no individual or group in Unitarianism makes an exclusive claim to the truth
* within certain core values each Unitarian can believe what they feel is right
* Unitarians are so called because they insist on the oneness of God and because they affirm the essential unity of humankind and of creation
* Unitarians believe religion should make a difference to the world, so they are often active in social justice and community work
* Unitarianism grew out of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century CE and started in Poland and Transylvania in the 1560s
* Unitarians have adopted the Flaming Chalice as the symbol of their faith
* The Unitarians were the first church in Britain to accept women as ministers, in 1904
* Unitarians welcome gays and lesbians in their ministry and support equal rights for gay people within the Church and in society at large
* A heretical religion?

Early Unitarians felt that the language of the Bible spoke clearly of "one God". Because of this they felt that the traditional Christian idea of God being a Trinity was wrong.

From the viewpoint of mainstream Christianity, therefore, Unitarianism is a heretical belief, and for many centuries those who believed in the unity of God were persecuted by the churches.



**Shinto at a glance**

Pagoda-style roofs and stone lanterns of Tosho Gu shrine in Nikko, Japan

The essence of Shinto is the Japanese devotion to invisible spiritual beings and powers called kami, to shrines, and to various rituals.

Shinto is not a way of explaining the world. What matters are rituals that enable human beings to communicate with kami.

Kami are not God or gods. They are spirits that are concerned with human beings - they appreciate our interest in them and want us to be happy - and if they are treated properly they will intervene in our lives to bring benefits like health, business success, and good exam results.

Shinto is a very local religion, in which devotees are likely to be concerned with their local shrine rather than the religion as a whole. Many Japanese will have a tiny shrine-altar in their homes.

However, it is also an unofficial national religion with shrines that dra w visitors from across the country. Because ritual rather than belief is at the heart of Shinto, Japanese people don't usually think of Shinto specifically as a religion - it's simply an aspect of Japanese life. This has enabled Shinto to coexist happily with Buddhism for centuries.

* The name Shinto comes from Chinese characters for Shen ('divine being'), and Tao ('way') and means 'Way of the Spirits'.
* Shrine visiting and taking part in festivals play a great part in binding local communities together.
* Shrine visiting at New Year is the most popular shared national event in Japan.
* Because Shinto is focussed on the land of Japan it is clearly an ethnic religion. Therefore Shinto is little interested in missionary work, and rarely practised outside its country of origin.
* Shinto sees human beings as basically good and has no concept of original sin, or of humanity as 'fallen'.
* Everything, including the spiritual, is experienced as part of this world. Shinto has no place for any transcendental other world.
* Shinto has no canonical scriptures.
* Shinto teaches important ethical principles but has no commandments.
* Shinto has no founder.
* Shinto has no God.
* Shinto does not require adherents to follow it as their only religion.

**Introduction to Hinduism**

Hindu shrine in Delhi, India, at sunrise looking out over the waters

Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. It also exists among significant populations outside of the sub continent and has over 900 million adherents worldwide.

In some ways Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world, or at least elements within it stretch back many thousands of years. Yet Hinduism resists easy definition partly because of the vast array of practices and beliefs found within it. It is also closely associated conceptually and historically with the other Indian religions Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings. Throughout its extensive history, there have been many key figures teaching different philosophies and writing numerous holy books. For these reasons, writers often refer to Hinduism as 'a way of life' or 'a family of religions' rather than a single religion.

Defining Hinduism

The term 'Hindu' was derived from the river or river complex of the northwest, the Sindhu. Sindhu is a Sanskrit word used by the inhabitants of the region, the Aryans in the second millennium BCE. Later migrants and invaders, the Persians in the sixth century BCE, the Greeks from the 4th century BCE, and the Muslims from the 8th century CE, used the name of this river in their own languages for the land and its people.

The term 'Hindu' itself probably does not go back before the 15th and 16th centuries when it was used by people to differentiate themselves from followers of other traditions, especially the Muslims (Yavannas), in Kashmir and Bengal. At that time the term may have simply indicated groups united by certain cultural practices such as cremation of the dead and styles of cuisine. The 'ism' was added to 'Hindu' only in the 19th century in the context of British colonialism and missionary activity.

The origins of the term 'hindu' are thus cultural, political and geographical. Now the term is widely accepted although any definition is subject to much debate. In some ways it is true to say that Hinduism is a religion of recent origin yet its roots and formation go back thousands of years.

Some claim that one is 'born a Hindu', but there are now many Hindus of non-Indian descent. Others claim that its core feature is belief in an impersonal Supreme, but important strands have long described and worshipped a personal God. Outsiders often criticise Hindus as being polytheistic, but many adherents claim to be monotheists.

Some Hindus define orthodoxy as compliance with the teachings of the Vedic texts (the four Vedas and their supplements). However, still others identify their tradition with 'Sanatana Dharma', the eternal order of conduct that transcends any specific body of sacred literature. Scholars sometimes draw attention to the caste system as a defining feature, but many Hindus view such practices as merely a social phenomenon or an aberration of their original teachings. Nor can we define Hinduism according to belief in concepts such as karma and samsara (reincarnation) because Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists (in a qualified form) accept this teaching too.

Although it is not easy to define Hinduism, we can say that it is rooted in India, most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as the Veda, and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as dharma.

* Hinduism originated around the Indus Valley near the River Indus in modern day Pakistan.
* About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.
* Most Hindus believe in a Supreme God, whose qualities and forms are represented by the multitude of deities which emanate from him.
* Hindus believe that existence is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, governed by Karma.
* Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived.
* The main Hindu texts are the Vedas and their supplements (books based on the Vedas). Veda is a Sanskrit word meaning 'knowledge'. These scriptures do not mention the word 'Hindu' but many scriptures discuss dharma, which can be rendered as 'code of conduct', 'law', or 'duty'
* Hindus celebrate many holy days, but the Festival of Lights, Diwali is the best known.
* The 2001 census recorded 559,000 Hindus in Britain, around 1% of the population.