

# Welcome to Religions Around the World

Can you guess how many different religions there are in the world? Five? Twenty-five? Five *hundred*?

Guess again.

The fact is there are more than four *thousand* religions in the world.

Most of the world's religions are very small. In fact, the smallest religion — called *Rastafari* — has only about 600,000 followers. That is pretty small when you consider there are nearly eight *billion* people in the world.

But when you add up all of the followers of all the religions in the world, guess what you get. More than 85 percent of all the people in the world identify with (or are part of) some religious group or spiritual tradition.



# Kids and Religions Around the World

All around the world, millions of young people practice their religion in a variety of different ways. Here are just some of those ways.



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**In Indonesia**, seven-year-old Rami — a young Muslim boy — is learning how to make Salah. That's an Arabic term for a very important Muslim prayer. The Salah involves reciting specific verses from the Muslim holy book. During the prayer, Rami will stand, bow, kneel, and touch the ground with his forehead. Like other Muslims, Rami will perform (or make) Salah five times a day for the rest of his life.

**More than 2,500 miles (4,037 km) away** in Israel, twelve-year-old Shira is studying for her upcoming *bat mitzvah*, a Jewish coming of age ritual. (For boys it is known as *bar mitzvah*.) During her bat mitvah, Shira is likely to lead prayers, chant from the Torah, deliver a speech about some portion of the Torah, and complete a charity project.



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**In the United States**, eight-year-old Joseph is preparing for his First Holy Communion. It is considered one of the most important occasions in a Roman Catholic

person's life. It is the first time that a person accepts the bread and wine (also known as the Eucharist). Catholics believe the bread and wine are symbols for Jesus' body and His blood. Holy Communion is an expression of a person's desire to let Jesus into their heart.

**In India**, Kayra and her brother Krishav chant the Gayatri mantra\*, one Hinduism's most powerful and important prayers.

*Om! Earth, Sky, Heaven.*

*We meditate on the*

*Brilliant light of the Sun:*

*May it illuminate our minds!*

The chanting of mantras is the most popular form of worship in Hinduism. Like many Hindus, the young siblings recite it on a daily basis. They think about its meaning for their lives, just like other Hindus have done for hundreds of years. Today, many Hindus believe the prayer can help not only calm the mind, but also help concentration and memory.

**In China** for 15 minutes every day, Daishin — whose name means Great Truth -- practices

Right Mindfulness. That is the seventh part of the Eightfold Path of Buddhism. He is training himself to stay alert to the present moment. He pays close attention to thoughts, feelings, and senses, such as hearing or taste.



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**\*Mantra:** A sacred utterance — a sound, word, or group of words believed by practitioners to have religious, magical or spiritual power.

# Buddhism



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**“Why must people suffer?” “What is the cause of suffering?”**

**About 2,500 years ago**, a young prince named Siddhartha Gautama began to seek (or look for) answers to those questions.

For many years, he prayed, he meditated, and he fasted. He thought deeply about how to help people stop suffering and find true happiness.

## **BUDDHISM**

### **At a Glance**

**Founder:** The Buddha (born Siddhartha Gautama).

**Number of Followers:** 500 million.

**Core Belief:** The Four Noble Truths.

**Sacred Texts:** The Tripitaka, which consists of teachings of the Buddha.

**Places of Worship:** Buddhist monasteries, temples, shrines.

**Deity:** No supreme deity or god.

**Leaders:** Buddhist monks and nuns.



# An Imaginary Interview with a Buddhist Monk

**Suppose you could talk** with a Buddhist monk. What questions would you ask? Here are some questions these curious kids wanted to know.

**Can anyone become a Buddhist monk?**

Well, in general, the answer is yes. But don't plan to show up at the door of a monastery and say, "I want to be a monk." Becoming a monk is very serious. It takes a great deal of preparation and study. It's also a good idea to volunteer at a monastery first to see what monastic life is like.

**Why do monks and nuns shave their heads?**

A shaved head symbolizes the importance of paying more attention to inward change than outward appearance.

**Are all Buddhists vegetarians?**

That's what a lot of people think, but it's not true. In fact, eating meat is a personal choice. Some Buddhists are vegetarian, some are vegan, but many more eat meat.

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# Christianity

**More than 2000 years ago** in a town called Bethlehem of Judea, a baby boy was born into a poor Jewish family. According to the Bible, this baby boy, called Jesus, was the son of God.

As a young man, Jesus began teaching people how to live a good life. He taught about forgiveness and kindness. He taught people to love their neighbors as themselves. Most importantly, he taught people to love God with all their heart.



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For a number of years, Jesus had a loyal following. But he also made enemies among religious and political leaders. Eventually, he was accused of many crimes including

## CHRISTIANITY

### At a Glance

**Founder:** Jesus Christ of Nazareth

**Number of World Followers:** 2.4 billion

**Core Belief:** Jesus is the Christ, or chosen one, whom God sent to the world to save humans.

**Holy Book:** The Bible, including the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament, which tells the story of Jesus.

**Places of Worship:** Church, cathedral.

**Deity:** God.

**Religious Leaders:** Priests, ministers, pastors.

blasphemy. He was sentenced to death and crucified.

The third day after Jesus' death, his followers found his tomb empty. They discovered that he had been raised (or resurrected) from the dead and entered Heaven.

After his resurrection, Jesus Christ's followers spread his message throughout the world. The teachings of Jesus are the basis of Christianity.

Today, there are about eight billion people in the world. More than two billion are followers of Christianity. That makes Christianity the world's largest religion.

# An **Imaginary** Interview with a **Christian Minister**

Non-Christian kids around the world often have questions about Christianity. Here are some questions these curious kids ask most.



**Why do Christians say "amen" at the end of a prayer?**

The word "amen" means "let it be so." It's a way of saying you agree with the words of the prayer that has just been said.



**Why is Jesus called Christ?**



**Why do Christians go to church on Sunday?**

Christians believe that when Jesus rose from the dead it was a Sunday. Therefore, they believe that Sundays are a special day of worship.



Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah—a savior sent to deliver people from sin. The Greek word for Messiah is *Khristos*. The word *Christ* comes from *Khristos*.



# HINDUISM

**Hinduism is one of the largest** religions in the world. Yet, it is different from other world religions in a number of ways.

First, there is no single founder, like Muhammad or Jesus Christ. Hinduism is based on ancient texts and teachings, called the Vedas.

Secondly, Hinduism is considered by some to be a polytheist religion. That's because most Hindus worship many different gods.

At the same time, even though there are many different gods in Hinduism, they are all part of one supreme God called "Brahman." So, in that sense, Hinduism is also considered by some to be monotheistic, just like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Those religions all believe in one God.



## HINDUISM

### At a Glance

**Founder:** No founder.

**Number of World Followers:** 1.2 billion

**Core Belief:** When someone dies, the human soul, called the *atman*, is reborn in another body — a process known as reincarnation.

**Sacred Texts:** The Vedas, a collection of religious texts on which Hinduism is based.

**Places of Worship:** Mandir (Hindu Temple).

**Deity:** Three main gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

**Religious Leaders:** Swami

A third difference between Hinduism and many other religions has to do with "reincarnation." Most followers of Hinduism believe that after one dies, he or she is reborn in a different body or physical form.

Another important part of Hinduism (as well as Buddhism) is the practice or principle of *ahimsa*. Ahimsa means "non-violence." It means that one must never harm anyone or anything in words or in actions.

Today, more than a billion people practice Hinduism worldwide. Most of them live in India, where Hinduism began.



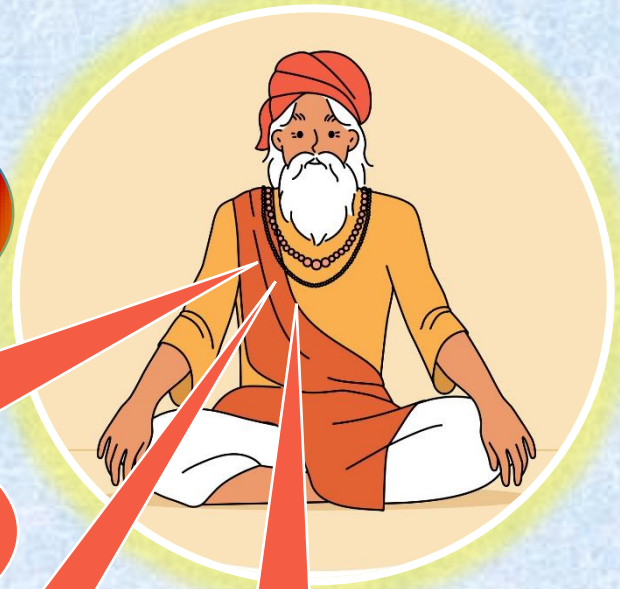
# An Imaginary Interview with a Hindu Swami

Suppose you could talk with a Hindu religious teacher, known as a swami. What questions would you ask? Here are some questions these curious kids wanted to know.



Do Hindus believe in more than one god?

Most Hindus believe in only one supreme god, called Brahman. There are other gods worshipped by Hindus, but the other gods are a different part of Brahman.



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Why do Hindu women wear a dot on their forehead?

The dot or mark is known as a bindi. The bindi is traditionally worn by women for religious purposes or to show that they're married.



Are all Hindus vegetarians?

Not at all. But a lot of people think that. However, in Hindu religion, the cow is considered a holy animal. So, throughout most of India, it is illegal to kill a cow. Therefore, many Hindus do not eat beef.

# ISLAM

**More than 1,500 years ago**, in the year 570, a baby boy was born in Mecca — a city in Saudi Arabia. His parents named him Muhammad.

When Muhammad was forty years old, in 610, an angel told Muhammad that Allah — the Islam God — had chosen him as a prophet.

For the rest of his life, Muhammad received messages that he believed came from Allah. Those messages are contained in the Islam holy book, known as the Koran (also spelled Qur'an).

Today, there are two major branches of Islam — the Sunni branch and the Shi'ite branch.

Almost 90 percent of Muslims are Sunnis. Sunnis are known as

<p><b>ISLAM</b></p> <p><b>At a Glance</b></p> <p><b>Founder:</b> Muhammad.</p> <p><b>Number of World Followers:</b> (called Muslims): 1.8 billion.</p> <p><b>Core Belief:</b> “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.”</p> <p><b>Holy Book:</b> The Koran (also spelled Qur'an) – believed to be the literal word of Allah as told to Muhammad.</p> <p><b>Deity:</b> Allah.</p> <p><b>Place of Worship:</b> Mosque.</p> <p><b>Prayer Leader:</b> Imam.</p>
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traditional Muslims. They follow the sayings of Muhammad.

The Shi'ite branch is much smaller. They believe Muslims can only know the truths of the Koran through a community leader called the *imam*.

In the last one hundred years, Islam had become the fastest growing religion in the world. Many people think Islam will soon have more followers than Christianity.

## Did You Know?

Muslims have a great deal of respect for Muhammad. So, any time Muslims say or write his name they usually follow it by saying “Peace Be Upon Him.” This is often abbreviated in writing to *pbuh*.





# An Imaginary Interview with Two Muslim Kids

Suppose you didn't know any Muslim kids. What questions would you ask them? Here are some questions these curious kids wanted to know.



Are there Muslims in the United States?

Absolutely. In fact, Islam is the third largest religion in the United States after Christianity and Judaism. There is an estimated four million Muslims living in the U.S.



Two Muslim Kids: iStock Credit: bayurabara



Are men and women equal in the Islam religion?

Yes and no. In the Islam religion, all human beings are said to be equal.

But unfortunately, there are many examples where women are not treated equally.



Why do Muslims pray on a rug?

Not all Muslims use a prayer rug. It's not required in Islam. The only requirement in Islam is that prayers be performed in an area that is clean. The prayer rug also creates a special and private space for a Muslim to silently communicate with God.



# JUDAISM

**Judaism is one of the oldest religions** in the world. It was started nearly 4,000 years ago in the Middle East by a man named Abraham.

At the time, people in the Middle East worshipped many gods. There was a god of the water, a god of the sky, a god of growing crops, and a god for just about everything else.

Abraham changed all that. According to many scholars, Abraham was the first person to teach the idea of only one all-powerful God.

About this time, God spoke to Abraham. According to the Torah, God made a special covenant — or agreement — with Abraham. God told Abraham that his descendants would live in a land of their own -- the Promised Land — if they followed God's rules.



## JUDAISM

### At a Glance

**Founder:** Abraham.

**Number of World Followers:** 14 million

**Core Belief:** There is only one God and that God created the world.

**Sacred Texts:** The Tanakh (or Hebrew Bible), which includes the same books as the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. The first five books of the Tanakh are known as the Torah.

**Deity:** God

**Place of Worship:** Synagogue.

**Religious Leader:** Rabbi.

That was the beginning of Judaism, even though it wasn't called Judaism at the time. Followers of Judaism believe the covenant was the start of a special relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Today, there are many different denominations (or branches) of Judaism. The three main branches within Judaism: Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, and Conservative Judaism. Each has its own beliefs and practices with regard to Jewish traditions and Jewish law.

Today, there are more than 14 million Jews around the world. But most live in Israel or the U.S.

# An Imaginary Interview with a RABBI

Suppose you didn't know anything about Judaism and could talk with a rabbi. What questions would you ask? Here are some questions these curious kids wanted to know.



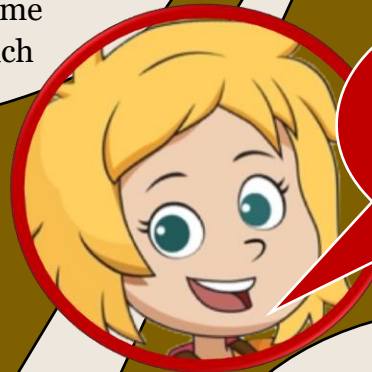
**What is Hanukkah?**

Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday that celebrates a military victory over a king who refused to let Jews practice their religion. The celebration lasts eight days and nights usually in December. Some Jewish people exchange gifts on each night of Hanukkah



**Why do Jewish men and boys wear a small cap on their head?**

It's actually called a Kippah or yarmulke (yah-mah-kah). It is worn by many Jewish boys and men as a sign of respect during prayers, while attending a synagogue, or in other rituals.



**What is the difference between Hebrew and Yiddish?**

Hebrew and Yiddish are both languages spoken by Jews all over the world. Both languages use the Hebrew alphabets. But other than that, they are very different languages.

Rabbi illustration: iStock Credit: eliflamra