

Categorizing Religions

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss some ways that the world's religions can be categorized based on personal or academic interests and perspectives. We'll also look at some key features of several main world religions. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Eastern Religions

1a. Hinduism

1b. Jainism

1c. Buddhism

1d. Confucianism

1e. Shintoism

2. Western Religions

2a. Judaism

2b. Christianity

2c. Islam

3. Classical Religions

4. Indigenous Religions

1. Eastern Religions

One of the first ways of categorizing religions is in terms of geography: Eastern religions and Western religions.

From a historical perspective, the Eastern religions predate the Western religions. For now, we'll look at the key features of some of the major **Eastern religions**, all of which will be discussed in greater detail later in the course.

1a. Hinduism

Hinduism is often considered the world's oldest living religion, as it dates back thousands of years. You can trace the word Hindu back to the Sanskrit word "Shindu," which is a reference to the river system in northwest

India.

Sanskrit is the ancient language of Hindu that is no longer spoken, but the Hindu sacred texts were written in Sanskrit. There are four of these texts, collectively called the Veda. The Veda helps guide one along the way of the Dharma, which is a term that refers to the natural law and order that sustains being. As a way of being in the world, Dharma means duty, morality, and virtue.

Another essential element in Hinduism is the belief in the law of karma, or action, which governs the process and cycle of birth, life, and death. This cycle is called samsara. The hope is to break free of this cycle of perpetual reincarnation. Therefore, one must follow the Dharma, always being attentive to the laws of karma.

No transcendent god is worshiped in Hinduism. Instead, a supreme transcendent power is identified as Brahman. There are many manifestations of this universal force, such as more personal gods that have very specific personalities and purposes in Hindu life and practice.

1b. Jainism

Another ancient religion from India that is still practiced today is called Jainism—which emphasizes spiritual independence, universal equality among all life forms, nonviolence, and self-control.

Nonviolence and self-control are the principal means of liberation from the endless cycle of reincarnation.

1c. Buddhism

The other principal religion that also originated in India is Buddhism. Historically, Hinduism precedes Buddhism, but they overlap philosophically in many ways.

Unlike Hinduism, however, Buddhism has a known founder. His name is the Buddha, meaning enlightened one, or awakened. In history, he was called Siddhartha Gautama. Followers along the way of the Buddha are called Buddhists.

The Buddha taught that enlightenment was possible to attain in this life; he taught this through his actions, words, silence, and presence.

The principal commitments of a Buddhist are known as the Three Jewels:

- The Buddha
- The Dharma
- The Sangha



All of these are Sanskrit words, with “Sangha” meaning community.

Along the Buddhist way, one continually reflects on the teachings of the Four Noble Truths:

- Life is suffering.
- Suffering is caused by cravings and attachments (which are caused and guided by ignorance).

- Release from suffering is possible.
- The truth is the way out of suffering.

Ultimate release from suffering is known as “Moksha.” This is a state and a way of being that is called nirvana.

1d. Confucianism

Moving over to fifth-century China, we’ll take a brief look at Confucianism. The founder of Confucianism was a man who emphasized the extreme importance of moral responsibility in the community. Confucius taught that a responsible life in the family and the community takes priority over some of the more unanswerable questions of existence. Nevertheless, human life and ethical duty clearly reflect a higher order and structure that are not to be denied or ignored.

One of the central texts of Confucianism that explores this is called the *I-Ching*, or the *Book of Changes*.

1e. Shintoism

Most of the religions we’ve mentioned so far have spread to Japan and other parts of the globe to a greater or lesser extent, but we’ll now start focusing on indigenous traditions in various regions.

In Japan, the ancient religion is called Shinto or Shintoism. The main feature of Shinto is to offer a way of maintaining a link with the past. The word “Shinto” means the way of the gods, and one of its core beliefs is that everything has a spiritual essence or “kami.”

In Japan, many people recognize both Shinto and Buddhism. Buddhism is practiced for things more directly related to this life, and Shinto is practiced more for things related to the other life, death, and the remembrance of things past or beyond.

Eastern Religions

Religion	Holy Book	God/Founder	Beliefs
Hinduism	The Veda	No one God; instead believes in Brahma that manifests in many ways	One must follow the Dharma. By paying attention to the laws of karma, one can escape the cycle of reincarnation.
Jainism	-	-	Emphasizes spiritual independence, nonviolence, self-control; nonviolence and self-control break the cycle of reincarnation.
Buddhism	-	Founder is Buddha	The principle commitments are the Three Jewels. Continually reflect on the Four Noble Truths. Nirvana is the release from suffering
Confucianism	I-Ching or Book of Changes	Founder is Confucius	Moral responsibility in the community is more important than unanswerable

			questions.
Shinto	-	-	Everything has a spiritual essence called kami; practiced in conjunction with Buddhism but related to life, death, and remembrance of the past.



TERM TO KNOW

Eastern Religion

Any religion originating on or east of the Indian subcontinent.

2. Western Religions

Now that we've briefly covered the East, we can take a look at some of the main religions in the West. As mentioned earlier in this lesson, **Western religions** historically follow Eastern religions in terms of when they were developed.

2a. Judaism

Judaism originated in Israel and is considered the first of the monotheistic religions. Monotheistic religions are those that adhere to the belief that there is only one god.

People who follow the beliefs of Judaism are called Jews or Hebrews, and they believe they are descended from Abraham. They also believe that they have been chosen by God for some purpose, and this purpose is laid out in their sacred texts, the Talmud and the Torah, which is the Hebrew Bible.

2b. Christianity

Arising out of Judaism is Christianity, also a monotheistic religion from the land of Israel. Christianity's central figure is Jesus Christ, believed to have been the son of God born to the Virgin Mary.

The story of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, as well as his teachings and actions in the world, make up the Christian Bible, which is called the New Testament. If there is a central teaching and principle associated with Christianity and the life of Christ, it could universally be called love.

2c. Islam

Following the historical line of the monotheistic traditions is Islam, which emerged during the seventh century. Islam refers to the life and teachings of the figure Muhammad, believed to have been a prophet inspired and informed directly by God through the angel Gabriel. The sacred text of this exchange is called the Qur'an.

Like many of the other religions, there are different branches of the faith; however, all Muslims, or followers of Islam, generally agree that while the word of God has been revealed before to Moses, Jesus of Nazareth, and other prophets, the Qur'an is God's final and complete revelation.

Muslims also generally agree on the Five Pillars of Islam:

- Creed
- Daily prayer
- Almsgiving
- Fasting during Ramadan
- Pilgrimage to Mecca (the birthplace of Muhammad and site of his revelation)

Western Religions

Religion	Holy Book	God/Founder	Beliefs
Judaism	The Torah and the Talmud	One God, descendants of Abraham	They believe that they are God's chosen people for the purposes laid out in sacred texts.
Christianity	The New Testament	One God; Jesus Christ is the primary figure	They believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Love is the primary value.
Islam	Qur'an (Koran)	One God; The Prophet Muhammad	Qur'an (Koran) is the final revelation. They believe in the Five Pillars.



TERM TO KNOW

Western Religion

Any religion originating in the present-day Middle East, Europe, or the Americas.

3. Classical Religions

Now that you have a general idea of how to organize and categorize religions according to East and West, another way to think about religions is in terms of whether or not they're still practiced.

All the religions mentioned so far are still practiced today and are thus called living religions. Those that aren't practiced are considered classical. Classical religions include the **Pantheons** or pantheistic religions of ancient Greece and Rome.

Despite their antiquity, or perhaps because of it, they were very influential in the development of the living traditions, particularly the monotheistic traditions.



TERM TO KNOW

Pantheon

A group of gods or deities.

4. Indigenous Religions

The final category is the indigenous religions. This refers to the religious practices and beliefs of indigenous people across the world. For the most part, these traditions have been transmitted orally. Because these are the oldest known religions, they are sometimes called **primal religions**.

It's hard to categorize these religions in terms of Eastern or Western, and it's also hard to categorize them in terms of classical or living because some are still practiced but many aren't. Nevertheless, these religions are the source of many myths, legends, and practices that have found their way into the living traditions we've mentioned so far.

The indigenous religions have found their way into modern life as well.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Indigenous religions often share a deep spiritual connection to and with nature and animals. This intuitive response to an interaction with nature might then be linked to contemporary environmental concerns.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that one way of categorizing religions is by geography: **Eastern religions** and **Western religions**. The primary religions from the East are **Hinduism**, **Jainism**, **Buddhism**, **Confucianism**, and **Shintoism**. The primary monotheistic religions that originated in the West are **Judaism**, **Christianity**, and **Islam**.

Religions can also be categorized according to whether or not they're still practiced. In this case, we refer to them as either living religions or classical religions. Indigenous, or primal, religions come from indigenous and/or tribal cultures around the world, and may or may not still be practiced.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY TED FAIRCHILD FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Eastern Religion

Any religion originating on or east of the Indian subcontinent.

Pantheon

A group of gods or deities.

Western Religion

Any religion originating in the present-day Middle East, Europe, or the Americas.