

Comparative Religion

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will help you think about religions in terms of their similarities and differences.

Comparative religion, as an academic discipline, studies the beliefs, rituals, customs, and traditions of all active religions. A practical starting point for comparing religions is to look at how they're categorized or grouped. You will cover the world's religions and their major groupings. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Abrahamic Religions](#)
2. [Indian Religions](#)
3. [Taoic Religions](#)
4. [Origin of Religion](#)

1. Abrahamic Religions

The three **Abrahamic religions** are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They are similar in that they claim the patriarch Abraham as a central figure in their family and spiritual genealogies. As a starting point for comparison, we have first of all a shared geographic origin, and then, on closer investigation, these three religions have a shared origin based on genealogy. However, if you look in more detail at the origin, you find that Judaism and Islam diverge.



THINK ABOUT IT

[What is this separation all about?](#)



It traces back to Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Judaism maintains that Abraham's second-born son, Isaac, is the rightful heir to the purpose and responsibility in the world invested by God to the Jewish people. In Islam, Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn son, is considered the legitimate heir. When you look yet more closely you will find that this question of family origin relates to questions of spiritual origin and the values, beliefs, and practices that stem from that.

This idea of origin is emphasized for several reasons. In comparative religion, you might want to know where religion begins in people's lives, how it functions in their lives, and how it is maintained or forgotten. Origin is emphasized at this point as well because the Western Abrahamic religions share the belief that there is only one god. They are grouped together and referred to as the monotheistic traditions.



TERM TO KNOW

Abrahamic Religion

Any of the religions that claim Abraham as an ancestor, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

2. Indian Religions

If you look at the second category of religions, the **Indian religions**, you notice that they don't adhere to a single supernatural deity. Indian religions may be polytheistic, henotheistic, or non-theistic depending on the religion.

Two Indian religions that share a common geographic origin are Hinduism and Buddhism. While there is a lot of overlapping of ideology, belief, and practice, there are also many differences.

One point of commonality is that they share a linguistic origin. Most of the Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts were written in Sanskrit and Pali, closely related in the family of Indo-European languages. However, they diverge in terms of geography, such as where they migrated to and flourished at certain points in history. If you study this movement in more detail, you will find many interesting points of difference in terms of practice, ritual, custom, and belief.



TERM TO KNOW

Indian Religion

Any religion originating on the Indian subcontinent.

3. Taoic Religions

The third category of religions is the **Taoic religions**. These are the religions of East Asia and include Taoism, Shintoism, and Confucianism.

What these religions share is a belief in the eternal flow and balance of the universe: the Tao. Living in sync with this universal harmonizing energy is the goal. Followers of these religions seek to see and live in the reflection of this ordering, balancing force.

Again, as with the other two main groups of religion, there are particular differences as well. In the Taoic religions, these variations can mostly be observed in terms of emphasis and priority given to certain principles and practices.



TERM TO KNOW

4. Origin of Religion

After tracing all that historically, sociologically, anthropologically, et cetera, you might just find yourself back with the question: where does religion begin in a life, in a culture, and in a people?

The question of origin that seems to pose such a problem from within the religions themselves in many cases is something to keep in mind when studying and comparing religions.



THINK ABOUT IT

How possible is it to step outside of one's tradition when considering that of another?



This is a question about the movement of stepping to the side and bracketing the commitments of one's own tradition to better experience the material that is being studied. This approach is known as the phenomenological approach.

You can use the phenomenological approach to look at the origin. It emphasizes and gives value to the variety of experiences within the field of religion on an individual, collective, and global level. Investigating the types and forms of experience allows the phenomenologist to bracket unanswerable questions, such as questions about origin, and look at the ways the experience of origin itself is approached. This approach is very helpful in **comparative religion**.



TERM TO KNOW

Comparative Religion

A discipline that takes as its subject the scholarly examination and comparison of the beliefs, rituals, customs, and traditions of all active religions.



SUMMARY

Comparative religion is an academic discipline that studies the beliefs, rituals, customs, and traditions of all active religions. The world's religions can be organized into three major groups: Abrahamic, Indian, and Taoic. The three **Abrahamic** traditions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The main **Indian** religions talked about were Hinduism and Buddhism. The **Taoic** religions referred to were Taoism, Shinto, and Confucianism. There are differences and commonalities within and between religions. You also looked at the question of the **origin of religion** for people and how best to approach the study of religion. A phenomenological approach to religion could be useful in studying and comparing religion.

because it offers experience as a benchmark or common framework to explore the process and purpose of religion in people's lives.

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



TERMS TO KNOW

Abrahamic Religion

Any of the religions that claim Abraham as an ancestor, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Comparative Religion

A discipline that takes as its subject the scholarly examination and comparison of the beliefs, rituals, customs, and traditions of all active religions.

Indian Religion

Any religion originating on the Indian subcontinent.

Taoic Religion

Any religion originating in east Asia.