Definition: religion from The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology

Basically, a system of beliefs with either an institutionalized or a traditionally defined pattern of ceremony. Religion is regarded by many as a cultural universal which emerges invariably as an outcome of the need to understand the human condition. Most, although not all, religions share certain characteristics, notably the concept of a (or several) supreme being(s), the promise of a pathway to an ideal existence and an afterlife.

Summary Article: Religion
From Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained

So far as archaeologists and anthropologists can tell, for as long as there have been humans there has been religion – at least in the sense that some of the earliest burials found show evidence of ritual associated with the dead continuing in another life. As to exactly how or why religion originated, and how it developed in pre-history, we can only make educated guesses.

Religion is surprisingly difficult to define. Socio-anthropological definitions tend to be either substantive (what religion is) or functional (what religion does). Both are useful, but both have problems. Substantive definitions are often too exclusive; any definition that includes 'God', for example, will miss out most forms of Buddhism. Functional definitions suffer from the opposite problem: they are often too inclusive. By some functional definitions, Marxism would be a religion. If the definition is broadened enough to include, for example, new age beliefs and practices, it can also be argued that football crowds, rock concerts and science-fiction fandom have characteristics of religion.

For general purposes, a working definition of religion could be: ‘A social construct encompassing beliefs and practices which enable people, individually and collectively, to make some sense of the Great Questions of life and death.’ This leaves open what the Great Questions are – they might include, among others: Is there any purpose to life? Do we continue to exist in any way after death? Is there a Higher Being, and if so, how should I relate to him, her or it?

émile Durkheim suggested that the main purpose of religion was to be the glue that held society together. Karl Marx, coming from a different direction, described religion as ‘the opiate of the people’. Nineteenth-century anthropologists believed that religion evolved from magic, and was itself being out-evolved by science, a theory which time has discredited. Indeed, with the late 20th-century rise of New Age movements and neopaganism in its many forms, magic has seen a resurgence in our high-tech age.

One of the main preoccupations of sociologists of religion in the second half of the 20th century was ‘secularization’, ie the decreasing influence of religion on society in Europe (the USA didn't follow the same trend). However, while mainstream Christian denominations (again in Europe) were having to close church buildings, more and more people seemed to flock to new religious movements (see cults, new religious movements and alternative religions). Perhaps, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, religion has become not so much secularized as individualized; certainly in the Western world, people now feel free to pick and choose what to believe from the wares laid out before them, instead of being constrained to accept what they are told by authority figures. Beliefs are no longer set in stone.
Despite all this there are countless millions who still follow the major world religions.

The term ‘animism’, basically meaning ‘belief in the spirits of nature or the physical environment’, is loosely and incorrectly applied to the religious beliefs of many tribal cultures. The 19th-century anthropologist Edward B Tylor’s theory that animism was the earliest form of religion is no longer generally accepted.

Pantheism is the belief that God is present in all of the world – indeed, the entire universe. The world-affirming or cosmic version equates the world with God; the world-denying or a-cosmic version denies the ultimate reality of the world – the divine is real, but our sense experience is illusory. Pantheism underlies Hinduism and some schools of Buddhism.

Polytheism is the belief in many gods. Historically the great pantheons of the Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Norse mythologies (among others) each have families of gods who are effectively men and women writ large. They are superheroes with all the virtues and flaws of real people: they love, they hate, they get jealous, they fight and they trick each other. In one way or another they intervene in the world of mankind, both helping out and involving humans in their squabbles. The gods could be good exemplars to follow, but their fickle nature made them useful ‘fall guys’ to be blamed when things went wrong.

The largest polytheistic religion today, with around 800 million adherents, is Hinduism – though strictly speaking, Hinduism is a group of inter-related religions from ‘the land beyond the Indus river’ (ie India). It is also arguable whether it is actually polytheistic, because some schools of Hinduism believe that there is one God, Brahma, above and beyond all the others, who are effectively attributes of the godhead rather than actually being gods themselves. But, at the level of grassroots believers, there are three main gods: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Sustainer (often better known through his avatar Krishna) and Shiva the Destroyer. However, because what we know as Hinduism incorporates all the local gods of small communities throughout the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in Asia, it has been calculated that there is a total of some 33 million gods. Perhaps Hinduism’s most distinctive characteristic, in contrast with the monotheistic religions of the Middle East, is its inclusivity.

Above all Hinduism emphasizes the right way of living (dharma), rather than any specific set of doctrines. Under one broad, tolerant umbrella are numerous very different schools: some, such as Advaita Vedanta, which teaches the essential oneness of God and man, are deeply philosophical; others are very down to earth. Most teach some form of reincarnation, with the quality of the next life determined by one’s karma, the consequences of one’s actions in this life. The ultimate aim is moksha, to step off the circle of repeated incarnations (samsara). Hinduism has a wealth of scriptures, including the Vedas which go back to 1200–500 bc, and the great mythological epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which includes the Bhagavad Gita, the famous discourse between Krishna and Arjuna.

The other great Eastern religious tradition is Buddhism, dating back to the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, c.500 bc. As in Hinduism, the ultimate aim is to step off the cycle of reincarnations, and so to achieve nirvana or nibbana; this is often described as blissful nothingness in union with God, but as most versions of Buddhism don’t acknowledge the existence of gods, this is not correct. The root verb of nibbana means to cool something by blowing on it, and nirvana is the cooling of all passions such as hate, greed and delusion, and being set free into a state of tranquillity, purity and non-attachment. Buddhism teaches the Four Noble Truths: life is full of suffering; at the heart of suffering lies craving; we can avoid suffering by losing craving through achieving nirvana; we can achieve this by following the
Eightfold Path. This path involves: right knowledge or understanding, right thought or intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right composure or concentration.

The two main strands of Buddhism are Theravada, found mainly in Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and Mahayana, found mainly in China, Japan and Korea. Each of these contains many different traditions; for example, the Tibetan Buddhism of the Dalai Lama stems from Mahayana Buddhism. There are 300–400 million Buddhists in the world.

Monotheism is the belief that there is only one god. Deism and theism are also both beliefs in One Creator God; the main difference, briefly, is that in deism God does not get actively involved in the world, and in theism he does. Deism generally accepts natural theology as opposed to revealed religion, in which God makes himself known through revelations and miracles. Theism, in contrast, asserts a personal God who intervenes in his creation; thus it is the basis of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Many Christians today assume that Christianity emerged fully fledged almost immediately after the death of Jesus, and that the religion it grew out of, Judaism, was also fully developed from the beginning. Neither is true. Biblical scholars have long rejected the concept of ‘revealed religion’ in the face of the clear historical and theological development of the Religions of the Book.

Judaism, the religion of a small Middle-Eastern tribe, absorbed influences from surrounding tribes with whom the Israelites fought or traded or, often controversially, intermarried. From the time of Abraham, and then Moses’ encounter with the burning bush, it is clear that one of the major early influences on Judaism, and thus later on Christianity and Islam, was Zoroastrianism. This was arguably the first monotheistic religion, with the concept also of a powerful opponent to God (Angra Mainyu or Ohriman, satan, the devil); Zoroastrianism also had a major influence on Jewish, Christian and Muslim beliefs about good and evil and about the afterlife, including resurrection, heaven and hell. Most scholars today accept that when Israel was in captivity in Babylon in the 6th century bc it took on many Sumerian beliefs and myths, including the Creation and Flood stories.

By the time of Jesus the main factions within Judaism were the Pharisees and the Sadducees, with the Essenes and Zealots providing the spiritual and political radical edge. Today’s Judaism, with around 15 million members, developed mainly from the rabbinical Pharisees.

Many scholars believe that Jesus was seen as, and probably saw himself as, a messianic figure within the context of his time and place (see millennium), but by half a century after his death the Jewish concept of the messiah had developed into the Christian concept of the Christ. The new religion of Christianity was universal (catholic); it taught salvation through faith in Jesus’s atoning death on the cross, a sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. It also taught the complex doctrine of the Trinity, that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are equal with the Father: three distinct persons within one godhead (see heretical sects). The teaching that Jesus is God is fundamental to orthodox Christian belief, but is anathema to Jews and Muslims, who are united in one thing: their belief that God is One, not three-in-one.

The crucial factor in the success of Christianity was its adoption by Emperor Constantine, leading to its spread throughout the Roman Empire. Over a thousand years Europe was entirely Christianized, followed by the New World, north and south, and the British Empire. Christianity is now the largest world religion, with around 2,000 million adherents, half of those Roman Catholic; there are roughly 300

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million Orthodox, and the remainder are made up of Anglican/Episcopalian, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals and other varieties of Protestantism.

Islam developed from the same roots as Judaism and Christianity; indeed, the Koran devotes much time to Adam, Abraham, Moses, and even Jesus. They were all prophets of the one God, but Muhammad (c.570–c.632) was the greatest prophet with the final revelation from God. The teachings he was given by the angel Gabriel were written down in what became the Koran. Very early on Islam split into two major divisions, Sunni (roughly four-fifths of the total) and Shiite (one-fifth), and there are numerous sects within both. There are around 1,000 million Muslims worldwide, including around 1.5 million in the UK and perhaps 5 million in North America.

The essence of Islam, which in Arabic means ‘submission’ or ‘surrender’ to the will of God, is: ‘There is no God but God (Allah), and Muhammad is his prophet.’ Islam is not just a religion but an entire structure of living, of behaviour, of morality. The Five Pillars of Islam, essential religious duties, are the profession of faith; formal prayer five times a day facing Mecca; alms-giving; fasting during the month of Ramadan; and the hajj, pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in every Muslim’s lifetime, if possible.

Three religions in one way or another connected with Islam are sufism, Sikhism and the Bahai Faith. Sufism is actually the mystical side of Islam rather than a separate religion, though in the West it is often seen as a universal religion, especially in its influences on some New Age and esoteric movements. Sufism focuses on the individual’s personal loving relationship with God through poetry, music and dance; the famous whirling dervishes belong to the Mevlevis, a Sufi order (or tariqa, meaning ‘way’) founded by the poet Rumi in the 13th century.

Sikhism originated in the Punjab, on the borders of what are now India and Pakistan, so inevitably absorbed elements of both Islam (particularly Sufism) and Hinduism (particularly Bhakti Hinduism – devotion to God rather than to ritual – and Advaita), though its founder Guru Nanak (1469–1539) wrote: ‘There is neither Hindu nor Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God’s path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim and the path which I follow is God’s.’ Guru Nanak taught meditation, devotion and worship of the one God; the word sikh means ‘student’ or disciple’.

Sikhs have a strong veneration for their ten gurus, and most especially for their sacred text the Guru Granth Sahib (Granth means ‘the Book’) which is regarded as the immortal guru. Guru Nanak came from the Sant spiritual tradition of northern India and, as well as his hymns, those of other Sant leaders are included in the Granth (see sant mat tradition). Most Sikhs are still of Punjabi descent; there are around 20–25 million Sikhs worldwide.

The Bahai Faith regards itself as the next world religion in order after Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Like them it is monotheistic. It was founded by Bahaullah (1817–92), and developed from the teachings of the Báb (1819–50), a religious teacher in Iran who claimed to be either the long-awaited return of the twelfth imam of ‘Twelver’ Shi’a Islam, or the gateway (báb) to the twelfth imam; before he was executed for blasphemy he spoke of a successor, ‘He whom God would make manifest’; this was Bahaullah (‘the glory of God’).

Bahais have a huge number of authoritative texts written by the Báb, Bahaullah and his successors as leaders of the Bahai Faith; they also include the Bible and the Koran. There have been at least 14 Manifestations of God, people who received divine revelation and guidance; these include Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Krishna – and the Báb and Bahaullah. They believe in

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One God who is unknowable except through his attributes, such as love, mercy, justice, patience, etc. They teach the unity of God, the unity of religion and the unity of humankind. The Bahai Faith has no priests; all people, men and women, are equal before God. The movement lays great emphasis on the education of women, especially in societies where this is found wanting. Bahais express their faith practically through working to improve the community around them at all levels from their immediate environment to the United Nations, where the religion is a non-governmental organization. The Bahai Faith has expanded rapidly in the last few decades, now having perhaps seven million members.

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