

Western Religions

Religion? What do you mean?

Religion: A personal or institutional set or system of beliefs and practices that is rooted in a view of human life in the physical world and its relationship with the spiritual realm or denial thereof. The major world religions, and most minor religions, have a definition of the spiritual realm that affirms its existence and defines a relationship of humans to that realm. Agnosticism is a set of beliefs that denies either the present knowledge or ability to know about the spiritual realm. Atheism is also a system of beliefs, but which by faith emphatically denies the existence of the spiritual realm or at least the existence of God.

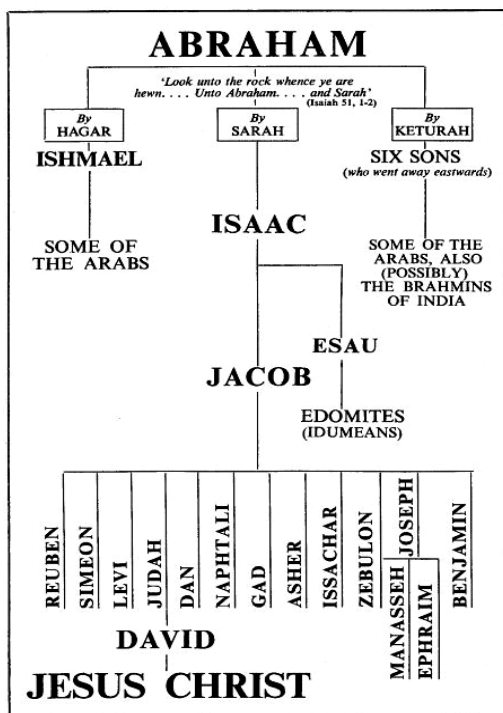
Western & eastern religions: a basic difference

While we could detail a great many differences between eastern & western religions, one helpful approach is to see that western religions tend to view God as transcendent from His creation, revealing and involving Himself by personal and deliberate intent. Time is viewed as primarily progressive and linear. Eastern religions on the other hand, view God as fundamentally intermingled with and immanent with the physical realm, and any transcendence from the physical realm is secondary and ultimately temporary. Time is viewed as primarily circular.

Old time religion?

In earlier centuries, it was the custom and frequently the law, that the religion of the political leader was also the religion of the people. Often this set of beliefs and practices included viewing the political leader as a deity among deities. It has only been in recent centuries of world history that the political leadership of many modern nations has stood

at a distance from religion, allowing personal choice of belief, with minimal personal consequence. But when we speak of religions, we must acknowledge that for many, their religious point of view is a cultural aspect of life that holds varying degrees of importance, rather than a deeply held belief and a consequent practice consistent with that belief.



Father Abraham had many sons

Interestingly, the three major western religions claim to have some root in Abraham, first introduced in the Bible (Jewish: TaNaCH) in Genesis 12 as Abram. Even today, Christian believers have a claim to relationship with Abraham by faith, as explained by Paul:

Galatians 3:7 (NASU)

Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.

Side by Side

We can compare and contrast the three major world religions in various aspects, some of which are show in the chart below:

	<u>Christianity</u>	<u>Judaism</u>	<u>Islam</u>
Founded	1 st century AD	15 th century BC	7 th century AD
Founder	Jesus Christ	Moses	Muhammad
Saved by	faith (many: also by works)	works	works
Heaven	one (+crowns & rewards)	three (vague)	seven
Purgatory	no, except Roman Catholic	no	yes (Barzakh)
Man's nature	sinful	good & bad	good
Double Predestination	no (except some Calvinists)	no, except Essenes	yes
Messiah to come	Yes, 2 nd coming (some exceptions & variations)	Orthodox (yes, 1 st time)	Isa to come again, bow to Muhammed, then die for the first time
Scriptures	66 Books of the Old & New Testament (plus the Apocrypha among some)	Tanach, primarily Torah + written traditions	Koran + Hadith

Then there's the math: dividing & addition

Within each of the three major religions, there are, of course, a number of divisions of doctrine, organization, etc. These, if one will allow for the certain errors of simplification, can be summarized as follows:

<u>Christianity</u>	<u>Judaism</u>	<u>Islam</u>
Orthodox	Orthodox	Sunni
Roman Catholic	Conservative	Shiite
Protestant	Reformed	

Each of these divisions, to be certain, has many subdivisions within each group listed. In the middle centuries of Christianity, these divisions involved violent clashes among the groups and subgroups within Christianity, but rarely today. In Islam, violent clashes between groups, originating in Muhammad's extended family, continue to this day.

Beyond the three primary western world religions, western cultures have a great number of other religions, the geographical distribution of which is quite complex. Some of these are listed below, and have their own subgroups and varying degrees of interconnection within those subgroups:

- Zoroastrianism
- Neo-Paganism, earth religions, including Wicca
- Animism, Voodoo (aka Vodun, Sevi Lwa), Santeria & tribal religions
- Rastafarianism
- Atheism & Humanism
- Scientology
- Satanism
- Egyptian religion (Isis, Ra, et al)

What do we say to these people?

There may be some value in knowing about the beliefs of the person you are speaking with, and we see that the authors of the New Testament did write with a knowledge of other religions (1 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 John 4:1-6, Revelation 2-3, et al). But what is ultimately most important is that these people be presented with God's special revelations, each testifying of the other:

- Jesus Christ: God's living Word
- The Bible: God's written word

Acts 4:12 (NASU)

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1 Corinthians 2:1-2 (NASU)

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (NASU)

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved... 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures... 11 ...so we preach and so you believed.

1 Timothy 2:3-7 (NASU)

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. 7 For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Top Twenty Religions in the United States, 2001

Religion	1990 Est. Adult Pop.	2001 Est. Adult Pop.	% of U.S. Pop., 2000	% Change 1990 - 2000
Christianity	151,225,000	159,030,000	76.5%	+5%
Nonreligious/Secular	13,116,000	27,539,000	13.2%	+110%
Judaism	3,137,000	2,831,000	1.3%	-10%
Islam	527,000	1,104,000	0.5%	+109%
Buddhism	401,000	1,082,000	0.5%	+170%
Agnostic	1,186,000	991,000	0.5%	-16%
Atheist		902,000	0.4%	
Hinduism	227,000	766,000	0.4%	+237%
Unitarian Universalist	502,000	629,000	0.3%	+25%
Wiccan/Pagan/Druid		307,000	0.1%	
Spiritualist		116,000		
Native American Religion	47,000	103,000		+119%
Baha'i	28,000	84,000		+200%
New Age	20,000	68,000		+240%
Sikhism	13,000	57,000		+338%
Scientology	45,000	55,000		+22%
Humanist	29,000	49,000		+69%
Deity (Deist)	6,000	49,000		+717%
Taoist	23,000	40,000		+74%
Eckankar	18,000	26,000		+44%

- From: http://www.sullivan-county.com/identity/deism_grows.htm, drawing from NSRI, ARIS studies and surveys for the United States.
- See also updated data and insights into the data found at: http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_prac2.htm.
- References are given above, believed to be from fairly objective sources, but should not be understood as agreement with the views expressed on either of those websites. Some of the above-listed religions are not western religions, but distinctly eastern religions or adaptations of eastern religions for the culture of the United States.