

WORLD RELIGIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Demographic data about people and their belief systems from across the world can be difficult to compare because:

- Some governments do not collect data about the religious beliefs and affiliations of their citizens.
- Individuals may identify as an adherent of more than one belief system (e.g., Buddhist and Atheist), or as a member of more than one recognized religion (e.g., some Jains identify as Hindus).
- Surveys and studies often group data on belief systems in different ways (e.g., African folk religions are not included in all studies across the globe).

The demographic data on belief systems presented here represent vetted estimates, gathered from a variety of established sources on the topic of religious diversity in the U.S. and across the globe. The range of adherents is noted where appropriate. The belief systems are listed by number of world adherents. Much of the United States data is drawn from the Pew Research Center's 2015 survey of the American religious landscape, and comparable US and world data is drawn from the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA). The Pew Research Center's data have a margin of error of +/- .6%.ⁱ

PRACTICES AND IDENTIFICATION

There are a range of ways to categorize religious beliefs and practices, and a range of ways people identify their own beliefs. Thus, believers/adherents (and non-believers/non-adherents) may self-identify or be described by others in a number of ways including: non-practicing, secular, modern, reformist, moderate, observant, conservative, orthodox and fundamentalist and/or extremist.

RELIGIONS AND BELIEF SYSTEMSⁱⁱ

CHRISTIANITY

World: Approximately 2 billion adherents (31.5% - 32.8% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 173 million – 240 million adherents (70.6% of the U.S. population)

Christianity is one of three monotheistic, Abrahamic religions. Abrahamic religions trace their origin to Abraham, who is a figure in the Old Testament, New Testament and the Qur'an. Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as they appear in the New Testament of the Holy Bible. For Christians, Jesus is the Son of God and Messiah as prophesized in the Hebrew scriptures and the savior of humanity. Jesus is considered both fully human and fully divine. Christianity also teaches that Jesus' death and resurrection paved the way for humans to overcome sin and be reconciled with God. The way Jesus lived his life serves as a model for Christians; together with scripture, especially the New Testament and the Ten Commandments, his life serves as the basis for Christian

morality. The cross is a symbol of the death of Jesus, and how he overcame death and sin. Christianity initially emerged during the first century C.E as a sect of Judaism. In the centuries that followed, diverse interpretations and practices developed so that, today, there are many different groups that follow the teachings of Jesus and fall under the umbrella of Christianity. Major branches in Christianity are Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox and Protestantism. Christianity is currently the largest and most practiced religion in the world.

ISLAM

World: Approximately 1 – 1.6 billion adherents (22.5% - 23.2% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 2.35 million – 7 million adherents (0.9% – 13% of the U.S. population)

Islam is one of three monotheistic Abrahamic religions. Abrahamic religions trace their origin to Abraham, who is a figure in the Old Testament, New Testament and the Qur'an. There is great diversity within Islam. It is the second-largest religion in the world today, and its followers are known as Muslims. The word Muslim means "one who submits to God," and Islam means "submission," or complete surrender to (*Allah* in Arabic). The holy text of Islam is the Qur'an, which Muslims believe was revealed to Muhammad from circa 610-632 C.E. as the direct word of God. Muhammad is considered the final messenger and Prophet of God (others include Moses, Elijah and Jesus). The Five Pillars of Islam comprise the faith's most fundamental beliefs and practices: belief in the Oneness of God and belief that Muhammad is His last messenger; ritual prayer five times a day; concern for, and almsgiving to, the needy; self-purification through fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca (the *hajj*) in one's lifetime by those who are able. Many Muslims keep a *halal* diet and pray five times a day facing the direction of Mecca. Mecca is in Saudi Arabia, and it is believed that Muhammad designated it as the holy city of Islam.

HINDUISM

World: Approximately 1 billion adherents (15% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 1.4 million adherents (0.7% of the U.S. population)

Hinduism, generally considered the world's oldest organized religion, is the third largest religion in the world. Many forms of Hinduism recognize a single major deity, Brahman, and see a variety of gods and goddesses as expressions of a Supreme God that can all be worshipped in many different ways. Therefore, Hinduism is considered by some to be monotheistic, and by others to be polytheistic. Unlike many religions, Hinduism does not attribute its foundations to a single individual or text, but rather acknowledges a variety of influences, possibly dating as far back as prehistoric times in the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism also does not have a single theology, or central religious organization or declaration of faith. It teaches that no particular religion has exclusive rights to salvation; rather, it views all genuine religious paths as facets of God. Hinduism is largely driven by a vast and rich scriptural body, which has been developed throughout its history. Of these texts, the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Tantras hold the most authority for most Hindus. Central ideas in Hinduism include Dharma (ethics and duties), Karma (law of cause and effect), Samsara (the ongoing reincarnation cycle of life, death and rebirth) and Moksha (the release from Samsara). In some practices of Hinduism, worship is very important, ranging from daily prayer rituals to ceremonial worship or puja. In addition, many Hindus maintain vegetarian diets, often derived from one of its core principles, *ahimsa*, the principle of nonviolence.

ATHEISM/AGNOSTICISM/NON-RELIGIOUSNESS/SECULARISM

World: Approximately 1 billion adherents/non-adherents (16.3% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 34 million – 49 million adherents/non-adherents (22.8% of the U.S. population)

Each belief system and non-belief system in this category is distinct from each other. Members of these groups are unified in their lack of attachment to any religious practice, belief or culture, and their lack of relationship to a higher power or scripture. Many people cross-identify within these groups, and as such, demographic research does not usually differentiate between these different groups of respondents. Often, agnostics end up being classified in the same category as atheists and/or other non-religious people.

How these groups are distinct:

Atheism is the absence of belief in any God, gods or spiritual beings. Atheists don't use God to explain the existence of the universe; they believe that humans can – and do – establish moral codes to live by without the aid of gods or scriptures. Many atheists are also secularists, and are not supportive of any preferential treatment given by the state to those adhering to an organized religion. However, it is possible to be both atheist and an adherent of a religious tradition. Many Buddhists identify as such, as do some adherents of other traditions like Humanistic Judaism and Non-Realism or Christian Atheism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Agnosticism is the view that the existence or non-existence of God or any deity, and other religious and metaphysical claims, are unknown and/or unknowable. Further, agnostics are generally committed to the idea of “not knowing.”

Non-Religiousness is the lack of religious principles or practices, and being uninvolved with religious matters. The worldviews and values of the non-religious are generally derived from epistemological systems with no religious affiliation.

Secular Humanism is a philosophy that blends the beliefs of atheists and rationalists with the history of religious humanism. Humanists believe that humanity is capable of morality and self-fulfillment based on a code of ethics, rather than a theistic morality.

FOLK RELIGIONS

World: Approximately 600 million+ adherents (5.9% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 630,000 adherents (.2 % of the U.S. population)

Folk religion is an umbrella term for local, indigenous practices that are tied to local lifestyles. This category is defined in different ways by different theorists but often includes:

- African traditional religions, which cover the various religious practices in Africa before the arrival of Islam and Christianity.
- Many varieties of religions developed by Africans in the Americas that are derived from African beliefs but include elements of Christianity, including Yoruba, Santería, Candomblé, Vodoun, and Oyotunji.
- Folk religions of the Americas such as the Aztec religion, Inca religion, Maya religion, and modern Catholic beliefs such as devotion of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico.
- Native American traditions that are practiced across the continent of North America.
- Folk associations with more organized religions.

A characteristic of some of these folk religions is religious syncretism, which is the blending or incorporation of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, as with the melding of African Folk Religion and Christianity.

Demographics on Folk Religions are difficult to find and verify due to varied definitions and interpretations of what is, and is not, a folk religion.

BUDDHISM

World: Approximately 400 million adherents (7.1-7.2% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 2 million adherents (0.7% -1,3% of the U.S. population)

Buddhism is a Dharmic (referring to duty, or the opportunity to act virtuously), non-theistic religion that follows the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha or the “Awakened One.” Buddhism originated in the Indian subcontinent about 2,600 years ago and spread into Asia and Eastern Europe after the death of the Buddha.

There are many branches of Buddhism, including Mahayana Buddhism, Southern or Theravada Buddhism, Eastern or Chinese Buddhism and Northern or Tibetan Buddhism. The main Buddhist texts, interpreted differently by followers of different branches, are the Pāli Canon (which includes rules for discipline, discourses and philosophy), the Mahayana Sutras (the original teachings of the Buddha), and the Dhammapada (the Buddha’s direct scriptures). Some of the guiding doctrines of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths. These Truths are: all living beings (people, animals) suffer; the cause of suffering is selfish desire; one can stop the suffering; and the way to stop the suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path (the guidelines stated by the Buddha for leading a righteous life). Another guiding principle in Buddhism is called the Middle Way, which suggests that life is to be lived in moderation without extremes, avoiding harm to others while cultivating good will toward all. Many Buddhists are vegetarians and believe in reincarnation.

CHINESE TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

World: Approximately 400 million adherents (6% of the world population)

U.S.: No reliable data

Chinese Traditional Religions encompass a diverse and complex collection of many religious and philosophical traditions, including Chinese Folk Religion, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, which have been in existence for much of China’s history. For many religious Chinese, these traditions combine to form a composite religious culture and worldview.^{iv}

Chinese Folk Religion refers to the local, tribal religious beliefs and practices that have existed in China for thousands of years. They vary widely among followers and may include beliefs in mythical figures and various gods and goddesses and ancestor veneration and communication with celestial bodies and animals, in addition to a wide range of other beliefs.

Taoism took shape as a distinct tradition around 550 B.C.E. It is believed to have been founded by Lao Zi, who authored the Tao-te-Ching, a central text for Taoist thought. The “Tao” is generally translated into “the path” or “the way,” and refers to a particular rightful way of living one’s life. In Taoism, several concepts are often emphasized. These include *wu wei* (“without action,” a term that signifies knowing when to act and when not to act, in accordance with natural forces) and opposition, the idea that everything is composed of opposing forces (e.g., hot and cold, high and low, yin and yang), which must be balanced. Through the ages, Taoism has involved god and ancestor worship as well as alchemy and medicine-making. Ultimately, however, the goal of the Taoist believer is to harmonize the self with the Tao, or “path.”

Confucianism was also founded in approximately 550 B.C.E., by Chinese philosopher Kong Qiu (Confucius) but did not become an established tradition until the second and first centuries B.C.E. Confucius believed the “ultimate reality” was beyond human comprehension. Therefore, Confucianism has no deities or teachings about the afterlife and instead urges individuals to concentrate on doing the right thing in this life. It emphasizes learning from the past, humanness, filial piety (respect for parents and ancestors), honesty, reciprocity, righteousness and loyalty, among other virtues. Confucius believed in the sacredness of daily rituals (the routines of everyday life) as a way to unite people and strengthen the community, and therefore shaping rituals is central to the Confucian system.^v

Buddhism is also practiced widely in China (see section on Buddhism for more information).

SHINTO

World: Approximately 3 million adherents (.06% – 1.5% of the world population)

U.S.: No reliable data

Shinto is the ancient, native religion of Japan, and often considered a type of animism (the belief that many beings, living or non-living, have souls) or shamanic tradition. Shinto obtained its name from the combination of Chinese words *shin* and *tao*, meaning “the Way of the Gods.” There are several types of Shinto, including Shrine, Sect, Folk and State Shinto, which focus on different aspects of the tradition. Shinto followers worship *kami*, who are localized gods or spiritual beings that reside in particular places, natural processes, or objects such as the sun, lakes, or shrines. Shinto does not have a specific set of prayers, holy buildings or holy people/*kami* that takes precedence over any other. Many Shinto venerate Ameratsu, the sun *kami*, and there are certain texts that while not sacred, have a type of “privileged” status. Many Japanese people don't think of Shinto specifically as a religion, but more as an aspect of Japanese life. At the end of World War II, Japanese leaders declared that Shinto was no longer the state religion of Japan, but many people still practice its rites and rituals. Conversely, since Shinto was once the state religion, many Japanese citizens are counted as Shinto though they do not practice. In addition, Shinto is often practiced alongside other religions like Buddhism or Confucianism, making the number of its followers difficult to estimate.

SIKHISM

World: Approximately 25 million adherents (.3% - 0.4% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 500,000 adherents (0.2% of the U.S. population)

Sikhism originated in Northern India in the 15th century. The teachings of Guru Nanak (the religion's founder) and of nine other gurus (enlightened leaders), as well as its holy text, the Guru Granth Sahib, are central to the tradition. The word “Sikh” originates from a Sanskrit root, which translates into “disciple” or “learning.” Thus, Sikhs focus on attaining salvation through the continual learning of God by way of personal meditation and rightful living. Sikhism has five central messages: there is one God (who is the same for all religions); life should focus on the dedication and remembrance of God at all times; Sikhs should be generous to the less fortunate and serve others; the human race is equal regardless of gender or race; and the seeking of truthful living that renounces worldly temptations and sins. Some Sikhs may choose to make a unique form of commitment called Amrit, which includes observing special rules, such as wearing the five articles of faith. Also known as the five K's, these are: (1) *Kesh* (hair): Leave hair uncut; (2) *Khanga* (comb): Keep a comb in the hair, representing cleanliness; (3) *Kirpan* (sword,): Wear a steel sword, a constant reminder of the duty to seek justice and fight oppression; (4) *Kara* (iron bracelet): Wear a bracelet that acts like a wedding ring, indicating the bond between God and the wearer; and (5) *Kachera* (long underpants): Wear a specific undergarment signifying self-discipline. Many Sikh men and women wear a turban to cover their long hair. Sikh temples are called *gurdwaras*.

JUDAISM

World: Approximately 15 million adherents (0.2% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 5 million adherents (1.7 - 1.9% of the U.S. population)

Judaism is the earliest of the three monotheistic, Abrahamic religions. Abrahamic religions trace their origin to Abraham, who is a figure in the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*), New Testament and the Qur'an. Tradition teaches that the origins of Judaism are found in the covenant (divine agreement) between Abraham and God, dated to 2,000 B.C.E.

There is a wide spectrum of observance among contemporary Jews, generally described as Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist. Judaism also has a rich history that is central to its traditions and heritage. Jews believe that there is one omnipotent, omniscient creator God and, according to tradition, God made a covenant of commandments and laws with the Jewish people. These laws are recorded in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) as given to Moses) and interpreted by the Talmud and Mishnah. Biblical writings and later rabbinic traditions are both central sources of authority in Judaism. Many Jews place an emphasis on the Jewish religion as a way of life and community. Core values include *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world), *Tzedakah* (charity), peace, family, community, justice, and living life in a holy manner. A Jewish temple is called a synagogue. Many Jews also keep a kosher diet.

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

World: Approximately 5 – 7 million adherents (0.09% – 0.1% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 170,000 adherents (.2% of the U.S. population)

The Bahá'í Faith was founded in 19th-century Persia after Siyyid 'Alí Mohammad, proclaimed himself the Báb, or “the Gate,” a messiah-like figure of Shi'a Islam. The Báb said there would soon be another in the line of prophets that included Moses, Muhammad and Jesus, and this prophet was Bahá'u'lláh, who is considered the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.^{vi} Bahá'ís believe that there is one creator deity that has had many prophets through the ages as exemplified through different world religions. Furthermore, Bahá'ís consider the spiritual truth of all religions to be the same. The Bahá'í Faith is dedicated to the idea that every living creature must be treated with love, kindness and compassion. As such, its purpose is to bring about the oneness of humanity. Some of the practices and principles include: daily prayer and communion with God, a life dedicated to the service of humanity, fellowship with the followers of all religions, equality of women and men and the abolition of extremes of poverty and wealth. The nine-pointed star is the Bahá'í Faith's symbol and represents spiritual completion. While the beginnings of the Bahá'í Faith have a background in Shi'a Islam, its followers view the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion. The analogy of Christianity forming as an independent religion out of Judaism is often used to show this. Historically, however, there has been some religious tension and persecution by some Muslims who do not recognize the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion, but rather as apostasy from Islam.

JAINISM

World: Approximately 5 – 10 million adherents (0.07% – 0.1% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 100,000 adherents (0.03% of the U.S. population)

Jainism is a religion based primarily in India, and adherents refer to it as an eternal belief system, without beginning or end. However, its organized practice dates to somewhere between the 9th and 6th centuries BCE. Jains believe that animals and plants, as well as human beings, contain living souls. Each of these souls is considered of equal value and to be treated with respect and compassion. In accordance with this belief, Jains are strict vegetarians and live lives that minimize the use of the world's resources. Jainism teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to live a life of harmlessness and renunciation. Like Hindus, Jains believe in reincarnation and seek to attain ultimate liberation, which means escaping the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth so that the immortal soul lives forever in a state of bliss. There are no gods or spiritual beings that will help human beings, and Jains rely on themselves to live a principled life. Jains take five great vows, or *mahavratas*, which are non-violence, non-attachment to possessions, not lying, not stealing and sexual restraint.^{vii}

DRUZE

World: Approximately 500,000 – 2 million adherents (<0.01% – 0.03% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 20,000 adherents (<0.01% of the U.S. population)

The Druze are a small, monotheistic religious group concentrated primarily in the Eastern Mediterranean, and they refer to themselves as *Ahl al-Tawhid* or *Al-muwahhidun*, meaning "The People of Monotheism." The Druze believe in one transcendent God that is present in the whole of existence, as opposed to being above existence. The Druze faith emerged out of Ismâ'îlism (a branch of Shi'a Islam) in the 10th and 11th centuries. Though it is based in Islam, the Druze faith incorporates beliefs from other philosophies and monotheistic religions. Their own religious texts are collectively known as *Kitab Al Hikma* (The Book of Wisdom). Druze adherents abide by seven commandments: a truthful tongue; cultivation and protection of the brethren; excision of fallacies and falsehoods; rejection of the villain and aggressor; adoration of the Lord in every era and at all times; cheerful acceptance of whatever comes from Him; and spontaneous submission to His Will. The Druze do not follow the Five Pillars of Islam, and are therefore not considered part of Islam by many Muslims. When they began facing persecution in the 11th century (which continues to this day), they took up *taqiyya*, a practice where they "conceal their true beliefs and outwardly accept the religious beliefs of those amongst who they live," a practice that still exists today.^{viii} Therefore, many Druze teachings remain secret and discerning an accurate number of believers worldwide is challenging.

WICCA AND NEO-PAGANISM

World: No reliable data

U.S.: .3% of the U.S. population

Neo-Paganism refers to a wide variety of modern traditions that emphasize a revival of ancient pagan practices and beliefs.^{ix} The largest and most well-known of the neo-pagan religions is Wicca. It is based on a number of modern teachings, including Gerald Gardner's *Book of Shadows*, but is a reconstruction of the beliefs, symbols and gods or goddesses of the ancient Celts (800 B.C.E.). It does not have a central orthodoxy, and the practices of Wiccans vary widely. Depending on one's viewpoint and which Wiccans one is referencing, Wiccans can be monotheistic, recognizing one God with male and female aspects; polytheistic, believing in many gods and goddesses; or atheistic. One of the primary tenets of Wicca is the emphasis on equality between the feminine and the masculine. The elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water are central to the religion, and these elements, along with the spirit, are one of the meanings behind the pentagram symbol. Many Wiccans are solitary practitioners, while others form groups of believers sometimes referred to as covens or groves. It is a decentralized religion with individuals developing their own beliefs, rituals and practices. Wiccans have a history of being marginalized and oppressed by Christian groups primarily because of the Christian view that they are associated with Satan or Satanic cults, a claim that Wiccans deny. Wicca and other neo-pagan religions are experiencing a rapid growth in the U.S. and around the world.

ZOROASTRIANISM

World: Approximately 200,000 adherents (0.003% of the world population)

U.S.: Approximately 18,000 adherents (0.006% of the U.S. population)

The followers of the religion and philosophy of Zoroastrianism consider the spirit of Ahura Mazda to be the Creator of all, as stated by the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra). The religion appears in recorded history around the mid-5th century B.C.E., during the era of the Old Persian Empire. Originally concentrated in Iran, in the 10th century many fled to India to practice freely, after the Islamization of the Empire. Therefore, today's major Zoroastrian communities are generally split into two groups: Iranian and the Parsi, who live in India. Major concepts of Zoroastrianism include the dualism of good/evil and the struggle between truth/order and falsehood/chaos. Truth and order are associated with the Creator, Ahura Mazda, and humans participate in the faith by living a life of good thoughts, words, and actions that aim toward eliminating chaos and evil. Celebrations and festivals are important

parts of the religion, including seven obligatory feasts. The first six, called the six *gahambars*, are a series of six feasts throughout the year that celebrate the changing seasons. The seventh and last obligatory feast is *Noruz*, or the New Year. This festival occurs on the spring equinox and is celebrated by feasting and lighting fires, which represent the light of God and purity. A traditional prayer ritual may include praising Ahura Mazda, purification by washing the hands, facing the sun or fire, and wearing a *kusti*, a cord knotted three times, around a *sudreh*, a long, white cotton shirt. If and how one prays is left up to the preference of each individual. As one of the world's smallest religions, its numbers are dwindling because conversion to the religion is prohibited and intermarriage is not permitted.^x

ⁱ Adherents.com <http://www.adherents.com> ; BBC Religions <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/> ; Pew Research Center: American's Changing Religious Landscape <<http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-05-08-full-report.pdf>>;

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: The Global Religious Landscape < <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>> ; American Religious Identification Survey <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/> ; Patheos.com <http://www.patheos.com/Library.html> ; The Pluralism Project <http://pluralism.org/resources/statistics/tradition.php>; Association of Religious Data Archives, http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_234_2.asp#S_1; Pew Research Center: Global Religious Diversity <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/> ; Pew Research Center: Folk Religionists <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/> ; Pew Research Center: Religious Composition by Country, In Percentages <<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-percentages/>>

ⁱⁱ Adapted from: Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, Religion and Diversity Education Program, *World Olympics: Preparing Students for a Multicultural and Multireligious World*, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Atheism: At a Glance," BBC Religions, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/atheism/ata glance/shtml> .

^{iv} "Chinese Traditional Religions," Adherents.com http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na_144.html .

^v "Confucianism," Patheos <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Confucianism.html> .

^{vi} "Baha'i," Patheos <<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Bahai.html>>

^{vii} "Jainism: At a Glance," BBC Religions, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/jainism/ata glance/shtml> .

^{viii} "The Druze (a.k.a. Druse, Muwahhid, Mowahhidoon, Mo'wa'he'doon, Taw'heed Faith)," Religions of the World, [Religioustolerance.org http://www.religioustolerance.org/druze.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/druze.htm) .

^{ix} "Paganism Portal: Beliefs, Rituals, History, and Facts," Patheos <http://www.patheos.com/Religion-Portals/Pagan.html> .

^x "Zoroastrianism," BBC Religions, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/> .