

Chapter Seven: Religion

What is Religion, and What Role Does It Play In Culture?

Like languages, interactions between people can cause religions to grow or shrink. Religion plays a major role in shaping the cultural landscape, from what foods or drink are available to dress styles. **Religion** is defined as a system of beliefs and practices that attempts to order life in terms of culturally perceived ultimate priorities. Through rituals, religion can have a major influence in the behaviors that occur during waking hours. Although religion is influential in many cultures, other cultures seek to downplay or even discourage organized religion and its influence; this is known as **secularism**. While religion has many benefits to society, it has also been used to justify brutality and exploitation, as in colonial days.

Where Did the Major Religions of the World Originate, and How Do Religions Diffuse?

There are three basic types of religions:

Monotheistic: worship of a single deity; God or Allah for example. Monotheistic belief is relatively new, being around for 3500 years or so.

Polytheistic: worship of many gods, even thousands.

Animistic: belief that inanimate objects (mountains, trees, rivers) possess spirits and should be revered.

If one looks at a map of the world religions, one must be aware that within many of the color zones, one will find adherents to other faiths. For example, even though India is shown as being Hindu, there are millions of Muslims and Sikhs in India. And even though France is shown as Catholic, many French have no faith at all. Each of the widespread religions have one thing in common: they are all **universalizing religions**, which seek to convert others to its system because it thinks it's system is the true way. **Ethnic religions** are those where adherents are born into the faith and converts are not actively sought. These tend to be locally concentrated among certain areas where the ethnic group is located, particularly in Africa and South American Indian groups.

Hinduism ranks as the third largest religion. Hearth: South Asia. It is 4000 years old, and although its hearth was in Pakistan, it is no longer practiced in Pakistan due to Pakistan's embracing of Islam. It is instead found mostly in India. Hinduism has been called an ethnic religion because it does not seek converts; however, it has spread by the movement of its people. Hindus describe their religion as monotheistic due to the one god Brahman (the universal soul), but many other gods in the religion exist as expressions of Brahman. There is no Hindu prophet, or administrative structure. Hinduism has many beliefs and practices, but a common theme is *karma*, or transferability of the soul. Through *reincarnation*, one's soul moves up a hierarchy (or down depending on behavior) and eventual escape from the cycle of rebirth through union with Brahman. Also associated with Hinduism is the **caste system**, which is also a hierarchy, but is a social and not religious one and unlike the religious ladder, one is locked into the level in which they are born. As time as gone on, partly due to the work of Mahatma Gandhi, life for the lowest caste of *untouchables* has gotten better. Hinduism has spread only a little bit due to its ethnic nature; but it is notably present in the Indonesian area of Bali, where many Hindus moved, and in a few pockets in Africa and the Caribbean where British colonizers moved some Indian to other British colonies.

Buddhism was founded by Prince Siddhartha, who, shaken by the injustice and misery he saw around him, fasted until he became the Buddha (the enlightened one). Hearth: South Asia. Salvation could be attained by anyone through enlightenment gained by elimination of greed, craving, and desire; complete honesty; and never hurting any person or animal. Buddhism was spread by an Indian ruler to Southeast Asia. It is a regional religion, with different forms in different regions. For example, Zen Buddhism, which is highly contemplative, is in Japan. Buddhism is under pressure due to pressures from tyrannical regimes in its range, but is diffusing to urban areas in the West, such as San Francisco.

Shintoism is related to Buddhism, and is found in Japan. It focuses primarily on nature and ancestor worship. The majority of Japanese observe both Buddhism and Shintoism.

Taoism is Chinese and is based on the teachings of Lao-Tsu, who published a volume titled *Tao-te-ching*, or the Book of the Way. Lao-Tsu taught that one should live in harmony with nature. This led to the rise of **Feng Shui**, which is the art and science of arranging living spaces in order to channel the life forces that exist in nature. Taoism stresses simplicity, spontaneity, tenderness, and tranquility. War, punishment, taxation, and ceremonial ostentation are evil. People, animals, and even dragons are objects of worship.

Confucianism is based on the teaching of Confucius, which stress service to one's fellow humans over service to spirits. He argued that human virtues and abilities, and not heritage, should determine a person's position in society. The teachings of Confucius, which are a compilation of writings and sayings, have strongly shaped Chinese society for millennia.

The Chinese religions have been restricted by the communist government of China that took power in 1949. However, due to 2000 years of Confucian and Taoist tradition, it has been very hard to limit the practices of these faiths. An example is Chinese resistance to the government's order of cremation of deceased persons in Hong Kong due to space concerns. Burial based on Feng Shui is very important to Chinese tradition; as such, now the cremated remains are buried in accordance to Feng Shui is a sort of compromise.

Judaism grew out of the belief system of the Jews, one of several nomadic tribes living in Southwest Asia about 4000 years ago. The roots of Judaism lie in the teachings of Abraham. According to Jewish teaching, Abraham and God had a covenant; as long as the Jews worshipped only one God, God would agree to protect the Jews as his chosen people; thus, Judaism is seen as the first monotheistic faith. Jews have had to deal with enslavement at the hand of Egypt and the loss of their homeland at the hands of the Romans. Unlike most ethnic religions, Judaism is not limited to a small territorial extent, but rather is scattered all over due to the lack of a homeland for centuries. Even though Judaism is united by a strong sense of ethnic distinctiveness, there are three broad categories within the religion: *Reform*, which strives to bring Judaism into modern times; *orthodox*, which strives to retain the traditional practices; and *conservative*, which lies somewhere in between.

The scattering of Jews after Roman destruction of Jerusalem is known as the **diaspora**, a term that signifies the spatial dispersion of members of any ethnic group. As refugees over the centuries, Jews have been at the mercy of the dominant ethnic group of whichever country they were inhabiting. It was not until 1948 that the international community helped the Jewish state of Israel take form.

Christianity can be traced to the same hearth in the Mediterranean as Judaism, and is based on the teaching of a single founder, Jesus. Christianity is the largest and globally the most widely dispersed religion. There are three main divisions of the Christian church; **Eastern Orthodox** in Eastern Europe; **Roman Catholic**, which is the largest branch of Christianity and is centered in Rome; and **Protestant**, which is popular in North America.

The diffusion of Christianity is the result of expansion due to missionaries, as well as relocation diffusion as a result of European colonization.

Islam is the youngest of the major religions and can be traced to a single founder, Muhammad, who was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia in the year 571 CE. Islam's hearth is the Middle East. Muhammad received the word of Allah and placed those revelations into the Qu'ran (Koran), Islam's holy book. Even though Muhammad is seen as the one true prophet, Judaism's Abraham and Christianity's Jesus are seen as prophets of Allah as well. Islam is also divided between two groups: **Sunni** (the great majority) and **Shi'ite** (concentrated in Iran). The split came after Muhammad's death and is based on who would replace him. Islam was spread through trade networks and through force. Islam is the second largest religion in the world and the fastest growing. Islam is found throughout the Northern half of Africa, Middle East, and Indonesia.

Shamanism is a community/local/isolated faith in which people follow their shaman, which is a religious leader, teacher, healer, and visionary. Shamanism is more common among African and Native American cultures.

Secularism is the rejection or indifference to religious faiths by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Secularism seems to be growing as more and more people worldwide turn their backs on organized religion. Often times this secularism can be encouraged by the government. For example, in France the wearing of all religious symbols from Muslim girls wearing scarves to Christians wearing crosses has been banned. Communism has also led to decline of religion; the Soviet Union, rather than try to get varying faiths to live together, discouraged all faith altogether. A decline in religion also stems from dissatisfaction with some teachings, like the discouragement of birth control in the Catholic church.

How is Religion Seen in the Cultural Landscape?

Religion can be seen in the cultural landscape with houses of worship such as churches and mosques. It could be seen in **pilgrimages**, or the act of travelling to a particular religious site. **Sacred sites** are places that members of a religious group infuse with religious meaning. Sacred sites can be landscapes, such as Bear Butte, which is sacred

to the Lakota and Cheyenne in the Northern US plains. It can also be a location of historical importance to faiths, such as Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jerusalem is the site of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. Also, Jesus was crucified outside the city wall, and buried there. Muslims believe that Jerusalem is the site at which Muhammad ascended into heaven. Jerusalem has thus been fought over by all three religions.

Hindus have numerous shrines, often made by individuals, all over, but particularly near water so that ritual bathing can take place. Buddhists revere the Bodhi (enlightenment) tree, under which the Buddha sat when he gained enlightenment. Christians build churches with tall spires or steeples. Muslims also build mosques with tall spires, or minarets. Five times a day the faithful are called to prayer from speakers mounted in the minarets. All Muslims are supposed to make the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in their lifetime.

In the United States, one can see varying religious strength based on regions. For example, New England is strongly Catholic; the South's leading denomination is Baptist; the Upper Midwest is largely Lutheran; the Southwest is predominately Catholic. In the area around Utah, Mormonism is the dominant faith.

What Role Does Religion Play in Political Conflicts?

Conflict in regard to religion can be religion vs. religion, such as Muslims vs. Christians in the former Yugoslavia. It can be conflict between the same religion, such as Sunni vs. Shi'ite in Iraq, or Catholics vs. Protestants in Northern Ireland.

Interfaith boundaries are the boundaries between the world's major faiths. Countries that lie on top of interfaith boundaries often suffer conflict, such as some African countries such as Nigeria, where the Northern half of the country is Muslim and the Southern half is Shamanist. Another is the former Yugoslavia, where the western part of the country was Muslim and the eastern part Orthodox Christian.

Northern Ireland constitutes an **intrafaith boundary**; that is where you have the nation's boundary within the same faith; in this case all of Northern Ireland is Christian, but there is conflict between Catholics and Protestants in that country.

One of the most contentious religious conflicts is between **Israel and Palestine**; this is a great example of an **interfaith boundary** situation, in that in the West Bank area of Israel, Jews and Arab Muslims are trying (and failing) to coexist. In 1948, the United Nations allowed Jews to return to and gain control of some of the land that they had lost to the Romans 1,900 years earlier. This meant that the Palestinians would have to share the land with the 'newcomer' Jews. The Palestinians, who are Arab, and their Arab neighbors, fought against Israel on numerous occasions; each time, as in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel won and took more territory, mainly a large area known as the West Bank (of the Jordan River), causing many Palestinians to flee. Israel has built settlements on this land, making it more and more difficult for the Palestinians to get full control of the land back. One way the Palestinians have rebelled against this situation is through terrorism, including car and bus bombs. Both sides believe they have a divine right to the land.

The former Yugoslavia on the Balkan Peninsula is another example of both **inter and intrafaith boundary** conflict. Yugoslavia contained numerous ethnic groups; the Serbians are Orthodox Christian, the Croats are Roman Catholic, making for an intrafaith boundary. Then there are Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo, which are other sections of former Yugoslavia. There was further bad blood between Croats and Serbs; Croats helped the Nazis hunt down anti-Nazi Serbs during WWII, committing acts of **genocide**, which is the attempt to destroy a certain ethnic group. During the reign of Josip Tito, Yugoslav tensions were kept under control. Once he died, Yugoslavia came apart, with Croat and Serbs fighting each other, as well as the Serbs' attempt to wipe out both Croats and Muslims from their territories, a term known as **ethnic cleansing**. NATO, the US/Western European military alliance, stepped in to crush the Serbs and restore order; tension still remains in the area, however.

Northern Ireland also is an example of **Intrafaith** conflict. When Great Britain took control of predominantly Catholic Northern Ireland, many Protestants moved into the country. The Protestant majority in Northern Ireland retained most of the political and economic power, causing Catholic charges of discrimination. Thus began a Christian on Christian conflict. The two sides self-segregated, shopping at stores of their own faith and living in segregated neighborhoods with toponyms relating to their faith.

Today throughout the world, religious leaders and millions of their followers are seeking to return to the basics of their faith. This drive toward **religious fundamentalism** is born out of frustration over a perceived breakdown in society's mores and values and a lack of control over their fate. **Religious extremism** is fundamentalism carried to the point of violence. The 9/11 attacks brought Islamic extremism to the forefront; however, Christian extremists also exist, as shown by US fundamentalists killing abortion doctors.

Among Christian religions, the Catholic Church is perhaps the most fundamental in its faith. Contrary to popular mood, the Catholic Church still forbids birth control and women in the priesthood. Christian fundamentalism is also evident with the Protestant Church, in which some faiths still argue for prayer in public schools, teaching of creationism in science courses, and the handling of snakes in worship because they interpret the Bible as having said to do so. Most recently, Protestant fundamentalists have assailed the Boy Scouts for their allowing gays to enter the Scouts.

Among the Jewish fundamentalists, the Orthodox Jews observe the most traditional form of Judaism. Some Jewish fundamentalists also tend to support the building of Jewish settlements on Palestinian lands and preaching anti-Arab sentiments.

Among Islamic countries, there is variation in the strictness of interpretation of the Koran. Some Muslims drink. Some women do not wear head coverings. However, in other countries, Islamic fundamentalism is shown by the expansion of **Shari'a laws**; such laws call for the amputation of hands in the case of theft and fewer rights for women, including complete covering of the face by wearing a burqa. One feature of Islamic fundamentalism is the call for **Jihad**, or holy-war, against threats to Islamic culture. Osama Bin Laden was one of those calling for jihad against the US for its support of Israel, its maintaining military bases in Saudi Arabia, and its increasing corruptive influence on the Islamic part of the world.