

Chapter 6

Religion

Key Issues

1. Where are religions distributed?
2. Why do religions have different distributions?
3. Why do religions organize space in distinctive patterns?
4. Why do territorial conflicts arise among religious groups?

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Religion interests geographers because it is essential for understanding how humans occupy Earth. Geographers, though, are not theologians, so they stay focused on those elements of religions that are geographically significant. Geographers study spatial *connections* in religion: the distinctive place of origin, the extent of diffusion, the processes by which religions diffused, and practices and beliefs that lead some to have more widespread distributions.

Geographers find the tension in *scale* between *globalization* and *local diversity* especially acute in religion for a number of reasons. People care deeply about their religion; some religions are *designed* to appeal to people throughout the world, whereas other religions appeal primarily to people in geographically limited areas; religious values are important in how people identify themselves, (and) the ways they organize the landscape; adopting a global religion usually requires turning away from a traditional local religion; and while migrants typically learn the language of the new location, they retain their religion.

This chapter starts by describing the distribution of major religions, and then explains why some religions have diffused widely, whereas others have not. The third section of the chapter discusses religion's strong imprint on the physical environment. Unfortunately, intense identification with one religion can lead adherents into conflicts discussed in the fourth key issue of the chapter.

Key Issue 1. Where Are Religions Distributed?

- **Universalizing religions**
- **Ethnic religions**

Geographers distinguish two types of religions: universalizing and ethnic.

Universalizing religions attempt to be global, to appeal to all people. An **ethnic religion** appeals primarily to one group of people living in one place.

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Universalizing Religions

About 58 percent of the world's population adheres to a universalizing religion, 26 percent to an ethnic religion, and 16 percent to no religion. The three main universalizing religions are Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Each is divided into branches, denominations, and sects. A **branch** is a large and fundamental division within a religion. A **denomination** is a division of a branch that unites a number of local congregations. A **sect** is a relatively small group that has broken away from an established denomination.

Christianity. Christianity has about 2 billion adherents, far more than any other world religion, and has the most widespread distribution.

Branches of Christianity. Christianity has three major branches: Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. Within Europe, Roman Catholicism is the dominant Christian branch in the southwest

and east, Protestantism in the northwest, and Orthodoxy in the east and southeast. The regions of Roman Catholic and Protestant majorities frequently have sharp boundaries, even when they run through the middle of countries.

The Orthodox branch of Christianity is a collection of 14 self-governing churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. More than 40 percent of all Eastern Orthodox Christians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, established in the sixteenth century. Nine of the other 13 self-governing churches were established in the nineteenth or twentieth century. The largest of these 9, the Romanian church, includes 20 percent of all Orthodox Christians.

The remaining 4 of the 14 churches — Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem — trace their origins to the earliest days of Christianity. They have a combined membership of about 3 percent of all Orthodox Christians.

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Christianity in the Western Hemisphere. The overwhelming percentage of people living in the Western Hemisphere — about 90 percent — are Christian. Roman Catholics comprise 95 percent of Christians in Latin America, compared with 40 percent in North America. Within North America, Roman Catholics are clustered in the southwestern and northeastern United States and the Canadian province of Québec. Protestants comprise 40 percent of Christians in North America. Baptists have the largest number of adherents in the U.S. Baptists are highly clustered in the southeast, whereas Lutherans are in the upper Midwest. Other Christian denominations are more evenly distributed around the country.

Smaller Branches of Christianity. Several other Christian churches developed independent of the three main branches. Two small Christian churches survive in northeast Africa: the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Ethiopian Church.

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The Armenian Church originated in Antioch, Syria, and was important in diffusing Christianity to South and East Asia between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. The Armenian Church, like other small sects, plays a significant role in regional conflicts. The Maronites, (clustered in Lebanon) are another example of a small Christian sect that plays a disproportionately prominent role in political unrest. In the U.S., members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) regard their church as a branch of Christianity separate from other branches.

Islam. Islam, the religion of 1.3 billion people, is the predominant religion of the Middle East from North Africa to Central Asia. Half of the world's Muslims live in four countries outside the Middle East: Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

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Branches of Islam. Islam is divided into two important branches: Sunni (from the Arabic word for orthodox) and Shiite (from the Arabic word for sectarian, sometimes written Shia in English). Sunnis comprise 83 percent of Muslims and are the largest branch in most Muslim countries. Sixteen percent of Muslims are Shiites, clustered in a handful of countries. Shiites comprise nearly 90 percent of the population in Iran and more than half the population in Iraq.

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Islam in North America and Europe. The Muslim population of North America and Europe has increased rapidly in recent years. Estimates of the number of Muslims in North America vary widely, from 1 to 5 million but it has increased from only a few hundred thousand in 1990. In Europe, France has the largest Muslim population, a legacy of immigration from former colonies in North Africa. Islam also has a presence in the United States through the Nation of Islam, also

known as Black Muslims, founded in Detroit in 1930 and led for more than 40 years by Elijah Muhammad, who called himself “the messenger of Allah.” Since Muhammad's death, in 1975, his son Wallace D. Muhammad led the Black Muslims closer to the principles of orthodox Islam, and the organizations name was changed to the American Muslim Mission.

Buddhism. Buddhism, the third of the world’s major universalizing religions, has 350 million adherents, especially in China and Southeast Asia.

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Like the other two universalizing religions, Buddhism split into more than one branch. The three main branches are Mahayana, Theravada, and Tantrayana.

An accurate count of Buddhists is especially difficult, because only a few people participate in Buddhist institutions. Buddhism differs in significant respects from the Western concept of a formal religious system. Christianity and Islam both require exclusive adherence. Most Buddhists in China and Japan, in particular, believe at the same time in an ethnic religion.

Other Universalizing Religions. Sikhism and Bahá’í are the two universalizing religions other than Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism with the largest numbers of adherents. Sikhism’s first guru (religious teacher or enlightener) was Nanak (A.D. 1469–1538), who lived in a village near the city of Lahore, in present-day Pakistan. The Bahá’í religion is even more recent than Sikhism. It grew out of the Bábí faith, which was founded in Shíráz, Iran, in 1844 by Siyyid ‘Ali Muhammad, known as the Báb (Persian for gateway).

Ethnic Religions

The ethnic religion with by far the largest number of followers is Hinduism. With 900 million adherents, Hinduism is the world’s third-largest religion, behind Christianity and Islam. Ethnic religions in Asia and Africa comprise most of the remainder.

Hinduism. Ethnic religions typically have much more clustered distributions than do universalizing religions. Ninety-seven percent of Hindus are concentrated in one country, India, and most of the remainder can be found in India’s neighbor, Nepal.

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The appropriate form of worship for any two individuals may not be the same. Hinduism does not have a central authority or a single holy book. The largest number of adherents — an estimated 70 percent — worships the god Vishnu, a loving god incarnated as Krishna. An estimated 26 percent adhere to Siva, a protective and destructive god. Shaktism is a form of worship dedicated to the female consorts of Vishnu and Siva.

Other Ethnic Religions

Several hundred million people practice ethnic religions in East Asia, especially in China and Japan. Buddhism does not compete for adherents with Confucianism, Daoism, and other ethnic religions in China, because many Chinese accept the teachings of both universalizing and ethnic religions.

Confucianism. Confucius (551–479 B.C.) was a philosopher and teacher in the Chinese province of Lu. Confucianism prescribed a series of ethical principles for the orderly conduct of daily life in China.

Daoism (Taoism). Lao-Zi (604–531? B.C., also spelled Lao Tse), a contemporary of Confucius, organized Daoism. Daoists seek dao (or tao), which means the way or path. Dao cannot be

comprehended by reason and knowledge, because not everything is knowable. Daoism split into many sects, some acting like secret societies, and followers embraced elements of magic.

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Shintoism. Since ancient times, Shintoism has been the distinctive ethnic religion of Japan. Ancient Shintoists considered forces of nature to be divine, especially the Sun and Moon, as well as rivers, trees, rocks, mountains, and certain animals. Gradually, deceased emperors and other ancestors became more important deities for Shintoists than natural features. Shintoism still thrives in Japan, although no longer as the official state religion.

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Judaism. Around one-third of the world's 14 million Jews live in the United States, one-third in Israel, and one third in the rest of the world.

Judaism plays a more substantial role in Western civilization than its number of adherents would suggest, because two of the three main universalizing religions — Christianity and Islam — find some of their roots in Judaism. It was the first recorded religion to espouse **monotheism**, belief that there is only one God. Judaism offered a sharp contrast to the **polytheism** practiced by neighboring people, who worshiped a collection of gods. The name Judaism derives from Judah, one of the patriarch Jacob's 12 sons; Israel is another biblical name for Jacob.

Ethnic African Religions. Approximately 100 million Africans, 12 percent of the population, follow traditional ethnic religions, sometimes called **animism**. African animist religions are apparently based on monotheistic concepts, although below the supreme god there is a hierarchy of divinities, assistants to god or personifications of natural phenomena, such as trees or rivers. Some atlases and textbooks persist in classifying Africa as predominantly animist, even though the actual percentage is small and declining. Africa is now 46 percent Christian and another 40 percent are Muslims. The growth in the two universalizing religions at the expense of ethnic religions reflects fundamental geographical differences between the two types of religions.

Key Issue 2. Why Do Religions Have Different Distributions?

- **Origin of religions**
- **Diffusion of religions**
- **Holy places**
- **The calendar**

We can identify several major geographical differences between universalizing and ethnic religions: locations where the religions originated, processes by which they diffused to other regions, types of places considered holy, calendar dates identified as important holidays, and attitudes toward modifying the physical environment.

Origin of Religions

Universalizing religions have precise places of origin, based on events in the life of a man. Ethnic religions have unknown or unclear origins, not tied to single historical individuals.

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Origin of Universalizing Religions. Each of the three universalizing religions can be traced to the actions and teachings of a man who lived since the start of recorded history. Specific events also led to the division of the universalizing religions into branches.

Origin of Christianity. Christianity was founded upon the teachings of Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem between 8 and 4 B.C. and died on a cross in Jerusalem about A.D. 30.

Christians believe that Jesus died to atone for human sins, that he was raised from the dead by God, and that his Resurrection from the dead provides people with hope for salvation. Roman Catholics accept the teachings of the Bible, as well as the interpretation of those teachings by the Church hierarchy, headed by the Pope. Orthodoxy comprises the faith and practices of a collection of churches that arose in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. The split between the Roman and Eastern churches dates to the fifth century, as a result of rivalry between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarchy of Constantinople. Protestantism originated with the principles of the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Origin of Islam. Islam traces its origin to the same narrative as Judaism and Christianity. All three religions consider Adam to have been the first man and Abraham to have been one of his descendants.

Jews and Christians trace their story through Abraham's original wife and son, Sarah and Isaac. Muslims trace their story through his second wife and son, Hagar and Ishmael. One of Ishmael's descendants, Muhammad, became the Prophet of Islam. Muhammad was born in Makkah about A.D. 570.

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Differences between the two main branches — Shiites and Sunnis — go back to the earliest days of Islam and basically reflect disagreement over the line of succession in Islamic leadership.

Origin of Buddhism. The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, was born about 563 B.C. in present-day Nepal, near the border with India. The son of a lord, he led a privileged existence sheltered from life's hardships. At age 29 Gautama left his palace and lived in a forest for the next six years, thinking and experimenting with forms of meditation. Gautama emerged as the Buddha, the "awakened or enlightened one," and spent 45 years preaching his views across India. While the Theravadists emphasize Buddha's life of self-help and years of solitary introspection, Mahayanists emphasize Buddha's later years of teaching and helping others.

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Origin of Other Universalizing Religions. Sikhism and Bahá'í were founded more recently than the three large universalizing religions. The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, traveled widely through South Asia around 500 years ago preaching his new faith, and many people became his Sikhs, which is the Hindi word for disciples. When it was established in Iran during the nineteenth century, Bahá'í provoked strong opposition from Shiite Muslims. The Báb was executed in 1850, as were 20,000 of his followers.

Origin of Hinduism, an Ethnic Religion. Unlike the universalizing religions, Hinduism did not originate with a specific founder. Hinduism existed prior to recorded history. Aryan tribes from Central Asia invaded India about 1400 B.C. and brought their religion. Centuries of intermingling with the Dravidians already living in the area modified their religious beliefs.

Diffusion of Religions

The three universalizing religions diffused from specific hearths, or places of origin, to other regions of the world. In contrast, ethnic religions typically remain clustered in one location.

Diffusion of Universalizing Religions. The hearths of the three largest universalizing religions are in Asia (Christianity and Islam in Southwest Asia, Buddhism in South Asia). Today these three together have several billion adherents distributed across wide areas of the world.

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Diffusion of Christianity. Christianity's diffusion has been rather clearly recorded. Consequently, geographers can examine its diffusion by reconstructing patterns of communications, interaction, and migration. Christianity first diffused from its hearth in Palestine through relocation diffusion. **Missionaries** carried the teachings of Jesus along the Roman Empire's protected sea routes and excellent road network. People in commercial towns and military settlements that were directly linked by the communications network received the message first. Christianity also spread widely through contagious diffusion — daily contact between believers in the towns and nonbelievers in the surrounding countryside. **Pagan**, the word for a follower of a polytheistic religion in ancient times, derives from the Latin word for *countryside*. The dominance of Christianity was assured during the fourth century through hierarchical diffusion. Emperor Constantine embraced it in A.D. 313, and Emperor Theodosius proclaimed it the empire's official religion in 380. In subsequent centuries, Christianity further diffused into Eastern Europe through conversion of kings or other elite figures.

Migration and missionary activity since 1500 has extended Christianity to other regions, through permanent resettlement of Europeans, by conversion of indigenous populations, and by intermarriage. In recent decades Christianity has further diffused to Africa, where it is now the most widely practiced religion. Latin Americans are predominantly Roman Catholic, colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese. Canada (except Québec) and the United States have Protestant majorities because colonists came primarily from Protestant England. Followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, popularly known as Mormons, originated at Fayette, New York, and then eventually migrated to the sparsely inhabited Salt Lake Valley in the present-day state of Utah.

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Diffusion of Islam. Muhammad's successors organized followers into armies that extended the region of Muslim control over an extensive area of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Islam diffused well beyond its hearth through relocation diffusion of missionaries to portions of sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Spatially isolated from the Islamic core region, Indonesia is predominantly Muslim, because Arab traders brought the religion there in the thirteenth century.

Diffusion of Buddhism. Buddhism did not diffuse rapidly from its point of origin in northeastern India. Most responsible for the spread of Buddhism was Asoka, emperor of the Magadhan Empire from about 273 to 232 B.C. About 257 B.C., at the height of the Magadhan Empire's power, Asoka became a Buddhist and thereafter attempted to put into practice Buddha's social principles. In the first century A.D., merchants along the trading routes from northeastern India introduced Buddhism to China. Chinese rulers allowed their people to become Buddhist monks during the fourth century A.D. Buddhism further diffused from China to Korea in the fourth century and from Korea to Japan two centuries later. During the same era, Buddhism lost its original base of support in India.

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Diffusion of Other Universalizing Religions. The Bahá'í religion diffused to other regions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and then spread rapidly during the late twentieth century, when a temple was constructed in every continent. Sikhism remained relatively clustered in the Punjab, where the religion originated. In 1802 they created an independent state in the Punjab. But when the British government created the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947, it divided the Punjab between the two instead of giving the Sikhs a separate country.

Lack of Diffusion of Ethnic Religions. Most ethnic religions have limited, if any, diffusion. These religions lack missionaries. Diffusion of universalizing religions, especially Christianity and Islam, typically comes at the expense of ethnic religions.

Mingling of Ethnic and Universalizing Religions. Universalizing religions may supplant ethnic religions or mingle with them. Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony, is mostly Roman Catholic, whereas Namibia, a former German colony, is heavily Lutheran. Elsewhere, traditional African religious ideas and practices have been merged with Christianity. In East Asia, Buddhism is the universalizing religion that has most mingled with ethnic religions, such as Shintoism in Japan.

The current situation in Japan offers a strong caution to anyone attempting to document the number of adherents of any religion. About 90 percent of Japanese say they are Shintos and about 70 percent say they are Buddhists. Ethnic religions can diffuse if adherents migrate to new locations for economic reasons and are not forced to adopt a strongly entrenched universalizing religion. The religious diversity of Mauritius is a function of the country's history of immigration. Mauritius was uninhabited until 1638, so it had no traditional ethnic religion. Hinduism on Mauritius traces back to the Indian immigrants, Islam to the African immigrants, and Christianity to the European immigrants.

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Judaism, an Exception. Only since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 has a significant percentage of the world's Jews lived in their Eastern Mediterranean homeland.

The Romans forced the Jewish diaspora, (from the Greek word for dispersion) after crushing an attempt by the Jews to rebel against Roman rule. Jews lived among other nationalities, retaining separate religious practices but adopting other cultural characteristics of the host country, such as language. Other nationalities often persecuted the Jews living in their midst. Historically, the Jews of many European countries were forced to live in a **ghetto**, a city neighborhood set up by law to be inhabited only by Jews. During World War II the Nazis systematically rounded up European Jews and exterminated them. Many of the survivors migrated to Israel. Today about 10 percent of the world's 14 million Jews live in Europe, compared to 90 percent a century ago.

Holy Places

Religions may elevate particular places to a holy position. An ethnic religion's holy places derive from the distinctive physical environment of its hearth, such as mountains, rivers, or rock formations. A universalizing religion endows with holiness cities and other places associated with the founder's life. Making a **pilgrimage** to these holy places is incorporated into the rituals of some universalizing and ethnic religions.

Holy Places in Universalizing Religions. Buddhism and Islam are the universalizing religions that place the most emphasis on identifying shrines.

Buddhist Shrines. Eight places are holy to Buddhists because they were the locations of important events in Buddha's life.

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Holy Places in Islam. The holiest locations in Islam are in cities associated with the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The holiest city for Muslims is Makkah (Mecca), the birthplace of Muhammad.

The second most holy geographic location in Islam is Madinah (Medina). Muhammad's tomb is at Madinah, inside Islam's second mosque. Every healthy Muslim who has adequate financial resources is expected to undertake a pilgrimage, called a *hajj*, to Makkah (Mecca).

Holy Places in Sikhism. Sikhism's most holy structure, the Darbar Sahib, or Golden Temple, was built at Amritsar, during the seventh century. Militant Sikhs used the Golden Temple as a base for launching attacks in support of greater autonomy during the 1980s.

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Holy Places in Ethnic Religions. Ethnic religions are closely tied to the physical geography of a particular place. Pilgrimages are undertaken to view these physical features.

Holy Places in Hinduism. As an ethnic religion of India, Hinduism is closely tied to the physical geography of India.

The natural features most likely to rank among the holiest shrines in India are riverbanks or coastlines. Hindus consider a pilgrimage, known as a *tirtha*, to be an act of purification. Hindus believe that they achieve purification by bathing in holy rivers. The Ganges is the holiest river in India because it is supposed to spring forth from the hair of Siva. Recent improvements in transportation have increased the accessibility of shrines.

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Cosmogony in Ethnic Religions. Ethnic religions differ from universalizing religions in their understanding of relationships between human beings and nature. These differences derive from distinctive concepts of **cosmogony**, which is a set of religious beliefs concerning the origin of the universe. For example, Chinese ethnic religions, such as Confucianism and Daoism, believe that the universe is made up of two forces, yin and yang, which exist in everything.

The universalizing religions that originated in Southwest Asia, notably Christianity and Islam, consider that God created the universe, including Earth's physical environment and human beings. A religious person can serve God by cultivating the land, draining wetlands, clearing forests, building new settlements, and otherwise making productive use of natural features that God created. In the name of God, some people have sought mastery over nature, not merely independence from it.

Christians are more likely to consider natural disasters to be preventable and may take steps to overcome the problem by modifying the environment. However, some Christians regard natural disasters as punishment for human sins. Ethnic religions do not attempt to transform the environment to the same extent. Environmental hazards may be accepted as normal and unavoidable.

The Calendar

Universalizing and ethnic religions have different approaches to the calendar. An ethnic religion typically has holidays based on the distinctive physical geography of the homeland. In universalizing religions, major holidays relate to events in the life of the founder rather than to the changing seasons of one particular place.

The Calendar in Ethnic Religions. A prominent feature of ethnic religions is celebration of the seasons. Rituals are performed to pray for favorable environmental conditions or to give thanks for past success.

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The Jewish Calendar. Judaism is classified as an ethnic religion in part because its major holidays are based on events in the agricultural calendar of the religion's homeland in present-day Israel. The reinterpretation of natural holidays in the light of historical events has been especially important for Jews in the United States, Western Europe, and other regions who are unfamiliar with the agricultural calendar of the Middle East. Israel uses a lunar, rather than a solar, calendar. The appearance of the new Moon marks the new month in Judaism and Islam and is a holiday for both religions. The lunar month is only about 29 days long, so a lunar year of about 350 days quickly becomes out of step with the agricultural seasons. The Jewish calendar solves the problem by adding an extra month 7 out of every 19 years.

The Solstice. The **solstice** has special significance in some ethnic religions. A major holiday in some pagan religions is the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year. Stonehenge is a prominent remnant of a pagan structure apparently aligned so the Sun rises between two stones on the solstice.

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The Calendar in Universalizing Religions. The principal purpose of the holidays in universalizing religions is to commemorate events in the founder's life. Christians associate their holidays with seasonal variations, but climate and the agricultural cycle are not central to the liturgy and rituals.

Islamic and Bahá'í calendars. Islam, like Judaism, uses a lunar calendar. Islam as a universalizing religion retains a strict lunar calendar. As a result of using a lunar calendar, Muslim holidays arrive in different seasons from generation to generation. The Bahá'ís use a calendar in which the year is divided into 19 months of 19 days each, with the addition of four intercalary days (five in leap years). The year begins on the first day of spring.

Christian, Buddhist, and Sikh Holidays. Christians commemorate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter, observed on the first Sunday after the first full Moon following the spring equinox in late March. But not all Christians observe Easter on the same day, because Eastern Orthodox churches use the Julian calendar. Christians may relate Easter to the agricultural cycle, but that relationship differs with where they live. Northern Europeans and North Americans associate Christmas, the birthday of Jesus, with winter conditions. But for Christians in the Southern Hemisphere, December 25 is the height of the summer, with warm days and abundant sunlight.

All Buddhists celebrate as major holidays Buddha's birth, Enlightenment, and death. However, Buddhists do not all observe them on the same days. The major holidays in Sikhism are the births and deaths of the religion's 10 gurus. Commemorating historical events distinguishes Sikhism as a universalizing religion, in contrast to India's ethnic religion, Hinduism, which glorifies the physical geography of India.

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Key Issue 3. Why Do Religions Organize Space in Distinctive Patterns?

- **Places of worship**
- **Sacred space**
- **Administration of space**

Geographers study the major impact on the landscape made by all religions, regardless of whether they are universalizing or ethnic. The distribution of religious elements on the landscape reflects the importance of religion in people's values.