

# Ch 8: God, god, or Gods?

## Introduction: Religion

How can unseen phenomena be explained?

What about concepts or ideas which cannot be measured or quantified?

Humanity is always acknowledging the fact that we do not know all that we do not know. While modern Western science has drastically increased the amount of accessible knowledge, humanity currently knows less than 1/1,000,000... about anything. Outside of scientific and academic communities, the gap between what is known and the unexplainable has been filled by the supernatural. The beliefs and rituals that grow out of these supernatural beliefs is, for purpose of academic conversation, religion and spirituality. In the discussion of culture, a society's spiritual point of view shapes their practices, norms, and taboos. It provides their society a framework for explaining how their society fits into the cosmos, as well as how they are to live their life today. With 90% of the global population claiming belief in at least one of the 4,600 religions of the world, it is important to study this unique cultural tapestry and to understand how it has shaped humanity in the past and will continue to do so into the future.

### **NOTICE!**

*This chapter will be discussing religious beliefs. The purpose of this chapter is to look at religion academically, seeking to inform and explain various religions based on what the religion claims to be true about itself, and the impact of those beliefs on the community of believers and the world. This chapter will not address if a system is right or wrong.*

## A. About Religion

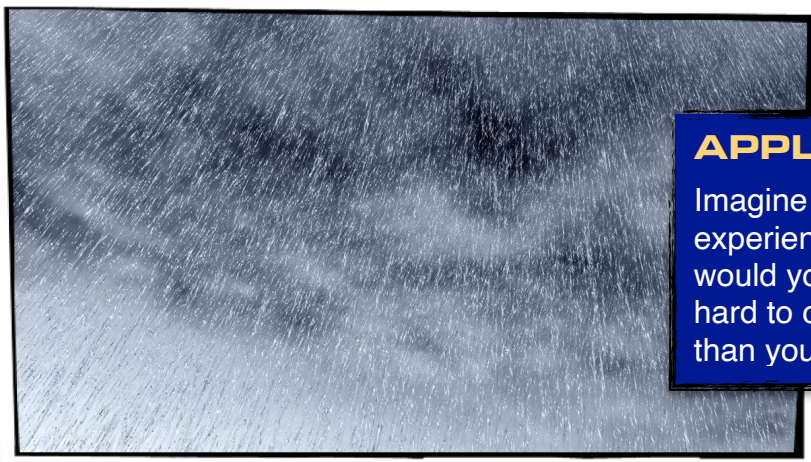
### Basic Principles

Religion functions as a key component of a cultural's superstructure, shaping a society's views and actions. While religions are as diverse as human societies, their core components are all similar:

- **Origin Stories & World Views.** A *religion* is an organized system of ideas about the natural and supernatural being(s) and/or force(s) in the universe(s). Religions have a core set of ideas that serve as the framework of their worldview, guiding followers in understanding their role and place in the universe. This *worldview* is founded upon and supported by a fundamental stories (said by some to be myths or legends) that describe the details of and give justification to the worldview. In some societies, these foundational stories and codes of behavior are passed along through oral tradition, while other religions have developed collections of writings that they now hold as sacred.
- **Body & Soul.** A vast majority of religions believe that humanity is composed of two parts: body and spirit. At birth the body and spirit are intertwined and can act independently of each other. Sayings like "My heart said yes, but my head said no" portray this perceived duality in humans. At death, the body and spirit diverge, with various explanations of what transpires next after the separation.
- **Rites & Rituals.** Each religion has rites, rituals, and practices which all followers practice as a means of fulfilling their spiritual responsibilities and appeasing the supernatural powers. The rituals may include speaking to the supernatural (prayer), withholding food or drink for a certain period of time (fasting), dressing in specific ways, performing certain songs/dances, sacrificing food/animals/people, or visiting special holy sites (pilgrimage).
- **Locations.** Religions hold certain places on the earth's surface to be holy, or set apart for extra special purposes. These could be designated places of daily or weekly worship or the location of a supposed spiritual event, like the appearance of a supernatural being.
- **Leadership.** The actions listed above are governed by groups of religious leaders, typically considered a priesthood or shamans, at certain locations deemed as more holy or sanctified. The priests, caliphs, or shamans are believed to have special connections to the supernatural, allowing them to communicate or influence the forces in the world in a way ordinary people cannot. These leaders have a strong say in what becomes a part of the norms and taboos within a society; from the vocabulary used, to how people dress, eat and interact. Leaders set the calendars and measurements of time and determining which moments and locations are most holy - worthy to be celebrated with festivals and ceremonies.







### APPLICATION #1:

Imagine being the first human (homo sapien) to ever experience rain. What would you have thought? What would your reaction have been? Would it have been hard to convince you there were forces more powerful than yourself?

## The Purpose of Religion

Religions serve many purposes in a society. First, religions explain the unexplainable. In regions of the world, or during eras of time, that did not have Western Science, the world was a giant mystery with nearly all of the elements being outside of humanities control and beyond human understanding. Phenomena such as birth, adolescent development, health, illness, death, weather, and natural disasters still remain well outside of the control of humanity; even with advanced medical practices. Religions gave meaning and understanding to these major life events.

With this framework of understanding, religion provides a means of coping with life's challenges. Prayers, meditations, music, dance, and rituals provided followers a means of reducing the anxiety of life's difficult moments while giving a measure of guidance for how to approach challenging situations, granting a measure of comfort when a person otherwise feels powerless or hopeless. For example, when faced with death, some religions state that a living person's prayers and songs could improve the afterlife of a loved one. These rituals can also provide people tools to manipulate the supernatural beings. When a situation is not going the way a person desires it to, prayers/offerings/fasting/sacrifices can be used to convince the god or goddess to listen and intervene.

Third, religions may provide order and purpose to society. Religions define who has authority and who does not within a belief system. Most successful rulers have the strong backing and support of religious leaders or are themselves considered the most important religious figure in the system. Religious institutions have also served as an important tool for education by being a source for structured language, practices, norms, traditions, and bureaucracy necessary to impart important knowledge and skills to large numbers of people. Religions set the terms for which traits are considered either taboo or are accepted within a society. Religion defines the focus of the lives of the followers, giving guidance for how a person should spend their time, talent and treasure.

Finally, religion serves as a *centripetal and centrifugal force* with a society. *Centripetal forces* provide a common bond of unity to a diverse group of people. While humans have billions of differences between each person, it only takes one or two commonalities to begin to create a sense of "we" instead of "you and me." This is created through sharing places of worship, common languages, similar music, icons, and images with other people. When two unique and diverse individuals share the same religious values, it creates a kinship or an "us" that is difficult to produce otherwise. For example, when two individuals from different countries and cultures arrive at the sacred Varanasi, they feel a sense of unity because of their common Hindu faith.

So too, religion can be a *centrifugal force*. In a multicultural society, people of different faiths can take on an "us vs. them" mentality. Religions can bestow the idea that, "our people will be in paradise while your people will face eternal suffering..." or "Our god said that \_\_\_\_ people are not allowed into society or cannot hold jobs..." This divisiveness can tear the fabric of a society apart.



## Religious Themes

Despite the variations in how religions are practiced, there are common themes and patterns addressed by religions.

- **What is Sacred?** Religions promote the idea that specific items, people, or locations are holy or sacred, somehow set apart by the god(s) as being special and different from ordinary things. Each religion defines sacred differently. Certain religions promote the sacredness of everything; with each object being interconnected to a larger web of spiritual energy. For example, animist religions hold that everything in nature is spiritual. The dirt, trees, bugs, wind, sun, clouds, rain... are all interconnected spiritually. The Jainism is completely nonviolent, even outlawing the squashing of bug. They wear masks during the summer so they do not accidentally breathe in small flies.



Other religions believe that only certain parts of the present reality are sacred resulting in only certain spaces or pieces of land being considered holy and revered, creating holy places of worship. For example, in Islam the cities of Mecca is considered the holiest city in Islam that all Muslims must point to when they pray. In Hinduism, the Ganges River is the holiest site in the religion. The water is considered the embodiment of goddess Ganga. Bathing in the waters purifies the person's soul.

The third variation is that the sacred exists, but outside of this present reality - typically in the "after life." People must perform certain actions in this life to be given access to the sacred in the afterlife. For example, in Protestant Christianity, no specific locations on earth are defined as "sacred." Instead, by saying certain prayers, holding certain beliefs, and being baptized (submerged in water), a person can gain access to the most sacred of spaces in their faith - heaven.

• **Nature of Nature.** Religions hold varying beliefs on the role and value of the natural environment. Certain religious views hold nature sacred, an embodiment of the supernatural forces at play in the universe. In this worldview, nothing in nature should be altered, except when absolutely necessary. For example, many indigenous nations in the Americas view the land as being spiritual and not something that can be claimed or owned. When these first nations were introduced to tractor-based farming, they said, "They strive to live on the earth, with the earth."

The opposite end of the spectrum is the view that physical nature is a temporary resource that is corrupted, contaminated, fallen, or doomed for destruction. It does not matter what happens to the natural world because it is only the spiritual world that matters.

In the middle is the view that nature is created by a supernatural force, but humans are given the task to improve and develop the environment. This is a debate across the spectrum of Christian faiths because in the Bible the book of Genesis claims that humans are supposed to be caretakers to the environment, while the book of Revelations states that this world will be destroyed (or regenerated - depending on the interpretation). Some denominations argue that Christians should care about climate change and deforestation, while others say that high mass industrialized consumption of the world's resources is ok because the world is going to be "destroyed" anyway.



Development or Disaster?





- **Origins of the Universe.** Religions include an origin story of how the world and universe came into existence by using a collection of creation stories to tie the origins of the universe to the actions of one god or many gods. In Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, one god spoke and all things came into being. In Traditional Chinese religion, many gods worked together to form the universe and earth. Other belief systems view the universe as being eternal, with no beginning and no end, just an endless loop.
- **Time.** Religions determine how a society understands the concept of time. Certain religions hold that time is linear: There is a beginning, middle, and end. Each moment is unique and will never repeat. Every event moves the human story forward to some event where the universe will end. This idea of time is common with religions that have god(s) creating the world. The Aztecs believed that the sun god Huitzilopochtli needed human hearts to be sacrificed in order to stay alive. If he was not sufficiently fed, the world would end.

Other religions promote an eternal universe, where time is cyclical. Just like a runner running around a track, each lap is retracing the same ground as the first lap. Thus, each moment of time is not “unique,” but instead is retreading the same path previously journeyed by all the ancestors that came before.

Religions measure time differently using various calendars aligned to significant sacred events. These calendars have different methods for measuring time, different names for days in the “week/month,” different number of years... For example: The year 2020 CE on the Gregorian calendar (Which is what most of the world now uses in the Industrialized-based culture), is the year 1441AH in the Islamic Calendar or 5780 in the Jewish Calendar.

- **Human Purpose.** Religions vary in their beliefs on the uniqueness and purpose of human life. Some religions promote that each human being is special, unique, and put on earth to achieve a divinely inspired purpose that is a part of a larger plan. Often, this plan is a battle of good versus evil, where defining what actions and complexes are “good” and “evil” are of high importance; this dichotomy can serve as the basis for a religion’s moral code.

Other religions focus on a people as a small part of the universe with emphasis is placed on how each human is in harmony with the larger community. Norms and taboos are evaluated based upon the effect of the action upon the larger social community and their collective traditions. The value to the group is more important than the effect on an individual.

- **Sacred Words and Texts.** Religions place varying importance on the value of words and written language. Some religions believe certain words and writings are sacred and need to be held in high honor; needing to be copied, memorized, recited, and displayed in music and art. Hinduism has the Vedic texts, Judaism has the Torah, Islam has the Koran, the Sikhs have the Adi Granth, while the Buddhists have the Tripitaka. Each holy book represents the teachings, practices, instructions, and taboos of the central teacher(s) of that faith tradition that the followers must adhere to on a daily basis. Similarly, many religions have words that can be spoken to the deity as prayer in certain languages. Many of these prayers, rituals, hymns/songs, or incantations are used to communicate with the god(s) or forces to offer praise, apologies, to submit certain requests, or fulfill mandated obligations. Other religions believe words to be deceitful and cannot be trusted, so instead value silence and wordless meditation.



- **Inclusive vs. Exclusive.** Religions vary in their viewpoints as to who is allowed into the faith and how many faiths a person is allowed to practice. Inclusive faiths hold to the "and" principle, allowing a person to follow multiple religions at the same time. Taoism is inclusive, allowing people to be Taoist AND Ancestral/Animist. Exclusive faiths hold to the "or" principle: a person must be one religion OR another - never both. Christianity states that people are either Christians OR they are not. It is not allowed for a person to be Christian AND Muslim, or Christian and Sikh.
- **Gender.** The role and purpose of gender varies amongst religious practices. Some religions provide men with all the power and authority, with women being forcefully subservient to men - under punishment of death or imprisonment if they don't. Shari'a texts have been interpreted in some Islamic societies in way that restricts how a woman must dress, restricts her access to courts without her father/brother/husband being present, restricts her right to control when and whom (and if) she marries. The Hindu Law of Manu states that a woman must never be independent. The Christian book of 1st Timothy states that women should be submissive, quiet, and never assume authority over a man. Certain Buddhist and Jainist sects promote that a woman must be reborn as a man to achieve enlightenment, and that a deceitful man may be reborn as a woman if he is not careful. All of the above praise women for their submissiveness and the ability to bear children.



On the opposite side of the spectrum are the Mosuo in Tibet. Through their religion called Daba, the Mosuo have become a kingdom led by women. Women are the rulers of the society, making all the policy decisions, etc. Methodist Christians have allowed women to become pastors and key church leaders, citing the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the women of the early church who played a prominent role.

## Categories

While there are thousands of unique belief systems, there are four key categories used to classify or categorize religions:

- **Polytheism.** Polytheism is the belief in multiple gods, goddesses, or supernatural forces. Most of the world's religions are polytheistic and fall into one of three categories: *Animism*, *Ancestral Spirits*, and *Pantheon faiths*.

*Animism* is the belief that everything in the universe has a soul, spirit, or is connected to the spiritual web of life. This includes plants, animals, fungus, and reptiles.

A second form of polytheism is *Ancestral Spirits*, which believes that when people die, their spirits continue to function on earth, just in a new capacity without their physical human body. These spirits can take the form of objects in nature, such as the wind, trees, or animals. These spirits can all complete a variety of tasks, depending on the religion: from intervening in the events and actions of the living, to re-inhabiting another body and living another life.

*Pantheon traditions* have an organized collection of gods and goddess who have specifically assigned roles or jobs. For example, the Greek Pantheon had Zeus, who controlled the sky and lightening, while Poseidon was god of the sea. Specific gods and goddesses would be invoked when certain interventions were needed.





- **Monotheism.** Monotheism is the belief in one and only one god. This universal god is omniscient, (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful), and omnipresent (everywhere at the same time). All needs and requests go to and come from one deity. Monotheist religions have the fewest quantity of religions, but they have the largest number of believers globally. The Abrahamic Faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism are monotheistic.
- **Agnostic/Deist.** Agnostics (or Deists) believe there is something supernatural, but do not subscribe to a set of rituals, rules, and beliefs. They have a spirituality, but do not believe the supernatural can or will interfere with daily life. Taoists and Buddhists are difficult to categorize because they do not have a “central god,” but they do have the Tao and Karma philosophies that represent supernatural forces. For the purposes of this course, they will be considered agnostic - but others may classify them in college as atheist.
- **Atheism.** Atheists hold the worldview that there are no supernatural beings or forces at work. There is no “duality” to humans: a body is a body. Everything can be explained through the chemical reactions and laws of physics. When a person sings or prays, they are just bouncing sound waves off the ceiling. When a person is sick, it is from germs that can be manipulated only by medicines and procedures. When a person dies, they biodegrade back into the fabric of natural earth. The organic life forms on the planet are the highest “form” of life. Humanity is responsible for meeting its own needs through their own actions, thus humanity must take actions to improve and support each other. Humanism represents a form of atheism that also has a belief structure, but the moral code is based on the value of human interaction with others, not on the fear of repercussions from an outside force. The core tenants of atheism will be explored later in the chapter.

## B. The Evolution of Religion

### Indigenous, Ethnic & Universal

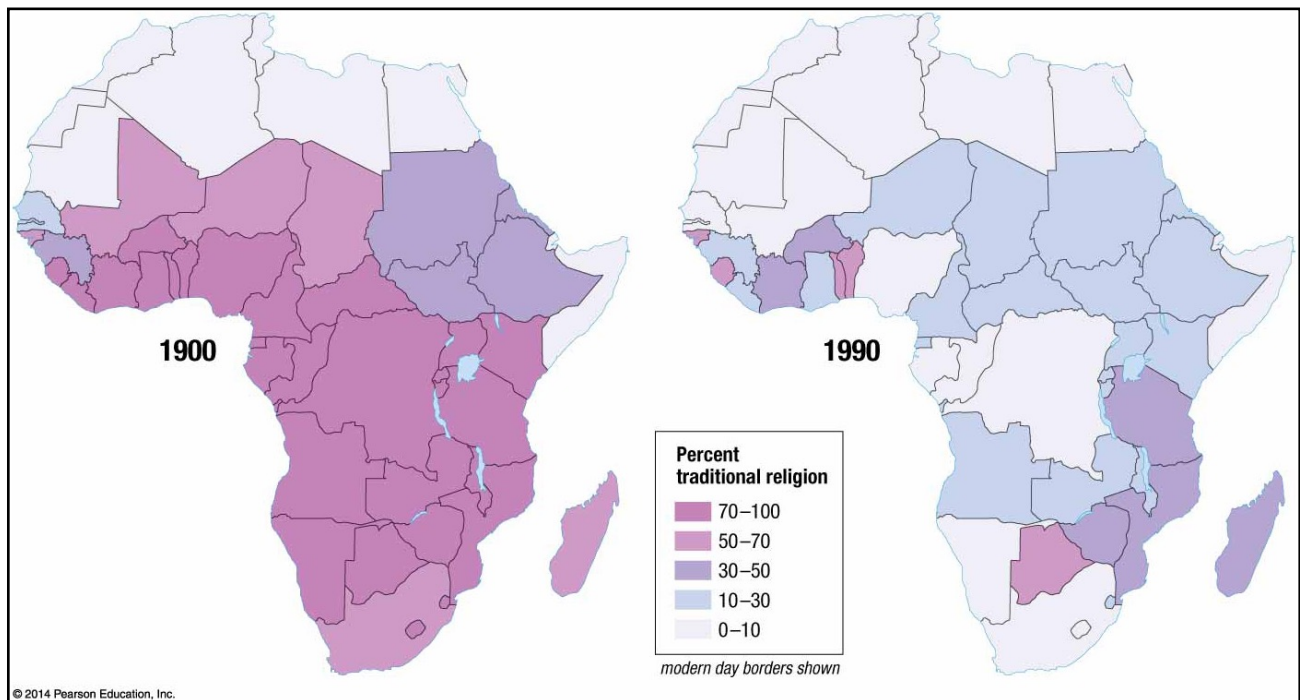
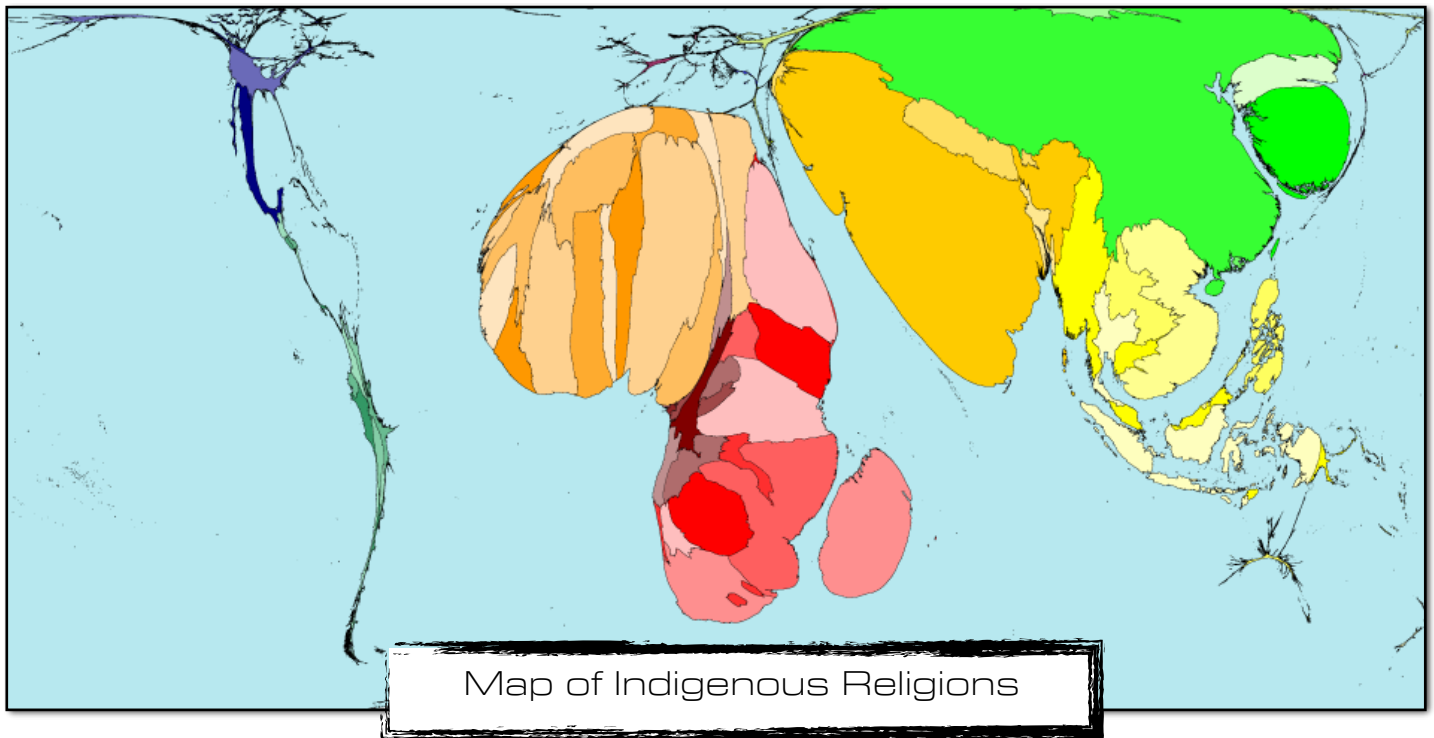
Religious institutions have developed over time through various stages roughly referred to as *Indigenous, Ethnic and Universal*.

- **Indigenous.** Indigenous religions are primarily found in isolated, rural regions, and due to this isolated situation, the tenants of the faith are very unique and tied intimately with the natural environment around them. Most of these isolated traditions were developed in the quest to survive, especially in isolated Stage 1 regions, with high birth and death rates. Thus, tradition is extremely important, as it is considered a matter of collective survival. Many indigenous faiths are a combination of animism and ancestral traditions. Because of the strong environmental influence upon the people, the supernatural is tied closely to the natural and the gods/goddesses/forces reflect the nature and needs around them. The features of the landscape are sacred because of spiritual ritual or because they are embodied by their ancestors. For example, Uluru in Australia is considered sacred to the Anangus nation. Uluru (or as the Anangus would prefer it called - nyunga) is the location where they can connect with the ancestors across time and receive blessings from them.



Indigenous faiths are very exclusive and protective, and most adherents to the faith are family members living within a very small area, or footprint, where those traditions are practiced. It is common for these religions to have a relationship component, requiring the person to either be born into the faith family or to be married in. The emphasis on tradition, family, and survival results in a slow process of change and adaptation, and instead highly values and encourages consistency.

The most common forms of growth and diffusion of indigenous are through reproduction and relocation. Indigenous religions prize high fertility rates, as a result of high IMR and CDR. Because the land is highly valued and spiritual in nature, most indigenous groups work as hard as they can to stay at the hearth location, unless forced out by natural disaster or war. Leaving the landscape is devastating, as they are also leaving behind their ancestors and location-specific gods. As societies develop through Rostow's stages, the interconnectedness leads to indigenous people either being forced off their land or migrating for economic opportunities. Either situation has historically resulted in a decrease in the number of indigenous societies.

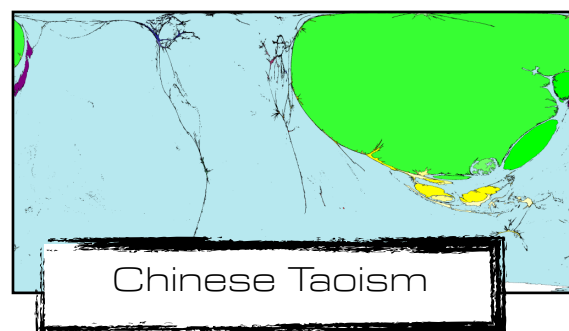
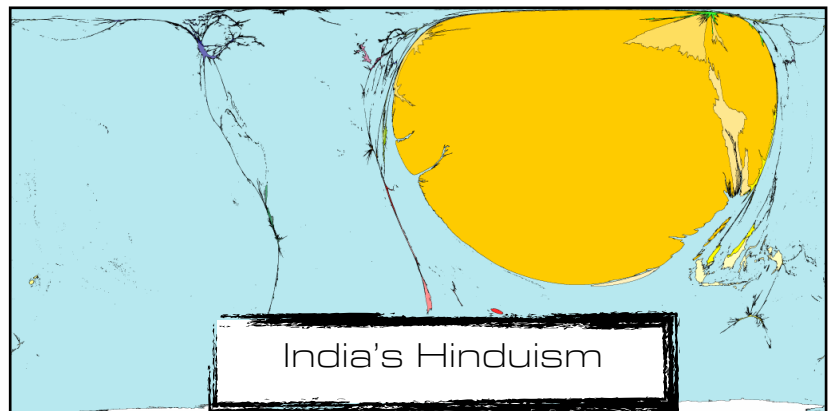
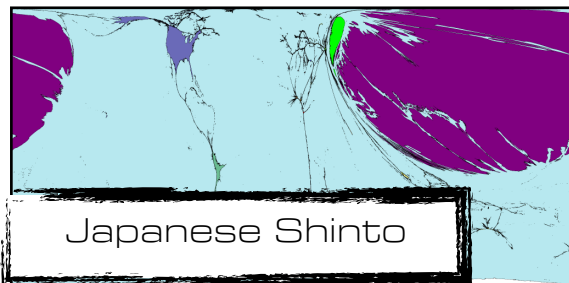


- Ethnic.** As societies settled into larger agricultural kingdoms and empires, religion evolved with them. Ethnic faiths have a well defined structure to them, with clearly named and defined pantheons of gods and goddesses. Similar to how societies developed to have kings and bureaucracies, religions developed a clearly defined social structure of religious leaders. The most powerful positioned himself at the top, with tiers of leaders beneath him with varying levels of authority. Oral traditions were replaced by written books which outlining norms, taboos, calendars, rituals, and required traditions. Sacred locations were replaced by sacred buildings and specific styles of architecture. Ethnic faiths also exist in areas with stronger transportation and information networks. The religious leadership have to navigate the religion through these encounters to ensure the religion does not blend (too much) with other religious and cultural ideas in the region; as they seek to unify and control the people they have political power over. Examples include the Greek, Roman, and Viking pantheons, Judaism, Taoism, Shinto, and Hinduism. Each developed at a period of time when agriculturally driven kingdoms and empires were forming and the government needed a strong centripetal force to unify the people and his power.





Despite the changes that religion underwent, a few commonalities stayed remained. Ethnic faiths were still driven by WHO a person was and to whom they were BORN, not to the ideas they believed. Ethnic faiths are ok with “us vs. them,” as people of ethnic faiths believe themselves to be specially chosen by their divine being(s). Thus, ethnic faiths primarily expand through pronatalist, high fertility rate policies. They diffuse through conquest or relocation diffusion. In the modern world, this relocation is most commonly driven by economic opportunities that exist outside of their cultural region. The people are less afraid to leave, because they can bring their rituals with them to the new location. If chain migration creates a large enough ethnic enclave, the community can build a new religious institution at their new home. Despite the willingness and ability to migrate, most ethnic faiths still have the largest religious following in the region where their hearth exists.



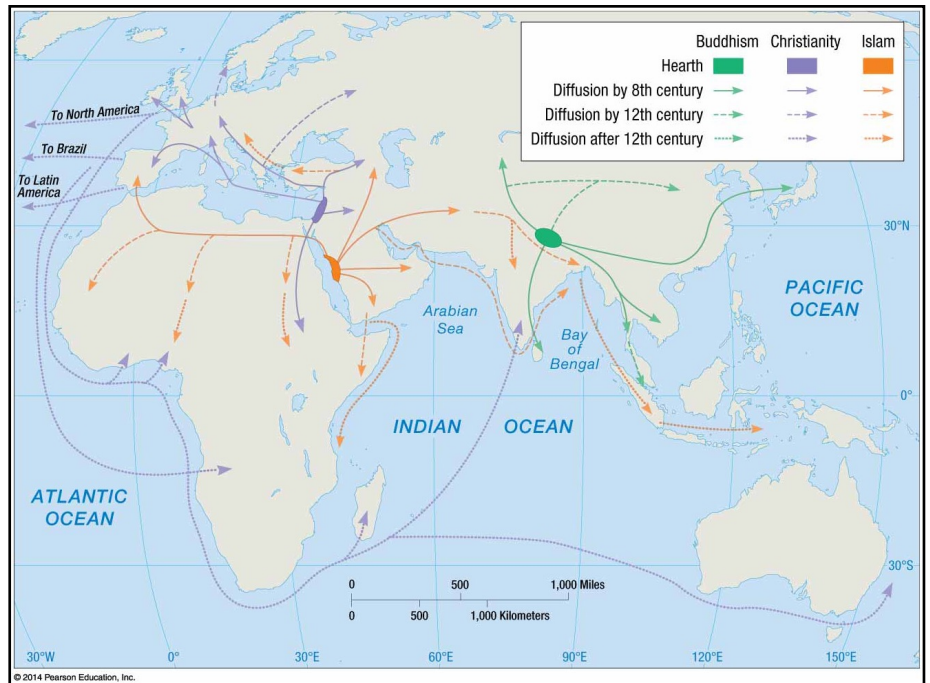
### APPLICATION #2:

Compare the spatial distribution of Shinto, Hinduism and Taoism. What factors caused this distribution?

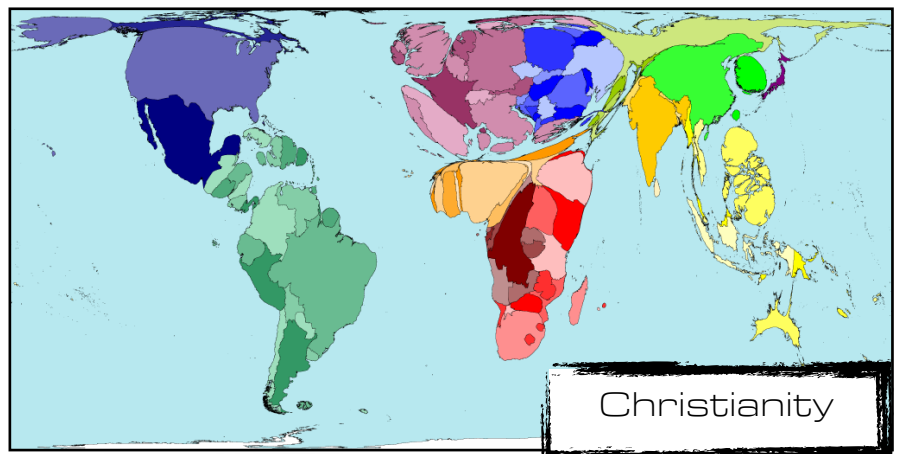
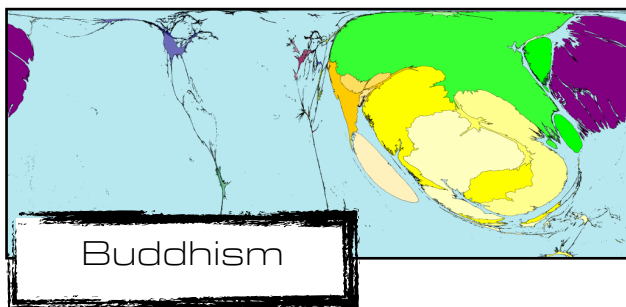
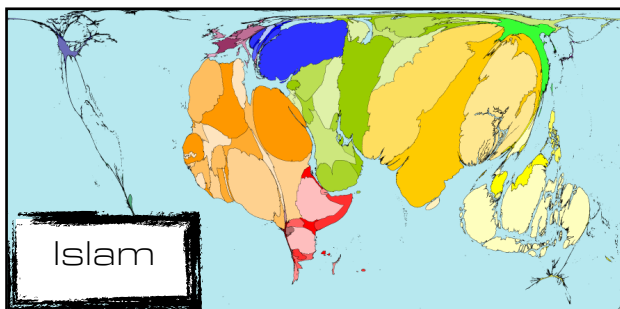
- **Universal.** Between 400 BCE - 650 CE religion transformed from being ethnically and regionally based to being dominated by universal goals. Universal faiths no longer cared about who a person was or their ethnicity, but instead about WHAT they believed. Universal faiths were no longer bound by tradition, landscape, or regional preference, but instead were driven by a quest for global diffusion. Universal faiths sent out missionaries along trade routes to evangelize and contagiously diffuse the religious message with a goal of converting everyone in the world. Judaism gave birth to Christianity. Zoroastrianism and Persian pantheons gave birth to Islam. Hinduism gave birth to Buddhism.

Each of these new universal faiths inherited traits and practices from their parent religion and transformed them with the influence of outside cultures. The root of each universal faith is a set of traditions founded in an ethnic faith. Once a universal faith began to expand and interact with outside groups, it continued to change, adapt, and amalgamate into a new creation the original ethnic faith did not (and may still not) agree with. Judaism stated there was to be a conquering king ruling over a specific piece of land and the Messiah would make this happen. Christians say the man named Jesus was the Messiah, but the kingdom was a spiritual kingdom EVERYONE can join in the afterlife... not a physical land-based kingdom solely for ethnic Jews. Christians took the idea of Jewish

Passover and transformed it into Easter. However, Easter began to transform as Christianity rapidly diffused throughout Europe - especially the Germanic regions. Now, Christian Easter is celebrated at the same time of year as passover (Jewish), associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Early Christian), along with bunnies and eggs (German fertility tradition). Similarly, Buddhism grew out of Hinduism. Siddhartha was from the King/Warrior caste, at the near-top of Hindu society. He kept the ideas of Karma and reincarnation, but said that everyone was equal and had an equal chance at achieving enlightenment. It didn't matter who you were, it was the ideas you believed and the actions you took as a result which determined your fate in the afterlife.



As a result of these transformations, universal faiths have diffused beyond their hearths to a broader macro-region that their parental ethnic faiths never reached. Islam now extends from Morocco to Saudi Arabia and all the way to its largest population in Indonesia. Buddhism diffused through the Silk Road to encompass most of Asia. Christianity diffused through European colonization, economic imperialism and the internet to reach every corner of the globe.



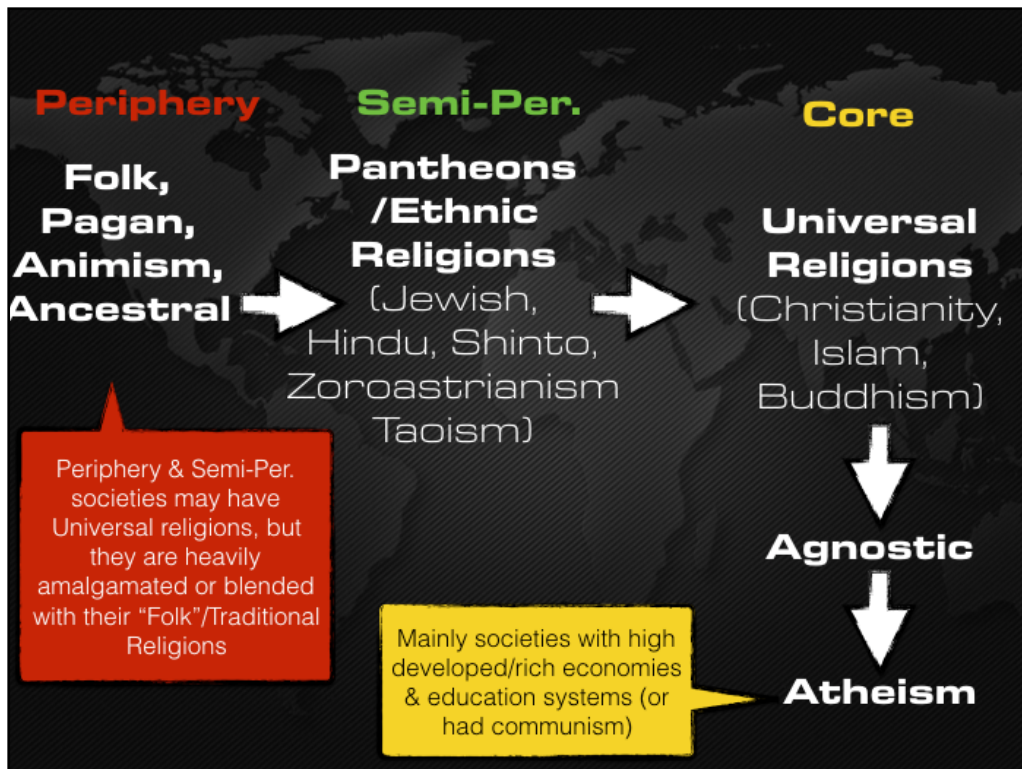
### APPLICATION #3:

Compare the spatial distribution of these three religions to the ethnic faiths. How is it different?



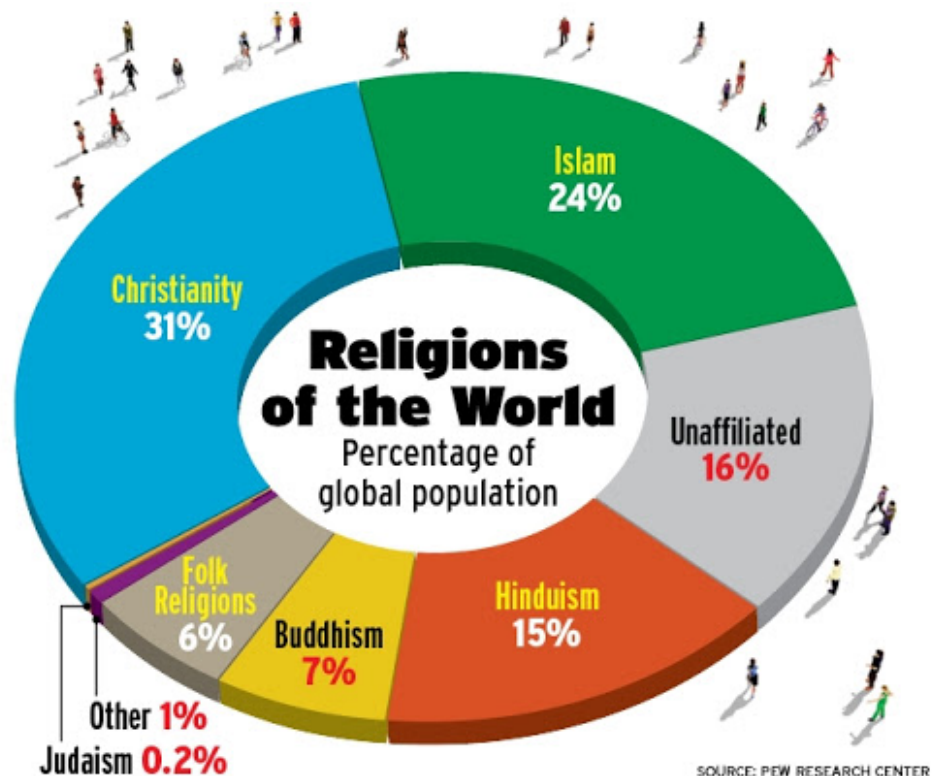
## Progression

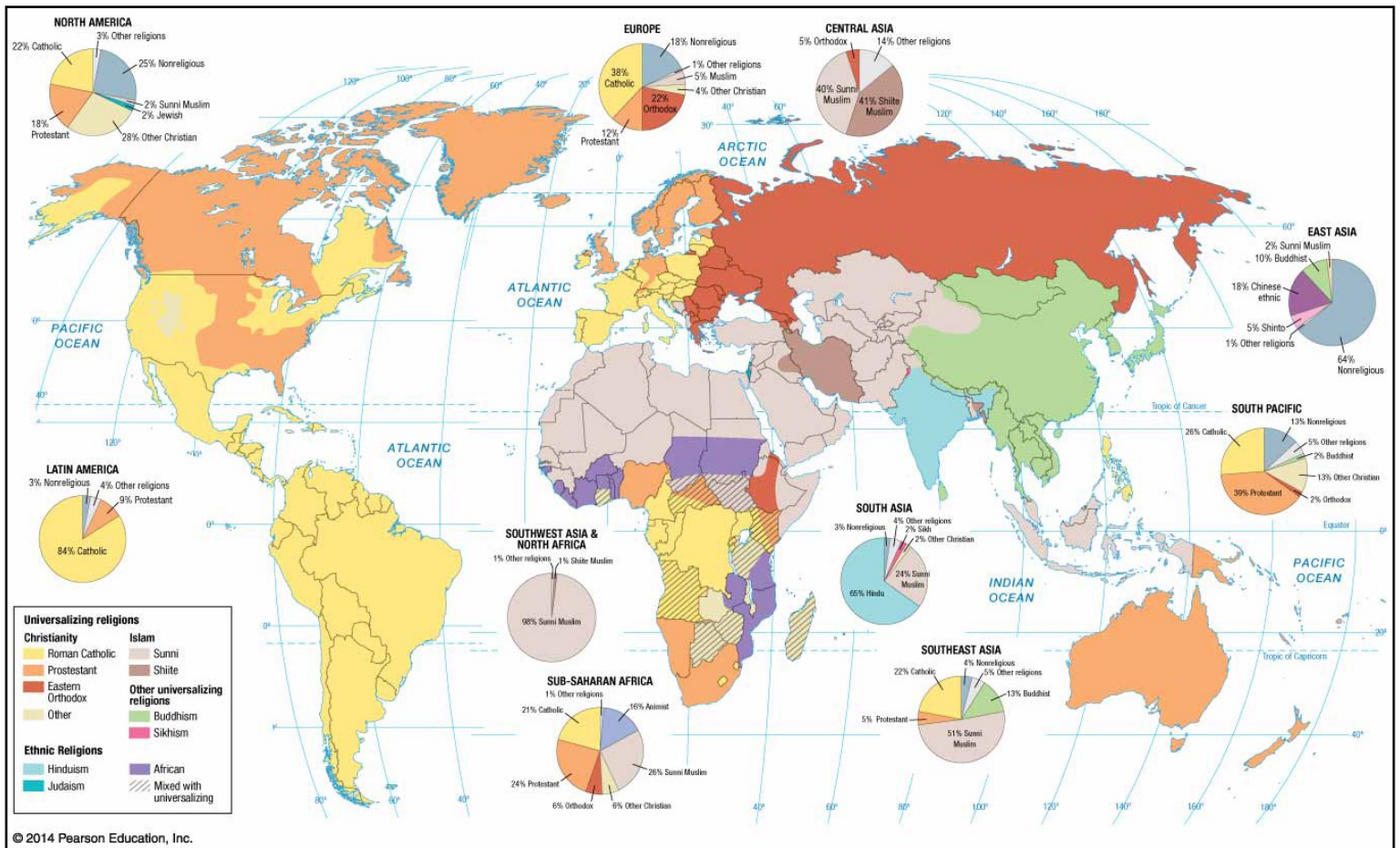
The following religious progression is a theoretical model and gives a general framework for understanding how religions have progressed. However, the reality of each religious organization is complicated, complex, and may not follow the exact progressions laid out here.



## Distributions

In the 21st century, the global religious landscape is dominated by universal faiths. The advancement of transportation and communication technology has interconnected the world like never before. Since interaction creates blendedness, the increase in global economic, social, and political interaction has created the platform for religious blending. Universal faiths now have the ability to create and globally diffuse music, movies, podcasts, and videos sharing their faith in seconds. Missionaries can get on a plane and be anywhere in the world within 24 hours. They can use remote scanning and the services of NGOs to find isolated tribes to share their faith with. As more people migrate from rural areas to cities (at the rate of 1 person every 3 seconds), the level of isolation is rapidly decreasing. This translates to the continued convergence and blending of the religious ethnosphere.





## APPLICATION #4:

Examine Religion on a global scale. What forces and processes have shaped each region to develop the religious culture it currently enjoys today?