

What is Religion?

There is no precise definition of “religion.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary offers the following:

1. the service and worship of God or the supernatural
2. devotion to a religious faith
3. a personal set or institutional system of religious beliefs, attitudes and practices
4. a cause, principle, or belief held to with faith and ardor (passion)

Every society has some form of religious belief. Throughout human history, religion has been one of the most powerful influences. Religious beliefs touch on what people think about life itself. What can be found are three common elements of a religion.

A set of **BELIEFS** about the nature of the universe, the existence of one God (monotheism) or several gods (polytheism), the meaning of life, and what happens after death.

A set of **CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES** that relate to the worship of one God or several gods, and a set of rules for proper conduct.

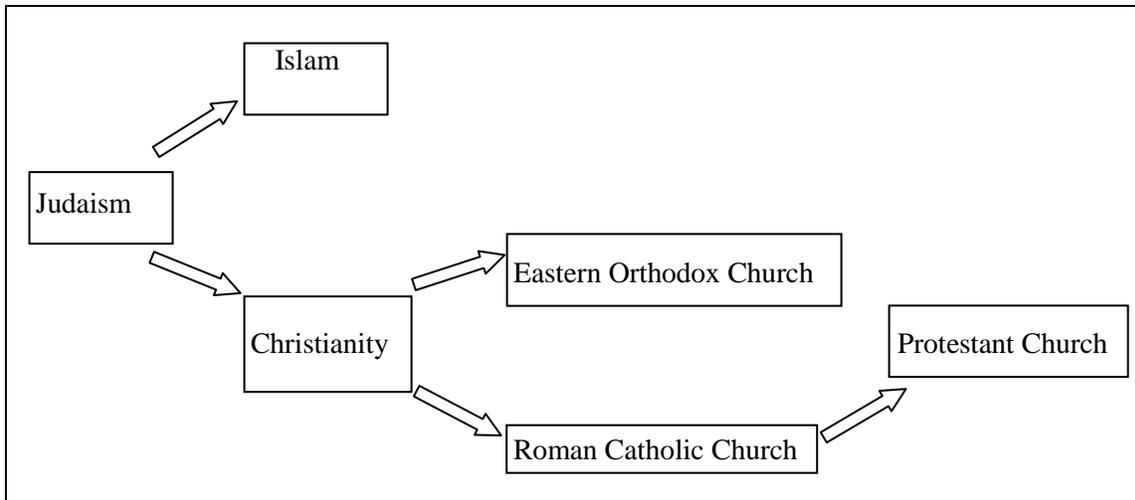
An **ORGANIZATION**, such as a church, mosque, temple or synagogue that oversees the conduct of religious practices.

We must understand the various religions and belief systems as they have been the foundation for man’s greatest cultural achievements in art, architecture, music and literature.

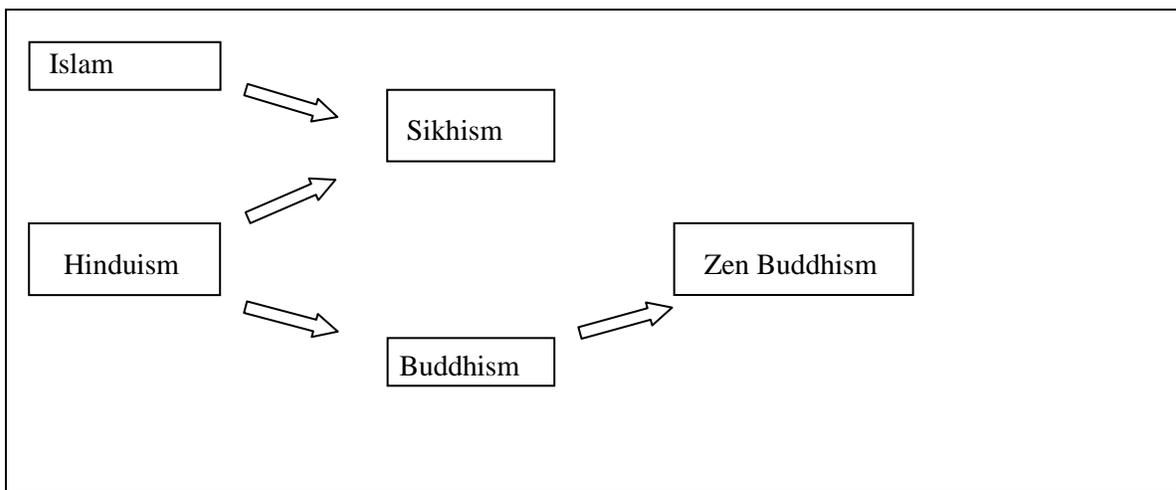
Early cave paintings were related to a belief in spirits and the afterlife. The masks and dance rituals of tribal groups in Africa were to honor the spirits. The human sacrifices in the Pacific Islands and Mesoamerica were done to appease the gods. The temples of ancient Greece and Rome were built in tribute to their deities. Medieval cathedrals in Europe were built to honor God’s kingdom on Earth and most of the art created during the Renaissance was inspired by religion.

Unfortunately, many social conflicts have arisen over a difference of religions.

The best way to look at the world’s religions is to organize them according to their historical development. The following charts give examples of how various religions developed over time.



Christianity and Islam both developed out of Judaism. Christianity later divided into Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism. Then during the 16th century, the Protestantism was created from the Protestant Reformation.



Another family of religions developed in India. Buddhism was developed from Hinduism. Then the religion of Sikhism brought together the beliefs of both Islam and Hinduism and formed one religion. Zen Buddhism is a form of Buddhism that developed in Japan.