

LANGUAGE

Language is the key to the world of culture. No other single culture trait more commonly binds people together because language is a set of symbols that allow people to communicate with one another. Over time, humans have devised hundreds of alphabets. Even the basic rules for writing differ. For example, most people in Western societies write from left to right, but people in Northern Africa and Western Asia write right to left, and people in Eastern Asia write from top to bottom.

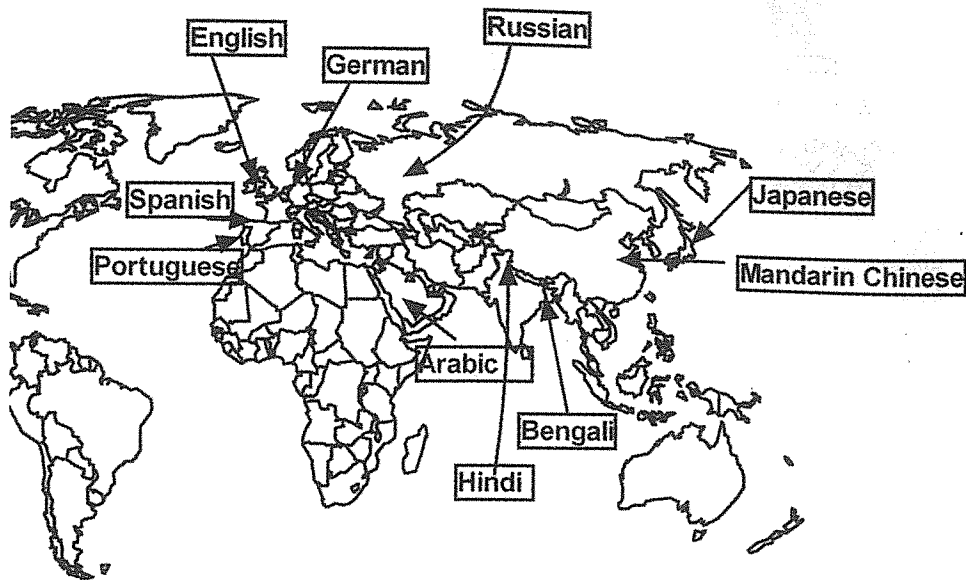
Language is a systematic means of communicating ideas and feelings through the use of signs, gestures, marks, or vocal sounds. Language not only allows for communication, but it ensures the continuity of culture, or **cultural transmission**, the process by which one generation passes culture to the next. Without language, the accumulated wisdom of previous generations would be much more difficult to pass on to children. Every society transmits culture through speech, and most today also pass it along through writing as well. The preservation of culture is much more likely if at least some of a society's members can read and write because written records often last long after they are created. Writing was invented some 5,000 years ago, although until the 20th century most ordinary people were illiterate. Today high-income nations are nearly universally literate, and literacy rates are increasing in most other countries of the world.

Linguists estimate that between 5,000 and 6,000 languages are in use in the world today, with some much more widely used than others. Only ten languages are spoken by at least 100 million people: Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, German, Mandarin and Wu Chinese, English, Hindi, Bengali, Arabic, and Japanese. These most commonly spoken languages have diffused from their origins in many ways, including through trade, conquests, and/or migrations. Some areas of the world are characterized by **linguistic fragmentation**, a condition in which many languages are spoken, each by a relatively small number of people. This condition may result in an area where many major languages have diffused or where people have existed in relative isolation from others. An example is the Caucasus region of Eastern Europe, where many different cultural groups have settled and retained their languages. Today several thousand languages are spoken by fewer than 2 million people.

THE TEN MOST COMMONLY SPOKEN LANGUAGES (Percentages for first language speakers only)

Mandarin Chinese	12.44 %
Spanish	4.85%
English	4.83%
Arabic	3.25%
Hindi	2.68%
Bengali	2.66%
Portuguese	2.62%
Russian	2.12%
Japanese	1.8%
Standard German	1.33%

Source: The CIA Factbook, 2009 estimates



Sources of Ten Major World Languages. Although there are thousands of languages spoken today, the majority of people in the world speak one of the languages indicated on the map. The map shows the origins of these languages before they diffused to many other areas of the world.

Language Families, Languages, and Dialects

How we define language depends on society's view of what makes up a cultural community, so the distinctions between language families, languages, and dialects are far from clear. However, each category represents a difference of scale, with language families having the broadest global perspective and dialects representing local variations of a language. **Linguistic geography** is the study of speech areas and their local variations by mapping word choices, pronunciations, or grammatical constructions.

- **Language families** – Languages are usually grouped into families with a shared, but fairly distant origin. The most commonly cited is the **Indo-European family**, since languages in this family are spoken by about half the world's people, with English as the most widely used. Other Indo-European languages include Spanish, English, Hindi, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, German, Marathi, French, Italian, Punjabi, and Urdu, accounting for over 1.7 billion native speakers. Romance languages form a **sub-family**, with origins in Latin, including Spanish, French, and Italian. The distant origins of the Indo-European family are thought to be in the vicinity of the Black Sea where speakers of a root language dispersed all over Europe and Central Asia, spreading their language that changed as it diffused, eventually evolving into distinct languages. Some analysts suggest that these inhabitants swept westward on horseback and conquered earlier inhabitants. Others believe that it was the spread of agriculture, not conquest, that was responsible for diffusing the Indo-European root language throughout Europe and Central Asia. Other language families include Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, Dravidian, and American Indian, and scholars propose that they too diffused from cultural hearths long ago.
- **Languages** – Languages are culturally defined, with **standard languages** those that are recognized by the government and the intellectual elite as the norm for use in schools, government, media, and other aspects of public life. Standard languages are often the

dialects identified with countries' capital cities or centers of power at the time the nations developed. For example, standard French is based on the dialect of Paris, which in the late 12th century began to dominate the land space that eventually became France. In China, standard Chinese is Mandarin Chinese heard in and around the capital, Beijing. However, many other versions of the language are spoken, including Wu Chinese, which is spoken in Shanghai and many other major cities south of Beijing. Sometimes, especially in multilingual states, a standard language may be designated as an **official language**, or the language endorsed and recognized by the government as the one that everyone should know and use. Countries may designate more than one official language, especially if linguistically distinct groups lobby the government for recognition of their languages.

- **Dialects** – On the sub-national scale, dialects may be thought of as regional variants of a standard language. Although most people in the country may understand the standard language, they speak with differences in vocabulary, and they put words together in phrases in different ways. Also, pronunciations vary, and people in some areas speak more quickly or slowly than people in other areas. An accent reveals almost anyone's regional home. Linguistic geographers map the area in which particular words are used, marking their limits as **isoglosses**, boundaries within which the words are spoken. An isogloss is not a clear line of demarcation, however, with the use of particular words fading as the boundary is approached. Major languages that have diffused widely from their origins often have hundreds of dialects. For example, on the world level British, American, Indian, and Australian English are all distinctive dialects. Regionally, in Britain alone, dialects may be grouped in three ways: Southern British English, Northern British English, and Scottish English, each containing several more localized variations. Dialect regions in the eastern United States may be divided into the North (New England and adjacent Canada extending to a secondary dialect area centered in New York City), the Midland (central New Jersey to central Delaware, spreading extensively across the interior of the United States and Canada), and the South (East Coast from Chesapeake Bay south). Dozens of other dialects exist in the mid-section and along the West Coast.

Coping with Language Barriers

People from different language groups are often quite creative in trying to communicate, even though their native tongues are mutually incomprehensible. **Bilingualism** (the ability to communicate in two languages) and **multilingualism** (the ability to communicate in more than two languages) may permit one person to speak the common language, or both to switch to a jointly understood third language. However, long-term contact between less skilled people sometimes results in the creation of a **pidgin**, an amalgamation of languages that borrows words from several. A pidgin is a hybrid that serves as a second language for everyone who uses it. For example, Lingala is a hybrid of Congolese dialects that the French invented to aid in communication among some 270 ethnic groups. If a pidgin becomes the first language of a group of speakers – who may have lost their former native tongue through disuse – a **creole** has evolved. An example is Haitian Creole, the language of Haiti, derived from pidginized French used in the slave trade.

An established language that comes to be spoken and understood over a large area is sometimes called a **lingua franca**, named after a medieval dialect of France spoken by Crusaders from various European



The modern area around the Mediterranean Sea. Most of the area around the Mediterranean Sea was dominated by the Roman Empire by the early 2nd century C.E. As political power spread, Latin became the *lingua franca* of the area. Once the empire fell, the area reverted to cultural practices of its various ethnicities, as reflected in the country and city names on the modern map. However, Latin blended with native tongues to create modern languages of Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian, and Portuguese.

countries as they pursued their quest to recapture the Holy Lands from the Turks. After the Crusades were over the language remained useful in the regions around the eastern Mediterranean Sea to facilitate trade and travel. Many years earlier, between 300 B.C.E. and 500 C.E., the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean was Greek, which was later replaced by Latin, the Roman language. Latin became the standard language of the entire Roman Empire, which stretched from Britain in the Northwest to lands far east of the Mediterranean. After the fall of the empire, people became isolated from one another and reverted to speaking their individual dialects that had never disappeared entirely, and Latin became a “dead” language. However, even though it did not survive as a major language, its influence is still seen in the development of the “Romance languages” that combined local dialects with Latin to create major modern languages such as French, Italian, and Spanish.

Today an important example of a *lingua franca* is English, which has become a language of international communication. The rapid growth in importance of English is reflected in the large number of students learning English as a second language in schools in many countries around the world. Some 200 million people speak English fluently as a second language, and countless others have some working knowledge of the language. Other than English, modern *lingua franca* languages include Swahili in East Africa, Hindustani in South Asia, and Russian in the former Soviet Union.

Toponymy

Toponymy is the study of place names, a special interest of linguistic geography. Place names become a part of the cultural landscape that remains long after the name givers have disappeared from the scene. In the United States, a classic study of toponymy is George Stewart’s *Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States*. A careful study of a map can reveal cultural identities and histories by simply noticing names of geographical and political features. For example, many names honor kings, queens, or heroes, such as “Maryland” for Queen Mary, “Virginia” for the Virgin Queen Elizabeth, “Carolina” and “Georgia” for English kings Charles and George. Other names reflect geographical origins: “York” (New York), the “Jersey Isles” (New Jersey), and “Hampshire”

(New Hampshire). Localized or temporary settlements, such as the Dutch around New York Harbor, live on in their place names, “Breukelyn” (Brooklyn) and “Haarlem” (Harlem). Some place names are simply descriptive (“Rocky Mountains,” “Salt Lake City”), and others denote incidents or events (“Battle Creek,” Michigan) or commemorate religious figures (“San Francisco,” “St. Louis”). In Canada, French ethnicity is reflected in place names in Quebec: “Trois-Rivieres,” “Grand Mère,” “Chateau-Richer,” “Montreal,” and “Quebec.”

Many place names have two or more parts. For example, names often contain the word “town,” “ton,” “burgh,” or “ville” (all references to a town) and a person (“Johnstown,” “Pottstown,” “Youngstown,” “Charleston,” “Princeton,” “Pittsburgh,” “Knoxville,” “Nashville”). Other two part names use prefixes, such as “new,” “big,” or “little,” that appear in many languages. An example is “Big River” in English, which is found as “Rio Grande” in Spanish, and “Mississippi” in Algonquin.

Language Extinction

Extinct languages were once in use, but are no longer spoken or read in daily activities by anyone in the world. The process of extinction no doubt has been going on throughout history and prehistory, but it seems to be accelerating as communication and transportation improvements bring world languages to most parts of the globe. An example of an extinct language is Gothic, widely spoken by people in Eastern and Northern Europe during the 3rd century C.E. The entire language family that Gothic originated from has disappeared, with the latest speakers of Gothic dying out in the Crimean area of Russia during the 16th century.

Some organizations are trying to preserve endangered languages, as evidenced by the European Union’s European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages, which provides financial support, especially to Celtic languages. Ethnic groups have also pushed for measures to preserve their languages, such as the movement in Wales to continue to teach Welsh, not just English, in their schools. In modern day Peru about 3 to 4 million people speak the native language Quechua, with a few others in Bolivia and Ecuador. Spanish has been the dominant language of these countries since the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, and Quechua has been in slow decline, spoken mainly in rural areas. However, in recent days two members of Peru’s Congress have insisted on delivering their speeches in Quechua, so that the legislature has been forced to hire translators. On an international level, Google has launched a version of its search engine in Quechua, and Microsoft has provided Quechua translations of its Windows and Office programs. In 2006 Peru’s president signed a law making discrimination on the basis of language a criminal offence.

RELIGION

Unlike language, which is important in all cultures, religion varies in its cultural influence. Historically, almost all cultures have centered on religion, and today many still do. However, in recent years other ideologies have replaced religion as key cultural components in some societies. One such ideology is **humanism**, with roots in Ancient Greece and Rome (and more recently the European Renaissance), which emphasizes the ability of human beings to guide their own lives. Another is **Marxism**, which transformed communism into a central ideology in many areas during the 20th century. However, even in societies that are largely non-religious, people are strongly influenced by religious values from earlier days.

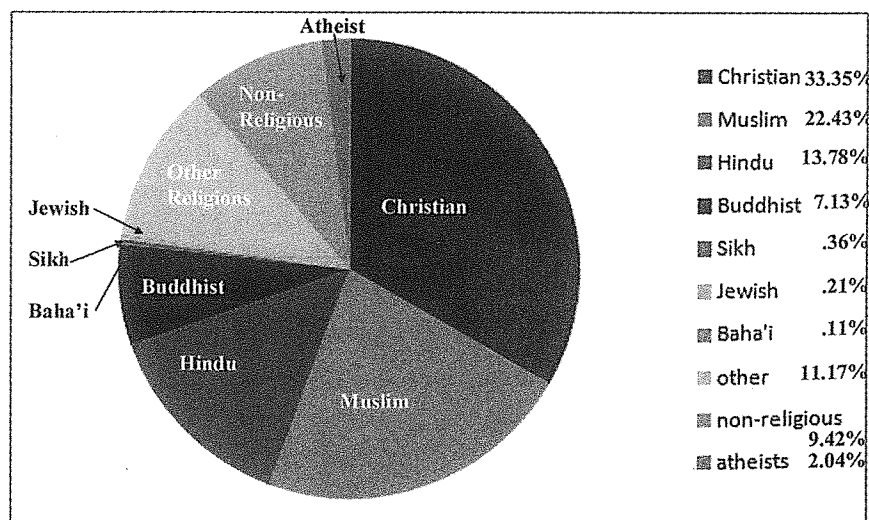
Religion distinguishes itself from other belief systems by its emphasis on the sacred and divine. According to French sociologist Emile Durkheim, religion is important in explaining anything that surpasses the limits of our knowledge. As human beings, we define most objects, events, and experiences as **profane**, or ordinary, but we define some things as **sacred**, or extraordinary, inspiring a sense of awe and reverence. Religions usually explain the relationship of the individual to the world, as well as the meaning of life and death, and what happens to people after they die. These beliefs become intertwined with other values, beliefs, and customs of the society so that they become basic to a people's way of life. For example, almost since its founding Islam has been the basis for *shari'a* law that defines the political systems of many Muslim countries.

Geographers are interested in religion because it shapes the cultural landscape, with predominant religions varying among regions of the world. Geographers document the places where various religions are located and offer explanations as to why some religions have diffused globally, whereas others have remained highly localized.

Universalizing Religions

The three main **universalizing religions** are Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Each attempts to be global in its appeal to all people, wherever they may live in the world, not just to those in one location. They contrast to **ethnic religions** that appeal primarily to one group of people living in one place. About 60% of the world's population identifies with a universalizing religion, 24% to an ethnic religion, and about 16% to no religion. Each of the three universalizing religions is divided into subgroups:

- **Branches** are large and basic divisions within a religion.
- **Denominations** are divisions of branches that unite local groups in a single administrative body.
- **Sects** are relatively small groups that do not affiliate with the more mainstream denominations.



Major Religions of the World as a Percentage of World Population. Although there are many different religions in the world, most people that call themselves religious adhere to the few religions identified on the chart. More than 60% of the world's population identifies with one of the three universalizing religions: Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. The largest single ethnic religion is Hinduism, with nearly 14% of the world's population, mostly located on the Indian subcontinent.

Christianity

Christianity has by far the most followers, with about 2.3 billion people worldwide calling themselves Christians. It also has the most widespread distribution, and it is the predominant religion in North America, South America, Europe, and Australia. Christianity has three major branches:

- **Roman Catholic** – About 50% of the world’s Christians are Roman Catholic, with concentrations in Latin America, French Canada (Quebec), Central Africa, and Southern and Eastern Europe.
- **Protestant** – About 18% of the world’s Christians are Protestants. This branch first split from the Catholic Church in the 16th century, and it later divided into hundreds of denominations. Protestantism is strong in North America, Northern Europe, Britain, South Africa, and Australia.
- **Eastern Orthodox** – About 12% of all Christians are Eastern Orthodox, a branch that officially split from Roman Catholicism in the 11th century C.E. It is strong in Eastern Europe and Russia.

Other Christians affiliate with a variety of African, Asian, and Latin American churches that cannot be categorized with the three major branches. Many communities were isolated from others at an early point in the development of the religion, but have remained Christian over the centuries. Examples are the Ethiopian Church, with about 10 million followers, and the Coptic Church of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea with about 50 million adherents.

More than one-half of U.S. adults consider themselves Protestants and one-fourth identify as Catholics. Only about 4% – according to an ABC news poll in 2011 – identify as adherents to a non-Christian religion – Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and a smattering of others. Although the diversity of Protestant denominations is great, regional differences mean that most people live in communities where one denomination predominates. For example, Baptists prevail in the southern states from Texas east to Virginia and Georgia. Many Methodists live in the Northeast and the Southwest, and Lutherans concentrate in Minnesota and North Dakota. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) live mainly in the state

PROTESTANTISM IN THE UNITED STATES (as a percentage of total population)

Baptist Church	16%
Methodist Church	7%
Pentecostal Church	6%
Lutheran Church	3%
Presbyterian Church	2%
Episcopalian Church	1%

Christianity in the United States. About 50% of the U.S. population is Protestant, but they belong to hundreds of different denominations and sects. Even the major denominations above are divided into different churches. For example, Baptists are divided into Southern Baptists, Northern Baptists, National Baptists, National Missionary Baptists, and Progressive National Baptists. Many Protestants belong to independent denominations that do not affiliate with the major groups listed above.

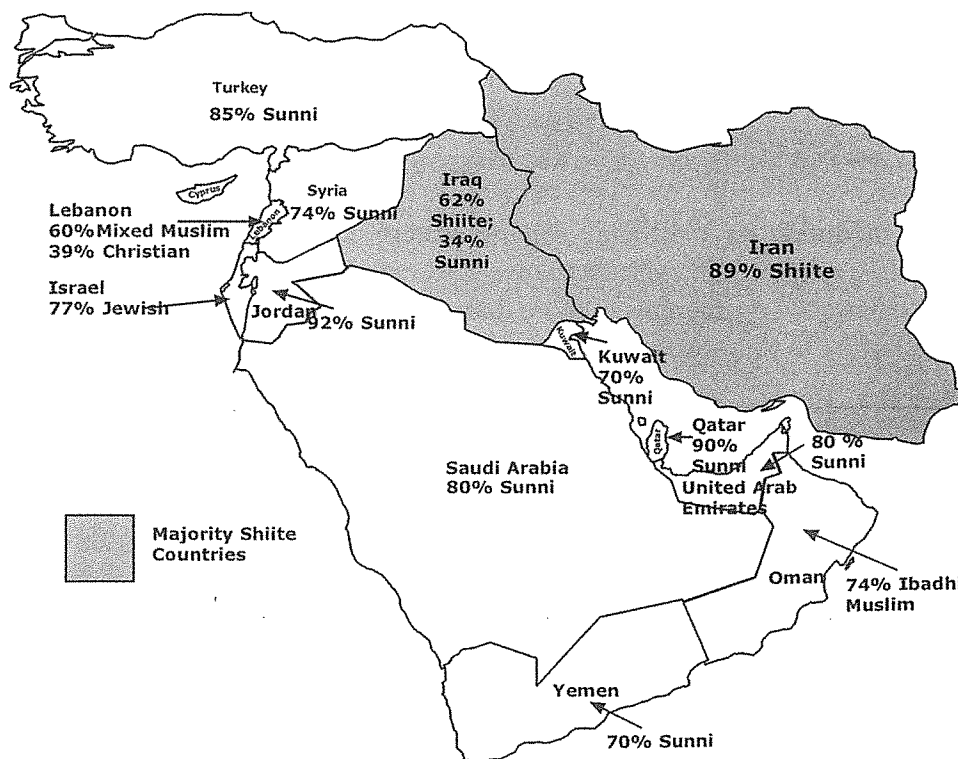
of Utah and its surrounding areas. These patterns are determined partly by movements of people in history. For example, Mormons traveled to Utah to escape religious persecution in the east, and immigrants from Scandinavia brought their Lutheran religion with them to the northern part of the Midwest.

Islam

The second largest world religion is Islam, with about 1.6 billion adherents. It is the predominant religion of the Middle East from North Africa to Central Asia, but about half of the world's Muslims live in four countries outside the Middle East: Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. The religion is spreading rapidly to other areas, including North America and Europe, and overall it is growing more quickly than Christianity is. For example, there are about 2 Muslims in the United States, making Islam a significant part of religious life in that country. It is also the youngest of the world religions, with a founding date in the 7th century C.E. on the Arabian Peninsula.

Islam is divided into two main branches:

- **Sunni** comprise 83% of all Muslims and is the largest branch in the Middle East and Asia. Although many live in the Middle East, the country with the largest concentration of Sunni Muslims is Indonesia.
- **Shiites** make up about 16% of all Muslims, and most are located in only a few countries of the Middle East. Nearly 40% of all Shiites live in Iran, 15% in Pakistan, 10% in Iraq, and 10% in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and Yemen.



Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East. Only two countries in the Middle East are majority Shiite: Iran and Iraq. All the rest, with the exceptions of Lebanon and Israel, are majority Sunni. A great deal of ethnic identity is based on Sunni or Shiite affiliation, and the two branches historically have experienced many tensions. The religious split is part of the reason the Middle East is one of the political and religious "hot spots" of our age.

The split between Sunni and Shiite branches occurred very early in the history of the religion, when an argument erupted over the rightful successor to Muhammad, the religion's 7th century founder. The Sunni believed that the successor should be chosen by agreement among the religious leaders, but the Shiites believed that the successor should be a member of Muhammad's family. The Sunni won the argument, but the Shiites refused to accept the decision, and the two branches have maintained their separate identities ever since, creating major divisions among and within Muslim countries that have often led to conflict.

Buddhism

Although Buddhism is the world's third major universalizing religion, it has only 365 million followers, considerably fewer than Christianity and Islam have. The religion began on the Indian subcontinent, where its founder, Siddhartha (the Buddha) lived. The religion diffused along the Silk Road and water routes across the Indian Ocean, mainly to East and Southeast Asia, where it remains a strong religion today. Today India is overwhelmingly Hindu and Islam, with only a small fraction of its citizens identifying as Buddhists.

Buddhism has three main branches:

- **Mahayana** – 56% of Buddhists are Mahayana, or “Big Wheel,” characterized by broad incorporation of ideas and gods from other religions as it spread into East Asia.
- **Theraveda** – About 38% of Buddhists are Theraveda, characterized by a stricter adherence to the original teachings of the Buddha. This branch is strong in Southeast Asia.
- **Tantrayana** – Only about 6% of Buddhists are Tantrayana, the “Vehicle of the Text,” with its emphasis on magic as well as different meditation techniques. It is found primarily in Tibet and Mongolia.

An accurate count of Buddhists is difficult because eastern religions don't require their followers to identify with only one religion. In contrast to most Westerners, many Asians combine their religious beliefs so that they claim to be adherents to more than one belief system. For example, in Japan, many Buddhists also subscribe to Shintoism, a native Japanese religion.

Other Universalizing Religions

Two other religions – **Sikhism** and **Baha'i** – qualify as universalizing religions because they actively seek converts to their broad views and beliefs. About 21 million Sikhs live in the Punjab region of India, with about 3 million more living elsewhere. Sikhs stress continual improvement and movement toward perfection by taking individual responsibility for their actions, a universal message that appeals to many. Sikhism combines beliefs from Hinduism and Islam – the two largest religions on the Indian subcontinent – but centers on the teachings of its founder, Guru Nanak. Baha'i is a relatively new faith, founded in Iran in 1844 by Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad, known as the Bab (Persian for “gateway”). Most followers live in Iran, where they are viewed by some Shiite Muslims as heretics to the faith, since they believe that Husayn 'Ali Nuri (Known as Baha'u'llah, or “Glory of God”) was the prophet and messenger of God, not Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic faith.

Ethnic Religions

Ethnic religions differ from universalizing religions in that they generally do not seek converts outside the group that gave rise to the religion. As a result, they tend to be spatially concentrated. The main exception is Judaism, whose adherents are widely scattered.

Hinduism

Although Hinduism is the world's third largest religion, most of its 800 million adherents live in India. A few live in the neighboring country of Nepal, and only about 1% are dispersed around the world. Hindus make up 80% of the population of India, 90% of Nepal, and a small minority in every other country. Hinduism is generally regarded as the world's oldest organized religion still in practice, but it is not tightly organized into branches or denominations. It has no central god or a single holy book, so each individual decides the best way to worship. There is a belief in the existence of a universal spirit (Brahman) that manifests itself in many shapes and forms, including the gods Vishnu and Shiva, but Hindus show allegiance to different gods.

The Chinese Religions

Because eastern religions do not require their followers to adhere to only one faith, Buddhism often blends with local belief systems, including **Confucianism** and **Daoism**. Neither religion involves concepts of supernatural omnipotence, so they are often viewed as philosophies, not religions. Confucianism provides a code of moral conduct based on humaneness and family loyalty. Daoism holds that human happiness lies in maintaining proper harmony with nature. These faiths survive in China today, and are also influential in Korea and Japan. There is no reliable data on the number of adherents, but the collective influence of the Chinese religious complex is huge, particularly since the religions have diffused not only to Korea and Japan, but to almost all other parts of East and Southeast Asia.

Shintoism

Shintoism is a native ethnic religion of Japan that focuses particularly on nature and reverence of ancestors. Ancient Shintoists considered forces of nature to be sacred, especially the sun and the moon, but also rivers, trees, rocks, and mountains. In the late 19th century Shintoism became the official state religion as part of an effort by the government to increase Japanese nationalism. Shintoism still thrives in Japan, although it is no longer the official state religion. Prayers are offered to ancestors, and shrines mark reverence for house deities.

Judaism

Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions, with a founding around 2000 B.C.E. by Abraham in the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Throughout its long existence, it has remained fundamentally an ethnic religion, a fact reflected in its relatively low numbers – about 15 million adherents. Unlike most other ethnic religions, its members are spread widely across the earth, mainly because of **diaspora**, or forced exodus from their lands of origin. About 6 millions Jews live in the United States, 4 million in Israel, and 2 million in the former Soviet Union. Within the United States,

Jews are heavily concentrated in the urban Northeast, with about one-third living in the New York area alone. The only country where Jews constitute a majority is Israel, a country created in 1948 as the Jewish homeland, the area where the religion began.

The influence of Judaism expands far beyond its numbers. It was the first recorded **monotheistic religion**, centered on the belief in one God. Christianity and Islam also have their roots in Judaism. Jesus was born a Jew, and Muhammad traced his ancestry to Abraham.

Shamanism and Traditional Religions

Shamanism is an ethnic religion in which people follow their shaman, a religious leader and teacher who is believed to be in contact with the supernatural. The religion takes different forms, largely because its followers are isolated from one another. Shamanism is reflected in the “totem poles” of North American natives, and shamans in East Asia are believed to be in contact with the ancestors, an important value in China, Korea, and Japan. Shamanism in Africa often takes the form of **animism**, the belief that inanimate objects (rocks, mountains, rivers, plants) have spirits and conscious life. Shamanism is a **traditional religion**, an integral part of a local culture and society, but not all traditional religions are shamanist. Traditional African religions involve beliefs in a god as creator and protector, in spirits, and in a life hereafter, opening the way for Christianity and Islam to convert some Africans to their beliefs. However, most Africans still adhere to their native religions, especially among ordinary, non-elite people.

The Spatial Impact of Religions

Geographers study the impact of universalizing and ethnic religions on the landscape. In large cities around the world, the tallest, most centralized, and elaborate buildings are often religious structures. Places of worship vary with the religion – churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, pagodas – but many other structures are arranged around the religious buildings. For example, the Hindu cultural landscape – urban as well as rural – is dotted with shrines that impose minimal disruption to the natural landscape. Shrines and temples are located near water, because water is part of sacred rituals, and it is believed that gods will not venture far from water. Buddhism also has affected the natural landscape through its respect for the Bodhi tree, where the Buddha first received his enlightenment in the Ganges River Valley. Bodhi trees are protected in Buddhist lands, with the religion diffused as far as China and Japan, marking the cultural landscapes of many villages and towns.

An important religious land use that impacts the cultural landscape has to do with disposing of the dead. In several religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – the dead are buried in specially designated areas called cemeteries. Early Christians buried their dead in the yard around the church, but as these areas became overcrowded, separate burial grounds were established outside the city walls. Cemeteries may take up significant space in a community. Before the widespread development of public parks in the 19th century, cemeteries were often the only green space in cities. Cemeteries are still used as parks in Muslim countries. Because cemeteries take up land space, the government in China has ordered that the practice of burial be discontinued in order to preserve land for agriculture. Cremation is increasingly practiced instead.