



Lu | SERVE

A Traveler's Guide to

GHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Did you know there are approximately 4,000 religions worldwide and that 82% of the global population identifies as religious? Did you also know that Christianity is the largest religion in the world at 32% of the global population, yet Islam is the fastest-growing religion and is expected to overtake Christianity in total adherents by 2050?¹

Even though modern societies appear non-religious, the world population is becoming more religious, not less.² For example, approximately 81% of Americans still believe in God.³ New religions are popping up every day, and the

geographical distribution of religions is constantly changing with migration and economic integration. People are more exposed now to a diverse array of religious ideas than at any point in human history. Religion and spirituality, far from being obsolete ideas of a pre-modern age, are alive and well in the 21st century.

Global Religious Affiliation

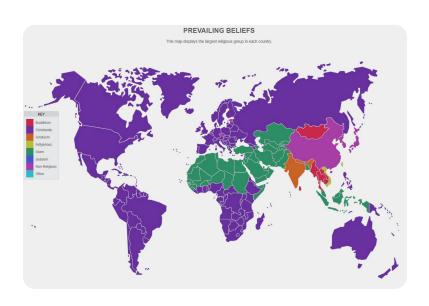
Christianity: 31.2%

Islam: 24.1%

Unaffiliated (including atheists & agnostics): 16.0%

Hinduism: 15.1% Buddhism: 6.9% Folk religions: 5.7%

Other religions (e.g., Judaism, Sikhism, Baha'i): 0.8%



WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

An increase in religiosity is not necessarily a good thing, however. If the global population is becoming more religious, what problems might that pose for Christians seeking to engage cross-culturally in the world?

I 11 Globalization

As our global community becomes increasingly interconnected through trade and communications, this increases encounters between religious communities in many modern societies. In most major US cities, one can find large groups of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists living in the same areas. When encountering different religious worldviews, knowing what others believe and how they live is important. However, globalization has led to tensions between religious groups, religious adherents, and secular governments. A heavily secularized society often puts greater pressure on people of faith to moderate (or water down) their convictions for the sake of good business and economic prosperity.



I 12 Christian Persecution

Millions of Christians around the world are persecuted every year for their faith.⁴ Christianity, even though it is the largest religion by population, is the most persecuted religious group in the world. Christians experience martyrdom, arrest, displacement, property damage, discrimination, and economic deprivation all over the world. The majority of persecution comes from other religious groups

who control the levers of political power in their countries or enjoy special privileges from their governments that afford economic and social advantages over Christians. As the world becomes more religious, hostility toward the followers of Christ will likely increase.

In 2023 alone:

More than 5,000 Christians were martyred More than 4,000 detained

More than 300,000 displaced

More than 365 million persecuted for their faith

Nearly 15,000 church properties were attacked 1 in 7 Christians around the world faced persecution

I 13 Postmodernism & the Post-Christian West

Postmodernism refers to a philosophical worldview that asserts all knowledge and all claims to truth are relative; that is, all claims to knowledge or truth are limited to one's perspective and that no one can know any objective, absolute, or universal truth about reality. One implication of this worldview is a rejection of any religion as the exclusive path to truth and to God. In postmodernism, it is both intolerant and arrogant to claim that one's religion is the only true religion.



Postmodernism has had enormous influence in western societies, the United States included. Christian adherents as a percentage of the population have declined dramatically in the United States and Europe in recent decades.⁵ By 2050, Islam is expected to equal the same percentage of the population as Christianity, and more than 60 million Christians are predicted to change their religion. In addition, the global percentage of Christians living in Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to rise from 24% in 2020 to nearly 40% by 2050, while Western nations become increasingly atheistic or agnostic.⁶

1.4 "Remixed" Religion



By 2021, the dominant worldview among younger generations of Americans had become a new form of syncretism, a mixing of "various worldviews that provides each individual with a customized understanding of, and response to life." Sociologists describe this phenomenon among young people as "Remix" Religion. By remixing their religion, young people combine new and old forms of religions.

gion – and even aspects of pop culture and media – into personalized "faiths" with niche communities, with some existing entirely online and outside historic religious institutions, traditions, and authority structures. Shockingly, an increasing percentage of Americans, including Christians, believe in some aspect of New Age religion (astrology, reincarnation, physics, spiritual energy). In keeping with this trend, up to 27% of Americans identify as "spiritual, but not religious," and more than 50% of Americans, including many Christians, may qualify as religiously "remixed."

Our increasingly complex, globalized world presents unique opportunities and challenges for Christians who follow the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20). Globalization, persecution, postmodernism, and remixed religion make the task of evangelism complicated and challenging. To engage cross-culturally and effectively build the kingdom of Christ in the world, Christians must be "wise as serpents and gentle as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

WHAT IS A RELIGION?

Defining the term "religion" is notoriously difficult, but a basic definition includes (1) a belief in a higher power (or powers) combined with (2) a reverence and dependence on that power and (3) special appeals made to that power for protection, forgiveness, blessings, and related concepts. Another definition would be "a system of beliefs and practices that provides values to give life meaning and coherence by directing a person toward transcendence."

A religion is not merely a system of beliefs, however. It encompasses a person's whole life and gives meaning to their existence. When Christians share the gospel with people of other faiths, they should acknowledge that to the adherents of other religions, their belief system represents meaning, purpose, value, and morality. When a follower of Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism is asked to convert and follow Christ, it entails a radical change to that individual's life, values, purpose, and sense of meaning as well as their relationships with their friends and family. To change one's religion is a significant decision – a choice with earthly and eternal significance.



WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF RELIGION?

3.1 Monotheistic Religions

Monotheism is the belief in only one God. Three major monotheistic religions are Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. These three are considered the three "great" monotheistic religions.







3.2 Polytheistic Religions

Polytheism is the worship of many gods, perhaps with one being the greatest (i.e., Henotheism). The largest and most well-known polytheistic religion is Hinduism, which has millions of gods. Other well-known polytheistic religions are Greco-Roman and Norse mythologies, but these are not considered active religions today.



3.3 Tribal, Folk, or Animistic Religions

Animism is a belief that personal and impersonal forces animate the physical world and that a person can communicate with and sometimes control these forces through special rituals. Animistic religions include African tribal religions, Native American religions, Haitian Voodoo, and other Indigenous religions. At times, Japanese Shinto is classified as animistic, but it may also be classified as polytheistic.



3.4 Non-theistic Religions

Non-theistic religions are philosophies that contain many elements of a religion, such as meaning, purpose, value, and transcendence, but they lack belief in a supreme deity (or God). Buddhism is the most famous example of a non-theistic religion. Confucianism and Taoism can also fit this classification, but certain schools of Taoism include veneration of gods, spirits, and ancestors.



3.5 Secular "Religions"

Although secular worldviews are not technically religions, they exhibit common elements of religion, such as a search for meaning and often a quest for transcendence. For example, atheism is the belief that God does not exist; naturalism is the belief that nothing exists outside of the natural universe; and materialism is the belief that all things in the universe, including consciousness, come from physical matter. These worldviews are non-religious, and a person who holds these beliefs must deny any ultimate meaning or purpose to life. Ironically, adherents of these worldviews cannot escape the quest for meaning and transcendence, which sometimes manifests through a devotion to ideologies such as Scientism (e.g., Neo-Darwinism), Statism (e.g., fascism, communism), or Self-Worship (e.g., Hedonism, Transhumanism, Romanticism).



3.6 New and (re)Emerging Religions

Emerging religions represent new (or very old) movements and religious practices that have gained widespread public acceptance. Sikhism, founded in 1469, is a relatively new religion that seeks peace and unity among Hindus and Muslims. Baha'i is a monotheistic offshoot of Islam and one of the world's youngest major religions (1844). Baha'i is characterized by pluralism, political correctness, and a desire for world peace. Wicca, Witchcraft, and the Occult are forms of spiritualism that are very old but have gone "mainstream" in recent decades largely because of the internet and social media. Today, there are over 1 million practitioners of witchcraft in the United States alone.10

WHERE DOES RELIGION COME FROM?

4.1 Subjective Theories of Religion

Skeptics may argue that the origin of religion can be explained in purely naturalistic terms. According to this argument, if it can be shown that religion is a way to fulfill human psychological needs, then appeals to the supernatural are unnecessary to explain the emergence of religious practice. Various models have been proposed:

- 1. Religion does not start with a set of propositional beliefs (i.e., God, Creation, etc.) but with feelings of absolute dependence. Later, people called this feeling of dependence "God."
- 2. The concept of "God" is merely a collection of idealized traits such as love, power, and knowledge. If someone believes in God, they merely believe in an idealized version of the self
- 3. Religion stems from the basic human need for a father figure. The concept of "God" is merely an idealized father image.
- **4.** Religion stems from an inner subconscious feeling of "the holy" or "the majestic." God
 - is merely this subconscious idea that provokes both fear and attraction in us
- **5.** Religion is a manifestation of subconscious symbols. These symbols manifest in the world as rituals, sacred buildings. artifacts, and festivals.
- 6. Religion is a manifestation of symbolic "archetypes" such as a loving old man, a hero, or an evil dragon.11

The idea that religion is rooted in symbolic archetypes was put forward by the famous psychologist, Carl Jung. Jung believed that universal ideas and themes within the human subconscious formed human experience. These themes came to be known as "Jungian archetypes." Each person embodies one primary archetype, but it can be influence by culture and environment. Jung's ideas were greatly influential on the renowned psychologist and author, Jordan Peterson. Peterson has produced several lectures on biblical stories while using Carl Jung's ideas as his interpretive framework.

The subjective theories may explain something about human nature, but they do not explain away the supernatural. Simply because religion fulfills certain psychological needs and that religion correlates to inner subconscious feelings of God, it does not logically entail that the objects of religion (i.e., God, gods) are not real. Our inner subconscious feelings may align with what is true about the world: that the supernatural is real and that God does exist. For all we know, God could have created human beings with subconscious feelings of Himself in order to direct them toward true worship.

Hence, subjective theories of religion can only explain the human aspects of religious belief, not whether these beliefs are true or false. In the end, the origin of religion is a metaphysical question, not simply a historical question.¹²

4.2 Evolutionary Theories of Religion

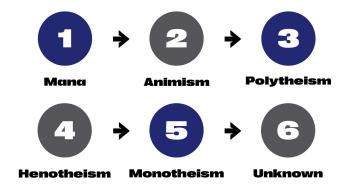
Evolutionary theories of religion explain the emergence of religion in gradual developmental stages, from animistic religions of early primitive tribes to the great monotheistic religions and post-religious "scientific" worldviews of today.13 According to the evolutionary model, the sequence of religious development looks something like this:

Christian theologian and philosopher of religion, Winfried Corduan, notes three important methodological assumptions within the evolutionary theory:

Methodological naturalism: Religion must be explained without reference to the supernatural.

Primitivism: Religion began at a primitive level and evolved to greater complexity.

Cultural bias: Primitive cultures are closer to the religion of early human beings.



However, there are two critical weaknesses of the evolutionary theory. First, anthropologists have never observed this sequence of development in any culture. Rather, changes in religious practices have occurred in every direction. Second, evolutionary theory predicts that the earliest stages of religion will not hold beliefs in gods, especially a Creator God. However, these cultures do, in fact, have beliefs in gods.14

I 4.3 Original Monotheism

The theory of original monotheism holds that religion did not evolve gradually from tribal animism. Rather, all cultures started with a common tradition of belief in an original Creator God. The study of anthropology and early religious writings has uncovered abundant evidence supporting this claim. For example, in the 1930s, a famous anthropologist and historian, Rev. Wilhelm Schmidt, published an extensive study demonstrating that the vast majority of Indigenous religions contained a belief in a Supreme Being, commonly referred to as the "Sky God" or "High God." Moreover, these Indigenous religions frequently ascribed the same attributes to this Supreme Being: eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, beneficence, morality, and creator. Schmidt's work provides strong evidence that monotheism was an essential property of ancient human civilizations before various groups split off and separated from one another.15

Virtually all religious traditions contain traces of this original monotheism. Philosopher of religion Winfried Corduan gives nine elements of this tradition that are commonly found across continents, time periods, and languages:

- 1. There is one God who has personhood (as opposed to being an impersonal force).
- 2. God is referred to with masculine grammar and has masculine qualities.
- **3.** God apparently lives in the sky (heaven).
- 4. God has great knowledge and power.
- 5. God created the world.
- **6.** God is the author of standards of good and evil.
- Human beings are God's creatures and are expected to abide by God's standards.
- **8.** Human beings have become alienated from God by disobeying God's standards.
- 9. God has provided a method for overcoming the alienation. 16

The biblical worldview affirms this theory of original monotheism. In the biblical worldview. God created the world and revealed Himself in historical space-time through divine revelation about the origin of creation and humanity's place in it. The biblical worldview also explains

"A worldview is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of our world."

James Sire, The Universe Next Door, p 17.

why religion is a universal human desire and how the world has become home to so many religious ideas:

- 1. The Bible says that eternity is set on the hearts of men (Eccl. 3:11).
- **2.** The moral law is written on every heart (Rom. 2:15).
- **3.** Creation itself reveals the Creator to all people (Rom. 1:20).
- 4. Man is separated from God and has turned to false worship (Rom. 1).



4.4 Devolution, not Evolution

According to the biblical worldview, the historical development of religion points to a degradation away from original monotheism into various forms of worship to other gods and spirits. Why would this be the case? The Bible says that human beings cannot help but worship something, but they have been alienated from God by sin. Instead of turning to God, they turned to idols and became darkened in their minds (Rom. 1). As a result, the world is full of idolatry and false worship:









- Idols come in many forms and are not limited to physical objects (Matt. 6:24; Col. 3:5).
- 2. Idols separate people from God and lead to sin, suffering, and death (Gal. 5:19-21; Rom. 1:21-23; 1 John 5:21).
- **3.** Idols can do nothing to save people (Ps. 115:4-8; Isa. 44:9-20).
- 4. Idols represent satanic/demonic powers that enslave people (Dt. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20; Gal. 4:8-9).

According to the biblical worldview, God has not forsaken human beings but has provided a way to overcome separation and spiritual darkness. The gospel of Jesus Christ is God's response to human sin and alienation:

- 1. God does not desire that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).
- 2. God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:16-17).
- 3. God is reclaiming the nations back to true worship and fellowship with Him (Matt. 28:19-20; Phil. 2:6-10; Rev. 7:9).



THE UNIQUE HOPE OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

5.1 The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

There is much common ground between the three great monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Still, Christianity drastically differs from Judaism and Islam regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christianity maintains that Jesus was God in the flesh and the Second Person of the Trinity. Judaism and Islam both hold to a unitarian (or oneness) conception of God. In these faiths, God is one person, not three. The doctrines of the Trinity and the Son of God's incarnation as Jesus Christ set Christianity apart from all theistic religions.

- **1.** Jesus is uniquely God incarnate (Phil. 5:5-11).
- **2.** He is the only way of salvation (Jn. 14:6).
- 3. His death uniquely satisfies the penalty for man's sin (Rom. 3:25-26).
- **4.** He is uniquely the full revelation of God (Heb. 1:1-3; 2 Tim. 1:9-10).
- **5.** He will return, and all earthly authority will be subject to Him (Rev. 19:11-21).

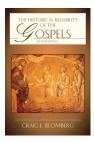
■ 5.2 The Importance of History

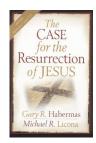
Unlike many religions that are based on myths and legends not tied to historical reality, the historical facts about Jesus are fundamental to the validity of the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15). Several historical facts provide strong evidence for the truth of the resurrection:

- **1.** Jesus of Nazareth was a historical person who lived in 1st-century Palestine.
- **2.** Jesus claimed to be God and even predicted his own death and resurrection.
- 3. He was crucified by the Romans and buried in a tomb.
- His tomb was later found empty.
- 5. His followers claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus and endured violent deaths while maintaining their beliefs.
- **6.** His followers formed creeds about Jesus' divinity within a few years of his death.
- 7. The Apostle Paul, formerly a Jewish Pharisee and persecutor of Christianity, had a radical conversion after claiming to have encountered the resurrected Christ.
- 8. James, a brother of Jesus and former skeptic, converted and was martyred.

5.3 The Inadequacy of Other Worldviews

Each worldview will attempt to account for the life and work of Jesus differently. Naturalism, for example, rejects belief in the supernatural and, therefore, any belief in miracles. Naturalistic worldviews will conclude that Jesus was only a man, and possibly a great moral teacher, but he did not perform miracles and was not God. Some naturalists may conclude Jesus was deluded, self-deceived, or a liar. However, naturalism fails to account for the historical evidence regarding Jesus' claims and resurrection.





Transcendentalism holds that all reality is spiritual and that God either is the universe (pantheism) or is part of the universe (panentheism). Transcendental religions might view Jesus as an enlightened teacher who showed the way to peace or a cosmic master who ascended this plain of reality for another. They also might claim that Jesus' true teachings have been distorted by later followers – a common claim among critics of Christianity, Again, one must ask whether the transcendental view fits the historical evidence about Jesus' claims and resurrection.

5.4 The Exclusivity of Christianity



Exclusivism means that only one religion is true, and all others are false. Christian exclusivism says that only those who put their faith in Jesus Christ will be

saved. This means that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the way back to God. In the modern age, Christian exclusivism is often viewed as arrogant, intolerant, and outmoded. In its place, other options are offered:

- 1. Pluralism: Pluralism is the belief that all religions and worldviews essentially lead to the same spiritual destination, that "all roads lead up the mountain to God." No single religion has an exclusive claim to the truth or salvation.
- 2. Universalism: Universalism, like pluralism, holds that everyone will go to heaven or transcend this world into a blissful afterlife. However, unlike pluralism, universalism anchors salvation in one religion, such as Christian Universalism. In this view, every person will eventually be saved by Christ, even if they do not believe in Christ.
- 3. Inclusivism: Inclusivism defers from pluralism and universalism by maintaining that only one religion is true but that some people (not all) may be saved outside of that religion. Inclusivism implies that God may accept the sincere worship of some religious adherents outside of Christianity.







The problem with these options is the biblical evidence pointing to the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ:

- Jesus Christ claimed to be God and the only way of salvation (Jn. 3:18, 6:29, 14:6).
- 2. Jesus' followers claimed He was God and the only way of salvation (Acts 4:12, 16:31; Rom. 10:9-15; Gal. 1:5; 1 Tim. 2:5).
- **3.** Jesus claimed that other religions were false (Jn. 3:18, 8:19, 24, 41-42, 44, 47).
- 4. Jesus' followers also claimed other religions were false (Acts 13:39, 17:22-31, 26:17-18; 1 Cor. 10:20).

Christians must take seriously the responsibility to spread the truth of Jesus Christ to the world. Without the knowledge of Christ, people remain in darkness and spiritual bondage. It is God's desire to see all people turn from their ways, receive forgiveness of sin, and spend eternity in fellowship with Him. Christians are responsible for effectively communicating the gospel of God's grace to every tribe, tongue, nation, and people, but they cannot do this while lacking in knowledge of the worldviews, history, traditions, and religious practices of other people. Hence, there are good reasons to learn about other religions:

- 1. Learning about religions helps us understand our world better. Understanding their traditions, customs, and beliefs allows us to recognize how these religions influence nations, peoples, and history.
- 2. To make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20), we must build bridges to the gospel by relating biblical concepts and categories to the cultural understanding of these other religions. This process is called contextualization (e.g., Acts 17:16-34).
- 3. Spiritual warfare is real, and evangelism is a major part of our wartime strategy. When souls are converted to Christ, the Bible says they are rescued from the domain of darkness (Col. 1:13). To engage the world with an evangelistic mindset is to take seriously the spiritual darkness that enslaves millions of people and to confront it with the light of the gospel (Eph. 6:10-17).
- **4.** By understanding other religions, we can bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).



Appendix

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1 7:1 Books and Articles

- Boyett, Jason. Twelve Major World Religions: The Beliefs, Rituals, Traditions of Humanity's Most Influential Faiths. Naperville, IL: Callisto Publishing, 2016.
- Burton, Tara Isabelle. Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World. New York: Public Affairs. 2022.
- **3.** Carmen, Molly and David Closson. "New Barna Research Reveals Extent of America's Loss of Faith." Family Research Council. Accessed: February, 25, 2025. https://www.frc.org/blog/2021/06/new-barna-research-reveals-extent-americas-loss-faith.
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- 12. Wootten, Joshua. "The Top Countries Facing Christian Persecution: Open Doors Releases 2024 World Watch List." The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Accessed: February, 25, 2025. https://erlc.com/resource/the-top-countries-facing-christian-persecution/.

7.2 References

- ¹ Chit Chart, "Visualizing the World's Most Popular Religions," accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/visualizing-religions-worldwide/.
- ² Pew Research Center, "Key Findings from the Global Religious Futures Project," accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.pewre-search.org/religion/2022/t2/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/.
- ³ Gallup, "How Many Americans Believe in God?" accessed February 28, 2025, https://news.gallup.com/poll/268205/americans-believe-qod.aspx.
- ⁴ Joshua Wootten, "The Top Countries Facing Christian Persecution: Open Doors Releases 2024 World Watch List," The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, accessed February 28, 2025, https://erlc.com/resource/the-top-countries-facing-christian-persecution/.
- ⁵ Molly Carmen and David Closson, "New Barna Research Reveals Extent of America's Loss of Faith," Family Research Council, accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.frc.org/blog/2021/06/new-barna-research-reveals-extent-americas-loss-faith.
- ⁶ Pew Research, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/.
- ⁷ Molly Carmen and David Closson, "New Barna Research Reveals Extent of America's Loss of Faith," Family Research Council, accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.frc.org/blog/2021/06/new-barna-research-reveals-extent-americas-loss-faith.
- ⁸ Tara Isabelle Burton, Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World (New York: Public Affairs, 2022), 21-22.
- 9 Wilfried Corduan, Neighboring Faiths (IVP: Downers Grove, 1998), 21.
- 10 Tara Isabelle Burton, Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World (New York: Public Affairs, 2022).
- ¹¹ Wilfried Corduan, Neighboring Faiths, 2nd ed, (IVP: Downers Grove, 2012), 28-31.
- 12 Ibid., 31.
- 13 Ibid., 32.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 39-40.
- ¹⁵ Wilhelm Schmidt, The Origin and Growth of Religion (New York: Cooper Square, 1931).
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 40.

Want to learn about other religions? Ask LU Serve for a Traveler's Guide to any of these religions:

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Indigenous Religions
Baha'i

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