Religions

Religion interests geographers because it is essential for understanding how humans occupy Earth. As always, human geographers start by asking “where?” and “why?”

Geographers document the places where various religions are located in the world and offer explanations for why some religions have widespread distributions and others are highly clustered in particular places. The predominant religion varies among regions of the world, as well as among regions within North America.

To understand why some religions occupy more space than others, geographers must look at differences among practices of various faiths. Geographers, though, are not theologians, so they stay focused on the elements of religions that are geographically significant. Geographers study spatial connections in religion:

- The distinctive place of origin of religions
- The extent of diffusion of religions from their places of origin
- The processes by which religions diffused to other locations
- The religious practices and beliefs that lead some religions to have more widespread distributions than others

Geographers find the tension in scale between globalization and local diversity especially acute in religion for a number of reasons:

- People care deeply about their religion and draw from religion their core values and beliefs, an essential element of the definition of culture (Figure 6-1).
- Some religions are actually designed to appeal to people throughout the world, whereas other religions are designed to appeal primarily to people in geographically limited areas.
- Religious values are important in understanding not only how people identify themselves, as was the case with language, but also the meaningful ways they organize the landscape.
- Most (though not all) religions require exclusive adherence, so adopting a global religion usually requires turning away from a traditional local religion. In contrast, people can learn a globally important language such as English and at the same time still speak the language of their local culture.
- As with language, migrants take their religion with them to new locations, but although migrants typically learn the language of the new location, they retain their religion.

This chapter starts by describing the distribution of major religions, and then the second section explains why some religions have diffused widely and others have not. As a major facet of culture, religion leaves a strong impact on the physical environment, discussed in the third section of the chapter.

Religion, like other cultural characteristics, can be a source of pride and a means of identification with a distinct culture. Unfortunately, intense identification with one religion can lead adherents into conflict with followers of other religions, as discussed in the fourth key issue of the chapter.

**KEY ISSUE 1** describes where religions are distributed.

The major world religions show patterns of globalization and local diversity. Some religions are distributed throughout the world, and in fact explicitly wish to be so distributed. Other religions are highly clustered and reflect diverse local cultural and physical conditions.

Similarly, the distribution of religions varies within regions; such as Europe and North America.

**KEY ISSUE 2** explains why religions have varying distributions. Some religions have well documented places of origin and processes of diffusion to other religions. Other religions have unknown origins and limited diffusion.

**KEY ISSUE 3** discusses distinctive patterns that religions have placed on the landscape. Religions have constructed places of worship and derive distinct meaning from the physical landscape.

**KEY ISSUE 4** examines conflicts among religions. Religious groups have fought with each other, as well as with governments. The attempt by adherents of one religion to organize Earth’s surface can come in conflict with attempts by others.
Where Are Religions Distributed?

Distribution of Religions

Branches of Universalizing Religions

Ethnic Religions

Then the Dalai Lama dies, Tibetan Buddhists believe that his spirit enters the body of a child. In 1937, a group of lamas located and recognized a 2-year-old child named Tenzin Gyatso as the fourteenth Dalai Lama, the incarnation of the deceased thirteenth Dalai Lama, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. The child was brought to Lhasa in 1939 when he was 4 and enthroned a year later. Priests trained the young Dalai Lama to assume leadership and sent him to college when he was 16. The Chapter Opener shows the fourteenth Dalai Lama at age 67.

The Dalai Lama—which translates as "oceanic teacher"—is not only the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism but was once also the head of the government of Tibet. Daily life in Tibet was traditionally dominated by Buddhist rites. As recently as the 1950s, one-fourth of all males were monks, and polygamy was encouraged among her males to produce enough children to prevent the population from declining. Figure 6-2 shows the Dalai Lama's former palace in Tibet's capital Lhasa, situated in the Himalaya Mountains.

China, which had ruled Tibet from 1720 until its independence in 1911, invaded the rugged, isolated country in 1950, turned it into a province named Xizang in 1951, and installed a Communist government in Tibet in 1953. The Chinese Communists sought to reduce the domination of Buddhist monks in the country's daily life by destroying monasteries and temples. Farmers were required to join agricultural communes unsuitable for their nomadic style of raising livestock, especially yaks. After crushing a rebellion in 1959, China executed or imprisoned tens of thousands and forced another 100,000, including the Dalai Lama, to emigrate. Buddhist temples were closed and demolished, and religious artifacts and scriptures were destroyed.

In recent years, the Chinese have built new roads and power plants to help raise the living standards in Tibet. The Chinese argue that they have brought modern conveniences to Tibet, including paved roads, hospitals, schools, and agricultural practices. Some monasteries have been rebuilt, but no new monks are being trained. At the same time, the Chinese have secured their hold on Tibet by encouraging immigration from other parts of China. The Chinese government opposes efforts by other countries and international organizations to encourage greater autonomy for Tibet.

Why did the Chinese try to dismantle the religious institutions of a poor, remote country? At issue was the fact that the presence of strong religious feelings among the Tibetan people conflicted with the aims of the Chinese government.

The conflict between traditional Buddhism and the Chinese government is one of many examples of the impact of religion. In the modern world of global economics and culture, local religious belief continues to play a strong role in people's lives.
Distribution of Religions

Learning Outcome 6.1.1
Describe the distribution of the major religions.

Only a few religions can claim the adherence of large numbers of people. Each of these faiths has a distinctive distribution across Earth's surface. Geographers distinguish two types of religions:

- **Universalizing religions** attempt to be global, to appeal to all people, wherever they may live in the world, not just to those of one culture or location.
- **Ethnic religions** appeal primarily to one group of people living in one place.

Statistics on the number of followers of religions can be controversial. No official count of religious membership is taken in the United States or in many other countries. Most statistics in this chapter come from Adherents.com, an organization not affiliated with any religion. According to Adherents.com, approximately 58 percent of the world's population practice a universalizing religion, 26 percent an ethnic religion, and 16 percent no religion.

The three universalizing religions with the largest numbers of adherents are Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. According to Adherents.com, there are 2.1 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims, and 376 million Buddhists in the world. Each of these religions has a distinctive distribution (Figure 6-3). The next three largest universalizing religions are Sikhism (23 million adherents), Bahá'í (7 million), and Zoroastrianism (3 million).

Hinduism is the ethnic religion with by far the largest number of adherents—900 million. Three other ethnic religions have at least 100 million adherents: Chinese traditional (394 million), Asian primal-indigenous (300 million), and African traditional religions (100 million). Three others—Juche, Spiritism, and Judaism—have between 14 million and 19 million adherents each.

The nonreligious category consists primarily of people who express no religious interest or preference and don't participate in any organized religious activity. Some people in this group espouse **atheism**, which is belief that God does not exist, or **agnosticism**, which is belief that nothing can be known about whether God exists. According to Adherents.com, most people in this category affirm neither belief nor lack of belief in God or some other Higher Power.

Figure 6-4 shows the worldwide percentage of people adhering to the various religions. The small pie charts in Figure 6-3 show the overall proportion of the world's religions in each world region. Table 6-1 shows the distribution of religions in the United States. 
LE 6.1 RELIGIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

- Religious or atheist: 30 million
- Christians: 161 million
- Roman Catholics: 66 million
- Protestants: 82 million
- A Baptist church: 37 million
  - A Southern Baptist Convention church: 17 million
  - A National Baptist Convention, U.S.A.: 8 million
  - A National Baptist Convention of America: 4 million
  - A National Missionary Baptist Convention of America: 3 million
  - A Progressive National Baptist Convention: 3 million
  - An American Baptist Church, USA: 2 million
  - Another Baptist church: 3 million
- A Methodist church: 13 million
  - A United Methodist church: 8 million
  - An African Methodist Episcopal or Episcopal Zion church: 4 million
- A Pentecostal church: 11 million
  - A Church of God in Christ: 6 million
  - One of the Assemblies of God churches: 3 million
  - One of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the world churches: 2 million
  - A Lutheran church: 8 million
  - An Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 5 million
  - One of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod churches: 3 million
  - A Presbyterian Church U.S.A.: 4 million
  - A Reformed church: 2 million
  - A United Church of Christ: 1 million
  - Another Reformed Church: 700,000
  - An Episcopal church: 2 million
- One of the Churches of Christ: 3 million
- A Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): 1 million
- A Seventh Day Adventist church: 1 million
- Orthodox: 3 million
  - A church of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America: 2 million
  - Another Orthodox church: 1 million
- Other Christians: 10 million
  - A Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: 6 million
  - A Jehovah's Witness church: 1 million
  - Other Christians: 3 million
- Hindus: 1 million
- Jews: 3 million
- Muslims: 1 million
- Other faiths: 6 million
Branches of Universalizing Religions

Learning Outcome 6.1.2
Describe the distribution of the major branches of Christianity.

The three principal universalizing religions are divided into branches, denominations, and sects. A branch is a large and fundamental division within a religion. A denomination is a division of a branch that unites a number of local congregations in a single legal and administrative body. A sect is a relatively small group that has broken away from an established denomination.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has more than 2 billion adherents, more than any other world religion, and it also has the most widespread distribution. It is the predominant religion in North America, South America, Europe, and Australia, and countries with a Christian majority exist in Africa and Asia as well (Figure 6-5).

BRANCHES OF CHRISTIANITY IN EUROPE. Christianity has three major branches—Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, Roman Catholics comprise 51 percent of the world's Christians, Protestants 24 percent, and Orthodox 11 percent. In addition, 14 percent of Christians belong to churches that do not consider themselves to be within any of these three branches.

In Europe, Roman Catholicism is the dominant Christian branch in the southwest and east, Protestantism in the northwest, and Orthodoxy in the east and southeast. The regions of Roman Catholic and Protestant majorities frequently have sharp boundaries, even when they run through the middle of countries. For example, the Netherlands and Switzerland have approximately equal percentages of Roman Catholics and Protestants, but Roman Catholic populations are concentrated in the south of these countries and the Protestant populations in the north.

The Orthodox branch of Christianity (often called Eastern Orthodox) is a collection of 14 self-governing churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. More than 40 percent of all Orthodox Christians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest of these 14 churches. Christianity came to Russia in the tenth century, and the Russian Orthodox Church was established in the sixteenth century.

Nine of the other 13 self-governing churches were established in the nineteenth or twentieth century. The largest of these 9, the Romanian Church, includes 20 percent of all Eastern Orthodox Christians. The Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbian Orthodox churches have approximately 10 percent each. The other 5 recently established Orthodox churches—those of Albania, Cyprus, Georgia, Poland, and Sinai—combined account for about 2 percent of all Orthodox Christians. The remaining 4 of the 14 Eastern Orthodox churches—those of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem—trace their origins to the earliest days of Christianity. They have a combined membership of about 3 percent of all Orthodox Christians.

BRANCHES OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE. The overwhelming percentage of people living in the Western Hemisphere—nearly 90 percent—are Christian. About 5 percent belong to other religions, and the remaining 6 percent profess adherence to no religion.

A fairly sharp boundary exists within the Western Hemisphere in the predominant branches of Christianity. Roman Catholics comprise 93 percent of Christians in Latin America, compared with 40 percent in North America. Within North America, Roman Catholics are clustered in the southwestern and northeastern United States and the Canadian province of Québec.

![Figure 6-5 Distribution of Christians](image-url)
Protestant churches have approximately 82 million members, or about 28 percent of the U.S. population over age five (Figure 6-6). Baptist churches have the largest number of adherents in the United States, about 37 million combined over age five (refer to Table 6-1). Membership in some Protestant churches varies by region of the United States. Baptists, for example, are highly clustered in the southeast, and Lutherans in the upper Midwest. Other Christian denominations are more evenly distributed around the country (Figure 6-7).

OTHER CHRISTIANS. Several other Christian churches developed independently of the three main branches. Many of these Christian communities were isolated from others at an early point in the development of Christianity, partly because of differences in doctrine and partly as a result of Islamic control of intervening territory in Southwest Asia and North Africa.

Two small Christian churches survive in northeast Africa—the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Ethiopian Church. The Ethiopian Church, with perhaps 10 million adherents, split from the Egyptian Coptic Church in 1948, although it traces its roots to the fourth century, when two shipwrecked Christians, who were taken as slaves, ultimately converted the Ethiopian king to Christianity.

The Armenian Church originated in Antioch, Syria, and was important in diffusing Christianity to South Asia and East Asia between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. The church’s few present-day adherents are concentrated in Lebanon and Armenia, as well as in northeastern Turkey and western Azerbaijan. Despite the small number of adherents, the Armenian Church, like other small sects, plays a significant role in regional conflicts. For example, Armenian Christians have fought for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, a portion of Azerbaijan, because Nagorno-Karabakh is predominantly Armenian, whereas the remainder of Azerbaijan is overwhelmingly Shiite Muslim (see Chapter 7).

The Maronites are another example of a small Christian sect that plays a disproportionately prominent role in political unrest. They are clustered in Lebanon, which has suffered through a long civil war fought among religious groups (see Chapter 7).

In the United States, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) regard their church as a branch of Christianity separate from other branches. About 3 percent of Americans are members of the Latter-day Saints, and a large percentage is clustered in Utah and surrounding states.

Pause and Reflect 6.1.2
Based on what you see in Figure 6-6 or Table 6-1, what are some of the largest Christian denominations in the United States that do not have highly clustered distributions in Figure 6-7?
ISLAM

Learning Outcome 6.1.3
Identify the major branches of Islam and Buddhism.

Islam, the religion of 1.5 billion people, is the predominant religion of the Middle East from North Africa to Central Asia (Figure 6-3). Half of the world's Muslims live in four countries outside the Middle East—Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

The word Islam in Arabic means "submission to the will of God," and it has a similar root to the Arabic word for peace. An adherent of the religion of Islam is known as a Muslim, which in Arabic means "one who surrenders to God.”

BRANCHES OF ISLAM. Islam is divided into two important branches:

- Sunni. The word Sunni comes from the Arabic for "people following the example of Muhammad." Sunnis comprise 83 percent of Muslims and are the largest branch in most Muslim countries in Southwest Asia and North Africa.

- Shiite. The word Shiite comes from the Arabic word for "sectarian." Shiites (sometimes called Shias in English) comprise 16 percent of Muslims, clustered in a handful of countries. Nearly 30 percent of all Shiites live in Iran, 15 percent in Pakistan, and 10 percent in Iraq. Shiites comprise nearly 90 percent of the population in Iran and more than half of the population in Azerbaijan, Iraq, and the less populous countries of Oman and Bahrain.

ISLAM IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA. The Muslim population of North America and Europe has increased rapidly in recent years.

In Europe, Muslims account for 5 percent of the population. France has the largest Muslim population, about 4 million, a legacy of immigration from predominantly Muslim former colonies in North Africa. Germany has about 3 million Muslims, also a legacy of immigration in Germany's case primarily from Turkey. In Southeast Europe, Albania, Bosnia, and Serbia each have about 2 million Muslims.

Estimates of the number of Muslims in North America vary widely, from 1 million to 5 million, but in any event the number has increased dramatically from only a few hundred thousand in 1990. Muslims in the United States come from a variety of backgrounds. According to the U.S. State Department, approximately one-third of U.S. Muslims trace their ancestry to Pakistan and other South Asian countries and one-fourth from Arab countries of Southwest Asia and North Africa. Many of these Muslims immigrated to the United States during the 1990s. Another one-fourth are African Americans, who have converted to Islam.

Islam also has a presence in the United States through the Nation of Islam, also known as Black Muslims, founded in Detroit in 1930 and led for more than 40 years by Elijah Muhammad, who called himself "the messenger of Allah."
Black Muslims lived austerely and advocated a separate autonomous nation within the United States for their adherents. Tension between Muhammad and a Black Muslim minister, Malcolm X, divided the sect during the 1960s. After a pilgrimage to Makkah in 1963, Malcolm X converted to orthodox Islam and founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He was assassinated in 1965. After Muhammad’s death, in 1975, his son Wallace D. Muhammad led the Black Muslims closer to the principles of orthodox Islam, and the organization’s name was changed to the American Muslim Mission. A splinter group adopted the original name, Nation of Islam, and continues to follow the separatist teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

OTHER UNIVERSALIZING RELIGIONS

Sikhism and Bahá’í are the two universalizing religions other than Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism that have the largest numbers of adherents. There are an estimated 23 million Sikhs and 7 million Bahá’ís. All but 3 million Sikhs are clustered in the Punjab region of India Bahá’ís are dispersed among many countries, primarily in Africa and Asia.

Sikhism’s first guru (religious teacher or enlightener) was Nanak (1469–1539), who lived in a village near the city of Lahore, in present-day Pakistan. God is perfect, but people have the capacity for continual improvement and movement toward perfection by taking individual responsibility for their deeds and actions on Earth, such as heartfelt adoration, devotion, and surrender to the one God. Sikhism’s most important ceremony, introduced by the tenth guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), is the Amrit (or Baptism), in which Sikhs declare they will uphold the principles of the faith. Gobind Singh also introduced the practice of men wearing turbans on their heads and never cutting their beards or hair. Wearing a uniform gave Sikhs a disciplined outlook and a sense of unity of purpose.

The Bahá’í religion is even more recent than Sikhism. It grew out of the Bahá’í faith, which was founded in Shiráz, Iran, in 1844 by Siyyid ʻAli Muhammad, known as the Báb (Persian for “gateway”). Bahá’ís believe that one of the Báb’s disciples, Husayn ʻAli Nuri, known as Bahá’u’lláh (Arabic for “Glory of God”), was the prophet and messenger of God. Bahá’u’lláh’s function was to overcome the disunity of religions and establish a universal faith through abolition of racial, class, and religious prejudices.

_Buddhists is also difficult to count because Buddhism, although a universalizing religion, differs in significant respects from the Western concept of a formal religious system. Someone can be both a Buddhist and a believer in other Eastern religions, whereas Christianity and Islam both require exclusive adherence. Most Buddhists in China and Japan, in particular, believe at the same time in an ethnic religion._
Ethnic Religions

Learning Outcome 6.1.4
Describe the distribution of the largest ethnic religions.

In contrast to universalizing religions, which often spread from one culture to another, ethnic religions tend to remain within the culture where they originated. Ethnic religions typically have much more clustered distributions than do universalizing religions. The ethnic religion with by far the largest number of followers is Hinduism. Ethnic religions in Asia and Africa comprise most of the remainder.

HINDUISM

Hinduism is the world's third-largest religion, with 900 million adherents, but 90 percent of Hindus are concentrated in one country, India, and most of the remainder can be found in India's neighbors Bangladesh and Nepal. Hindus comprise more than 80 percent of the population of India and Nepal, about 9 percent in Bangladesh, and a small minority in every other country (Figure 6-10).

The average Hindu has allegiance to a particular god or concept within a broad range of possibilities. The manifestation of God with the largest number of adherents—an estimated 80 percent—is Vaishnavism, which worships the god Vishnu, a loving god incarnated as Krishna. The second-largest is Sivaism, dedicated to Siva, a protective and destructive god.

OTHER ASIAN ETHNIC RELIGIONS

Three religions based in East Asia and Southeast Asia show the difficulty of classifying ethnic religions and counting adherents. Chinese traditional religions are syncretic, which means they combine several traditions. Primal-indigenous religions are especially difficult to document because they are based on oral traditions rather than writing. Juche is classified as a religion by Adherents.com but not by other sources.

CHINESE TRADITIONAL. Adherents.com considers Chinese traditional religion to be a combination of Buddhism (a universalizing religion) with Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese practices. Most Chinese who consider themselves religious blend together the religious cultures of these multiple traditions:

- **Confucianism.** Confucius (551–479 B.C.) was a philosopher and teacher in the Chinese province of Lu. His sayings, which were recorded by his students, emphasize the importance of the ancient Chinese tradition of proper behavior. Confucianism prescribed a series of ethical principles for the orderly conduct of daily life in China such as following traditions, fulfilling obligations, and treating others with sympathy and respect. These rules applied to China's rulers as well as to their subjects.

- **Taoism.** Lao-Zi (604–531? B.C., also spelled Lao Tse) organized Taoism. Although a government administrator by profession, Lao-Zi's writings emphasized the mystical and magical aspects of life rather than the importance of public service, which Confucius had emphasized. Tao, which means "the way" or "the path," cannot be comprehended by reason and knowledge because not everything is knowable. (Figure 6-11).

Commingling of diverse philosophies is not totally foreign to Americans. The tenets of a religion such as Christianity, the wisdom of the ancient Greek philosophers, and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence can all be held dear without doing grave injustice to the others.

Pause and Reflect 6.1.4
Referring to Table 6-1, which ethnic religions have at least 1 million adherents in the United States?

PRIMAL-INDIGENOUS. Several hundred million people practice what Adherents.com has grouped into the category of primal-indigenous religions. Most of these people reside in Southeast Asia or South Pacific islands.

Relatively little is known about primal-indigenous religions because written documents have not come down from ancestors. Religious rituals are passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Followers of primal-indigenous religions believe that because God dwells within all things, everything in nature is spiritual. Narratives concerning nature are specific to the physical landscape where they are told.

Included in this group are Shamanism and Paganism. According to Shamans, invisible forces or spirits affect the lives of the living. Pagan used to refer to the practices of ancient peoples, such as the Greeks and Romans, who had multiple gods with human forms. The term is currently used to refer to beliefs that originated with religions that predated Christianity and Islam.
JUDAISM. Roughly two-fifths of the world’s 14 million Jews live in the United States and another two-fifths in Israel. The name Judaism derives from Judah, one of the patriarch Jacob’s 12 sons; Israel is another biblical name for Jacob. The Bible recounts the ancient history of the Jewish people. Judaism plays a more substantial role in Western civilization than its number of adherents would suggest:

- Judaism is the first recorded religion to espouse monotheism, belief that there is only one God. Fundamental to Judaism is belief in one all-powerful God. Judaism offered a sharp contrast to the polytheism practiced by neighboring people, who worshipped a collection of gods.

- Two of the three main universalizing religions—Christianity and Islam—find some of their roots in Judaism. About 4,000 years ago Abraham, considered the patriarch or father of Judaism, migrated from present-day Iraq to present-day Israel, along a route known as the Fertile Crescent (see discussion of the Fertile Crescent in Chapter 8 and Figure 8-10). About 2,000 years after Abraham, Jesus was born a Jew, and about 500 years after Jesus Muhammad traced his ancestry to Abraham.

CHECK-IN: KEY ISSUE 1

Where Are Religions Distributed?

- Religions can be classified into universalizing and ethnic.
- The three largest universalizing religions are Christianity, which is found primarily in Europe, North America, and Latin America; Islam, which is found primarily in Southeast, Central, and Southwest Asia, as well as North Africa; and Buddhism, which is found primarily in East Asia.
- The largest ethnic religion is Hinduism, which is found primarily in South Asia.

FIGURE 6-12
DISTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

The percentage of animists in sub-Saharan Africa has declined from more than 70 percent in 1900 to around 12 percent in 2010. As recently as 1980, some 200 million Africans—half the population of the region at the time—were classified as animists. Followers of traditional African religions now constitute a clear majority of the population only in Botswana. The rapid decline in animists in Africa has been caused by increases in the numbers of Christians and Muslims.