



Understanding Diverse Faiths

This resource is designed to give a basic overview of diverse religious faiths and an understanding of how these faiths view the concepts of philanthropy, service and volunteerism.

Baha-ism
Buddhism
Christianity
Church of Jesus Christ, Latter-day Saints
Hinduism
Islam
Jainism
Jehovah's Witnesses
Judaism
Sikhism
Taoism
The Unification Church
Unitarianism





Baha'ism

Overview:

The Baha'i faith follows the teachings of *Baha'u'llah*, a nineteenth-century teacher who claimed he was the last messenger of God. Baha'u'llah taught that God revealed his word through messengers living before him. Baha'is believe these messengers were the founders of world religions (i.e. *Abraham*, *Mohammad*, *Jesus*, etc.). *Baha'u'llah* taught that his holy book, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, superseded but did not contradict earlier works such as the *Torah*, the *Bible* and the *Qur'an*. He maintained that these books were all appropriate for the times in which they were revealed, but as humanity matures, God speaks to new prophets with a new message. Baha'i teachings focus on the unity of all people and are based on the principles of justice and equality. Baha'is feel that borders should not delineate race, nationality and religion. *Baha'u'llah* wrote of a world civilization without prejudices, one in which all people are equal and speak a common language.

Holidays:

Ala: March-21st; the fasting month in which daily prayer is required; leads up to the New Year

Naw Ruz: New Year

Ridvan Festival: celebration commemorating the twelve days *Baha'u'llah* spent on the Tigris riverbank telling his message

Faith Details:

- The houses of worship are called *Mashriqul Adkar*.
- Drugs and alcohol are forbidden.

Teachings about Service:

(selection from the writings of Abdul'l-Baha)

“One amongst his teachings is this, that love and good faith must so dominate the human heart that men will regard the stranger as a familiar friend, the malefactor as one of their own, the alien even as a loved one, the enemy as a companion dear and close.”



Buddhism

Overview:

The word *Buddhism* derives from the name *Buddha*, which means “the one who has awakened or attained enlightenment.” In the sixth-century BCE, an Indian Prince named Siddhartha Gautama denounced all his worldly possessions to embark on a spiritual journey toward enlightenment. After living an early life of indulgence and luxury, he pursued a life of physical suffering. After years of intense fasting and physical discomfort, he decided that was not the way to end suffering. He then settled on the Middle Path, a life of moderation and meditation, and became Lord Buddha. Buddhism is based on Four Noble Truths: Life is suffering, there is a cause for suffering (i.e., desire), suffering will end, and the way to escape suffering is through the Eightfold Path delineated by the Lord Buddha. The Eightfold Path (often symbolized as wheel with eight spokes) is a guide for Buddhists to live compassionately and peacefully through discipline of thought and action. It is said that living life according to Buddha’s *dharma* (teachings) will lead to Nirvana, a life free from suffering, a state that escapes the cycle of death and rebirth.

Holidays:

Note: Buddhist celebrations vary widely across countries and cultures.

Monlam Chenmo/ The Great Prayer Festival: 8th – 15th of the first lunar month; prayer ceremony to increase world peace and harmony; celebrated in Tibetan and Indian Buddhism

Tibetan New Year: New moon of February; houses are cleaned to sweep away negativity from the previous year

Buddha Day or Vesakha: full moon in May; Buddhists all over the world gather to celebrate the birth, enlightenment and nirvana of the Lord Buddha

O-Bon: 13th to 15th of July; festival that remembers ancestors; a time for family reunion; celebrated in Japanese Buddhism

Faith Details:

- The five monks who were the first to follow his teachings are called *Arhats*.
- In 535 BCE Buddha’s teachings were collected into two documents called the *Tripitaka* and *Theravada*.
- There are many different ways to practice Buddhism; most variations exist among geographic location and culture.
- His Holiness the *Dalai Lama* is the leader of the Buddhist faith and lives in Tibet.

Teachings about Service:

(Itivuttaka 18) “If beings knew, as I know, the fruit of sharing gifts, they would not enjoy their use without sharing them, nor would the taint of stinginess obsess the heart and stay there. Even if it were their last bit, their last morsel of food, they would not enjoy its use without sharing it, if there were anyone to receive it.”



Christianity

Overview

There are many denominations of Christianity that often have vastly different traditions, customs, and beliefs. However they all share a link to the basic stories of the *Bible* and stem from the early texts of Judaism. Christians are often separated into Catholics, the largest denomination, and Protestants, all other denominations. Christians believe that just over 2,000 years ago, God chose a woman named Mary to give birth to the Messiah. His name was Jesus (later known as Christ). Christians believe he was the mortal son of God and born to a virgin mother. Jesus lived his life as a carpenter, teacher, healer, and miracle worker. He assembled a group of twelve followers called disciples. One Passover, he prophesied his own death. He was crucified by the Romans, but Christians believe he later rose from the dead. His disciples wrote accounts of his life, death and resurrection in the New Testament of the *Bible* and spread his teachings throughout the world, baptizing people in his name. They believe if they worship Jesus as their savior and live according to his will they will join him in heaven after death.

Holidays:

Christmas: December 25th; celebration of Jesus' birth

Easter: the first Sunday following the full moon that occurs on or after the vernal equinox; celebration of Christ's resurrection, a day of great rejoicing

Ash Wednesday: Wednesday before Easter; the beginning of Lent.

Good Friday: the Friday before Easter; in memory of Jesus' crucifixion

Faith Details:

- Church services are usually held Sunday mornings.
- Houses of worship are churches, cathedrals, basilicas and temples, depending on the denomination.
- The Pope is the official leader of the Catholic Church.
- Other denominations include Anglican, Evangelical, Baptist, Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Methodist, and Presbyterian.

Teachings about Service:

(Bible) "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:35-40 NRSV)



Church of Jesus Christ, Latter-day Saints

Overview:

The Latter-day Saints believe they are charged with keeping the true word of God, as other Christian denominations have corrupted His message. This church embraces the idea that Jesus is the son of God, and that he died to save humanity. They believe they are the only religious group able to achieve salvation. According to this faith doctrine, Jesus will create a *Zion* in America sometime in the future. The Latter-day Saints use *The Book of Mormon* as a scriptural supplement to the *Bible*. Joseph Smith transcribed this book, in the United States, during the nineteenth-century. *The Book of Mormon* was transcribed from Golden Plates that were said to contain the lost sacred text of the Prophet Mormon. Joseph Smith also wrote *The Articles of Faith* which are thirteen basic principles summarizing the beliefs of this church. Many Latter-day Saints followed an early leader named Brigham Young to the Salt Lake Valley of Utah. Salt Lake City is now the hub of the spiritual and financial arms of this church.

Holidays:

Pioneer Day: July 24th; day celebrating the early Latter-day Saints Pioneers who settled in the Utah Valley

Christmas: December 25th; celebrating the birth of Jesus

Easter: the first Sunday following the full moon that occurs on or after the vernal equinox; celebration of Christ's resurrection and a day of great rejoicing.

Faith Details:

- Followers are called Latter-day Saints; the term *Mormon* is commonly used but inaccurate.
- Many Latter-day Saints abstain from drinking alcohol and dancing.
- Young Latter-day Saints often embark on evangelical missions.

Teachings about Service:

(Elder M. Russell Ballard, O Be Wise)

"We have been charged to watch over one another and to serve one another. . . . Our goal should always be to use the programs of the Church as a means to lift, encourage, assist, teach, love, and perfect people."



Hinduism

Overview:

Hinduism began on the Indian sub-continent as an amalgamation of various belief systems with no known originator. The original name of Hinduism is *Santana dharma* or “eternal truth.” They believe that God takes many different forms and is worshiped by many different names; God is a part of everything, and everything is a part of God. Their view is that every creature in the world embodies a special spark called *atman* which is shared with God and is the part of every living thing that is reborn. All actions, good or bad, are carried with *atman* throughout each life. This is called *karma*. It is thought that by accumulating good *karma* through good actions, one can achieve complete communion with God. This communion is an end to the cycles of reincarnation and is referred to as *moksha*. Just like the other Vedic faiths (Buddhism and Jainism), there is no beginning or end of time or a final judgment as all of life is cyclical through Hinduism.

Holidays:

Note: Hindu celebrations vary widely across countries and cultures.

Diwali: Fall Festival to celebrate *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and good fortune

Faith Details:

- Cows are considered sacred and not to be killed, mistreated or eaten.
- There are many sacred books associated with Hinduism but the major ones are the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas*, the *Mohabharanta* and the *Ramayana*.
- The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most widely read texts in the *Upanishads*. It is written in a poetic form and is generally chanted.
- *Puja* is the act of worship or devotion; prayer.

Teachings about Service:

(Bhagavad Gita 3.10)

“At the beginning, mankind and the obligation of selfless service were created together. Through selfless service, you will always be fruitful and find the fulfillment of your desires.”



Islam

Overview:

Followers of Islam are called Muslims, meaning “ones who submit to God.” Muslims believe that there is only one God whom they call Allah. *Allah* is said to have revealed His word to Muhammad in the seventh-century BCE. The *Qur'an* is the holy book that contains Allah's message to Muhammad, a message that Muslims believe restored religion to its uncorrupted state. They also study the *Bible*, although they believe it has been corrupted. The Five Pillars, or core values of Islam, are as follows: announcing *Allah* as the only God, praying five times a day in the direction of Mecca, giving *alms*, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one's lifetime.

Holidays:

Hijra: Islamic New Year; when Muhammad was forced from Mecca; the beginning of the Islamic Religion; Muslims began counting years AH (after Hijra) at this point.

Ramadan: a month in the Islamic calendar; usually begins in January; Muslims fast from dawn to dusk to learn self restraint

Night of Power: the last ten nights of Ramadan; any one of these nights could have been the one when the *Qur'an* was delivered to *Muhammad*; Muslims spend this time at the *Mosque*.

Eid-ul-Fitr: festival celebrating the end of the month of fasting; gifts usually exchanged

Muhammed's ascension: The day *Muhammad* was believed to have made a miraculous trip to Jerusalem and ascended into heaven

Faith Details:

- Islamic meeting houses are called *Mosques*, and Muslim men are expected to pray there on Friday afternoons.
- *Imams* are the leaders of Muslim communities which are called *ummah*.
- The three main denominations of Islam are *Shi'a*, *Sunni*, and *Sufism*.
- Meat must be slaughtered in such a way that makes it allowable or *halal*.
- Pork, alcohol and gambling are strictly forbidden.
- The word *Jihad* is often misinterpreted to mean “Holy War.” In reality, the term has multiple interpretations but is generally understood to mean “the personal struggle to maintain faith” or “protecting Islam from antagonists by spreading the beliefs of Islam,” sometimes through force.

Teachings about Service:

(Translation from Al-Qur'an Surah 93:1-11) “I call to witness the early hours of morning, And the night when dark and still, Your Lord has neither left you, nor despises you. What is to come is better for you than what has gone before; For your Lord will certainly give you, and you will be content. Did He not find you an orphan and take care of you? Did He not find you perplexed, and show you the way? Did He not find you poor and enrich you? So do not oppress the orphan, and do not drive the beggar away, And keep recounting the favors of your Lord.”



Jainism

Overview:

Jainism stems from the word *Jinas* which means “to overcome,” reflecting the commitment of Jains to overcome their feelings of hate, greed and selfishness. It is one of the oldest religions. Jainism inspires the principal of non-injury or *ahimsa*, in which they try to avoid violence toward humans, plants and animals. Jains do not believe in an all-powerful entity, rather they revere the spirituality within nature. They follow the teachings of twenty-four great teachers in an effort to escape the cycle of death and re-birth, leading to *moksha*, the revelation of the soul’s true nature. They believe the universe is separated into levels of heavens and hells. Jains believe that all life is closely tied together in a web of interdependence and equality that supports itself.

Holidays:

Paryushana: (Digambar/Shwetambar) eight- and ten-day fasts honoring the eight and ten principles; period of confession and forgiveness

Faith Details:

- Two of the core texts are the *Siddhanta* and the *Anuyoga*, the teachings that had a great deal of influence on Mahatma Ghandi.
- Jain scriptures were written over a long period of time, but the most cited is the *Tattvartha Sutra*, or Book of Reality, written by the monk-scholar *Umasvati* almost 1800 years ago.
- The primary figures are *Tirthankars*.
- The two main branches are *Digambar* and *Shvetambar*.
- The temple is called a *derasar*.
- The eternal part of the soul, which gets reborn, is called the *jiva*.
- To do the least harm, Jains follow a strict vegetarian lifestyle, and many make employment out of trading, as most other jobs require doing some harm.
- Devout Jains do not eat, drink, or travel after sunset, and they do not rise before sunrise.
- Jains often help with interfaith relations.
- Monks walk barefoot and sweep the ground in order to avoid killing insects.
- Monks cover their mouths when performing holy acts to avoid salivating on sacred objects.

Teachings about Service:

(Tattvarthasutra 5.21)

“Rendering help to another is the function of all human beings.”



Jehovah's Witnesses

Overview:

This branch of Christianity was founded by Charles Taze Russell and originally known as the International Bible Students Association. Jehovah is the personal name for God that was used in the Hebrew scriptures. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that worshiping God properly means living properly. To witnesses includes living honest, truthful and sober lives. They spread their ideals by walking door-to-door and giving away copies of *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* Jehovah's Witnesses regard Jesus as Jehovah's son and the King of God's Kingdom. Witnesses maintain that they will be the only ones saved and admitted to heaven.

Holidays:

Jehovah's Witnesses only commemorate one day of the year, the anniversary of the death of Jesus. They calculate this day according to the lunar calendar from the last supper. They celebrate no other holidays, as they are considered pagan or secularized.

Faith Details:

- Witnesses refuse military service, voting in elections, and taking part in most religious festivals and secular celebrations (such as birthdays).
- Witnesses do not condone the sharing of blood as in transfusions.
- Missionary work is compulsory for all who are physically capable; it is usually carried out door-to-door.

Teachings about Service:

The preaching work is regarded as a form of humanitarian effort by giving people hope for the future. Aid work after large natural disasters is considered an important part of their work. The focus of relief efforts is primarily on helping fellow members, while providing assistance to others in need near the area in which they are working. On-going aid work, such as working in soup kitchens, clothing donations, or building homes for the homeless is not practiced.



Judaism

Overview:

Judaism is widely considered the first monotheistic religion, originating in 2000 BCE when a man named Abraham is believed to have made a covenant with God. The agreement was that the children of *Abraham* (the Jews) would be God's "chosen people" and receive His word and mercy in return for obedience of God's laws. Jews believe that this covenant was renewed 800 years later when God helped Moses part the Red Sea and lead the Jews to freedom from enslavement by the Egyptians. God then punished the Egyptians for enslaving the Jews. They believe that God bestowed ten *Commandments* to *Moses* at this time and promised that He would send a messiah, the final prophet and his representative on earth, heralding a new age of peace, justice and unity. Christianity stems from Judaism.

Holidays:

Passover: March or April; commemorates the story of the Exodus, in which the ancient Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt

Rosh Hashana: mid-September; the Jewish New Year and the beginning of the ten-day period of atonement that culminates with Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur: mid-September; a day of atonement marked by fasting

Hanukah: usually in mid- December; an eight-day celebration commemorating the rededication of a temple after its destruction by Romans and a miracle that included a small amount of oil burning for eight days

Purim: Spring; a celebration commemorating the bravery of Queen Esther when foiling a plot by an ancient ruler to exterminate the Jews; celebrated with carnivals and costumes

Faith Details:

- The three main branches of Judaism, increasing in religious adherence, are Reform, Conservative and Orthodox.
- The house of worship is called a synagogue or temple and is where a Rabbi presides over religious matters.
- Shabbat (Sabbath) is the weekly day of rest honored from sundown on Friday evening to sundown Saturday night. During this time, observant Jews avoid using electricity or cars and resign to prayer, rest and reflection.
- Many Jewish men cover their heads with a *yarmulke* or other hat. Women who cover their heads usually do so only while in temple with a cloth. Orthodox women cover all of their hair in the presence of men who are not their spouses, usually with wigs.
- Jewish dietary restrictions permit things that are kosher. Items in grocery stores are usually marked with a symbol of "K" or "U" to indicate that they are *kosher* and not *terefah*.
- Jewish custom does not permit writing the word *God*, so many write it as *G-d* (see below).

Teachings about Service

(Translated from Etz Hayim, *Deut 10:17-19*)

"For the Lord your G-d is G-d supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome G-d, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."



Sikhism

Overview:

Sikhism encourages the pursuit of salvation through disciplined, personal meditation on the name and message of God. Sikhs follow the teachings of ten enlightened leaders called gurus. The faith originated in Punjab, India, in the fifteenth century, with one such leader named *Guru Nanak*. It has influences from Hinduism, including the concepts of karma and rebirth. Sikhs develop an intimate faith relationship with their genderless, transcendent and omnipresent God whom they call *Waheguru*. Inward meditation is considered the path to enlightenment. Ego, greed, lust, attachment and anger are the five evils to be avoided to attain salvation. For Sikhs, salvation is not thought of in terms of heaven or hell but is considered to be the personal union with God and an escape from the continuous cycle of birth.

Holidays:

Gurpurabs: days celebrating the birth or martyrdoms of one of the ten gurus

Baisakhi: usually April 13th; celebrates the changing of the seasons as well as the beginning of the baptismal tradition

Diwali: October; celebrates the release of Guru Hargobind from jail

Hola Mohalla: February or March; at the same time as the Hindu festival Holi; includes athletic contests

Faith Details:

- The word *Sikh* means “disciple.”
- The Sikh temple is called a *gurdwara*. Visitors are expected to remove shoes, cover heads, and bow to the floor upon entrance.
- Sikhs study a text called *Guru Granth Sahib*.
- Many Sikhs wear the *Five Ks*; markers which help Sikhs and others practice their faith.
- Sikhs typically eat meat but not meat that has been slaughtered according to the rules of Islam or Judaism. They are also discouraged from using illicit drugs or alcohol.

Teachings about Service:

Sikhs emphasize service to others based on equality and regardless of social status. Many gurdwaras have free kitchens called “langars.” Some langars in India can feed thousands of people a day. (*Guru Granth Sahib*) “The individual who performs selfless service without thought of reward shall attain God’s salvation.”



Taoism

Overview:

The Chinese word *Tao* refers to the “Way of the Universe,” the natural force that guides all life on earth. The faith emerged around the first-century BCE in China. At one point, it was one of China’s great religions (along with Buddhism and Confucianism). In 1911, state support ended and a period of turmoil began. Millions of monks were put to manual labor and abused. The number dwindled to 50,000 monks by 1960. Roughly twenty million people now follow Taoism, 30,000 in the U.S. Taoists believe that *Tao* is nothing but it is in everything. It is the deep source of all. Human suffering is the result of fighting nature, struggling against the way of the universe. By balancing their lives with nature, Taoists believe they can escape suffering. Balance is symbolized by the *yin* and the *yang*—two opposing, dynamic forces of the universe that give order to all life. The life force within humans is called *ch’i*, the breath we are born with. Because Taoists think everyone is born with as many breaths inside them as they will ever have, they practice many breathing exercises and meditations designed to help people preserve their *ch’i*.

Holidays and Festivals:

Hungry Ghosts Festival: late summer/early spring; communities give offerings and prayers to the ghosts of people not given proper burial or not honored by their families so that the ghosts will act benevolently

Chinese New Year: February or March; the major festival of Taoism; families gather to replace paper gods hung around the house and lavish gifts are given to children

Faith Details:

- There are over 1,440 sacred texts but the most commonly read (by Taoists and non-Taoists alike) is the *Tao Te Ching*, a book of poetry and philosophy written by Lao Tzu.
- Feng Shui is the ancient art of determining the flow of *ch’i* in and around buildings and the natural landscape so that humans can be in harmony with this flow.
- Retreating into any natural landscape is thought to help Taoists be at peace.
- Taoists believe time is cyclical, not linear.
- Tao is pronounced as “Dow”, Taoism as “Daoism.”

Teachings about Service:

(Lao Tzu) “Freely extend your goodwill and virtue in every direction, regardless of circumstances.”



Unitarianism

Overview:

The Unitarian Church originated in the 1700s with a basis of Christian beliefs. However, most Unitarians in the United States do not consider themselves Christians. They focus on God as the unitary deity, accepting Jesus as a moral authority but not as the son of God. Most do not believe in the concept of original sin or Satan. They believe that God is good. Because of this, many Unitarians think all people will be granted salvation. Unitarianism encourages open-minded, freethinking views of God, Jesus, the world and the purpose of life. They believe that all religions lead to the same truth, thus their services often contain messages stemming from an amalgamation of other religions. While Unitarians read the *Bible*, they encourage critical interpretation of it. Most Unitarians in the U.S. and Canada are *Unitarian Universalists (UU)*.

Holidays:

Some Unitarians celebrate Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter) and holidays traditionally associated with other religions, such as the Hindu festival of Divali.

Faith Details:

- Churches teach from multiple religious traditions including Buddhism and Judaism.
- Beliefs often vary greatly from one congregation to another.

Teachings about Service:

(www.beliefnet.com)

Many Unitarians work to promote peace, environmental protection, the right to a divorce, and the right to an abortion. They also fight to achieve gender equality and equality for homosexuals.



The Unification Church

Overview:

The Unification Church was founded in 1954 by a Korean man named Sun Myung Moon in an effort to unify all Christian churches. Followers are called Unificationists. Moon says that Jesus appeared to him, at the age of sixteen, with a message. He teaches that God attempts to create the perfect family. Throughout history, they believe, Satan has thwarted those attempts, but the Reverend Moon and his wife constitute the new godly family. Anyone can become a member of the Divine Family by joining the church. Unificationists hold massive ceremonies in which members wear wedding attire and become a part of the church. Unificationists believe in a universal God and the salvation of all people, good and evil, living and dead. They hold that Jesus did not come to earth to die, but was sent to save humanity and establish heaven on earth.

Faith Details:

- The Divine Principle defines the beliefs of the Unification Church. It was written by Reverend Sun Myung Moon. It draws from the *Bible* as well as Asian traditions.
- The Bible is also used by the Unification Church. *The Divine Principle* quotes it many times as a source of knowledge.
- Followers are sometimes referred to incorrectly as “Moonies.”

Teachings about Service:

(Guidance for Heavenly Tradition, Volume 3 by Rev. Young Hwi Kim)

“Those who serve for the sake of mankind and the world will be the most respected, for example inventors who develop new medicines which help eliminate disease or new machines which benefit many people. Such people, who contribute to the whole purpose, will be highly respected.”