

RELIGION

Most people believe in the supernatural and consider it sacred. Those beliefs help people cope with the stresses and joys of life. In the past, those stresses and joys were very often a product of people's interaction with the natural environment. Today, religion continues to reflect and condition our interaction with the natural environment, as well as many other aspects of our daily lives.

What is it?

Religion comes in many forms. Most scholars characterize **religion** as a system of beliefs that connect humans to the supernatural. Religious beliefs and practices are generally considered *sacred* because practitioners believe these rules, rituals, and beliefs were conceived by a supernatural power, god(s) or person that has extraordinary power or insight. Religion is also generally practiced in a group setting, so those committed to a religion, or **adherents** are bound by beliefs and practices that become the basis for group and individual identities. Religious beliefs and practices are a product of the natural and social environments from which they evolved and in turn critically inform the adherents how they should think and act about a wide range of issues, from politics to economics to their interactions with the natural environment.

Religion *in general* is hard to characterize though because it comes in so many different forms. One way of categorizing religions is to look at how a religion gets new members. Some religions actively recruit people into their faith. You may have had young men in white shirts and black ties come to your door and encourage you to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. These missionaries from the Latter Day Saints church, commonly known as Mormons, are members of one of the more high profile **proselytic faiths**. These are **universal religions** because anyone can join. Most Christians actively seek new members, and many go to great lengths to achieve that goal. Other religions rarely proselytize. Closed religions are called **ethnic religions**, and generally you have to be born



Figure 6:1: San Gabriel, CA - Mission Church. Mission church architecture was surely a tool to help Catholic missionaries attract local Indians who had no formal architectural traditions.

into them to become part of that religious group. Judaism and Hinduism are the two best-known ethnic religions. It would be very rare indeed to have a Jewish rabbi invite you to temple so that you might consider becoming Jewish.

Religions can also be lumped together on other criteria. Religions can have a single god or many gods. Those focused on a single *deity* are called **monotheistic**. Islam, Christianity and Judaism consider themselves monotheistic religions. Other religions are called **polytheistic** because have multiple deities, with various responsibilities, personalities and capabilities. The religions of Ancient Greece and Rome are the best examples of polytheistic religions. Some religions are **pantheistic** in which the divine is everywhere and in everything. Practitioners of some religions direct their energies inward in an attempt to achieve an elevated state of mind, while others seek paradise through outward deeds or acts of devotion. Frequently these categories are messy and overlap in various fashions. Some believe that all religions essentially advance similar truths.

Some religions are easy to recognize for Americans. Adherents meet regularly as a group, or **congregation**, in a building. Some religions are harder to recognize. They may not have a building, or meet in groups. Other presumably *profane* or *secular* belief systems make take on many of the characteristics of a religion: they may have texts that are treated as sacred, or nearly sacred; they may have many followers who engage in well-practiced rituals; they may even have holidays, and special clothes for priest-like figures. Sociologists have likened Fascism and Marxism to religions, though such ideas are certainly open to debate.

Even within a single religion, there are occasionally multiple of sub-divisions or **denominations** and within those sub-divisions, even more sub-divisions and so on. Even with a single small group of believers or congregation, individuals will interpret or understand religious doctrine or engage religious practice differently, making it difficult to say much definitively about any specific set of beliefs.

Frequently, small religions, or denominations within a religion are called **cults**, a word may be derogatory, but is not necessarily so among academics. Many conservative Christians characterize Mormonism as a cult. So, when Mitt Romney, a Mormon, ran for President in 2012, there was some consternation from

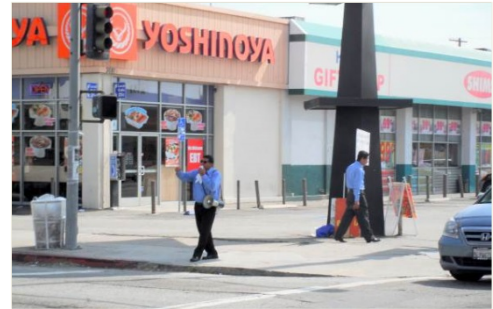


Figure 6:2: Los Angeles, CA - Street Preacher. This man used a bullhorn and stood on a corner to attract converts.

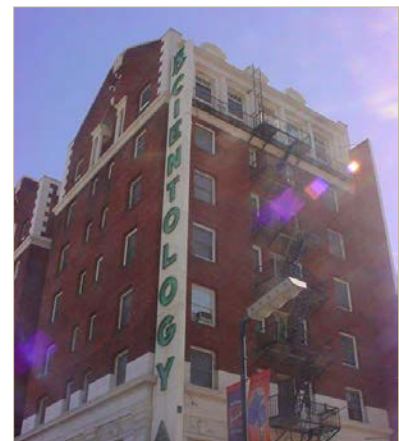


Figure 6:3: Hollywood, CA - The large scientology building on Hollywood Boulevard is suggestive of the attractiveness of alternative religions in a place like Hollywood.

some sectors. Of course, many of these same people were convinced that President Obama is / was a Muslim, so opinions about Romney's religion may have had a negligible effect on the outcome of the election.

What does it look like? The Landscape of Religion

Religious practice shapes the landscape in myriad fashion. The landscape is capable of revealing a great deal about the belief systems and values both dominant and minority religious groups in a place or region.

Christian churches are the most obvious part of the religious landscape of the United States. [Sacred architecture](#) may be grandiose, like many Catholic Churches, or simple like the buildings used by the Amish. Both rely upon a particular understanding of the same religious texts. Many religions have temples, shrines and other houses of worship as well that sometimes pass unrecognized as sacred space by Christians. Dozens of other places on the landscape are believed to have special sacred functions or meanings, including cemeteries, certain mountains, rivers, etc.

For some, clearly the architecture of the church reflects the desire of its congregation to glorify their God. They attempt to create as best they can a monument worthy of a "House of God". Catholic churches, and certainly Catholic cathedrals and basilicas qualify as monumental architecture. Inspiring architecture may help people feel the presence of the supernatural. Architecture is used to instruct the faithful, especially in the time before widespread literacy. Consider the role of stained glass artwork as a stories telling devices two centuries ago, when few in a congregation had literacy skills. Architecture can be used to recruit new converts. Consider the impact of the modest mission churches of California upon the Indian converts in the late 18th century. Architecture, and landscape in general, can be a very powerful communicative medium.



Figure 6:4: Ruston, LA - . Small white Baptist churches like this one dot the rural landscape of the Deep South. They are iconic of a lifestyle and a specific belief system in the rural South.

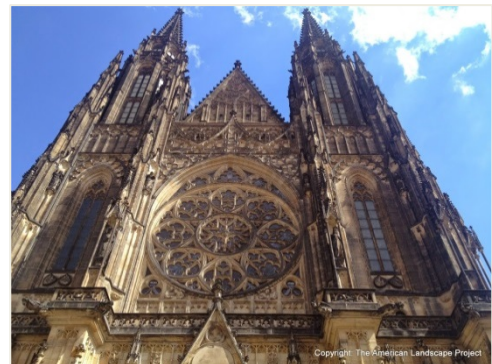


Figure 6:5: Prague, Czech Republic - Massive cathedrals are important markers of the prestige of many cities with large Catholic populations. The grandeur of these buildings reflects specific denominational beliefs about architecture.

Approaching in size and grandeur of Catholic buildings are many new *megachurches*, which have become popular in the United States among Evangelical Christians. These churches, which are sometimes mockingly called “Six Flags Over Jesus” by local towns people, may feature multiple buildings; gymnasiums, classrooms, coffee shops and bookstores, in addition to the more common chapels and rectories. These churches offer a variety of services for the convenience of their congregations, and therefore are easy to justify as great *recruiting* tools. Churches would claim that buildings that bring people to the faith are worth the cost and effort. Still, the extravagance of the building programs has created some controversy. Some think that these mega-churches threaten to overwhelm, and destroy smaller congregations without the money to compete for the favor of adherents. Government officials and businesses have also occasionally questioned the tax-exempt status of churches that appear to operate in as successful business enterprises.



Figure 6:6: West Monroe, LA. This mega church had a parking area so vast, the lots were numbered like one finds at an amusement park. These massive churches threaten the existence of smaller, “hard pew” churches like the one pictured above.

Elaborate church buildings also draw the scorn of those who believe that Christian doctrine calls the faithful to “humble yourself before the Lord” in all areas of life. *Amish* and certain orders of the *Mennonites* are the two groups in the US that perhaps best embody this notion. Some of the more conservative Amish groups do not build church buildings at all, but rather gather to worship in private homes. This is because they focus on a particular passage in the Bible that suggests that God “does not dwell in temples made with hands”.

Other congregations also prefer simple church architecture. Some of the oldest churches in America, those built by Puritans in New England adhered to strict rules regarding simplicity and humility. They built churches without stained glass, crucifixes, or statues or other artwork. The buildings were generally square, to help enforce notions of *communalism* that characterized their politics and economics. These buildings also functioned as a civic center as well because the idea of separating church and state had not yet occurred to these Americans. Many other congregations have carried forth the tradition of very simple churches, out of a desire to spend precious church monies on things other than buildings.



Figure 6:7: Bakersfield, CA - Though this church is in a formal commercial building, to those who perceive it as such, it is sacred space. Some congregations value humility in action and it is reflected in their architecture.

Of course, impoverished congregations lack funds to build elaborate churches, so they may seek out buildings designed for purposes other than sacred activity. The adaptive reuse of secular spaces into sacred spaces brings into question the process by which spaces become sacred. What process, for example, transforms an abandoned gas station or convenience store into a proper church? Can any place be a “House of God” or are certain places unavailable for such a distinction.

Shrines

Clearly, the practice of turning profane, ordinary, spaces into sacred ones is commonplace. In areas where Catholicism is prevalent, small folk-art shrines, generally dedicated to the [Virgin Mary](#), and enclosed in an artificial grotto; sometimes fashioned out of an old bathtub, thereby lending the colorful name [Bathtub Mary](#), or [Madonna on the Half Shell](#) to these home-made devotional spaces. Similar are the impromptu, frequently temporary shrines erected to victims of car crashes or other accidents. Mourners often place candles, crosses, crudely painted bicycles and other memorabilia at the site of an accident, temporarily creating a sacred space for the unfortunate few who may have known the victim.

Occasionally, the site of a particularly public tragedy will instantly become sacred space; inviting religious-like pilgrimage and even [dark tourism](#). The [ground zero](#) location in New York City, [Dealey Plaza](#) in Dallas and [Ford’s Theater](#) in Washington, D.C. have taken on elements of sacred space because people come to remember, grieve and engage metaphysical questions. Behavior in such locations often approximates that which one would witness in more formally recognized sacred spaces; with people talking in hushed or reverent tones, walking slowly etc. Other spaces in the United States, like the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. have taken on the status of quasi-sacred space.



Figure 6:8: Los Angeles, CA - This house in a residential neighborhood also serves as a temple for these Buddhists who are celebrating the end of a fasting period.



Figure 6:9: Troy, NY - Home-made folk shrines such as this stone grotto in Upstate New York are common in areas with large Catholic populations.



Figure 6:10: Oklahoma City, OK - At the site of the bombed [Murrah Federal Building](#), mourners created an impromptu memorial, transforming the street from profane to sacred space.

Religious Holiday Space

Religious holidays often transform public space into quasi-religious space. Most of it is rather mundane, and quite removed from any sort of actual religious doctrine or practice. In the US, in the month leading up to the Christmas holiday, many profane spaces (shopping malls, or even roadsides) become quasi-religious space. Therefore, even though Santa Claus and Saint Nick are obviously tied to the Christian tradition, they are also widely embraced as symbols of a public holiday that is celebrated enthusiastically by non-Christians and even in non-Christian nations, like Japan. More controversial though is the use of more purely public space, like courthouses or parks, for the display of clearly religious *nativity scenes* and *menorahs* during the holiday season. Judges frequently have to decide exactly when and how religious people can use public space to promote or celebrate religious holidays or events.

Other examples of the uneasy intersection of church and state occur when public funds are used to promote, organize or otherwise regulate large religious festivals. *Mardi Gras*, which for some Catholics, is a celebration preceding the start of the *Lenten* fasting season attracts huge crowds, many of who are tourists, to New Orleans each year. Many other towns in the Gulf Coast regions have public celebrations, frequently including a parade that costs taxpayers a great deal of money. St. Patrick's Day parades, Halloween festivals and many other such celebrations require significant public endorsement, but seem to pass without controversy.

Cemeteries

Cemeteries are common landscapes that often function as religious space, though they are often regulated and maintained by the public. How a society treats the corpses of their dead, and how they treat the places where the dead are buried (if they bury their dead) may reveal a great deal about the beliefs of the people who build them.

The *Abrahamic faiths* generally have a similar set of beliefs about the "end of time" in which humans, and the remains of humans, shall reconcile with the divine. For



Figure 6:11: Chicago, IL - The Saint Patrick's Day Parade mixes ethnic, religion and civic functions into a single event, blurring the lines between church and state; public and sacred space.



Figure 6:12: Boston, MA - Colonial era grave markers in New England often feature "winged death heads", presumably a warning to the living to lead virtuous lives.

this reason, it is tradition for people in these religions to bury their dead so that the remains of the deceased may be brought back to life, or resurrected in some form at the end of time. Muslims tend to bury their dead perpendicular to Mecca, with the dead facing their holiest city. Christians tend to bury people facing east, so that the dead may rise to face Christ on Judgment Day. Burying so many people has multiple implications in geography, not the least of which is the amount of territory given over housing the remains of the dead, especially in large cities like New York; or very old cities like Cairo. Some cultures hold these grounds inviolable. Other traditions are more flexible, allowing for the removal of remains from gravesites so that the space may be re-used or recycled. Some burial sites may add new remains to existing mausoleums, or crypts; particularly when a family “owns” a particular site.



Figure 6:13: Dubach, LA - Stone markers indicate a family cemetery plot, just behind the house of a 19th century homestead. How have attitudes changed toward death and burial?

Before the 20th century, it was common practice in many parts of the United States to buried loved ones somewhere on a family’s property. Backyard cemeteries may have made sense generations ago, but are generally forbidden today for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fate of cemeteries upon the sale of a property. Many Americans find cemeteries “creepy”, so having a number of unknown people buried in your backyard would be even more so. It’s certainly enough to inspire movies, like [Poltergeist](#), among others.

Americans’ attitudes toward cemeteries have evolved. The Puritans of New England paid little attention to matters of cemeteries and gravestones. All were buried without much ceremony in a common plot, often without permanent markers. Later, New Englanders marked burial plots with morbid-looking [winged death heads](#) and *skull and crossbones* imagery to remind the living of their own mortality. Later, as religious practice evolved, so did the nature and variety of grave markers; as well as the function of cemeteries. For some time during the 19th century, cemeteries were treated much like parks are treated today, a place where death and dying could be encountered in a pleasant, tranquil setting; a place for a stroll or a picnic. The design aesthetics of these early cemeteries influenced the development of public park space in the United States.



Figure 6:14: Glendale, CA - Cemeteries were for a time designed to be park-like museum spaces where people could engage in activities beyond mourning.

Traditional, common [monumental cemeteries](#) are costly and difficult to maintain. Headstones marking the location of burial sites erode, crack and break. Wealthier families, especially generations ago, were also prone to building large monuments to family patriarchs in an attempt to raise the stature of the deceased in perpetuity. Of course, over many generations they too deteriorate and may become hazards. The cost of simply trimming grass has led to the popularization of memorial gardens, or [lawn cemeteries](#), that use low, flat grave markers that permit lawn tractors to mow grass quickly and efficiently. The sight of heavy machinery passing over the remains of loved ones may violate the sense of propriety for some. The other problem with lawn-style cemeteries is the uniformity of the gravestones. Many people dislike the thought of commemorating a loved one with a generic marker, so they leave mementos or plant flowers; thereby increasing maintenance costs.

More recently, the costs associated with burials have invited an increasing number of people to consider cremation, or [natural burial](#) to mitigate the environmental consequences of conventional burial rituals, which often involve a large number of processes that slow down the inevitable decomposition of a corpse. Natural burials exclude coffins, burial vaults, embalming and traditional headstones, etc.

Where is it?: Religious Realms

Most people in the world adhere to some sort of belief, however most people belong to one of two major world religion families: Abrahamic and Indian. Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) all evolved in the Middle East, cover much of the world today and share a number of commonalities. Indian Religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, etc.) evolved on the Indian subcontinent and spread northeast across Asia. People who are not part of either of these grand traditions, may adhere to a local (or folk) religion; or may not belong to any particular religion.

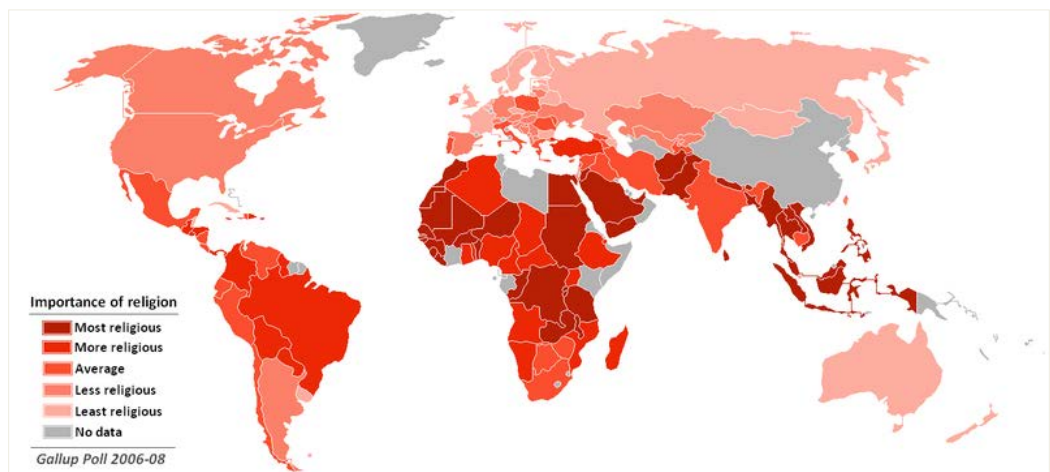


Figure 6:15: World Map depicting the importance of religion in people's daily lives (2005-2008) according to the Gallup Polling. Source: Gallup, [Wikimedia](#).

There is wide variation in the religiosity of people worldwide. In some parts of the world, essentially every person's life is centered around their faith. This is particularly true in the Muslim world, and many parts of the developing world. In much of the developed world, religious fervor is not as great. The United States, contrary to what many people think, remains a relatively religious country; especially when compared to other regions with advanced economies, like Europe and Japan.

The map below shows the distribution of the major world religions using national boundaries. Religions certainly cross boundaries, so this map is not as accurate as one might like, but it does provide a general picture of the distribution of world's faithful.

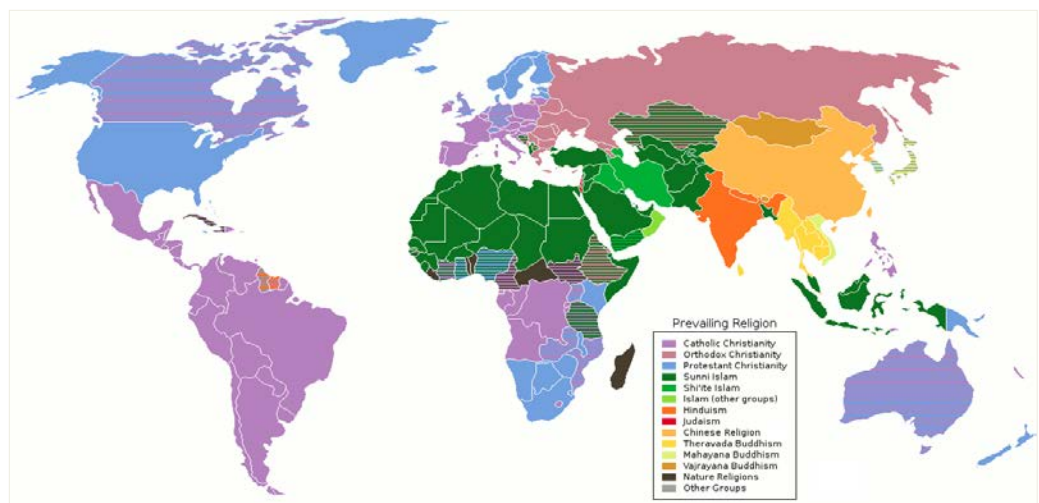


Figure 6:16: World Map. Qualitative color scheme on this map represent the majority religion in each country of the world. What flaws can you see in this map? Source: [Wikimedia](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:World_religions_map)

Christianity

Christianity, with about 2.2 billion followers is the religion with the most adherents, but many in the developed world are not committed to their faith. This is a process called **secularization** and it characterizes much of Europe's Christianity. Christians are also split into various, generally peaceful, factions. The **Great Schism** of 1054 led to the creation of two great branches of Christianity: Eastern and Western. The **Eastern Orthodox** Catholic Church, which now includes multiple, national Orthodox churches (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox etc.). Many people of Southeastern and Eastern European areas (and their descendants who have migrated to the US) are Orthodox. They have many similarities and important differences with **Western Christians**. On the landscape, you may recognize the distinctive **onion domes** or helmet cupolas on Orthodox churches that distinguish them

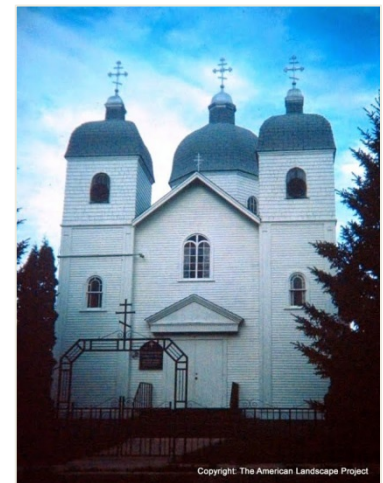


Figure 6:17: Brandon, MB - This vintage photo features a Ukrainian Orthodox church, with its distinctive onion domes and crosses.

from the steeples that are more common on Western Christian churches.

Western Christianity

Western Christians or the *Roman Catholic* Church also broke apart during a period called the *Protestant Reformation* that began in 1517. A number of highly religious Catholics began protesting the manner in which religious authorities were running the Roman Church. They demanded reforms and have since become known as *Protestants*. They were upset about a lot of things, but eventually their demands included among other things, that the Holy Bible could be interpreted by individuals, thereby removing the total authority of the Pope. Because increasing numbers of Europeans could read, and many people fancied themselves capable of interpreting holy texts, a large number of Protestants formed denominations of their own, splitting from one another like branches from a tree. A series of religious wars

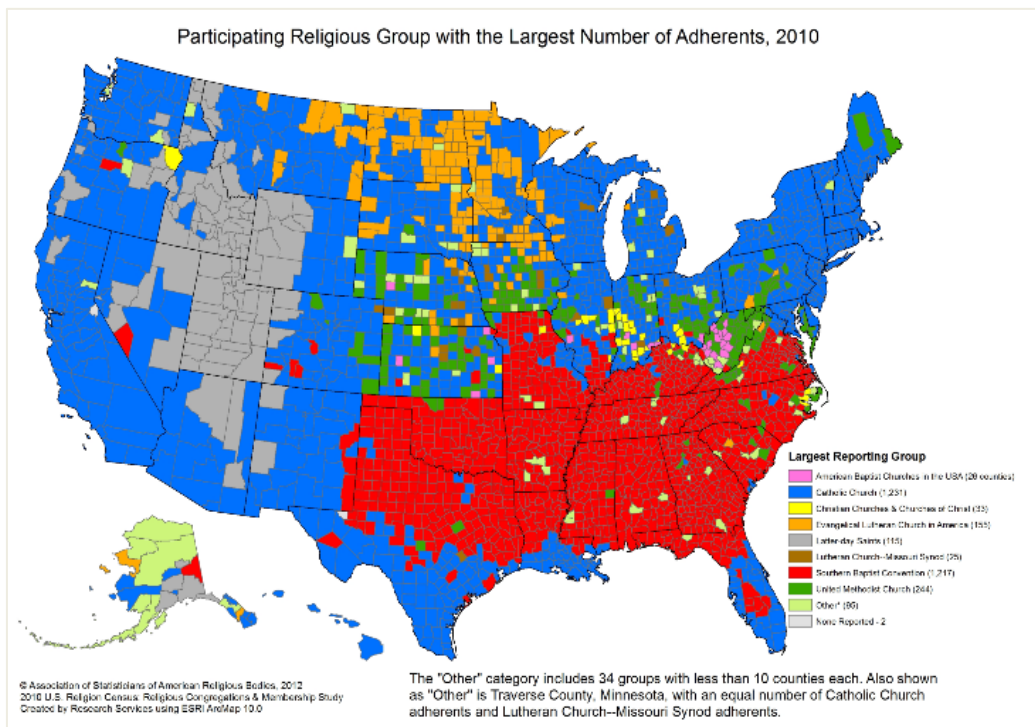


Figure 6:18: Map of predominant religious denomination by county in 2010. Click to Enlarge. Source: [ASARB](#)

followed. Most Germans from the northern part of the country abandoned Catholicism altogether. Those who could not worship as they wished migrated to other locations where they felt safe, or at least comfortable, if not dominant. The United States was a destination for many of Europe's religious refugees, but it is *not* true that religious refugees were always tolerant of other religions once they arrived in the New World. Quite the opposite is true.

American Christianity

Just as Americans are quite ignorant about the religious diversity around the world, it is also easy to be ignorant of the diversity *within* American Christianity. So great are the differences among American Christian faiths, that it sometimes seems inappropriate to lump all the

various denominations and congregations together under a single label. Nevertheless, we do, and so it is worthwhile to examine the distribution of the main American denominations.

About 60 million American are Roman Catholic. Catholics are the largest religious group in the country. Catholics are concentrated in New England, around the Great Lakes and along the southern US border from Louisiana to California. Massachusetts is about 50% Catholic, but several southern states have fewer than five percent. Many large cities, including those in the Midwest (St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, etc.) also have large percentages of Catholics.

Evangelical Protestants concentrate (by percent of adherence) in the Deep South and Appalachia, mostly where Catholics do not live. However, large numbers of Evangelical Christians live in places like Los Angeles (nearly 1 million) and Chicago (.5 million). Evangelicals emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, are generally more literal in their interpretation of the Bible and are motivated to spread their beliefs. They often have very charismatic church leaders. There are about 50 million Evangelicals in the US, distributed among dozens of denominations. The best known of these groups are the Southern Baptists (16 million), but also include and a variety of Pentecostal churches; each also broken into many dozens of sub-denominations, and local variations; plus a very large number of so-called Non-Denominational churches.



Association of
Statisticians of
American Religious
Bodies
2010 Religion Census

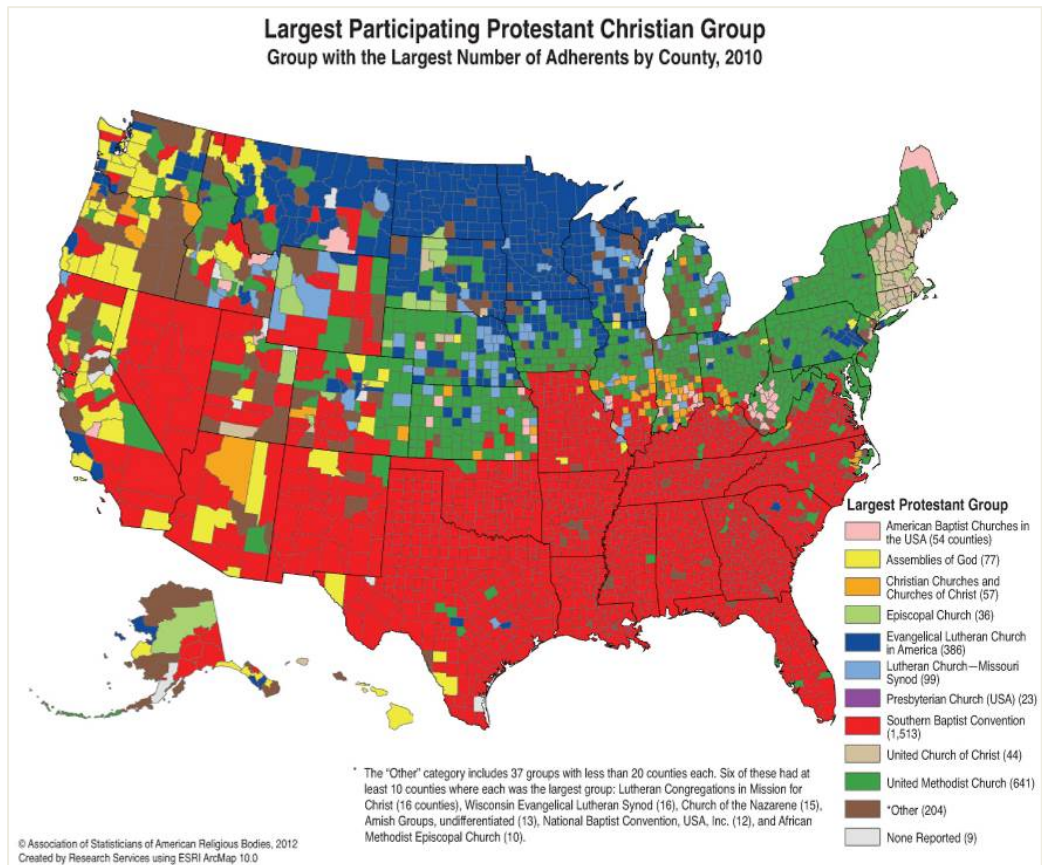


Figure 6:19: US Map by County - Predominant Protestant Christian denomination. Note the Baptist South, Methodist Midwest and Lutheran north central. Source: [ASARB](#) (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies)

[Mainline Protestants](#) make up the other large category of Christians in the United States. These folks tend to be more progressive (or liberal) theologically and politically or socially than their Evangelical brethren. They are less likely to be [Biblical literalists](#) and less likely to knock on your door to get you to come to their church. Among the Mainline Protestant denominations are the [Episcopalians](#), [Methodists](#) (United), [Lutherans](#) and the [Presbyterians](#) are probably the best known mainline protestant groups. As one might guess, the Mainline Protestants are found in the middle of the United States. Methodists are really quite common in the Great Lakes/Midwestern states (Pennsylvania to Nebraska); Lutherans are dominant (or nearly so) in the Upper Midwest. The United Church of Christ, which is what the old New England [Congregationalists](#) have “become” are common in New England.



Pew Research
Religion and Public
Life

[Religious Landscape
Survey](#)

(with maps!)

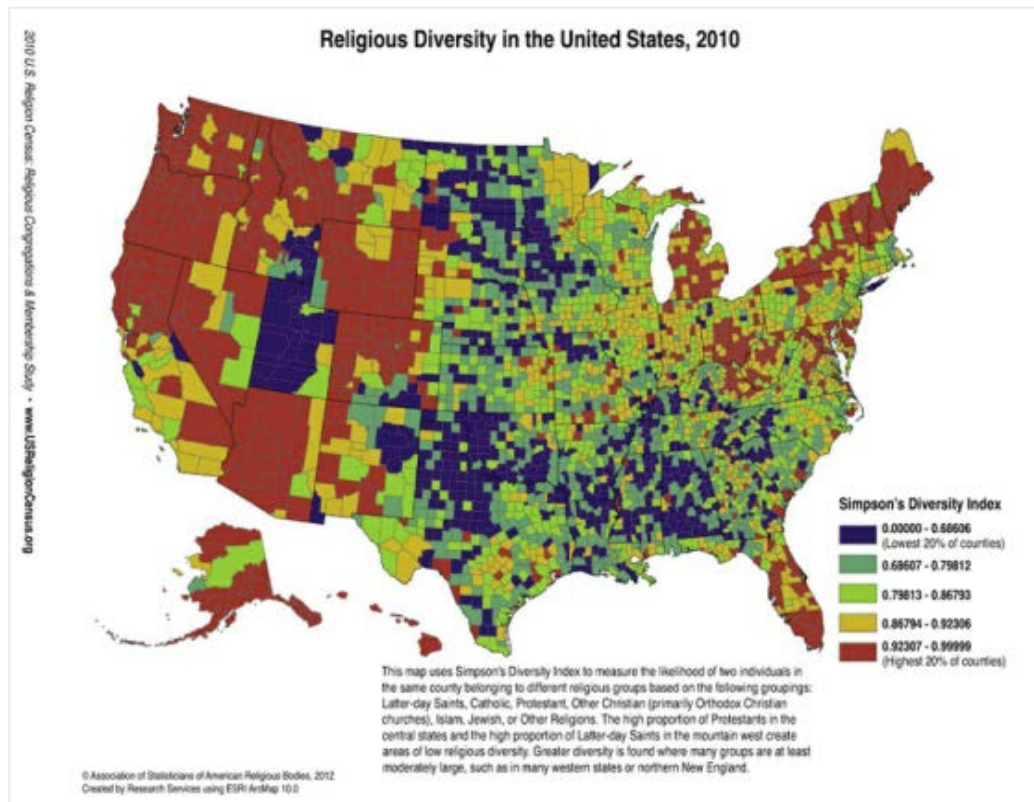


Figure 6:20: US Map by Counties - Some parts of the United States have a great mixture of religions, especially on the West Coast and New England. The Deep South and Utah have little religious diversity. Source: [ASARB](#)

[Mormons](#) (LDS) are not considered Protestants, because they do trace their history through the reformation; but back to church to the time of Christ. Mormonism originated during the early 19th century during a period of great religious fervor in the United States known as the [Second Great Awakening](#). During this time, many new religious denominations were established, and churches flourished. Joseph Smith Jr. founded the [LDS Church](#) after translating the [Book of Mormon](#), which he found near his home in Upstate New York, written in an ancient language on gold plates. The Book of Mormon tells a story of Christians during the time of a man named Mormon who lived in America before Europeans came, and before Christ was born. Though some Christians consider the LDS

church a cult, and chose to focus on the Mormon's history of *polygamy* (now virtually extinct). It is probably wiser to focus instead on the vast similarities between Mormons and Evangelical Christians since both have conservative cultural practices, a focus on family life and strongly held religious convictions. The acceptance of Mormons by most American Christians was obvious in the 2012 Presidential election cycle when LDS member Mitt Romney ran as a Republican with minimal attention to his faith.



Figure 6:21: Salt Lake City, UT - The Great Temple in Salt Lake City is the heart of the Mormon cultural region and a symbol of the significant economic power of LDS members.



[The American Values Atlas](#)

Maps and Tables of religious affiliation, political, moral and social questions.

Just as important as maps of where a religion is dominant are maps of where no religion is dominant, or religion is not important. In the United States, it's important to note that many parts of the Midwest and West, there is no dominant religious group (see map of religious diversity above). In some areas of the US, folks aren't that religious and therefore don't belong to a church. In parts of Oregon and Maine for example, less than 1/3rd of the population appears to belong to any faith. Nationally, about 13% of Americans are *agnostic*. Note that in the map below, West Virginia also appears to have low rates of adherence; but this seems out of line with other cultural traits there. Can you guess why this map shows

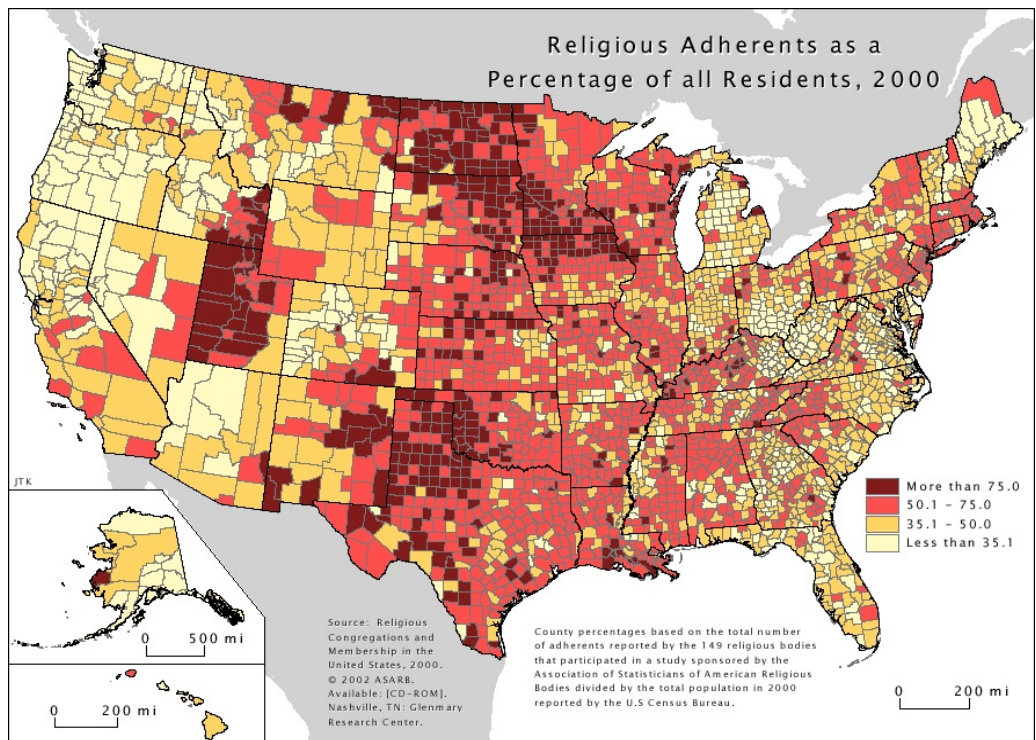


Figure 6:22 US Map by County - Rates of religious adherence vary greatly in the United States. The counties in the lightest color have rates of adherence sometimes below 33%. Utah and the Great Plains states have rates above 66%. Source: ASARB

some very rural areas with low rates of adherence? Could it be that folks in rural locations simply do not belong to a church included in a national surveys of church membership?

Islam

Islam is the world's second largest religion with over 1.5 billion adherents. Like Christianity, Islam is not monolithic; it has broken into several sub-faiths, but the about 80% of are [Sunni](#). An important minority of Muslims are [Shia](#), and they live primarily in Iran and Iraq. There are numerous sects as well, such as Syria's well-known group the [Alawites](#). Many other factions exist within the two main groups. Americans tend to think that all, or most, Muslims live in the Middle East and North Africa, but far more Muslims live in places like Indonesia (Southeast Asia) Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (South Asia). Keep in mind that Nigeria has nearly as many Muslims as Egypt, which is the most populous Muslim country in the Middle East.

Because there are about 2.6 million Muslims in the United States, and it is one of the fastest growing religions in the world, and the Islamic world is constantly in the news *and* Americans are generally ignorant about Islam, it is valuable to know a bit about Islam.

First, Islam is the religion and Muslims are the followers of Islam. The holy text of Islam is the [Qur'an](#) (or Koran -- there are various spellings of many Arabic words). Islam has a number of commonalities with Christianity and Judaism. In fact, Muslims believe essentially that all three faiths are variations of the same universal truth, and recognize Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as prophets. Muslims believe that earlier versions of Islam were corrupted over the years (becoming Judaism and Christianity) and it wasn't until the Koran was revealed verbatim to the *last* prophet [Muhammad](#) that the universal truth of [Allah](#) was properly codified, and written in Arabic.

Islam has several characteristics and practices that American students should know. First, Islam is *strictly* [monotheistic](#). To them (and Jews), the [Holy Trinity](#) (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is not sufficiently monotheistic. There is an expansive set of Islamic laws covering virtually every aspect of Muslim life, so it cannot be treated here, but non-Muslims should be familiar with the [Five Pillars](#), which represent the core behaviors of observant Muslims.



Figure 6.23: Mecca, Saudi Arabia - The Kaaba is the holiest location in Islam. It is the destination for millions of Muslims from around the world participating in the Hajj, the holy pilgrimage. Source: [Wikimedia](#).

Five Pillars of Islam

First, one must “take the [Shahadah](#)”, meaning they must recite an oath as a basic profession of faith to become a Muslim. The Sunni version of it translates roughly thus: “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah”. The Shahadah is repeated many times, frequently as part of the second pillar, called [Salat](#), which is five daily prayer sessions. Prayers are often recited at a mosque, where Muslims worship, but any place will suffice when it is time to pray. The third pillar is [alms giving](#), or donating to money to help the poor and other people in need. It’s not exactly charity, because Muslims who can afford it are obliged to give a certain percentage of their wealth as [zakat](#), and together these amounts likely exceed all other worldwide sources of aid to the needy. The fast ([sawm](#)) of [Ramadan](#) is the fourth pillar and it requires Muslims of faith and good health to fast (no food or water!) from sunrise to sunset for the entire month of Ramadan. There is good food and fellowship at sunset each day during the fast, and a holiday, [Eid al-Fitr](#), marking the end of the fast. Some Muslims observe a shortened work day during Ramadan, but basketball fans may recall Muslim NBA players Hakeem Olajuwon and Kareem Abdul Jabbar who played exceptionally well during the fast. The final pillar is the pilgrimage to Islam’s holiest city [Mecca](#) called the [Haji](#). All Muslims, if they are able, must travel at least once in their lifetime to the holiest location in the Muslim world at a specific time of year and engage in a series of rituals alongside as many as three million other Muslims. Clearly, it is one of the world’s greatest spectacles, but the size of the crowds in recent years has challenged Saudi authorities to ensure the safety of pilgrims.



Listen:
[The Shahadah](#)

Judaism

The oldest of the Abrahamic religions is [Judaism](#). It is monotheistic, rooted in the Middle East, text based and fragmented like Christianity and Islam, but unlike its Abrahamic cousins, it is not a universalizing religion. Jews (the followers of Judaism) are broken into several groups. Those are in turn also broken into sub-groups. In the most basic sense, one can divide Jews into three broad categories based on their interpretation of Jewish Law, starting with the most conservative, [orthodox groups](#), a conservative group and a more liberal or Reform group. It’s also plausible to add a fourth group; those that are only culturally Jewish; essentially accepting Jewish culture without accepting the religion. Anywhere from about 11 to 15 million people in the world call themselves Jewish. About 40% live in the United States ([mostly in New York, Miami, L.A. and other select large cities](#)) and about 40% live in Israel, the historic Jewish homeland. About 10% live in Europe and scattered elsewhere. Jews who identify as having a relatively recent European ancestry are often called [Ashkenazi](#), and they are by far the most numerous. The other large group of Jews that are defined geographically are those that identify with a Middle Eastern or Mediterranean heritage. They are called [Sephardic](#)



Figure 6:24: Natchez, MS - Abandoned synagogue in Mississippi speaks to the concentration of Jews in the US to large cities largely outside of the anti-Semitic southland.

[Jews](#); though it should be pointed out that these categories can be slippery and defined differently.

Jews make up a little less than 2% of all Americans, but they have had an outsized effect on American culture. Largely safe in the United States from persecution, Jews have thrived in the U.S. thanks in part a cultural emphasis on education and career success. Still, Jewish people have for the most part become part of the American mainstream, assimilating to the point of disappearing in some communities. Inter-marriage with non-Jewish people, and a low birth rate has contributed to the assimilation process. Orthodox communities, on the other hand, have remained somewhat out of the mainstream of American life, largely confined to the largest urban areas, but their numbers are growing more quickly than their more progressive or reformed Jewish cousins.

Hinduism

There are probably around one billion Hindus in the world, making it the third largest religion. Most Hindus live in India, and Nepal, but there are well over a million living in the United States, largely in large urban areas like Los Angeles and New York City. Hinduism is the oldest of the major faiths and probably has more branches and versions of any as well, making it challenging to describe in a coherent fashion. The Indian Supreme Court has even challenged its description as a “religion”, arguing instead that it should be considered a way of life instead. Still, most westerners have trouble understanding [Hinduism](#) without framing it within our existing notions of religion. For example, Hinduism doesn’t have people who get kicked out of the faith for having alternative beliefs; there are no heresies. Therefore, some Hindus are monotheistic, some polytheistic, some pantheistic and others still atheists.

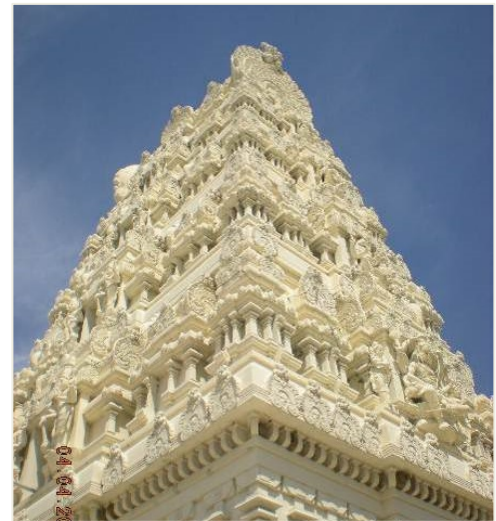


Figure 6:25: Malibu, CA - Hindu Temple. Extraordinary architectural elements mark this Hindu temple near Los Angeles. Architecture is a common means by which religions communicate their commitment to their faith.

There are some more common ideas and practices in Hinduism that college-educated Americans ought to know a little bit about, especially since we have incorporated some of these notions into our own vocabulary. You’ve no doubt heard people say something like, “bad [karma](#)”, if they witness someone doing something mean-spirited. This is a Hindu notion that people get, eventually, the life they deserve, but with a twist on the common American understanding – the good or bad you do in this life may carry over to the next life in a process called [reincarnation](#). People who can adhere to their [dharma](#), or achieve a sort of harmony with an ideal lifestyle (righteousness), may lead them to eventually experience

[nirvana](#), a state of blissful enlightenment that is the goal for many Hindus. [Yoga](#), what many Americans think of as simply a set of stretching exercises, is actually a set of practices that Hindus use to help achieve spiritual goals; there are a number of different Yogas each with different elements, but for the most part, they are paths to spiritual well-being, not just physical well-being.

Hindus have loads of holidays, some public and some more private. They have a host of rituals as well. In contrast with Christians, burial is not common, but rather they practice [ritual cremation](#). Vast numbers of Hindus make pilgrimages as well. One of the better known is the one made by Shakti Hindus to the banks of the Ganges in the holy city of [Varanasi](#), where the river absolves sin. Many Hindus go to Varanasi to die for this reason.

Buddhism

[Siddhartha Guatama](#), more commonly known as Buddha, lived somewhere in India during around five centuries ago. Unsettled by the abuses and the injustices associated with the form of Hinduism, he set out to create a new path to spiritual enlightenment. It's not surprising then that [Buddhism](#), the practice he invented, shares many characteristics with Hinduism, including the notions of Dharma, reincarnation, karma, etc. There are many differences as well. A core message of Buddhist teaching are the [Four Noble Truths](#), which explain why people have trouble achieving an enlightened lifestyle. Essentially, the message is as follows: 1) We suffer greatly from many things; 2) Our suffering is a result of our ignorance and desires; 3) To cease our suffering we must eliminate our ignorance and desires 4) There is an [eight-fold path](#) to achieving liberation from our ignorance and desires.

Buddhism spread out of India and is the dominant belief system in much of East and Southeast Asia, plus Sri Lanka, Bali and Kalmykia in Russia. There are several sects within Buddhism. The Theravada Buddhists are dominant in Southeast Asia, where a great percentage of the people are actively participate in Buddhist practice. In China, Korea and Japan, Mahayana Buddhism is more popular, but the rates of adherence are lower, and Buddhism is heavily interwoven with other local traditions, like [Confucianism](#) in China or [Shinto](#) in Japan. Tibetan Buddhism is found in Tibet, Nepal and Mongolia, and it is perhaps the best known version in the US because of the popularity of the [Dalai Lama](#), the best known of all Buddhist leaders.

In the US, Buddhists are found mostly in California and in big cities in the East, where Asian-Americans live. However, because Buddhists don't "belong" to congregations, like Christians, their numbers are hard to discern.



Figure 6:26: Los Angeles, CA - The Thien Hau Temple near downtown LA functions as a religious temple for the Vietnamese and Chinese communities in Los Angeles is officially a Taoist shrine, but associations with Buddhism and local religions are evident. Source: [Wikimedia](#)

Religious Diffusion – Why is it here?

How did the map of religions come to look the way it does? The United States offers a quality case study on religious diffusion. Most Americans are Christian for several reasons. At the most fundamental level, any Christian is that way because some other Christian at some point sought out new converts. The Europeans were converted to Christianity by people from the Middle East, and in turn Europeans converted the peoples of the New World as they conquered territory in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, religious conversion was one of the driving forces behind the colonization of much of the world: it was the *God* part of the “Three G’s” of the colonial age: God, Gold and Glory. Saving souls was a very real purpose for those who came to the Americas as missionaries centuries ago. Religion also helped to salve the conscious of those who recognized the crass economics of colonial expansion. Religious intolerance within Europe against religious minorities drove many Christians to migrate to the New World.

Mostly however, the United States is largely Christian because most of the people who migrated here from Europe were Christians. Africans brought to the US as slaves, and many Native Americans who were already here, were forced to convert to Christianity by militarily powerful, intolerant and genuinely faithful Europeans. For many generations, Americans had little choice in terms of religion. There could be strong social and even legal sanctions against adopting new beliefs, even though the US Constitution guaranteed the right to religious choice. Also, for generations Americans knew little of other religions or practices.

Religious affiliation changes slowly. Most people inherit their religious practices and ideas from their parents. Few consider adopting a new one, which undermines rapid changes from one generation to the next. When people do adopt a different faith, or even when they diverge from strongly held familial practices, it often signals significant life changes for those making the change. Major events, like marriage to someone from a different faith, long distance migrations, wars, or some



Figure 6:27: Canoga Park, CA - Church Sign. In ethnically diverse regions, religious and ethnic tolerance is evidenced by the tendency of multiple, diverse congregations to share the same sacred space.



Figure 6:28: Shreveport, LA - Billboard. Evangelicals in many parts of the country exhort others to follow Christian religious doctrine. Some considered the message on this sign blasphemous because a person signed it as "God".

other major upheaval within a family count among the forces powerful enough to disrupt religious continuity among and between generations.

The map of denominational affiliation is a little harder to explain. Some of the pattern can be explained by ethnicity. The Spanish converted the ancestors of some Americans living in the American Southwest. The fact that places like California already had many established Catholic churches, has surely been comforting to those Catholics migrating to California over the years. Other largely Catholic areas of the US exist where Catholic immigrants to the US from Europe found jobs. If those already there were tolerant of the arriving Catholics, those migrants often became a majority, and in the process attracted additional Catholics through a process known as [chain migration](#).



Figure 6:29: San Gabriel, CA - Grape Vine. Spanish missionaries introduced viticulture in California. Today California remains largely Catholic and viticulture forms a significant part of California's agricultural economy, .

Lutherans, largely migrated from the Germanic countries of Northern Europe. It's hardly surprising that Germans and Scandinavians found the the colder climates of Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Dakotas much to their liking. When they migrated here, they brought their religion. So, at least for one group, environmental pre-adaptation to a specific climate seems to have played a role in creating the religious landscape.

Baptists were not the first group to migrate into the American South, in fact they remained a small minority throughout the colonial period. Their numbers grew as a result of their focus on spoken/oral religious services. This set them apart from the Anglican/Episcopal churches favored by the earliest southerners because many of the later immigrants to the South could not read; and schooling was far less important in the southern US than in New England or the Middle Atlantic states. It became the religion of the ordinary people of the South. Prior to the Civil War, American Baptists split into two large groups over slavery. The Southern Baptist Convention was born, and increased in popularity. Most blacks at that time attended the same church as whites, so today still many black families belong to some version of the Baptist faith.



Figure 6:30: Winterhaven, FL: This large modern church attests to the popularity of religion in the Deep South, where much of the population belongs to a Baptist congregation.

Mormons are largely found in the Intermontane West because this was a safe place for them to practice their religion in the 1800s. Early Mormons found themselves the victims of extreme religious intolerance in Missouri and Illinois where they had hoped to settle and build their community. After the founder of the church, Joseph Smith, was murdered in 1844, the Mormons moved to what is now Utah in search of a place isolated from persecution. Although there was a short “war” between Mormon settlers and the US Army largely over the degree of sovereignty the Utah territory had over its own affairs, the isolation of Utah and Idaho has helped Mormons maintain a reasonably unique cultural realm.



Figure 6:31: Salt Lake City, UT - Highway Sign. The beehive symbolizes the exceptional work ethic of Utahans, nearly 75% of whom are Mormons.

While religious persecution may have driven early Mormons into some of the most desolate, isolated lands in the United States, religious intolerance (or just the fear of it) keeps other religious minorities in large cities. Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in the United States tend to be found in many of the same large urban areas. Why? Partly this would be explained by the patterns of economic opportunity and migration. On the positive side, it is easier for those who want to find people of their own religion and culture are more likely to do so in a large city. Religions frequently preach fellowship. On the darker side, there is also an argument to be made that there is safety in the numbers afforded minority communities in large cities where a critical mass of defensive support can be mustered against discriminatory practices. There tends to be a sort of apathy (or tolerance) in large cities. Urban folks are more used to diversity and feel little threat in “the other”.

A final spatial pattern discernible in the US is the manner in which particularly unusual or novel religious practices, like [snake handling](#) in Appalachia. Though similar in outcome to the search for isolation practiced by Mormons; remoteness itself seems capable of fostering innovation in religious practice or doctrinal interpretation. The American West, which at one time featured thousands of isolated towns and villages attracted dozens of Christian splinter groups and fostered, via isolation, the creation of dozens more. Mt. Shasta in northern California is home to several “new age” cults (or religions).



Figure 6:32: Slab City, CA - Salvation Mountain. This folk art monument, built in an anarchic settlement in the California's low desert evokes the strong desire of some Christians to build monuments to their faith.

The Big Picture

Religion affects a great number of elements of any culture, and is itself a product of culture. Economic activity, politics, ethnicity, language, and the environment all interact with religion in complex and compelling ways. The vast extent of the interactions can't be spelled out here (even if we could); so a few examples will have to suffice.

Religion and Politics

In the United States, as is the case elsewhere, religious affiliation is a good predictor of political behavior. Evangelical Christians and Mormons rank among the most politically conservative voters in the US year after year. This relationship was greatly strengthened by the so-called “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s, when for the first time since the Civil War, conservative Christians (largely from the South) abandoned the Democratic Party in favor of the Republican Party. Certainly part of the switch was motivated by the Democrats stance on Civil Rights, but hot-button religious issues, particularly abortion, drove many Evangelicals to the Right. Leading the charge were several high profile television ministers, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. The new alliances, particularly with the pro-business/anti-taxation element of the Republican Party forged during the Reagan era have caused some Evangelical Christians some discomfort however. The numerous Biblical restrictions on usury, for example, have made it difficult for some Evangelicals to fully support Republican policies calling for less regulation of interest rates charged to people taking out loans.

Religion and Economics

Because many religions condemn charging interest on loans, there was little reason to loan money in many parts of the world for many centuries. Jewish people, who faced fewer restrictions on usury, faced little competition in the banking industry until attitudes began to change in modern times. This may explain in part why Jewish folks have traditionally involved with the banking industry. In a very similar fashion, many Evangelical Christians and Mormons expressly forbid the consumption of alcohol. It is therefore not surprising that few wineries exist in Utah or Alabama. On the other hand, California's long association with



Figure 6:33: Reseda, CA - Payday Lender Storefront. [Usury](#) was once considered a very serious sin, undermining the banking and lending industry. In recent years, deregulation of usury laws have resulted in the proliferation of high interest rate loans, even in the most religious regions.



Figure 6:34: North Carolina - Pork Skins. The prevalence of pork in the diet of Baptists in the South would not be possible if Muslims or Jews were the dominant population.

Catholicism has helped advance the very profitable viticultural industry in that state. Muslims and Jews (and some Christians) abstain from eating pork because of religious restrictions; therefore pig farming would be very rare in Israel or the Muslim world. Many parts of India abstain from eating any meat, so any sort of animal husbandry would be an unlikely career path.

Religion and the Environment

How Christians have understood their relationship with the natural environment has had fascinating consequences in American history. The Puritans of New England, having fled Europe while there were still plenty of vestiges of various nature religions in the religious practices of their neighbors; they held a pretty dim view of the great forests of New England. To them, the city was where Christians were most likely to find orderliness, which was a characteristic of God. Puritans considered Boston, *a city upon a hill*, a holy beacon for the rest of the world to watch for moral guidance. Farming landscapes were good too, as long as they were free from the chaos that characterized the wild places on earth (where Satan was influential). Great examples of these views are found in the literary works of 18th century authors, like [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) (e.g., *The Scarlet Letter*), but the notion that the wilderness is a chaotic place for sinfulness can be found today in numerous *slasher films* frequently filmed at some summer camp in a forest. The NHL ice hockey team, known as the New Jersey Devils derives their name from the *same fear* of the woods.

In the 19th century, American attitudes began to change toward wilderness locations. Rather than always being a place of chaos, where you would become bewildered, people like [John Muir](#) argued that wilderness was where people commune with all that was spirituality good. As the industrial revolution and modern capitalism wrought massive changes, religious folks began to see cities as the *loci* of moral degradation and spiritual corruption, and wilderness areas as “God’s Country”.

Those two philosophical positions still battle for supremacy and geographers have found that religious affiliation has a great deal of influence over what people think about things like climate change or deforestation. If your religion commands you to be a good steward of the natural environment, you are likely to have a positive view of environmentalism. If on the other hand, you think that the earth is provided by God for humankind to use as we see fit, then perhaps coal mining or pipelines won’t bother you. Some Christian Fundamentalists take it even further, believing that ecological catastrophes, like global climate change, are a sign of the approaching Apocalypse, and therefore a welcome sign of the end-of-days.



Figure 6:35: Yosemite National Park, CA - Yosemite Falls. The preservation of this landscape for recreation and conservation reflects a significant change in religious-spiritual attitudes toward nature in the mid 19th century.