

Name _____ Date _____

Major World Religions

“Major World Religions”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. The Jewish faith began with Abraham, who led the Hebrew people to the “Promised Land.” This land was called Canaan and was on the land in the Mediterranean where Israel is today. The Jewish people (also known as the Hebrews) were unusual at the time for believing in only one god. Most everyone else around them worshipped multiple deities. In about 2000 BCE, there was a long drought and famine in Canaan, so the Jewish people migrated to Egypt to find water and work. When they returned to Canaan in 1200 BCE, they found that people had moved in while they were gone. The Jews claimed rights to the land, based on their history there, but the Canaanites didn’t want to give it up. So they fought. The land of Israel, claimed by both the Jews (Israelis) and the Palestinians, is still being fought over today.

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2. Moses was a prophet who spoke to God. First, he led the Jews out of Egypt. For a time the Jews had lived a nice life in the land of the pharaohs, but their growing numbers concerned the pharaoh, who thought they were getting too powerful. So he had them all enslaved. It was Moses who got them out of this bad situation. Known as the Exodus, this was a turning point in Judaism. Moses was also the man to whom God gave the Ten Commandments, according to the Judaeo-Christian story.

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The Jewish faith is based largely on five books; add them up and you have the Torah, also known as the Five Books of Moses. The Torah is just one of three texts that comprise the Hebrew Bible. Christians didn’t write a brand-new bible for themselves; they added to the Jewish Bible, which they call “the Old Testament.” The parts they added are called “the New Testament.” So the Ten Commandments are the same in both the Jewish and Christian religions. Both faiths believe the commandments were the ten laws that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai to bring back to the people. They form the basis of law in many countries.

3. There is little doubt that Jesus was a real, historical figure. He was a Jew who was angered by the hypocrisy he saw around him. He was upset that people followed the laws of the Torah without spiritually connecting with God, and he didn't think they did enough to help those who were sick and poor. One of Jesus's most famous speeches is called the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus described his golden rule ("Do unto others what you would have them do unto you").

Eventually, Jesus attracted a large group of followers who called him a messiah, a savior or liberator of the Jewish people. This caught the attention of the Roman authorities, who thought he might start an open rebellion. They tried him in court, found him guilty and crucified him, the typical way that Romans put people to death.

According to the Christian Bible, three days after he died, Jesus was resurrected, or brought back to life. In the following days, he appeared to various people and told the apostles (his close followers and students) to spread his teachings throughout the world. Jesus also promised to come to Earth again to resurrect the dead and judge everyone.

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4. The Christians had it rough in the early days of their religion. When the city of Rome had a huge fire during Nero's regime, Nero blamed the fire on the Christians, and they were persecuted. Over time, though, Jesus's disciples began to spread their new religion. Unlike the Jews, who hardly ever converted new followers, Christians actively recruited new members. Christianity became a much larger force under the Roman emperor Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, who pushed the faith all across his empire. By 380 CE, Christianity had become the official state religion of the Roman Empire, by decree of emperor Theodosius. It serves as the official religion of many European nations up to the present day.

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5. Another powerful prophet, Muhammad, is the man who begot the Muslim faith. He was born in Mecca, a city in Saudi Arabia, in 570 CE. According to Islam, the angel Gabriel appeared to him when he was 40, bringing the message of God. For the next 23 years, the angel visited Muhammad on many occasions, each time giving him new messages from God. These were written down into the Qur'an. Like Jesus, Muhammad's role was to teach the people and demonstrate the correct way to behave.

The Islamic faith, the religion of Muslims, dates back to the time just after Muhammad's death, around 650 CE. The Islamic faith followed the prophet Muhammad very closely. Through him, Allah gave the Muslims the Five Pillars and told them not to eat pork or drink alcohol. The Five Pillars of Islam are somewhat similar to the Ten Commandments; they are supposed to be laws straight from the mouth of God about how you should behave. Muslims believe that Moses and Jesus were prophets, but that Muhammad was the last prophet. The Qur'an includes many of the same stories as the Old Testament, which is part of the Jewish and Christian faiths. So there are a great deal of similarities between the three religions.

6. Hinduism is a truly unique religion in that it had no founder. It just sort of developed along with the culture and religious traditions of India. Unlike other religions, it doesn't have a single dogma—a system of beliefs—but many. It has numerous subsets, and people who practice Hinduism can have very different ideas or interpretations from each other. Because Hinduism is so diverse, some of its followers believe in multiple gods; others believe in only one; some believe in none. Nearly all believe that the soul is eternal and that a life force, Brahma, exists throughout everything.

One of the beliefs that developed in Hinduism is reincarnation, the idea that our souls migrate to a new body upon death. According to Hinduism, what we come back as depends on our karma, the good or bad actions we commit in our lifetime. Hinduism also stresses meditation. To meditate is to get in touch with Brahma, the universal life force, by relaxing and focusing only on your breath. Meditation is related to yoga, a system of stretching and body movements that have been practiced in some form for thousands of years.

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7. Imagine walking away from everything you ever had into an uncertain future. That's what Siddhartha Guatama did in about 528 BCE. In India, he left his cushy role as prince to wander the countryside looking for life's answers. It worked out well for him according to the story of Buddhism. Unhappy with the Hindu religion, Siddhartha traveled around and meditated for quite some time, trying to understand why pain exists. Meditation is still an important part of Buddhism today. Then he found what he was looking for: enlightenment. From then on he was known as the Buddha, or "enlightened one."

Buddhism spread all across India. People liked it as an alternative to Hinduism. It was a simple, peaceful, loving faith, and when people heard about its tenets in other parts of Asia, they took to them as well. Soon Buddhism would be one of the largest religions in the world, spreading throughout India and China, two of the planet's most populous places. People in India liked that Buddhism broke with the caste system, which was a way of keeping social groups separate, and that it called for a way to become free from human suffering.

8. Other religions and philosophies thrive in Asia. Confucianism is popular in China, while Shinto was once the state religion of Japan.

Confucius (551-479 BCE) was a philosopher and teacher in China. Some people confuse his philosophies with religion, but they were more ways of thinking and behaving than a spiritual set of beliefs. His ideas about virtue, family and society became the foundation for the moral code of China. He thought that children should respect their parents, citizens should obey their government and people should adhere to high standards of behavior if they expect others to.

Buddhism is often mixed with Shinto in Japan; in fact, most people there practice both. Shinto is another ancient religion, dating back to about 500 BCE. It's based on the idea of kami, or the Shinto deities. But they're not gods like the omnipotent gods of other religions; they are more like spirit forces that look after humans and help them. They're often found in natural objects or creatures and in special people. There are four affirmations in Shinto: honor of tradition and family; love of nature; physical cleanliness; and matsuri, the worship of kami. People who believe in Shinto often incorporate other ideas into their religion, like Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

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