

History of religious categories

[Religion](#)



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An 1883 map of the world divided into colors representing "Christians, Buddhists, Hindoos, Mohammedans, Fetichists". In world cultures, there have traditionally been many different groupings of religious belief. In Indian culture, different religious philosophies were traditionally respected as academic differences in pursuit of the same truth. In Islam, the Quran mentions three different categories: Muslims, the People of the Book, and idol worshippers.

Initially, Christians had a simple dichotomy of world beliefs: Christian civility versus foreign heresy or barbarity. In the 18th century, "heresy" was clarified to mean Judaism and Islam; [citation needed] along with outright paganism, this created a fourfold classification which spawned such works as John Toland's *Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity*, which represented the three Abrahamic religions as different "nations" or sects within religion itself, the "true monotheism."

Daniel Defoe described the original definition as follows: "Religion is properly the Worship given to God, but 'tis also applied to the Worship of Idols and false Deities." At the turn of the 19th century, in between 1780 and 1810, the language dramatically changed: instead of "religion" being synonymous with spirituality, authors began using the plural, "religions", to refer to both Christianity and other forms of worship.

Therefore, Hannah Adams's early encyclopedia, for example, had its name changed from *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects...* to *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations*. [3] In 1838, the four-way division of Christianity, Judaism, Mahomedanism (archaic terminology

for Islam) and Paganism was multiplied considerably by Josiah Conder's Analytical and Comparative View of All Religions Now Extant among Mankind.

Conder's work still adheres to the four-way classification, but in his eye for detail he puts together much historical work to create something resembling our modern Western image: he includes Druze, Yezidis, Mandeans, and Elamites[clarification needed] under a list of possibly monotheistic groups, and under the final category, of " polytheism and pantheism", he lists Zoroastrianism, " Vedas, Puranas, Tantras, Reformed sects" of India as well as " Brahminical idolatry", Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Lamaism, " religion of China and Japan", and " illiterate superstitions".

The modern meaning of the phrase " world religion", putting non-Christians at the same, living level as Christians, began with the 1893Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, Illinois. The Parliament spurred the creation of a dozen privately funded lectures with the intent of informing people of the diversity of religious experience: these lectures funded researchers such as William James, D. T. Suzuki, and Alan Watts, who greatly influenced the public conception of world religions.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the category of " world religion" fell into serious question, especially for drawing parallels between vastly different cultures, and thereby creating an arbitrary separation between the religious and the secular. [6] Even history professors have now taken note of these complications and advise against teaching " world religions" in schools. [7]

Others see the shaping of religions in the context of the nation-state as the "invention of traditions".