

CRASH COURSE REVIEW – RELIGION

What does Religion have to do with Human Geography?

Understanding religious differences is important to the field of human geography. So how do you as a geographer study religion? Geographers research and document the location of religions and use the results to explain why certain religions are widely distributed and why other religions are extremely concentrated. There are two types of religions for Human Geography studies: universalizing and ethnic religions. After you read this AP Human Geography study guide, you will better understand the difference between universalizing and ethnic religions. We will also explore why it is important to understand and examine the implications of the origin, distribution, and diffusion of religions. This study guide will conclude with how universalizing and ethnic religions relate to the AP Human Geography exam.

What is Religion?

Before we can understand the differences between universalizing and ethnic religions, we must first have a discussion on the definition of religion itself. You may not have sat down and thought about religion as a pure concept, but religion is a vital part of human culture, and it helps us celebrate and understand our place in the world. Religion is a common set of beliefs and practices through which people seek harmony with the power of the universe. It is also a communal way to relate a belief that centers on a system of thought, unseen being, person, or object that is believed to be supernatural, sacred, or divine. Religion can impact how we interact with other people and our environment, which then shapes the development of a people's cultural landscape.

Theistic Aspects of Religion

Now that we know the basic definition of religion and why it is important to us to study religion as part of the AP Human Geography course, we will now explore the different types of religions based on several factors. One factor that distinguishes various religions is the number of gods that followers worship. In this regard, monotheism and polytheism are the two classifications of religion. Religions are monotheistic because they believe in one supreme being or god. In contrast to monotheism, polytheistic religions believe in more than one supreme or deity. Polytheistic religions practiced today include Hinduism and Shintoism. As geographers, we need to examine religions with an eye on universality and ethnicity. Origin and predominate location define ethnic and universalizing religions as well to help explain how the religion diffused over time.

Universalizing Religions

First, let's look at the definition of universalizing religion. Universalizing religions offer belief systems that are attractive to the universal population. They look for new members and welcome anyone and everyone who wishes to adopt their belief system. Universalizing religions have many diverse members, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, hence the term universal. Therefore, it is evident that universal religions consist of many different ethnic groups because they convert and accept anyone of any background and are usually not closely tied to one location.

Christianity

Christianity is the largest universalizing religion, both in area and in number, with about two billion adherents. Founded on the teachings of Jesus, Christianity is monotheistic, believing that God is a Trinity and Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The three main branches of Christianity are Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. Roman Catholics are predominate in Southwest Europe and Latin America, Protestants in Northwest Europe and North America, and Orthodox in Eastern Europe. Eastern Orthodoxy is the largest single religious faith in Greece, Cyprus, and Russia.

Islam

Islam is the second largest universalizing religion with over 1.5 billion adherents. In Arabic, Islam means “submitting to the will of God”. Those who practice Islam are Muslims, which means one who surrenders to God. Islam begins with Abraham like Christianity and Judaism, but traces their story through Abraham’s second wife and son, Hagar and Ishmael, not Sarah and Isaac like the Christians and Jews. Their leader and prophet is Muhammad. The two branches of Islam are Sunni and Shiite. The division between the Sunni and Shia originated in a disagreement over leadership after Muhammad’s death in 632 CE. Islam is the predominant religion in the Middle East from North Africa to Central Asia. More than half of the world’s Muslims live in four countries outside the Middle East: Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

Buddhism

Buddhism is the fourth largest religion, with about 350 million adherents. Buddhism was founded in Northern India by the first known Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. The core Buddhist belief is reincarnation. In this concept, people are reborn after dying. One can attain Nirvana if one releases their attachment to desire and self. Today, Buddhism is a majority faith in Southeast Asia, China, and Japan.

Ethnic Religions

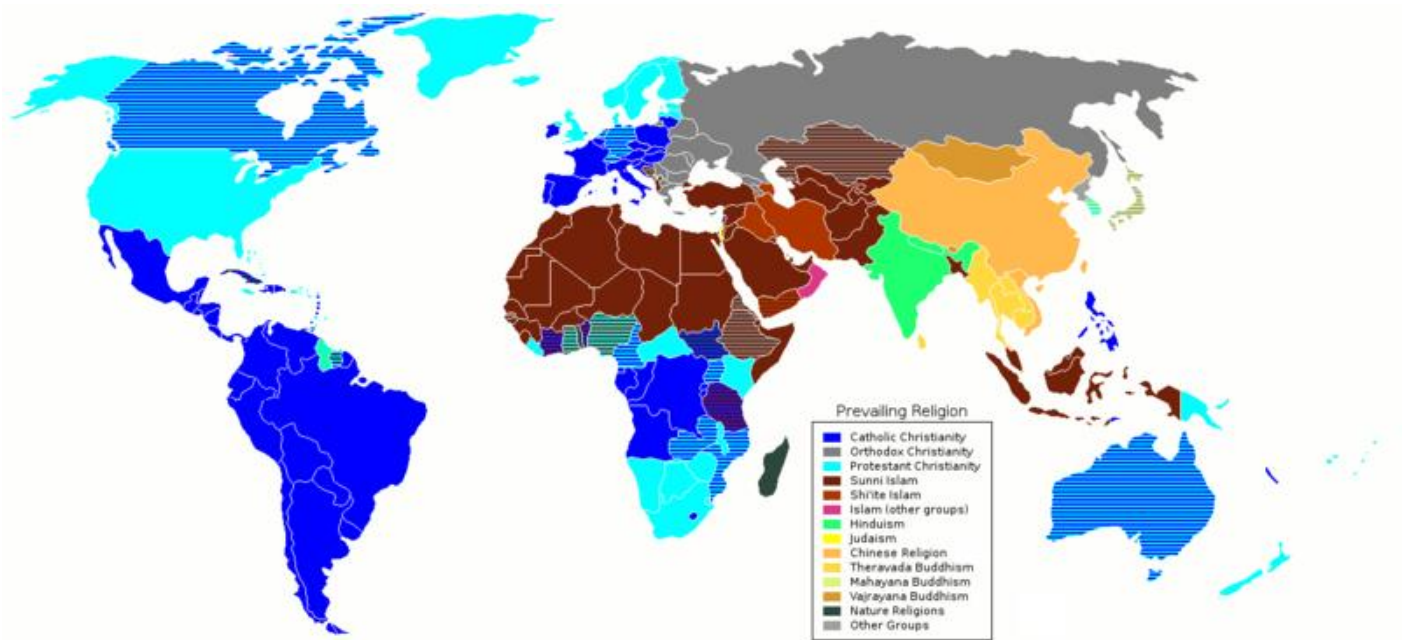
In contrast to universalizing religions, ethnic religions usually consist of beliefs, superstitions, and rituals handed down from generation to generation within an ethnicity and culture. It follows one’s ethnicity because the religion does not tend to convert. In some ways, ethnic religions act like a folk culture. It expands via relocation diffusion and often increases through birth rates. Ethnic religions relate closely to culture, ethnic heritage, and to the physical geography of a particular place. Ethnic religions do not attempt to appeal to all people, but only one group, maybe in one locale or within one ethnicity. Judaism and Hinduism are two prime examples of ethnic religions.

Hinduism

Hinduism is the largest ethnic religion and the world’s third largest religion with about 1 billion adherents. Hinduism existed before recorded history and had no specific founder. The origins of Hinduism in India are unclear; however, the oldest manuscripts date to 1500 BCE. Hinduism consists of many different religious groups evolved in India since 1500 BCE. Other religions are more centrally organized than Hinduism, and it is up to the individual to decide the best way to worship God. The principle of reincarnation is the cornerstone of Hinduism, and their doctrine closely mirrors India’s caste system. Almost all Hindus live in one country, India, but also are in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

Judaism

Judaism is an ethnic religion that has more than 14 million followers worldwide. There are 6 million Jews in Israel and 5 million in the United States. Two of the main universalizing religions, Christianity and Islam, find some of their roots in Judaism, recognizing Abraham as a Patriarch. Jews believe in one true God, and the Western Wall of the old temple in Jerusalem is one of their most holy sites. The three branches of Judaism are Orthodox, Conservatives, and Reformed. Judaism is distributed throughout part of the Middle East and North Africa, the United States, Russia, and Europe.



[Image Source: Wikimedia Commons](#)

Religious Diffusion

How did all religions get to where they are today? Religions spread over time through a process called diffusion. The map shown above indicates where the identified religions are most prominent. There are two methods of diffusion: expansion and relocation. In expansion diffusion, beliefs of a religion transmit by direct contact between believers and nonbelievers. This contact causes the number of believers to increase over time either by direct contact between believers and nonbelievers (contagious diffusion) or by conversion of nonbelievers by missionaries (hierarchical diffusion). Relocation diffusion happens when a group of believers moves to a new location, where they then spread the teachings of a religion that are often not yet widely known or practiced in the region. So let's look at how universalizing and ethnic religions have spread across the globe.

Diffusion of Universalizing Religions

The top three universalizing religions spread through expansion and relocation diffusion. Each has a hearth in Asia: Christianity in Israel, Islam in Saudi Arabia, and Buddhism in India. A hearth is an area where a set of cultural traits and concepts develop. Followers of each religion migrated, preaching the message of the religions to people far beyond the hearth. Christianity spread through relocation diffusion by missionaries and hierarchical diffusion when the Roman Empire made Christianity its official

religion. Christianity became the dominant religion in North and South America because of the early explorers and colonizers from Europe were Christians. Islam spread mostly through contagious diffusion by military conquest into North Africa and Western Europe and through Arab traders traveling to Indonesia. Buddhism spread primarily through relocation diffusion by missionaries and was slow to diffuse outside the area of origin.

Diffusion of Ethnic Religions

By its definition, ethnic religions are found near the hearth but spread through relocation diffusion. Unlike universalizing religions, ethnic religions haven't spread primarily because of the lack of missionaries. In some cases, universalizing religions, like Christianity and Islam, replace ethnic religions. Judaism diffused by the scattering of Jews around the world after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Universalizing and Ethnic Religions in the AP Human Geography Exam

The Course Description of the AP Human Geography lets you know that you have to distinguish between ethnic and universalizing religions. In turn, the AP Human Geography exam focuses on how religion impacts elements of the cultural landscape, so focus your studies on how aspects of a religion affect the way people interact with each other. Universalizing and ethnic religions have appeared in the multiple-choice section of the AP Human Geography exam. In 2006, there were three questions relating to the diffusion of ethnic and universalizing religions, but that doesn't mean they will be in future multiple-choice sections of the exam.