**http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/atlas-of-world-religions-asian-religions-a-460247-druck.html**

**Asian Religions**

The major religions Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and the moral philosophy of Confucianism evolved in Asia. The eastern religions also extend to Shinto in Japan, Zen Buddhism and, in outlying regions, natural religions with Shamanist features.

Buddhism and Jainism profess neither a personal god nor a creator. Since Hinduism does not proselytize, it is limited largely to residents of the Indian subcontinent. Hindus do not necessarily need a priest or guru to practice their religion, which is comprised of the belief in, and subjection to, a personal god or goddess as well as unconditional faith in the all-encompassing Spirit.

Perhaps more than all other Asian religions, Buddhism has aroused worldwide interest. Among its most sustained strengths is its ability to adjust to changing circumstances and a multitude of cultures. Growing interest in Asian culture and its spiritual values throughout the West has resulted in the creation of a large number of communities based on Buddhist teaching and its applications. Buddhism has encountered intense opposition in the communist countries of Asia. Since the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950/51 and the subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama (1959), China has been trying to wipe out, or at least restrict, Buddhist influence there. Although Buddhism survived in China, it is subject to state regulation and controls. Many monasteries in Tibet have been closed, the state officially promotes the settlement of Chinese in the region, and traditional Tibetan customs are being suppressed.

**Hinduism**

The spread of Buddhism and Hinduism

The roots of Hinduism can be traced back to the third millennium B.C.E. Around 1500 B.C.E., nomadic Aryan people entered northwestern India from Persia. Mingling their beliefs with those of the local inhabitants, they initiated a spiritual movement that produced several strands of religion now collectively referred to as Hinduism. A religion rooted in mythology, Hinduism has neither a founder nor a fixed canon. Despite its pluralistic nature, most Hindus acknowledge the authority of the sacred ancient scriptures, the four Vedas, and the division of society into four major castes: priests (Brahmins), warriors, artisans and peasants. Outside these categories are the "untouchables" (dalits), who are often forced to do the "unclean" jobs. The Hindus' highest goal is liberation (moksha) from the cycle of reincarnations through unity with god or the manifestation of the ultimate reality - the identification of one's own soul (atman) with the universal soul (Brahman).

**Believers worldwide: about 1 billion**

**Buddhism**

Proliferation of Buddhism

A salvational religion that was created around 528 B.C.E. in northern India. Founded by Siddharta Gautama (563-483 B.C.E.), whom his supporters later called the Buddha (the Enlightened One).

At the core of its teachings are the "Four Noble Truths":

* The truth that life means suffering (e.g. birth, death)
* The truth of the origin of suffering as attachment (desire, delusion)
* The truth of the cessation of suffering (through dispassionate detachment)
* The truth of the "Eightfold Path" leading to the cessation of desire and suffering

The Eightfold Path leads to the cessation of suffering and the attainment of nirvana:

* Right belief, i.e. in the Four Noble Truths
* Right purpose: overcoming sensuality, loving others, harming no living beings
* Right speech
* Right conduct
* Right means of livelihood
* Right effort
* Right mindfulness
* Right meditation to attain sainthood and the quiescence of nirvana

A being remains caught in the cycle of reincarnations until it reaches nirvana. The Buddha did not leave behind any scriptures. The first collection of texts dates from the 1st century B.C.E. in Sri Lanka (Pali Canon).

**Believers worldwide: about 450 million**

**Shinto/Japan**

Rooted in animism. Gods (kami) inhabit certain mountains, trees, stones and the sun, hence these are to be worshipped. There is no founder or sacred scripture. The kami cult evolved from the 6th to the 8th centuries to strengthen Japanese identification with the myth of the sun goddess Amaterasu (main shrine in Ise) as the ancestress of Japan's emperors. The Shinto faith is a religion emphasizing strong social rites and personal intercessions in everyday matters. Since Shinto is not dogmatic, it coexists with other religions.

**Believers in Japan: about 107 million**

**Sikhism**

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in northwestern India. Nanak taught that there is only one God, who is both infinite and omnipresent. His teachings were continued by nine successive gurus. Like Hindus, the Sikhs ("students") believe in a cycle of reincarnations that leads ultimately to unification with God; in contrast, however, their focus lies on human action as a means to escape the cycle of rebirths. Salvation is obtained by avoiding defined evils and living a moral life. The Sikhs' sacred scriptures are called the Guru Granth Sahib.

**Believers worldwide: about 24 million**

**Jainism**

In the middle of the 1st millennium B.C.E., the authority of Hindu priests was called into question by, among others, Mahavira (circa 599-527 B.C.E.), the founder of Jainism. His followers reject the Vedas, the idea of a creator god and the caste system. They venerate 24 Teachers. Through faith, consciousness, correct behavior and, above all, total nonviolence (ahimsa), every human can be liberated from having to be reborn. Jains are vegetarians. Monks wear a cloth over their mouths to avoid harming any living creature in the air.

**Believers in India: about 4.4 million**

**Taoism**

Taoism is both a folk religion and a philosophy. It can be regarded as China's original religion. Founded in the 6th century B.C.E. by Lao Tzu, the putative author of the classic text Tao Te Ching, Taoism has no deity. "Tao" means "way," i.e. the cosmic order of the polar forces yin (female) and yang (male); it is viewed as a universal principle not accessible through mere human reason. As a school of thought, Taoism is the antithesis of Confucianism. Its ideal is a world without force, attained by wu wei (inaction), the avoidance of all unnecessary intervention. Only those who know that they are ignorant can intuitively understand - by achieving harmony with nature - the truth underlying all things. Spirits and demons figure in this folk religion, as do meditation techniques believed to lead to longevity and even immortality.

**Confucianism**

Confucianism, founded by Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.), is a moral and state philosophy. In a time characterized by particularism and frequent war, it promoted the model of an idealized antiquity, where rulers transmitted responsibility for the empire to the most worthy rather than to their own offspring. The noble human - junzi, literally "ruler's son" - referred not to a social class, but to an ideal type, the ethically noble, who as such is alone qualified to rule. Through his moral actions, the ethically noble person in state and society serves as a role model for his people. The principal virtues are Righteousness, Compassion, Morality, Wisdom and Sincerity. These characteristics are not inborn but are acquired through constant practice. Well-being, of an individual as well as of the family and society, hinges on adherence to moral rules. The primary source of Confucius' teachings is the collection of sayings called the Lunyu.