

Glossary

In brackets after each explanation the religious tradition to which the term belongs is indicated, where it is not clear from the explanation itself. The traditions are designated as follows:

B: Buddhism
CB: Chinese Buddhism
Ch: Christianity
Cn: Confucianism
H: Hinduism
I: Islam
J: Judaism
S: Sikhism
T: Taoism

A Mi T'o, the Chinese name for the Buddha Amitabha (q.v.)

Aberah, sin (J)

Abhidamma, Pali form of Sanskrit "Abhidharma," the third section of the Buddhist scriptures

Achariya, a title of respect (H)

Adhan, the call to prayer (I)

Adonai, a name of God (J)

Agni, the Vedic god of fire, and so of the fire-sacrifice, the hearth, and the priestly caste (H)

Ahimsa, non-violence, the principle that one ought not to cause harm (B)

Allah, God, from "al-ilah," "the God" (I)

Amitabha, the Buddha who brings his devotees to the Pure Land

Amoraim, commentators on the Mishnah (J)

Analects, the chief collection of Confucius's sayings

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- Anatta**, (Pali form of Sanskrit “Anatman”) the doctrine of No Self or No Soul (B)
- Anicca**, (Pali form of Sanskrit “Anitya”) the doctrine of impermanence (B)
- Anointing of the Sick**, one of the seven Sacraments accepted by Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians
- Apocrypha**, books not properly to be included in the Bible (Ch)
- Arhant**, one who has attained nirvana (B)
- Arjuna**, the hero of the Bhagavad-Gita (H)
- Artha**, one of the recognized goals of life (H)
- Aryan**, noble; a term applied to the Indo-European tribes that migrated into India around 1500 B.C. (H)
- Asana**, a posture in the practice of yoga (H)
- Ashkenazim**, Jews who lived in northern Europe, or their descendants
- Atharva Veda**, one of the Vedas (H)
- Atman**, the Self (H)
- Avalokiteshvara**, a Bodhisattva (B)
- Avatara**, incarnation of a god, esp. Vishnu (H)
- Ayat Allah** (Arabic) or **Ayatollah** (Persian), “Sign of God.” Title of an especially eminent religious scholar (I)
- Baptism**, the ceremony of washing, one of the Christian Sacraments. In Sikhism, the ceremony of induction into the Khalsa (q.v.)
- Bar Mitzvah**, a ceremony of entrance into adulthood (J)
- Bat Mitzvah**, a similar ceremony to the Bar Mitzvah, for girls
- Berakhah**, blessing (J)
- Bhagavad-Gita**, the Song of God, part of the epic poem, the Mahabharata (H)
- Bhakti**, devotion (H)
- Bhikkhu**, a monk (B)
- Bible**, the sacred scriptures of Judaism and Christianity; from the Greek, “ta biblia,” “the books”
- Bishop**, an official of the Christian Church, from the Greek “episkopos,” an overseer (Ch)
- B’nai B’rith**, “Sons of the Covenant,” a Jewish organization
- Bodhi**, enlightenment (B)
- Brahma**, the creator god (H)
- Brahmacarin**, a celibate student, the first stage of life (H)
- Brahman**, power, the Absolute Reality (H)
- Brahmin**, a member of the priestly class (H)
- B’rit Milah**, circumcision (J)
- B’rit**, Covenant (J)
- Buddha**, the Enlightened One
- Caliph**, Mohammed’s successor as ruler of the faithful (I)
- Christ**, the Messiah, from the Greek meaning “the Anointed One” (Ch)
- Ch’un Ch’iu**, the Spring and Autumn Annals, one of the Confucian classics

Chun-Tzu, the Noble Man, the Princely Man, the gentleman (Cn)
Chung, sincerity (Cn)
Church, from the Greek “kyriake,” meaning “belonging to the Lord” (Ch)
Confirmation, a Sacrament recognized by Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches (Ch)

Deva, divinity (H)
Devi, the Mother Goddess (H)
Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha (Pali)
Dharma, duty, esp. class duty (H)
Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha (Sanskrit)
Dhyana, meditation (B)
Diaspora, the Jewish community outside of Palestine
Doctrine of the Mean, one of the Confucian “Four Books”
Dukkha, suffering, sorrow, discontent. The first Noble Truth (B)
Durga, goddess, wife of Shiva (H)

El, a name of God (J)
Elohim, a name of God (J)
Emancipation, the liberation of the Jews in Europe from civil disabilities
Emunah, faith (J)
Eschatology, the doctrine of the Last Things (Ch)
Eucharist, the Christian celebration of the communal meal, one of the Sacraments

Ganesha, son of Shiva and Parvati, the god who prospers undertakings, has the head of an elephant (H)
Gehenna, Greek form of Gehinnom used in New Testament (Ch)
Gehinnom, place of punishment, named after a waste disposal site near Jerusalem
Gemara, “Completion,” a portion of the Talmud containing comments on the Mishnah (J)
Gentile, a non-Jew
Gita, song, abbreviation for Bhagavad-Gita (H)
Gospel, in general, “Good News;” as a document, an early life of Jesus with some claim to be considered part of Scripture
Granth, also **Adi Granth**, **Guru Granth Sahib**, the sacred book of the Sikh community
Great Learning, one of the Confucian “Four Books”
Grihastha, householder (H)
Guru, an authority; title of the leader of the Sikh community.

Hadath, a form of uncleanness (I)
Hadith, the sayings and deeds of Mohammed (I)
Haggadah, the sermons of the rabbis, part of the Talmud (J)
Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca (I)
Halakhah, part of the Talmud relating to the observance of the Law (J)

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- Hallel**, praise of God (J)
Hanukah, Jewish festival celebrating the victory of the Maccabees
Hasidism, a form of Jewish mysticism
Haumai, self-love (S)
Heresy, a doctrine considered not correct or orthodox
Het, sin (J)
Hijra, Hegira, Mohammed's journey from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622 (I)
Hinayana, the "Narrow Vehicle," one of the chief forms of Buddhism
Ho, harmony (Cn)
Hsiao, filial piety (Cn)
Hukam, the divine will (S)
- I**, justice, righteousness (Cn)
I Ching, the Book of Changes (Cn)
Imam, leader, especially the leader of prayer in the Salat. In Shiite Islam, the divinely appointed guide of the whole Moslem community (I)
Indra, Vedic god of thunder and lightning, god of warriors (H)
Islam, "surrender," "submission"
- Jati**, birth, caste (H)
Jihad, "striving," "battle." Can be either the internal and spiritual battle against oneself, or the external holy war against unbelievers (I)
Jiva, soul (H)
Jivatman, soul (H)
Jnana, intellect (H)
- Kabbalah**, a form of Jewish mysticism
Kach, short trousers, worn by members of the Khalsa (S)
Kaddish, a prayer of blessing (J)
Kali, goddess, wife of Shiva (H)
Kalimah, the name of the statement witnessed to in the Shahadah (I)
Kama, desire, love, craving (B)
Kama, love, desire; one of the recognized goals of life (H)
Kamma, Pali word for Karma
Kangha, comb, worn in the hair by members of the Khalsa (S)
Kara, steel wrist band worn by members of the Khalsa (S)
Karma, action (H and B)
Karuna, compassion (B)
Kashrut, the dietary laws of Judaism
Kaur, "princess," surname given to female members of the Khalsa (S)
Kes, uncut hair, a mark of the Khalsa (S)
Khalsa, the Pure, an elite group within the Sikh community
Kippah, a skullcap, worn out of reverence for the presence of God (J)
Kirpan, sword, a dagger worn by members of the Khalsa (S)

- Kirtan**, hymn-singing (S)
Koran, the sacred scripture of Islam (see **Qur'an**) (I)
Kosher, belonging to Kashrut (J)
Krishna, incarnation of Vishnu (H)
Kshatriya, warrior class (H)
Kuan Yin, the Chinese name for the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (q.v.) (B)
Kuei, a bad spirit (Cn)
- Langar**, “kitchen,” the common meal of the Sikh community
Li, appropriate action, ritual (Cn)
Li Chi, one of the Confucian classics, the Book of Ritual
Limbo, a state after death for those worthy neither of heaven nor of hell (Ch)
Lin Chi, a branch of Ch’an Buddhism
Lingam, stylized representation of phallus, symbol of Shiva (H)
- Magga**, Pali form of Sanskrit “Marga,” the Path. The fourth Noble Truth (B)
Mahayana, one of the chief forms of Buddhism
Mantra, a verbal formula used in meditation (B)
Marga, the Path (H, B)
Masjid, mosque (I)
Mass, a Catholic term for the Eucharist, considered especially as a sacramental sacrifice (Ch)
Maya, magician’s trick, a term for the empirical world in Hindu thought
Mencius, one of the Confucian “Four Books,” named after one of Confucius’s chief followers
Messiah, from the Hebrew, meaning the “Anointed One,” a term applied to the expected savior (J and Ch)
Metta, friendship, love, universal love (B)
Mezuzah, a small container placed on the frame of the door, holding a portion of the scriptures (J)
Mihrab, the niche in the wall of a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca (I)
Mishnah, “Repetition,” a portion of the Talmud composed by Rabbi Judah, containing the opinions of the Tannaim (J)
Moksha, liberation (H)
Muezzin, mu’adhdhin, the one who calls to prayer (I)
Mullah, Iranian form of “mawla,” a religious teacher (I)
Muslim, one who has surrendered to God (I)
- Nadar**, the grace of God (S)
Najasa, a substance causing pollution (I)
Nam, “name,” a title of God (S)
Nirguna, without attributes, a term applied to Brahman (H)
Nirodha, the cessation of Dukkha, the third Noble Truth (B)
Nirvana, the state of final release, especially from the ego (H and B)

Glossary

Orthodoxy, a doctrine held to be officially correct; a branch of the Christian Church

Paramartha (Pali: **paramattha**), Absolute Truth, Ultimate Reality (B)

Parinirvana, final or ultimate nirvana attained after death (B)

Parvati, the wife of Shiva (H)

Penance, the Sacrament of the confession and forgiveness of sins, accepted by Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians

Pesach, Passover (J)

Prajna (Pali: **Panna**), wisdom (B)

Priest, from the Greek “presbyteros,” an elder

Puja, worship (H)

Purgatory, a state of purification after death for those not yet ready to enter heaven (Ch)

Purim, a Jewish festival celebrating the triumph of Esther

Qadi, a religious judge (I)

Qibla, the direction of Mecca (I)

Qur’an, “recitation”, the sacred scripture of Islam (I)

Raja, “king,” also name of a form of yoga (H)

Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, hero of the Ramayana (H)

Ramadan, the month of fasting (I)

Ren, human-heartedness, compassion (Cn)

Rig Veda, one of the Vedas (H)

Rinzai, the Japanese name for Lin Chi (q.v.)

Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, one of the chief Jewish festivals

Rta, the natural law (H)

Sabad, “Word,” God as revealed in the human heart (S)

Sach, “truth,” a title of God

Sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible grace, from the Latin “sacramentum” (Ch)

Saguna, with attributes, a designation of Brahman (H)

Salat, ritual prayer (I)

Sama Veda, one of the Vedas (H)

Samadhi, concentration attained through meditation; mental discipline (B)

Samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (H and B)

Samudaya, the origin of Dukkha, the second Noble Truth (B)

Sangha, the Buddhist community

Sannyasin, the fourth stage of life, complete renunciation (H)

Sartori, enlightenment (B)

Satguru, the highest Guru, a title of God (S)

Sati, mindfulness, the practice of being aware of one’s thoughts, actions and feelings (B)

Sawm, fasting (I)

- Schism**, an organizational split or rupture of a religious body
Sephardim, Jews who lived in Spain, or their descendants
Shaddai, a name of God (J)
Shahada, the confession of faith that there is no God but God or Allah (I)
Shakti, power or force, used as name of the wife of Shiva (H)
Shang Ti, the supreme ancestor worshipped by the Shang (Cn)
Shari'ah, the divine law (I)
Shastra, "Instruction," a class of non-scriptural treatises (H)
Shavuot, the feast of Pentecost, celebrating the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai (J)
Shekinah, the presence of God (J)
Shen, a good spirit (Cn)
Shia, a branch of Islam
Shih Ching, the Book of Poetry (Cn)
Shirk, the sin of placing a created thing on the same level as Allah (I)
Shiva, mourning for the dead (J)
Shiva, one of the principal gods of classical Hinduism
Shraddha (Pali: **Saddha**) faith, belief, confidence (B)
Shu, concern for others, altruism (Cn)
Shu Ching, the Book of History (Cn)
Sikh, a disciple or follower (S)
Sila, ethics (B)
Simhat Torah, the Joy of Torah, a festival, the last day of Sukkot (J)
Singh, "lion," surname given to male members of the Khalsa (S)
Skandha (Pali: **Khandha**), aggregate (B)
Smṛti, "Remembered," authoritative texts not part of the scripture (H)
Soma, a plant with narcotic qualities, the god associated with this, and by extension the moon (H)
Soto, the Japanese name for Tsao Tung (q.v.)
Sruti, "Heard," sacred scripture (H)
Stupa, a shrine containing relics of the Buddha
Sudra, a laborer, the lowest of the four classic classes of Hindu society
Sufi, a mystic (I)
Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra, the Buddhist writing describing the Pure Land of Amitabha
Sukkot, the festival of Tabernacles (J)
Sunna, custom, especially of Mohammed (I)
Sunni, one of the chief branches of Islam
Sutra, "Discourse." In Hinduism, a class of non-scriptural writings. In Buddhism, the second section of the Buddhist scriptures
Sutta, the Pali form of "Sutra"

Tallit, a prayer-shawl (J)
Tanha, desire, craving (B)
Tao, in Confucianism, the right way to live; the teachings of Confucius

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- Tao**, in Taoism, the ultimate principle of the universe
Tathagata, the “Thus-Come,” a title of the Buddha
Te, originally power, subsequently moral power (Cn)
Tefillin, leather straps containing portions of the Hebrew scriptures, worn on the arms and forehead during prayer (J)
Theravada, the Way of the Elders, one of the chief branches of Buddhism
Ti, a divinity of the Shang (Cn)
T’i, brotherly love (Cn)
T’ien, Heaven (Cn and T)
T’ien Ming, the Mandate of Heaven (Cn)
T’ien Tzu, the Son of Heaven (Cn)
Torah, the divine Law (J)
Tripitaka, the “Three Baskets,” the scriptures of Buddhism
Tsao Tung, a branch of Ch’an Buddhism
- Ulama**, the group of religious experts (I)
Umma, the Muslim community
Upadana, grasping, attachment (B)
Upanishad, a document appended to the Vedas (H)
- Vaisya**, a trader or peasant, the third class of Hindu society
Vanaprastha, a forest-dweller, the third stage of life (H)
Varna, class (H)
Veda, one of the sacred books of Hinduism
Vinaya, “Conduct,” the first section of the Buddhist scriptures
Vishnu, one of the chief gods of classical Hinduism
- Wu**, enlightenment, satori (B)
Wu wei, inactive action, laissez-faire, benign neglect, dealing with things according to their natures (T)
- Yahweh**, a name of God in Judaism
Yajur Veda, one of the Vedas, the sacred books of Hinduism
Yang and Yin, the complementary forces operating in nature (Cn and T)
Yoga, a path to spiritual liberation (H)
Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (J)
Yoni, the symbol of the female sexual organs, representing Shakti (H)
- Zakat**, obligatory almsgiving (I)

Some Technical Terms Used in the Discussion of Religions

Agnosticism is the view that it is impossible to know with any certainty whether some belief is true or not, for example, whether there is a God or not.



Animism is the belief that physical objects such as mountains or trees are inhabited by spiritual beings.

Atheism is the rejection of belief in God.

Deism is the belief that God created the world at the beginning of time, but does not further intervene in its operations in miraculous ways such as special revelations.

Dualism is the view that there are two primordial realities, for example, that the principle of evil is just as eternal and independent as the principle of good, or the view that reality is divided into two fundamental parts or halves.

Henotheism. It sometimes happens that the followers of a religion recognize the existence of many gods, but worship only one. The ancient Israelites, for example, appear to have believed that the gods worshipped by their neighboring peoples really existed, but they confined their own worship to their own national divinity, Yahweh. This state of affairs is called henotheism, from the Greek “hen,” meaning “one.”

Kathenotheism. It also sometimes happens that the followers of a religion recognize the existence of more than one god, and also worship them, but at the time they are worshipping any one particular god, they speak as if the god they are worshipping at that time is the only existing god. We find evidence of this, for example, in portions of the Vedas, the scriptures of Hinduism. This is called kathenotheism, from the Greek “kath-” meaning “as it were.”

Monism is the view that fundamentally there is only one reality, only one existing being. If this reality or being is divine, the view is pantheism.

Monotheism, from the Greek “monos,” meaning “alone, single,” is the belief that there is only one personal God.

Mysticism is the search for an experiential oneness with the supreme reality.

Naturalism is the belief that there are no supernatural realities, but only natural ones.

Panentheism is the view that God is present in everything, without being simply identical with everything.

Pantheism is the belief that God is everything, and everything is God. It implies monism.

Polytheism is belief in the existence of more than one God (poly = many).

Skepticism is doubt, especially doubt whether there is a God or whether religious belief is valid.

Theism, from the Greek “theos,” God, is belief in the existence of God, usually understanding “God” to mean a personal being rather than an impersonal force. In practice it is largely synonymous with monotheism.

