

Characteristics and Distribution of Major Religions of the World

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Abstract: Religion is a very significant cultural characteristic of human society. Geographers are concerned with the spatio-temporal distribution of religion. Human geographers focus on those characteristics of religion which are geographically significant like place of origin, distribution, diffusion to other places and elements of different religions. The objectives of the present paper include – (i) description of some well known definitions of religion; (ii) to represent classification of religions of the world; (iii) to highlight the characteristics of major religions and (iv) to explain the distribution and diffusion of religions.

Key Words: Religion, Beliefs, Practices, Universal and Holy.

Definitions of Religion

Religion includes a set of beliefs and practices which help human beings in achieving mental harmony with greater powers (natural as well as supernatural). According to French Sociologist Emile Durkhiem (1915) “religion is a unified set of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden,—beliefs and practices which unite [into] one single moral community, all those who adhere to them”. He considered religion as a projection of the social values of society and in brief religion as society worship itself. Through shared beliefs and rituals it helps in social cohesion and by enforcing religious morals and norms helps in social control.

Another popular definition of religion was propounded by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1985). He defined “religion as (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”. Likewise scholars Van Baal and Van Beek (1985) defined “religion as explicit and implicit notions and ideas, accepted as true, which relate to a reality which cannot be verified empirically”. In his work ‘Towards an Anthropological Definition of Religion’ scholar Guido Verboom (2002) defined “religion as a set of beliefs and/or actions to regulate and approach reality, expressed in: (a) doctrine, (b) philosophy, (c) myth, (d) symbol (e) ethic, (f) ritual, (g) matter, (h) experience and (i) social organisation, in some way related to spiritual qualities, phenomena or entities”.

All the definitions mentioned so far represent the definition as well as functions of religion. These definitions highlight the role of religion in the formation and maintenance of social order. Morris (1987) in his critical analysis of religion concluded that religion plays significant social functions and helps in formation and maintenance of a social order. On the other hand, Karl Marx concluded about religion that it is the opiate of the masses.

Basic Characteristics of Religions

The basic facts or characteristics of religions are following – (i) Belief in supernatural power (Spirits, Gods or God) – belief in supernatural power i.e a power beyond man and this physical world or god is a common characteristic feature of all religions; (ii) Rituals and ceremonies – all religions have their own rituals and

ceremonies. These are emotional as well as ceremonial practices at the level of individuals and society. Religions strongly encourage or require prescribed ritual activities for individuals and communities of faith; (iii) Dominance of emotions - In religion instead of scientific reasoning and logic emotions dominate. The common emotions of hope, fear, reverence and humility are generally the outcome of religious rituals and beliefs. Sufferings, compassion, inner peace and harmony are the common themes of most religions; (iv) Concepts of Sacred, Profane and Taboo - concepts of sacredness, profane, taboos, sinful acts, dooms day, good and bad luck are also common elements of religions; (v) Sacred places, objects and symbols – Every religion has its own sacred places, objects and symbols. The symbols are the signs used for sacred objects or situations in different religions. Rome and Jerusalem are sacred places for Christians, Mecca and Medina for Muslims, Prayag (Allahabad), Varanasi (Banaras), Dwarka, Rameshwaram, Puri, Madurai, Ujjain, Mathura, Badrinath and Kedarnath for Hindus, Amritsar, Kartarpur and Anandpur Sahib for Sikhs, Lumbini, Sarnath and Kapilvastu for Buddhists. Likewise sacred objects and symbols vary from religion to religion. In case of Hindus, the temples, idols, Vedas, Ramayana, Bhagwatgita, cow (*Gaumata*) and rivers like the Ganga and Yamuna (Jamuna), symbols of ‘Om’ and ‘Swastik’ are sacred. In case of Muslims the holy Quran, Baithullah, Mosque and Crescent are sacred. In case of Christians Church, holy book Bible and symbol of cross are sacred. For Buddhists the stupa, the Dharmachakra or Dharma wheel, the Bodhi Tree and lotus flower are main sacred symbols; (vi) Goal of salvation - Most religions are oriented towards the achievement of goal of blessedness, release, or fulfillment that transcends evil, in either this world or the next, or possibly both. Salvation is one of the fundamental objectives of post-archaic religions. The right steps and path to achieve salvation are also well defined and identified in some religions; (vii) Ethical role – religion sets appropriate forms of conduct in a particular society. Ethics and moral values are institutionalized as informal norms or formal codes of conduct in the form of various laws, and finally (vii) Religious organization- every religion has its own structure and function based on beliefs and practices in which individuals play their roles.

Classification of Religions

There is a great variety of religions in different parts of the world. Each has a distinctive and dynamic distribution across the earth's surface. Generally religions are classified into two broad categories of monotheistic (Belief in One God) and polytheistic (Belief in more than One God). For instance, Islam is monotheistic and Hinduism is polytheistic. However, geographical studies focus on spatial organization of world religions especially in place of origin, dispersal and spatial distribution of religions. From geographical perspective world religions are classified into three categories – (i) universal religions; (ii) ethnic or indigenous religions; and (iii) tribal or traditional religions. Universal religions are those religions which are not confined to particular ethnic group and nationality rather are followed by people of all castes and creeds. Christianity, Islam and Buddhism are universal religions (Figure 1). On the other hand ethnic or indigenous religions are followed by persons related to a particular ethnic group and also generally determine the culture, language and customs of that ethnic group. Ethnic religion membership is not based on simple declaration of faith but depends on birth in that particular religious community or by adhering to a complex life style or cultural identity of that ethnic group. Hinduism, Judaism, Chinese folk religions (Confucianism and Taoism) and Shintoism are major ethnic religions of the world. In addition to universal and ethnic religions there are numerous tribal religions with a great variety of belief systems and ritual practices. The tribal or traditional religions can be broadly categorised as Animistic religions and Shamanism. Animism represents belief that objects, places and creatures (plants and animals) possess a distinct spiritual essence. In Shamanism most important role is played by a Shaman. Shaman is the person who is believed to have access to spirits. During rituals in trance state he provides divination and healing to fellow community members. Tribal religions are scattered in different parts of world mainly in tribal localities. A brief description of major religions of the world is given in the following section.

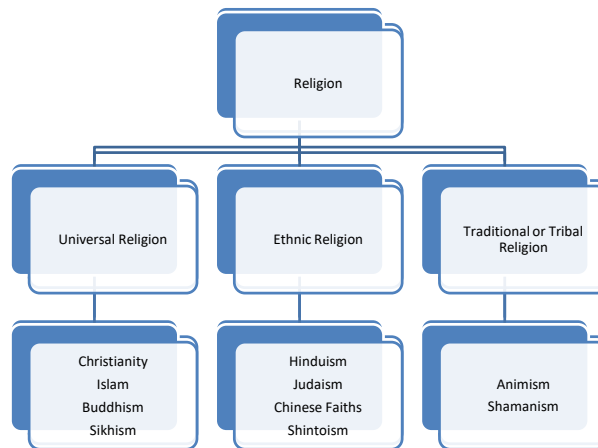


Figure 1. Classification of Religions

Christianity

Christianity is the largest religion of the world in terms of number of adherents and geographical spread. About one-third of the world’s population follows Christianity (Table 1). Christianity originated in the 1st century A.D., as a movement within Judaism or as Jewish sect in Roman province Judea, by the efforts of Jesus of Nazareth (Palestine). It quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire and emerged as State religion of Roman Empire by the end of the 4th Century. It spread to Europe, Syria, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Anatolia (Turkey), Transcaucasia and to North Africa in Egypt and Ethiopia. During the Middle Ages it spread to Northern Europe and Russia. During the Age of Exploration and Discoveries it diffused to New World region and missionary work and colonization further extended it into large number of African and Asian countries.



Table 1. The Global Religious Landscape, 2015

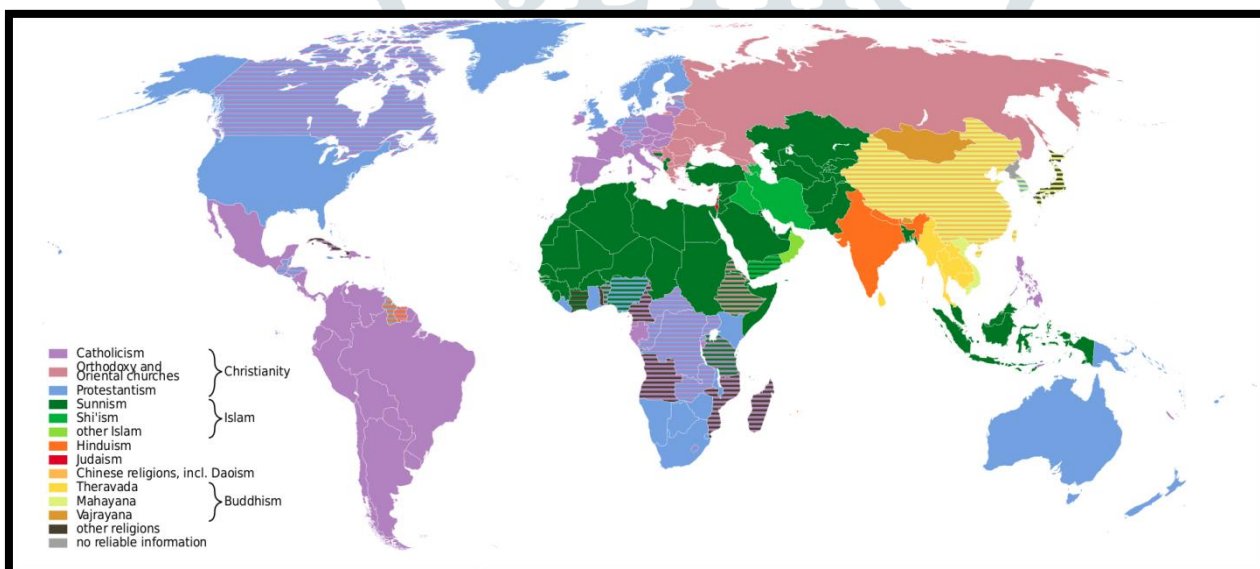
Religion	Population	Percentage Share
Christians	2,276,250,000	31.2
Muslims	1,752,620,000	24.1
Unaffiliated	1,165,020,000	16.0
Hindus	1,099,110,000	15.1
Buddhists	499,380,000	6.9
Folk Religion	418,280,000	5.7
Other Religion	59,710,000	0.8
Jews	14,270,000	0.2
Total	7,284,640,000	100

Source: Pew Research Centre. (The Changing Global Religious Landscape)

Christians have faith in Jesus and the holy book the Bible. Jesus is regarded as son of God and the Messiah (the Christ). The Bible includes the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament (39 books) is the original Hebrew Bible which was written at different time periods between about 1200 and 165 BC and these are sacred scriptures of the Jews. Christians have faith that Jesus was the Messiah as promised in the Old Testament to save humanity. The New Testaments (27 books) were written by the Christians in the first century A.D. (between 50 and 100 A.D). Christianity is a monotheistic universal religion with belief in one God. There are three elements to this one God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Christianity is the most widely distributed religion of the world. It is the predominant religion in Europe, North America, South America, Australia and in many countries of Africa and Asia continents have Christian majority (Figure 2). The three major branches of Christianity are – the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox and the various dominations of Protestantism. About half of the Christians are associated with Roman Catholic Churches, about one-third of the Christians are associated with various dominations of Protestantism and around one-tenth with Eastern Orthodox Christianity. In Europe the Roman Catholicism predominates in the southwest and east, Protestantism in the northwest and Eastern Orthodoxy in the east and southeast.

Figure 2. World Distribution of Religions



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_religious_groups#/media/File:World_religions_map_en.svg

Christians especially the Roman Catholics have a well established spatial hierarchical organisation. The basic unit of geographical organization is the diocese which on the lower side is divided into parishes each headed by a priest and diocese is headed by a bishop. On the higher side, a group of dioceses represents a province which is headed by an Archbishop. The Archbishops are subordinate to the Pope who also functions as the bishop of Rome diocese. The Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity includes 14 self-governing churches in the Middle East and Eastern Europe region. These churches along with the share of the Eastern Orthodox Christians include – the Russian Orthodox Church (about 40 per cent), the Romanian Church (about 20 per cent), the Bulgarian Church (about 10 per cent), the Serbian Church (about 10 per cent), Greek Church (about 10 per cent) and rest of the Orthodox Christians are associated with Albania, Cyprus, Georgia, Poland, Sinai, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem churches.

In the Western Hemisphere about 90 per cent of the population belongs to the Christianity. In Latin America Roman Catholics share is about 93 per cent of the Christians of Latin America and in North America various dominations of Protestants dominate in different parts and Roman Catholics constitute only about 29

per cent of the Christians of North America. Regional distribution of Christians has changed a lot in last 100 years. In 1910 Europe constituted 66.3 per cent of the world's Christians and followed by Americas with 27 per cent share. Asia-Pacific region (4.5 per cent), Sub-Saharan Africa (1.4 per cent) and Middle East and North Africa (0.7 per cent) constituted a minor share of world's Christians. But in 2015, Europe constitutes only about one-fourth of the world's Christians population and share of Sub-Saharan Africa has increased to 26 per cent, followed by Latin America-Caribbean (25 per cent) and Asia-Pacific regions (Table 2). This is mainly due to different stages of demographic transitions in different parts of the world. In terms of absolute number of Christians the leading countries are – USA, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, Philippines, Nigeria, Congo Democratic Republic, Ethiopia and Germany.

Table 2: Global Christian Population Distribution, 2015

Region	Global Christian Population (%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	26
Latin America-Caribbean	25
Europe	24
Asia-Pacific	13
North America	12
Middle East-North Africa	1
Global	100

Source: Pew Research Centre. (The Changing Global Religious Landscape)

Islam

Islam is a universal monotheistic religion. It is the second largest religion of the world with about 24 per cent or 1.8 billion of the world population as its adherents. In the 7th century it was founded by Prophet Mohammad who lived in Mecca and moved to Medina in 622 A.D., where the first mosque was constructed that also enshrines the grave of Mohammad. Islam literally means submission or total surrender to God (Allah) who is absolutely unique, omnipotent, compassionate (*Al-Rahmān*) and merciful (*Al-Rahīm*). Adherent of Islam is known as Muslim which means “submitter” or “one who surrenders”. The Holy Quran is considered by Muslims as the final revelation and verbatim word of God (Allah). The Holy Quran is written in Arabic language and it includes religious doctrines, rules of worship and also pronouncements on worldly matters. The five pillars of faith in Islam are – (i) There is no god but God (Allah) and Mohammad is his prophet or messenger; Muslims recite this basic creed of Islam (the Shahadah) (ii) Pray five times a day (Salat); (iii) Fasting (rosaz) during the month of Ramzan; (iv) Almsgiving (zakaat) for the support of poor; and (v) Performing pilgrimage (Haj) to the holy place, Mecca (Kabba) at least once in a life time.

Islam expanded quickly (within a Century) from Iberia (Spain) and Morocco in the west to the Indus River in the east, due to expansion of political control and forceful conversions. Islamic world experienced political, economic, cultural and scientific flourishing during the Islamic Golden Age from 8th Century to 13th Century. Later it spread to Indian subcontinent, South-east Asia and Sub-Saharan and Eastern Africa. Even at present it is the fastest growing religion of the world. Islam is divided into two major branches – Sunni (about 80-85 per cent of Muslims) and Shia (about 15-20 per cent of the Muslims). Iran, Pakistan and Iraq constitute 30 per cent, 15 per cent and 10 per cent share of world Shia Muslims population, respectively. In Iran nearly 90 per cent population belongs to Shias and more than half of the population in countries – Azerbaijan, Iraq, Oman and Bahrain. Rest of the Islamic World is dominated by Sunni Muslims.

Islam is dominant religion in Central Asia, Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and in some parts of South Asia and South East Asia. There are about 50 Muslim majority countries in the world. Indonesia (12.7 per cent), Pakistan (11 per cent) and India (10.9 per cent) together constitute about one-third

of the world Muslim population. Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran and Turkey together constitute about 28 per cent of the Muslim population. About two-thirds of Muslims population of the world is concentrated in Asia and about 31 per cent in Africa. The share of Europe in world Muslim population is only about 3 per cent and in other parts of world like North America, Latin America and Oceania the share of Muslim population is almost negligible.

Hinduism

Hinduism was founded about 3000-2500 B.C., and therefore is the oldest religion of the world. It is also referred as *Sanātana Dharma* (i.e. the eternal tradition). Hinduism is the largest ethnic religion of the world and the third-largest religion with 15.1 per cent population of the world as Hindus. Its distribution is highly clustered and about 95 per cent Hindus of the world are present in one country i.e. India. In India the share of Hindus in total population of the country is about 79.8 per cent. In the neighbouring country Nepal Hindus constitute about 81 per cent population of the country. Another country with Hindu dominance is Mauritius. Hinduism has not diffused like universal religions, but Hindus are present in different parts of the world due to migration. Indian sub-continent has concentration of about 98 per cent Hindus of the world. Hindus are present as minority groups in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Fiji and Guyana and in Caribbean island countries. Hindus have also migrated and settled in USA, Canada, Australia, Middle East countries and African countries like South Africa and Kenya etc.

Hinduism is basically a way of living. It is polytheistic religion with followers of many gods and goddesses. It is a federal religion with a synthesis of beliefs, rituals, practices, behaviour and a code of ethics to live life with peace and happiness. The divinity of soul binds all Hindus in one organic whole. Vaishnavism (Worship of the god Vishnu also incarnated as god Ram and Krishna), Shivaism (Worship of god Shiva) and Shaktism (Worship of goddess) are main beliefs in Hinduism. The sacred books of Hindus include the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagwat Gita. Hindus believe in four Purusharthas (*Dharma* or righteousness or ethics, *Artha* or livelihood or wealth, *Kama* (sensual pleasure) and *Moksha* or salvation from cycle of rebirths or samsara); four ashrams or stages of life (Brahmacharya or student, Grihastha or householder, Vanaprastha or retired and Sannyasa or renunciation), four Varnas (Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras), the philosophy of Karma (Action) and caste based social system are also central to Hindus. Pilgrimage to four religious places (Char Dham) Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri and Rameswaram has religious significance.

Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha in the 6th century B.C., mainly as a reformist movement of Hinduism. The essence of Buddhism rests on four noble truths: (i) the world or life is full of suffering, misery and disappointments; (ii) suffering is consequence of one's desires; (iii) renunciation of desire leads to path of salvation; and (iv) to achieve salvation or nirvana follow the following eightfold path – (1) Right View; (2) Right intention; (3) Right speech; (4) Right action; (5) Right livelihood; (6) Right effort; (7) Right mindfulness and (8) Right concentration. By orienting life on the eightfold path person can achieve nirvana i.e the state of release from the sufferings of the world or life. The four most important holy places to Buddhists are located in northeastern India and southern Nepal. These places are – Lumbini (place of birth in southern Nepal), Bodh Gaya (in Bihar where Buddha reached perfect enlightenment), Sarnath (in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh where Buddha gave his first sermon), and Kusinagara (in Bihar where Buddha died and achieved nirvana).

Initially Buddhism remained confined to its place of origin in northeastern India. It spread within and outside Indian sub continent mainly by the efforts of Ashoka, the Great king of Magadh Empire. It spread to Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Myanmar, the Himalayas and other parts of India. Later on it spread to China and from China it diffused to Korea and Japan. With the passage of time Buddhism split into three major branches – Mahayana (about 56 per cent of Buddhism adherents), Theravada (about 38 per cent of Buddhists) and Tantrayana (remaining 6 per cent). Mahayanists are concentrated mainly in China, Korea and Japan. Theravadists Buddhists are found mainly in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. The Tantrayana Buddhists are concentrated in Tibet and Mongolia. At present, Buddhism is the fourth largest religion of the world with about 7 per cent population of the world as adherents of Buddhism. There number was about 140 million in 2010 and now it is about 500 million and majority (about 98 per cent) are concentrated in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia regions.

Confucianism

This ethnic religion was founded by Confucius (551-479 B.C.) who was a philosopher and teacher in China. Confucianism has its roots in the social values, institutions, transcendent ideals, and ethical values of traditional Chinese society. Therefore, it is also categorized as a “civil religion” by sociologist Robert Bellah. It prescribed ethical rules for systematic conduct of day to day life. It insisted on following traditions, fulfilling moral obligations and behaving with others with respect and sympathy. The simple guiding principle is that one should treat others the way one wish to be treated by others. Confucianism was elevated to the level of the State religion (till 1911) during the phase of the Han dynasty. Confucianism prevailed as way of living and part of the Chinese social fabric for about 2000 years. Confucianism played significant role in maintaining a civilized society by establishing a stable, unified and enduring social order.

Taoism or Daoism

Taoism or Daoism was established by Lao-Zi or Lao Tse (604-517 B.C.), a contemporary of Confucius. Taoists seek “tao” or “dao” which stands for the “way” or “path”. The “Tao” is the ultimate creative principle of the universe and all things are unified and connected in the “Tao”. Tao is not god and is not worshiped. Taoism includes many deities that are worshipped in Taoist temples. Confucists focused on significance of public service and ethical values but Taoists emphasized on the mythical and magical aspects of life. It believes that everything cannot be known and cannot be subjected to scientific reasoning and knowledge. Therefore in Taoism myths and legends play significant role along with elements of magic. Taoism as an ancient tradition of philosophy and religious belief is deeply rooted in Chinese customs and worldview. Taoists practice meditation, feng shui, fortune telling and reading and chanting of scriptures. Taoism is a religion of unity and opposites; Yin and Yang. The principle of Yin Yang considers the world as filled with complementary forces such as hot and cold, light and dark etc. Priesthood and an ecclesiastical hierarchy operated in Taoism from the eighth century up to 1927 when it was formally abolished. Taoism was officially banned by the Communists in 1949 but it still prevails in large parts of China and it is legal in Taiwan.

Shintoism

Shintoism is ancient ethnic religion of Japan. Ancient Shintoism was basically animistic and based on the belief that forces of nature such as the Sun, Moon, rivers, trees, mountains and certain animals are divine. Gradually, ancestor worship including worship of emperors gained prominence in Shintoism. To differentiate it from Buddhism it was named as Shinto which represents the way of the God. Under the rule of the Emperor Meiji (1868-1912), to counter the challenges of the West, Shintoism was declared officially

as the State religion and ancient belief that the emperor is of divine descent was reinforced. Shinotism provided strong base for unity of Japanese society to develop the country. After the defeat in the World War Second, the Japanese Emperor Hirohito was forced to renounce his divinity and Shintoism failed to survive as state religion. In 2008 the number of religious adherents affiliated to Shintoism in Japan was about 108 million and in 2016 there number declined to approximately 85 million.

Judaism

Judaism is the first recorded religion of the world based on monotheism. Judaism originated in the Middle East about 3500 years ago. The adherents of Judaism are known as Jews. Jews consider themselves as the people chosen by the God to follow His ethical and moral principles. Christianity and Islam have also their roots in Judaism because Jesus was born as a Jew and Muhammad traced his lineage to Abraham. Judaism has a rich history of religious text and the most important of them is the Torah. There are about 14.5 million Jews in the world and about 83.5 per cent of them are concentrated in Israel (44 per cent) and USA (39.5 per cent). Within USA about one-fourth of the Jews are concentrated in New York region. France, Canada and United Kingdom are the other major countries having presence of Jews. Jews experienced great spatial shifts in their history and holocaust during Nazi regime. In 1948 the State of Israel was established as “Holy land (the Promised land) and Homeland for Jews”.

Sikhism

Sikhism originated in the Punjab region of Indian sub-continent around the end of the 15th century through the spiritual teachings of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak (1469-1539). Sikhi is derived from “Sikh” which represents a “disciple”, “seeker”, or “learner”. Sikhism is a universal monotheistic religion with faith in the “*Ik Onkar*” (One Supreme Being – God). The Guru Granth Sahib is the sacred book of Sikhs. The tenth and the last guru, Govind Singh (1666-1708) introduced Amrit (or Baptism) ceremony in which Sikhs declare to uphold the principles of the faith. He also introduced the practice of 5 Ks (*Pañj Kakār*) - Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (a wooden comb for the hair), Kara (an iron bracelet), Kachera (cotton undergarment) and Kirpan (an iron dagger to defend oneself). A Sikh who has taken Amrit and keeps all five Ks is called Khalsa (pure) or Amritdhari Sikh. Sikhism has beliefs in divine unity and equality of mankind, selfless service, devotion and surrender to the one God. Sikhs are concentrated predominantly in the Punjab region of India and due to migration have presence in all inhabited continents of the world. They are in significant numbers in Canada, UK and USA. There are about 25 million Sikhs in the world and about 21 million are present in India. The Golden Temple or Darbar Sahib Amritsar and Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur (Pakistan) are most important holy places for Sikhs. Kartarpur is significant for Sikhs because Guru Nanak, the first guru and founder of Sikhism, did his missionary work and it was also his final resting place.

Conclusion

The chronological and chorological extent of religions shows that religion is an essential aspect of human societies. It plays a significant social function and helps in formation and maintenance of social order. But religious conflicts and communalism are also frequent, widespread and common and emerge as threat to human peace and security. Majority scholars initially predicted that religious values and their importance in society will diminish with the spread and intensification of process of modernization. However, contrary to their prediction religious principles have gained or maintained their significance in the economies of the world. According to Pew Research Centre Report (2017) approximately 16 per cent population of the world reported as “unaffiliated” to any religion. Out of these unaffiliated only about 12 per cent were atheists (don’t believe in God) and 17 per cent were agnostic (don’t know if any God exists) and rest 71 per cent

described their religion “nothing in particular” but still believed in God or a universal spirit. Thus, religion has maintained its social, economic and political significance.

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