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**Faith in Real Life:
An In-Depth Look at the Spiritual Lives of
People around the Globe**

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Faith in Real Life: An In-Depth Look at the Spiritual Lives of Peoples Around the Globe

Want to know the basic beliefs of a particular religion? It's fairly easy to pick up an encyclopedia of world religions (Amazon has over 500 of them) or go to a website such as www.religionfacts.com . There you can find what the religion teaches about God or their gods, prayer, after-life, suffering and myriad other subjects.

Want to know what followers of a particular religion really believe and how they live? You have to go beyond the religion's teachings and take a look at their daily lives.

As many authors have pointed out, religion and spirituality are, in fact, two very different things. The main distinction between them is that religion is public while spirituality is private. Religion has been defined as

A social assembly where like-minded individuals congregate to form an organization where spirituality is experienced through structured beliefs (Burke, Hackney, Hudson, Mirante, Watts, & Epp, 1999).

Spirituality on the other hand can be described as

A metaphysical/transcendental experience or any experience that brings one meaning, purpose, or into a relationship with a higher being or higher power (Burke, et al., 1999).

This ground-breaking study by the Center for Bible Engagement provides new insights into the spiritual lives of people from the world's major religions. Almost 10,000 people in 20 countries shared their beliefs about death, communicating with God or their gods, prayer, sacred texts, and what it means to grow spiritually. They told us not only what they believe, but also what spiritual practices they engage in and what their needs are. Through this data, we can understand how faith and spirituality intersect with the real lives of every day people.

The report is divided into sections by major religion. Within each section, we describe what a random sample of adults from that faith say about these topics:

- ◆ Faith Practices
- ◆ Life and Death
- ◆ Spiritual Me
- ◆ Communicating with God
- ◆ Spiritual Growth
- ◆ Spiritual Needs and Struggles

Buddhists

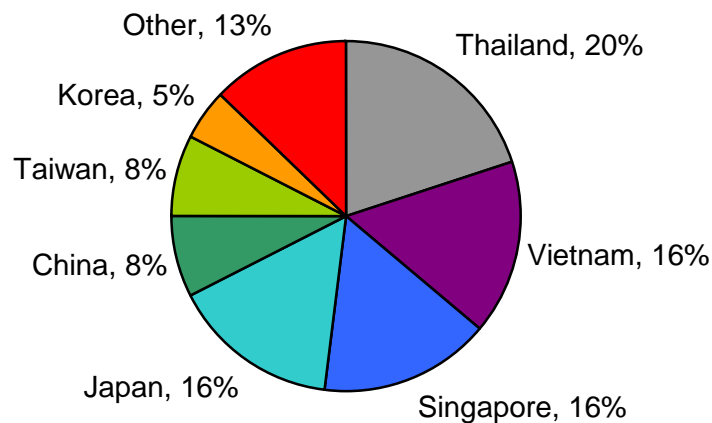


Basic descriptions vary whether they emphasize Buddhism as a religion or a philosophy of life. With approximately 400 million followers, mainly in Asia, Buddhism encourages people to lead a moral life, to be mindful and aware of their thoughts and actions, and to develop wisdom and understanding. Following the teachings of Buddha, it claims to provide an explanation of a purpose to life, apparent injustice and inequality around the world, and a way of life that leads to true happiness (Source: <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/5minbud.htm>).

There are many different types of Buddhism, particularly from country to country. Also, as is true of many religions, there is great variability among adherents in their personal beliefs and spiritual practices.

More than 2,000 Buddhists participated in the CBE study. Figure 1 shows that they primarily represented seven Asian countries.

Figure 1. Buddhist Respondents by Country.



Buddhists believe in reincarnation and that one must go through cycles of birth, life, and death. After many such cycles, if a person releases their attachment to desire and the self, they can attain Nirvana. Buddhists do not believe in any type of God, the need for a savior, prayer, or eternal life after death.

Since the time of the Buddha, Buddhism has integrated many regional religious rituals, beliefs and customs into it as it has spread throughout Asia. This has occurred with little conflict due to the philosophical nature of Buddhism. (<http://political.heplist.com/religion/buddhism/general>). The way in which Buddhism easily accommodates other belief systems is evident in the CBE study. Among the Buddhists in our sample, one-quarter identified themselves with at least one other religion as well. Most commonly, they also said they are Christian (15%) or Chinese Traditionalist (9%).

Faith Practices

Few Buddhists claim to follow their religion very closely. In fact, most say they do so either “somewhat closely” (44%) or “not closely at all” (43%).

Regardless of religious tradition, the majority of people express confidence that their religion is the right one for them. Much fewer believe that their religion is the only true path for spiritual growth. Among Buddhists (and consistent with the teachings of Buddhism), the gap is quite large. Seven out of ten Buddhists believe their religion is the right one for them. Only two-fifths say it is the one true path.

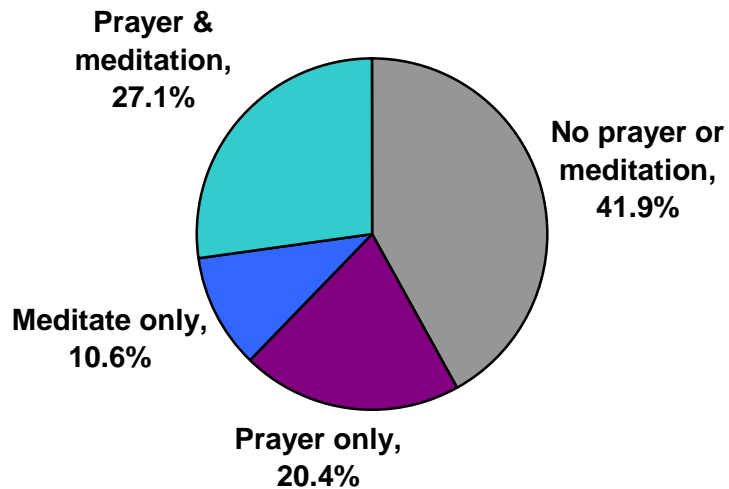
Most express a strong interest in spiritual things (55%) and a strong desire to grow spiritually (58%). Compared to other religious groups, Buddhists express less spiritual interest and desire than Hindus, Muslims, and Christians (Asia & Americas).

In terms of their personal spiritual practices, three out of five Buddhists pray and/or meditate at least once during a typical week. Prayer and meditation are considered virtually the same thing within Buddhism:

Buddhist prayer is a practice to awaken our inherent inner capacities of strength, compassion and wisdom rather than to petition external forces based on fear, idolizing, and worldly and/or heavenly gain. Buddhist prayer is a form of meditation; it is a practice of inner reconditioning. Buddhist prayer replaces the negative with the virtuous and points us to the blessings of Life. (Lewis, 2006).

Figure 2 shows that when we consider prayer and meditation together, we find that 27% do both in a typical week, one out of five prays only, and 11% only meditate.

Figure 2. Buddhists - Prayer & Meditation in a Typical Week.



Only about two-fifths of Buddhists read or listen to the teachings of Buddha in a typical week. This rate of engagement with their sacred text is similar to the rates among Chinese religionists and Jews. It is much lower than that of Hindus, Muslims, and Christian (outside Europe).

Compared to other religious groups, Buddhists have less familiarity with the teaching of Buddha than other faith groups do with their religions' sacred texts. Two out of three Buddhists have read or listened to the teachings of Buddha at some point in their lives. Only one-quarter say they are very familiar with these texts. A significant minority (35%) has no knowledge at all or are aware of it, but have never engaged it.

Spiritual Me

The vast majority of Buddhists agree that "the sum total of what we think, say, feel & do is known as our spiritual existence". However, less than half say that our spiritual existence extends beyond our physical death.

In terms of their daily life, most followers of Buddhism believe that what they choose to think, say, feel & do today impacts tomorrow. Seven out of ten faces daily thoughts and desires for things they should avoid or for things they should do, but choose not to do.

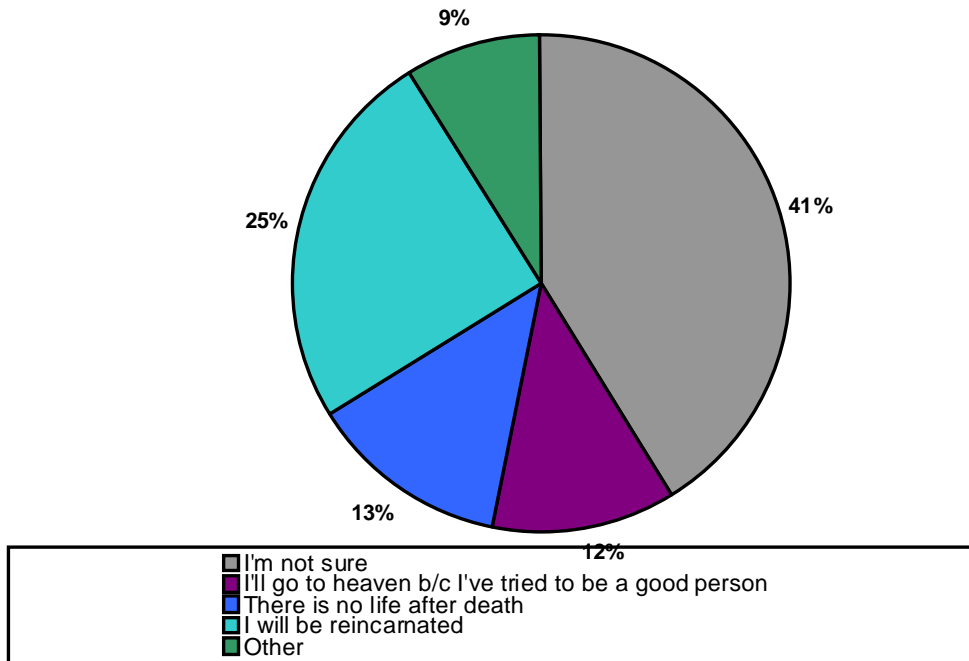
Life & Death

Regarding physical death, Buddhism teaches that after death one is either reborn or enters nirvana. This teaching differs from the reincarnation

teachings of Hinduism, in that Buddha taught that there is no such thing as a "soul" (Source: <http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/beliefs/afterlife.htm>).

The Buddhists in our sample hold a variety of beliefs about what will happen when they die. Their most common response was that they are not sure. One-quarter believe they will be reincarnated. A minority says they will go to heaven because they've tried to be a good person.

Figure 3. Buddhists - What will happen when you die?



Communicating with God

The fact that Buddhists view prayer as a form of meditation is evident in their answers about communicating with God. Less than one-fifth of Buddhists says they communicate with God. Interestingly, almost twice as many (27%) believe that God communicates with them.

Spiritual Growth

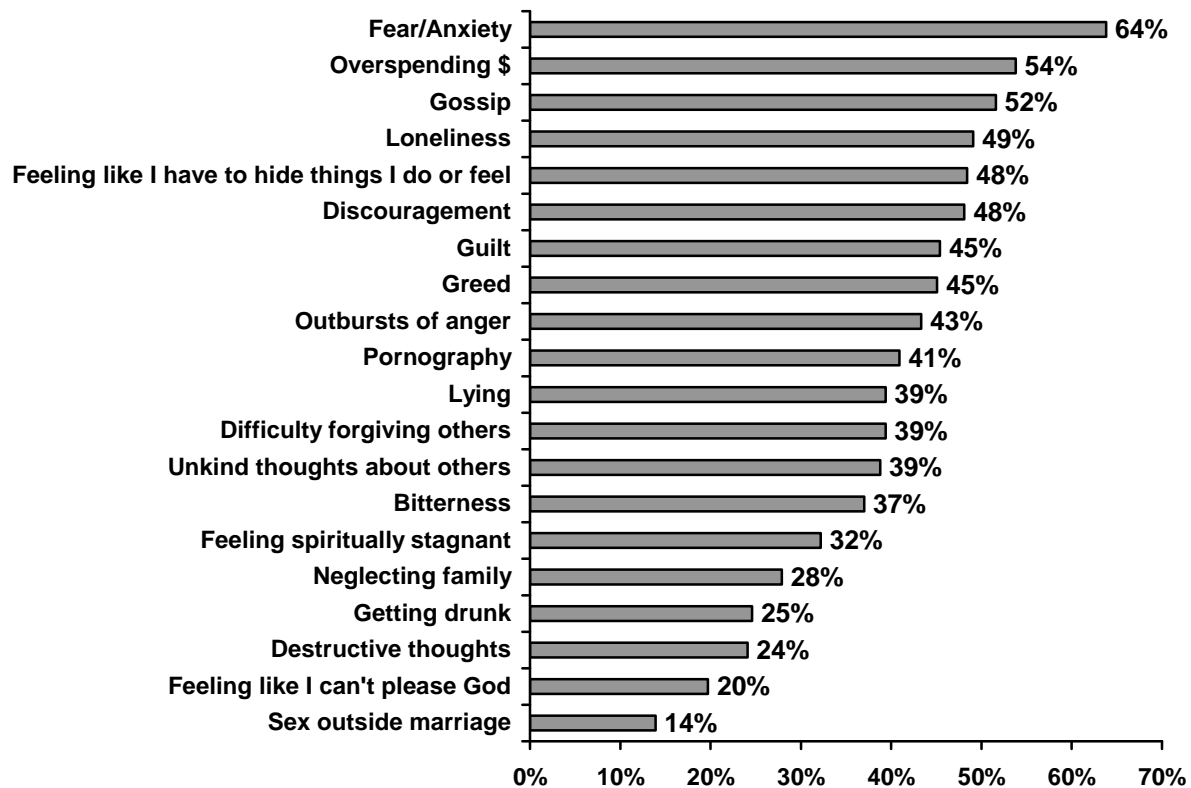
Certain reasons for engaging a spiritual text are more motivating for Buddhists than other reasons. By far, wisdom to live a better life and wisdom to be a better person are the most appealing. Few would be motivated to engage a spiritual text because it would help them learn about God or experience closeness with God.

Half of Buddhists express willingness to engage the Christian Bible, if given the opportunity to do so. While fewer are willing to engage the Christian Bible than the teachings of Buddha, they are more willing to engage the Christian Bible than the sacred texts of other religions.

Spiritual Needs & Struggles

Most Buddhists say that they face daily temptations and strongly believe that the choices they make today impact tomorrow. Fear or anxiety is the most common struggle for Buddhists, with two out of three struggling with this at least once a month. Overspending or mishandling money and gossip are also common concerns for them.

Figure 4. Buddhists - Percent Struggling In This Area At Least Monthly.



Chinese Traditionalists



There are an estimated 220 to 225 million followers of traditional Chinese religions in the world today. With some ties to Buddhism, this religion teaches that there is a spiritual realm that in many ways mirrors the present world. Deities and immortals reside in the Western Paradise and the dead enter the Yin World to be judged for their actions in life. Those in the spirit world experience the same appetites, customs, needs, and desires as those in the physical realm. Thus, they are to be cared for by people (e.g., burning “hell money” for deceased relatives) and can be bribed to earn favor. The merit a person earns will determine where they go upon death, including in what form they will be reincarnated.

Faith Practices

In the CBE study, Chinese religionists hail primarily from China and Taiwan. Two-thirds say that they follow their religion “somewhat closely”, and only a small minority (4%) follows their religion “very closely”.

Compared to people in other faith groups, adherents of Chinese traditional religion are the least likely to feel confident that it’s the right one for them. Three out of five express this belief. Only 40% believe it is the only true path to spiritual growth.

A strong interest in spiritual things and desire to grow spiritually is fairly common. Almost two-thirds say these statements accurately describe them.

Venerating ancestors is the most common spiritual practice among Chinese religionists; 68% engage in an activity that venerates ancestors at least once a week.

Almost half (46%) will meditate and three out of ten will pray at least weekly. Because of its diverse nature, Chinese traditional religion does not share one common sacred text, although the writings of Confucius and teachings of Buddha are considered by many to be important spiritual works. Among survey respondents, more than one-third of this faith’s adherents read the writings of Confucius and 27% read the teachings of Buddha in the past seven days.

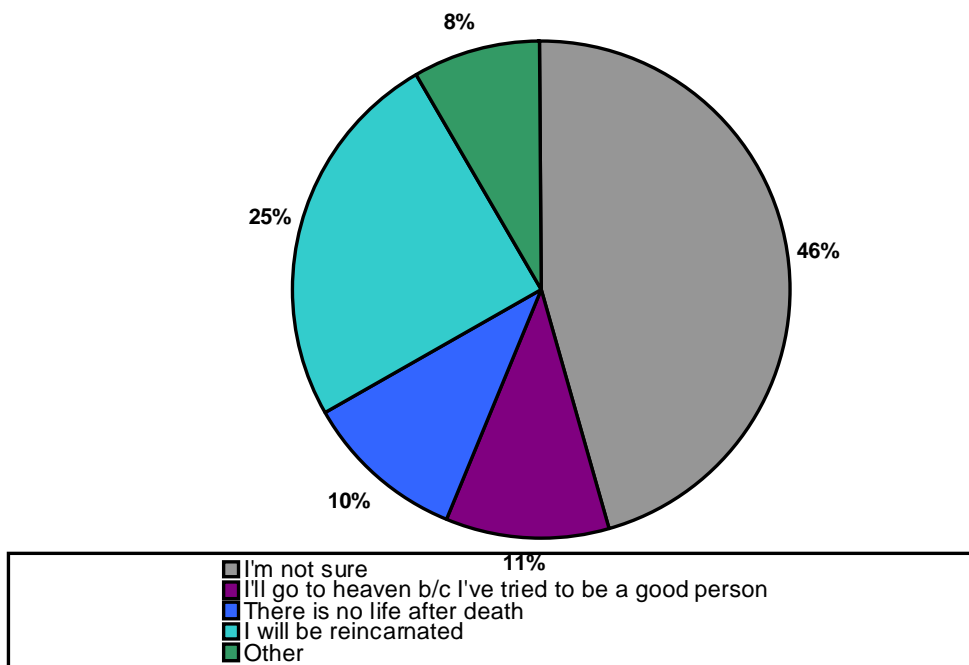
Life & Death

Chinese traditional religion holds elaborate teachings regarding death, judgment, punishment, and rewards (Tong, 2003). It teaches that there are deities over every city and town that keep a record of the good and bad done by the people who live there. Upon death, a person is escorted by the Ox-Head and Horse-Face spirits to the first court of hell. A reading of the record book determines how they will then proceed through the 10 halls of hell with its 18 levels of punishment. At the tenth court, the decision is made about how the form in which the individual will be reincarnated human, animal or insect.

Despite the heavy emphasis on the spirit world, Chinese religionists do not universally hold a belief in a spiritual existence beyond death. In fact, one-third disagree that there is such a spiritual existence and another 11% are not sure.

Concerning their own personal destination upon death, 46% of Chinese religionists express uncertainty. One-fourth believes they will be reincarnated while one out of ten expects to go to heaven because he or she has tried to be a good person.

Figure 5. Chinese Religionists - What do you believe will happen when you die?



Spiritual Me

Agreement that we have a spiritual existence, that we daily face temptations, and that what we choose today affects tomorrow runs high among Chinese religionists. Three-fourths believe that we have a spiritual existence that is the sum total of what we think, say, feel, and do. The same proportion report experiencing daily temptations to have or do something they shouldn't. Also eight out of ten agree that what we do today affects tomorrow.

Communicating with God

Communicating with God or gods represents a somewhat foreign concept to adherents of Chinese traditional religions. About one-fourth believe that they communicate with God or their gods & 29% say that God or gods communicate with them.

Spiritual Growth

Similar to Buddhists, adherents of traditional Chinese religion are most motivated to engage sacred texts that promise wisdom to live a better life. Those that address the big questions in life are also appealing to them. Experiencing closeness with God or knowing more about God fall far down on their list of motivations.

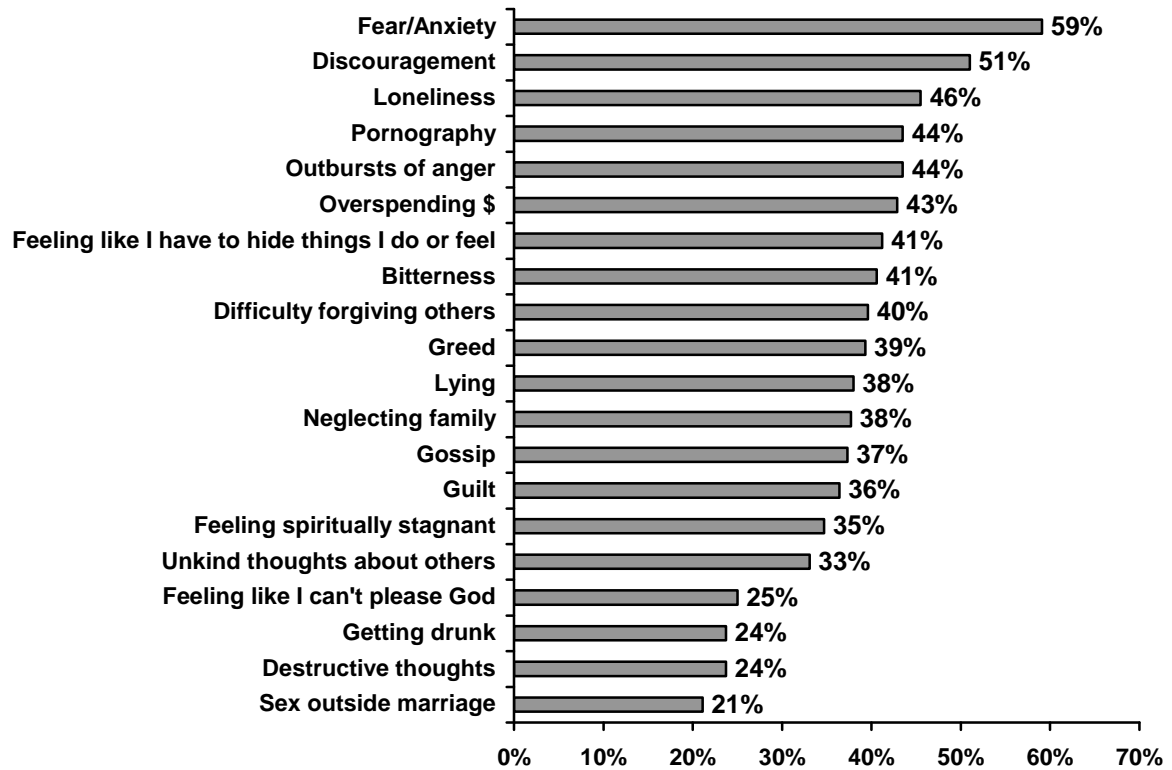
Chinese religionists are more willing to read or listen to the Christian Bible than other sacred texts. Three out of five (62%) express a willingness to engage the Christian Bible, if given the opportunity.

Spiritual Needs & Struggles

Fear or anxiety is the top spiritual struggle among Chinese religionists, with three-fifths experiencing it at least monthly. Feelings of discouragement and loneliness are also quite common.

Pornography use tends to run high among this group as well. Nearly three out of five men and one quarter of women use pornography at least once a month.

Figure 6. Chinese Religionists - Percent Struggling in this Area at Least Monthly.





Hindus

Approximately 13% of the world's population follows Hinduism. Its 900 million adherents live primarily in India, Nepal, and Mauritius.

Hinduism teaches the existence of a supreme spirit or one unified cosmic force, called Brahman, as well as hundreds of god and goddesses, representing different aspects of Brahma. Generally, Hindus do not pray to Brahman as Christians pray to God. Some may worship their gods and goddesses particularly those they believe have the most influence on their lives. Others do not worship any gods.

Shrines to the various deities may be found in temples, in private homes, or in public spaces. Hindus believe that if proper care is not taken of a deity, they will abandon the shrine. Thus, priests reside at the temples to attend to the deities. Worship occurs primarily through individual offerings to the deity, not through congregational activities.

Faith Practices

The Hindus who participated in our study reside primarily in India. One-third – the second highest among all of our faith groups – say that they follow their religion “very closely”. More than half describe themselves as following their religion “somewhat closely”.

Hinduism's followers generally have a strong interest in spiritual matters. More than seven out of ten express a strong desire to grow spiritually and 76% believe their religion is the right one for them. A smaller group (55%) feels that Hinduism is the only true path to spiritual growth.

Most Hindus regularly participate in faith practices such as attending worship, praying, meditating, and reading or listening to the Vedas (Hindu scriptures). Three out of four attends worship at least once a month. In a typical week, nine out of ten will pray and 59% will meditate.

The high level of involvement in temple worship and prayer is somewhat remarkable, given that saying prayers and visiting the temple are not

requirements in Hinduism. Rather each person is free to worship in their own way.

Hinduism's sacred text, the Vedas, is described as *"the meditative and philosophical focus for millions of monks and a billion seekers. Their stanzas are chanted from memory by priests and laymen daily as liturgy in temple worship and domestic ritual. All Hindus wholeheartedly accept the Vedas, yet each draws selectively, interprets freely and amplifies abundantly."* (*Hindu Scriptures, 2006*). Three out of five Hindus read or listen to the Vedas each week.

Life & Death

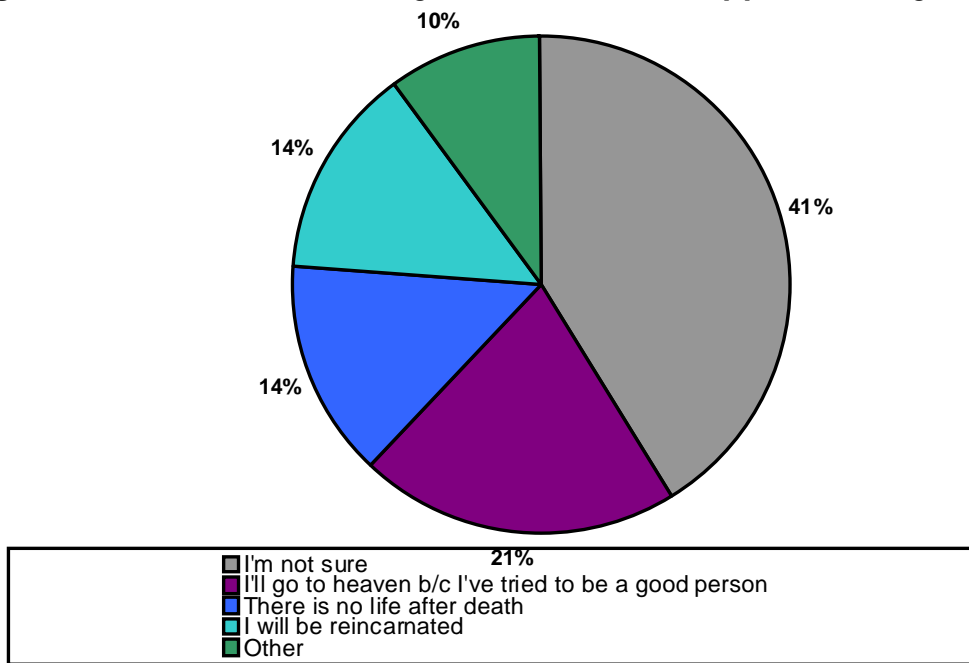
Hinduism teaches that after death, the soul lives on until it is reborn in another form. Immediately upon death, the soul becomes a *preta*, or ghost. Death rites carried out over the following twelve days help the *preta* to change into a *pitri*, an ancestral spirit that then lives in the abode of his or her ancestors (Rambachan, 1998).

Also in Hinduism, the quality of your next life depends on *karma* or how you live this life. The ultimate goal for a Hindu is to live in such a way that you gain *moksha* and break free of the reincarnation cycle. *Moksha* is when you soul merges with Brahman.

Despite the teaching of their religion, Hindus do not universally agree that we have a spiritual existence that extends beyond our physical death. Only 56% believe in such an existence.

When asked what will happen when they die, 41% of Hindus express uncertainty. One out of five expects to go to heaven because they have tried to be a good person. Only 14% anticipate being reincarnated, while the same percentage asserts that there is no life after death.

Figure 7. Hindus - What do you believe will happen when you die?



Spiritual Me

Hindus generally agree that people have a spiritual aspect, that we face daily temptations to have or do things we shouldn't, and that our choices today affect tomorrow. The vast majority of Hindus believe that we each have a spiritual existence that represents the sum total of what we think, say, feel, and do. Four out of five feel that our thoughts, words, feelings and actions today impact tomorrow. In addition, most (72%) say that they face daily temptations.

Communicating with God

The idea of personal communication with God resonates with most Hindus. This may be surprising given the large number of deities within Hinduism. It is consistent though with their understanding of one unifying cosmic force and with worship being personal, rather than congregational.

More than half of Hindus (54%) say that they communicate with their gods. Slightly more, 58%, believe that their gods communicate with them.

Spiritual Growth

Hindus are most motivated to engage a sacred text if it provides wisdom to help live a better life or wisdom to be a better person. "Answers to life's big questions" and "Comfort in difficult times" provide only weak motivation.

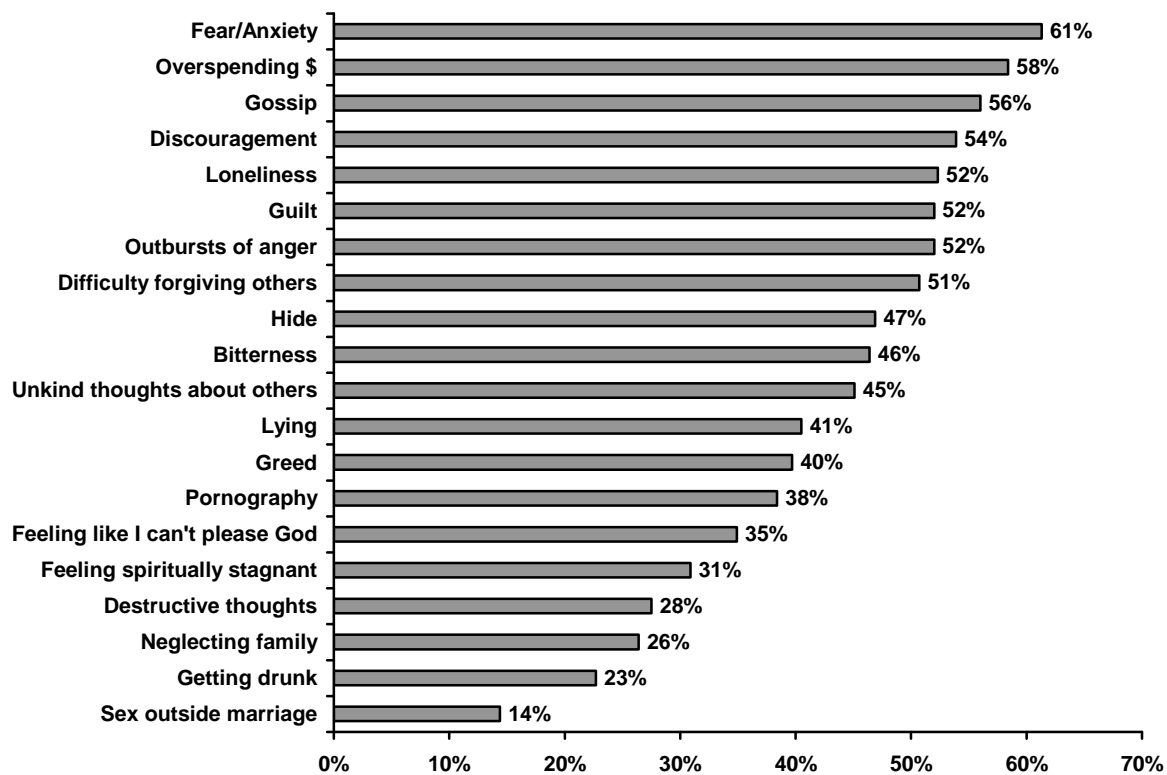
Generally, Hindus have little familiarity with the Christian Bible. One-quarter states that they have no knowledge at all, while 40% are aware, but have never been directly exposed to it.

Despite this limited familiarity, most Hindus express a willingness to read or listen to the Christian Bible. In fact, 73% say they are likely to do so, if given the opportunity.

Spiritual Needs & Struggles

Dealing with fear and anxiety is the most common spiritual struggle for Hindus. Most also deal frequently with overspending or mishandling money, gossiping, discouragement, loneliness, guilt, and outbursts of anger.

Figure 8. Hindus - Percent Struggling in this Area at Least Monthly.



Jews



Dating back more than 3,000 years to the covenantal relationship between God and the children of Israel, Judaism is one of the oldest monotheistic religions. The basic tenets originate in the Hebrew Bible and were also explored in later texts such as the Talmud.

Today there are approximately 14 million Jewish people. Most live in either the United States or Israel. While they share a common heritage, Jews are very diverse in their beliefs and religious practices. Strict Orthodox sects exist as do those who choose a more secular path.

Faith Practices

Almost all Jewish respondents in our survey live in Israel. One-half say they follow the teachings of their religion “somewhat closely”. The remainder is almost evenly divided between those who hold “very closely” to their faith and those who do not closely at all.

The vast majority (75%) of Jews express confidence that their religion is the right one for them. Consistent with the idea of being a chosen people, relatively few (36%) believe Judaism is the only true path to spiritual growth.

Spiritual matters hold less interest for Jews than for most other faith groups. One out of two expresses a strong interest in spiritual things and only 46% say they have a strong desire to grow spiritually.

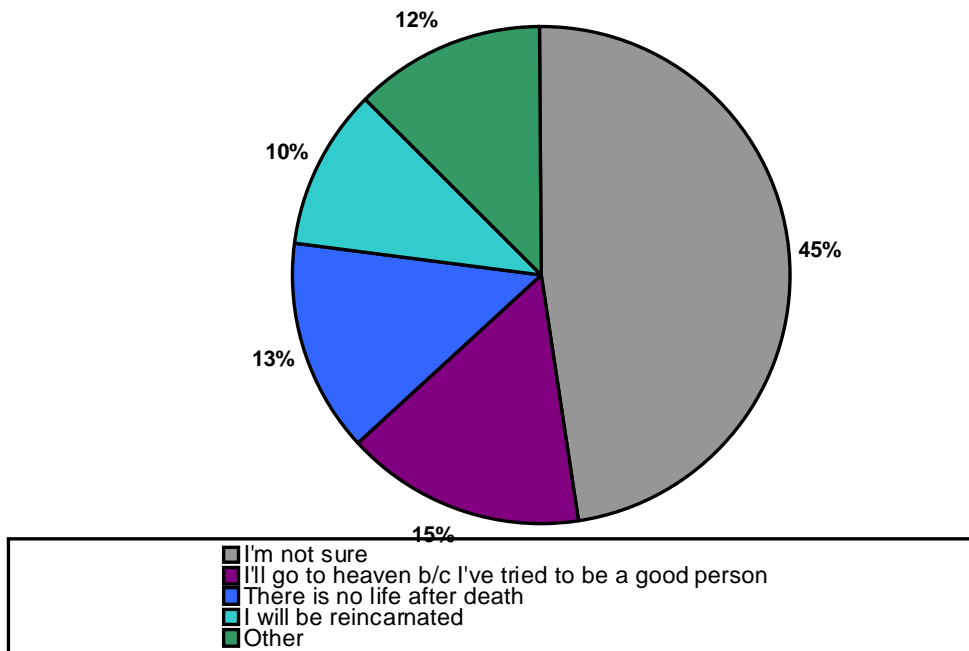
Personal faith practices generally do not play a large role in Jewish people’s daily lives. Most (69%) attend worship only on special occasions or not at all. In a typical week, less than half will pray (46%), about two out of five (42%) will engage the Hebrew Bible, and only 16% read or listen to the Talmud. Despite this low level of current personal involvement with their scriptures, most (56%) say they are very familiar with the Hebrew Bible.

Life & Death

Judaism teaches that there is an afterlife, but has little dogma about it. The range of traditional beliefs is quite wide, including resurrection, reincarnation, and temporary (but not eternal) punishment.

Less than half of Jewish respondents in our survey believe that they will have a spiritual existence that extends beyond their physical death. Similar to most other faith groups, 45% of Jews express uncertainty about what will happen to them personally upon death. Significant minorities contend there is no life after death, that they will go to heaven because they tried to be a good person or followed their religion, or that they will be reincarnated.

Figure 9. Jews - What do you believe will happen when you die?



Spiritual Me

Although they have less interest in spiritual matters than other faith groups, Jews generally do agree with the basic concepts of a "Spiritual Me". That is, three out of five say we have a spiritual existence that is the sum total of what we think, say, feel & do. Most (70%) believe that our choices today, including our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions, impact tomorrow. While most Jews acknowledge that they feel temptation daily, they are less likely to agree this is true than members of other faith groups.

Communicating with God

The Hebrew word for prayer derives from root words that mean “to judge oneself.” Thus, while in Judaism prayers are directed towards God, they provide a means of introspection about the person’s role in the universe and relationship to God. Judaism espouses prayer as an integral part of everyday life with one of the most important prayers, the Birkat Ha-Mazon never being recited in the synagogue.

As mentioned previously, less than half of Jews pray in a typical week. Similarly, one out of two believes that they communicate with God (49%) or that God communicates with them (47%).

Spiritual Growth

Jews are unique among faith groups in that “comfort in difficult times” represents their strongest motivation for engaging a sacred text. Wisdom to live a better life and to be a better person is also an important motivator.

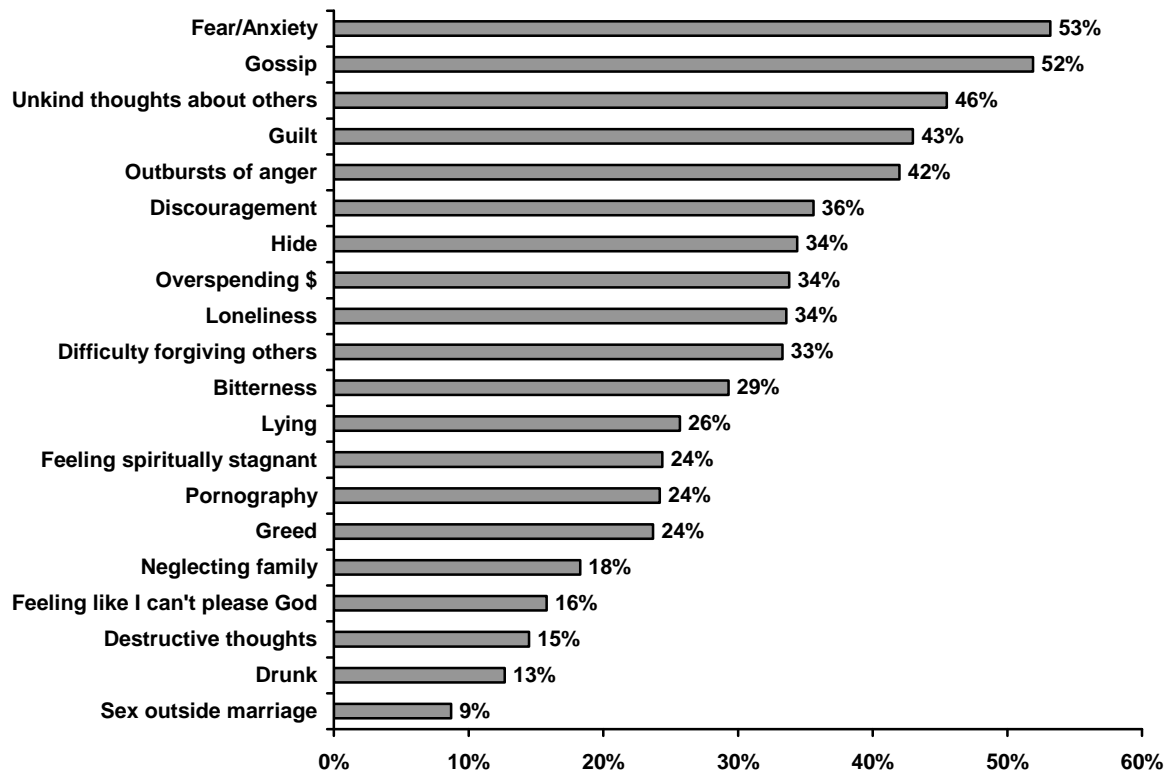
Jewish people indicate the least familiarity with the Christian Bible, among all of the faith groups studied. Half describe themselves as having “no knowledge at all”. An additional 39% are aware, but have never read or listened to it.

Adherents of Judaism also indicate little willingness to engage the Christian Bible. Less than one-third says they are likely to read or listen to the Bible in the future if given the opportunity.

Spiritual Needs & Struggles

Jews resemble other faith groups in that their most common area of personal struggle is in dealing with fear and anxiety. Gossip, unkind thoughts about others, and guilt are common concerns as well.

Figure 10. Jews - Percent Struggling In This Area At Least Monthly.





Muslims

In recent years, Islam has become a major topic of public interest. Almost two billion people around the world identify themselves as Muslim. Indonesia and Pakistan have the largest Muslim populations. Muslims represent a majority of the population in forty-eight countries predominantly located in Africa and Asia (Kopstein & Lichbach, 2005).

Islam teaches that there is one god, Allah, who created the universe. Adherents are called to hold to five “pillars”:

- 1) Shahada – The creed concerning Allah and Mohammad.
- 2) Salat – Daily prayers, five times per day while facing the city of Mecca
- 3) Sawm – Ritual fasting at particular times of the year
- 4) Zakat – Giving of alms
- 5) Hajj – Pilgrimage to Mecca

In our study of spiritual beliefs and practices around the world, Muslims stood out from the other faith groups in several ways. Followers of Islam indicated the highest rates of involvement with prayer and reading their sacred text, the Qur’an. They are the most likely to believe that their religion is the right one for them and the only true path to spiritual growth. However, most Muslims regularly struggle with feeling that they can’t please God and feeling spiritually stagnant.

Data are based on the responses of 1,785 Muslims. Respondents reside primarily in Algeria (22%), Egypt (25%), Indonesia (21%) and Saudi Arabia (27%).

Spiritual Practices

Generally, Muslims say that they follow their religion “somewhat” (66%) or “very” closely (29%). The pattern among other faith groups is that the majority of followers express confidence that their religion is the right one for them, but much fewer believe that their religion is the only true path for spiritual growth. Muslims are the exception, with nearly identical proportions believing their religion is right for them (78%) and the one true path (74%).

Commitment to their religion is evident in Muslims’ personal spiritual practices. Nearly two-thirds (63%) attend religious services at least once a week. In a typical week, nine out of ten will pray and read or listen to the

Qur'an. Remarkably, 74% pray every day and 43% read or listen to the Qur'an daily.

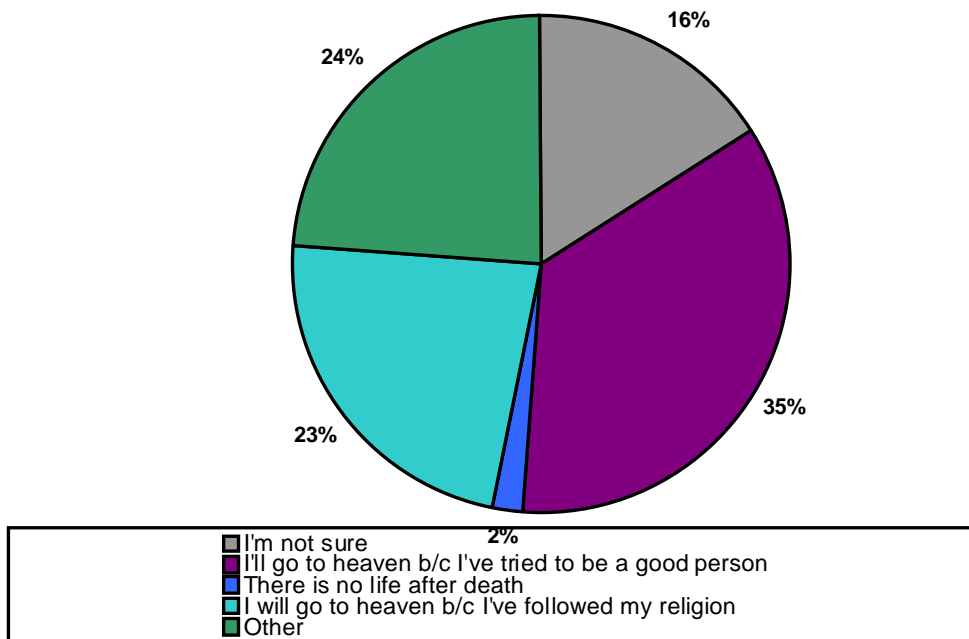
Nine out of ten Muslims describe themselves as "very familiar" with the Qur'an. In contrast, only a little more than half of Jews and 44% of Christians indicate this level of familiarity with their own sacred texts.

Life & Death

Islam teaches that after death, the individual will face the judgment of Allah, being admitted either to heaven or paradise by mercy or to hell by justice. In this life, Muslims generally do not believe that they can definitely know their final destination. Consequently they strive to make every effort to please Allah.

When asked what will happen when they die, most Muslims say that they will go to heaven because they have tried to be a good person (35%) or have followed their religion (23%). Compared to other faith groups, relatively few (16%) say they don't know what happens. The high percentage of "other" responses among Muslims reflects those who gave a non-standard response, typically indicating that Allah will judge them after death.

Figure 11. Muslims - What do you believe will happen when you die?



Spiritual Me

Although most of Muslims agree with the basic ideas of a Spiritual Me, the percentages are less than many other faith groups. About three out of five followers of Islam believe that we have a spiritual existence defined as the sum total of what we think, say, feel and do. A similar percentage acknowledges that they face daily temptations for things they should avoid, while two-thirds agree that what we do today impacts tomorrow.

Communicating with God

The notion of personally communicating with God resonates strongly with Muslims. Nearly nine out of ten Muslims say that they communicate with God and that God communicates with them. This percentage is much higher than that found among all other faith groups.

Spiritual Growth

For most people, *wisdom to help me be a better person* and *wisdom to help me live a better life* are the most important factors that would lead them to engage a spiritual text. Muslims are an exception. For them, *a way to learn more about God* and *a way to experience authentic closeness with God* are the most critical.

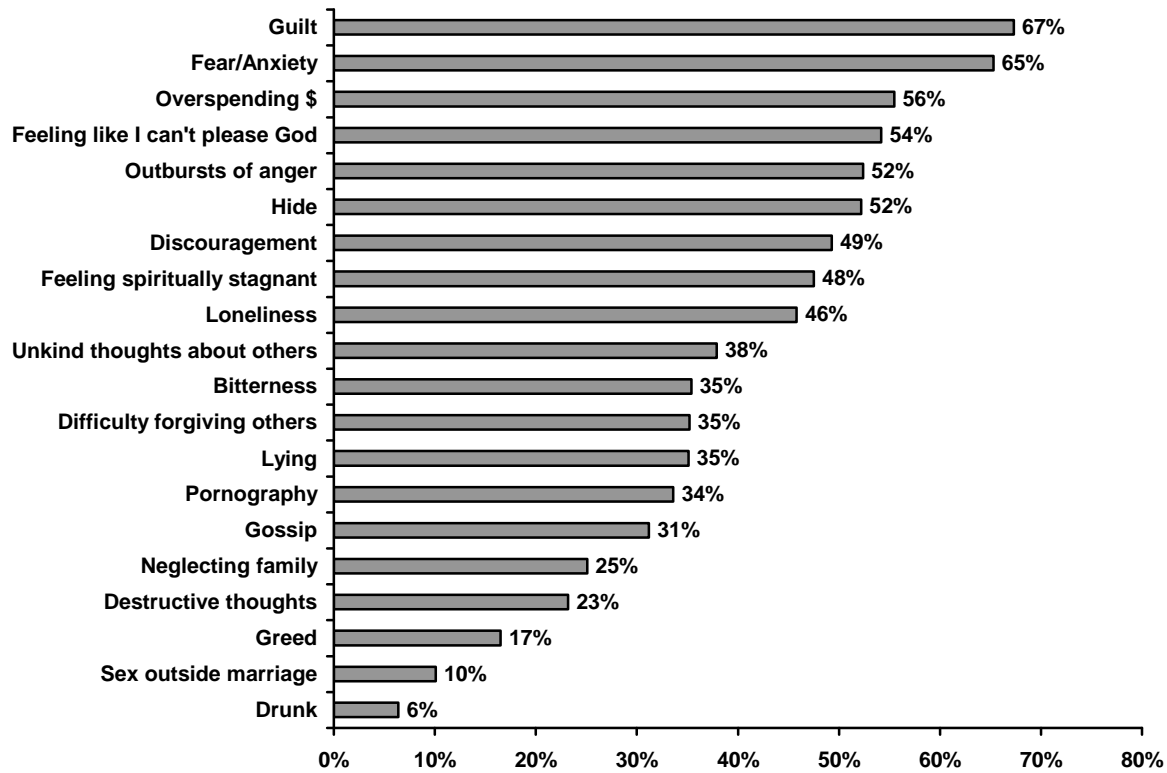
Muslims typically have some level of awareness of the Christian Bible. Three out of five say that they are aware of it, with nearly one quarter having read or listened to at least some of the text.

Slightly less than half of Muslims express a willingness to engage the Bible in the future. Although this reflects less willingness than among Buddhists, Chinese religionists, and Hindus, it is important to note that Muslims are more open to the Bible than most other sacred texts.

Spiritual Needs & Struggles

In addition to varying in their religious beliefs and practices, Muslims also differ in their perceived spiritual needs. Two-thirds struggle with feelings of guilt on a monthly basis. A similar percentage also deals with fear and anxiety. Of all faith groups, Muslims report the highest rates of feeling spiritually stagnant and that they can't please God.

Figure 12. Muslims - Percent Struggling In This Area At Least Monthly.



Summary

The preceding sections illustrate that spiritual matters are important to the followers of most faith groups. However, the ways in which spirituality intersects with daily life differ dramatically and sometimes in ways that seem to run counter to their religion's teachings.

The following figures present graphical summaries of the main findings from the CBE study. By displaying all faith groups together, they allow for easy comparison among them.

Areas of common ground in this study include a basic belief in a spiritual existence and that choices today impact tomorrow. With only a couple of exceptions, most people look to spiritual texts for wisdom to live a better life or be a better person. Uncertainty about what will happen when they die is the norm for most faith groups. Regardless of faith tradition, most followers face a common spiritual struggle in dealing with fear or anxiety.

Figure 13. Spiritual Interest and Desire for Spiritual Growth.

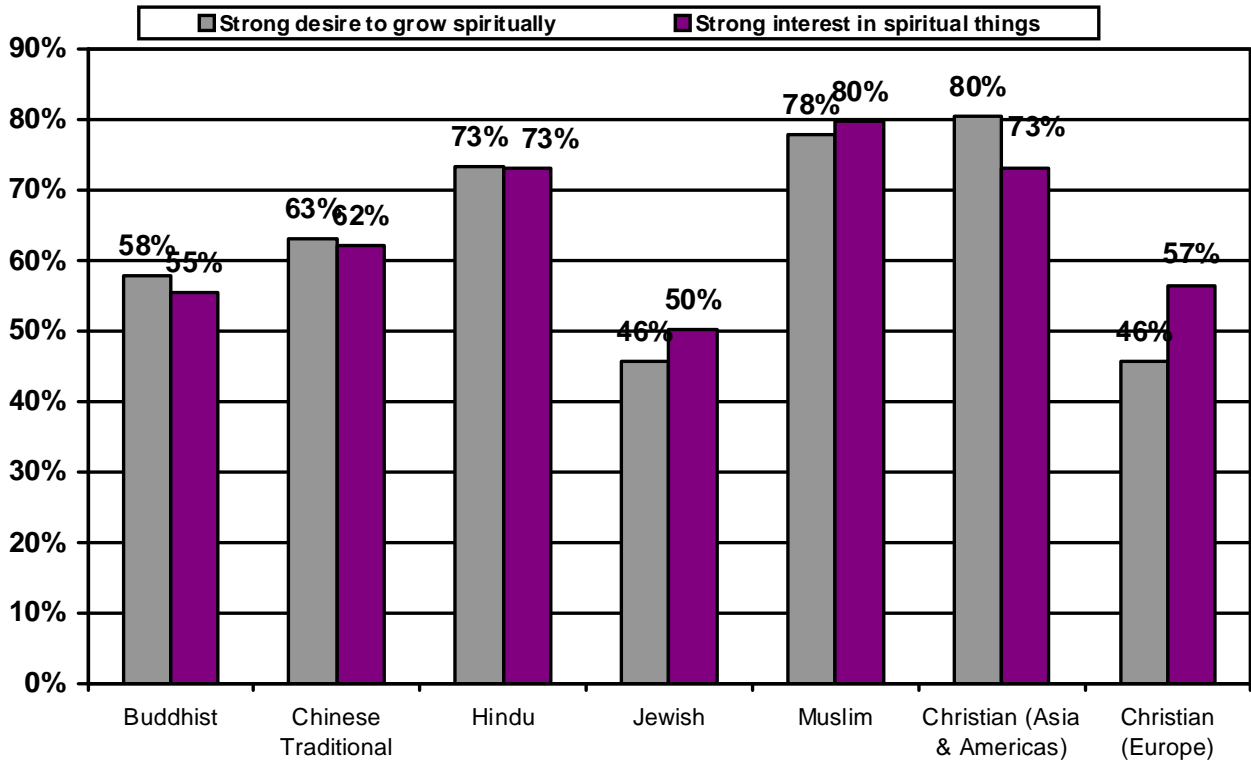


Figure 14. My Spiritual Existence.

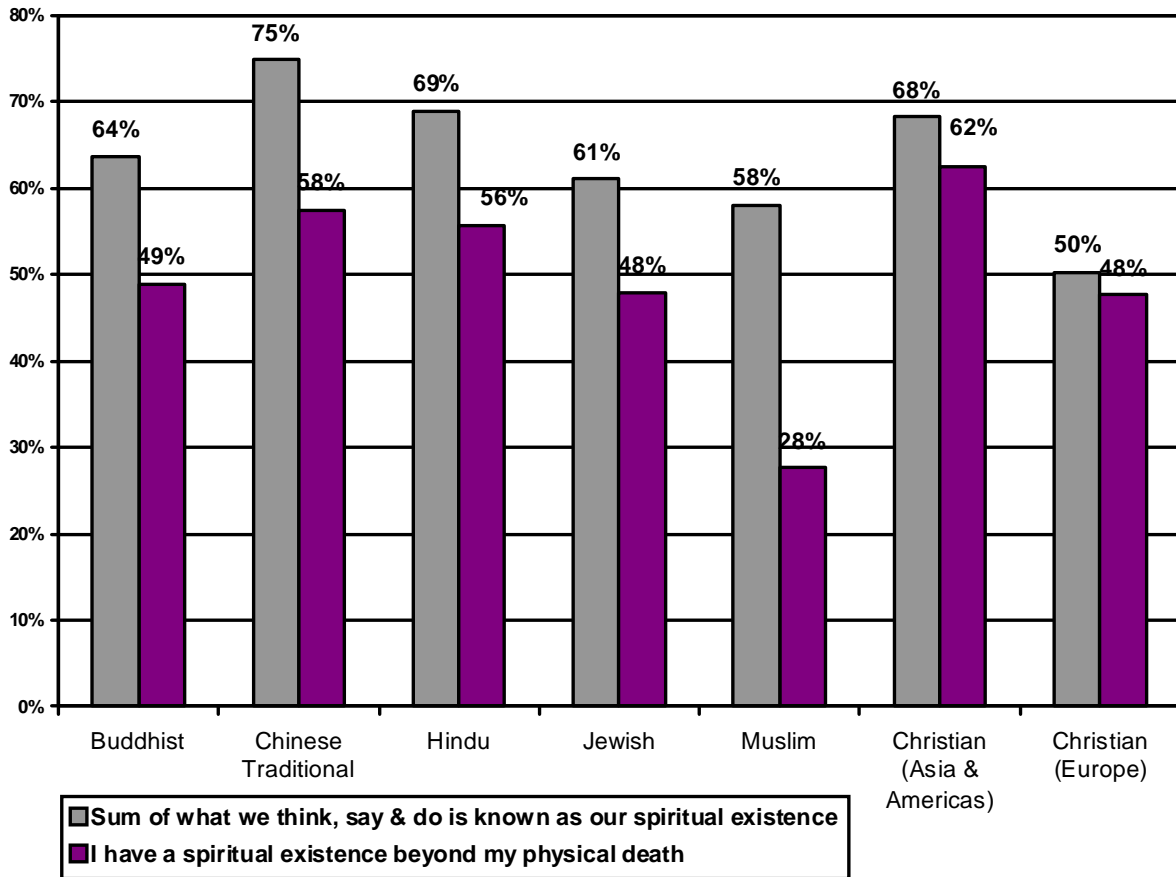


Figure 15. What will happen when you die?

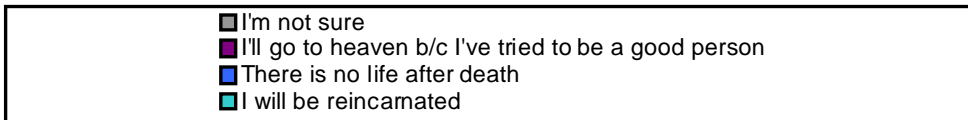
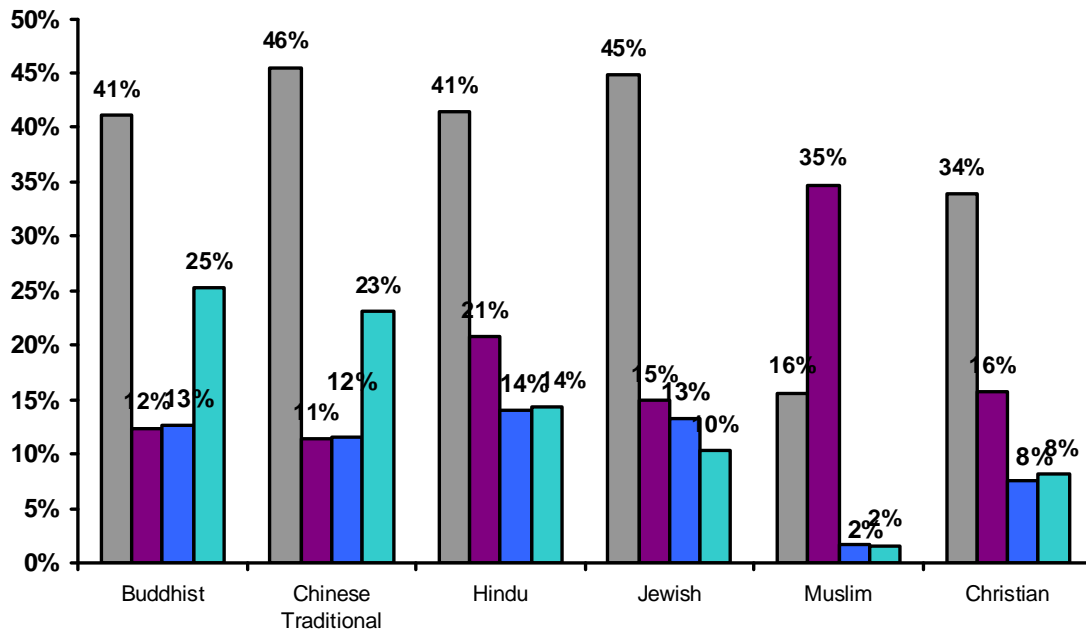


Figure 16. Communicating with God or your gods.

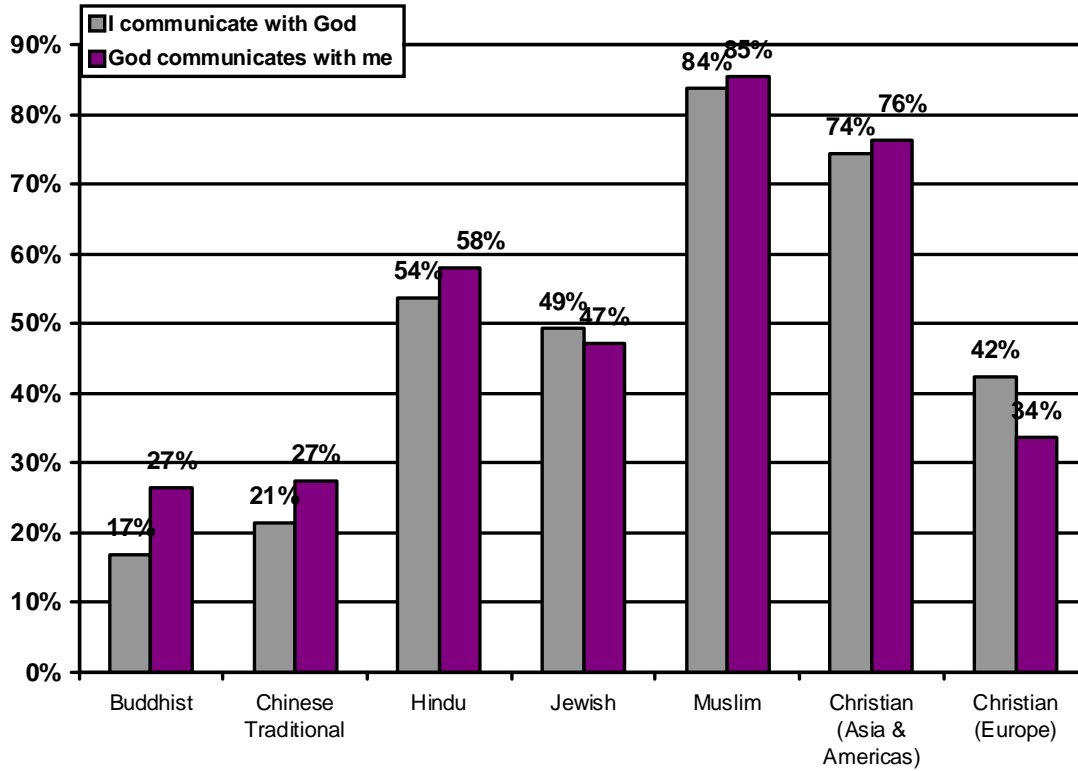


Figure 17. Familiarity with your own sacred text.

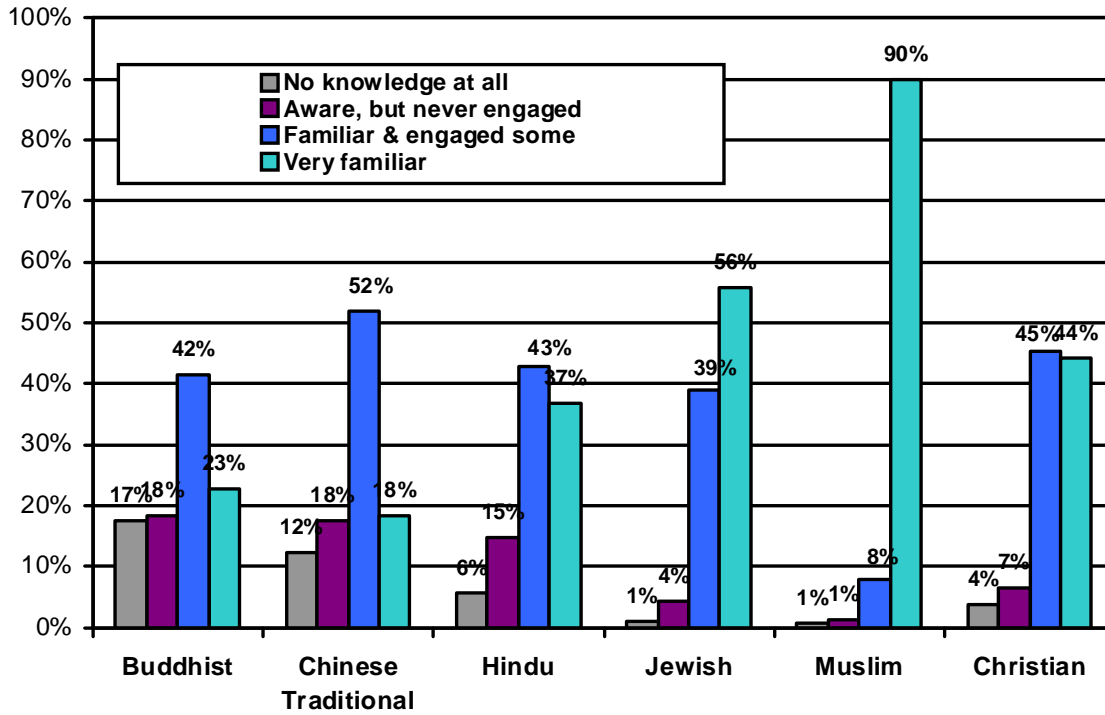
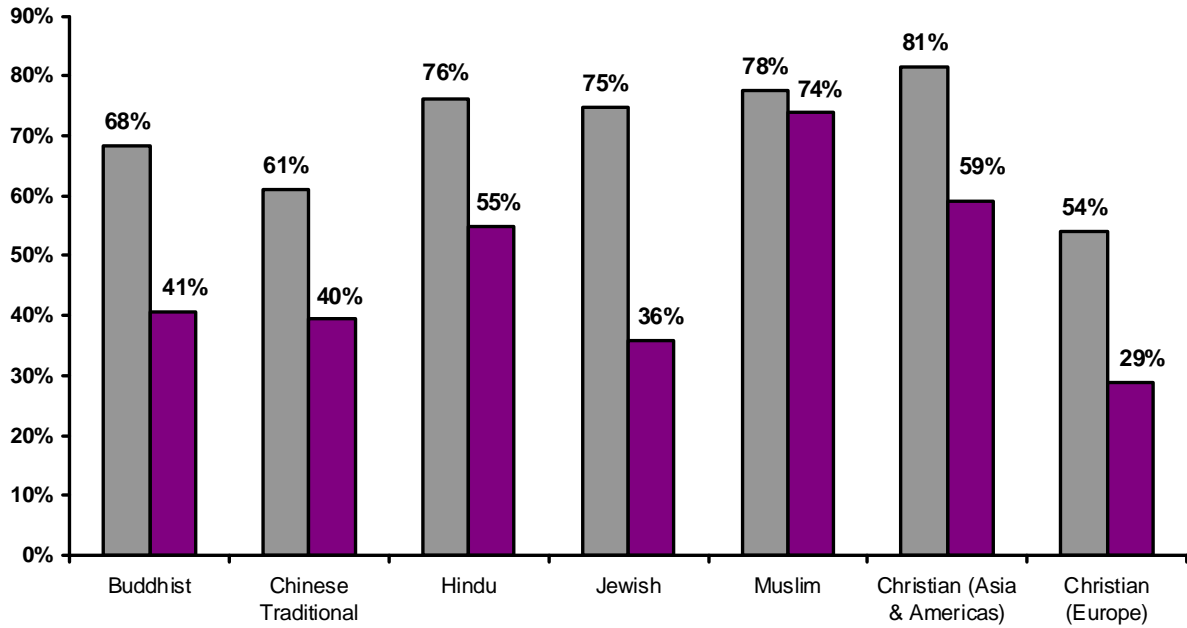
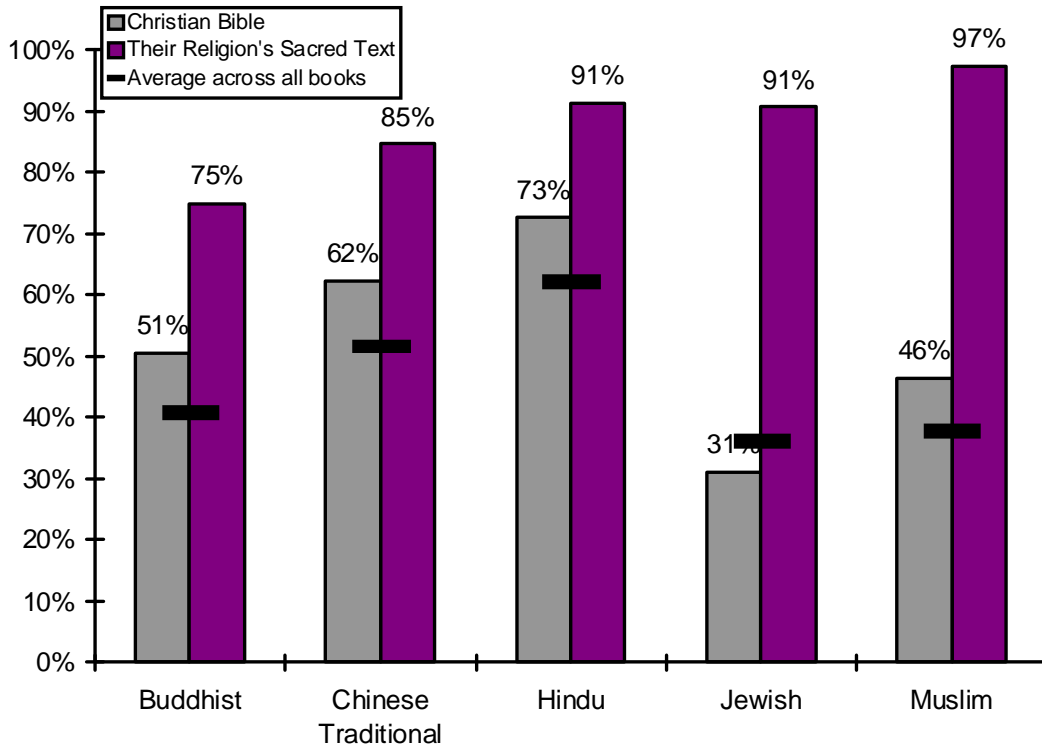


Figure 18. Confidence in my religion.



■ I'm confident my religion is the right one for me. ■ My religion is the only true path for spiritual growth.

Figure 19. Willingness to engage the Christian Bible.



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