



▲ The Greek god Hermes is shown here as a messenger.

What major belief systems have emerged over time?

Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism are all belief systems that originated in ancient India or China and that still attract many followers. Today, thousands of different belief systems exist around the world. Most of them share certain characteristics—for example, belief in the existence of spiritual powers such as gods and respectful worship by followers, often through prayer. Belief systems vary in whether their followers worship gods and if so, how many, as the following examples show:



▲ Many Daoists painted peaceful nature scenes like this one.

Many Gods

The earliest belief systems focused on the idea that a powerful spirit inhabited every element of nature. In later belief systems, followers often worshiped gods associated with natural forces—such as sun, rain, or fire—or forces related to life and death. Of the many Hindu gods, the three most important are a creator, a preserver, and a destroyer. Other belief systems, such as those of the Greeks and Romans, identified each god with human characteristics and behaviors. For example, the Greek god Hermes was known as a trickster and a thief.

One God

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share the belief that one god created the universe and rules over it. Jews believe that God's law is clear—"You shall have no other gods before me." Jesus, among whose followers Christianity developed, was a Jew. For that reason, much of the Jewish belief system was incorporated into Christianity, including its monotheism. Muslims, or followers of Islam, believe they should serve God by accepting five basic duties. The first is the daily declaration of faith that "there is no God but Allah."

No Gods

Other major belief systems have no gods. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, for example, all arose in response to the inspiring ideas of wise, human teachers. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, stressed moral principles that would lead people to a state of enlightenment. Confucius offered guidelines about how to live virtuously, his goal being to ensure social order and good government. Laozi, who was believed to be Daoism's founder, taught his followers how to live in harmony with nature.



An Italian artist depicted the Christian God as a father in this painting. ▶

Thinking Critically

- Analyze Information** Do you think there is at least one element that all belief systems have in common? If so, what is it?
- Connections to Today** Do research to learn more about one of the belief systems described above. Write a summary telling how many people follow this belief system today, and in which countries.