

# Religious leaders

The six major religions have each been defined by vibrant characters offering their take on moral leadership. Who are they, and who is taking on their role in secular society?



**Thumbs up:** Pope Francis is the 266th leader of the Catholic Church © PA

## Q: Why do religions need leaders?

A: In a lot of ways, religious leaders have the same role as any other: they provide guidance and inspiration. Religious leaders do this by teaching and interpreting religious texts, leading worship, and supporting their communities. They also perform religious ceremonies such as weddings.

## Q: Like a priest?

A: Yes, for Catholics and Hindus. Other denominations of Christianity may refer to the leaders of their churches as pastors, vicars or ministers. In Islam, the leader of a Mosque is called an imam, and in Judaism, spiritual leaders are referred to as rabbis.

Whatever the name, these are all part of that religion's 'clergy'. Some religions have hierarchies within this system, such as bishops and archbishops. In Catholicism, the pope sits at the very top of the clergy, and is considered 'God's representative on Earth'. This makes his word a moral absolute; a recent poll showed that one in four Catholics in the US had started donating more to charity since [Pope Francis](#) began making speeches strongly advocating help for the poor.

The Buddhist clergy, the Sangha, is an order of ordained monks and nuns. In [Tibetan Buddhism](#), the Dalai Lama offers inspiration and wisdom to his followers.

## Q: Does every religion have a clergy?

No. The tenth Sikh Guru abolished priests, which he felt had become corrupt. Instead, he appointed custodians of the Holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, at each Gurdwara. Anyone is allowed to read from the book or lead worship at the temple, which is run by committee.

## Q: Is a priest the same thing as a prophet?

A: Not necessarily. A prophet is a person who is believed to be teaching a direct message from God.

Jewish scripture recognises 55 prophets of [Israel](#), the most important of whom was Moses, who delivered the ten commandments. Christians, Jews and Muslims share many of the same prophets. For Christians, however, Jesus is considered much more than a prophet – he was the son of God, who lived, died and was resurrected on Earth to atone for the sins of humanity. Muslims, however, believe that he was merely a human being, and that Muhammad was the final prophet, to whom the angel Gabriel revealed the word of Allah, which was transcribed to become the Qur'an.

## Q: Do other religions have prophets?

A: Not in quite the same way. Hinduism is based on religious texts from ancient India. These include the vedas, which contain hymns and rituals, and epic poems about [Rama](#) and [Sita](#).

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak, who

was born in 1469 in what is now Pakistan. He preached that there was neither Muslim nor Hindu, but all that mattered was belief in the one true God. There were nine successive gurus who laid the foundations of Sikhism, before the Guru Granth Sahib was named the final teacher.

Likewise, Buddhism was founded on the teachings of the Buddha, who lived in India around 500-400 BCE.

## Q: Is there an equivalent for non-religious people?

A: It's very common to look for guidance or some kind of moral authority from others. Religious or not, most of us have an internal sense of right and wrong which can be influenced by a huge variety of people.

Some celebrities – including the Beatles and Kanye West – have compared themselves to Jesus. This doesn't mean that they actually believe themselves to have divine authority, but for better or worse, their fame does give them a certain amount of influence.

Others may find moral guidance from the comment pages of their favourite newspaper, from family members, or simply by listening to their 'gut', which has been learning from experience and absorbing society's worldviews since birth.

## YOU DECIDE

Do moral leaders exist in a secular society? Are they necessary?

## ACTIVITY

Choose a well-known religious leader and design a pamphlet explaining their core teachings. For Moses, for example, this would include the ten commandments.

## WORD WATCH

**Pope Francis** – The 266th pope of the Catholic Church was elected at the Vatican in 2013. He has continually called for a reduction in economic inequality and described ‘unbridled capitalism’ as ‘a new tyranny’ in 2013, and more recently as ‘the dung of the devil’.

**Tibetan Buddhism** – Tibet was a small country

in Asia which was colonised by the Republic of China in 1950 – although China says that it has always had a claim over the region, and refers to its entry as a ‘peaceful liberation’. Many Tibetans remain loyal to the Dalai Lama, who continues to live in exile in India. Tibetan Buddhism is an entirely non-violent religion.

**Israel** – This middle-eastern country is regarded by Christians, Jews and Muslims as the ‘Holy Land’, a belief which has been the

source of several wars – from the crusades in the middle ages to an ongoing conflict with Palestine.

**Rama and Sita** – The Sikh and Hindu festival of Diwali is based on the story of Rama and Sita, who were expelled from their rightful kingdom. When they defeated the demon king, Ravana, oil lamps were lit to guide and welcome them home.



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## Notes

