



# Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-Educated Person Should Know

*Mark Berkson*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-Educated Person Should Know

*Mark Berkson*

## **Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-Educated Person Should Know** Mark Berkson

According to polls conducted by Gallup and the Pew Research Forum on Religion & Public Life, the majority of Americans fail basic tests about religion, including tests on their own faith. This is troublesome because religious literacy is about so much more than naming deities or knowing the stories of ancient history. For many of us, religion is a way to examine and understand ourselves.

Moreover, religious literacy – the knowledge of basic teachings, symbols, practices, founders, institutions, and values of the world's religious traditions - can shed new light on the world around us and knock down the boundaries between us, making us better neighbors and better citizens. These 24 enlightening lectures offer you the chance to experience the breadth and depth of the world's religions from all angles – historical, theological, and cultural. They take you on a tour of the world and its religious cultures. From India to East Asia to the Middle East to the United States, your journey with Professor Berkson introduces you to the beliefs and practices of other traditions and provides you with new insights into your own.

The course approaches each religion from an "imaginative insider's perspective." What does the world look like from the perspective of someone within each tradition? What does this person value and care about? What are the everyday scriptures, rituals, traditions, and holidays like?

Along the way, you'll discover certain features that are common to many religions – concepts of divinity, scripture, rituals, and explanations of good and evil - and you'll find new ways to attain greater self-understanding.

Disclaimer: Please note that this recording may include references to supplemental texts or print references that are not essential to the program and not supplied with your purchase.

©2012 The Teaching Company, LLC (P)2012 The Great Courses

## **Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-Educated Person Should Know** **Details**

Date : Published July 8th 2013 by The Great Courses

ISBN :

Author : Mark Berkson

Format : Audible Audio 13 pages

Genre : Religion, Nonfiction, Audiobook, Philosophy

 [Download Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-Edu ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-E ...pdf](#)

## **Download and Read Free Online Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-Educated Person Should Know** Mark Berkson

---

## **From Reader Review Cultural Literacy for Religion: Everything the Well-Educated Person Should Know for online ebook**

### **Ron Harris says**

Long, really long, I mean crazy long. By the time I got to the end I couldn't remember what I discovered at the beginning. I'll have to go back and re-do and keep notes. Structured as a series of lectures, it can be hard to follow.

---

### **Bill Scheidegger says**

This a great overview of the world's major religious sects. As the professor notes, this is something that is missing in the American public school systems. You don't have to teach following a religion to teach about a religion. This book is a great step in learning what different religious organizations are and the practices they adhere too. It teaches you their meaning without trying to indoctrinate you into any one belief system.

We are the world's melting pot. We are made up of all the people the rest of the world didn't want at one time or another. We should at least understand what it is that our neighbor believes, even if we don't believe it ourselves.

---

### **Jessi Smith says**

On a Goodreads Scale of 1--5 Stars, I give this audiobook course 10 Stars!! This neutral and unbiased overview of so many of the world's religious traditions, from ancient to present times, was extremely well done. Each is so vastly unique in history and culture, and yet as they were laid out, I also perceived so much commonality, beauty, and much to admire. With the overview of Christianity, I realized how much I did NOT know about all the different modern denominations, and how this one grew out of that one. And of course there was discussion about when religion meets politics and socio-economics, the affects on those made vulnerable and disenfranchised by oppression, abuse and neglect, and why conflicts and violence arise in the name of religion.

What I take away from this is, no matter our personal leanings and religious commitments, we absolutely need to learn a great deal more about the world that lives outside of our own little circles. There is a rich and complex tapestry of religious and cultural tradition all around us that deserves, at a minimum, our respect, more education and understanding, listening and learning, acceptance and inclusivity, cooperation, and appreciation for all this amazing diversity.

---

### **Clif Hostetler says**

There's a lot of information presented in these twenty-four lectures about a wide varieties of religions. Perhaps I'm now a bit more culturally literate. However, I don't feel ready to take a test on the subject. One of the points made in the first lecture is that there is wide spread ignorance on the subject of religion. Surprisingly, there's often a lack of knowledge about people's own professed religion. Thus, it's not difficult

to be above average in "literacy for religion."

Even though there's plenty of information in these lectures that was not retained by my mind, perhaps in the future; if I read an article about an Islamic holiday, Hindu ritual, or a debate about church state separation; if I'm invited to a bar mitzva or baptism; if I encounter someone who meditates or fasts on certain days; if I see an ancestral altar or an image of a sikh guru, or a yin yang symbol; after listening to these lectures perhaps I will have a chance to understand the larger context and have a greater appreciation for the religious commitments behind those things. (view spoiler)

I thought the following long excerpt from the end of Lecture Twelve was particularly interesting. It discusses the differences between belief and practice when it comes to religion.

So if you look at belief the Japanese do not seem religious. But if we look at practice we see high levels of involvement. In addition, when polls are taken asking Japanese people what religion they practice, or what they're connected with, the number of checked religions is far greater than the total population of Japan. This means that most people checked more than one religion. In general the Japanese tend to practice a particular religion at certain moments in their lives that the religion is best suited to. For example when a baby is born or a new business is started a Shinto priest might be called in conduct the ritual. But when someone dies a Buddhist priest who deals more with issues of impermanence and death will be called upon.

There's a Japanese saying, "Born Shinto, die Buddhist." In fact Christian weddings have also become quite popular in Japan leading some to expand the saying to, "Born Shinto, marry Christian, die Buddhist." Some call this approach to religion contextualism. And many Chinese and Japanese see religions as dealing with different spheres of life rather than being at odds with each other. They are complimentary, not conflicting.

It's worth reflecting on why the east Asian approach to religion is so different from the Western approach. Here's one perspective. Affiliation in monotheistic religions is based mostly on belief, and many of the beliefs are mutually exclusive. One cannot both be a Christian and a Muslim because beliefs in these traditions about the nature of Jesus and the status of the Quran cannot be reconciled. But if religion affiliation is more about practice and less about belief, then being affiliated with more than one tradition becomes possible.

This approach to religion is becoming more common in the West as people are combining the religions of their birth, like Judaism or Christianity, with Asian traditions, like Buddhism or Confucianism. And this is why there are more and more people in the West who think of themselves as "Buddhist-Jew" or "Zen-Christian."

The following is a listing of the lecture titles followed by a short description. The descriptions come from the Great Courses website.

### **1. Religion—Its Meaning and Importance**

Start by reexamining basic questions: Why does religion matter? What makes a religion? As you explore the answers, you'll embark on a journey toward a better understanding of the world, its histories, and its cultures, as well as a better understanding of yourself and what it means to be a good citizen in a diverse global community.

### **2. Facets of Religion—Divinity and Devotion**

God. Divinity. Ultimate Reality. Start your journey by looking at how different religious traditions approach the concept of "God." In addition to exploring the concepts of divinity, you'll also look at key components of

religious devotion: scripture, ritual, ideas about good and evil, and doctrines of salvation.

### **3. Hinduism—Foundational Texts and Teachings**

Explore the history of what some scholars consider the oldest living religion. You'll begin with the Indus River Valley civilization, and then you'll learn key elements of the Aryan and Vedic traditions, including scriptures, the pantheon of deities, and the social caste system. Then turn to the soul—Atman—and the concept of rebirth.

### **4. Hindu Gods and Devotional Practices**

In this lecture, uncover new insights into the nature of divinity by studying the variety of fascinating Hindu deities, including Vishnu and his avatars, the many forms of Shiva, and forms of the goddess Devi. You'll also look at ways Hindus worship, from chanting in temples to festivals such as Diwali.

### **5. Gita to Gandhi—Yogas and Modern Hinduism**

Examine Hinduism's many paths to spiritual liberation, from the teachings in the Bhagavad Gita to the many types of yoga. Your study of Hinduism concludes with a survey of its role in the world today: Hindu nationalism, modern democracy of India, and the influx of Hindus to the United States.

### **6. Waking Up—The Buddha and His Teachings**

The life of Siddhartha Gautama—the Buddha himself—is a fascinating journey from a wealthy and sheltered upbringing to an understanding of Samsara, the cycle of rebirth and perpetual discontent. After meditating beneath the bodhi tree, he woke up with Buddhism's key to liberation: the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

### **7. Vehicles to Nirvana—The Schools of Buddhism**

Take a look at the three major schools of the Buddhist world: Theravada Buddhism, with its five precepts of ethical behavior; Mahayana Buddhism, the "great vehicle" that created new paths to Nirvana for its practitioners; and Vajrayana—including Tibetan—Buddhism. Also, explore the history of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

### **8. Chinese Religion and Cosmology**

Travel east to China to survey the elements of Chinese cosmology that have shaped Chinese thought for millennia: the forces of yin and yang, and the metaphysical notions of qi and feng shui. You'll see that the goal of Chinese cosmology is to restore harmony to the world, and the focus is on family, nature, and the home.

### **9. Confucianism—Rituals and Relationships**

Professor Berkson charts the life of Confucius whose impact on East Asian thought is impossible to overstate. Born in the 6th century B.C.E. during a time of chaos in China, Confucius's religious tenets emphasized learning, self-cultivation, and human relationships in this world—rather than the supernatural, revelation, or life after death.

### **10. Daoism—Harmony, Nature, and the Way**

Learn about China's second major religion through the Dao De Jing, a collection of sayings that advocate a life of simplicity and contentment. Consider how Daoism's process of unlearning complements Confucianism's emphasis on learning, and see how to practice effortless action—or wu wei.

### **11. Kami and Spirits—Shinto and Shamanism**

Professor Berkson takes you to Japan and the tradition of Shinto. Here you'll see how the Kami (gods/spirits) relate to everyday life in Japan, including agriculture and the role of the emperor. You'll then explore Shamanism, especially the characteristics of the Korean and Hmong traditions.

## **12. East Asian Buddhism—Zen and Pure Land**

Conclude your journey through the Asian traditions with a study of Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism gave rise to the “laughing Buddha,” which affirms the joys of the world. Japanese Zen, with its emphasis on “just sitting” and its famous lcoans, has drawn practitioners from other traditions and given rise to Zen-Christians.

## **13. Judaism—God, Torah, and Covenant**

Your voyage through the Western traditions begins with the world’s oldest monotheistic religion: Judaism. Explore the nature of the Jewish people, who have both a religious and an ethnic identity. At the heart of Judaism is the Torah, and you’ll examine its stories, its laws, and the major figures who shaped the religion.

## **14. Varieties of Jewish Thought and Practice**

Witness the history of the Jewish people, from the first destruction of the temple 3,000 years ago to the aftermath of the Holocaust. You’ll study the varieties of Jewish culture in diaspora, from the tenets of Orthodox Judaism and Hasidism to the views of Conservative and Reform Jews.

## **15. Living a Jewish Life**

This lecture explores the rhythms that shape Jewish life: the weekly Sabbath and annual Jewish holy days, including Yom Kippur, Passover, Chanukah, and Purim. You’ll also learn about specific customs and rituals of Judaism, such as kosher food, what happens at a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, and the wedding ceremony.

## **16 The Life and Commemoration of Jesus**

Return to the ancient world and uncover the life of Jesus. The writings of the New Testament show a man who preached love, forgiveness, and turning the other cheek. You’ll witness the major events of his life, from his birth and baptism to the story of the Passion, and see how these events are linked to major Christian holidays.

## **17. Catholic and Orthodox Christianity**

How did Christianity flourish in its early years? Discover the process that led from Paul’s letters in the 1st century to Constantine’s conversion in the 4th century and the eventual formation of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. Then look at the theology and sacraments of Catholicism.

## **18. Protestantism and Christianity Today**

Encounter the Protestant Reformation and its central tenets—justification through faith, a priesthood of all believers, and a focus on the Bible. You’ll also look at the major denominations that developed, such as Lutheranism and Methodism. Then consider various nondenominational movements in today’s world: evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and liberal Christianity.

## **19. Muhammad, Qur’an, and Islamic Civilization**

Islam was founded in the 7th century by Muhammad, who received the revelation of the Qur’an. In this lecture, discover the depth and diversity of this major world religion. Along the way, hear the poetic qualities of the scripture, learn about the customs of Islam, and explore its connection to Judaism and Christianity.

## **20. Unity in Islam—The Five Pillars**

Despite its diversity, Islam is unified by the Five Pillars. Examine each in detail and witness the beliefs and rituals of Muslims: the nature of God, the ritual of prayer, the importance of giving alms, the fast during Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Then uncover the truth about jihad and Islamic law.

## **21. Forms of Islam—Diversity among Muslims**

Learn the history of Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, which began with the question of who would succeed Muhammad after his death. Follow the historical narrative through the 18th and 19th centuries, when

Muslims were forced to grapple with Western values, then finish with an analysis of Islam in the world today, from the Middle East to America.

## **22. Jains, Sikhs, and Baha'is**

This lecture takes you beyond the most widely practiced religions and shows you the self-discipline and renunciation of the Jains, who are committed to non-harming; the highly influential Sikhs, who make up only 2% of India's population; and the Baha'i faith, a growing, pluralistic religion with roots in Shi'a Islam.

## **23. Religion and Law in America**

Return to America, where an important piece of cultural literacy involves understanding the Constitution and the relationship between church and state. You'll learn how the establishment and free exercise clauses have influenced both education and the freedom of religious practice by taking a closer look at several fascinating (and controversial) Supreme Court cases.

## **24. Religion Today—Trends, Challenges, and Hope**

Religion is a moving target, constantly changing in our modern world. This lecture examines four demographic trends and how they impact the health of both religious traditions and society at large. The lecture concludes with a consideration of the relationship between religion and violence—how violence emerges and how it can be reduced.

---

### **Nur'en Töre says**

it is too dense, very few information about religions sticks in my mind. It assumes general knowledge about the religion and it gives very dense summary. May be in a country where you already meet with that culture it gives information, but if you are from a country where you don't encounter that culture, it is a bit too much. But i like the topic how in america, secular government handles that many religions. And also topic of pluralist religion is interesting.

---

### **Mary Treystman says**

Lots of info. This is a great overview of the major religions of the world. It's a straight up class though so if you're looking for entertainment, this isn't it. I found myself zoning out here and there because of the more facts/less interpretation style but it was still super interesting and informative.

---

### **Jessica Meyers says**

Fantastic group of lectures by professor Berkson! I have already taken a religion class in college, so a big part of the book was basically review for me. However I still found each religion fascinating and even learned a bit more than I already knew. I definitely recommend this to anyone who wants to know more about the world's religions and history.

## Howdy says

This was informative and just the right length. Bergson zips through the world's religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, the Chinese folk religions, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He takes a positive view of each and summarizes key beliefs and practices. His last two lectures, on how religion intersects with the law in the US and on religion and violence, I thought were pretty superficial and not as good.

---

## Jared Gillins says

This series was really well done. Everyone should listen to it (or something similar to it—just learn about religions, okay?).

My only real complaint, and this was probably unavoidable, is that it felt like we only scratched the surface of most of the religions covered. Each lecture is 30 minutes. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all got three lectures. Every other religious tradition got one lecture or shared a lecture with one or two others. If I were going to lecture a group to help them understand Mormonism, I would be hard-pressed to explain all of the essentials in an hour and a half—let alone doing so for Christianity as a whole.

Again, this probably couldn't really be helped. And given the amount of time he had, Professor Berkson did a remarkable job introducing each faith or belief system and giving the listener a cursory understanding of it. And to his credit, he inspired me to learn more about all of the religions he taught about. Here's to a greater mutual understanding among all of us.

Incidentally, I think that after Robert Greenberg, Mark Berkson is the best Great Courses lecturer I've listened to.

---

## Evgeniy Vasilev says

Very well balanced view on some of the most popular religion nowadays.

---

## Forrest says

This series of lectures provides an excellent overview of a vast subject.

Twelve hours isn't enough time to do more than skim the surface of comparative religion, but Professor Berkson's friendly style and strictly neutral manner make the material approachable and inspire a yearning to learn more about all the traditions covered.

Three lectures are devoted to each of the big five world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), with a smattering of other living faiths touched upon only briefly, and a few additional lectures on patterns of belief and the social impact of religion (particularly in the United States). Berkson tries to address the history, main pillars, and key practices of each tradition; and helpfully points out features the listener is likely to encounter when visiting a practitioner's home or place of worship.

---

As an agnostic/atheist, I believe in none of these religions, but I appreciate their profound depth, beauty, and influence on the world. As a human being, I know it's vital that we all understand each other if we're going to make it as a species.

If you've never explored the beliefs of others, or just need a refresher course like I did, this is a pretty good place to start.

---

### **Heather says**

Certainly not comprehensive but a nice overview of the world's major religions. While I am not religious, I find the exploration of religion brings me so much peace and joy because I believe that at the intersection of most religions is a compass to truth. It's a truth that I don't think any one of us will ever really know in this existence, but it gives me comfort nonetheless.

At any rate, this book will whet your appetite, and I encourage you to delve deeper into each of these great world religions in order to become a more conscious and compassionate human being.

---

### **Kat says**

The biggest thing we can do to fight bigotry is to learn more about people who are different from ourselves. This is a great overview of the biggest religions worldwide and a few smaller groups! The variety within a religion is discussed including the many varied Christian denominations. He ends with a lesson on religion and the US government followed by a lecture discussing what we individually can do to foster hope and understanding rather than a breeding ground for hate and violence.

---

### **Tiana Warner says**

A solid, objective overview of the major religions in the world. A crazy amount of subject matter to cover in a single book, so I found it simultaneously too dense and too high-level. Still, I feel more knowledgeable about world religions, so it did its job! The narrator was clear and well spoken.

---

### **Becky says**

I highly recommend this one. It was really interesting and really well organized. Dr. Berkson is really good to listen to and he approaches his content with gentleness, knowing that religion is something that potentially defines a lot of people's lives. He's also incredibly knowledgeable. This is one I'd actually be interested in listening to again, as there's a lot of information here and it's engaging enough so as not to be too boring for another listen through. Definitely worth a listen.

---