

## Resources for AskAway Reference with Religion Students

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### Some Background

Religion is an enormous and complex subject area. Beyond the standard religious faith labels with which we are familiar: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., there usually subdivisions or sects within each religion, as well as individual Scriptures or sacred books, theologies, and interfaces between belief and politics/social life/law, etc. There are also numerous smaller religions, new religious movements and less defined spiritualities.

### Getting Oriented with Wikipedia

Religion lacks a comprehensive online reference tool. The most useful quick reference source (despite its known issues) is Wikipedia, which can generally get you up to speed on any particular religious faith, term or idea.

### Scholarly Tools

#### **ATLA Religion Database (or its partial full text version ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials)**

The largest journal database in religion. It also includes essays in edited books. Coverage is 1949- Metadata is rigorous, and it allows controlled vocabulary searching through its "Indexes" link. Watch for the distinction between "Name as Subject" (e.g. King, Martin Luther) and "Subjects All." Note as well the separate "Scriptures" link that enables users to browse for articles on Bible passages. Tutorial available at <http://www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/ATLADemo.htm>.

#### **New Testament Abstracts / Old Testament Abstracts**

Provide limited metadata and are mainly useful for searching for journal articles on Bible passages.

#### **EBSCO Religion & Philosophy Collection**

Essentially a subset of Academic Search Premier. The main challenge is weak metadata, especially in subject searching.

#### **ProQuest Religion**

Limited metadata

#### **Index Theologicus (<http://www.ixtheo.de/cgi-bin/ixtheo/maskeeng.pl?db=ixtheo>)**

free, high quality index of about 600 religious journals. Drawbacks include lack of full text and some rather complex search protocols. Useful if your institution lacks its own religion journal database.

## Internet Portals

### **Wabash Center Internet Guide to Religion**

([http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide\\_headings.aspx](http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide_headings.aspx))

Developed and maintained by Charles Bellinger, librarian at Brite Divinity School under contract with the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. It opens the doors to the best of the Net on virtually every area of religious thought. One caution – it includes a large number of academic syllabi which sometimes get in the way of finding sites you want to identify.

**Facets of Religion** (<http://www.facetsofreligion.com/>) is a subdivision of the WWW Virtual Library. It is very useful for the beliefs and writings of the major religions.

### **Hartford Institute for Religion Research: Religion Data Resources**

([http://hirr.hartsem.edu/sociology/research\\_datasets.html](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/sociology/research_datasets.html)) is a useful portal for religious data, demographics, opinion, etc.

## FAQs

### 1. Christianity

#### a. *What are the main divisions of Christianity?*

The Christian world is essentially divided into three major schools of thought – Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism. Catholicism and Orthodoxy grew up together but split in 1054 into the Eastern/Greek/Orthodox camp and the Western/Latin/Catholic camp. The former has a patriarch with less absolute authority than the Western pope, and the two groups differ somewhat in a number of areas of belief and practice.

#### b. *What do I need to know about Protestantism?*

Protestantism is a split from Catholicism alone (15<sup>th</sup> century) primarily involving rejection of the Pope and most Catholic authoritative tradition along with an emphasis on salvation by grace through faith alone. Protestantism is itself identified in two schools of thought – Mainline (often distinguished as “liberal,” though that term has fallen out of fashion) and Evangelical. Evangelicals would see themselves as taking the Bible more literally and viewing it as more free from error than Mainline thinkers. Evangelicals have more of an emphasis on salvation as a crisis decision rather than a growth in faith than do Mainline.

#### c. *What is meant by “theology?”*

Theology is essentially the study of God and his relationships with the world. For Christianity, the main source for theological information is the Bible, but theology also uses the history of Christian thought and tradition as an information source. Theology

may be systematic, biblical, historical or philosophical. In reference service, concentrate on getting a working understanding of terminology and identifying relevant subject headings. This area is complex in the extreme, so you should not be expected to offer much more than elementary guidance in searching for material on an identified topic.

d. *What should I know about biblical studies?*

This is a complex and challenging area that makes use of historical backgrounds, linguistics, history of the biblical text and various interpretive theories. There are few solid biblical resources on the open Internet. If you simply need a Bible online, use <http://www.biblegateway.com/>. If a patron wants help with an “exegesis paper”, you will likely need to refer him/her to a live reference librarian, because these projects are beyond the scope of virtual reference. You can certainly, though, offer guidance on subject headings (noting that most biblical subject headings take the form: Bible. O.T. Genesis), and the Scripture search functions in *ATLA Religion Database* and *New Testament / Old Testament Abstracts*, if these are available to you. ATLA also covers other religions besides Christianity.

Some terminology:

Bible Commentary – An explanation of the Bible (or a portion of the Bible) passage by passage in biblical order.

Exegesis – Drawing out the original writer’s meaning using backgrounds, linguistics and interpretive skills.

Hermeneutics – Interpretation of a text.

e. *What do I need to know about church history?*

Not much more than you need to know about history. The same skills needed for history reference will work well for church history.

f. *What is involved in research in “Ministry” or “Practical Theology?”*

This area is diverse, everything from organizational structures of the church to particular groups within denominational structures to pastoral work (which often overlaps with business in areas of management and leadership), to mission (evangelism and international mission work). Once again, identify terminology quickly with a tool like Wikipedia, then seek subject headings.

A useful tip is use of the LC Subject heading **Church Work With \_\_\_\_\_** (as in Church work with Gangs). This works with library catalogs and ATLA Religion Database).

## 2. Other Religions

a. *How can I begin to address a topic in a religious system about which I know next to nothing?*

First, focus on terminology – any provided names or religious terminology – with a Wikipedia search.

Second, recognize that generally patrons are seeking material on beliefs or practices of a particular faith. The name of a religion with subdivisions should be enough for subject access in the catalog. If students find that their own libraries are limited, journals are a good route to take. Note as well that most religions have extensive Internet presences with relevant sacred books, belief statements, etc. that are authoritative. See the Internet portals above.

**Links to some sacred writings of the major religions:**

Buddhism - <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts.html>

Christianity - <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

Confucianism and Daoism (or Taoism) -  
<http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts.html>

Hinduism - <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/index.htm>

Islam - <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HolKora.html> (Qur'an or Koran in English)  
- <http://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith/> (Hadith)

Judaism - <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/>

Shinto - <http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/index.htm>

Sikhism - <http://re-xs.ucsm.ac.uk/re/religion/sikhism/writings.html>