

[illegible]

ARBITRARY THROWDOWN

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What's the best religion?
It's a question that's stumped scholars and started dozens of wars.
Finally, we've got the answer.

MOST hardcore MONKS



JAINISM

VS.

SHAOLIN MONASTERY

IMAGINE A NAKED MAN carrying a broom, sweeping the ground as he walks. Think he's crazy? That depends on your understanding of karma.

Much like Buddhists and Hindus, Jains use karma to answer that most vexing of theological problems—why bad things happen to good people. Jainism holds that we're all reborn again and again. If you're a nice person and rotten things keep happening to you, well, in a past life you might have been Thomas from *Downton Abbey*; you're simply paying for those indiscretions now.

On the flip side, Jainism encourages followers to think long-term by acting with kindness now. Jain monks take the philosophy to its extreme, believing that *ahimsā*, or non-violence, should dictate every action. To avoid inflicting harm on even the tiniest of creatures, monks sweep their paths as they walk. Some even don face masks (called *muhpatti*) to avoid accidentally swallowing bugs.

Many Jain also believe that the only way to reach *moksha*, or liberation from this cycle of rebirth, is to renounce your body and live as a true ascetic. Like all religions there are sub-sects: Svetambara monks wear simple white robes and carry a bowl for alms, while Digambara monks insist on complete nudity and eat only the food they can cup with their hands.

Such an intense commitment to nonviolence can spur intriguing questions about seemingly mundane things. For some Jain, even temples bring up a philosophical dilemma: Should you murder insects to build a place of worship? And while most practicing Jain are vegetarian, many won't eat root vegetables, because uprooting an entire plant from the ground means killing it.

Beware of stereotypes, though—today, as when the religion was founded, 2,500 years ago, monks make up a small minority; your average Jain doesn't carry a broom, just as your average Catholic doesn't whip himself as penance or walk around performing exorcisms.

At the other end of the nonviolence spectrum are the fighting monks of the Shaolin Monastery in China. These Buddhists are legendary for their martial arts prowess (think: every kung fu movie cliché). But how did a group of priests come to embrace fighting when the first precept of Buddhism is not to harm living beings?

The phenomenon began in 610 CE, when the monks fought off bandits who attacked their temple. As word of their victory spread, Emperor Li Shimin of the Tang dynasty enlisted their talents for his military campaigns. For centuries the monks were deployed as actual military units, where they developed their own style of fighting. They also started to eat red meat to provide sustenance for the military grind.

Over hundreds of years, the warrior monks became masters of their trademark weapon: the staff. They synthesized various fighting techniques and studied human anatomy to better understand the body's pressure points, incorporating this knowledge into their hand-to-hand combat. Perhaps most famously, they harnessed qigong, a technique of breathing, stillness, and controlled movement to unleash "qi," the body's energy force. Qigong helps some monks break stones with their foreheads, kick bare feet through rocks, or raise their body temperature through meditation to survive cold weather. This mastery of body and self does more than create the ultimate warrior; it's also a path toward inner peace and enlightenment. So one monk's sweeping broom is another man's fighting staff.

Qigong enables some monks to break stones with their foreheads or kick bare feet through rocks.

WINNER

SHAOLIN

THIS IS IN NO WAY BECAUSE WE'RE A LITTLE INTIMIDATED. (PLEASE DON'T HURT US.)

BEST CREATION STORY INVOLVING AN EGG



CHINESE
PHAN KU

VS.

TAHITIAN
TA'AROA

WHICH CAME FIRST: the universe or the egg? According to ancient Chinese myth, in the very beginning there was nothing but an egg. Inside slept the god Phan Ku. When he woke, he cracked the shell open. The lighter parts of the egg floated up and formed the sky (the ying), and the darker, heavier parts landed and formed the Earth below (the yang). With his feet on the ground and his head touching the sky, Phan Ku grew and grew—10 feet a day for 18,000 years—which pushed the sky higher and higher. When Phan Ku died, one of his eyes became the sun and the other the moon. His blood became the rivers. His hair turned into plants; his skull formed the dome of the sky; and the fleas on his body became us, the humans.

This isn't the only egg-based explanation of our world. Halfway across the Pacific Ocean, the ancient Polynesians told a similar story. In the time before time, an egg revolved in darkness. This egg served as an

incubator for Ta'aroa, a Tahitian god. He soon grew bored and created Tu, another god. Together they created the first man, Ti'i, and the first woman, Hina. Unfortunately, Ti'i had a malicious nature and a taste for killing, so the gods punished him by cursing the stars, moon, sea, and trees. Everything would have been destroyed were it not for Hina. Because she was so good, the cursed stars get to appear from time to time, which is why they twinkle. It's thanks to Hina that the seas are sometimes higher, the trees' leaves grow, and night becomes day. And it's thanks to Hina that women are seen as the source of all goodness.

Variations on the "cosmic egg" theory occur in Native American and Egyptian mythology, too, not to mention another, slightly

more modern theory that suggests that in a time before space the universe was packed into a dense ball of matter. This egglike object then somehow expanded, creating the universe as we know it. Certain modern civilizations call it the Big Bang Theory.

WINNER

TA'AROA

WHILE ALL EGG THEORIES ARE BEAUTIFUL,
ONLY THE POLYNESIANS' EGG THEORY
HATCHED ANCIENT FEMINISM.

FACE-OFF

Egyptian God with the Least Appealing Face

We can't all look like Cleopatra. Not even the gods.



AMMIT

The Frankenstein god: Part crocodile, part lion, part hippo—all scary. Makes sense, since his task is to devour evil souls.



HEQET

Good news: You're a goddess! Bad news: you have the head of a frog.



KHEPRI

He embodies the sun, so his head is a dung beetle. You knew the sun's motion is explained by dung beetles, right?

HOLIEST HAIRDO



RASTAFARI

VS.

SIKH

YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED BY how much the Bible has to say about haircuts. Numbers 6:5 decrees that “... no razor shall touch his head.... He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long.” And Leviticus 21:5 adds, “They shall not make baldness on their heads.”

No one has taken these style guides more seriously than the Rastafarians, who, in 1930s Jamaica, launched a religion that incorporates Christianity, the “Back to Africa” movement, marijuana use, and dreadlocks. The hair holds special significance—dreadlocks suggest wisdom (the longer the locks, the wiser the Rasta), they require patience (dreadlocks take time to coil), and, most importantly, they symbolize African freedom, as combs, razors, and scissors were considered tools of Roman enslavers.

There’s no official catechism of Rastafarianism. Some Rastas worship Haile Selassie I, the Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930–1974, as the reincarnation of Jesus. And while there are several interpretations of the religion, one of the more common tenets is that marijuana is not only allowed, it’s encouraged—Rastas smoke herb in communal “reasoning sessions,” since Genesis 3:18 proclaims “thou shalt eat the herb of the field.” But there’s a trade-off: *I-tal*, the Rasta diet, forbids pork, milk, coffee, and booze.

Some three hundred years before Rastas embraced dreadlocks, the Sikhs took a similar vow of hirsuteness. The

Punjab-based group had 10 founding gurus, and the 10th guru, Gobind Singh, created a code of conduct for *khalsa* (purity) that includes the five *k*’s:

Kara: A steel bracelet, signifying restraint.

Kirpan: A ceremonial sword, to defend the good and weak.

Kachha: Long underwear, secured with a drawstring, meant to curb lust.

Kangha: A comb, for the fifth and most distinctive *k*...

Kesh: Unshorn hair.

Gobind Singh was very clear about the haircuts, commanding, “My Sikh shall not use the razor. For him the use of razor or shaving the chin shall be as sinful as incest.” In fact, removing any body hair is forbidden, so forget about waxing, tweezing, and threading. Sikhs reason that because God created man with hair, cutting it is against His will.

Today, the custom has evolved. Sikhism has over 20 million followers (most still in Punjab), and though the vast majority of men still wear turbans, using the cloth to contain their long locks, some Sikh

have taken to trimming or shaving their body hair. This is a fairly modern take on the religion. In 1745, the governor of Punjab, who imprisoned the leader Bhai Taru Singh, gave the Sikh a choice: Cut your hair, or be executed.

Singh chose death.

Dreadlocks symbolize African freedom, as combs, razors, and scissors were tools of enslavers.

WINNER

SIKH

THE RASTAS MAY HAVE STYLE,
BUT THE SIKH COMMITMENT TO BODY
HAIR IS UNPARALLELED.

FIRMEST REJECTION OF BRUNCH



JUDAISM

VS.



ISLAM

A “JUDAISM VS. ISLAM” throwdown ... what could possibly go wrong? Actually, there’s less conflict than you’d think. The breakdown of religiously approved foods—halal in Islam and kosher in Judaism—has more in common than just the obvious nixing of bacon.

Both mandates come straight from the holy books and place particular importance on how an animal is killed. In both religions, a holy man is on-site to ensure a very specific protocol. Animals must be killed with a swift, sharp incision to the neck. The animal must not be wounded first, and it can’t be eaten if it was killed by another animal. Carcasses also have to be drained, since consuming blood is forbidden. (Just one of the reasons vampires don’t keep kosher.)

There’s more. For Muslims, a prayer to Allah must be said before slaying each beast, and both the animal and butcher must face Mecca during the act. Meanwhile, for Jews, two prayers are sufficient for a full day’s slaughter—one before the day’s killing, one at the end. In both, certain organs must be scrapped. Exodus instructs “take all the fat that covers the entrails ... and the two kidneys and the fat that is on them, and offer them up in smoke on the altar.”

But here’s where kosher restrictions get more complicated. In one of many additional wrinkles, kashruth (Jewish dietary law) forbids eating the hindquarters of animals, since Jacob’s hip was touched by God. This is why you can enjoy a kosher brisket, but not a kosher tenderloin. Also, meat and dairy can never be cooked

or eaten together—a rule the Torah explicitly mentions three times. As a result, the cookware used for meat cannot be used to prepare dairy (one contaminates the other). To keep a truly kosher kitchen, you need at least two sets of dishes, pots, spoons, and cabinets. The Torah itself doesn’t specify whether you need one or two George Foreman grills, but for millennia, rabbis have parsed the text, debated the nuances, and created elaborate rules for how to *kasher* (make kosher) your kitchen, including:

- Cleanse your frying pan by treating it “with a blowtorch.”
- Non-serrated knives can be cleansed through *ne’itzah*—sticking the knife in the ground 10 different times.
- It’s controversial, but some practitioners use a dishwasher for both meat and dairy dishes. Not at the same time, though. You’ll need separate racks, and you’ll have to wait 24 hours between the meat cycle and the dairy cycle ... with an empty wash in between.

Once a year, Passover brings a whole new set of no-no’s, thanks to Exodus’s “For seven days, you shall eat unleavened bread” requirement. That means no wheat, oats, rye, barley, bagels, oatmeal, corn, beer, or pizza. Given these restrictions, Judaism’s clearly the winner, right?

Not so fast. Muslims are forbidden to drink alcohol (or, more generally, “intoxicants”) and, in the strictest interpretation, aren’t even allowed to work in establishments where booze is sold or consumed. In other words, no eggs Benedict or Bloody Marys. ☹

WINNER

ISLAM

IF WE WERE JUST TALKING ABOUT FOOD, JUDAISM WOULD TAKE THE UNLEAVENED CAKE, BUT ONCE YOU FACTOR IN BELLINIS, THIS ONE GOES TO ISLAM.