



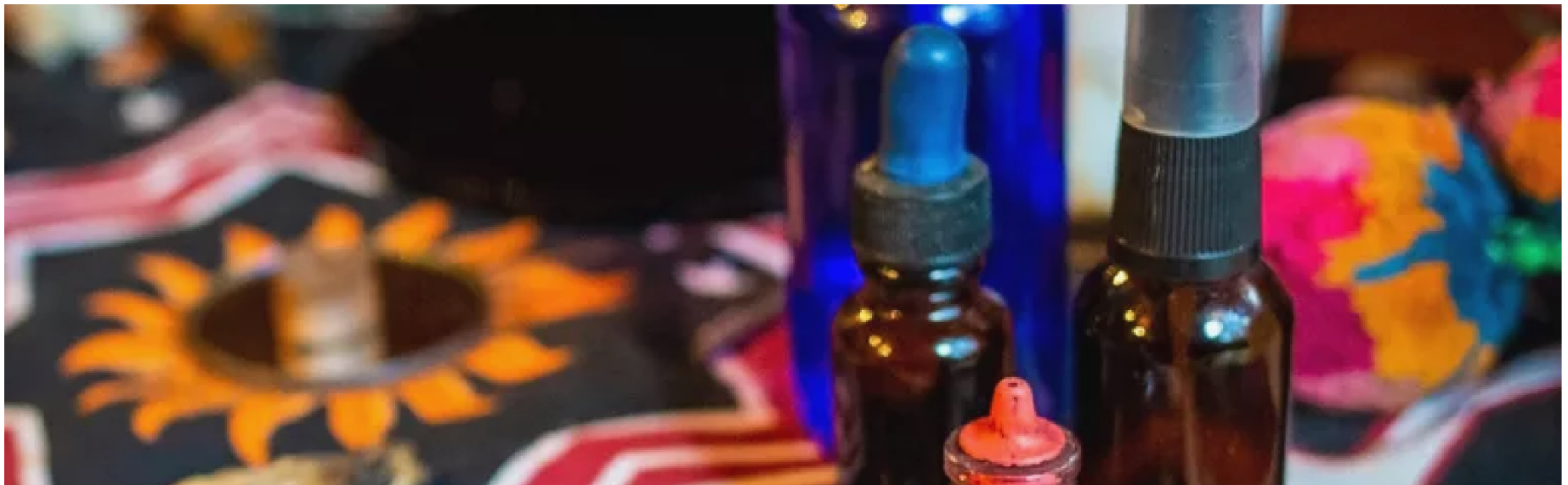
## What Is Folk Religion? Definition and Examples

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By McKenzie Perkins

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Folk religion is any ethnic or cultural religious practice that falls outside the doctrine of organized religion. Grounded on popular beliefs and sometimes called popular or vernacular religion, the term refers to the way in which people experience and practice religion in their daily lives.

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS


### Key Takeaways

Folk religion includes religious practices and beliefs shared by an ethnic or cultural group.

Although its practice can be influenced by organized religious doctrines, it does not follow externally prescribed axioms. Folk religion also lacks the organizational structure of mainstream religions and its practice is often limited geographically.

Folk religion has no sacred text or theological doctrine. It is concerned with the everyday understanding of spirituality rather than with rites and rituals.

Folklore, as opposed to folk religion, is a collection of cultural beliefs passed down through generations.



Folk religion is usually followed by those who do not claim any religious doctrine via baptism, confession, daily prayer, reverence, or church attendance. Folk religions can absorb elements of liturgically prescribed religions, as is the case for folk Christianity, folk Islam, and folk Hindu, but they can also exist entirely independently, like Vietnamese Dao Mau and many indigenous faiths.

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## Origins and Key Characteristics

The term “folk religion” is relatively new, dating back only to 1901, when a Lutheran theologian and pastor, Paul Drews, penned the German *Religiöse Volkskunde*, or folk religion. Drew sought to define the experience of the common “folk” or peasantry in order to educate pastors about the kinds of Christian faith they would experience when they left the seminary.

The concept of folk religion, however, predates Drew’s definition. During the 18th century, Christian missionaries encountered people in rural areas engaged in Christianity laced with superstition, including sermons given by members of the clergy. This discovery sparked outrage within the clerical community, which was expressed through the written record that now illustrates the history of folk religion.

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This body of literature culminated in the early 20th century, outlining anomalous religious practices and especially noting the prevalence of folk religion within Catholic communities. There was a fine line, for example, between the veneration and the worship of saints. The ethnically Yoruba people, brought to Cuba from West Africa as slaves, shielded traditional deities, called Orichás, by renaming them as Roman Catholic saints. Over time, the worship of Orichás and saints combined into the folk religion Santería.

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the fastest growing religion in the United States.

Folk religion is the collection of religious practices that fall outside the doctrine of organized religion, and these practices can be culturally or ethnically based. For example, over 30 percent of Han Chinese people follow Shenism, or Chinese folk religion. Shenism is most closely related to Taoism, but it also features blended elements of Confucianism, Chinese mythological deities, and Buddhist beliefs about karma.

Unlike prescribed liturgical practice, folk religion has no sacred text or theological doctrine. It is concerned more with the everyday understanding of spirituality than with rites and rituals. However, determining exactly what constitutes organized religious practice as opposed to folk religion is difficult, if not impossible. Some, for example,

including the Vatican as of 2017, would claim that the sacred nature of saintly body parts is a result of folk religion, while others would define it as a closer relationship to God.

## **Folklore vs. Folk Religion**

While folk religion encompasses daily transcendent experience and practice, folklore is a collection of cultural beliefs that is told through myths, legends, and ancestral histories, and is passed down generations.

For example, the pre-Christian Pagan beliefs of the Celtic people (who inhabited what is now Ireland and the United Kingdom) were shaped by myths and legends concerning the Fae (or fairies) that inhabited the supernatural world alongside the natural world. A reverence for mystical places like fairy hills and fairy rings developed, as well as a fear and awe of the ability of fairies to interact with the natural world.

Changelings, for example, were thought to be fairies that secretly took the place of children during infancy. The fairy child would appear sick and wouldn't grow at the same rate as a human child, so parents would often leave the child in place for the fairies to find overnight. If the child was alive the next morning, the fairy would have returned the human child to its rightful body, but if the child had died, it was only the fairy that had actually

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United Kingdom and Ireland identify as Christian, myths and legends still find refuge in contemporary art and literature, and fairy hills are widely considered to be mystical places.

Modern English speakers unknowingly pay homage to mythological folklore, as the days of the week make reference to Roman and Norse gods. Wednesday, for example, is Wodin's (or Odin's) Day, while Thursday is Thor's Day, and Friday is dedicated to Odin's wife, Freyr. Saturday is a reference to the Roman god Saturn, and Tuesday is named after either the Roman Mars or Scandinavian Tyr.

Both folk religion and folklore influence daily spiritual life and practices across the modern world.

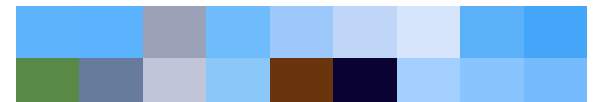
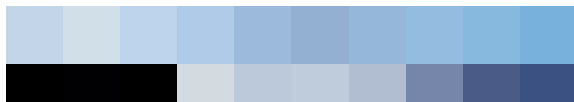
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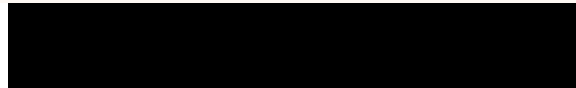
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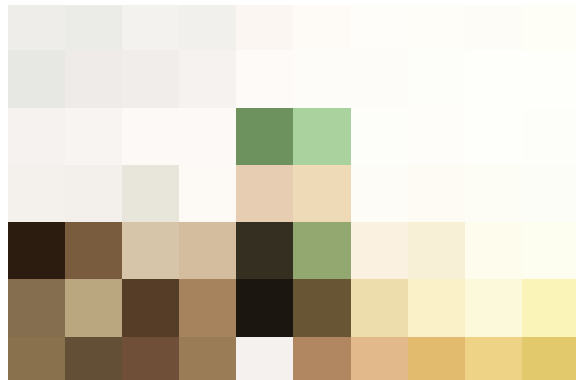
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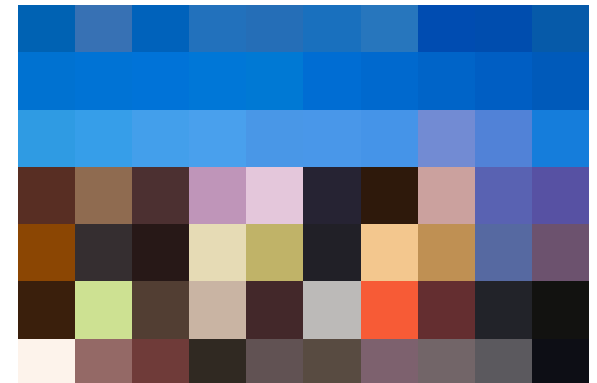
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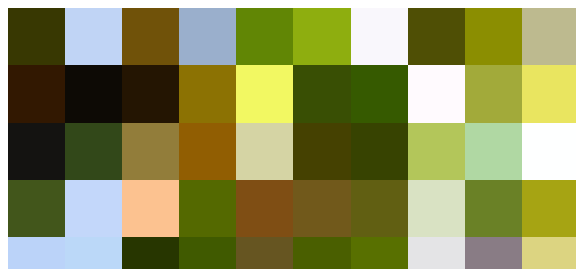
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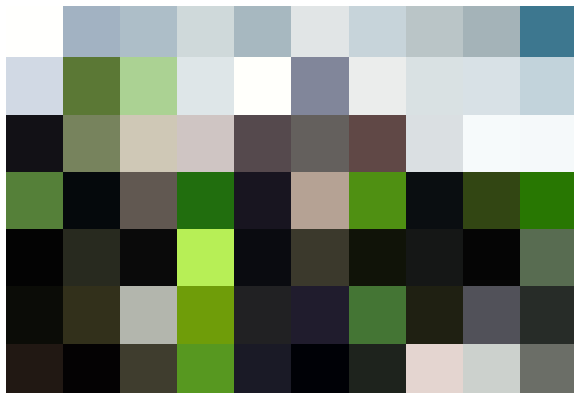
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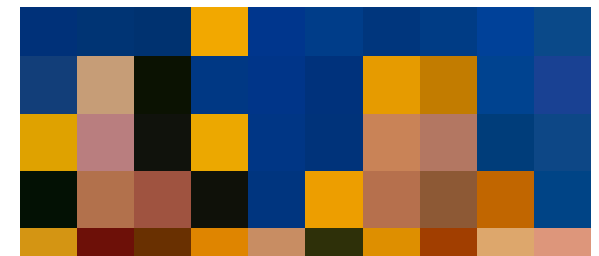
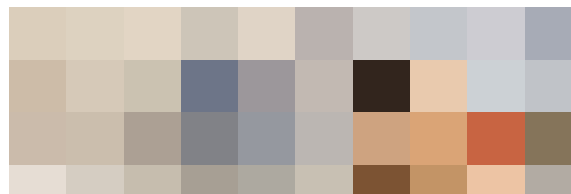
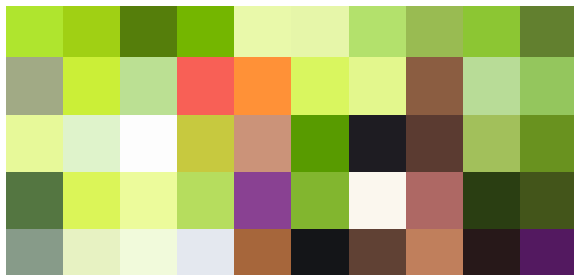
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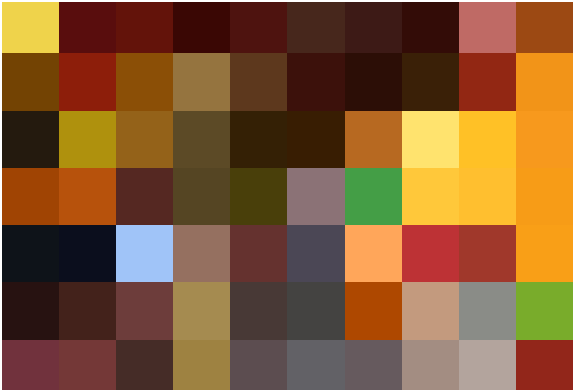
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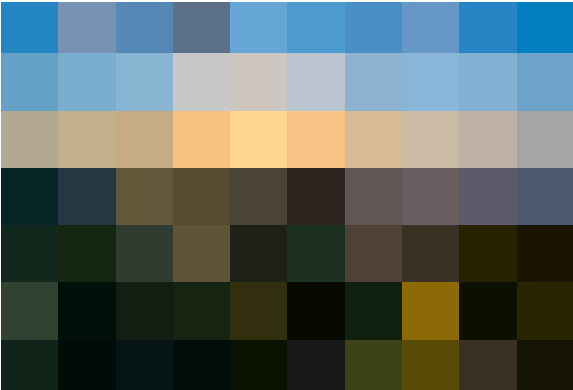
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