World Religions

Western Traditions

FIFTH EDITION

OXFORD
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Amir Hussain | Roy C. Amore | Willard Oxtoby

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Edited by

Amir Hussain
Roy C. Amore
Willard G. Oxtoby

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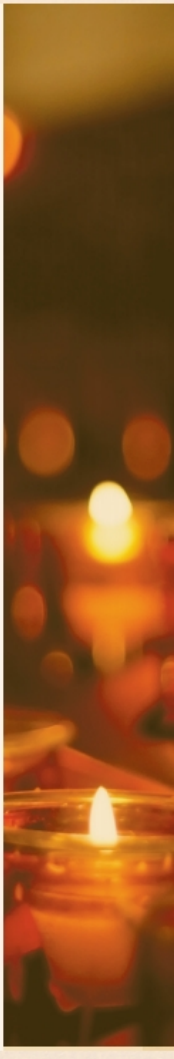

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Contributors

Roy C. Amore is Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Windsor in Ontario, where he teaches in the areas of religion and politics. His extensive research in the areas of comparative religion and Asia has enabled him to author *Religion and Politics in the World's Hot Spots*; and *Two Masters, One Message*, a book comparing the lives and teachings of Christ and Buddha, as well as to co-author *Lustful Maidens and Ascetic Kings: Buddhist and Hindu Stories of Life*, among other works.

Ken Derry is Associate Professor of Religion, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). His teaching and research focus on the ways in which modern cultural products relate to more "traditional" religious beliefs and practices. He is particularly interested in the connections between religion and violence in Indigenous literature and film, as well as in popular culture. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.

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Amir Hussain is Professor in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in Los Angeles, where he teaches courses on Islam and world religions. A dual citizen of Canada and the United States, his most recent book is *Muslims and the Making of America*. From 2011 to 2015 he was the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. He has published over 60 book chapters or scholarly articles about religion, and he was twice selected by LMU students as Professor of the Year.

Michele Murray is Dean of Arts and Science at Bishop's University, where she is also Professor in the Department of Religion and holds the William and Nancy Turner Chair in Christianity. She obtained her M.A. from Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Jewish history of the Second Temple period, and her Ph.D. in religion from the University of Toronto. Her research areas include Jewish–Christian relations in the ancient world and interaction among eastern Mediterranean religions in late antiquity.

The late **Willard G. Oxtoby**, the original editor of this work, was Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto, where he launched the graduate program in the study of religion. His books include *Experiencing India: European Descriptions and Impressions* and *The Meaning of Other Faiths*.

Preface

I first met Will Oxtoby in 1987, as a student in his undergraduate course on world religions at the University of Toronto that he taught with Joe O'Connell and Julia Ching. Eventually, I became one of the many teaching assistants for that course. I also took numerous other courses with Will, and he supervised my M.A. as well as my Ph.D. dissertation. Whereas I came from a working-class background (both my parents were factory workers), Will had a consummate academic pedigree. The son and grandson of scholars, he held degrees from Stanford and Princeton and teaching appointments at McGill, Harvard, Yale, and the University of Toronto. He was also an outstanding researcher. But I think that Will's true excellence was as a teacher. It is no coincidence that the publication for which he will be best remembered is a textbook.

Will wrote and edited several chapters of the original *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* and *World Religions: Western Traditions*. The work was first used in draft form for students in his world religions class in 1994–1995. After some fine-tuning, it was published in 1996 and then revised for subsequent editions. The project was Will's gift to those who did not have the privilege of studying with him.

Will believed that only those who loved classroom teaching should write textbooks, and therefore every author he recruited had to be an excellent teacher. He also made sure that his fellow authors were not just academic authorities but sympathetic observers, if not members, of the traditions about which they were writing.

Together, Roy C. Amore and I have tried to stay true to his vision. In his original foreword, Will wrote that people often used to ask him why he would waste his life on something as unimportant as religion, but that after the Islamic Revolution in Iran no one ever asked that question again. I have had the same experience: since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, not a single student has raised the issue of relevance. On the contrary, the study of world religions is more important today than ever before.

New to This Edition

This fifth edition of the Western Traditions volume, like the new Eastern volume edited by Roy C. Amore, continues the color features and extensive use of Focus boxes and Site boxes so appreciated by readers of the fourth edition, while adding two new features: Interview boxes and Women in the Traditions boxes. The Interview boxes report on a short interview with an important or influential member of one of the traditions discussed in each chapter. The Women in the Traditions boxes expand the coverage found in the chapters by examining an issue relating to women's practice or women's lives within a tradition.

The introductory chapter has been enhanced in several ways. In the fourth edition the introductory chapter, "About Religion," was shared by both Eastern and Western volumes. For this fifth edition the introductory chapter, now titled "Studying Western Religions," has been newly written to incorporate several goals. It focuses more exclusively on Western traditions, and it gives more attention to theories about religion and methods for the study of religion.

The "Current Issues in Western Traditions" chapter has been extensively updated to include important new developments such as those in the Middle East and Myanmar, as well as expanded treatment of marriage equality and religion.

Features and Pedagogy

In this book, we have provided students with a variety of ways to engage with religion in a readable manner. They include the following:

- **Traditions at a Glance Boxes**, which give readers a summary of the basics at the start of each chapter
- **Timelines**, which help to place religious developments in historical context
- **Maps**, which provide useful reference points
- **Art Program**, which highlights practitioners' lived experiences
- **Sacred/Foundational Texts Tables**, which give students a convenient summary of the most important texts in each tradition, how and when they were composed, and the uses made of them
- **Sites Boxes**, which draw attention to locations of special significance to each tradition
- **Document Boxes**, which provide a generous selection of excerpts from scripture and other important writings
- **Focus Boxes**, which offer additional information on selected subjects
- **Interview Boxes**, which offer replies to interview questions by an important or interesting adherent of a religious tradition discussed in the chapter
- **Women in the Traditions boxes**, which provide examination of some issue relating especially to women or women's issues within a tradition discussed in the chapter
- **End-of-Chapter Discussion Questions**, which enhance students' critical understanding of key concepts
- **Glossaries**, which explain key terms
- **Further Readings and Recommended Websites**, which provide excellent starting points for further research

Student and Instructor Resources

A rich set of supplemental resources is available to support teaching and learning in this course. These supplements include an Instructor's Manual, Computerized Test Bank, PowerPoint lecture outlines, and Student Resources on the Oxford University Press **Ancillary Resource Center (ARC)** and **Learning Management System Cartridges** with Instructor and Student Resources.

The Oxford University Press **Ancillary Resource Center (ARC)** at oup-arc.com houses the following **Instructor Resources**:

- A Computerized Test Bank, including multiple-choice, true/false, short answer, and essay questions
- An Instructor's Manual, including
  - A "pencil and paper" version of the Computerized Test Bank
  - Chapter Summaries
  - Chapter Learning Objectives
  - Key Concepts
  - Lecture Outlines
  - Discussion Questions
  - Web Links to sites of further interest
  - Suggestions for further reading
- PowerPoint lecture outlines
- PowerPoint art database

The **Student Resources** on the **ARC** contain the following:

- Self-Assessment Quizzes
- Chapter Learning Objectives
- Key Terms
- Study and Reflection Questions
- Research Paper Topics
- Additional resources

Learning Management System Cartridges are also available for *World Religions: Western Traditions*, Fifth Edition. For more information on this, please contact your OUP representative or call 1-800-280-0280.

Acknowledgments

At Oxford University Press Canada, I would like to thank Katherine Skene, Meg Patterson, and Amy Gordon for their help and encouragement. With our shift to the OUP office in the United States for this edition, I would like to thank Robert Miller, Alyssa Palazzo, Meg Botteon, and Sydney Keen for their developmental guidance, and Sarah Vogelsong, Lisa Ball, Leslie Anglin, and Ken Hassman for their hands-on editorial work. I also need to thank Roy C. Amore for all his help in making this volume a reality and a tribute to Will's legacy. Of course, my thanks to Ken Derry, Michael Desrochers, Wendy Fletcher, and Michele Murray for their fine contributions.

With Roy C. Amore, I am also grateful to the following reviewers and those reviewers who wish to remain anonymous, whose comments helped to shape this volume:

Peter Frick, St. Paul's University College
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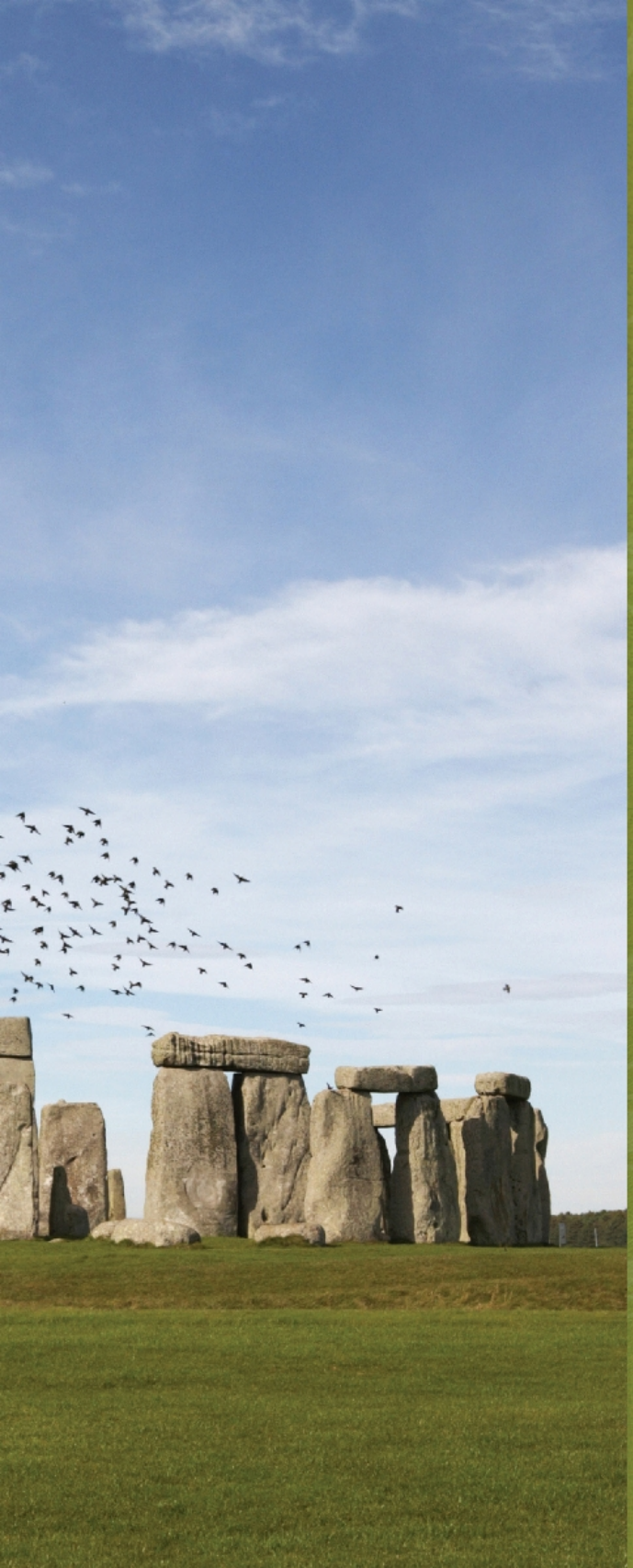
Tim Labron, Concordia University of Edmonton
Colin James Law, University of Georgia
Sandy Dwayne Martin, University of Georgia

We have lost a lot of artists, writers, musicians, teachers, and friends over the past five years. This edition is in memory of all of those who have "gone alee" to the place where "there's a better song."

Amir Hussain
January 2019
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles



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Studying Western Religions

Amir Hussain &
Roy C. Amore

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Some basic characteristics of human religion from ancient times
- A number of patterns that can be observed in more than one religious tradition
- Various theories of why humans are religious
- Various methods used for studying religions
- Some reasons for studying religion

Basic Human Religion: Looking Both Ways from Stonehenge

Standing on the west side of **Stonehenge**, we watch the sun rise through the circle of massive standing stones. Within the outer circle is a grouping of paired stones capped by lintels and arranged in a horseshoe pattern, opening toward the rising sun. At the center of the horseshoe lies a flat stone that was once thought to have served as an altar for sacrifices. Today, however, it is believed that the center stone originally stood upright, marking the spot where an observer would stand to watch the movements of the sun and stars.

The Stonehenge we know today is what remains of a structure erected between 3,500 and 4,000 years ago. However, the site had already been used as a burial ground for centuries before that time: researchers believe that the remains of as many as 240 people, probably from a single ruling family or clan, were interred there between roughly 3000 and 2500 BCE.[1] The structure itself is generally believed to have been used for ceremonial purposes, and its orientation—toward the point where the sun rises on the summer solstice—has led many to think it might have been designed to serve as a kind of astronomical observatory. Another recent theory, based on excavations of a nearby Neolithic village, Durrington Walls, with a similar circular arrangement of timber posts, suggests that the two sites represented the living and the dead, respectively, with Stonehenge serving as the permanent dwelling place of the ancestors. If so, parallels can be found in other ancient cultures.[2]

Ignoring the crowd of tourists, we position ourselves behind the central stone to note the position of the rising sun in relation to the "heel stone" on the horizon more than 200 feet away. Today, on the morning of the summer solstice, the sun rises in the northeast, just to the left of the heel stone. It's easy to imagine that this day—the longest of the year and the only one on which the sun rises to the north side of the heel stone—would have been the occasion for some kind of ceremony in ancient times, that the entire community would have gathered at dawn to watch as someone with special authority—perhaps a priest, perhaps the local chief or ruler—confirmed the position of the rising sun. It's also easy to imagine the sense of order in the universe that such people would have felt as a result of knowing exactly when and where the sun would change course.

Tomorrow the sun will rise behind the heel stone and continue its (apparent) journey toward the south for the next six months. Then, in late December, on the winter solstice, the sun will appear to reverse course and begin traveling northward again. Many centuries after people first gathered at Stonehenge, the Romans would celebrate this day as marking the annual "rebirth" of the sun—the high point of the festival they called Saturnalia. And in the fourth century CE, the Christians in Rome would choose the same time of year to celebrate the birth of their risen god. Their chosen day, Christmas, would combine the unrestrained revelry of the Roman midwinter festival, marked by feasting, gift-giving, and general merriment, with the celebration of the coming to earth of a deity incarnate.

Looking Back from Stonehenge

There are a few concepts, shared by virtually all human cultures, that seem fundamental to what we call religion: powerful gods, sacred places, a life of some kind after death, and the presence in the physical world of spirits that interact with humans in various ways.

◄ Birds over Stonehenge (Tore Johannesen/Getty Images)

These concepts are so old and so widespread that no one can say where or when they first emerged.

Three Worlds

Historically, it seems that humans around the globe have imagined the world to consist of three levels—sky, earth, and underworld. The uppermost level, the sky, has typically been considered the home of the greatest deities. Exactly how this concept developed is impossible to know, but we can guess that the awesome power of storms was one contributing factor. The apparent movement of the sun, the stars, and the planets across the sky was very likely another. Observing the varying patterns could well have led early humans to believe that the heavenly bodies were living entities animated by their own individual spirits—in effect, gods and goddesses.

The very highest level, located in the heavens above the clouds and stars, was thought to be the home of the highest deity, typically referred to by a name such as Sky Father, Creator, or King of Heaven. This deity—invariably male—was the forerunner of the god of the monotheistic religions.

Under the earth the spirits of serpents (surviving as the cobras, or ***nagas***, in the religions of India) or reptilian monsters (surviving in dragon lore) were thought to dwell; perhaps because they were associated with dark and hidden places, they were usually imagined as evil. Finally, between the sky and the underworld lay the earth: the intermediate level where humans lived.

Sacred Places

Around the world, there are certain types of places where humans tend to feel they are in the presence of some unusual energy or power. Such places are regarded as set apart from the everyday world and are treated with special respect. Among those places, often described as "sacred," meaning "set aside," are mountains and hilltops—the places closest to the sky-dwelling deities. In the ancient Middle East, for instance, worship was often conducted at ritual centers known simply as **high places**. People gathered at these sites to win the favor of the deities by offering them food, drink, praise, and prayer. One widely known example is the altar area on the cliff above the ancient city of Petra in Jordan (familiar to many people from the *Indiana Jones* films).

Great rivers and waterfalls are often regarded as sacred as well. And in Japan virtually every feature of the natural landscape—from great mountains and waterfalls to trees and stones—was traditionally believed to be animated by its own god or spirit (*kami*).

Animal Spirits

Another common and long-standing human tendency has been to attribute spirits to animals, either individually or as members of a family with a kind of collective guardian spirit. For this reason, traditional hunting societies have typically sought to ensure that the animals they kill for food are treated with the proper respect, lest other members of those species be frightened away or refuse to let themselves be caught.

In addition, body parts from the most impressive animals—such as bulls, bears, lions, or eagles—have often been used as "power objects" to help humans make contact with the spirits of these animals. People in many cultures have attributed magical properties to objects such as bear claws or eagle feathers, wearing them as amulets or hanging them in the doorways of their homes as protection against evil spirits.

Death and Burial

From ancient times, humans have taken great care with the burial of their dead. The body might be positioned with the head facing east, the "first direction," where the sun rises, or placed in the fetal position, suggesting a hope for rebirth into a different realm. These burial positions in themselves would not be enough to prove a belief in an afterlife; however, most such graves have also contained, along with the remains of the dead, "grave goods" of various kinds. Some of these provisions for the afterlife likely belonged to the person in life, while

Focus

A Modern Scholar's Reflection on Burial and Religion

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000), the great Canadian scholar of religion, wrote about prehistoric burials:

> Some years ago I had the privilege of standing in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem before a case in which the plaster was still wet, setting the skeleton of *Palaeoanthropos palestiniensis* or "Mount Carmel man," dating somewhere from a hundred to two hundred thousand years BCE. It had been found under a floor in a distinct excavated cyst, quite clearly buried. This is the earliest instance we have of human activity of a kind that today we call religious. While there is no way of knowing what went on in the minds or hearts of this man's community who took the trouble to bury him carefully, this much we can say: that present religious practices of humankind can be traced back for at least a thousand centuries in a continuous tradition.
>
> . . . [P]rehistoric burial shows that men and women from the very earliest traces of their beginnings have recognized that there is more to human life than meets the eye, that our total significance is not exhausted within the six feet of space or sixty years of time whereby we each play our part on the stage of earth. The sober observation of the historian now agrees with the insight of the philosopher, and the faith of the saint, that human beings are not human until they have recognized that the proper response to death is poetry, not prose. (Smith 1998: 33–34)

some appear to be specially made replicas, and some are rare, presumably costly items such as precious stones. Apparently the living were willing to sacrifice important resources to help the dead in the afterlife.

The belief that deceased ancestors can play a role in guiding the living members of their families appears to be especially widespread. Traditions such as the Japanese **Obon**, the Mexican **Day of the Dead**, and the Christian **All Saints Day** and **Hallowe'en** all reflect the belief that the souls of the dead return to earth once a year to share a ritual meal with the living.

Why Are Humans Religious?

The reasons behind human religiosity are complex and varied. All we can say with any certainty is that religion seems to grow out of human experiences: out of the fear of death, which religion transforms into the hope for a good afterlife, and out of the uncertainty surrounding natural events, which becomes a sense of control over nature through the intervention of a priest capable of predicting the change of seasons and the movement of the planets. Religion emerges through the experience of good or bad powers that are sensed in dreams, in sacred spaces, and in certain humans and animals.

Religion has many emotional dimensions, including fear, awe, love, and hate. But it also has intellectual dimensions, including curiosity about what causes things to happen, the recognition of a sense of order in the universe that suggests the presence of a creator, and the drive to make sense out of human experience.

The nature of religious belief and practice has changed through the centuries, so we must be careful not to take the religion of any particular time and place as the norm. What we can safely say is that religion is such an ancient aspect of human

experience that it has become part of human nature. For this reason some scholars have given our species, *Homo sapiens*, a second name: *Homo religiosus*.

Looking Forward from Stonehenge

Looking forward from ancient Stonehenge, we can see a number of patterns emerge in different parts of the world, some of them almost simultaneously.

Since most of the chapters in this book focus on individual religious traditions, it may be useful to begin with a broader perspective. What follows is a brief overview of some of the major developments in the history of what the late Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith called "religion in the singular," meaning the history of human religiosity in the most general sense.

Shamanism

One very early pattern of human religiosity involves a ritual specialist—in essence, a kind of priest—that we know today as a **shaman**. The word "shaman" comes from a specific central Asian culture, but it has become the generic term for a person who acts as an intermediary between humans and the spirit world. Other terms include "medicine man," "soul doctor," and "witchdoctor."

Shamans are still active in a number of cultures today. The way they operate varies, but certain patterns seem to be almost universal, which in itself suggests that the way of the shaman is very ancient. Sometimes the child of a shaman will follow in the parent's footsteps, but more often a shaman will be "called" to the role by his or her psychic abilities, as manifested in some extraordinary vision or revelation, or perhaps a near-death experience.

Candidates for the role of shaman face a long and rigorous apprenticeship that often includes a vision quest, in the course of which they are likely to confront terrifying apparitions. Typically the quester will acquire a guiding spirit, sometimes the spirit of a particular animal (perhaps a bear or an eagle, whose claws or feathers the shaman may wear to draw strength from its special powers) and sometimes a more humanlike spirit (a god or goddess). That spirit will then often continue to serve as a guide and protector throughout the shaman's life.

To communicate with the spirit world, the shaman enters a trance state (often induced by rhythmic chanting or drumming). According to Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, contact is then made in one of two ways. In the first, described as "ecstatic" (from a Greek root meaning "to stand outside"), the shaman's soul leaves his or her body (which may appear lifeless) and travels to the realm where the spirits live. In the second, the shaman calls the spirit into his or her own body and is possessed by it; in such cases the shaman may take on the voice and personality of the spirit or mimic its way of moving.

In either case, after regaining normal consciousness the shaman announces what he or she has learned about the problem at hand and what should be done about it. Typically, the problem is traced to the anger of a particular spirit; the shaman then explains the reason for that anger and what must be done to appease the spirit. In most cases the appropriate response is to perform a ritual sacrifice of some kind.

Hunting Rituals

Many ancient cave drawings depict hunting scenes in which a human figure seems to be performing a dance of some kind. Based on what we know of later hunting societies, we can guess that the figure is a shaman performing a ritual either to ensure a successful hunt or to appease the spirits of the animals killed.

It's not hard to imagine why such societies would have sought ways to influence the outcome of a hunt. Indeed, it seems that the more dangerous the endeavor, the more likely humans were to surround it with rituals. As the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out in his book

AP photo/Jean Clottes

Animal images from the Chauvet cave in southern France, dated c. 30,000 BCE.

Magic, Science and Religion, the Trobriand Islanders he studied did not perform any special ceremonies before fishing in the lagoon, but they never failed to perform rituals before setting out to fish in the open ocean. This suggests that religious behavior is, at least in part, a way of coping with dangerous situations.

In addition, though, early humans believed that the spirits of the animals they hunted had to be appeased. Thus a special ritual might be performed to mark the first goose kill of the season, in the hope that other geese would not be frightened away from the hunting grounds.

Such rituals reflect humans' concern over the future food supply, but they also reveal something about the nature of human belief in spirits. From very ancient times, it seems, humans have believed that the spirit—whether of an animal killed for food or of a human being—survives death and can communicate with others of its kind.

Coping with Unfriendly Spirits

The spirits associated with natural phenomena—whether animals or storms, mountains or rivers—have typically been thought to behave toward humans in the same ways that humans behave toward one another. Strategies for dealing with unfriendly spirits have therefore usually been based on what has worked with humans.

Many cultures have believed wild, uninhabited areas to be guarded by resident spirits. In some cases, these spirits have taken the form of monsters or mythical beasts; in others, such as the folklore of Scandinavia, they have assumed the guise of "little people" such as trolls.

In earlier times, unfriendly spirits were of particular concern to those who ventured into the forest as hunters or gatherers, but they were not confined to the wilderness. Pain and disease of all kinds—from toothache to appendicitis to mental illness—were also attributed to possession by malevolent spirits or demons. In Sri Lanka, those suffering from certain illnesses were advised to have a shaman sacrifice a chicken as an offering to the "graveyard demon," effectively bribing him to go away; in such cases a second chicken, still alive, would be given to the shaman who performed the ritual. Another approach was to frighten the demon away, either by threatening to invoke another, stronger spiritual power, such as the spirit guide of the shaman, to drive him off, or by making threatening gestures or loud noises. The firecrackers still used in some East Asian rituals are examples of the latter approach.

Connecting to the Cosmos

A second pattern that emerged as religion developed across the globe is the one that inspired the building of structures like Stonehenge. People of the Neolithic ("new rock") era went to extraordinary lengths to create sacred areas by assembling huge stones in complex patterns. In some cases the motivation may have been political: perhaps a leader wanted to demonstrate his power over the people under his command. In others, however, the main reason undoubtedly had something to do with religion, such as the need for a public space where the rituals essential to the society—weddings, puberty rites, funerals—could be performed.

Discerning the Cosmic Cycles

Ritual centers such as Stonehenge may also have served purposes that we might today think of as scientific or technical, but that their builders would have associated with religion. One very important function of priests was to track the seasons and determine the best time for seasonal activities such as planting. In addition to tracking the north–south movements of the sun, the people of the Neolithic era paid careful attention to the phases of the moon and the positions of certain constellations at their rising. The horizon was divided into segments named after the planet or constellation associated with that section. What we now call astrology developed as a way of understanding the cycle of the seasons and how humans fit into it, collectively and individually. In ancient times no important decision would have been made without consulting an expert in the movements of the sun, moon, planets, and constellations. Even in modern times, many people, including political leaders, will consult an astrologer before making a major decision.

Hilltop Tombs

We suggested earlier that two powerful motivators of human religion are the fear of death and the idea of an afterlife. Ancient cultures around the world appear to have favored high places as burial sites. Where there were no hills, artificial ones were sometimes built, at least for the most important members of the society. The pyramids of Egypt and the stupas of Asia are both examples of this practice. In the pyramids, shafts extending from the burial chambers toward important stars connected the deceased with the cosmos. Similarly, in Buddhist stupas, a wooden pole—later replaced by a vertical stone structure—extended above the burial mound to connect the earth with the heavens. Scholars refer to this kind of symbolic link between earth and sky as an *axis mundi* ("world axis").

Associating Animals and Gods

Another common feature of Neolithic religion was a tendency to associate certain animals with specific deities. One very early example comes from the ancient (c. 7000–5000 BCE) city of Catalhoyuk ("forked mound"), near Konya in modern Turkey, where a small sculpture of a woman flanked by two large felines was found. James Mellaart, the archaeologist who first excavated the site in the 1960s, believed she represented a mother goddess seated on a throne. Although this interpretation has been

disputed, we know that the ancient Egyptians had a cat goddess named Bast who was revered as a symbol of both motherliness and hunting prowess.

A similar pattern of association linked the most powerful male deities of Neolithic societies with the strength and virility of the bull. In Greek mythology, the great god Zeus took the form of a white bull when he abducted the Phoenician princess Europa. A creature known as the minotaur—half man, half bull—was said to have been kept in a labyrinth beneath the ancient palace of Knossos, on the island of Crete, where frescos show people leaping over the horns of a bull. Greek temples often displayed bull horns near their altars. And in India a bull named Nandi is the sacred mount of the great god Shiva.

The association of the bull with the creator god can be seen even in Judaism, which strictly forbids the use of any image to represent its invisible deity. In the Hebrew Bible, when Moses returns from the mountain where he encounters God and finds that his brother Aaron, the first high priest, has allowed the people to worship an image of a golden calf or bullock, he denounces this practice as idolatry. Centuries later, one of Solomon's sons is severely chastised for installing bull images in the temples he has built.

Temple Religion

A third pattern that emerged as religions spread featured the construction of larger temples, the creation of more elaborate sacrificial rituals, and the development of a priestly class endowed with unusual power, prestige, and wealth. This pattern, beginning at least 3,000 years ago, played an enormous role in shaping many traditions, including Judaism, Chinese religion, and Hinduism.

Indo-European Priests

"Indo-European" is a modern term referring to a language family and cultural system that eventually stretched from India all the way through Europe; it does not designate any particular ethnic group. The Indo-European (IE) cultural system has been one of the most important in human history. It may have originated in the region around the Black Sea, but that is only one of many theories that scholars have proposed. From the vocabulary of "proto-IE," as reconstructed by linguists, it is clear that the IE people hunted, practiced metallurgy, rode horses, drove chariots, and waged war, among other activities. Farming, however, appears not to have been part of their culture: the fact that the IE vocabulary related to agriculture differs from one place to another suggests that when it came to farming the Indo-Europeans simply adopted existing local practices.

Everywhere the IE warriors conquered, they set up a social system with four basic divisions, the top three of which consisted of priests, warriors, and middle-class commoners. In India these groups are known respectively as the *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, and *vaishyas*. In ancient times each of these groups had a special clothing color; thus, today in India *varna* ("color") is still the standard term for "class." The priests performed rituals, kept the calendar, taught the young, and advised the kings; within the warrior class, the top clans were the rulers; and the middle-class "commoners" earned their living as merchants or farmers. Finally, all people of local origin, no matter how wealthy or accomplished, were relegated to the servant (*shudra*) class.

The four-level social system was given mythic status in the *Rig Veda*, according to which the world came into being through the sacrifice of a "cosmic person" (*Purusha*). Out of his mouth came the brahmin priests, whose job was to chant the sacred hymns and syllables. The warriors came from his arms, the middle class from his thighs, and the servants from his feet. Even today, this ancient hymn continues to buttress the social structure of India.

Over a period of about a thousand years, beginning around 2500 BCE, the Indo-Europeans took control of the territories that are now Afghanistan, northwest India, Pakistan, Turkey, Greece, Rome, central Europe, and, for a while, even Egypt. Their religious culture was similar to those embraced by most of their contemporaries 4,000 to 5,000 years

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The Sacrifice

When they divided the Man [Purusha, the primal Person sacrificed by the gods to create the world], into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth was the brahmin, his arms were made into the nobles, his two thighs were the populace, and from his feet the servants were born. (Doniger O'Flaherty 1975: 26)

Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place which he will choose: at the feast of unleavened bread, at the feast of weeks, and at the feast of booths. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed: All shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you. (From Moses's instructions to the people of Israel; Deuteronomy 16:16–17)

ago, with many deities, including a "sky father" (a name that survives in the Greek Zeus Pater, the Latin Jupiter, and the Sanskrit Dyaus Pitar) and a storm god (Indra in India, Thor in Scandinavia). They also sang hymns to female deities, such as the goddess of dawn, and had a hereditary priesthood to offer sacrifices to the gods.

Although the IE people did not necessarily invent the system of hereditary priesthood, they certainly contributed to its spread. In addition to Hindu brahmins, ancient Roman priests and Celtic Druids inherited their priestly status. These priests enjoyed great power and prestige, and sometimes were resented by non-priests. (One ancient Indian text includes a parody in which dogs, acting like priests, dance around a fire chanting, "*Om* let us eat, *om* let us drink."[3])

Priests and Temples Elsewhere

We know when the first Jewish temple was built. After David had been chosen as king of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, he captured the Jebusite city now known as Jerusalem. He transformed the city into a proper capital, complete with a grand palace for himself and an organized priesthood. His son Solomon took the next step, building the first temple in the mid-tenth century BCE. The priests attached to the temple soon made it the only site where sacrificial rituals could be performed.

The Jewish priesthood was hereditary. All those who served in the temple as assistants to the priests were required to be Levites (members of the tribe of Levi), and priests themselves had to be not only Levites but direct descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, who was the original high priest.

Priests became a powerful social class in many other parts of the world as well, including Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In some cultures they were a hereditary class, and in others they were recruited. Typically, the role of priest was reserved for males, females being considered impure because of the menstrual cycle; the Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome, who tended the sacred fires and performed rituals, were among the very few exceptions to the general rule.

Prophetic Religion

By 700 BCE or even earlier, several new religious traditions had begun to form under the leadership

of a great prophet or sage—a fourth pattern in the development of religiosity. The word "prophet" derives from Greek and has two related meanings, one referring to a person who speaks on behalf of a deity and one referring to a person who foresees or predicts the future. The terms are often conflated because prophets delivering messages from the deity often warned of disasters to come if God's will was not obeyed. The site of the temple at Delphi, Greece, where a virgin priestess said to be under the inspiration of Apollo delivered prophecies, must have seemed a natural spot for making contact with the divine and receiving sacred knowledge: high up a mountainside, close to the gods, with a natural cave that resembled the entrance to a womb (*delphys* in Greek, representing the mysterious female energy) and a standing stone or *omphalos* (navel of the earth) representing the male energy and the connection between heaven and earth.

This sacred site dates back at least 3,000 years, to a time before the rise of classical Greece, when the oracle was believed to be inspired not by Apollo but by the earth goddess Gaia. Eventually males took control of the sacred site, but even in classical times the virgin priestesses would prepare themselves to receive Apollo's message by bathing in an artesian spring and breathing intoxicating

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Ritual Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible

Long before the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem, where priests would perform ritual sacrifices, God commanded the Hebrew patriarch Abraham to sacrifice several animals to mark the covenant that was about to be made between them.

> Then [God] said to [Abram], "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.
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> As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. . . ."
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> When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces [the halved carcasses]. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites." (Genesis 15:7–21)

fumes emitted from a fissure in the earth—with both water and fumes believed to issue from Gaia, the earth.

Those wishing to consult the oracle had to climb the mountain, make known their request, pay a fee, and sacrifice a black goat before their question could be put to the oracle. The priestess would take her place over the fissure and, in an ecstatic trance, deliver Apollo's message, which was typically unintelligible and had to be translated into ordinary language by a male priest. Interpreting the real-world significance of a prophecy was not so simple, however. In one famous case, a Greek leader who asked what would happen if he went to war with another state was told that a great country would fall; accordingly, he went to war—but the country that fell was his own. Similarly, in the Oedipus myth, the oracle's prophecy that the infant would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother was fulfilled in spite of the measures taken to avoid that fate.

Abrahamic Prophetic Traditions

In 586 BCE the people of Israel were forcibly removed from their homeland and exiled to Babylon. The centuries that followed the "Babylonian captivity" were the defining period for the concept of prophecy as it developed in the three monotheistic traditions that trace their origins to the Prophet Abraham. Often, the Jewish prophets' messages were directed toward the people of Israel as a whole, warning of the disasters that loomed if they did not follow God's demands. Christianity saw Jesus and certain events surrounding his life as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies. And Islam in turn recognized the Hebrew prophets, beginning with Abraham and including Jesus, as the forerunners of the Prophet Muhammad, the last and greatest of all prophets, the messenger (*rasul*) who received God's final revelations. Muslims understand Muhammad to have been the "seal of the prophets": no other prophet will follow him, since he has delivered the message of God in its entirety. As in earlier prophetic traditions, the Day of Judgment (or Day of Doom) and the concepts of heaven and hell are central to Islam.

Zarathustra, Prophet of the Wise Lord

Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) was a prophet figure who lived more than 2,500 years ago, probably in the region of eastern Iran or Afghanistan. Although we know little about his life, he left behind a collection of poems devoted to a "wise lord" called Ahura Mazda. The religion that developed around his teachings, which came to be known as Zoroastrianism, played an important part in the development of monotheism. The concepts of heaven and hell also owe a lot to the Zoroastrians, who believed that evildoers would be condemned to hell at their death, but that eventually a great day of judgment would come when the souls of all the dead would be made to pass through a fiery wall. Those who had been virtuous in life would pass through the fire without pain, while the rest would be cleansed of their remaining sin and permitted to enter paradise (a term believed to derive from a Persian word meaning garden). The threat of hell and the promise of heaven were powerful tools for any prophet seeking to persuade people to behave as he or she believed the deity demanded.

The First Principle: Greek Philosophy Before Socrates

Around 2,500 years ago the Greek-speaking philosophers of Ionia (now southwestern Turkey) began to ask the following question: What is the first principle, the first cause, the source from which all else comes? Starting from the science of the day, they tried to determine which of the four primal elements—earth, air, fire, and water—came first. Although their methods were those of philosophy rather than scientific experimentation, their attempt to understand the causal principle underlying all things—without bringing in a god as the final cause—marked a major advance toward the development of the scientific worldview.

Sites

Tell Megiddo, Israel

Tell Megiddo is an archaeological mound in Israel, southeast of the modern city of Haifa. The ancient city of Megiddo was strategically located near a pass used by the trade route connecting Egypt and Assyria. The site of a battle with Egypt in the sixteenth century BCE, Har ("Mount") Megiddo is mentioned numerous times in the Hebrew Bible and is referred to by the Greek version of its name, Armageddon, in Revelation 16:16—a passage that some Christians interpret to mean that a final battle will be fought there at the end of time.

Judith Reichstein

The remains of Har Megiddo, the site known to Christians as Armageddon. The circular rock structure is thought to have been an altar.

Mystery Religion

"Mystery religion," a sixth pattern that emerges in the history of religiosity, refers to a type of Greek and Roman tradition in which the core teachings and rituals were kept secret from outsiders and were revealed only to those who were prepared to undergo initiation in the hope of securing blessings during this life and a heavenly paradise in the afterlife. Such religions became so popular during the Roman period that they presented a threat to the power and influence of the official Roman priesthood (not to be confused with the Roman Catholic priesthood).

The Eleusinian mystery tradition may be the oldest of these religions. Named for an ancient Greek town called Eleusis, it grew out of the myth of the young Persephone, or Kore ("girl"), who is abducted by the god of the dead, Hades, and taken down into the underworld. With the disappearance of this young girl—a potent symbol of growth and fertility—everything on earth begins to die. This imperils not only humans but also the gods themselves, who depend on humans to feed them through sacrifices. The girl's mother, Demeter, is therefore allowed to descend into the underworld and bring her back. Scholars understand the Persephone myth to be based on the seasonal cycles of stagnation during the winter and renewal in the spring. Members of her cult believed that by identifying themselves with the dying and rising goddess through the celebration of seasonal rituals, they too would triumph over death.

Initiates into the mysteries associated with the god Dionysus also followed a very ancient tradition. Through rituals that included the drinking of wine, ecstatic dancing, and perhaps the eating of mind-altering plants, participants were able to enter into ecstatic states of consciousness in which they believed that their god would ensure a pleasant afterlife. Another popular mystery cult, dedicated to the goddess Isis, had Egyptian origins.

Theistic Mysticism

European religious thought included a minority position that was theistic in that its adherents believed in god but was out of the mainstream because they conceived of god as a cosmic force rather than as a person-like mastermind. For their own safety they often needed to keep their views and practices secretive, and so they were considered mystics by others. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim mystics all believed in a god beyond the reaches of human understanding. Christian mystics such as Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) would use terms such as *Ungrund* ("ungrounded") or *Urgrund* ("original ground") to refer to the divine as the primal cause.

Many scholars have suggested that mystery cults such as these may have influenced the development of Christianity. The early Christians were initiated into the new cult by undergoing baptism. They then joined an inner circle of people whose faith centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus and who hoped that by following Christ they would secure blessings during this life and a place in heaven after death. Although Christianity developed out of Judaism, its theological structure does seem to have been influenced, however indirectly, by mystery religion.

Avatar: God on Earth

Long before anyone thought of an "avatar" as either a blue-skinned movie humanoid or an on-screen image representing a player in a computer game, *avatar(a)* was a Sanskrit theological term for the "coming down" to earth of a god. By the first century of the Common Era, the idea of a god born in human form had taken root in many parts of the world. In the earlier stages of the development of religion there were many stories of gods and goddesses who came down to earth, but there are two major differences between these accounts and the avatar stories.

First, whereas the ancient gods came down to earth as gods, the avatar is a god in a truly human form—as a later Christian creed put it, "fully God and fully man." For example, in the ancient Indian story of Princess Dhamayanti, her father holds a party to which he invites all the marriageable princes from various kingdoms. Four gods also attend the party, however, all disguised as the handsome prince Nala,