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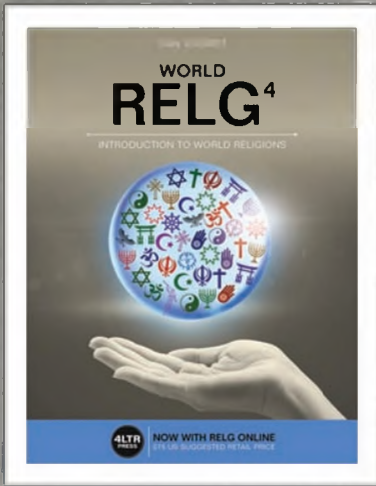
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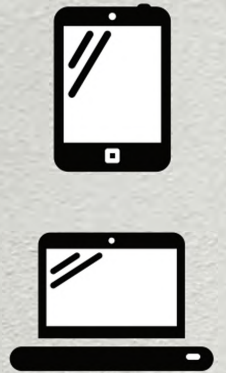
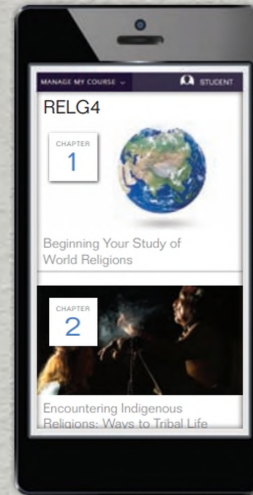
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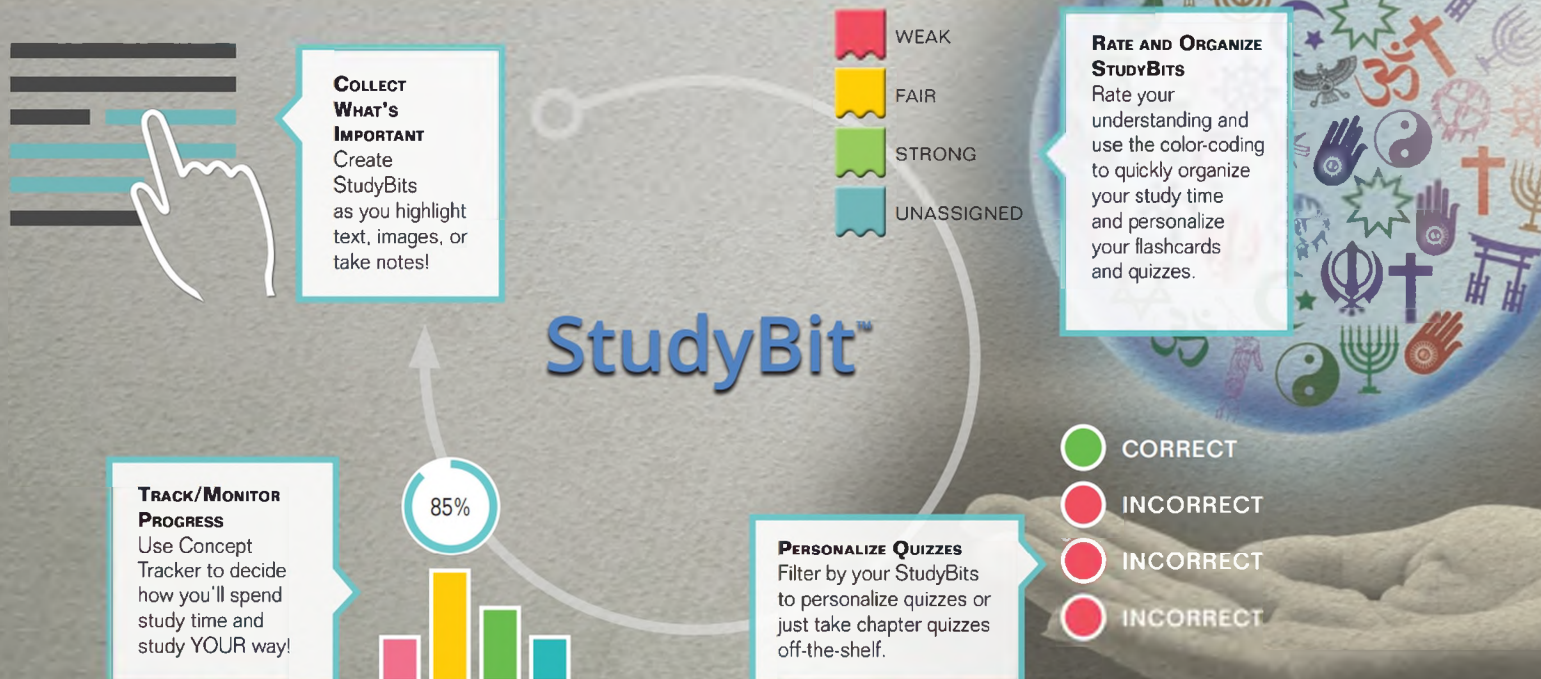
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1 Beginning Your Study of World Religions



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LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

- 1-1 State and explain your own *preunderstanding* of religion.
- 1-2 State and explain the definition of *religion* used in this book.
- 1-3 Give your own answer to the question: Why study religion?
- 1-4 List and describe the six different dimensions of religion.
- 1-5 Discuss how the various academic disciplines contribute to the study of religion.
- 1-6 Explain the special issues involved in the study of religion today.

After you finish
this chapter, go
to **PAGE 28** for
STUDY TOOLS

“Religion starts with the perception that something is wrong.” —Karen Armstrong



Your Visit to the Hsi Lai Temple in Southern California

Imagine that you're walking up the broad flight of stone steps to the Hsi Lai (shee LAI) Buddhist temple in Hacienda Heights, California, just east of Los Angeles. Hsi Lai claims to be the largest Buddhist temple in North America, and it certainly looks like it from where you stand! When you get inside, you look around and realize that this is a religious building complex like none other you have ever seen. No large-group ceremonies are going on, at least not right now. Instead, small groups of worshipers and tourists come and go, doing their own thing. Some offer incense, a few are carrying flowers to leave in the temple, others are praying and meditating in front of statues, and out in the courtyard people are doing meditative exercises.

The families coming to this temple do not seem to reflect deeply on their faith while here. Nobody is reading Buddhist religious texts, and the monks are not teaching or preaching to a group. Rather, people come here just to sense something of the sacred and be in its presence. Their minds are calmed by the familiar architecture, the many statues of the Buddha, and by the smell of incense. They engage in quiet, low-key activities.



A part of the Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple complex in Southern California



The new perspective of Earth from space has helped to stimulate global thinking on religions. The continent of Asia visible here is where most of the religions treated in this book originated, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

You notice people who aren't doing traditional Buddhist worship. You wonder if this means that they might come from other religious traditions. Some people you see are just tourists; a few of them are only interested in the vegetarian buffet lunch served every day. But perhaps they too have come to absorb the beauty of this place, and at least a bit of its religious meaning. This temple was founded not only to bridge the differences between different groups of Buddhists, but also to be a bridge between Eastern and Western religions and ways of life.

As you are introduced to the academic study of religion, you may find yourself bewildered by the varieties of religion, by the different academic methods used to study religions, and by hot topics such as religion and gender, ecology, and violence. You may have questions about matters of fact and value: Is one religion true, are different religions true, or are none of them true? What might it all mean for *you*?

These issues may occur to you as well:

- Formal “separation of church and state” is strong in the United States and Canada, but religion and politics are mixed in powerful ways here and around the world. The government of China’s continuous pressure on Buddhism in Tibet is just one example.
- Most people in North America affirm the importance of religion for their lives, but fewer actually practice it. For example, nearly 90 percent of all North Americans believe in the existence of God or gods, but only about half regularly participate in religious services or other religious practices such as prayer, meditation, or giving to those in need.
- Despite a high level of religious belief in the United States, the majority of Americans have surprisingly little knowledge of religion, even their own. Stephen Prothero (PROTH-er-oh), a professor of religion at Boston University who has appeared on *The Daily Show*, says that Americans—even those who attend services regularly—are often “religious illiterates.” As Laurie Goodstein of *The New York Times* wrote while summarizing a 2010 study of religious knowledge in the United States, “Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion.”¹ In Western Europe, most people don’t hold formally to a religion, but they know a good deal about religion, because it is a required academic subject in schools.

- Is religion in the world shrinking, or is it growing? Actually, the answer is both. Although Christianity is shrinking in Europe and North America, in other parts of the world it is growing; Islam and Buddhism are also growing. The number of people in North America who formally adhere to no religion at all is also growing, but certain religious practices, such as prayer, are as strong as ever.
- Nearly all of the major religions of the world come from ancient times. However, every decade of the past two hundred years has seen new religious movements (NRMs) born around the world; some of them are now powerful, and some are controversial. You might wonder why we still get new religions—don't we have enough already?
- Religion has evoked the best and the worst among humans. Love, care for others, and social reforms have arisen from religion. It has inspired great music, art, and architecture and has uplifted human life in countless ways. However, it has also been the source of much destruction.

“Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion.”

—Laurie Goodstein

You might think this, but probably not. Instead, your mind automatically begins to sift through your knowledge for an explanation consistent with what you already hold to be true. Only people who are already convinced, or seriously entertaining the idea, that a set of things is

true—there is life on other planets, beings from these places travel to Earth, and they talk with humans—will easily accept your friend's comment. Given your prior understanding that such things probably aren't factual, you won't likely entertain these theories as a serious possibility.

1-1a What Is Preunderstanding?

We interpret all of our experience in just this way, because, as psychologists tell us, this is the way the human mind operates. Our understanding of new experiences is interpreted in the light of previous experiences. **Preunderstanding** is the state of one's understanding of reality, with which one makes sense of one's new experiences. It describes what we already know, whether that knowledge is correct or not. Even if a new experience corrects our old knowledge—let's say that, in this case, you actually do meet a space alien with your friend—it is always understood on the basis of old knowledge. This new knowledge is then integrated into old understandings, and our preunderstanding grows. In other words, the term *preunderstanding* describes the existing state of our understanding before a new experience calls for interpretation. Our preunderstanding changes as we alter our knowledge, beliefs, and convictions over time.

1-1b Your Preunderstanding of Religion

All this raises the question: What elements of your preunderstanding of religion might influence your study of world religions? Each person must examine and answer this question individually. With each encounter with new people and new ideas, our knowledge of ourselves and our knowledge of others are connected and influence each other. You should first think through your own past encounters with religion, pro and con. Here are several short but thought-provoking questions

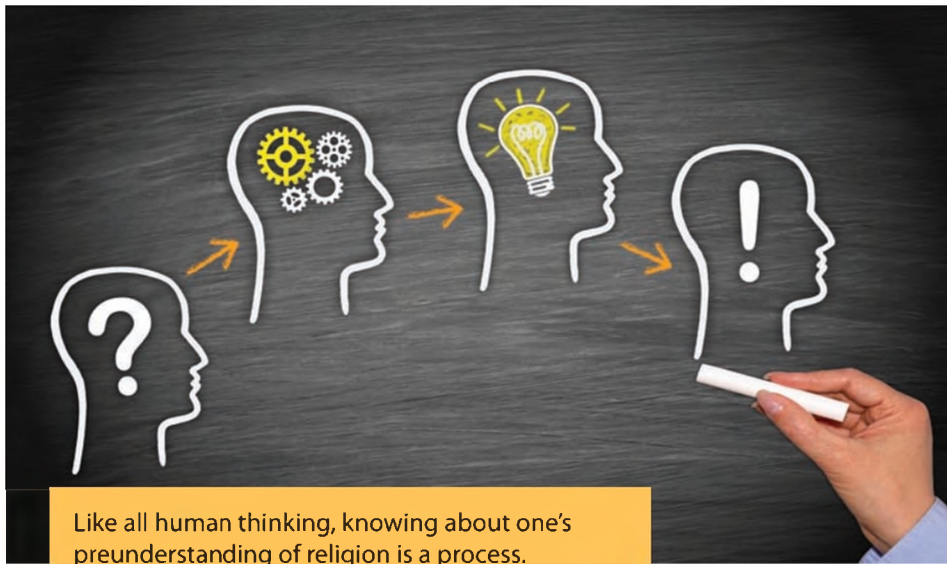
1-1 Coming to Grips with Your Preunderstanding of Religion

Imagine for a moment that a good friend tells you, “I've met and talked with an alien visitor from another planet.” You might say to yourself, amid all the thoughts and emotions that you might have when you

hear something strange or upsetting, “I don't believe in space aliens!” But then you might think, “Are there alien visitors to Earth after all? Maybe they're real, and maybe my friend *has* been talking with them.”

preunderstanding

State of one's understanding of reality, with which one makes sense of one's new experiences



Like all human thinking, knowing about one's preunderstanding of religion is a process.

to consider as you think of your own preunderstanding of religion and religions:

1. Do I have an unprejudiced view of what religion in general is? Or am I biased for or against it?
2. Can I “suspend my disbelief” or “suspend my belief” to encounter religions objectively?
3. If I hold a religious belief, can I study other religions without feeling threatened in my own?
4. Can I encounter practices that seem unusual to me without getting too upset?
5. Can I be humble and provisional in my conclusions?
6. Can I postpone any personal judgment on a religion until I've learned more about it?

You are now poised to begin your study of the world's leading religions, beginning with the question: “What is religion?” During your journey in understanding, you will encounter the lives and religions of other people. In this process, you will learn more about yourself as well.

1-2 What Is Religion?

Religion is found in all cultures today and throughout history. Evidence from early human remains shows signs of religion, including veneration of animal spirits in art and human burials that suggest belief in a life beyond death. Anthropologists today have concluded that Neanderthal humans who lived around

40,000 years ago may have had religious beliefs and practices, and that modern humans (who began to emerge around 35,000 years ago) definitely had religion. From the dawn of human civilizations to today, religion has shaped all human cultures.

1-2a Defining Religion

But this talk of the prevalence of religion leads us to ask: What exactly is religion? Many people have

something interesting to say about what religion is. Grappling with this question involves both careful, objective, academic thinking and personal engagement. John Bowker remarks, “We all know what [religion] is until someone asks us to tell them.”² If pressed for an answer, people in the Western world would typically say that religion is based on belief in and obedience to God. However, do they mean the God followed in a particular religion or something more general, such as gods? A few major religions—certain branches of Hinduism and Buddhism, for example—have relatively little teaching about gods. Jainism has no gods at all.

Some people around the world would answer that religion is a system of morality. On first reflection, this might seem to be a more all-encompassing definition than the previous one. Karen Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun and now a popular writer on world religions, wrote that “Religion starts with the perception that something is wrong,” and that the value systems in religions deal with that wrong.³ The three main Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have strong moral teachings. Confucianism is so centered on morality that the issue of whether it is a social philosophy or a religion is often debated. However, a few religions, such as Shinto, have little or no developed teaching about morality. All this shows how our prior perceptions color our answer to the question, “What is religion?” Despite the difficulties of this question, many scholars from various academic fields have attempted to answer it in as objective a manner as possible.



KOSMOS111/SHUTTERSTOCK

- “All bunk”—Thomas Edison, American inventor (ca. 1925)
- “An illusion deriving its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires”—Sigmund Freud, Austrian psychiatrist (1932)
- “The state of being grasped by an ultimate concern . . . which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life”—Paul Tillich, Christian theologian (1957)
- “A set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence”—Robert Bellah, American sociologist (1964)

Those who define religion in a positive way often associate it with light. They see light as a symbol of knowledge, power, and warmth.

1-2b Notable Definitions of Religion

Another way of studying the issue of what *religion* means is by looking at definitions that have been offered in the past and have had an influence on the discussion. Here is a sampling of how *religion* has been defined in the Western world, by scholars and others. Religion is . . .

- “The feeling of absolute dependence”—Friedrich Schleiermacher, Christian theologian (1799)
- “The opiate of the people”—Karl Marx, founder of communism (1843)
- “A set of things which the average man thinks he believes and wishes he was certain of”—Mark Twain, American writer (1879)
- “A unified system of beliefs and practices . . . which unite into one single moral community”—Émile Durkheim, French sociologist of religion (1915)

religion Pattern of beliefs and practices that expresses and enacts what a community regards as sacred and/or ultimate about life

- “What grows out of, and gives expression to, experience of the holy in its various aspects”—Rudolf Otto, German scholar of religion (1917)

- “Feeling warmer in our hearts, more connected to others, more connected to something greater, and having a sense of peace”—Goldie Hawn, American film actress (2005)

1-2c The Definition Used in This Book

You will have to wrestle with defining *religion*, because scholarship isn’t settled on any one definition, and defining it involves some subjectivity. Here’s the definition used in this book: **Religion** is a pattern of beliefs and practices that expresses and enacts what a community regards as sacred and/or ultimate about life.

Let’s unpack this definition. First, religion is *a pattern of beliefs and practices*. All religions believe certain things about the ultimate reality in or beyond the world. They answer existential questions that humans have such as:

- Why am I here?
- What does it mean to be human?
- How can what is wrong in the world—and in me—be corrected?
- Where am I—and the world—going?

They answer these questions in different ways. Different religions believe in one God (**monotheism**) or many gods (**polytheism**). They believe in a world soul in Hinduism, in Nirvana in Buddhism, and in a cosmic Way in both Daoism (Taoism) and Confucianism. They practice these beliefs in certain ways: in worship, rituals at various points of the individual life cycle, meditation, and ordinary actions in daily life. Each religion has its own way of arranging these beliefs and practices into a distinctive pattern.

Second, this pattern *expresses and enacts what is sacred*. *Sacred* refers to what is considered most holy and important, whether in this world, in a supernatural world that transcends this one, or both. Religions draw on their experience of the sacred; express the sacred in all of its aspects; and enact it by continuing to make it real for believers. Because common Western notions of the sacred often entail a belief in a holy God, we add this further phrase to our definition: *ultimate about life*. This “ultimate” may be a principle, an impersonal force, or a spiritual power, hidden in the world or beyond it. Sacredness or “the ultimate” in world religions is wider than a divine being.

Third, note that it is a *community* of like-minded people that forms a religion. Religions sometimes begin with an individual (Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammad), but they soon become social communities of shared belief and practice. They persist through history as communities of religion. Not all religions try to grow throughout the world, but all of them are concerned with passing themselves from generation to generation, thus becoming traditions.

The meaning of *religion* is typically traced to the ancient Latin word *religio* (ree-LIG-ee-oh), derived from the verb *religere*, “to bind/tie fast.” Of course, the meaning of a word today can’t be limited to what it meant thousands of years ago, but this ancient meaning of *religion* illustrates nicely the different parts of our definition. First, it meant a supernatural constraint on behavior, doing what is good, and especially avoiding evil. It “bound” people to what was right. Second, it entailed a holy awe for the gods and sacred power in general. Third, *religio* meant a system of life that bound people together in a group and oriented them to the gods. Finally, it entailed the practices of rites and ceremonies by which the Roman people expressed and enacted their religion.⁴

Different religions of the world call themselves by different names, many of them not using the word *religion* at all. For example, Daoism is “the Way” to most Daoists; they don’t refer to it as “the Daoist religion.” Many Hindus call their religion “the Eternal Teaching”; Buddhists often call theirs a “school.” Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims prefer the term *faith* instead of *religion*. But no matter what they call themselves, they are in fact *religions* as that term is used in scholarship and teaching.

How does the definition given previously exclude things that *aren’t* religion? Here are two examples. First, the definition speaks of religion as a system based on the sacred or on ultimate value; other systems that do not view themselves as religions do not usually speak about the sacred or ultimate. This is true of political ideologies and parties, such as Democrats and Republicans, systems of popular psychology or “life coaching” such as that of Tony Robbins, and so on. (This isn’t meant to devalue these other groups; many people find a great deal of meaning and inspiration in them.) Therefore, people who belong to nonreligious groups can also practice a variety of religions or no religion at all. Second, a pattern of belief held by only one person can’t be

a religion as we define it here. Such do-it-yourself religion may be popular in Europe and North America, and it is usually sincere and important to the person who holds it, but it doesn’t bring with it a social bond. Some scholars refer to this as **private religion**, but others question whether private religion is really religion at all.

“We all know what [religion] is until someone asks us to tell them.”

—John Bowker

1-3 Why Study Religion?

At first, the question, “Why study religion?” may seem pointless to you. You might say, “I’m taking the course, aren’t I?” You may go on to give your reasons for taking this course: to get course credit, to fulfill a cultural studies requirement at your school and maybe pick up some knowledge and skills along the way, and ultimately to get an academic degree that will lead to a good job. But let’s explore a bit further why students today should study religion.

monotheism Belief in one God

polytheism Belief in many gods

private religion Pattern of belief held by only one person



A Closer Look

Is Religion a Dirty Word?

To some religious people, *religion* is, if not a dirty word, at least a derogatory one. Some Christians, Jews, and Muslims think that religion is a bad thing. Many religious people want to have a strong connection with God/ultimate reality/cosmic power, but not a “religion.” They call their own beliefs a faith, teaching, school, spirituality, or something similar, but they often call other people’s belief systems, somewhat pejoratively, “religion.” In his best-selling book, *The Shack*, written for Christians and released as a Hollywood film in 2017, William Young even has Jesus say, “I’m not too big on religion.”

People who don’t like any religion at all also use *religion* in a negative way. A growing number of people in North America and Europe say, “I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious.” Spirituality is a growing feature of life in North America and Europe; it is a broad term, but when used in the expression “spiritual, not religious” it usually connotes

a personal interest in religious ideas and values without the social commitments that go with religion. A 2008 documentary film, featuring comic and social critic Bill Maher, was titled not *Religious*, but *Religulous*, Maher’s unflattering combination of *religion* and *ridiculous*.

“I’m not too big on religion.”

—Jesus, in *The Shack*

To study world religions well, you have to put aside the prejudices you might have about the term *religion*, whether pro or con. All scholars of religion use *religion* as an academic, neutral, descriptive term, and you should too, regardless of your own personal stance on religious belief and practice. To use an analogy, many people today, including students, often use the word *politics* prejudicially. But in order to study the academic field of political science, one must put aside prejudice about the term *politics*. The same is true with *religion* in the study of religion.

1-3a Studying the Persistence of Religion in the Modern World

Religion should be studied—among other reasons—to understand its persistence in the modern world, which in many ways is not hospitable to religious belief and practice. The rise of **secularism**, or life without religion, particularly in the public sphere, has challenged most religions for the past two hundred years. (A second, lesser-used definition of secularism or secularization is the shift of social institutions such as government, schools, and the rest from religious to civil authority.) Today, the secular approach to life rejects religion for the perceived evils of extremism (“Look what happened on 9/11!” is commonly heard); the inappropriateness of religious training for children (“Children should be allowed to decide for themselves when they are older”); and the better view on life offered by science (“Religion is false, because we know about evolution”).

secularism Life without religion

Secularism has led to a lessening of religious belief and practice, and in North America to widespread

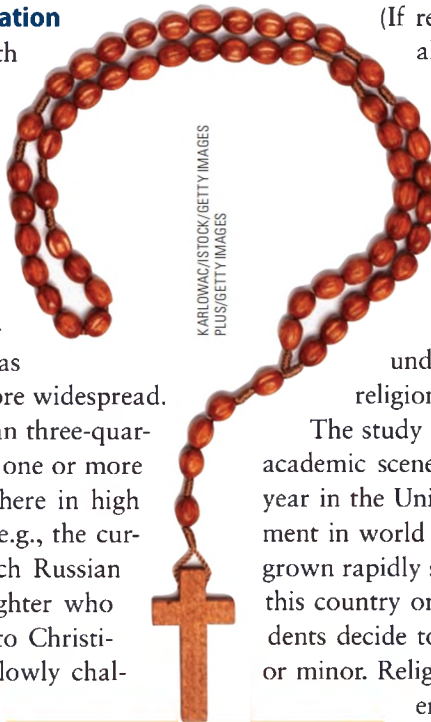
illiteracy about religion. Many people, including about half of all Europeans and a growing number of North Americans, are neither especially religious nor completely irreligious; they are “in the middle” between them. They combine aspects of secular life with aspects of religious life.

Secularism has led to the rise of the “nones,” people with no religious affiliation. The nones are attracting attention by scholars as their numbers and influence grow in many Western societies and especially in Asia. Scholars are now researching questions like these: Are the nones significantly different as a group from religious people? Should public officials who sometimes encounter religious issues and people be aware of the nones and be prepared to deal with them respectfully? What sorts of religious beliefs might they have, despite being formally unaffiliated with any religion? As examples of this new research, two recent books stand out: Joseph Baker and Buster Smith’s *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* and Christel Manning’s *Losing our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children*.⁵

Despite the rise of the nones, religion is still a powerful force in the world. This means that reports of the death

of religion are mistaken. The **secularization hypothesis**, widely held in the twentieth century, said that science and education would diminish or end religion in the modern world. For instance, British philosopher Bertrand Russell said in 1952 that religion “will fade away as we adopt reason and science as our guidelines.” But the secularization hypothesis has now been largely discredited. Religion is strong today even as science and secularism have become more widespread. The nones are prominent, but more than three-quarters of the world’s people identify with one or more religions. We still find religion everywhere in high culture, as well as in popular culture (e.g., the current TV series *The Americans*, in which Russian spies in the United States have a daughter who complicates their work by converting to Christianity; *Vikings*, in which Christianity slowly challenges a brutal Scandinavian society; and the rock band U2), and in everyday life in North America and around the world. The religions of the world are now present in North America, and nearly every religion is as close as one’s keyboard, on the Internet. In the Soviet Union and China—which tried with Communist fervor in the twentieth century to suppress and even extinguish all religion—religion has come back vigorously. Only one in eight people in China now call themselves atheists, and the government of China is bringing back Confucian texts and teachings to counteract the “money-first” mentality among so many young people there. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, religion is at or near the center of global issues and cultural conflict. It has an increasingly visible role in national and even international politics. One simply can’t understand many of the conflicts in our world without a basic knowledge of religion. Religion is emerging as one of the main markers of human identity in the twenty-first century, along with gender, class, and ethnicity.⁶

Why does religion keep on thriving? First, despite the challenges to religion, it continues to be a powerful resource for everyday life all around the world. Religion still provides meaning, strength, and joy to many. Another reason is that religious traditions have proven themselves adaptable to the ever changing situations of human life. They’ve changed over the thousands of years that many of them have existed, and the study of these changes forms a large part of the study of religion.



KARLOWAC/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES
PLUS/GETTY IMAGES

The rise of secularism has challenged most religions for the past two hundred years.

(If religions can’t or don’t change, they usually die out.) Many religions even have some room for skepticism and for the secular, which gives them strength in our rapidly changing world. In many places, especially in central and southern Africa, indigenous religions tied to local cultures are fading, but universal religions such as Christianity and Islam have taken their place. If you want to understand the world today, understanding religion is an important part of it.

The study of religion is also a persistent part of the academic scene. Around 750,000 undergraduates each year in the United States take a religion course. Enrollment in world religion courses in the United States has grown rapidly since the religiously connected attacks on this country on September 11, 2001. A number of students decide to make the study of religion their major or minor. Religion is taught in the vast majority of liberal arts colleges, as well as in private and state universities. Leading universities that didn’t have a religious studies program in the past because of a more secular orientation established one in the twentieth century—among them are Harvard, Princeton, Cornell, and Stanford. In 2009 the American Historical Association reported that more historians in the United States now specialize in religious issues than in any others. Even the government of China, which is officially atheistic, is setting up graduate degree programs in religious studies in several of its selective universities. What’s more, the study of religion in U.S. K–12 public schools is growing, with some schools using new guidelines from the American Academy of Religion, an association of religion professors.⁷ In sum, the academic study of religion is alive and well.

1-3b What the Academic Study of Religion Can Offer You

The opportunity to shape one’s knowledge and values is one of the advantages of being a student, but most students today are rightly concerned about how studying religion will help them earn a living in today’s economy. A small proportion of students in religion courses choose to make a professional career in religion, as the leader of a religious

secularization hypothesis Idea that science and education diminish or end religion in the modern world

community (such as a rabbi, priest, or minister), an editor of religious publications, or a professor of religion. Some students take a world religions course to clarify or strengthen their own religious knowledge and values.

They realize the truth in the proverb first uttered by Max Müller, “Those who know only one religion know none.”

Students taking a world religion course learn more about an important aspect of the world today. This study offers students training in a unique combination of academic and everyday skills such as:

- The ability to understand how religious thought and practice are related to everyday life, especially important today in careers such as teaching, health care, social work, and business.
- The ability to understand the religious dimensions of conflicts within and between nations.
- An appreciation of the complexities of religious language and values.
- An ability to understand and explain important texts both critically and empathetically.
- **Cultural intelligence** or “cross-cultural competence,” the ability to understand and deal with people of other cultures and religions.

Few academic fields bring together so many different forms of analysis as religion does. The study of religion is interdisciplinary in a time when the value of interdisciplinary study is increasingly recognized in higher education. With this broad liberal arts background, many religion majors or minors go on to study law, business, education, and medicine in graduate school.⁸ In short, the study of religion offers a foundation for a successful and fulfilling career in many fields, in addition to growth in personal knowledge and satisfaction.

1-4 Dimensions of Religion

As we examine the varieties of religious experience, all sorts of human beliefs and practices come into view. Religion seems to be as wide as human life itself. This was illustrated in one American publishing company’s poster, which read: “Books about religion are also about love,

cultural intelligence
Ability to understand, respect, and deal with people of other cultures and religions

“Those who know only one religion know none.”

—Max Müller

sex, politics, AIDS, war, peace, justice, ecology, philosophy, addiction, recovery, ethics, race, gender, dissent, technology, old age, New Age, faith, heavy metal, morality, beauty, God, psychology, money,

dogma, freedom, history, death, and life.” To get a grip on this complexity, various scholars have organized the dimensions of religion in different ways. These dimensions are somewhat artificial, and they cannot fully describe the meaning and value that believers see in their religion. However, they’re helpful in grasping the mass of information available about religions. Prominent scholar of comparative religion, Ninian Smart, first laid out five dimensions in the 1960s, but by the 1990s he had come to think there were nine. Rodney Stark and Charles Glock have systematized the various interlocking aspects of religion in the following six dimensions (see Figure 1.1).⁹

1-4a The Cognitive Dimension

Religions have cognitive (thinking) dimensions that teach their followers what is necessary to know. Most religions teach about their gods and founders, often in stories. They teach about the creation of the world, the meaning of life, and ways to overcome death. They teach about human identity, both individual and social: gender,

Figure 1.1 Dimensions of Religion



ROBERT VAN VOORST © CENGAGE LEARNING

class, ethnicity, and other aspects of human identity. They provide ways of understanding what the world is and what it should be. Often, the history of religion itself is explained so that followers can know that they stand in a great tradition. The cognitive dimension of religion entails analyzing and systematizing knowledge, as well as learning it and passing it on. Its teachings are framed in stories; in short statements that summarize beliefs (e.g., the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism); and in songs, proverbs, laws, and many other forms. The cognitive dimensions of religion typically grow so comprehensive that religions usually contain an entire worldview. However, we must keep in mind that there is often a significant gap between official religious teachings and what is believed and practiced by ordinary members.

1-4b The Ethical Dimension

Ethics are important in almost all religions, because, as we saw previously, religions seek to correct what they perceive to be wrong in the world. Personal ethics are found in religions, but the emphasis is most often on social ethics. All religions have moral expectations for marriage, families, religious societies or congregations, social classes, and even whole nations. We may think of religious ethics as “rules” more negative than positive, but most religions have a balance of both “do this” and “don’t do that.” These systems of social ethics can become the law of the nation where religion

is not separated from the state, as is the case with Shari’a, religion-based law in some officially Muslim countries. Values, norms, and patterns of behavior in religions are internalized with the help of moral rules. Different people and activities serve to shape religious behavior: living specialist models, such as people who lead a religion (clergy, monks, gurus, and the like); celebrated models, such as saviors, saints, and immortals; and ordinary models, such as other people in one’s religion. When social morality based on religion is constantly and carefully practiced, religion becomes a way of life.

1-4c The Ritual Dimension

Ritual is symbolic action in worship, meditation, or other religious activities. It’s symbolic and often abstract, but meant to achieve very practical goals. When most people in North America today think of religion, they think of the ritual ceremonies of worship. But ritual also includes formal and informal prayer, sacrifice, chanting of scriptures, public processions, and even travel. **Pilgrimage**—travel to a special destination to increase one’s devotion and/or improve one’s religious status—doesn’t often come to the minds of modern North Americans as a religious ritual, but in 2015 millions of people worldwide went on a pilgrimage and spent the equivalent of U.S. \$19 billion on it. Ritual can be long, elaborate ceremonies performed by religious specialists or simple daily acts such as a short

prayer before eating a meal or going to sleep. Rituals are directed to one God, many gods, spirits, or deceased ancestors. Ritual is not only symbolic but also effective; it helps to reenact and reapply the deep truths of a religion to people in the present. Mircea Eliade (MUHR-chuh eh-lee-AH-deh, 1907–1986) advanced his influential theory of “eternal return” around **myths**, stories that relate the basic truths of a religion. (We often use *myth* today to mean an untrue story, but religions use it in a completely opposite way.) This theory holds that rituals do not simply commemorate myths but actually participate in them and bring believers to

ritual Symbolic action in worship, meditation, or other religious activities

pilgrimage Travel to a special destination to increase one’s devotion and/or improve one’s religious status

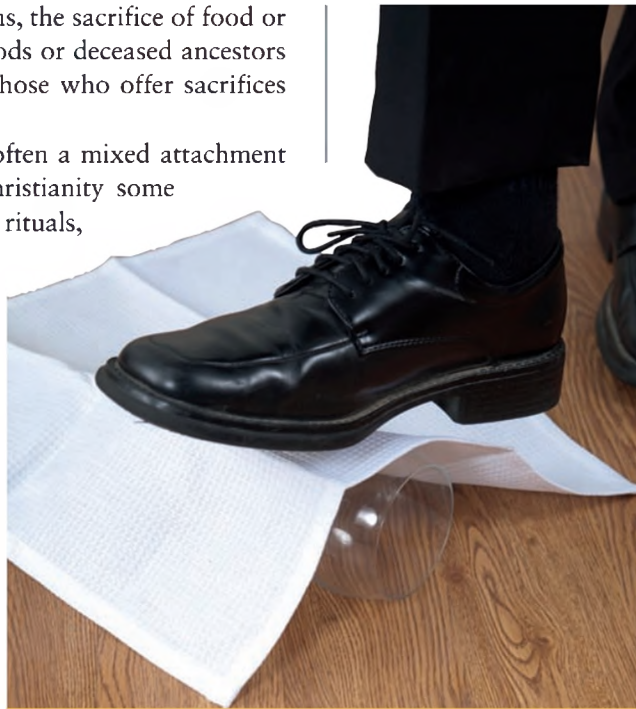
myths Stories that relate basic truths of a religion



Ethical and ritual dimensions come together in a Hindu wedding in Ahmedabad, India, where a priest offers a sacrifice for the well-being of the married couple.

God/the gods. In a few religions, the sacrifice of food or drink is thought to feed the gods or deceased ancestors and make them happy with those who offer sacrifices to them.

Within religions there is often a mixed attachment to ritual. For example, in Christianity some Protestants minimize formal rituals, but most Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox have some elaborate rituals. Sufi Muslims emphasize pilgrimage to God “in the heart,” in part to contrast with other Muslims who view the pilgrimage to Mecca as the highlight of their life. Some Hindus give up the rituals of the home and temple to seek salvation in solitary meditation. Although ritual may be downplayed, it never completely disappears from religion.



Groom breaking a wineglass at a Jewish wedding, a ritual remembering the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E.

institutional dimension is so important that people often speak of “organized religion.”

1-4e The Aesthetic Dimension

The aesthetic (beauty) dimension is the sensory element of religion. Beauty appeals to the rational mind but has a special appeal to human emotions. This dimension encompasses religion’s sounds and smells, spaces, holy places, and landscapes. It also includes its main symbols (for instance, Judaism’s six-pointed Star of David, and Buddhism’s wheel), devotional images and statuary, and all the religious items

of material culture. Islamic religious art tends to be abstract, because of strong prohibitions of anything that could enable the worship of other gods. Most Hindu art, on the other hand, is fully representational, at times even sensual. The aesthetic dimension encompasses the architecture and decoration of religious buildings, as well as works of music, poetry, and hymns. It also includes ritual gestures: hand gestures in yoga, bodies kneeling in prayer, hands pressed together in Hindu greeting and Christian prayer, and many others.

1-4f The Emotional Dimension

This dimension includes the particular emotions and wider moods experienced in religion. They include senses of awe, fear, and love. They also include some religions’ hope for life after death or other religions’ hope for no more life after death. The emotional dimension includes confidence received to cope with death, suffering, and evil. The emotional self-confidence and sense of purpose that religion brings are so notable that “losing my religion” or “getting religion” are common expressions. The emotional dimension includes the emotions that come with belonging and personal identity, as well as with concern for others.

1-4d The Institutional Dimension

Because religions are social more than personal, they give an organizational structure to their religious community and (usually) the wider society. Moreover, many religions are internally diverse, with different institutional structures for each internal group. Most religions come from ancient, traditional societies, so they aren’t democratic organizations; power in religious institutions tends to flow from the top down. This is also true of **new religious movements (NRMs)**, religious groups that have arisen since the nineteenth century and now have sufficient size to merit study. Typically, one charismatic leader founds an NRM and wields great power; an example is L. Ron Hubbard of the Scientology movement. Religions make a valid distinction between specialists (religious healers, priests, and monks) who lead the religions and the main body of people who practice a religion, typically called **laity**. This

new religious movements (NRMs)

Religious groups that have arisen since the nineteenth century and now have sufficient size to merit study

laity Main body of people who practice a religion

It also includes extraordinary feelings and experiences such as isolation, union with an ultimate reality or divine being(s), and hallucinations. The emotional dimension of religion looms large today in the Western world, where belief for many is primarily a matter of emotion. In the words of the 1981 hit song by the rock group Journey, put to more recent use by such television shows as *Family Guy* and *Big Brother*, “Don’t stop believing, hold on to that feeling.”

To conclude this section, let us consider that sometimes people reduce religion to one or two of these dimensions. For example, they may suppose that religion is primarily an ethical system, a system of teaching about the divine, an institution, or even a feel-good emotion. This reduction is to be expected, but it’s wrong. Almost all religions are multidimensional. That the many dimensions of religion are closely related to one another was suggested by British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who wrote that the power of religion lies in its grasp of this truth: “The order of the world, the depth of reality of the world, the value of the world in its whole and in its parts, the beauty of the world, the zest for life, the peace of life, and the mastery of evil, are all bound together.”¹⁰



Sensual art put to spiritual use: a Hindu goddess

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promote it. It is a study from the “inside.” Christian theology has been an important part of the Western university since the oldest universities were founded in thirteenth-century Europe. Theology is pursued today at many American schools, especially those with religious affiliations. As the eleventh-century Christian theologian Anselm (AHN-sehlm) said, theology is “faith seeking understanding.” This statement is true of theological study in other religions as well, in both Eastern and Western religions. The university thought to be the oldest still existing today—at the Al-Azhar (al-ah-ZAHR) Mosque in Cairo, Egypt—was founded for theological study. Theology is older in Buddhism and Hinduism than it is in Christianity or Islam. These religions have typically relied closely on philosophy and textual studies to carry out their theological work.

The second branch is called **religious studies**, a relatively new field of academic study of religion that aims to understand all religious traditions objectively, in a religiously neutral way, from the “outside.” Religious studies doesn’t ask students to make religious commitments or even require students to reflect on those they have. In the Enlightenment (ca. 1650–1800), the independence and separation of human reason from religion had developed

to the extent that a scholarly treatment of religion independent from theology could begin. Reason, not faith, was now seeking understanding of religion. A recent book by Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, describes how Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars in Europe forged this new area of study in early modern times. Stroumsa writes that three major events from 1500 to 1800 laid the foundation for the birth of the study of religion: the rise of European colonial empires, which gave birth to curiosity about other cultures; the Reformation, which permanently altered Christianity; and the new academic study of world languages and literature.

theology Study of a religion based on a religious commitment to it, in order to promote it

religious studies Academic study of religion that aims to understand all religious traditions objectively, in a religiously neutral way

1-5 Ways of Studying Religion

The study of religion is pursued today with a wide variety of methods. These center largely on six different academic disciplines, some of which you may be studying. We’ll consider these methods and the work of prominent scholars who have influenced the rise of religious studies as an academic discipline by contributing to these methods. Along the way, we’ll encounter different theories of the origin and purpose of religion. Before we discuss these methods, however, we should deal with the important matter of the difference between theology and religious studies.

1-5a Theology and Religious Studies

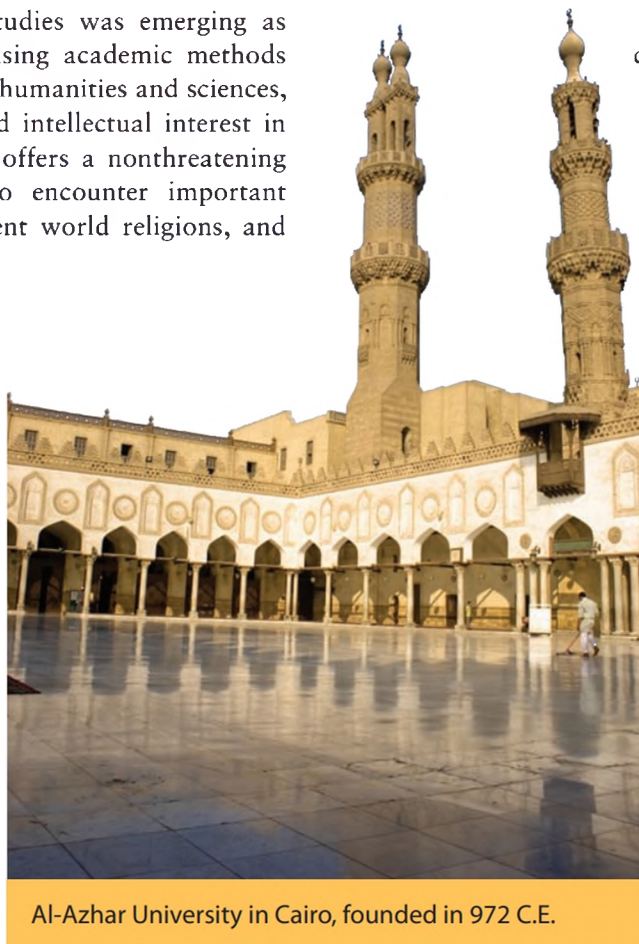
The study of religion in America today is pursued in two main ways. **Theology** is the study of a religion based on a religious commitment to it, in order to

By about 1875, religious studies was emerging as an academic field.¹¹ Now using academic methods from many disciplines in the humanities and sciences, religious studies has a broad intellectual interest in different world religions. It offers a nonthreatening opportunity for students to encounter important issues about religion, different world religions, and life itself.

1-5b History

History is the scholarly study of the past, whether that past is remote (e.g., the beginnings of human civilization) or recent (the events of last year). It seeks to find out what really happened and why. This task is important because, as historian Philip Jenkins has written about religion, “Virtually everybody uses the past in everyday discourse, but the historical record on which they draw is littered with myths, half-truths, and folk-history.”¹² When history is applied to religion, rich and important knowledge emerges, because religions come from the past, both remote and recent. The formal method scholars have developed is called the **historical-critical method**, the study of the past using careful scholarly methods, such as archaeology and the study of texts in their original languages. History studies the process of a religion’s beginnings, growth, diversity, decline, and so on. An example is a recent book titled *Sacred Schisms: How Religions Divide*, which carefully studies internal splits in a dozen religions and draws conclusions about the process of religious splits.¹³ History has almost always been a main method in the study of religion.

historical-critical method Study of the past using careful, scholarly methods



Al-Azhar University in Cairo, founded in 972 C.E.

Oxford historian of Indian culture Max Müller (1823–1900), whom we met earlier, is one of the founders of religious studies—some would say *the* founder. He edited a fifty-volume collection of ancient sacred scriptures from the main Asian religions, translated for the first time into reliable English editions (the Sacred Books of the East series, 1879–1910), a foundational contribution to research and teaching in religious history. He promoted a scholarly discussion on developmental and evolutionary patterns in religious history and on the relation of myth, ritual, and magic to religion in the past. In his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), Müller argued that religious scholarship can be fully scientific in its meth-

ods and results. It can collect, classify, and compare religious texts just as scientifically as a botanist collects and studies plants.

The surprising horrors of the First World War (1914–1918) ended assumptions of automatic progress.

By the end of the 1800s, the notion of near-steady, almost evolutionary progress often assumed in these studies (and in much of European and North American higher learning and culture at that time) started to fade, and the surprising horrors of the First World War (1914–1918) ended assumptions of automatic progress in religion and culture. Müller’s work in religious history was largely text based, especially in scriptures. This was a necessary first step, but the field of religious history would widen in the twentieth century to include popular history, the history of material culture, and additional areas. It would also become less naïve about the ability of historians to be “scientifically” objective about their work.

One particular approach taken by a number of historians of religions is the **history of religions school**. The history of religions school began the formal study of religion as a social and cultural phenomenon. It saw religion as evolving with human culture, from “primitive” polytheism to ethical monotheism. It divided world religions into steps of evolution from polytheistic to monotheistic and from informal to formal. Despite the faults of such an approach, it contributed to a sharp increase in our knowledge about other religions. For the first time, an accurate “map” of the different religions of the world emerged (see Map 1.1).

1-5c Psychology

Psychology deals with the structure and activity of the human mind. It is the scientific study of individual behavior, including emotions and other thoughts. Psychology has an interest in religion because of religion’s role in shaping human behavior—for example, in coping with life-cycle changes and death. Psychology also focuses on how religions understand the human self, including gender. It has been particularly concerned with research in conversion, mysticism, and meditation.

Psychology sought at first to explain the origins of religion in terms of the subconscious mind. Sigmund Freud (froid) and Carl Gustav Jung (yoong), the founders of psychoanalysis, sought in opposing ways to trace the origins from the strongest, most basic human needs and drives. Freud (1856–1939) and his school regarded religion as a neurotic condition that needed therapy when it persisted into adulthood. (See his definition of religion in Section 1-2b.) He held that religion, particularly a belief in God, derives from a need for a divine father figure when children gradually separate from their human fathers. These ideas can be found in his books *The Future of an Illusion*, in which the “illusion” is religion, and *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud finally admitted that a person could experience religion as a valid “oceanic feeling,” but later Freudians would continue to be mostly negative toward religion until about the 1980s, when some change toward a more positive view began.

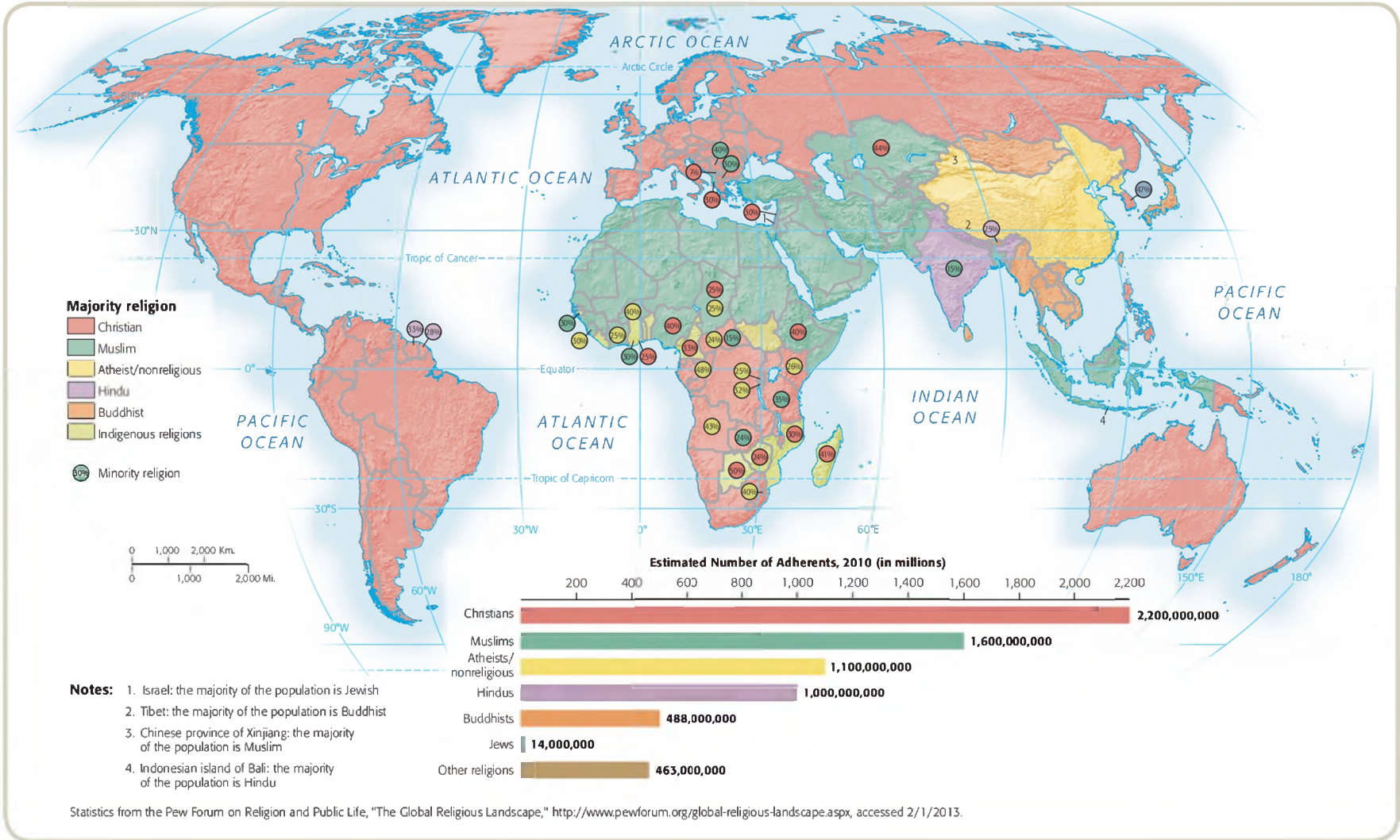
Freud’s pupil Jung (1875–1961), on the other hand, was appreciative of religion. In his books *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* and *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, he held that conceptions of the divine, whether of god(s) or another form of ultimate reality, were related to an ancient archetypal pattern that

resides in the subconscious of all human minds. Religion enables each developing person to bring out and employ this archetype as the individual personality grows and achieves what Jung called “individuation,” or personal maturity and wholeness. The notion of individuation would become important in the human potential/humanistic branch of American psychology. This positive archetype is found in all societies, Jung argued, and his theory also became important for many researchers in the academic discipline of cultural anthropology.

William James (1842–1910), a professor at Harvard, was an American founder of the field of psychology. In his still-important book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James advanced a more pragmatic and positive view of religion than did either Freud or Jung. He maintained that the religious experience of individuals, not religious institutions, should be the primary focus of the psychology of religion and of religion itself. Intense types of religious experience in particular should be studied by psychologists, because they are the closest thing to a “microscope” into the mind. Individuals must develop certain “over-beliefs” that, while they cannot be proven, help humans live purposefully and in “harmony with the universe.” After James, the psychological study of religion went into something of a decline, and scientific research into religious behavior faded.

Since the 1980s, the psychological study of religion has been revived and advanced by neuroscience, particularly with regard to research on the human brain. (Here the psychology of religion comes very close to biology, which we will discuss in Section 1-5g.) A prominent researcher in this field is Andrew Newberg of Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. He measures what happens in the brains of subjects while they meditate or pray—in a way, providing the “microscope into the mind” that William James sought. Newberg’s research uses brain imaging to study Tibetan Buddhists in meditation and Roman Catholic nuns in prayer. He has found that during intense sessions of these activities, areas of the brain associated with concentration and emotion become more active and areas associated with the sense of self become less active. Newberg hypothesizes that this may explain the sense of “otherness” and “oneness with God or ultimate

history of religions school The first academic method to study religion as a social and cultural phenomenon



Map 1.1

Distribution of World Religions Today

Christianity has the most believers in the world today and is the dominant faith in the Americas, Oceania, Europe, Russia, and central and southern Africa. Most people in the northern half of Africa, western Asia, and central Asia embrace Islam. Hindus are concentrated in India and Buddhists in East and Southeast Asia. Although China has been largely atheistic or nonreligious under Communist rule, its main religions—Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity—are growing, and are now espoused by about 25 percent of the population.