



LIVING RELIGIONS

TENTH EDITION

MARY PAT FISHER
ROBIN RINEHART

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PREFACE

Religion is not a museum piece but a vibrant force in the lives of many people around the world today. *Living Religions* is a sympathetic approach to what is living and significant in the world's major religious traditions and in various new movements that are arising. This book provides a clear and straightforward account of the development, doctrines, and practices of the major faiths followed today. The emphasis throughout is on the personal consciousness of believers and their own accounts of their religion and its relevance in contemporary life.

What is new in this edition?

This tenth edition of *Living Religions* has been thoroughly revised and updated with the help of a wonderful co-author, Robin Rinehart, author of books on Asian religions, and Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Religious Studies at Lafayette College, Pennsylvania. In preparing the text we worked with an outstanding team of specialist consultants who provided detailed suggestions and resources for improving the text in the light of recent scholarship.

Old approaches to understanding and explaining religions are being increasingly challenged, so in this edition we have given special attention to sensitive issues raised by current scholarship and by voices from within the religions. Since the first edition of *Living Religions*, which was published in 1991, scholars have turned away from flat declarations that there are two distinct schools of Buddhism, for instance, for the reality is more fluid. Much more emphasis is being placed on cultural customs, popular spiritual practices, mixtures of religions, and varieties of religious ways, as opposed to distinct monolithic institutionalized religions, and this is reflected in new material woven throughout this edition. It is now more difficult to make sweeping generalizations about any religion, for they do not fit the facts that are coming to light.

Globalization

Globalization increasingly shapes our lives, altering cultures and bringing greater contact among people of different religions. It is harder than ever before to sort out reified individual religions. The effects of globalization are, therefore, examined in each chapter of this new edition.

Religion and violence

The crossing and merging of religious paths does not always lead to greater unity, however. Although appreciation and acceptance of the religious ways of others is increasing in some quarters, interactions between differing faiths are also leading to defensive hardening of boundaries. Sadly, the search

for religious identity is being used politically to stoke fires of exclusivism and hatred. In the twenty-first century, as interest in religious participation grows, violence perpetrated in the name of religion is also growing. This tenth edition follows this disturbing trend, while making distinctions between the basic teachings of religions, none of which condones wanton violence, and the ways in which religions have been politicized. Every religion is struggling with its responses to modernity, including fundamentalist and exclusivist reactions to increasing pluralism within our societies, and these struggles are discussed in each chapter.

Economics

Tied together by globalization, people around the world have been affected by a widespread economic recession. The attitudes of religions toward economic issues, including greed, materialism, and the growing gap between rich and poor, are examined throughout this edition.

Environmental and societal change

People of many faiths are also looking at ways in which their religious practices and beliefs are interwoven with and affect the natural environment. This edition, therefore, includes material on religious approaches to contemporary ecological concerns, such as contamination from oil extraction that has devastated coastal areas in Nigeria and ominous signs of climate change everywhere. Many other social issues are being taken up by religious leaders. Examples in this edition include LGBT acceptance, structural injustice, corruption, HIV/AIDS, and female infanticide.

Women

This edition includes expanded coverage of women, with women's voices and contributions woven into the discussion of each religion. Feminist theologies now span decades of work and have reached the point of self-criticism, rather than focusing largely on criticism of traditional patriarchal attitudes that barred women from roles of spiritual power. Obstacles to women's expression of their spirituality still exist, however, and are discussed within the context of the various religious traditions.

This new edition also preserves and improves upon the features that make *Living Religions* special:

Personal interviews with followers of each faith provide interesting and informative first-person accounts of each religion as perceived from within the tradition. We have presented these first-person quotations from many people in "Living..." feature boxes, such as a new interview with a "spiritual but

not religious” student in the United States, and also in excerpts woven throughout the text, such as new insights from a Yoruba dancer and a Jain nun. There are new interview boxes—which focus on how practitioners of each faith experience the beliefs and rituals of their tradition—in the Religious Responses and Daoism and Confucianism chapters. Each chapter opens with an emblematic quotation taken from this first-person material.

Sixteen Religion in Practice feature boxes portray the spiritual activities and beliefs of religious groups or individuals, such as the indigenous American sun dance and the Hindu sacred thread ceremony, providing fascinating insights into significant practices and festivals. A new Religion in Practice box in the Buddhism chapter gives a senior nun’s explanation of death rites in Tibetan Buddhism, and a new box in the Judaism chapter follows the stories of an LGBT couple who are personally and professionally active in the Jewish community.

Eight Religion in Public Life feature boxes portray the spiritual roots of people who are making significant contributions to modern society, such as the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. Two new Religion in Public Life boxes have been added in this tenth edition, featuring Malala Yousafzai, the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize winner who is courageously continuing to campaign for the right to education despite being shot by the Taliban in Pakistan; and the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, representing 130 different religious and ethnic groups who gather to jointly advise the Kazakhstani government on public issues.

Ten Teaching Story feature boxes contain tales that serve as take-off points for discussions about core values embedded in each faith.

An enhanced image program provides fifty-three new images, which, along with more than 200 existing images, help to bring religions to life. Many of the new photographs are Mary’s own, from countries she has visited while doing personal research for this edition. Narrative captions offer additional insights into the characteristics and orientation of each tradition and the people who practice it. Five maps enhancing understanding of particular religions have been altered and improved for this edition.

Quotations from primary sources throughout the book give direct access to the thinking and flavor of each tradition. Attempts have been made to use accessible modern translations for easier understanding.

Pedagogical aids are included throughout the text. New Learning Objectives at the start of each chapter are designed to help students focus on key topics. To reinforce learning, these objectives appear as questions under section headings, and brief summaries of the main points are also included at the end of each chapter. Key Terms, defined and highlighted in boldface when they first appear for discussion, are included in an extensive glossary; many of these are also listed and defined at the end of each chapter for immediate understanding and

review. Useful guides to the pronunciation of many words are included in the glossary. Suggested reading lists of relevant books have been reinstated and updated for each chapter.

Chapter-by-chapter revisions

Chapter 1: Religious Responses has been revised and updated with increased reference to non-Western perspectives on the study of religion. The “Functional perspective: religion is useful” section has been revised with contentious assertions modified. The term “Ultimate Reality” has been used more consistently throughout the chapter as a way of referring to that which is central to all religions but known by many different names. The section on “Understandings of Ultimate Reality” now includes a discussion of humanism. New sub-headings have been added for clarity in the sections “Ritual, symbol, and myth” and “The encounter between science and religion”. The last section, “Lenses for studying religions,” has been revised and made more relevant by including questions that students might ask themselves. A new interview box has been added featuring the views of a student who considers herself “spiritual but not religious,” an increasingly common choice. New images in this chapter include an evocative photo of people praying in a traditional Daoist temple in Hong Kong, surrounded by the modern cityscape.

Chapter 2: Indigenous Sacred Ways has been revised with special attention to new ways of defining indigenous religions. Along with acknowledgment of the great cultural diversity among indigenous religious ways, there is also expanded discussion of commonalities. New topics explored include Yoruba dance experiences, spirit mediums, and conversion to Islam by Aboriginal people. Discussion of shamanism has been revised and the community-centered nature of indigenous ways has been brought into sharper focus. Discussions of contemporary issues now include the effects of ayahuasca tourism on local forest people in South America, eviction of Maasai for the sake of foreign tourism in Kenya, and Indian tribal people’s attempts to block government allocation of forest land to coal-mining companies. New images include the popular Guelagueta celebration in Oaxaca, Mexico, and an alarming photograph of the effects of oil spills on Ogoni land in Nigeria.

Chapter 3: Hinduism has been extensively reorganized for greater logic and easier understanding of this complex of religious ways. Hindu identity politics have come to the fore with successes of the BJP party in India, so the chapter includes questions of whether political success will lead to more exclusive or more inclusive versions of Hinduism. There are five new images in the chapter: an ancient stone carving representing the sun god, a float from a village procession with humans representing characters from the Ramayana, countless brass bells hung in gratitude to a popular local deity, a woman making auspicious designs of colored powders outside her home, and a photograph suggesting the great numbers of devotees who undertake the rigorous mountain trek to the Amarnath cave shrine.

Chapter 4: Jainism includes increased discussion of the relevance of Jainism today. Explanation of the role of the Tirthankaras is expanded, as is that of the role of nuns and laywomen in Jainism. A new feature box describes the meanings of the Jain symbol. The “World Jainism” section has also been updated and revised. The appeal of Jain meditation techniques for foreigners who travel to India to participate in special Preksha meditation camps is discussed, and there is a new image of this growing phenomenon. A new photo of a statue of Mahavir shows both his personal asceticism and the richly ornamental stone carvings with which Jain temples are often adorned.

Chapter 5: Buddhism has been extensively reorganized and revised in the light of recent scholarship, which stresses similarities more than differences between the various schools of Buddhism. Material on the Four Noble Truths and the Dharma has been clarified. New scholarship on the Mahayana tradition is incorporated, including the various canons and emphasis on rituals and monastic practices shared with Theravada. The Vajrayana section has also been updated to reflect new scholarship, and a new Religion in Practice box has been added on death rites in Tibetan Buddhism. “Buddhism in the West” has been amplified with new material on mindfulness teachings and practice. The “Socially engaged Buddhism” section is updated, with discussion on the goals of Buddhist development. Nine new images for this chapter include the huge One Million Monk Dhammakaya Temple in Thailand, Jizo statues for stillborn babies and aborted fetuses in Japan, a senior Tibetan nun teaching a hand position for meditation to a young nun, and the courageous Myanmar (Burma) opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Chapter 6: Daoism and Confucianism has new material on Daoist temples and practices in Hong Kong, where old traditions are popular among younger generations. The discussion of Confucian virtues has been expanded, for they are of increasing interest as having contemporary relevance. “Neo-Confucianism” has been revised with more information on Zhu Xi’s work, and the spread of Neo-Confucianism to Korea and Japan. Material on the resurgence of Confucianism in twenty-first century China has been updated, and there is additional discussion of the contributions of Confucianism to the economic success of East Asian countries. A new Living Confucianism box has been added, featuring Simon Man-ho Wong of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Material on Falun Gong has been moved to the chapter on New Religious Movements, for both Daoists and Buddhists deny that the controversial movement is related to their religions. New images include a photo of a young woman making offerings to her ancestors at a Hong Kong ancestral hall and children participating in a lavish celebration of the birthday of Confucius in Qufu, his home city.

Chapter 7: Shinto has expanded sections on State Shinto and responses to the devastating 2011 tsunami, including revival of old rituals and festivals to improve relationships with the

kami. There are new images of a shrine festival organized by young people in the area hardest hit by the tsunami, and of sumo wrestling, which carries on traditions associated with Shinto beliefs.

The special section on **Zoroastrianism** has been updated to include modern-day pilgrimages to ancient holy places. A new photo illustrates pilgrims worshipping with fire at a sacred site at the base of a cliff in Iran.

Chapter 8: Judaism has been revised for clarity and chronology in the sections on biblical and rabbinic Judaism. Material on the Torah has been rewritten to provide a better explanation of the complexity of the Hebrew scriptures. Contemporary manifestations of Judaism have been updated with new material on Jewish Renewal and modern inclusion of LGBT Jews. A new Religion in Practice box has been added featuring prominent Jewish women who have married each other and who are educating their two children and other young people according to inclusivist values. New images in this chapter include a Torah study group in Israel, a family Seder, women celebrating Purim by reading the Book of Esther together, and Women of the Wall praying during their monthly Rosh Hadesh observance at the Western Wall.

Chapter 9: Christianity has been revised with special reference to contemporary features, issues, and scholarship. Discussion of popular Christianity includes additional information on veneration of relics and participation in pilgrimages. Coverage of the spread of Catholicism to South America, Asia, and Africa is expanded. Veneration of Mary is updated with its current manifestations. Contemporary issues including the plight of Christians amidst violence in the Middle East, sexual abuses by clergy, and ordination of women as bishops are discussed. This chapter also looks at liberalizing attempts by Pope Francis and the split in various denominations between traditionalists and modernizers. There is a new photo of Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew from their historic meeting in Jerusalem to begin working together in areas of common concern. Other new photos include a painting of the Pentecost by a modern Chinese artist, a Posada procession for Christmas in California, Pope Francis greeting a little boy during his homily on grandparents, African Americans worshipping from the heart, and volunteers praying over relief supplies for malnourished children.

Chapter 10: Islam features updated material on contemporary Islam, particularly with reference to politics. Some of the quotations from the Qur’an are replaced with more recent translations, and there are more quotes by women. Information on hajj is expanded, and major Islamic holidays are described. The institution of the caliphate is explained, including its contemporary political relevance. Coverage of shari’ah is increased and fiqh (jurisprudence) explained. Financial and dietary principles are discussed. The militant activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria and IS (Islamic State) in Syria and Iraq are also discussed, along with repudiation of violence in the name

of Islam by other Muslims. Malala Yousafzai, Nobel Peace Prize winner for her courageous support of education for girls in Pakistan, is the subject of a new Religion in Public Life box. New images include a closer photo of the cave of Hira where the Prophet undertook spiritual retreats, men doing their private prayers at an Indian mosque, a communal meal celebrating the end of Ramadan fasting in China, children dressed in their best clothes enjoying a sweet dish at the end of Eid al-Adha prayers, a better image of the interior of the Dome of the Rock, Eid al-Fitr in a Chinese mosque, and a screenshot from the website “Muslim Voices” with articles covering issues such as misunderstandings about Islam and being Muslim in America.

Chapter 11: Sikhism introduces the sant tradition as a feature of the environment in which Sikhism originated. Coverage of the Five Ks is expanded. Contemporary issues include discussion of hate crimes against Sikhs in the diaspora, including the Oak Creek incident in Wisconsin. There is a new image of reading from a large handwritten copy of the Guru Granth Sahib in the Golden Temple as a pilgrim listens reverently.

Chapter 12: New Religious Movements has been updated with discussion of the satirical Flying Spaghetti Monster movement and succession issues in the Unification movement since the death of Rev. Moon. Material on Falun Gong, previously in the Daoism and Confucianism chapter, is also included. There is a new image of a dramatic Agon Shu Shinto-Buddhist fire ceremony with discussion of combinations of several religions. The Chipko tree-hugging movement to save forests from destruction by vested interests is also illustrated and discussed.

Chapter 13: Religion in the Twenty-first Century opens with an updated pie chart on the percentages of people in the world practicing the various religions, including “nones.” Religion is more in the news than ever before, often with reference to politically instigated clashes between people of different religions. Thus this chapter includes displacement of people in the Middle East by violent conflicts, fallout from the Iraq war and the Arab Spring, the spread of IS, recent tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, and the perceived need for radical cultural and political reform if such tensions are to be abated. At the same time, initiatives to improve harmony among people of different religions are growing. Thus the chapter describes efforts such as the Oasis of Peace community in Israel, and there is a new Religion in Public Life feature box on the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, which intentionally embraces all religious and ethnic groups. Discussion of serious social issues affecting the future of humanity includes responses to climate change and concern about structural evil embedded in capitalism and materialism. New images include a poster that scared Swiss citizens into voting to ban minarets on mosques, Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Arab children with a peace sign at their Oasis of Peace school, the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, and an interfaith Noah’s Ark float in the huge People’s Climate March in New York.

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In order to try to understand each religion from the inside, Mary has traveled for many years to study and worship with devotees and teachers of all faiths, and to interview them about their experience of their tradition. People of all religions also come to the Gobind Sadan Institute for Advanced Studies in Comparative Religions, in New Delhi, where it is her good fortune to meet and speak with them about their spiritual experiences and beliefs. Robin has also traveled extensively while doing research on religions, especially in India, and her experiences and colleagues have been very helpful in improving our writings about the contemporary practice of religions.

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Gobind Sadan Institute for Advanced Studies

in Comparative Religions

Robin Rinehart

Lafayette College

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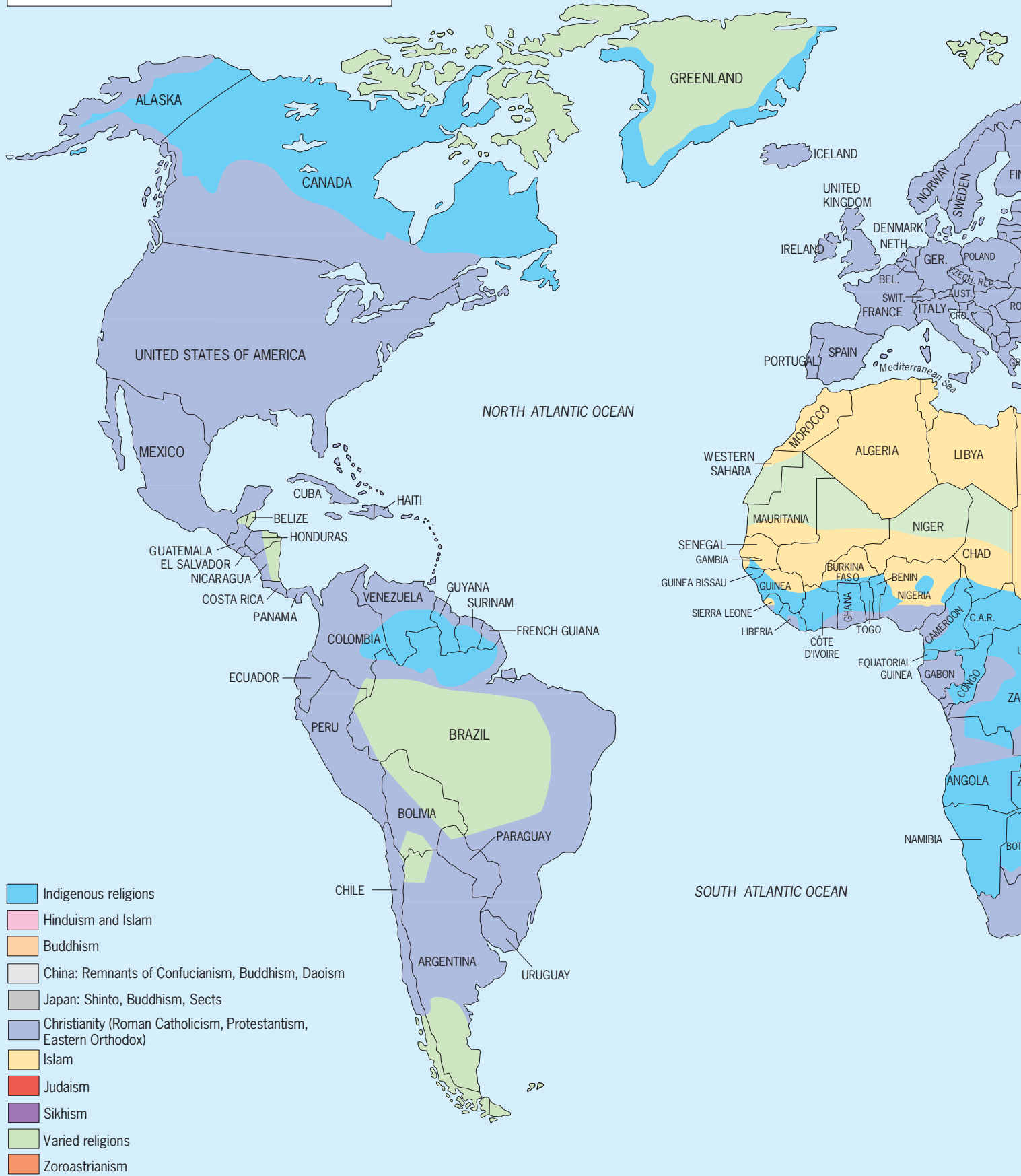
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Predominant forms of religions in the world today





TIMELINE	2000 BCE	1500	1000	500	1 CE
INDIGENOUS	←				
HINDUISM	←	According to some scholars, early Vedas first composed c.1500 BCE		<i>Ramayana</i> and <i>Mahabharata</i> in present form after 400 BCE	Code of Manu compiled 100–300 CE Patanjali systematizes <i>Yoga Sutras</i> by 200 BCE
JAINISM		Series of 23 Tirthankaras before c.777 BCE →		Life of Mahavira 599–527 BCE	Digambaras and Shvetambaras diverge from 3rd century BCE
BUDDHISM				Life of Gautama Buddha c.5th century BCE King Ashoka spreads Buddhism c.258 BCE	Theravada Buddhism develops c.200 BCE–200 CE Mahayana Buddhism develops 1st century CE
DAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM				Life of Laozi c.600–300 BCE Life of Confucius c.551–479 BCE	Educational system based on Confucian Classics from 205 BCE Life of Zhuangzi c.365–290 BCE
SHINTO	Shinto begins in pre-history as local nature- and ancestor-based traditions				
JUDAISM	Life of Abraham c.1900–1700 BCE	Moses leads Israelites out of Egypt c.13th or 12th century BCE	David, king of Judah and Israel c.1010–970 BCE		Jerusalem falls to Romans 70 CE First Temple destroyed; Jews exiled 586 BCE
CHRISTIANITY					Life of Jesus c.4 BCE–30 CE Paul organizes early Christians c.50–60 CE Gospels written down c.70–95 CE
ISLAM					
SIKHISM					
INTERFAITH					
	2000 BCE	1500	1000	500	1 CE

300	600	900	1200	1500	1800	2000 CE
Ancient ways passed down and adapted over millennia 						
Tantras written down c.300	Bhakti movement 600–1800 				Life of Ramakrishna 1836–1886	
					Jain monks establish Jain centers outside India 1970s–1980s	
	Life of Songstan (c.609–650) who declares Buddhism national religion of Tibet	Persecution of Buddhism begins in China 845	Chan Buddhism to Japan as Zen 13th century		Buddhism spreads in the West 20th century Full ordination of nuns from 23 countries 1998	
	Japan imports Confucianism to unite tribes into empire	Sung dynasty revives ritualistic Confucianism (“Neo-Confucianism”)			Cultural Revolution attacks religions 1966–1976 Confucian revival in China; International Association of Confucianism established; Daoist sects and temples re-established 1990–2000	
	Shinto name adopted 6th century CE				State Shinto established 1868	
Rabbinical tradition develops 1st to 4th centuries			Life of Maimonides 1135–1204	Expulsion of Jews from Spain 1492	The Baal Shem Tov c.1700–1760	The Holocaust 1933–1945 Independent state of Israel 1948 Israeli wall for separation from Palestinians 2003
		Centralization of papal power after 800	Split between Western and Eastern Orthodox Churches 1054	Monastic orders proliferate 1300s Spanish Inquisition established 1478	Protestantism established 1517	Second Vatican Council 1962–1965 Churches reopened in Soviet Union 1989
	Life of Muhammad c.570–632 Spread of Islam begins 633 Sunni–Shi’a split c.682 Islam’s cultural peak 750–1258			Akbar becomes Mughal emperor in India 1556	European dominance 1800s–1900s	Terrorism and counterterrorism increase 2001 Muslim resurgence and OPEC 1970s
				Life of Guru Nanak 1469–1539	At death of Guru Gobind Singh (1708), living presence of the guru is embodied in Guru Granth Sahib (scriptures)	300th anniversary of Khalsa 1999
				Mughal emperor Akbar initiates interfaith dialogues 1556–1605		First International Human Unity Conference 1974 Parliament of the World’s Religions centenary celebrations 1993
300	600	900	1200	1500	1800	2000 CE

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CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES



“By calling myself spiritual but not religious, I can still acknowledge my belief that there may be higher powers of a divine nature without necessarily accepting just one belief system of an organized religious institution.” Ivy DeWitt¹

- 1.1 *Explain what is meant by spirituality*
- 1.2 *Identify three perspectives used to explain the existence of religion*
- 1.3 *Differentiate between monotheistic, polytheistic, and nontheistic*
- 1.4 *Explain the significance of rituals, symbols, and myths in religions*
- 1.5 *Contrast absolutist with liberal interpretations of a religious tradition*
- 1.6 *Discuss the major positions that have emerged in the dialogue between science and religion since the nineteenth century*
- 1.7 *Describe how women are challenging the patriarchal nature of many institutionalized religions*
- 1.8 *Identify the factors that contribute to the negative aspects of organized religions*
- 1.9 *Summarize the different “lenses” used by scholars to study religion*

Before sunrise, members of a Muslim family rise in Malaysia, perform their purifying ablutions, spread their prayer rugs facing Mecca, and begin their prostrations and prayers to Allah. In a French cathedral, worshipers line up for their turn to have a priest place a wafer on their tongue, murmuring, “This is the body of Christ, given for you.” In a South Indian village, a group of women reverently anoint a cylindrical stone with milk and fragrant sandalwood paste and place

Jewish women praying at the Western Wall. Many scraps of paper with personal prayers are tucked into the cracks between the ancient stones.



around it offerings of flowers. The monks of a Japanese Zen Buddhist monastery sit cross-legged and upright in utter silence, which is broken occasionally by the noise of the *kyosaku* bat falling on their shoulders. On a mountain in Mexico, men, women, and children who have been dancing without food or water for days greet an eagle flying overhead with a burst of whistling from the small wooden flutes they wear around their necks. In Jerusalem, Jews tuck scraps of paper containing their personal prayers between the stones of the ancient Western Wall, which once supported their sacred Temple, while above that wall only Muslims are allowed to enter the Dome of the Rock to pray.

These and countless other moments in the lives of people around the world are threads of the tapestry we call religion. The word is probably derived from the Latin, meaning “to tie back,” “to tie again.” All of religion shares the goal of tying people back to something behind the surface of life—a greater reality, which lies beyond, or invisibly infuses, the world that we can perceive with our five senses.

Attempts to connect with or comprehend this greater reality have taken many forms. Many of them are organized institutions, such as Buddhism or Christianity. These institutions are complexes of such elements as leaders, beliefs, rituals, symbols, myths, scriptures, ethics, spiritual practices, cultural components, historical traditions, and management structures. Moreover, they are not fixed and distinct categories, as simple labels such as “Buddhism” and “Christianity” suggest. Each of these labels is an abstraction that is used in the attempt to bring some kind of order to the study of religious patterns that are in fact complex, diverse, ever-changing, and overlapping.

Attempts to define religion

What are the inner dimensions of religion?

The labels “Buddhism,” “Hinduism,” “Daoism,” “Zoroastrianism,” and “Confucianism” did not exist until the nineteenth century, though the many patterns to which they refer had existed for thousands of years. Professor Willard G. Oxtoby (1933–2003), founding director of the Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto, observed that when Western Christian scholars began studying other religions, they applied assumptions based on the Christian model

to other paths, looking for specific creedal statements of belief (a rarity in indigenous lifeways), a dichotomy between what is secular and what is sacred (not helpful in looking at the teachings of Confucius and his followers), and the idea that a person belongs to only one religion at a time (which does not apply in Japan, where people freely follow various religious traditions).

Not all religious behavior occurs within institutional confines. The inner dimensions of religion—such as experiences, beliefs, and values—can be referred to as **spirituality**. This is part of what is called religion, but it may occur in personal, noninstitutional ways, without the ritual and social dimensions of organized religions. Indeed there are growing numbers of people in the world today who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (see box, p. 4). Personal spirituality without reference to a particular religious tradition permeates much contemporary artistic creation. Without theology, without historical references, such direct experiences are difficult to express, whether in words, images, or music. Contemporary artist Lisa Bradley says of her luminous paintings:

In them you can see movement and stillness at the same time, things coming in and out of focus. The light seems to be from behind. There is a sense of something like a permeable membrane, of things coming from one dimension to another. But even that doesn't describe it well. How do you describe truth in words?²

Religions can be dynamic in their effects, bringing deep changes in individuals and societies, for good or ill. As Professor Christopher Queen, world religions scholar from Harvard University, observes:

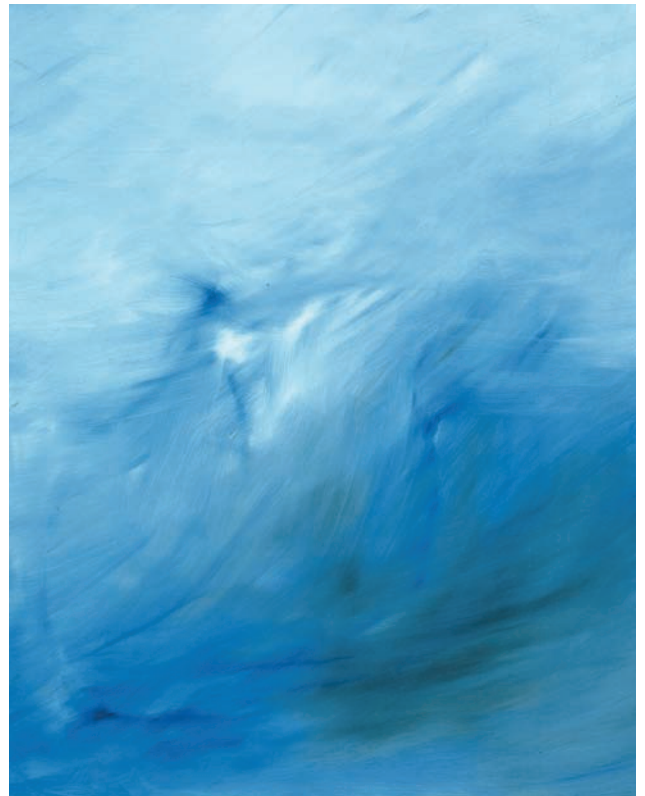
The interpersonal and political realms may be transformed by powerful religious forces. Devotion linking human and divine beings, belief in holy people or sacred space, and ethical teachings that shape behaviors and attitudes may combine to transform individual identities and the social order itself.³

Frederick Streng (1933–1993), an influential scholar of comparative religion, suggested in his book *Understanding Religious Life* that the central definition of religion is that it is a “means to ultimate transformation.” A complete definition of religion would include its relational aspect (“tying back”), its transformational potential, and also its political dimensions.

Current attempts to define religions may thus refer more to processes than to fixed independent entities. Professor of Religious Studies Thomas A. Tweed, for instance, proposes this definition in his book *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*:

Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries—terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic. ...This theory is, above all, about movement and relation, and it is an attempt to correct theories [of religion] that have presupposed stasis and minimized interdependence.⁴

Religion is such a complex and elusive topic that some contemporary scholars of religion are seriously questioning whether “religion” or “religions” can be studied at all, or whether the concept of religion itself is useful. They have determined that no matter where and at what point they try to define the concept, other parts will get away. Nonetheless, this difficult-to-grasp subject is central to many people’s lives and has assumed great political significance in today’s world,



Lisa Bradley, *Passing Shadow*, 2002.

LIVING RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

An Interview with Ivy DeWitt



Ivy DeWitt is a recent college graduate who majored in both economics and religious studies. Raised in a traditional Baptist Church, she found that as she learned more about different religions, and asked questions

about issues such as women's roles within religions, she no longer felt comfortable identifying herself as a member of one specific religious group. Now, like about eighteen percent of Americans, she describes herself as "spiritual but not religious,"⁵ exploring her beliefs in an individualistic way rather than through set teachings and practices of a single religious organization. Ivy explains:

Being spiritual but not religious allows for a more individualized experience and expression of religion. Spirituality feels like an entirely personal experience in many ways to me, and being spiritual but not religious allows me to question and explore a variety of religious identities without feeling as though I'm constrained by a single religious institution. By calling myself spiritual but not religious, I can still acknowledge my belief that there may be higher powers of a divine nature without necessarily accepting just one belief system of an organized religious institution.

Ivy acknowledges the important role that religious organizations play in building a strong community, but found that her personal exploration of spirituality was more important to her:

I think of "religion" as having more to do with communities and institutions. Growing up as a Baptist Protestant Christian, I felt that the most important part of the religious experience was having strong ties to your group. I also believe another important aspect of religion is doctrines. While I acknowledge that people can have a variety of opinions within a single religion, and that views can also vary throughout branches of a religion, doctrines help to unify people under a central belief system, which can also be very important in holding a community together. In contrast, I think of spirituality as a more individualized experience, something that isn't defined by the specific teachings or practices of a particular religion. While many people associate spirituality with a greater sense of feeling or emotion than anything that comes about through being part of an organized religion, I don't necessarily agree. Religion and spirituality can overlap to create a wide sense of emotional experiences, but I like to associate spirituality with individual discovery. To me, spirituality is not just about emotional experience, but also about finding what your values are, and aligning them either with a religious identity or a personalized belief system.

Ivy first began to question whether her own evolving beliefs were compatible with what she was taught in school and church during high school:

I attended a non-denominational Protestant high school. I had questions about women's roles in church, and I wondered if my personal beliefs aligned with Protestant teachings on contemporary social issues. There were discussions within my communities about whether women could be pastors. I struggled to understand whether this implied that women and men had different spiritual capabilities, and if I agreed with that sentiment. I started to distance myself from the church as a way to decide what my own viewpoints were concerning women's rights and other social issues—and whether they aligned with the religious perspectives I had been raised with. I decided to identify as spiritual but not religious roughly about partway through my junior year of college. I began to realize that I didn't hold any set beliefs that I felt aligned with my religious tradition. Ultimately I decided that it didn't make sense for me to continue identifying as a Protestant, and the spiritual but not religious label seemed to capture how I felt at the time. I continue to use it now because I believe it is the most accurate description of my belief system. I care more about holding to my personal beliefs in relation to women's rights and social justice than the community or doctrinal aspects of religion. It's not that I believe the religious beliefs I grew up with are completely incongruent with my own, but at the moment identifying with a single religious community isn't reconcilable with other principles that I value.

For Ivy, spiritual experience does not follow from accepting a particular set of beliefs, but more from exploring many different religious traditions to see what inspires her.

Being spiritual but not religious allows me to navigate religious history while also navigating my own identity. I don't believe I'll ever finish navigating either one, which is why I enjoy how being spiritual has allowed me to do that free of any particular religious labels. Some people disagree with certain key tenets of their religion, but still remain a part of it. I think that they choose to focus on what they see as core principles of the tradition, in spite of whatever disagreements they have, and they may find it hard to give up being part of a religious community. I do think that spiritual but not religious people are to some extent missing out on some of the community-related parts of religion. But I believe that most people who identify as spiritual but not religious probably aren't looking for a community religious experience. Having participated in a religious community myself, I sincerely enjoy my current ability to explore different religious traditions and identities on my own without feeling tied to a specific institution.⁶

so it is important to try sincerely to understand it. In this introductory chapter, we will try to develop some understanding of religion in a generic sense—why it exists, its various patterns and modes of interpretation, its encounters with modern science, its inclusion or exclusion of women, and its potentially negative aspects—before trying in the subsequent chapters to understand the major traditions known as “religions” practiced around the world today.

Why are there religions?

What major theories have evolved to explain the existence of religion?

In many cultures and times, religion has been the basic foundation of life, permeating all aspects of human existence. In fact, in some cultures what we may now identify as “religion” has so permeated everything that it was not even identified as a particular category of human experience. But from the time of the European Enlightenment, religion has become in the West an object to be studied, rather than a basic fact of life. Cultural anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and even biologists and neuroscientists have peered at religion through their own particular lenses, trying to explain what religion is, its function and purpose, and developing a wide range of methods for studying religion. In the following pages we will briefly examine some of the major theories that have evolved. They are not mutually exclusive.

Materialist perspective: humans invented religion

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scientific materialism gained considerable prominence as a theory to explain the fact that religion can be found in some form in every culture around the world. The materialistic point of view is that the supernatural is invented by humans; only the material world exists.

An influential example of this perspective can be found in the work of the nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). He reasoned that deities are simply projections, objectifications of human qualities such as power, wisdom, and love onto an imagined cosmic deity outside ourselves. Then we worship it as Supreme and do not recognize that those same qualities lie within ourselves; instead, we see ourselves as weak and sinful. Feuerbach developed this theory with particular reference to Christianity as he had seen it.

Other scientific materialists believe that religions have been created or at least used to manipulate people. Historically, religions have often supported and served secular power. The nineteenth-century socialist philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883), author of *The Communist Manifesto*, argued that a culture’s religion—as well as all other aspects of its social structure—springs from its economic framework. In Marx’s view, religion’s origins lie in the longings of the oppressed. It may have developed from the desire to revolutionize society and combat exploitation, but in failing to do so it became otherworldly, an expression of unfulfilled desires for a better, more satisfying life:

Man makes religion: religion does not make man. ... The religious world is but the reflex of the real world. ... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.⁷

According to Marx, not only do religions pacify people falsely, they may themselves become tools of oppression. For instance, he charged Christian authorities of his times with supporting “vile acts of the oppressors” by explaining them as due punishment of sinners by God. Other critics have made similar complaints against Asian religions that blame the sufferings of the poor on their own misdeeds in previous lives. Such interpretations and uses of religious

teachings lessen the perceived need for society to help those who are oppressed and suffering. Marx's ideas thus led toward twentieth-century atheistic communism, for he had asserted, "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness."⁸

Many contemporary atheist thinkers have also adopted a materialist approach to religion, arguing that religious assertions about the supernatural, such as the existence of God, are testable hypotheses that cannot be proven.

Functional perspective: religion is useful

Another line of reasoning has emerged in the search for a theory explaining the universal existence of religions: They are found everywhere because they are useful, both for society and for individuals. Religions "do things" for us, such as helping us to define ourselves and making the world and life comprehensible to us. Functional explanations have come from many disciplines.

One version of the functional explanation is based on sociology. Pioneering work in this area was done by French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). He proposed that humans cannot live without organized social structures, and that religion is a glue that holds a society together. Surely religions have the potential for creating harmony in society, for they all teach social virtues such as love, compassion, altruism, justice, and discipline over our desires and emotions. Political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell concluded from a survey of religiosity in the United States that people who are involved in organized religions are generally more generous toward their neighbors and more conscientious as citizens than those who do not participate in religions,⁹ although critics have noted that it may be that the group affiliation that is part of religion is a better predictor of generosity than religious belief itself. The role of religion in the social process of identity formation at individual, family, community, and national levels is now being carefully examined, for people's identification with a particular religion can be manipulated to influence social change—either to thwart, moderate, or encourage it.

Biology also offers some functional reasons for the existence of religion. For instance, John Bowker, author of *Is God a Virus?*, asserts that religions are organized systems that serve the essential biological purpose of bringing people together for their common survival. To Bowker, religion is found universally because it protects gene replication and the nurturing of children. He proposes that because of its survival value, the potential for religiosity may even be genetically inherent in human brains.

Some medical professionals have found that religious faith may be good for our health. Research conducted by the Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health at Duke University found that those who attend religious services or read scriptures frequently are significantly longer lived, less likely to be depressed, less likely to have high blood pressure, and nearly ninety percent less likely to smoke. Many other studies have indicated that patients with strong faith recover faster from illness and operations. In contrast, however, some scholars have pointed out that some of the most religious regions of the world also have very high rates of disease, suggesting that it is not just religion but broader societal factors such as community support as well as access to health care that factor into overall wellbeing.

Many medical studies have also been done on the potential of prayer to heal illness, but results have been mixed. However, meditation has been proved to reduce mental stress and also to help develop positive emotions, even in the face of great difficulties. Citing laboratory tests of the mental calmness of Buddhists who practice "mindfulness" meditation, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama points out that:

Over the millenniums, many practitioners have carried out what we might call "experiments" in how to overcome our tendencies toward destructive emotions. The

*world today needs citizens and leaders who can work toward ensuring stability and engage in dialogue with the “enemy”—no matter what kind of aggression or assault they may have endured. If humanity is to survive, happiness and inner balance are crucial. We would do well to remember that the war against hatred and terror can be waged on this, the internal front, too.*¹⁰

From the point of view of individual psychology, there are many explanations of the usefulness of religion. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1938) suggested that religion fulfills neurotic needs. He described religion as a collective fantasy, a “universal obsessional neurosis”—a replaying of our loving and fearful relationships with our parents. Religious belief gives us a God powerful enough to protect us from the terrors of life, and will reward or punish us for obedience or nonobedience to social norms. From Freud’s extremely sceptical point of view, religious belief is an illusion springing from people’s infantile insecurity and neurotic guilt; as such it closely resembles mental illness.

On a more positive note, the twentieth-century psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1900–1980) concluded that humans have a need for a stable frame of reference, and that religion fulfills this need. As Mata Amritanandamayi, a contemporary Indian spiritual teacher, explains:

*Faith in God gives one the mental strength needed to confront the problems of life. Faith in the existence of God makes one feel safe and protected from all the evil influences of the world. To have faith in the existence of a Supreme Power and to live accordingly is a religion. When we become religious, morality arises, which, in turn, will help to keep us away from malevolent influences. We won’t drink, we won’t smoke, and we will stop wasting our energy through unnecessary gossip and talk. ... We will also develop qualities like love, compassion, patience, mental equipoise, and other positive traits. These will help us to love and serve everyone equally. ... Where there is faith, there is harmony, unity and love. A nonbeliever always doubts. ... He cannot be at peace; he’s restless. ... The foundation of his entire life is unstable and scattered due to his lack of faith in a higher principle.*¹¹

For many, the desire for material achievement offers a temporary sense of purposefulness. But once achieved, material goals may seem hollow. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Ninth Sikh Guru, said:

*The whole world is just like a dream;
It will pass away in an instant,
Like a wall of sand,
[Though] built up and plastered with great care,
Which does not last even four days.
Likewise are the pleasures of mammon.*¹²

Once this realization comes, a search for something more lasting and deeply meaningful may then arise.

Religions propose ideals that can radically transform people. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was an extremely shy, fearful child. His transformation into one of the great political figures of the twentieth century occurred as he meditated single-mindedly on the great Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, particularly the second chapter, which he says was “inscribed on the tablet of my heart.”¹³ It reads, in part:

*He is forever free who has broken
Out of the ego-cage of I and mine
To be united with the Lord of Love.
This is the supreme state. Attain thou this
And pass from death to immortality.*¹⁴

People need inner strength for dealing with personal problems. Those who are suffering severe physical illness, privation, terror, or grief often turn to the divine for help. Conviction that Someone or Something that cannot be seen exists may be an antidote to the discomfiting sense of being alone in the



Even in the midst of busy modern life, many people turn to Something they cannot see for spiritual help. These people are making food offerings in the popular Sik Sik Yuen Wong Tai Sin Daoist temple in Hong Kong in hope of spiritual healing for themselves or their loved ones.

universe. This isolation can be painful, even terrifying. The divine may be sought as a loving father or mother, or as a friend. Alternatively, some paths offer the way of self-transcendence. Through them, the sense of isolation is lost in mystical merger with the One Being, with the Ultimate Reality.

According to some Asian religions, the concept that we are distinct, autonomous individuals is an illusion; what we think of as “our” consciousnesses and “our” bodies is in perpetual flux. Thus, freedom from problems lies in accepting temporal change and devaluing the “small self” in favor of the eternal self. The ancient sages of India, whose teachings are preserved in the Upanishads, called this eternal self “the breathing behind breathing, the sight behind sight, the hearing behind hearing, the thinking behind thinking...”¹⁵

Buddhists see the problem of human existence differently. What humans have in common, they feel, is the suffering that comes from life’s impermanence and our craving for it to remain the same. For Buddhists, reliance on an Absolute or God and the belief in a personal self or an Eternal Self only makes the suffering more intense. The solution is to let go of these ideas, to accept the groundlessness and openness of life, and to grow in clear awareness and humanistic values.

We may look to religions for understanding, for answers to our many questions about life. Is life just a series of random and chaotic incidents, or is there some meaning and order behind what is happening? Who are we? Why are we here? What happens after we die? Why is there suffering? Why is there evil? Is anybody

up there listening? We have difficulty accepting the commonsense notion that this life is all there is. We are born, we struggle to support ourselves, we age, and we die. If we believe that there is nothing more, fear of death may inhibit enjoyment of life and make all human actions seem pointless. Confronting mortality is so basic to the spiritual life that, as the Christian monk Brother David Steindl-Rast observes, whenever monks from any spiritual tradition meet, within five minutes they are talking about death.

It appears that throughout the world man [sic] has always been seeking something beyond his own death, beyond his own problems, something that will be enduring, true and timeless. He has called it God, he has given it many names; and most of us believe in something of that kind, without ever actually experiencing it.

*Jiddu Krishnamurti*¹⁶

For those who find security in specific answers, some religions offer **dogma**—systems of doctrines proclaimed as absolutely true and accepted as such, even if they lie beyond the domain of one’s personal experiences. Absolute faith provides some people with a secure feeling of rootedness, meaning, and orderliness in the midst of rapid social change. Religions may also provide rules for living, governing everything from diet to personal relationships. Such prescriptions may be seen as earthly reflections of the order that prevails in the cosmos. Some religions, however, encourage people to explore the perennial questions by themselves, and to live in the uncertainties of not knowing intellectually, breaking through old concepts until nothing remains but truth itself.

Faith perspective: Ultimate Reality exists

From the point of view of religious faith, there truly is an underlying reality that cannot readily be perceived. Human responses to this Ultimate Reality have been expressed and institutionalized as the structures of some religions.

How have people concluded that there is some supreme, Ultimate Reality, even though they may be unable to perceive it with their ordinary senses? Some simply accept what has been told to them or what is written in their holy books. Others have come to their own conclusions.

One path to faith is through deep questioning. Martin Luther (1483–1546), father of the Protestant branches of Christianity, recounted how he searched for faith in God through storms of doubt, “raged with a fierce and agitated conscience.”¹⁷ Jnana yoga practitioners probe the question “Who am I?” Gradually they strip away all of what they are not—for instance, “I am not the body, I am not the thinking”—and dig even into the roots of “I,” until only pure Awareness remains.

The human mind does not function in the rational mode alone; there are other modes of consciousness. In his classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the philosopher William James (1842–1910) concluded:

*Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. . . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.*¹⁸

To perceive truth directly, beyond the senses, beyond the limits of human reason, beyond blind belief, is often called **mysticism**. George William Russell (1867–1935), an Irish writer who described his mystical experiences under the pen name “AE,” was lying on a hillside:

*not then thinking of anything but the sunlight, and how sweet it was to drowse there, when, suddenly, I felt a fiery heart throb, and knew it was personal and intimate, and started with every sense dilated and intent, and turned inwards, and I heard first a music as of bells going away . . . and then the heart of the hills was opened to me, and I knew there was no hill for those who were there, and they were unconscious of the ponderous mountain piled above the palaces of light, and the winds were sparkling and diamond clear, yet full of colour as an opal, as they glittered through the valley, and I knew the Golden Age was all about me, and it was we who had been blind to it but that it had never passed away from the world.*¹⁹

Encounters with this ordinarily unseen, Ultimate Reality are given various names in spiritual traditions: **enlightenment**, **realization**, illumination, satori, **awakening**, self-knowledge, **gnosis**, ecstatic communion, “coming home.” Such a state may arise spontaneously, as in near-death experiences in which people seem to find themselves in a world of unearthly radiance, or may be induced by meditation, fasting, prayer, chanting, drugs, or dancing.

Many religions have developed meditation techniques that encourage intuitive wisdom to come forth. Whether this wisdom is perceived as a natural faculty within or an external voice, the process is similar. The consciousness is initially turned away from the world and even from one’s own feelings and thoughts, letting them all go. Often a concentration practice, such as watching the breath or staring at a candle flame, is used to collect the awareness into a single, unfragmented focus. Once the mind is quiet, distinctions between inside and outside drop away. The seer becomes one with the seen, in a fusion of subject and object



Sufi dervishes in Sudan chant names of God’s qualities as a way to God-realization.