

1 Studying the World's Religions

Scan the news on any given day, and you probably will come across examples of how religion influences everyday life around the world. Consider the following newspaper excerpts:

Muslim, Sikh and Hindu residents of Ahmedabad said today that people associated with the World Hindu Council, the group that was aboard [a train attacked by Muslims], had played a role in instigating the anti-Muslim riots in revenge, with their trademark shouts of “Jai Shri Ram!”—“Victory to the God Ram!”

No longer exclusive to traditionally Buddhist countries, Buddhist temples such as this one in Bangkok, Thailand, are becoming more common all over the world.



A priest in the northern city of Rousse, supported by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, says he will denounce the Harry Potter books of J. K. Rowling—best sellers in Bulgaria, as in much of the rest of the world—at his service tomorrow.

The Vatican announced that Pope John Paul II would canonize Amabile Lucia Visintainer, giving Brazil, the world's most populous Roman Catholic country, its first saint.

Faced with a storm of criticism of a coming exhibition with Nazi themes, the Jewish Museum said yesterday that it had a plan intended to satisfy Holocaust survivors who have objected to some of the works without alienating ardent supporters of provocative new art.

A Global Village

The preceding quotations are drawn from four different articles in the same newspaper on the same day—the *New York Times*, March 2, 2002: compelling evidence that the world's religions are part of everybody's everyday world. We cannot call ourselves informed citizens without having at least a basic knowledge of them.

Today more than ever before, we live in a global village. Thumbing through the newspaper, logging on to the Internet, flying across the ocean, buying clothes and goods created by people far away, and a host of other activities have made us all, in a real sense, neighbors. This unprecedented variety of interactions offers an abundance of opportunities to enrich our lives, by connecting us with people who think and live differently than we do. But it also poses challenges. For one thing, it is more difficult than ever to be adequately informed about one's community—now that that "community" includes the entire world. And part of meeting this challenge is gaining a sound understanding of the world's religious traditions.

As the global community grows ever more close-knit, the relevance of religion in our day-to-day lives will continue to loom larger, not only at the level of international affairs, but locally as well. Most people already have—or soon will have—friends, classmates, or coworkers who belong to religious traditions quite different from their own.

Recognizing the need to understand the world's religions is one thing; achieving such

A Search newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and other sources for at least three stories that mention religion. Answer this question: How does religion affect people's daily lives in each example?

an understanding is another. This book aims to help. In certain ways, the study of world religions is especially challenging, as the following section explains. But it also offers a great opportunity for discovering the many ways of being human.

The Nature of a Religious Tradition

Religion begins with mystery. Being human inevitably prompts deep questions about our existence: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? For that matter, what is “here”? That is, what is the nature of this world? What is the nature of the supreme or ultimate reality? Beset with such questions, we find ourselves confronting mystery on all sides. By responding to the questions, religion provides a way of living and dying meaningfully amid the mystery.

This book explores the various responses to mystery that are offered by the world’s religions. Anything so intimately involved with mystery is bound to be difficult, so it will help if the study itself is demystified as much as possible. The process of demystification begins by probing the nature of the questions most religious traditions address.

Religious Questions

Human beings, presumably unlike any other members of the animal kingdom, have the amazing capacity to question such fundamental things as the source and the meaning of their existence. We are self-conscious beings. Along with being physical, rational, and emotional, we have the capacity for self-reflection; we have a conscience; we can ponder our own nature. In a word, we are spiritual (although the term *spiritual* is open to interpretation). And by virtue of our spirituality, we ask—and answer—life’s most basic questions. Because these questions are more or less pertinent to

each religious tradition, they can be organized into a kind of framework to use in studying the world’s religions.

Not everyone chooses to answer these basic religious questions by following a religious tradition. Some people, even though they regard themselves as spiritual, are not members of a specific religion. But others find that religions help them grapple with religious questions. Religions offer responses that have been tested by time, in some cases by thousands of years. They are also fortified by the richness of tradition and by the shared experience of community.

Regardless of how we choose to respond to them, religious questions are inevitable. Studying these questions can help us better understand the nature of a religious tradition. Let us consider the primary ones.

What Is the Human Condition?

The initial religious question concerns the basic nature of the human condition: What is our essential nature? Are we merely what we appear to be—physical bodies somehow equipped with the capacity to think and to feel? Or are we endowed with a deeper spiritual essence, some form of soul? Are human beings by nature good, or evil, or somewhere in-between, perhaps originally good but now flawed in some way?

Often a religion’s view of the basic nature of the human condition is set forth in its account of human origins. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, told in the Jewish and Christian Bibles and also in the Qur’an (or Koran, the sacred book of Islam), is one clear example.

Suffering is an important aspect of the human condition. All religions recognize that we suffer. The question is, Why do we suffer? If we are by nature good and in no need of greater perfection, then of course suffering is not our fault. But if we are evil, or somehow flawed, perhaps we deserve to suffer. A religion

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The terms *spiritual* and *religious* often mean different things to different people. What does each term mean to you?

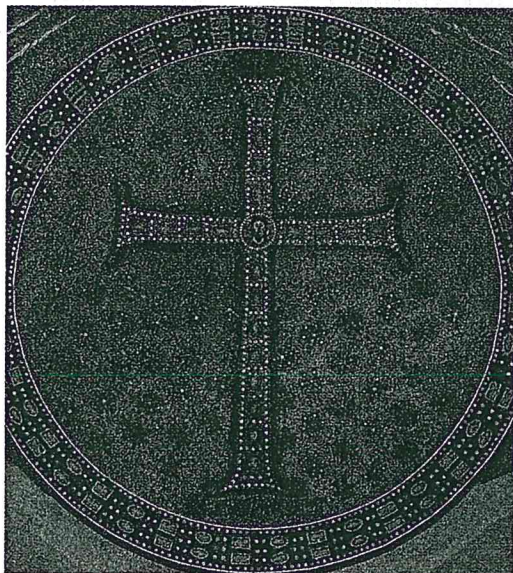
C Contemplate the human condition by comparing the situation of humans with that of a favorite animal (it could be a pet). Does the animal think or feel, like people do? Does it seem to have a spiritual essence or soul? Does it seem to be by nature good, or evil, or somewhere in-between?

typically describes a means of overcoming suffering—and of responding to the human condition in general—through the attainment of some higher state of spiritual maturity.

What Is Spiritual Perfection?

Almost every religion describes what is needed to fulfill our spiritual potential most perfectly. Some religions teach a form of spiritual perfection that can be attained in this life. Others teach that perfection must await an afterlife. In either case perfection is a difficult thing to attain; in fact some religions teach that it is impossible to attain on our own, without divine assistance. Therefore religions tend to acknowledge the goodness of being as spiritually mature and near to perfection as possible, and do not always propose that perfection is a simple all-or-none condition.

Later in this study of religions, you will encounter specific examples that explore various approaches to spiritual maturity and **spiritual perfection**. For now briefly consider three questions about the way a religion defines spiritual perfection: What is ethical—that is, how are we to act while living in the world? How do we transcend the human condition? And how do we attain salvation?



In Christianity the cross is often used as a symbol of salvation. This mosaic is from a church in Ravenna, Italy.

What is ethical? Religions typically prescribe an ethical life as a basic requirement for the journey toward spiritual perfection. Indeed teachings regarding right and wrong constitute a significant part of most religious traditions.

How do we transcend the human condition? Some forms of spiritual perfection can be attained in this life, either temporarily or abidingly. Buddhist enlightenment is one example. These forms all involve a type of **transcendence**, or overcoming of the normal limitations imposed by the human condition. Of course, we can respond to the challenges of being human in a variety of ways. Some people simply try to ignore them by allowing a certain numbness of the spirit. Others become workaholics to block them out. Some hide behind a veil of drugs or alcohol. Religions normally insist on a different type of response, a form of transcendence that brings one face-to-face with the human condition, and then raises one above it or allows one to see through it (the precise descriptions of this transcendence vary by religion). The Buddhist who has attained enlightenment, for example, while continuing to inhabit a physical body with the usual discomforts and needs, is said to maintain a state of indescribable spiritual tranquility and bliss.

How do we attain salvation? Most religions teach that spiritual maturity or perfection is closely related to some form of salvation from the ultimate limitation imposed by the human condition: death. Religions that emphasize forms of transcendence typically hold that there is a direct connection between the transcendence attained in this life and final salvation. Some forms of Buddhism teach that the attainment of enlightenment in this life leads to *nirvana*, the final liberation. Religions such as Christianity and Islam, which teach that salvation depends on the divine, tend to maintain that final spiritual perfection awaits

in the afterlife, sometimes after the individual's salvation has already been assured. According to this view, spiritual maturation continues even in a heavenly afterlife.

What Is Our Destiny?

As spiritual beings, we ponder our destiny. We wonder, Where are we going, ultimately? Most (though not all) religions provide answers to that question, and their answers are closely linked to the issues of spiritual perfection.

According to some religions, human beings face two possible destinies: one leads to reward, typically eternal life in paradise, and the other leads to condemnation. Individual destiny is linked to the question of spiritual maturation: the degree to which one has achieved perfection naturally corresponds to one's prospects for reward in the afterlife.

The question of destiny is more complex for religions that teach that human beings live more than one lifetime—religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In this case the immediate destiny after this life is generally not the ultimate, final destiny, but just another step toward the final destiny. Nevertheless, the need to seek spiritual maturity (if not perfection) in this life remains vital, because the level of one's maturity (or perfection) tends to determine the nature of one's future life.

What Is the Nature of the World?

Along with answering questions about human beings, religions also answer questions about the world. Where did the world come from? Is it real, or is it just some kind of cosmic illusion? Is it sacred, perhaps even living? Or is it merely matter? Is it a help or a hindrance to the religious quest?

Such questions belong to the general category **cosmology**—the understanding of the nature of the universe. The answers to cosmological questions tend to determine a religion's degree of interest in the natural world. Some religions express such interest through support

of scientific inquiry and theories regarding the natural world, while others tend to be suspicious of science.

What Is Ultimate Reality, and How Is It Revealed?

Finally, there is the religious question of ultimate reality (or for Western traditions especially, God). Theistic religions hold a belief in God or in multiple gods. These religions teach a certain theology, or doctrine regarding the divine. The theologies of the world include a range of basic perspectives: **monotheism** (belief in only one God), **polytheism** (belief in many gods), and **pantheism** (belief that the divine reality exists in everything), to name but a few.

Nontheistic religions do not hold a belief in a god who is essentially relevant for us, although they sometimes do hold a belief in various divine or semidivine beings. Some of these religions teach that all reality is essentially one thing, and that human beings are part of the ultimate reality.

Most religions also teach that the supreme or ultimate reality, whatever form it takes, is somehow revealed to humans. This **revelation** usually takes place through sacred stories or myths, or through various types of religious experience.

Seven Dimensions of Religion

Exploring the basic questions to which religions respond helps us understand the functions of religions. Considering the elements that make up religions helps us understand the forms of religions. Scholar Ninian Smart suggests that all the religious traditions manifest seven dimensions: experiential, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, ritual, social, and material. These dimensions are not exclusive of one another: for example, myths often set forth patterns of ritual. Indeed the seven dimensions are intertwined and complementary, weaving a rich

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Summarize your personal cosmology—your own understanding of the nature of the world. Focus especially on the following questions: Where did the world come from? Is the world somehow a living, organic entity, or is it merely inorganic matter?

E Like the terms *religious* and *spiritual*, *faith* tends to mean different things to different people. What does *faith* mean to you?

tapestry through which religions respond to humans' basic questions, offering a doctrine here, prescribing a ritual there, and so forth. All religions use the same seven elements to create their own unique tapestry, often emphasizing one dimension more, another dimension less. Zen Buddhism, for example, has a strong experiential dimension but says relatively little about doctrines.

Experiential

Religions commonly begin with the religious experiences of individuals. Some of these beginnings are famous and easy to identify. When a young prince named Gautama experienced enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree, he became the Buddha, and Buddhism was born. When Muhammad began to experience revelations from Allah, Islam began to take form. Other beginnings are not so easily identified. Moreover, religious experiences can be part of anyone's religious life; they do not always result in a new religion.

Faith generally belongs to the category religious experience, although it also has doctrinal aspects. In the New Testament, for instance, the Apostle Paul describes faith as being closely related to experience of the Holy

Spirit, and involving more than just intellectual belief.

The world's major religions acknowledge numerous types of religious experience, some of them astounding. Generally speaking, in theistic religions God is experienced as a holy presence who is other (that is, as a being distinct from the individual). This experience of God is often characterized by two separate emotions: awe-inspiring fear, and fascination. A well-known example of this type of experience is the revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai, through the burning bush. Moses was fearful of God, yet drawn in fascination toward the divine presence.

In nontheistic religions, religious experience usually takes the form of **mysticism**. In one basic type of mysticism, found in Hinduism and other religions, the individual becomes one with the divine through inward contemplation. Another form of religious experience, known as the vision quest, is found in many primal religions, which include Native American traditions.

Mythic

The concept **myth** may not be familiar to us because most people no longer hold a pre-

The religious experience of Moses is depicted in *Moses Before the Burning Bush*, by the Italian painter Raphael (1483–1520).



dominantly mythic worldview. The matter is further complicated by our tendency to use the term *myth* in various ways. Typically we equate myths with falsehoods—but in the study of world religions, myths actually convey important truths.

We Westerners tend to base our perspectives on history and science, acquiring knowledge through empirical observation and rational thinking. Myths are both nonhistorical and nonrational. But they do not necessarily conflict with history and science, nor are they necessarily false or *irrational*. Myths are sources of sacred truth and are therefore powerful, for they give meaning to life.

Myths take the form of sacred stories that are passed along from one generation to the next. Many are conveyed orally, though some are recorded in scripture. Myths are often set in primordial time, a period in the distant past somehow set apart from the ordinary present. They commonly tell of the origins of humans and the world. Myths set forth fundamental knowledge regarding the nature of things and the proper way to live.

The story of Creation, told in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, is one such sacred story, or myth. It provides knowledge about a number of basic issues: the world was created by God; human beings were created in the image of God and are by nature good; humans are meant to have “dominion” over the other creatures of the world; and so forth. These mythic ideas depend neither on history nor on science, but they remain sacred truths for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

Doctrinal

For many people, the most obvious and basic aspect of religion is belief. Adherents of a religion believe in something, namely, the creeds, doctrines, or teachings of their religion. Christians believe, for example, in the Apostles’ Creed and in the doctrine of the Trinity. The belief aspect of religion is categorized as the doctrinal dimension.

Doctrines, creeds, and other teachings commonly originate in lived religious experience. They also derive from myths. Whereas myth and experience tend in some ways to defy the rational impulses of the mind, doctrines make sense of the content of experience and myth. They are often recorded in sacred texts, or scriptures, along with the myths and the accounts of revelation and other religious experiences that serve as the foundations of religions.

Ethical

Religions tend to devote much attention to **ethics**: How are we to act while living in the world? The ethical dimension includes many sets of teachings that respond to that question: for example, the Ten Commandments in the Christian tradition, which have striking parallels in some other traditions. The ethical dimension also incorporates more general ethical principles, such as the Buddhist ideal of compassion, which is notably similar to the Christian ideal of love for one’s neighbor.

Ritual

Worship is a common aspect of religions, taking a variety of forms and occupying much of an individual’s religious life. Most forms of worship are carried out through some formal practice, or **ritual**. Like belief, ritual is very familiar to most of us. Many religious rituals re-enact a myth or sacred story. For example, every Muslim ideally will make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca, the most holy city of Islam. Various aspects of the pilgrimage re-enact the sacred story of Muhammad’s original journey to Mecca, a leading event in the founding of the religion.

Social

Religions naturally involve communities, and most people consider the communal aspect of religion significant and attractive. A sense of community, of belonging to a group such as a tribe or a parish or a congregation,

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Myth is not as strong an element in the modern, scientific world as it was in earlier ages. Still, as the example of the Genesis account of Creation suggests, some of our basic perspectives about life are derived from mythic sources. What other mythic truths—truths that are based on neither history nor science, but that give life meaning and direction—are prevalent in your society?

is usually empowering for individuals. The shared experience of community also fortifies religions themselves, and often results in some form of organization, typically including a hierarchy of leadership. For example, religions usually recognize one level of membership for officials or priests, and another level for common adherents. Often particular figures are thought to embody the ideals of spiritual perfection: the Taoist sage and the Christian saint are two such figures.

Material

The sacred architecture of cathedrals, temples, and other structures of worship, and the art within them, are among humanity's beautiful cultural achievements. Icons, such as the crucifix and statues of the Buddha, are part of this material dimension of religion. So too are books of scripture. Other types of sacred entities, whether natural (such as mountains) or of human construction (such as cities), also are highly significant for some religions. In India, for example, Hindus consider almost every major river sacred.

Some Challenges and Rewards of Studying the World's Religions

Several issues might make studying the world's religions unsettling. For example, it would seem that by definition, ultimate reality must be the same for all humans. Certainly the monotheistic religions consider God to be the God of all. But if that is the case, how can there be more than one true religion? Are the religions saying essentially the same thing, even though they are using different words filtered through different historical and cultural frameworks? Are they in basic agreement about the truth? If so, does the matter of choosing a religion simply come down to personal preference?

These are difficult questions, and it is unrealistic to hope that they will all be answered satisfactorily by the end of this study. Besides, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, religion is grounded in mystery, and surely we should not expect to penetrate such mystery entirely. We can, however, make progress toward understanding, by clarifying a proper perspective from which to examine the world's religions.

Two Approaches

A study of the world's religions is enriched when it is approached in two ways. First, it should be approached using a comparative methodology. Friedrich Max Müller, one of the founders of the study of comparative religions, pointed out that to know just one religion is to know none. As we move from chapter to chapter in this book, the dimensions of religion, along with the common questions to which different religions respond, should become clearer. Studying many religions should enable us to know each one, including our own, more precisely.

Second, the study of religions should be approached with **empathy**, which is the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective. Scholar Ninian Smart often quotes a Native American proverb: "Never judge a person until you have walked a mile in his moccasins." Empathy requires the use of the imagination, and can be quite challenging. It is rewarding too, providing a needed tool for gaining insight into the ways of others. The study of religions would not advance far if it lacked such insight.

Objectives

What can we hope to gain from a broad study of the world's religions? For one thing, we can strive to become knowledgeable about their responses to the most fundamental religious

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Identify at least two examples of sacred entities, art, or architecture in your community. Compare the examples in terms of how they express religious ideas and provoke emotions.

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It is important to cultivate empathy—the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective—when studying the religions of others. Try applying the Native American proverb on empathy by "walking a mile in the moccasins" of a family member or close friend. What do you think life looks like from that person's perspective?

questions asked by human beings all over the world. All religions are treasure troves of wisdom, and everyone can benefit from exploring them. For another thing, we can try to become better acquainted with the seven dimensions of religion through the study of abundant examples. Finally, we can expect to emerge from this study with a greatly enhanced understanding of the people who follow the religions we have explored. That, in turn, can enrich us in our role as citizens of the global village.

Chapter Review

1. What issues do people usually address when they ask questions about the human condition?
2. How does spiritual maturity or perfection relate to the quest for salvation?
3. Briefly explain how religions differ over the question of destiny.
4. Name some ways that religions perceive the nature of the world.
5. Describe the difference between theistic and nontheistic religions.
6. In what two ways is the ultimate reality usually revealed?
7. Describe in general terms the religious experience of the theistic religions. Then briefly compare it with the religious experience of the nontheistic religions.
8. Briefly explain the concept of myth.
9. Identify at least two dimensions of religion, in addition to the mythic, doctrinal, and experiential.
10. What is one benefit of using a comparative approach to study the world's religions?
11. What is empathy?

Glossary

cosmology. The understanding of the nature of the universe.

empathy. The capacity for seeing things from another's perspective, and an important methodological approach for studying religions.

ethics. A dimension of religion that deals with how we are to act while living in the world.

faith. Experience of the divine or holy presence, sometimes involving intellectual belief and sometimes emphasizing personal trust.

monotheism. The belief in only one god.

mysticism. A category of religious experiences characterized by communing or uniting with the divine through inward contemplation.

myth. A story (often recorded in scripture) that tends to answer questions of origins and serves as a source of sacred truth.

pantheism. The belief that the divine reality exists in everything.

polytheism. The belief in many gods.

revelation. The transmission of the divine will or knowledge to human beings, typically through myths or some form of religious experience.

ritual. Formal worship practice, often based on the re-enactment of a myth.

spiritual perfection. The complete fulfillment of spiritual potential; religions typically teach that such fulfillment can be achieved in this life or in the afterlife, or at least that followers need to become as spiritually mature as possible.

transcendence. The overcoming of the normal limitations imposed by the human condition, whether temporarily or abidingly.