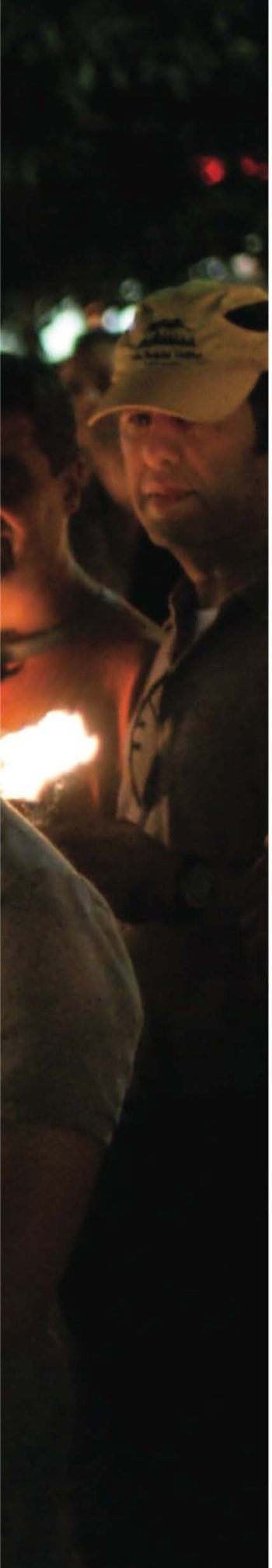
INVITATION TO World Religions



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An INVITATION to the STUDY of WORLD RELIGIONS

ON AMERICAN COLLEGE CAMPUSES, indications of the world's religions are readily observable. Bulletin boards bear fliers announcing upcoming events pertaining to Buddhist meditation or Hindu sacred art or the Islamic observance of Ramadan. Campus religious groups engage in outreach activities at tables alongside walkways or in student unions, oftentimes with posters quoting scripture or displaying religious icons. Some icons even commonly adorn the students themselves—a cross necklace, for example, or a tattoo of the *yin/yang* symbol.

To study the world's religions is to progress from mere observation of things to understanding their meaning and relevance. Anyone who observes the *yin/yang* symbol can appreciate the beauty of its spiraling, interweaving symmetry, but studying Chinese religion reveals a much more complex meaning. Mysterious in their origins, *yin* and *yang* are complementary primal energies that give rise to all creation. For the human being, to maintain a perfect balance of *yin* and *yang* is to live an ideal life. The nearly ubiquitous symbol of the cross similarly takes on new depths and complexities of meaning, even for many who identify themselves as Christian, when approached through the study of world religions. To Christians, God, the creator of all things, having taken on human form in the person of Jesus Christ, willingly suffered the painful death of crucifixion on the cross to save humanity from the power of sin.

On many campuses, people of different religious perspectives gather for candlelight vigils to observe times of sorrow as well as celebration.

We can expand on our understanding of the meaning and cultural relevance of these two icons through a brief comparative study. Chinese religion, with its belief in the creative, complementary energies of *yin* and *yang*, has neither need nor room for a creator such as the Christian God. The Christian concept of sin and the corresponding need for salvation are alien to the Chinese quest for balance of *yin* and *yang*. These two icons, in other words, signify profoundly different cultural orientations.

To study the world's religions is to enhance one's understanding and appreciation of the rich variety of cultures around the globe. This chapter introduces this field of study by exploring the significance, examining the foundational concepts, and describing appropriate strategies for the academic exploration of religion.

APPROACHING THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS

In order to be an educated person today, one must have an awareness of world religions. To learn about this subject matter is to increase one's cultural literacy—the objective that lies at the heart of this study. The religious traditions examined in this book are foundational aspects of cultures around the globe. Religion plays a crucial role in molding, transforming, and transmitting cultures. Interacting and intermeshing with other cultural aspects—politics, economics, aesthetics—religion is arguably a culture's most potent force, in ways both constructive and destructive. When people believe they are acting in a manner that is condoned by a transcendent power or is in keeping with timeless tradition, they tend to act more fervently and with greater potency. In other words, religions are powerful, sometimes even dangerous. Knowing about them is crucial for negotiating our richly complex world.

"World Religions" has been a prominent course of study in American colleges and universities for nearly a century. Recently, the category has come under scrutiny by some scholars, as has the so-called "world religions discourse" that often accompanies it.[1] Although such scrutiny sometimes tends to lose sight of the obvious—that "world religions" as an academic category, whatever its origins, is here to stay and that learning about its subject matter is vitally important—critics are correct to demand sound academic approaches to the study. A primary concern involves the fact that the study of world religions, and indeed the entire enterprise of the academic study of religion, arose within the nominally Christian European intellectual culture that tended to take for granted that Christianity was a model of what a religion ought to be and, commonly, that it was the only *true* religion. Until the late decades of the nineteenth century, theorists applied the term "world religion" (in the singular) only to Christianity. Eventually Buddhism, Judaism, and occasionally Islam were grouped with Christianity as "world religions" (or "the world's religions"). By the 1930s the list had grown to include the ten to twelve religions that still today are normally categorized as world religions.

And so, to the basic need for knowing about the world religions (however they came to be categorized), we can add another vital need: that we go about studying them appropriately through awareness of what we might call the "do's and don'ts" of religious studies, which this chapter explores in some detail. We can begin by noting

that an appropriate study of world religions does not privilege any religion as being somehow exemplary or the model with which others are to be compared. On a related note, we need to avoid terms and categories that are rooted in such privileging. For example, "faith" is a natural term to use when studying Christianity, but it can hardly be applied to the study of Confucianism or Shinto. Other important issues involve underlying motives or assumptions that can too easily creep in. A common one is this: All religions ultimately say the same thing. This is an intriguing possibility, but in fact, it is impossible to prove by way of a sound academic approach—that is, well-reasoned theorizing based on careful analysis of the evidence.

The challenge of mastering the "do's" and avoiding the "don'ts" only enriches our study. We begin by considering the rise of the modern academic field of religious studies.

William James defined religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude. . . ." Caspar David Friedrich depicted the solitary, contemplative individual in his 1818 painting, *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog.*

Religion as a Subject of Academic Inquiry

The academic study of religion, commonly known as "religious studies" (or sometimes as "comparative religion" or "history of religions") is a relatively recent development. Prior to the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, it rarely occurred to anyone to think of a religion as an entity that could be separated from other aspects of culture, and therefore as something that could be defined as a distinct category and studied as such. Enlightenment thinkers, most influentially the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), conceived of religion as something separate from the various phenomena the human mind is capable of perceiving.[2] This impulse toward categorically separating religion, coupled with European exploration of distant lands and their unfamiliar "religions," launched efforts to understand religion that have continued to the present day. This shift means that we modern observers need to be cautious when appraising the religious aspects of other cultures, lest we make the error of assuming that all peoples have recognized religion as a distinctive category. Most cultures throughout history have had neither the conceptual category nor a term meaning "religion."

The academic study of religion is generally distinct from theology, the field of inquiry that focuses on considering the nature of the divine. Unlike religious studies, theology is an important example of *doing* and *being* religious, which naturally invites consideration of the supernatural and of the "truth" of religious claims. Religious studies, like most other academic pursuits, is to a large extent based in an approach to knowledge that depends on analysis of empirical data. The discourse and actions of human beings can be observed and studied through normal means of academic inquiry; empirical evidence can be gathered, and through rational argumentation hypotheses can be formulated and supported. Supernatural beings and events normally are held to be beyond the reach of academic inquiry. The academic study of religion, as understood by the authors of this book, is therefore not theology, however much we

World religions today.


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might admire theologians and enjoy studying their work, which is itself an important human enterprise and a major component of religion.

The Definitional Challenge A natural outcome of the Enlightenment impulse toward categorically separating religion from other aspects of culture has been to produce a universal definition of the term. Scholars from various academic disciplines have struggled with this challenge without having produced a single definition that pleases everyone. Many theorists today dismiss the challenge as futile, and some even go so far as to argue that use of the term "religion" in academic study should be abandoned altogether because of its ambiguity and misleading inferences. Most scholars involved in religious studies, however, agree that they are studying basically the same subject, and for lack of a better term most are content with calling it "religion."

The relevance of defining "religion" can be understood through an analogy that compares religions to houses. Embarking on a study of religions without concern over *what*, exactly, we are studying would be akin to setting off for foreign places to explore the nature of houses without first agreeing on what counts as a house. Would we include apartments? Vacation cabins? Palaces? Defining terms helps us draw clear boundaries around the subject of study. Another challenge involves our preconceived notions of things. We might assume that everyone shares a common idea of a typical "house" (like the kind we learned to draw in grade school), but such an assumption is mainly the result of preconceptions based on our own culture's norms. People from other cultures might dwell in structures that have little in common with our standard notion of a house.

Let's consider some notable attempts at conceptualizing "religion" while keeping in mind our "house" analogy. In fact, when exploring the more specific category "world religion," it will be useful to think of a similarly more specific category of house: a mansion, and more specifically, an old mansion that has undergone a long process of refurbishing. Although certainly considered a type of house, a mansion has many rooms that serve a wide variety of functions and styles. Imagine an old mansion that has kept the same foundation and basic structure over the years, but to which various inhabitants have made changes that have enabled the structure to survive into modern times. Our study of the world's religions is an invitation to explore several extraordinary "old mansions." Our tools of study—beginning with considerations of definition—are designed to help us make the most of our explorations, to take in fully the teachings, the histories, and the practices of the world's religions.

Three Classic Definitions The history of the attempt to formulate suitable definitions of "religion" is intriguing. In many instances, definitions reveal as much about the historical era and about the intentions of the individual theorist as they do about the nature of religion.

The following well-known definitions of "religion" were set forth by notable theorists in different fields:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.[3]
>
> —*Émile Durkheim*

> [Religion is] . . . the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.[4]
>
> —*William James*

> [T]he religious aspect points to that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man's spiritual life. Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern.[5]
>
> —*Paul Tillich*

French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), a founding figure of the sociological study of religion, emphasizes in his definition the *social* nature of religion. He insists on the unification brought about by "beliefs and practices," culminating in a "moral community called a Church." Durkheim surely hits on some central functions of religion, but most scholars contend that he overemphasizes this social orientation. On the other hand, American psychologist William James (1842–1910) emphasizes the *individual* nature of religion. Although this aspect is also clearly important, his definition omits any mention of religion's social nature. The definitions put forth by Durkheim and James, although provocative, are therefore problematically limiting.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965), a Protestant theologian, naturally connects religion to a focus on "man's spiritual life." His notion of religion as "ultimate concern" has been quite influential over the past several decades, probably in part because many find it true to their own experiences. But the definition is very broad, and it says nothing regarding the specific content of religious traditions. In emphasizing the existential concerns of religion, it neglects the social and institutional components of the traditions. People commonly claim to be "spiritual" while also denying that they belong to a religion. A sound definition needs to accommodate this distinction or else avoid this ambiguity altogether.

Two Prominent Definitions Let us now consider two definitions of religion that currently enjoy wide favor and that avoid these sorts of shortcomings. The *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, a popular reference work, states: "One may clarify the term religion by defining it as a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings."[6] This definition encompasses a wide array of cultural phenomena, while at the same time restricting the category, most especially with the concept "superhuman beings."

Bruce Lincoln (b. 1948), one of the most prominent contemporary theorists of religion, asserts in his definition that a religion always consists of four "domains"—discourse, practice, community, and institution:

1. A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status . . .
2. A set of practices whose purpose is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected . . .
3. A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices . . .
4. An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.[7]

Lincoln's definition, although considerably lengthier than the *Dictionary*'s, is impressively precise. It also is helpfully inclusive. By basing religion on the notion of the "transcendent" rather than on "supernatural beings" or the like, Lincoln's definition encompasses Confucianism and forms of Buddhism, including Theravada, that do not focus on belief in supernatural beings. (Chapters 5 and 8 explore in more detail the categorization of Buddhism and Confucianism, respectively, as religions rather than "philosophies".) The religions featured in this textbook conform to Lincoln's definition. This is not to say that Lincoln, or for that matter any other theorist, has determined what religion "truly" is. In the words of sociologist Peter Berger (b. 1929), commenting on the challenge of defining religion, "a definition is not more or less true, only more or less useful."[8] For purposes of our study, Lincoln's definition provides a useful means of categorizing the subject matter. It clarifies why the traditions featured in this book qualify as religions while also, especially with its insistence that a religion involves an "institution," establishing helpful limits. The general category "spirituality," for example, would not necessarily qualify as religion based on Lincoln's definition.

We now shift our focus from what religions *are* to consider what religions *do*. In the next section, we analyze various functions of religion, concentrating especially on the fundamental questions to which religious traditions provide answers.

WHAT RELIGIONS DO

Whatever one thinks a religion *is*, this much remains certain: a religion *does*. This fact is closely related to the challenge of defining religion. Some theorists have emphasized this functional side of religion in their explanations. Underlying Durkheim's definition, for example, is a theory that reduces religion to being an effect of societal forces. Religion, in turn, serves to promote social unity. Here is a clear case in point that definitions reveal as much about the intentions of the theorist as they do about the nature of religion. As we have already noted, Durkheim is regarded as a founder of sociology;

it is not surprising that he emphasizes the social aspects of religion. Consider also this assertion from psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939):

> Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father.[9]

Freud was an atheist whose psychological theory held religion to be undesirable. Political philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883), likewise an atheist, offers a similarly negative assessment, which is even more antagonistic toward religion:

> *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the *world of man*, the state, society. . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people.[10]

At sites like this Confucian temple in Beijing, China, Confucius (Master K'ung) is honored for his enduring contributions to Chinese culture. Sound definitions of "religion" are flexible enough to include Confucianism as a religious tradition.

Marx, strongly affected by what he perceived as the economic disparities of the Industrial Revolution, was a thoroughgoing materialist who dismissed all forms of ideology as being abstractions and, to some extent, obstacles to the pursuit of true well-being. Freud similarly regarded religion as an effect of other forces, viewing it as a by-product of psychological forces. According to Freud, religion functions as an unhealthy but soothing buffer against the inner terrors of the psyche. For Marx, religion functions in a similarly unhealthy manner, as an opiate that deters the suffering individual from attending to the true cause of affliction.

These functionalist explanations, although provocative and at least somewhat insightful, are largely regarded now by scholars as being severely limited in their perspectives. Perhaps religions *do* function in these ways at certain times in certain situations; but surely religions do much more. In fact, neither Freud nor Marx ever actually tried to define religion; rather, they tried to explain it away. This does not diminish, however, the enduring relevance of these theorists for purposes of striving to understand the "big picture" of the role religion plays in the lives of individuals and in societies.

We can widen our vantage point on the functions of religion and produce a fairer and more accurate depiction by considering the variety of life's challenges that these traditions help people to face and to overcome.

Religious Questions and Challenges

It might seem disrespectful or even blasphemous to ask, Why do religions exist? But in fact this is a perfectly legitimate and instructive question. As human enterprises,

religions naturally respond to human needs and readily acknowledge reasons for their doctrines and rituals. A typical reason has to do with some kind of perceived separation from the sacred or estrangement from a state of perfection or fulfillment. The human condition, as ordinarily experienced, is regarded as being disconnected from the fulfillment that lies at the end of a spiritual path. Various related questions and challenges are addressed by religions, with these three prominent questions recurring in some form in nearly every system:

1. What is ultimate reality?
2. How should we live in this world?
3. What is our ultimate purpose?

The rest of this book's chapters explore the ways major religions answer these questions. For now, let's consider these questions more broadly.

What Is Ultimate Reality? It is difficult to imagine a religion that has nothing to say about ultimate reality—even if this involves asserting that "ultimate" reality consists of no more than the natural world and we human beings who inhabit it. Religions typically assert that ultimate reality is somehow divine, and explanation of the nature and role of the divine takes center stage in a religion's belief system. But the "divine" is not necessarily thought of as God or gods. When it is, we refer to that religion as a **theistic** (from Greek *theos*, or god) belief system. When it is not, the religion is said to be **nontheistic**. Some forms of Buddhism, such as Zen, are clearly nontheistic. A helpful middle ground descriptive term is **transtheistic**, acknowledging the existence of gods—but of gods that are not vital with regard to the most crucial religious issues, such as the quest for enlightenment or salvation.[11]

Theistic religions can be further categorized. **Polytheism** (from Greek *polys*, or many) is the belief in many gods ("gods" is considered a gender-neutral term and can—and often does—include goddesses). **Monotheism** (from Greek *monos*, or only one) is the belief in only one god (and hence the term is normally capitalized—God—a proper noun referring to a specific being). Here, a kind of middle ground comes in the form of **henotheism** (from Greek *hen*, the number one), which acknowledges a plurality of gods but elevates one of them to special status. Some forms of Hindu devotion to a particular god such as Vishnu or Shiva are henotheistic.

Pantheism (from Greek *pan*, or all) is the belief that the divine is identical to nature or the material world. Although not one of the world's living religions, the ancient Greek and Roman religious philosophy known as Stoicism is an example. It is important to bear in mind, too, that the world's religions often feature entities that are supernatural and yet are not necessarily gods. These quasi-divine figures, such as angels, demons, and the monstrous characters that feature prominently in myths, are typically difficult to categorize but are important elements of religion nonetheless. To complicate matters further, scholars of non-Western religions have commonly used

the term "god" to refer to supernatural beings that are more similar to angels, or even to the saints of Catholic tradition. The *theos* in the "polytheism" of such non-Western religions therefore often refers to a very different type of being than does the *theos* in "monotheism." Simplistic application of such terms is misleading.

Nontheistic belief systems include those that uphold **atheism**, which in modern parlance is a perspective that denies the existence of God or gods. In ancient times, a person could be labeled an atheist for denying the significance of deities, even while believing that they exist. Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, for example, Epicureans were considered to be atheists. Even according to the modern meaning of atheism, some atheists nevertheless could be regarded as religious—depending on how one defines "religion." The *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* definition, with its basis in "supernatural beings," likely would not leave room for atheism, whereas Bruce Lincoln's definition could. (The issue of atheism as religious or not is taken up in "The New Atheism" section of Chapter 14.)

This painting, produced in 1810, depicts the Hindu deities Shiva and Parvati with their children, Ganesha and Kartikeya. Hindus believe in many gods and goddesses, these four—and especially Shiva—being among the most popular.

Nontheistic religions (and here the term is on surer footing) also include those that conceive of the divine as an impersonal force or substratum of existence. Some nontheistic religions, such as various forms of Buddhism (Chapter 5) and Hinduism (Chapter 4), even assume the existence of divine beings while rejecting the notion that such beings can truly help humans find spiritual fulfillment. Some Hindus, for example, while believing in many gods and goddesses, hold that Brahman, impersonal and ultimately indescribable, is the essence of all. Those Hindus therefore embrace **monism** because of this primary belief that all reality is ultimately one. Monism is also described as nondualistic, because there is no distinction between the divine reality on one hand and the rest of reality, including human individuals, on the other.

Such a categorizing scheme admits to some complications. Some Hindus are monistic because they understand all reality ultimately to be one thing: Brahman. But some of those same monistic Hindus also pay homage to a variety of supernatural and divine beings, and thus might also be described as polytheists.

Along with asserting the existence of ultimate reality, religions describe how this reality is revealed to human beings. The foundational moments of **revelation** are frequently recorded in sacred texts, or scriptures. In the case of theistic religions, scriptures set forth narratives describing the role of God or the gods in history and also include pronouncements directly attributed to the divine. In the Jewish and Christian Bible, for example, God's will regarding ethical behavior is expressed directly in the Ten Commandments. The giving of the Ten Commandments is described in the long narrative about the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, in which God is said to have played a central role.

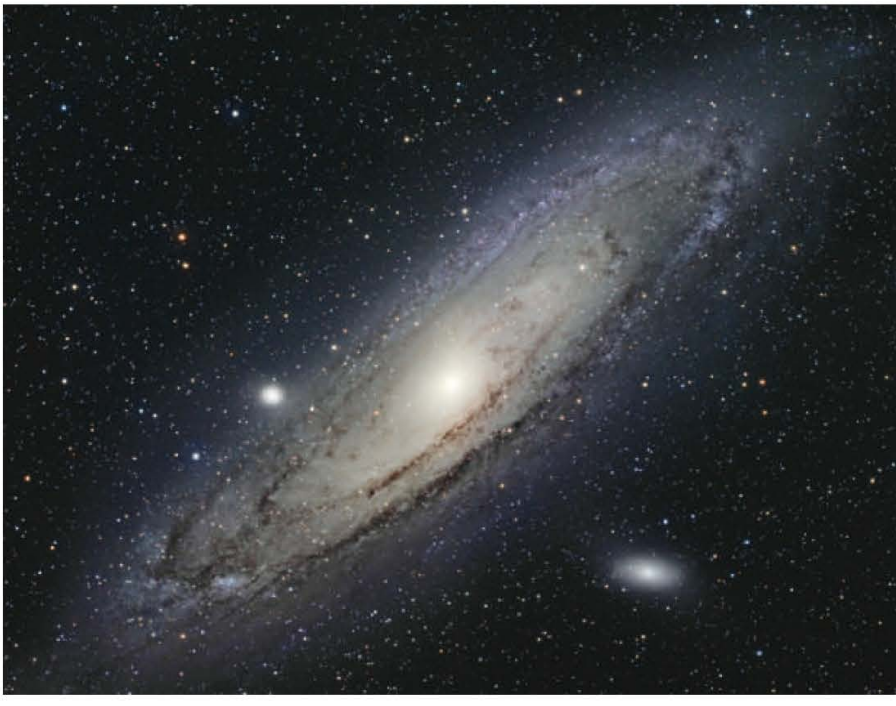
Among nontheistic religions in particular—but also among the mystical traditions that form part of every religious tradition—revelation usually combines textual transmission with a direct experience of revelation. Revelation is usually experienced by a founding figure of the religion, whose experiences are later written about; subsequent believers can then experience similar types of revelation, which requires their own participation. Buddhists, for example, have scriptural records that describe the Buddha's experience of "unbinding" or release, as well as pronouncements by various deities praising the ultimate value of that experience. Followers must then connect to such revelation through practices such as meditation.

Another helpful way of thinking about revelation is offered by historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who makes much descriptive use of the phenomenon he calls "hierophany," or "the *act of manifestation* of the sacred," which helps a people to establish its cosmology, or religious understanding, of the order of the world.[12] Eliade emphasizes how this concept applies to indigenous or small-scale traditions (those of "archaic man" in Eliade's terminology). But the phenomenon of the hierophany is readily apparent within the world's major religions, often, but not always, as a theophany, a manifestation of God or of gods. The role of hierophanies in establishing places of special significance can be observed in many of the sites related to the founding figures and events of the major religions: Christianity's Church of the Nativity (and other sacred sites related to the life of Christ); Islam's sacred city of Mecca; Buddhism's Bodh Gaya, site of Gautama's foundational experience of Enlightenment; and so on. Sacred moments establish sacred spatial monuments, thus establishing a sense of centrality and spatial order.

Along with often referring to other worlds, religions have much to say about *this* world. Human beings have always asked searching questions about the origin and status of our planet and of the universe. Typically these two issues—origin and status—are intertwined. If our world was intentionally fashioned by a creator god, for instance, then it bears the stamp of divine affirmation. Thus the early chapters of the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) describe the measured, creative activity of God, including the creation of humankind. In contrast, the creation stories of some religious traditions deemphasize the role of the divine will in bringing about the world, sometimes (as in the religion of the ancient Greeks) describing the advent of the principal deities *after* the universe itself has been created. The gods, like humans, come into a world that is already established; gods and humans are depicted as sharing the world, which naturally affects the relationship between human and divine. In other religions,

Ka'ba, Mecca.

notably those same South Asian traditions that embrace liberation as the ultimate religious objective, this world is depicted as a kind of illusion, somehow not altogether real or permanently abiding. It is thus not so surprising that liberation involves being completely freed from the confines of this world.



The Andromeda Galaxy.

These are but a few examples of religious understanding of the nature of the world, a general category known as **cosmology** (from *kosmos*, the Greek term for world or universe). Along with clarifying the origin and sacred status of the world, cosmology also explains how the world is ordered. Many traditions attribute the order of the universe to the doings of divine being(s) or forces. Yet in certain respects modern scientific explanations set forth cosmologies that are intriguingly similar to some religious cosmologies taught by religious personages of the distant past, such as Gautama the Buddha or Epicurus, a Greek philosopher who espoused a theory of atomism, arguing that reality is composed entirely of a very large number of very small particles. (Recall that the Epicureans were labeled "atheists" because they denied the significance of the gods.)

Of course, a particular religion's cosmology strongly influences the degree to which its adherents are involved in caring for the world. Religions that are indifferent or hostile toward the natural world are not apt to encourage anything akin to environmentalism. On the other hand, a religion that teaches that the world is inherently sacred naturally encourages a sense of stewardship toward the natural world. Native American traditions, for example, are notably environmentally oriented.

How Should We Live in This World? Many religions have much to say about God or other superhuman beings and phenomena, and yet all religions are human enterprises. Their teachings are communicated in human languages, their rituals are practiced by human participants, and their histories are entwined with the development of human societies and cultures. Religions also explain what it is to be a human being.

Explanations regarding what it is to be human also figure largely into ethical or moral considerations. Are we by nature good, evil, or somewhere in between? Religions tend to recognize that human beings do not always do the right thing, and they commonly offer teachings and disciplines directed toward moral or ethical improvement. To say that we are by nature good, and at the same time to recognize moral failings, is to infer that some cause external to our nature is causing the shortcoming. If we are by nature evil, on the other hand, or at least naturally prone to doing

Sixteenth-century triptych (altar painting) depicting the creation of Eve (center), the eating of the forbidden fruit (left), and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (right). This story of humankind's first sin sets forth basic biblical perspectives on the human condition.

wrong, then the moral challenge lies within and the means of improvement would need to be directed inwardly.

Religions typically prescribe what is right behavior and what is wrong, based on a set of ethical tenets, such as the Jewish and Christian Ten Commandments. In fact, the very prospects of improving upon the human condition and of faring well in an afterlife quite commonly are deemed to depend in some way upon right ethical behavior. The ethical teachings of many religions are notably similar. The so-called Golden Rule ("Do unto others what you would have them do unto you"[13]) set forth in the Christian New Testament is pronounced in similar forms in the scriptures of virtually all of the world's major traditions.

The religions differ, however, over the issue of the source of ethical truth. Some emphasize **revealed ethics**, asserting that God, or some other supernatural force such as Hindu *dharma* (ethical duty), has established what constitutes right behavior and has in some manner revealed this to human beings. The divine will might be conceived of as God (or gods), or it might take the form of an impersonal principle, such as *dharma*. Another common approach, in some forms of Buddhism, for example, emphasizes the role of conscience in the moral deliberations of each individual. These two emphases are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some religions, Christianity among them, teach that both revealed ethics and individual conscience work together as means of distinguishing right from wrong.

What Is Our Ultimate Purpose? The challenge of mortality—the fact that we are destined to die—is sometimes cited as the primary motivating force behind religion. And although it is true that all religions have at least something to say about death, the wide diversity of perspectives is quite astounding. For example, whereas Christianity, with its focus on the resurrection of Christ and the hope of eternal life, can be said to make mortality a central concern, Zen Buddhism, drawing inspiration from the classic Daoist texts, refuses to make much at all of death beyond acknowledging its natural place in the order of things.

Both the challenge of mortality and the issue of our moral nature relate to questions regarding the human condition—and what can be done about it. In many faiths,

how we conduct ourselves in this world will determine our fates after we die. Most religions readily acknowledge that human beings are destined to die (although some, such as Daoism, have at times aspired to discover means of inducing physical immortality). As we have noted, some religions have little to say about the prospects of life beyond death. But most religions do provide explanations regarding the fate of the individual after death, and their explanations vary widely.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism all maintain belief in *samsara*, the "wheel of life" that implies a series of lives, deaths, and rebirths for every individual. The ultimate aim of each of these religions is liberation from *samsara*. Buddhist nirvana is one such form of liberation. But most of the adherents of Buddhism and these other religions anticipate that death will lead to rebirth into another life form (not necessarily human), one in a long series of rebirths. Furthermore, the reborn are destined for any one of multiple realms, including a variety of hells and heavens.

Other religions, notably Christianity and Islam, teach that individuals are destined for some sort of afterlife, usually a version of heaven or of hell. Sometimes the teachings are more complicated. The traditional Catholic doctrine of purgatory, for example, anticipates an intermediary destiny somewhere between the perfect bliss of heaven and the horrible agony of hell, where an individual can gradually be purified from sin, ultimately achieving salvation and entry to heaven.

Given what a religion says about the human condition, what ultimate purpose is the religious life intended to achieve? Is there a state of existence to which the religious person can hope to aspire that perfectly completes or even transcends the human condition, overcoming entirely its cares and shortcomings?

One such state of existence is the **numinous experience**, as described by Rudolf Otto in his classic work *The Idea of the Holy* (1923). Otto (1869–1937), a Protestant theologian and a philosopher of religion, describes the encounter with "the Holy" as "numinous," a term he coined from the Latin *numen*, meaning spirit or divinity (plural, *numina*). A genuine numinous experience, Otto asserts, is characterized by two powerful and contending forces: ***mysterium tremendum*** and ***fascinans***. *Mysterium tremendum*, which in Latin means "awe-inspiring mystery," is the feeling of awe that overwhelms a person who experiences the majestic presence of the "wholly other."[14] *Fascinans* (Latin, "fascinating"), is the contrasting feeling of overwhelming attraction. The encounter with the Holy is thus alluring (*fascinans*) even as it is frightening on account of the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*). The biblical phenomenon of the "fear of God" fits this description, as the God who is being feared is at the same time recognized as the source of life and the hope for salvation.

Otto's insightful analysis of the numinous experience suffers from a significant limitation: based in his Protestant Christian outlook, it may ring true to a Protestant; from a global perspective, however, the analysis is rather limiting. For example, Otto discounts the **mystical experience**, a category that includes such phenomena as Buddhist nirvana, the complete dissolution of an individual's sense of selfhood said

Moses and the Burning Bush (1990), charcoal and pastel on paper by Hans Feibusch. In the drawing, God reveals himself to Moses in a bush that is on fire but not consumed by the flames. The event is described in Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

by Buddhists to be a state of perfect bliss and ultimate fulfillment. According to Otto, nirvana involves too much *fascinans* without enough *mysterium tremendum*.

Recall that Bruce Lincoln's definition of religion is based on the notion of the transcendent. Both the numinous experience and nirvana are examples of transcendent states of existence. For Otto, the numinous experience depends on the existence of "the Holy," or God. For many Buddhists, the experience of nirvana does not depend whatsoever on belief in God or gods. Most world religions, whether they embrace belief in a supernatural being or not, assert the possibility of such a transcendent state of existence, an ultimate objective of the religious life that brings complete fulfillment of all spiritual longings. For a Buddhist who has experienced nirvana, for example, there is, paradoxically, no longer a need for Buddhism. The religious life has been lived to its fullest extent, and the ultimate objective has been reached. Because nirvana involves the complete extinction of individual existence, it is truly transcendent of the human condition. Other religions, in widely varying ways, also set forth ultimate objectives, whether or not they imply the complete transcendence of the human condition. In some cases spiritual fulfillment can be said to consist of living in harmony with nature. Others readily acknowledge the supernatural—usually God (or gods)—and the need for human beings to live in perfect relationship with it. Christianity, for example, offers salvation from the effects of sin, which otherwise estrange the individual from God. Sometimes spiritual fulfillment is thought to be achievable in this lifetime; other times it is projected into the distant future, after many lifetimes of striving and development.

Of course, improving upon the human condition does not have to involve complete transcendence or anything close to it. Day to day the world over, religious people improve upon the human condition in all sorts of ways. Belief in a loving God gives hope and fortitude in the face of life's uncertainties. Meditation and prayer bring an enhanced sense of tranquility. Religious motivations often lie behind charitable acts. Belonging to a religious group offers social benefits that can be deeply fulfilling. Even for individuals who do not participate directly in a religious tradition, sacred art, architecture, and music can bring joy to life.

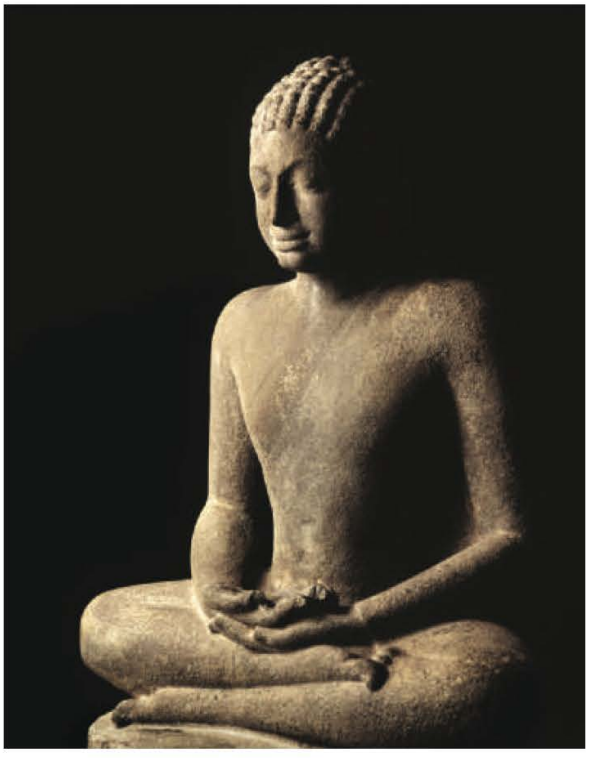
DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIONS

Sound definitions strive to be universal in scope. Along with a sound definition, a means of categorizing the common, though not necessarily universal, components of

a subject of study can often prove beneficial. We now explore possibilities for identifying religious phenomena, in part to bring home the important point that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to go about categorizing them. Instead, we seek the most useful means given the task at hand. This will lead naturally to clarifying how this book goes about organizing its presentation of material.

Some scholarly approaches to the world's religions feature specific categories of phenomena as the primary means of organizing information. Religious scholar Ninian Smart's (1927–2001) "dimensional" scheme, for example, divides the various aspects of religious traditions into seven dimensions:

- The mythic (or sacred narrative)
- The doctrinal (or philosophical)
- The ethical (or legal)
- The ritual (or practical)
- The experiential (or emotional)
- The social
- The material[15]



Meditating Buddha, sixth century C.E. (Thai). Sculptures of the Buddha typically depict the serene calm of the enlightened state.

Such an approach to the content of religious traditions is very useful, especially if one focuses on a comparative analysis that emphasizes particular motifs (that is, "dimensions" or aspects thereof).

In this book, we organize things into three main categories: teachings, historical development, and way of life. Although each chapter of this book is organized around these three main categories, we do not strive in all chapters to devote equal attention to each category. To do so would be to ignore the varying nature of the religious traditions and to force an inappropriately rigid structure. Judaism, for example, calls for extensive attention to historical development in order to best understand the context of its teachings and practices; Jainism, for which an early historical record barely exists, does not.

Teachings

Obviously, religions tend to involve beliefs. But as long as they remain private to the individual, beliefs are problematic for the student of religion. As public elements of a religion's teachings, however, beliefs can be observed and interpreted. Such public beliefs are manifested as doctrines or creeds—sets of concepts that are *believed in*. (The term "creed" derives from the Latin verb *credo*, or "I believe.") Among the world's major religions, Christianity most emphasizes doctrines. Most Christians, for example, regularly acknowledge belief in the statements of the Nicene Creed.

Religious teachings include another significant category, often referred to as **myth** (as noted in Smart's "mythic" dimension). Quite in contrast to the modern connotation of myth as a falsehood, myth as understood by the academic field of religious studies

is a powerful source of sacred truth. Set forth in narrative form and originally conveyed orally, myths do not depend on empirical verifiability or rational coherence for their power. They are simply accepted by believers as true accounts, often involving events of primordial time that describe the origin of things.

As we have noted previously, religions typically include ethical instructions, whether doctrinal or mythic, among their teachings. And as Smart readily acknowledges, the various dimensions are closely interrelated; the ethical dimension, for example, extends into the doctrinal and the mythic, and so forth.

Historical Development

It almost goes without saying that the world's major religions—all of which are many centuries, even millennia, old—have long and intricate histories. Thus the historical development of religious traditions incorporates a vast sweep of social, artistic, and other cultural phenomena.

The wide array of artistic, architectural, and other aspects of material culture generated within religious traditions is of course obvious to anyone who has studied art history. The ornate Hindu temple sculptures, the majestic statues of Jain *tirthankaras*, the mathematically ordered architectural features of Islamic arabesque décor—these, among countless other examples, attest to the extensive role of religion in the nurturing of material culture. Other forms of artistic creation, most prominently music and theater, also are common and significant features of religions. And, as Smart helpfully clarifies when discussing the material dimension of religion, natural entities (mountains, rivers, wooded groves) are designated as sacred by some traditions.

Devils Tower, located in northeastern Wyoming, is regarded as a sacred place by many Native Americans.

Social institutions and phenomena of various sorts—economic activities, politics, social class structures and hierarchies—have typically played highly influential roles in the historical development of religious traditions. As we have observed, Marx and Durkheim went as far as to reduce religion to being entirely the effect of economic and societal forces, respectively. Even for theorists who opt not to go nearly as far as this, the relevance of such phenomena is obvious.

Way of Life

This main category tends to feature two general types of religious phenomena: practices and modes of experience. Recall that Smart includes the ritual (or practical) and the experiential (or emotional) among his seven dimensions of religion. Some such elements are tangible and readily observable and describable, such as a **ritual** like the exchange of marriage vows or the procession of pilgrims to a shrine. Others are highly personal and therefore hidden from the outsider's view. One of the great challenges of studying religions rests precisely in this personal, private quality. Modes of experience such as Buddhist nirvana are by definition beyond the reach of empirical observation and of description. Rudolf Otto, throughout his analysis, emphasizes the impossibility of describing the "numinous" experience fully. Even common practices such as prayer and meditation tend to involve an inner aspect that is highly personal and quite inaccessible to anyone who is not sharing the experience. A book such as this one can do its best to illustrate and to explain these experiential phenomena but cannot be expected to provide a full disclosure at certain points. Such is the nature of religion.

RELIGIONS IN THE MODERN WORLD

A sound analysis of the world's religions must pay heed to the rapid changes that characterize the modern world. Historical transformations, accelerated during the past several centuries by such diverse and powerful factors as colonialism, the scientific revolution, and economic globalization, have reshaped religious traditions. This book takes into account such factors whenever appropriate. Here we introduce four specific phenomena that will reappear frequently in the pages that follow: modernization, urbanization, globalization, and multiculturalism. We give special attention to two features of modernization that are especially noteworthy for our study: the increasingly visible place of women within religious traditions and the encounter of religion and science.

Modernization and Related Phenomena

Modernization is the general process through which societies transform economically, socially, and culturally to keep pace with an increasingly competitive global marketplace. Its net effects include increased literacy, improved education, enhanced technologies, self-sustaining economies, the increased roles of women in various aspects of society, and the greater involvement of the general populace in government (as in democracies). All these effects involve corresponding changes within religious traditions.

Higher literacy rates and improved education, for example, facilitate increased access to religious texts that previously were controlled by and confined to the religious elite. Technological advances, strengthened economies, and increased participation in government all nurture greater equality for and empowerment of the common people. A general feature of modernity, moreover, is its tendency to deny the authority of tradition and the past. Traditional patriarchal modes, for example, have tended over time to be diminished. Around the globe, we are witnessing a general erosion of long-standing power structures within religions. Obviously this is not the case in all circumstances; changes have tended to occur in different societies at different times, and some religious institutions are better equipped to ward off change. But over the long haul, modernization clearly has influenced the reshaping of religious traditions.

Urbanization A significant demographic effect of modernization is **urbanization**, the shift of population centers from rural, agricultural settings to cities. A century ago, only about 10 percent of the global population lived in cities; today, more than half of us are urbanites. Many religious traditions developed within primarily rural settings, patterning their calendars of holy days and rituals around agricultural cycles. Such patterns have far less relevance today for most religious people.

Trinity Church, built in 1846, sits amidst the skyscrapers of Wall Street in New York City.

Globalization **Globalization** is the linking and intermixing of cultures. It accelerated quickly during the centuries of exploration and colonization and has been nurtured considerably by the advanced technologies brought about by modernization. The extent of this linking and intermixing is evinced in the very term "World Wide Web," and the pronounced and rapidly evolving effects of the Internet and other technologies have been extraordinary. The almost instantaneous exchange of information that this technology allows is more or less paralleled by enhanced forms of affordable transportation. In sum, we now live in a global community that could hardly have been imagined a few decades ago.

Multiculturalism The most pronounced religious effects of globalization pertain to the closely related phenomenon of **multiculturalism**, the coexistence of different peoples and their cultural ways in one time and place. Many people today live in religiously pluralistic societies, no longer sheltered from the presence of religions other than their own. This plurality increases the degree of influence exerted by one religion on another, making it difficult for many individuals to regard any one religious tradition as the *only* viable one. This circumstance, in

turn, fosters general questioning and critical assessment of religion. To some extent, such questioning and critical assessment erodes the authority traditionally attributed to religion. Globalization, then, like modernization, has nurtured the notably modern process of **secularization**, the general turning away from traditional religious authority and institutions.

The Changing Roles of Women in Religions

One of the more pronounced effects of modernization on world religions has been the increased visibility and prominence of women within many traditions. To some extent this increase also has *caused* the furtherance of modernization. As women increasingly feel themselves empowered and are afforded opportunities to effect change, their momentum propels modernizing transformations. Traditional patriarchal modes have tended to give way to more egalitarian ones, and old assumptions have gradually receded. To cite just one example, the percentage of clergy in Protestant Christian churches who are women has recently risen quite dramatically. According to a 2009 survey, in 1999 5 percent of senior pastors were female; ten years later this had doubled to 10 percent.[16]

Corresponding to the increased visibility and prominence of women in many religions has been the dramatic development over the past five decades of feminist theory and its application to the study of religion. Sometimes referred to as women's studies or as gender studies, academic approaches based in feminist theory have revealed the strong historical tendency of religious traditions to subordinate women and to enforce the perpetuation of patriarchal systems. On the one hand, these studies have revealed contributions of women through the ages that have hitherto been largely ignored, while on the other hand they have prompted changes within some religions that have expanded the roles of women and have provided opportunities for higher degrees of prominence. In other words, studies based in feminist theory have to some extent *changed* the religions themselves, along with providing new and potent means of studying them.

The Encounter of Religion and Science

Perhaps no single feature of modernization has been more challenging to traditional religious ways—and more nurturing of secularization—than the encounter of religion with science. One need only think of the impact of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and its theory of evolution to note the potential for conflict between scientific and traditional religious worldviews. The question of whether the biblical account of creation should be taught alongside the theory of evolution in schools is a divisive issue in some predominantly Christian societies today. In the domain of cosmology, too, science has tended to overwhelm traditional perspectives, such as the idea that the Earth is somehow the center of the cosmos, as implied in the Bible and in the creation myths of many traditions.

Many more examples could be drawn from the history of religions and the history of science to illustrate the ongoing potential for conflict between these two domains.

Of course, religions are not always hostile to science. In fact, as we have already noted, sometimes modern scientific theories seem almost to converge with ancient religious outlooks. Acquiring a more sophisticated perspective on the encounter of religion and science requires us to consider the underlying reasons for both conflict and convergence.

Fundamental to the scientific method is dependence on empirical data, the observable "facts" of any given situation. To a large extent, religions do not rely only on the observable as a source of determining truth. Religious belief is often characterized precisely by commitment to the *non*observable, such as a supernatural being. This very term, "supernatural," indicates another, related point of contention between religion and science. For whereas the latter takes for granted that the universe consistently obeys certain laws of nature, religions commonly embrace belief in beings and events that are not subject to these laws.

And yet, these issues of natural laws and of the observable versus the unobservable also lead to points of convergence between science and religion. Certain basic and extremely significant scientific questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the ground of consciousness? What causes gravity? What existed, if anything, prior to the Big Bang, and what caused *its* existence? Science and religion can perhaps generally agree over this: mystery abounds. Granted, the scientific response to a mystery is "let's solve it," whereas the religious response typically is, "this is a mystery and is meant to be." But in the meantime, mystery abides, allowing for a certain kind of convergence. It is probably no accident that the percentage of scientists in the United States who regularly attend religious services is almost the same as the percentage for the general population.[17]

AN ACADEMIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

Scholars approach the study of religion in a variety of ways. And although there is no such thing as *the* correct approach, it is helpful to keep some basic concepts in mind.

Balance and Empathy

One concept is the maintenance of a healthy balance between the perspective of an insider (one who practices a given religion) and the perspective of an outsider (one who studies the religion without practicing it). For, although an insider arguably has the best vantage point on the lived realities of the religion, presumably the insider is primarily concerned with *being* religious and not in explaining the religion in a manner most effective for those who hold other religious (or nonreligious) perspectives. It is quite natural for an insider to feel bias in favor of his or her own religion. The outsider, on the other hand, would have no reason to feel such bias. But the outsider would not have the benefit of experiencing the religion firsthand. It is analogous to trying to understand a goldfish in a pond. An outsider can describe the fish's color, its movements, its eating habits. But the outsider can say very little about what it is actually like to be a goldfish.[18]

The academic approach to the study of religions attempts to balance the perspectives of insider and outsider, thereby drawing upon the benefits of each. It is not an

intentionally religious enterprise. As we have noted previously, it is not *doing* religion or *being* religious, unlike theology. Instead, it strives to analyze and describe religions in a way that is accurate and fair for all concerned—insiders and outsiders alike. An instructive parallel can be drawn from the discipline of political science. Rather than advocating a particular political point of view, and rather than *being* a politician, a political scientist strives to analyze and describe political viewpoints and phenomena in a fair, neutral manner. A good political scientist could, for instance, belong to the Democratic Party but still produce a fair article about a Republican politician—without ever betraying personal Democratic convictions. A good scholar of religion, of whatever religious (or nonreligious) persuasion, attends to religious matters with a similarly neutral stance.

A miniature illustration from the "Automata of al-Jazari," a Muslim scholar, inventor, engineer, mathematician, and astronomer who lived from 1136 to 1206.

Another basic concept for the academic approach to religion is **empathy**, the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective. Empathy works in tandem with the usual tools of scholarship—the observation and rational assessment of empirical data—to yield an effective academic approach to the study of religions. The sometimes cold, impersonal procedures of scholarship are enlivened by the personal insights afforded by empathy.

Comparative and Multidisciplinary Approaches

A sound study of the world's religions also features a comparative approach. The chief benefit of this was emphasized by the nineteenth-century scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), who is generally regarded as the founder of the modern field of religious studies. He frequently asserted that to know just one religion is to know none. In other words, in order to understand the phenomena of any given tradition, it is necessary to study other traditions, observing such phenomena as they occur in a wide variety of situations. This naturally requires that the study of world religions be cross-cultural in scope. As we proceed from chapter to chapter, the usefulness of comparison will become more and more evident.

This is not to say that comparison should be undertaken haphazardly or with intention only to discover similarities while ignoring differences. Those critics mentioned earlier who deride the "world religions discourse" tend to be suspicious of attempts at comparison, claiming that too often similarities are indeed valued over differences and that the categories used to make comparisons tend to privilege Christianity over other traditions. Sometimes the results of the comparison of religion differentiate religions into groups that are too sweepingly general: for example, "Eastern" and "Western" religions. Still, the benefits of comparative analysis outweigh the risks, and the potential pitfalls that these critics appropriately warn against can indeed be avoided through a conscientious approach.

Along with being cross-cultural, religious studies is multidisciplinary, or polymethodic, drawing on the contributions of anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, feminist theory, and other disciplines and fields of study.

This chapter on many occasions has made use of the term *culture*, the study of which is the domain of anthropology. We have noted that religion plays a crucial role in molding, transforming, and transmitting cultures and that it interacts and intermeshes with other cultural aspects. A sound study of the world's religions requires careful consideration of the interrelationship between religion and culture; in other words, it requires a healthy dose of cultural anthropology.

The need for involvement of the other disciplines should be likewise apparent. Given their historical and social aspects, the appropriateness of the disciplines of history and sociology for the study of religions is to be expected. And especially when trying to make sense of the modes of religious experience, psychology offers important inroads to understanding that the other disciplines are not equipped to provide. Along with Freud and James, whose definitions we have considered, Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) deserves mention for his vital contributions to the study of religious symbolism and of the general role of the unconscious mind in the religious life. The philosophy of religion, in certain respects the closest to actually *doing* religion (or theology), endeavors to assess critically the truth claims and arguments set forth by religions. Questions involving the existence of God, for example, are among those taken up by philosophers. Feminist theory, as noted previously, has contributed substantially toward advancing the study of world religions. Theories and methods of the natural sciences also have contributed substantially, at a pace that is accelerating rapidly. The widest array of innovations has come from cognitive science, which studies both the physical capacity for thinking (i.e., the "brain"—although this category can also include computers and other systems of artificial intelligence) and mental functions (i.e., the "mind"). Cognitive science is itself a multidisciplinary field with contributors who include neuroscientists, evolutionary biologists, and computer scientists, along with specialists from the social sciences.

Suffice it to say that the multidisciplinary nature of religious studies accounts for its very *existence* as an academic discipline. Without the involvement and contributions of its many subdisciplines, there could be no academic field of religious studies.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have explored the nature of religion and how to study it from an academic perspective. The main objective is to prepare for the study that follows, a chapter-by-chapter examination of the major religions of the world. But the relatively theoretical and methodological content of this introductory chapter is relevant and challenging in its own right. Indeed, some readers might be surprised to learn that the search for an adequate definition has posed a daunting challenge or that the study of religion requires special means of approach. Hopefully these same readers have come

to recognize the complexity of the ideas and the challenge of the task without feeling daunted about going forward with our study.

We have noted that the rest of this book's chapters feature a threefold organizational scheme consisting of teachings, historical development, and way of life. Although these chapters, with their focus on the religious traditions themselves, naturally are quite different from this introduction, it is worth noticing that in this chapter, too, we have featured historical development—of both the attempts to explain or define religion and the approaches to studying it—and teachings, most especially the theories of various notable contributors to religious studies. The "way of life" aspect perhaps has been less obvious, but in fact it is important and deserves consideration as we end the chapter. On more than one occasion we have drawn a distinction between the academic study of religion and *doing* religion or *being* religious. Where, then, does this leave the individual who wants to do (and be) both? Ultimately, this is a question to be left for the individual reader to ponder. But it might prove helpful to know that the degree of *being* religious among scholars of religion spans the spectrum of possibilities, from not religious at all to highly devout. Either way (or someplace in between), one thing is true for all who venture forth to study the world's religions: we are investigating important and enduring aspects of human cultures, down through the millennia and around the globe. Our understanding of things that matter is sure to be enriched.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

For Review

1. Who is Émile Durkheim, and what is notable about his definition of religion?
2. Bruce Lincoln, in his definition of religion, identifies four "domains." What are they?
3. What is "revelation," and how is it pertinent to the question: What is ultimate reality?
4. Identify and briefly describe Ninian Smart's seven "dimensions" of religion.
5. What is "empathy," and how is it relevant for the academic study of religion?

For Further Reflection

1. Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, while tending to be dismissive of the enduring importance of religion, asserted explanations that continue to provoke and to enrich academic consideration of the role of religion. Based on their statements included in this chapter, how might their perspectives be provocative and enriching in this respect?
2. This chapter and book pose three prominent questions with regard to the challenges addressed by the world's religions: What is ultimate reality? How should we live in this world? What is our ultimate purpose? Drawing on examples and ideas presented in this chapter, discuss to what extent and in what ways these three questions are interrelated.
3. Explore the interrelationship of these features of religions in the modern world: globalization, secularization, and multiculturalism.

GLOSSARY

atheism Perspective that denies the existence of God or gods.

cosmology Understanding of the nature of the world that typically explains its origin and how it is ordered.

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

globalization The linking and intermixing of cultures.

henotheism The belief that acknowledges a plurality of gods but elevates one of them to special status.

modernization The general process through which societies transform economically, socially, and culturally to become more in keeping with the standards set by industrialized Europe.

monism The belief that all reality is ultimately one.

monotheism The belief in only one god.

multiculturalism The coexistence of different peoples and their cultural ways in one time and place.

mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans The contrasting feelings of awe-inspiring mystery and of overwhelming attraction that are said by Rudolf Otto to characterize the numinous experience.

mystical experience A general category of religious experience characterized in various ways, for example, as the uniting with the divine through inward contemplation or as the dissolution of the sense of individual selfhood.

myth A story or narrative, originally conveyed orally, that sets forth basic truths of a religious tradition; myths often involve events of primordial time that describe the origins of things.

nontheistic Term denoting a religion that does not maintain belief in God or gods.

numinous experience Rudolf Otto's term for describing an encounter with "the Holy"; it is characterized by two powerful and contending forces, *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*.

pantheism The belief that the divine reality is identical to nature or the material world.

polytheism The belief in many gods.

revealed ethics Truth regarding right behavior believed to be divinely established and intentionally made known to human beings.

revelation The expression of the divine will, commonly recorded in sacred texts.

ritual Formal worship practice.

secularization The general turning away from traditional religious authority and institutions.

Stoicism Ancient Greek and Roman pantheistic religious philosophy.

theistic Term denoting a religion that maintains belief in God or gods.

transtheistic Term denoting a theological perspective that acknowledges the existence of gods while denying that the gods are vital with regard to the most crucial religious issues, such as the quest for salvation.

urbanization The shift of population centers from rural, agricultural settings to cities.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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Hinnels, John, ed. *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Routledge, 2010. Coverage of significant issues in religious studies by leading scholars.

(*continued*)

Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Careful historical analysis of the term and category "world religions."

Pals, Daniel. *Eight Theories of Religion*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. The best introduction to the history of religious studies as an academic field, including chapters on Karl Marx, William James, Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, and Mircea Eliade.

Smart, Ninian. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996. An engaging presentation of Smart's "dimensions."

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982. A collection of essays that exemplify Smith's impressively wide-ranging and astute approach to the study of religion.

Taylor, Mark C., ed. *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Articles on various central topics for the study of religions, written by leading scholars in the field.

ONLINE RESOURCES

American Academy of Religion
aarweb.org
The largest and most influential North American academic society for the study of religion.

Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project
pewforum.org
Excellent source of information on issues involving social and political aspects of religion.

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
pluralism.org
Offers an impressive array of helpful resources, especially with regard to the world's religions in North America.