



CHAPTER **1**



# Understanding Religion



## FIRST ENCOUNTER

For months you have wanted to take a break from work and the monotony of everyday life, and recently some friends invited you to vacation with them at their mountain cabin. At first you hesitate. This is not the kind of trip you had in mind. After re-considering, you realize that a remote getaway with friends is just the change of pace you need.

Now, three weeks later, you have been driving all day and have just arrived at the cabin. It is late afternoon, and the air is so cold you can see your breath. Your friends welcome you warmly, and there's a nice fire in the living room. Your hosts show you to your room and give you a short tour. Soon you are all fixing supper together—pasta, mushrooms, salad. During the meal you discuss your work, your zany relatives, and your mutual friends. Everyone is laughing and having a good time. It's confirmed: coming here was a great idea.

After supper, your friends won't let you help with the dishes (of course there is no dishwasher). "I think I'll go out for a walk," you say, putting on your heavy jacket with the hood. As the front door closes behind you, you step into a world transformed by twilight.

What strikes you first is the smell in the air. There is nothing quite like the scent of burning wood—almost like incense. It fits perfectly with the chill. You walk farther, beyond the clearing that surrounds the house, and suddenly you are on a path beneath tall pine trees. As a strong breeze rises, the trees make an eerie, whispering sound. It is not exactly a rustle, more like a rush. You recall reading once that the sound of wind in pines is “the sound of eternity.”

Moving on, you find yourself walking along the mountain’s ridge. To your left you see the evening star against the blue-black sky. To your right, it’s still light and you see why you are cold: you are literally above the clouds. You sit down on a flat rock, pull up your hood, and watch the pine tree silhouettes disappear as darkness spreads its thickening veil.

It’s difficult to pull yourself away. All around you stars begin to pop out, and soon they are blooming thick as wildflowers. Overhead, the mass of stars resembles a river—it must be the Milky Way. You get up and slowly turn full circle to take it all in.

You had almost forgotten about stars. You don’t see them much back home, let alone think of them. Where you live, stars appear in movies. Here, though, stars are mysterious points of light. You remember what you once learned: stars are so distant that their light can take millions of years to reach earth. You realize that some of the stars you see may no longer exist; only their light remains.

At last you begin to walk back to the cabin. A cluster of clouds emerges on the horizon, lit from behind by the rising moon. You see your friends’ wooden cabin in the distance. From here it looks so small. The stars seem like the permanent, real world, while the house appears little and temporary—more like a question mark in the great book of the universe. Questions flood your mind. Who are we human beings? Do we make any difference to the universe? Are we part of any cosmic plan? Is there any point to the universe at all? What is it all about?

## WHY IS THERE RELIGION?

One of the world’s most mysterious paintings, by French artist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), depicts a group of people who stand or sit in a kind of timeless primeval world, arms lifted up to the sky.<sup>1</sup> Gauguin painted the work toward the end of his life and considered it to be his masterpiece. The title of the painting is an odd one: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Like us when we look out at the night sky with wonder, Gauguin’s figures appear as strangers in the cosmos. Gauguin’s vision expresses amazement at how great we human beings are, yet also how small we are within the galaxy and how short our lives are.

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<sup>1</sup>*Note:* This text uses the time designations B.C.E. (“before the common era”) and C.E. (“of the common era”) in place of the Christianity-biased abbreviations B.C. (“before Christ”) and A.D. (*anno Domini*, “in the year of the Lord”).



Why do we sometimes feel disjointed, unconnected, alone? Where do we fit? Religion is among the greatest of human efforts to answer these questions. It helps unite us in communities that bring meaning to our lives; it offers answers to our deepest questions; and it helps give us a sense of place in the universe.

In his painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Paul Gauguin uses the images of a religious statue and people in postures of prayer to express the deepest human questions.

### Speculations on the Sources of Religion

Why does religion exist? An evident answer is that it serves many human needs. One of our primary needs is having a means to deal with our mortality. Because we and our loved ones must die, we have to face the pain of death and the inevitable questions it brings about whether there is any soul, afterlife, or rebirth. People often look to religion for the answers. Religion can help us cope with death, and religious rituals can offer us comfort. Human beings also desire good health, a regular supply of food, and the conditions (such as suitable weather) necessary to ensure these things. Before the development of modern science, human beings looked to religion to bring about these practical benefits, and they often still do.

Human beings are also social by nature, and religion offers companionship and the fulfillment that can come from belonging to a group. Moreover, religion often provides a way to care for the needy.

Human beings have a need to seek out and create artistic forms of expression. Religion stimulates art, music, and dance, and it has been the inspirational source of some of the most imaginative buildings in the world. Religion not only makes use of multiple arts but also integrates them into a living, often beautiful whole.

Perhaps the most basic function of religion is to respond to our natural wonder about ourselves and the cosmos—our musings on a starry night. Religion helps us relate to the unknown universe around us by answering the basic questions of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

Issues relating to the origins of religion have engaged thinkers with new urgency ever since the dawn of the age of science. Many have suggested that



Death is inevitable. In different ways, religion helps people understand and deal with that certainty.

of religion in early attempts by human beings to influence nature, and he identified religion as an intermediate stage between magic and science.

religion is a human attempt to feel more secure in an unfeeling universe. The English anthropologist E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), for example, believed religion was rooted in spirit worship. He noted how frequently religions see “spirits” as having some control over natural forces and how commonly religions see those who die—the ancestors—as passing into the spirit world. Fear of the power of all these spirits, he thought, made it necessary for people to find ways to please their ancestors. Religion offered such ways, thus allowing the living to avoid the spirits’ dangerous power and to convert that power into a force that worked for the good of human beings. Similarly, the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer (1854–1941), author of *The Golden Bough*, saw the origins

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) theorized that belief in a God or gods arises from an adult’s projection of powerful and long-lasting childhood experiences with his or her parents. According to Freud, these experiences, of fear as well as of security, are the basis for the adult’s attempts to deal with the anxieties of a complicated present and an unknown future. Freud argued that since a major function of religion is to help human beings feel secure in an unsafe universe, religion becomes less necessary as human beings gain greater physical and mental security. Freud’s major works on religion include *Totem and Taboo*, *The Future of an Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*.

Another psychologist, William James (1842–1910), came to his ideas on religion via an unusual course of study. Although he began his higher education as a student of art, he made a radical switch to the study of medicine. Finally, when he recognized the influence of the mind on the body, he was led to the study of psychology and then of religion, which he saw as growing out of psychological needs. James viewed religion as a positive way of fulfilling these needs and praised its positive influence on the lives of individuals. He wrote that religion brings “a new zest” to living, provides “an assurance of safety,” and leads to a “harmonious relation with the universe.”<sup>2</sup>

The German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) argued in his book *The Idea of the Holy* that religions emerge when people experience that aspect of reality which is essentially mysterious. He called it the “mystery that causes trembling and fascination” (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). In general, we take our existence for granted and live with little wonder, but occasionally something disturbs our ordinary view of reality. For example, a strong manifestation of nature—such as a violent thunderstorm—may startle us. It is an aspect of reality that is frightening, forcing us to tremble (*tremendum*) but also to feel fascination (*fascinans*). The emotional result is what Otto called *numinous awe*.<sup>3</sup> He pointed out how often religious art depicts that which is terrifying, such as the bloodthirsty Hindu goddess Durga.<sup>4</sup>

Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), an early disciple of Freud, broke with his mentor because of fundamental differences of interpretation, particularly

about religion. In his books *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, and *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung described religion as something that grew out of the individual's need to arrive at personal fulfillment, which he called *individuation*. According to Jung, many religious insignia can be seen as symbols of personal integration and human wholeness: the circle, the cross (which is made of lines that join at the center), and the sacred diagram of the mandala (often a circle within or enclosing a square), which he called "the path to the center, to individuation."<sup>5</sup> He pointed out that as people age they can make a healthy use of religion to understand their place in the universe and to prepare for death. For Jung, religion was a noble human response to the depth of reality and to its complexity.

Various scholars have attempted to identify "stages" in the development of religions. Austrian ethnographer and philologist Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954) argued that all humankind once believed in a single High God and that to this simple **monotheism** (a belief in one God) later beliefs in lesser gods and spirits were added. The reverse has also been suggested, namely, that **polytheism** (a belief in many gods) led to monotheism. Influenced by the notion of evolution, some have speculated that religions "evolve" naturally from **animism** (a worldview that sees all elements of nature as being filled with spirit or spirits) to polytheism and then to monotheism. Critics of this view feel it is biased in favor of monotheism, in part because it is a view originally advanced by Christian scholars who presented their belief system as the most advanced.

Scholars today hesitate to speak of any "evolution" of religion from one form to another. To apply the biological notion of evolution to human belief systems seems biased, oversimple, and speculative. Even more important, such a point of view leads to subjective judgments that one religion is more "highly evolved" than another—a shortsightedness that has kept many people from appreciating the unique insights and contributions of every religion. Consequently, the focus of religious studies has moved from the study of religion to the study of religions, a field that assumes that all religions are equally worthy of study.

## Key Characteristics of Religion

When people begin their study of religions, they bring ideas from the religion in which they were raised or from the predominant religion of their society. They may assume, for example, that every religion has a sacred book or that it worships a divine being or that it has a set of commandments. Indeed, many religions do share all these characteristics, but some do not. Shinto, for example, does not have a set of commandments, nor does it preach a moral code; Zen Buddhism does not worship a divine being; and many native religions have no written sacred scripture. Nevertheless, we call them all religions. What, then—if not a common set of elements—must be present for something to be called a religion?

An obvious starting point for many scholars is to examine linguistic clues: What are the linguistic roots of the term *religion*? Intriguingly, the most

common interpretation of *religion* is “to join again,” “to reconnect.” The Latin roots of the word *religion* are thought to be *re-*, meaning “again,” and *lig-*, meaning “join,” or “connect” (as in “ligament”).<sup>6</sup> If this derivation is correct, then the word *religion* suggests the joining of our natural, human world to the sacred world. In classical Latin, the term *religio* meant awe for the gods and concern for proper ritual.<sup>7</sup> We must recognize, though, that the term *religion* arose in Western culture and may not be entirely appropriate when applied across cultures; *spiritual path*, for example, might be a more fitting designation to refer to other religious systems. We will keep these things in mind when we use the long-established term *religion*.

Religion [is] a way of life founded upon the apprehension of sacredness in existence.

—Julian Huxley, biologist<sup>9</sup>

Traditional dictionary definitions of *religion* read something like this: A system of belief that involves worship of a God or gods, prayer, ritual, and a moral code. But there are so many exceptions to that definition that it is neither comprehensive nor accurate. So instead of saying that a religion *must* have certain characteristics, it is now thought more useful to list a series of characteristics that are found in what are commonly accepted as religions. We may accept as a religion whatever manifests a reasonable number of these characteristics. Scholars do note, however, that what we ordinarily call religions manifest to some degree the following eight elements:<sup>8</sup>

*Belief system* Several beliefs fit together into a fairly complete and systematic interpretation of the universe and the human being’s place in it; this is also called a *worldview*.

*Community* The belief system is shared, and its ideals are practiced by a group.

*Central myths* Stories that express the religious beliefs of a group are retold and often reenacted. Examples of central myths include the major events in the life of the Hindu god Krishna, the enlightenment experience of the Buddha, the exodus of the Israelites from oppression in Egypt, the death and resurrection of Jesus, or Muhammad’s escape from Mecca to Medina. Scholars call such central stories *myths*. We should note that the term *myth*, as scholars use it, is a specialized term. It does not in itself mean (as the word is popularly used) that the stories are historically untrue but only that the stories are central to the religion.

*Ritual* Beliefs are enacted and made real through ceremonies.

*Ethics* Rules about human behavior are established, often having been revealed from a supernatural realm, but they can also be viewed as socially generated guidelines.

*Characteristic emotional experiences* Among the emotional experiences typically associated with religions are dread, guilt, awe, mystery, devotion, conversion, “rebirth,” liberation, ecstasy, bliss, and inner peace.

*Material expression* Religions make use of an astonishing variety of physical elements—statues, paintings, musical compositions (including chants), musical instruments, ritual objects, flowers, incense, clothing, architecture, and specific locations.



Religious rituals often are symbolic reenactments of events that involved a religion's key figures. In the Hawaiian islands, dance is used even today to honor the people's links with their ancestors.

*Sacredness* A distinction is made between the sacred and the ordinary; ceremonies often emphasize the differentiation between the sacred and the ordinary through the deliberate use of different language, clothing, and architecture. Certain objects, actions, people, and places may share in the sacredness or express it.

## The Sacred

All religions are concerned with the deepest level of reality, and for most religions the core or origin of everything is sacred and mysterious. This sense of a mysterious, originating holiness is called by many names: Brahman, Tao, Great Mother, Divine Parent, Great Spirit, Ground of Being, Great Mysterious, the Ultimate, the Absolute, the Divine, the Holy. People, however, experience and explain sacred reality, referred to by these names, in different ways, as we shall see in the chapters that follow.

One familiar term for the sacred reality, particularly in the Western world, is *God*, and, as mentioned earlier, *monotheism* is the term that means a belief in one God. In some systems, the term *God* often carries with it the notion of a Cosmic Person—a divine being with will and intelligence who is just and compassionate and infinite in virtues. God is also called *omnipotent* ("having total power over the universe"). Although God may be said to have personal aspects, all monotheistic religions agree that the reality of God is beyond all categories: God is said to be pure spirit, not fully definable in words. This notion of a powerful God, distinct from the universe, describes a sacredness that is



active in the world but also distinct from it. That is, God is **transcendent**, unlimited by the world and all ordinary reality.

In some religions, however, the sacred, ultimate reality is not viewed as having personal attributes but is more like an energy or mysterious power. Frequently, the sacred is then spoken of as something **immanent** within the universe. In some religions, there is a tendency to speak of the universe not just as having been created but also as a manifestation of the sacred nature itself, in which nothing is separate from the sacred. This view, called **pantheism** (Greek: “all divine”), sees the sacred as being discoverable within the physical world and its processes. In other words, nature itself is holy.

Some religions worship the sacred reality in the form of many coexisting gods, a view called *polytheism*. The multiple gods may be fairly separate entities, each in charge of an aspect of reality (such as nature gods), or they may be multiple manifestations of the same basic sacred reality.

In recent centuries, we find a tendency to deny the existence of any God or gods (**atheism**), to argue that the existence of God cannot be proven (**agnosticism**), or simply to take no position (**nontheism**). (Such tendencies are not strictly modern; they can also be found in some ancient systems, such as Jainism; see Chapter 5.) However, if one sees religion broadly, as a “spiritual path,” then even systems based on these three views—particularly if they show other typical characteristics of a religion—can also be called religions.

### Religious Symbolism

Religions present views of reality, and most speak of the sacred. Nevertheless, because religions are so varied in their teachings and because the teachings of some religions, when taken at face value, conflict with those of others, it is common to assert that religions express truth *symbolically*. A symbol is something fairly concrete, ordinary, and universal that can represent—and help human beings intensely experience—something of greater complexity. For example, water can represent spiritual cleansing; the sun, health; a mountain, strength; and a circle, eternity. We frequently find symbolism, both deliberate and unconscious, in religious art and ritual.

Symbols—and their interpretation—have long played an important part in analyzing dreams. It was once common to think of dreams as messages from a supernatural realm that provided a key to the future. Although this type of interpretation is less common nowadays, most people still think that dreams are significant. Sigmund Freud introduced his view of the dream as a door into subconscious levels of the mind; he argued that by understanding dreams symbolically we can understand our hidden needs and

The mandala, according to Jung, illustrates “the path to the center, to individuation.”





fears. For example, a dream of being lost in a forest might be interpreted as distress over losing one's sense of direction in life, or a dream of flying could be interpreted as a need to seek freedom.

Carl Gustav Jung extended the symbol-focused method of dream interpretation to the interpretation of religion. Some religious leaders have been cautious about this approach—popularized during the last half of the twentieth century by Joseph Campbell—lest everything be turned into a symbol and all literal meaning be lost. And specialists in religion oppose the view that two religions are basically the same simply because similar symbols appear in both.

Nevertheless, there are many scholars and religious leaders who recognize the importance of symbolic interpretation, because the use of religious symbols may point to some structure that underlies all religions. There is no doubt that many of the same symbolic images and actions appear repeatedly in religions throughout the world. Water, for instance, is used in all sorts of religious rituals: Hindus bathe in the Ganges River; Christians use water for baptisms; Jews use water for ritual purification; and Muslims and followers of Shinto wash before prayer. Ashes also have widespread use among religious traditions to suggest death and the spirit world: ashes are used by tribal

Washing with water is a universal symbol of inner purification.



To ascend one of the pyramids in Teotihuacán was to seek a place where one could encounter the sacred.

religions in dance ceremonies, by Hindu holy men to represent asceticism and detachment, and by Christians, whose foreheads are marked by ashes in observance of Ash Wednesday. Likewise, religious buildings are placed on hills or are raised on mounds and reached by stairs—all suggesting the symbol of the holy mountain, where the sacred can be encountered.

We also see in various religions the recurrence of a symbolic story of transformation: a state of original purity degenerates into pollution or disorder; a battle to fight disorder culminates in a sacrificial death; and the result is a renewed sense of purity and order. Scholars point out, too, that religions frequently use words in a symbolic way; for example, the divine is often described as existing “up above,” insight can be “awakened,” a person can feel “reborn,” and so on.

When viewed this way, religious symbols, myths, and terminology at times suggest a universal symbolic “language” that all religions speak. Those interested in religious symbolism hope that understanding the “language” of symbols will help uncover what is universally important in all religions.

## PATTERNS AMONG RELIGIONS

When we study religions in a comparative and historical sense, we are not looking to validate them or to disprove them or to enhance our own belief or practice—as we might if we were studying our personal religious tradition. Instead, we want to comprehend the particular religions as thoroughly as possible and (as we emphasize in this book) to understand the experience of people within each religion. Part of that process of understanding leads us to see patterns of similarity and difference among religions.

Although we do look for patterns, we must recognize that these patterns are not conceptual straightjackets. Religions, especially those with long histories and extensive followings, are usually quite complex. Furthermore, religions are not permanent theoretical constructs but are constantly in a process of change—influenced by governments, thinkers, historical events, changing technology, and, especially, the shifting values of the cultures in which they exist.

Religion is the substance of culture, and culture the form of religion.

—Paul Tillich, theologian<sup>10</sup>

### First Pattern: Focus of Beliefs and Practices

Realizing the limitation of all generalizations, we nonetheless might look for orientations shown by individual religions as a way of gaining some perspective on them. When we look at the world's dominant religions, we see three basic orientations in their conception and location of the sacred.<sup>11</sup>

*Sacramental orientation* The sacramental orientation emphasizes carrying out rituals and ceremonies regularly and correctly as the path to salvation; in some religions, correct ritual is believed to influence the processes of nature. All religions have some degree of ritual, but the ceremonial tendency is predominant, for example, in most tribal religions, in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in Vedic Hinduism, and in Tibetan Buddhism. Making the Catholic sign of the cross, for example, is done in a certain way: only with the right hand, beginning with a touch on the forehead, then on one's chest, and finally on each shoulder, left to right.<sup>12</sup>

*Prophetic orientation* The prophetic orientation stresses that contact with the sacred is ensured by proper belief and by adherence to moral rules. This orientation also implies that a human being may be an important intermediary between the believer and the sacred; for example, a prophet may speak to believers on behalf of the sacred. Prophetic orientation is a prominent aspect of Judaism, Protestant Christianity, and Islam, which all see the sacred as being transcendent but personal. Billy Graham, the famous evangelist, has often urged personal conversion with these rhyming words: "The Bible commands it; our Savior demands it." The television crusades of ministers like him are good examples of the prophetic orientation in action.

*Mystical orientation* The mystical orientation seeks union with a reality greater than oneself, such as with God, the process of nature, the universe, or reality as a whole. Often techniques for lessening the sense of one's individual identity (such as seated meditation) help the individual experience a greater unity. The mystical orientation is a prominent aspect of Upanishadic Hinduism, Taoism, and some schools of Buddhism. (Master Kusan [1901–1983], a Korean teacher of Zen Buddhism, described the disappearance of self in the enlightenment experience of unity with this memorable question, "Could a snowflake survive inside a burning flame?"<sup>13</sup>) Although the mystical orientation is more common in religions that stress the immanence of the sacred or that are nontheistic, it

is an important but less prominent tendency in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well.

Any one of these three orientations may be dominant in a religion, yet the other two orientations might also be found in the same religion to a lesser extent and possibly be subsumed into a different purpose. For example, ceremony can be utilized to help induce mystical experience, as in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, Japanese Shingon Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, and even Zen Buddhism, which has a strongly ritualistic aspect of its own.

### **Second Pattern: Religious Views of the World and Life**

Religions must provide answers to the great questions that people ask. How did the universe come into existence, does it have a purpose, and will it end? What is time, and how should we make use of it? What should be our relationship to the world of nature? Why do human beings exist? How do we reach fulfillment, transformation, or salvation? Why is there suffering in the world, and how should we deal with it? What happens when we die? What should we hold as sacred? The questions do not vary, but the answers do.

Given the great variety in their worldviews, it is not surprising that each religion defines differently the nature of sacred reality, the universe, the natural world, time, and human purpose. Religions also differ in their attitudes toward the role of words in expressing the sacred and in their relations to other religious traditions. By examining different views on these concepts, we will have further bases for comparison that will lead us to a more complete understanding of the world's religions.

*The nature of sacred reality* Some religions, as we have seen, speak of the sacred as transcendent, existing primarily in a realm beyond the everyday world. In other religions, though, sacred reality is spoken of as being immanent; that is, it is within nature and human beings and can be experienced as energy or holiness. Sometimes the sacred is viewed as having personal attributes, while elsewhere it is seen as an impersonal entity.

*The nature of the universe* Some religions see the universe as having been begun by an intelligent, personal Creator who continues to guide the universe according to a cosmic plan. Other religions view the universe as being eternal, that is, having no beginning or end. The implications of these two positions are quite important to what is central in a religion and to how the human being acts in regard to this central belief. If the universe is created, especially by a transcendent deity, the center of sacredness is the Creator rather than the universe, but human beings imitate the Creator by changing and perfecting the world. If, however, the universe is eternal, the material universe itself is sacred and perfect and requires no change.

*The human attitude toward nature* At one end of the spectrum of attitudes on this topic are religions or religious schools that see nature as the realm of evil forces that must be overcome. Nature is gross and contami-

nating, existing in opposition to the nonmaterial world of the spirit—a view, known as **dualism**, held by some forms of Christianity and Hinduism. At the other end of the spectrum, as in Taoism and Shinto, nature is considered to be sacred and needs no alteration. Other religions, such as Judaism and Islam, take a middle ground, holding that the natural world originated from a divine action but that human beings are called upon to continue to shape it.

*Time* Religions that emphasize a creation, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, tend to see time as being linear, moving in a straight line from the beginning of the universe to its end. Being limited and unrepeatable, time is important. In some other religions, such as Buddhism, however, time is cyclical. The universe simply moves through endless changes, which repeat themselves over grand periods of time. In such a religion, time is not as crucial or “real,” because, ultimately, the universe is not moving to some final point; consequently, appreciating the present may be more important than being oriented to the future.

*Human purpose* In some religions, human beings are part of a great divine plan, and although each person is unique, individual meaning comes also from the cosmic plan. The cosmic plan may be viewed as a struggle between forces of good and evil, with human beings at the center of the stage and the forces of good and evil at work within them. Because human actions are so important, they must be guided by a prescribed moral code that is meant to be internalized by the individual. This view is significant in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In contrast, other religions do not see human life in similarly dramatic terms, and the individual is only part of much larger realities. In Taoism and Shinto, a human being is a small part of the natural universe, and in Confucianism, an individual is part of the family and of society. Such religions place less emphasis on individual rights and more emphasis on how the individual can maintain harmony with the whole. Actions are not guided by an internalized moral system but by society, tradition, and a sense of mutual obligation.

*Words and scriptures* In some religions, the sacred is to be found in written and spoken words, and for those religions that use writing and create scriptures, reading, copying, and using sacred words in music or art are important. We see the importance of words in native religions (which pass on their traditions orally), in Judaism, in Christianity, in Islam, and in Hinduism. Other religions—such as Taoism and Zen Buddhism, which show a certain mistrust of words—value silence and wordless meditation. Although Zen and Taoism utilize language in their practices and have produced significant literature, each of these religions finds language limited in expressing the richness or totality of reality.

*Exclusiveness and inclusiveness* Some religions emphasize that the sacred is distinct from the world and that order must be imposed by separating good from bad, true from false. In that view, to share in sacredness means separation—for example, withdrawal from certain foods, places,



## Is Goddess Worship Still Alive?

Although male imagery is dominant in contemporary religions, traces—and current practices—of Goddess worship are abundant.

- In India, the divine is worshiped in its female aspects as the Great Mother (also known as Kali and Durga) or as other female deities.
- In Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, Mary, the mother of Jesus, receives special veneration; she is held to possess suprahuman powers and is a strong role model for women's behavior.
- In the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon, Guanyin (Kannon) is worshiped as a female ideal of mercy.
- In Japan, the premier Shinto divinity is the goddess Amaterasu, patroness of the imperial family. In contrast to many other religion systems, the goddess Amaterasu is associated with the sun, and a male god is associated with the moon.
- In Korea and Japan, shamans are frequently female.
- In Africa, India, and elsewhere, some tribal cultures remain matriarchal.
- In Wicca, a contemporary restoration of ancient, nature-based religion, devotees worship a female deity they refer to as the Goddess.
- Symbolic forms of the female divine are still prominent in the rites of several religions. Common symbols include the moon, the snake, spirals and labyrinths, the egg, *yoni* (symbolic vagina), water, and earth. These symbolic repre-

sentations of the female suggest generation, growth, nurturance, intuition, and wisdom.



*The egg is often used to symbolize the female divine. Here an “Easter egg” hangs in the square fronting Our Lady of Tyn church in Prague, reminding us that at its root Easter is a celebration of fertility.*

people, practices, or beliefs. Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are among the religions that have been generally exclusive, making it impossible to belong to more than one religion at the same time. In contrast, other religions have stressed inclusiveness. Frequently, such religions also have emphasized social harmony, the inadequacy of language, or the relativity of truth, and they have accepted belief in many deities. Their inclusiveness has led them to admit many types of beliefs and practices into their religions, to the point that it is possible for an individual to belong to several religions—such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism—simultaneously. Such inclusiveness has led to misunderstanding at times, as in the case of a Christian missionary having “converted” a Japanese follower only to find the new convert still visiting a Shinto shrine.

### Third Pattern: Religious Views of Male and Female

Because gender is such an intrinsic and important part of being human, religions have had much to say about the roles of men and women, both on earth and in the divine spheres. Thus, views of what is male and what is female provide another basis for comparing religions.

In many influential religions of today, male imagery and control seem to dominate; the sacred is considered male and the full-time religious specialists are frequently male. But this may not always have been the case. Tantalizing evidence suggests that female divinities once played an important role in many cultures and religions. The most significant female deity was particularly associated with fertility and motherhood and has been known by many names, such as Astarte, Asherah, Aphrodite, and Freia (the origin of the word *Friday*). Statues of a Mother-Goddess—sometimes with many breasts to suggest the spiritual power of the nurturing female—have been found throughout Europe, as well as in Turkey, Israel, and the Middle East.

Why has patriarchal religion, at least for now, so overcome matriarchal elements? It is possible that matriarchy and Goddess worship were frequent in early societies but that matriarchal cultures were suppressed by male-led nomadic cultures, by the development of the tools and strategies of war, and by the growth of populous city-states that needed defense.

It appears that male domination spread significantly after 2000 B.C.E.\* In India, the Aryans who entered the subcontinent were led by males on horseback who worshiped gods that were almost exclusively male. In Israel, worship of the Goddess was stamped out by prophets who preached exclusive worship of the male god Yahweh and by kings who wanted loyalty paid to them and their offspring. We read passages like this in the Hebrew Scriptures: “They abandoned the Lord and worshipped Baal and the Astartes. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel” (Judg. 2: 13–14).<sup>14</sup> The Christian New Testament forbids women to preach: “I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men; they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and broke God’s law” (1 Tim. 2:12–14).<sup>15</sup> In Asia, Confucianism has been distrustful of women in general and has ordinarily refused them leadership roles. In Buddhism, despite recognition in scripture that women can be enlightened, in practice the great majority of leaders have been men.<sup>16</sup> This patriarchal tendency has shaped religious life, for good or bad, for the last three to four thousand years.

Bishop Barbara Harris, shown here at her consecration in 1989, became the first female bishop of the Episcopal Church.





Nevertheless, changes—inevitable in religion, as in everything else—are occurring. As women take leadership roles in business and civic life, they are assuming similar leadership roles in religion in some societies. The study of comparative religion has helped this process by opening people's eyes to those religions of the past in which goddesses were worshiped and women played leading roles. Students of art, literature, and the history of religion are finding abundant evidence of female mystics, poets, shamans, and prophets. It is possible that religion in general is turning away from exclusively patriarchal patterns and beginning to include once again matriarchal values and practices.

## MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

One of the most fascinating things about religion is that it has influenced so many areas of human life. Consequently, religion can be studied from the point of view of several disciplines. History and literary study have provided two traditional ways of approaching religion, and more recently the fields of anthropology, psychology, and sociology have offered a new look at religion from the perspective of human behavior.

There are other approaches, too. We can focus our study on a single religion or look at several religions at the same time. Believers may opt to explore their own religion "from the inside," while nonbelievers may want to concentrate on the answers that several religions have given to a single question, such as life or death. Following is a list of some common approaches to religion.

*Psychology* Psychology (Greek: "soul study") deals with human mental states, emotions, and behaviors. Despite being a fairly young discipline, psychology has taken a close look at religion because it offers such rich human "material" to explore. A few areas of study include religious influences on child rearing, human behavior, and self-identity; group dynamics in religion; trance states; and comparative mystical experiences.

*Mythology* The study of religious tales, texts, and art has uncovered some universal patterns. Mythology is full of recurrent images and themes found in all religions, such as the tree of knowledge, the ladder to heaven, the fountain of life, the labyrinth, the secret garden, the holy mountain, the newborn child, the suffering hero, initiation, rebirth, the cosmic battle, the female spirit guide, and the aged teacher of wisdom.

*Philosophy* Philosophy (Greek: "love of wisdom") in some ways originated from a struggle with religion; although both arenas pose many of the same questions, philosophy does not automatically accept the answers given by any religion to the great questions. Instead, philosophy seeks answers independently, following reason rather than religious authority, and it tries to fit its answers into a rational, systematic whole. Some questions philosophy asks are, Does human life have any purpose? Is there an afterlife? and How should we live? Philosophy is

essentially the work of individuals, while religion is a community experience; philosophy tries to avoid emotion, while religion often nurtures it; and philosophy is carried on without ritual, while religion naturally expresses itself in ceremony.

*Theology* Theology (Greek: “study of the divine”) is the study of topics as they relate to one particular religious tradition. A theologian is an individual who usually studies his or her own belief system. For example, a person who is in training to become a Christian minister might study Christian doctrine.

*The arts* Comparing patterns in religious art makes an intriguing study. For example, religious architecture often uses symmetry, height, and archaic styles to suggest the sacred; religious music frequently employs a slow pace and repeated rhythms to induce tranquillity; and religious art often incorporates gold, haloes, equilateral designs, and circles to suggest perfection or otherworldliness.

*Anthropology* Anthropology (Greek: “study of human beings”) has been interested in how religions influence the ways a culture deals with issues such as family interaction, individual roles, property rights, marriage, child rearing, social hierarchies, and division of labor.

*Archeology* Archeology (Greek: “study of origins”) explores the remains of earlier civilizations, often uncovering the artifacts and ruins of religious buildings from ancient cultures. When possible, archeologists translate writings left by these people, much of which can be religious in origin. Archeology occasionally sheds light on how one religion has influenced another. For example, the excavation of a cuneiform library at Nineveh 150 years ago revealed a story (in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*) that is similar to—and may have influenced—the biblical story of Noah and the flood. Archeology can also reveal religious material that enables scholars to decipher an entire writing system. For example, the discovery in the early nineteenth century of the Rosetta Stone (which contained the same inscription in three different scripts) led researchers to unlock the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

*Comparative religion* The academic study of religion has intensified as a result of the increasing interaction between different cultures, as well as the translation of religious documents from around the world. Scholars attempt to examine objectively all elements of specific religions, and departments of religious studies have been set up by universities to analyze, teach, and publish the growing body of knowledge.

## KEY CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Comparative religion as a field of study is now more than two hundred years old, and scholars have become increasingly aware of the complexity of their task. Among the questions they ask are these: What should we study in order

to properly understand religions? What attitudes should we have when we study the religions of others? How can researchers be objective?

It may seem to many that studying religions is a fairly straightforward, though time-consuming, endeavor: scholars read the scriptures of the various religions, talk with practitioners, visit or research the sacred sites, and experience the major ceremonies. Keep in mind, though, that in the first century of comparative religious scholarship, scholars had little ability to travel. Their studies, therefore, were limited to what they could read. Scholars would read the scriptures of specific religions, read accounts by others who had experienced some of the sacred sites and rituals, make comparisons based on what they had read, and publish their conclusions. Moreover, archeology and anthropology, because they were only in their earliest stages, could not be utilized to enhance scholars' studies and conclusions. Among scholars who had to rely on such an approach—sometimes called “armchair scholarship”—were James Frazer and E. B. Tylor, mentioned earlier. But the limitations of that style of work soon became apparent.

Studying the scriptures of religions, early scholars encountered many problems. Sometimes the texts of the scriptures were incomplete, or the translations that scholars might need to depend on were not accurate. Also, scriptures of many religions often contain *hagiography* (Greek: “holy writing” or “saint writing”). Hagiography is not objective history, written to present dry facts, but rather it is storytelling whose aim is to inspire devotion; some or all of the details might be pious elaboration. Again, outside help (from archeology and other sciences) was unavailable to check scriptural stories for historical accuracy.

Another large area of concern involved the study of religions that did not have written scriptures but had only oral traditions. Scholars of religion asked numerous questions: How should the oral traditions be studied properly? In the case of oral religions, are religious artifacts and ritual words the equivalent of scriptures? And how can we understand the meaning of religious rituals and artifacts for the people who actually use them?

In more recent times, scholarship in religions has increasingly been carried out by people trained in the behavioral sciences. This scientific tendency began seriously with the work of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). Before Durkheim, it was commonly thought that each major religion was the creation of a “great founder.” But Durkheim insisted on studying religions as group phenomena that were subject to social laws. He pointed out that religious behavior is relative to the society in which it is found, and that a society will often use a religion to reinforce its own values. Durkheim argued that societies, rather than great founders, create religions. Durkheim based his conclusions on research, and he urged thinkers to base their conclusions on evidence rather than mere speculation.

The scientific orientation that Durkheim helped establish has greatly influenced contemporary scholarship in comparative religion. Modern work in religions depends heavily on anthropological investigation in the field done by specialists who have learned the necessary languages and have lived among the people they study. One anthropologist who became highly re-

garded for this type of research was E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), who lived among the Azande and Nuer peoples in the Sudan. Another esteemed researcher is the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (b. 1926), who lived in Bali, Java, and Morocco and has written about the specific religious practices there. Geertz has championed what he calls “thick description”—a description not only of rituals and religious artifacts but also of their exact meaning for practitioners.

This research-based approach would seem to be the proper way to study religions. But it raises its own problems and questions: Are we listening only to the opinions of the researcher, or are the voices of the people who are studied truly being heard? Can an outsider, no matter how sensitive, be truly objective? Doesn't a researcher automatically contaminate the research? And is it possible that informants might give deliberately false answers to questions that they consider inappropriate? (They do.)

There are also moral questions: Does the research arise from respect, or is the researcher's curiosity just another example of cultural domination—a new form of colonialism? (A famous *New Yorker* cartoon expressed this well. Two friends in a forest village are talking about a sad-looking foreigner nearby. The foreigner, dressed in a safari suit and sur helmet, is tied up. One villager asks, “Another missionary?” “No,” says the friend. “It's another anthropologist.”) A second moral question relates specifically to the study of native religions. Any researcher inevitably introduces new ideas and new objects (clothing, flashlight, camera, video recorder). But is it ethical to bring significant changes to a culture that may have been unchanged for thousands of years? (Of course, this problem is becoming less pressing, as modern life—brought by radio and airplane—enters even the remotest areas around the globe.)

Researchers have turned their attention not only to native religions but also to unique variants within major world religions. Just below the surface of some major religions are often older religions, still alive, sometimes in blended forms. These syncretic forms are common, for example, among Catholic Christians in Latin America, Muslims in Indonesia, and Theravada Buddhists in Southeast Asia. But greater awareness of the enormous variety among practitioners of major religions has raised new questions: Can we really talk anymore about a single “Christianity” or “Buddhism” or “Islam”? Do the so-called world religions really exist, or are they just useful fictions?

The scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion* that the notion of monolithic world religions is a fiction that should be abandoned. He even argues that ultimately the only religion is that of each individual. Other scholars have enlarged his critical approach. Some have pointed out that the religious experience of women within a religious tradition may be quite different from that of men. (In Islam, for example, women's religious experience takes place at shrines and in the home, whereas men's religious experience is more centered on the mosque.) We should also recognize that within a single world religion the personal religious experience of an individual will be quite different for a child, a teenager, or an adult. And the meaning of being a “Buddhist” or “Christian” or “Hindu” will differ, depending on the culture or historical period that the individual inhabits. (Think

of the difference between being a Christian in the Roman Empire of the first century and being a Christian in North America in the twenty-first century.) Lastly, there is the fact that individuals in some societies, such as in China and Japan, practice forms of religion that effortlessly blend elements from several major religions.

Although this book obviously has not abandoned the category of world religions, it tries to show that religions are not separate, homogeneous, or unchanging. It sees world religions as grand patterns but recognizes that we are true to these religions only when we acknowledge the great diversity within them.

## WHY STUDY THE MAJOR RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD?

Science investigates; religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge which is power; religion gives man wisdom which is control.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>17</sup>

Because religions are so wide-ranging and influential, their study helps round out a person's education, as well as enrich one's experience of many other related subjects. Let's now consider some additional pleasures and rewards of studying religions.

*Insight into religious traditions* Each religion is interesting in its own right, as a complex system of values, relationships, personalities, and human creativity.

*Insight into what religions share* The study of religions requires sympathy and objectivity. While it is true that being a believer of a particular religion brings a special insight that an outsider cannot have, it is also true that an outsider can appreciate things that are not always obvious to the insider. This is particularly true of shared patterns of imagery, belief, and practice.

*Insight into people* Understanding a person's religious background tells us more about that person's attitudes and values. Such understanding is valuable for successful human relations—in both public life and private life.

*Tolerance* Because human beings are emotional creatures, their religions can sometimes allow inflamed feelings to override common decency. As history shows, religious communities have occasionally relied on censorship and authoritarianism to impose their will. Examining the major religions of the world helps us develop objectivity and tolerance toward people of varying religious traditions.

*Appreciation of differences* In a multicultural world, tolerance of differences is valuable, but enjoyment of differences is even better. Variety is a fact of nature, and the person who can enjoy variety—in religion and elsewhere—is a person who will never be tired of life.

*Insight into everyday life* Religious influences can be found everywhere in modern culture, not just within religious buildings. Politicians make use



## Exploring Religion through Travel

Travel, which at one time was affordable for only the very rich, is now an option for a broad spectrum of the population—and something wonderful for people interested in religion. Studying religions from books is somewhat limited, as compared to a firsthand experience of the great religious art, architecture, music, and ceremony to be found across the globe. The difference between studying books about religion and actually experiencing the living expressions of religion throughout the world can be likened to the transforming experience in the film *The Wizard of Oz*: when the main character Dorothy (Greek: “gift of God”) begins her mythic journey, accompanied only by her dog Toto (Latin: “whole”), her black-and-white world suddenly turns to color. (This book encourages such firsthand experience; sections titled “Religion beyond the Classroom” that appear at the end of each chapter will offer suggestions for specific places to visit.)

There are innumerable programs designed specifically for young travelers. Many colleges offer study-abroad programs, including summer courses that incorporate travel, as well as semester and year-long study programs abroad. Scholarships and other financial aid may be available for these programs. Large travel companies also offer summer tours for students, particularly to Europe and Asia; these companies are able to offer affordable tours by scheduling charter flights and inexpensive hotel accommodations. Programs such as these often make an excellent first trip abroad for students. Young travelers touring on their own can also join the Youth Hostel Association of their country and make use of a worldwide network of inexpensive youth hostels, which is quite extensive in Europe but also exists in the United States and many other countries around the world.

Senior citizens (people 55 years and above) can take advantage of Elderhostel programs. Elderhostel offers a wide variety of activities—educational courses, excursions, and service projects—all around the world, usually lasting from one to several weeks. Among the various religious programs offered are studies of Jerusalem, English cathedrals, and religious art.

Travelers who have limited time should look into travel packages that include the costs of airfare, hotel, and car or tour bus. Many countries also sell railroad passes. The Eurailpass and Britrail Pass are the best known and can be purchased through any travel agent. Retirees, often with more time and open schedules, might consider cruises that include sight-seeing opportunities on land. Moreover, there are agencies and clubs through which homeowners can exchange the use of their house or apartment with people from another region or country.

Information on travel, youth hostels, and home exchanges can be found in the travel sections of libraries and bookstores. There are also many fine guidebooks for travelers, some for the general traveler and others for quite specialized audiences. Good guidebooks should be read in preparation for travel, and at least one should be carried along on the trip. Intellectual preparation and practical planning before travel make the journey an even richer experience. Recommended guidebooks for students are the *Lonely Planet* series and the *Let's Go* series from the Harvard Student Agencies. Specialized travel books relating to religion are also available, such as guides to English cathedrals, Japanese temples, and pilgrimage sites around the world. The Internet is another good source of travel information, with several thousand sites to choose from. And, of course, travel agents can help in planning and making reservations.

of religious images, for example, when they speak of a “new covenant” with voters. Specific religions and religious denominations take public positions on moral issues, such as abortion and war. Our weekly routines are regulated by the originally Jewish practice of a six-day work week followed by a day of rest, and the European-American school calendar is divided in two by the originally Christian Christmas holidays. Even comic strips use religious imagery: animals crowded onto a

wooden boat, a man holding two tablets, angels on clouds, a person meditating on a mountaintop. The value of the study of religions is that it helps us recognize and appreciate the religious influences that are everywhere.

*Appreciation for the arts* Anyone attracted to painting, sculpture, music, or architecture will be drawn to the study of religions, because various religious traditions have possibly been the most significant patron of these arts. The study of religions is a gateway to these forms of art and many others.

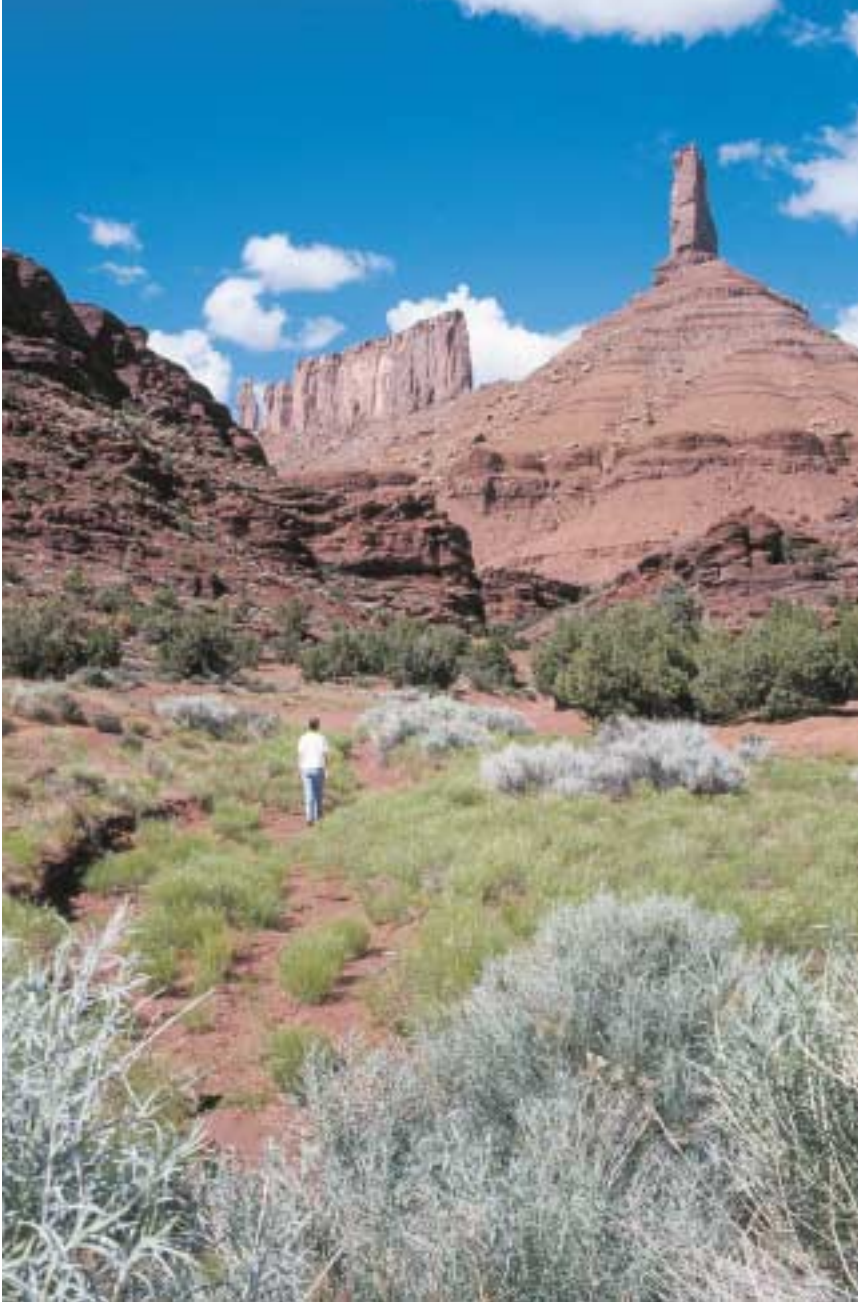
*Enjoyment of travel* One of the great pleasures of our age is travel. Climbing up the temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia or a Mayan pyramid in Mexico is quite different from just reading about them. The study of world religions gives travelers the background necessary to fully enjoy the many wonderful places they can now experience directly.

*Insight into family traditions* Religions have influenced most earlier cultures so strongly that their effects are readily identifiable in the values of our parents and grandparents—even if they are not actively religious individuals. These values include attitudes toward education, individual rights, gender roles, different ethnic groups, different religions, and elders.

*Help in one's own religious quest* Not everyone is destined to become an artist or a musician or a poet, yet each one of us has some ability to appreciate visual arts, music, and poetry. In the same way, although some people may not be explicitly religious, they may have religious instincts, a sense of the sacred, and a desire to seek ways to feel at home in the universe. Those who belong to a religion will have their beliefs and practices enriched by the study of the world's religions, because they will learn about their religion's history, major figures, scriptures, and influences from different points of view. Others may have little interest in traditional religions yet nonetheless insist that they have a strong interest in spirituality and may describe their lives as a spiritual quest. For any person involved in a spiritual search, it is extremely helpful to study a variety of religions. Stories of others' spiritual quests provide insights that we may draw on for our own spiritual journey.

## THE PILGRIMAGE

With open minds, eager for the many benefits of studying religions, we now begin an intellectual pilgrimage to many of the world's important living religions. We will first look at a sample of religions often associated with native peoples across the globe. We will then go on to study religions that emerged on the Indian subcontinent and then to the religions that arose in China and Japan. Next we will travel to the area east of the Mediterranean Sea—a generally arid region that nonetheless has been a fertile ground for new religious



The Journey begins.

ideas. Finally, we will encounter some of the newest religious movements and will consider the modern religious search.

Our journey, though academic and intellectual, may prompt strong emotions in some readers. For some it will be a prelude to an actual physical pilgrimage. For others it will be an intellectual pilgrimage that will provoke both doubt and insight.

We begin with the knowledge that at the end of every journey we are not quite the same as we were when we started. Ours is a journey of discovery, and through discovery, we hope to become more appreciative of the experience of being human in the universe.



## RELIGION BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

You can learn a great deal about religious practice and the artistic manifestations of religion without having to travel far from home. For example, you only have to look under “Churches” in the yellow pages of a telephone book to find listings that will probably extend for pages. In addition, Saturday newspapers often have religious news and announcements of upcoming events.

What were once considered “minority” religions are becoming widespread, and any city will have meeting places for a variety of religions. North America, in particular, has many Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist temples, Catholic monasteries and retreat houses, Zen meditation centers, Muslim mosques, Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, Hindu temples, and Hindu or Buddhist vegetarian restaurants. Cities and counties with a diversity of ethnic minori-

ties are particularly rich in religious places of worship and meditation. Call up and ask about making a visit. People in religious centers almost invariably welcome outsiders, and they will direct you to other people and places within their tradition. Find out when there are services, concerts, and meetings; and if you are seriously interested, ask to be put on their mailing list.

Although travel abroad requires more planning, effort, and money, it provides unforgettable experiences. It can be done more easily than most people think and at virtually any age. Most religions encourage travel for religious reasons—this is the meaning of a pilgrimage, an ancient custom that is still very much alive. The goal of a pilgrimage is not only to visit a particular place but to grow spiritually. Even if your reason for travel is not conventionally religious, the experience will surely result in personal growth.

## FOR FULLER UNDERSTANDING

1. Explore the insights of Freud or Jung about religion, and use those insights to examine the religious tradition with which you are most familiar. How would Freud or Jung understand that religion?
2. Early in this chapter we examined some human needs that religion sometimes fulfills. Can you add to those needs mentioned?
3. In this book we will focus on architecture and travel as two aspects of studying religions. Make a list of interesting religious buildings and travel destinations in your area.
4. Keep a notebook or journal of references to religion that you see in newspapers and on television. What patterns do you see? What issues recur?

## RELATED READINGS

Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. An investigation of myths, fairy tales, and religious symbols in readable style. See also Campbell’s more difficult *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press/Bollingen, 1968), which focuses on the journey of the mythic hero in several religions and cultures.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959. A seminal work by a major scholar of comparative religion that cites examples from many cultures of universal religious symbols, ways of establishing sacred space and sacred time, and techniques for initiation and rebirth.

Huxley, Aldous. *The Perennial Philosophy*. New York: HarperCollins, 1970. A book that quotes much mystical religious literature to argue that all mystical experience is basically similar, despite different religious language. Although Huxley’s argument is greatly debated, the book is an important contribution to the topic.

Jung, Carl G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. London: Fontana, 1972. The author’s account of his own life, which focuses on his religious search and his understanding of religious symbolism. It is a dense but fascinating classic that anyone with an interest in religious symbolism will enjoy.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991. A scholarly in-

vestigation of the multiple, changing meanings to be found in the notion of religion. Stone, Merlin. *When God Was a Woman*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. An impor-

tant book that brought attention to ancient worship of the divine in female form.

## KEY TERMS

**agnosticism:** Literally meaning “not know”; the position that holds that the existence of God cannot be proven.

**animism:** From the Latin *anima*, meaning “spirit,” “soul,” “life force”; a worldview common among oral religions (religions with no written scriptures) that sees all elements of nature as being filled with spirit or spirits.

**atheism:** Literally meaning “not God”; the position that holds that there is no God or gods.

**dualism:** The belief that reality is made of two different principles (spirit and matter); the belief in two gods (good and evil) in conflict.

**immanent:** Existing and operating within nature.

**monotheism:** The belief in one God.

**nonthestic:** Not asserting or denying the existence of any deity; unconcerned with the supernatural.

**pantheism:** The belief that everything in the universe is divine.

**polytheism:** The belief in many gods.

**transcendent:** Not limited by the physical world.