

HANDBOOK OF RELIGION

A Christian Engagement
with Traditions,
Teachings, and Practices



TERRY C. MUCK,
HAROLD A. NETLAND, AND
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EDITORS

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Preface

The volume you have in your hands is an edited book. That means it is the product of many people, including an editor, two associate editors, and 55 contributors who together wrote the 134 essays and the 239 study aids scattered throughout the book. Because the topics of the essays are global in nature and the backgrounds of the essayists are diverse, the “voice” of the book is complicated. Perhaps as a starting place to explaining that complicated voice, it might be a good idea to introduce the editors and the essayists and the essays they wrote.

Editors

All three of the editors, Terry Muck, Harold Netland, and Gerald McDermott, are evangelical theologians and historians of religion. Terry Muck is the executive director of the Louisville Institute, Gerald McDermott is professor of religion at Roanoke (Virginia) College, and Harold Netland is professor of philosophy of religion at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois. We all study the religions of the world in such a way as is consistent with the tenets of evangelical theology.

Yet this is not a book on the theology of religions. The essays in part 1 are explicitly theological in focus and are written by evangelicals with evangelical concerns in view. But the essays that follow are not intended to be exercises in theology of religions but rather descriptive in nature, introducing other religious traditions and their relation to Christianity. My (Terry Muck’s) essays on Buddhism in part 2, for example, although written by an evangelical Christian, are primarily descriptive in introducing historical and current realities concerning Buddhism and its relation to Christianity. While consistent with my Christian commitments, these chapters reflect the widely accepted methodology of religious studies and could appear in a general text on Buddhism. Our purpose in

the handbook is to provide an introduction to religious traditions in the world today and an overview of current issues in the encounter between these religions and Christianity. Thus, apart from the chapters in part 1, explicitly theological treatment of issues is minimal.

Essayists

Further, not all of the essayists in the book are orthodox Christians, and some do not even identify themselves as Christian. Most are Christians. But the adherent essays are obviously written by those committed to other religious traditions, and a few of the other chapters are written by distinguished scholars who do not claim to be Christian. One of our subgoals in selecting essayists was to choose as many scholars as possible who are both (1) orthodox Christians in their faith commitments and (2) expert scholars of religion, simply to show that being the first does not preclude being the second (and vice versa). Yet an equally important goal was to pick highly competent scholars in each religion area, and that meant sometimes going outside the Christian scholarly world.

The nature of our core assignment directive—*write essays that give answers to the questions Christians most commonly ask about non-Christian religions*—does not make it a requirement that the essayists be committed to orthodox Christian understandings of theology. In fact, such an assignment does not even require that the essayists be Christian, although it does demand that they have a good understanding of Christianity and Christian concerns. We believe that almost all of the essays reflect this understanding.

One example of this is our use of the word “Christian” in the subtitle of the book—*A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practice*. This usage is meant to reflect the focus and perspective of the questions the essays are intended to answer rather than the orthodox bona fides of the authors.

Essays

Thus, the essays sometimes reflect positions that not all orthodox theologians would agree with. Key issues in religious studies, especially as they concern the relation of Christianity and other religious traditions, bristle with controversy. Disagreements among orthodox scholars on some of these matters are not unusual. The three editors of this handbook do not agree on all questions addressed in the chapters that follow. This is simply the nature of a scholarly edited book that deals with a subject such as religious studies. Scholars understand the value of a variety of perspectives on an issue, and we feel it is important for the contributors to give their perspectives even when we might disagree with what is being said. So as editors we offer an important disclaimer: we don’t all agree with all the positions taken by authors of essays in this handbook.

Religion/Not a Religion

To perhaps further complicate the “voice” of this book, let me refer to an interesting question that surfaced in several contexts. The question has to do with what qualifies as a religion. There are two ways to determine the answer to this question: the scholarly and the experiential. Typically, scholars, when faced with such a situation, would begin by postulating a definition of religion and then compare with that definition social and psychological phenomena they run across in the field. When this is done, many such definitions would not include traditions such as Marxism and environmentalism as religious. Yet other definitions would include those as religious.

The experiential method, however, determines what is religious by how the adherents of that social phenomenon judge their movement. Few Marxists, for example, would consider their worldview to be religious. Some groups we deal with in this book as religions, such as Freemasonry, resist mightily the implication that they are religious movements. We include essays on these movements in this book, knowing that the very people we are talking about don’t always see their group as a religion.

This may be a good place to point out the obvious fact that our coverage of religions in this handbook is selective, not comprehensive. Gordon Melton, for example, says that there are over fifteen hundred new religious movements in the United States alone, but we cover only a small fraction of them in part 4.

Study Aids

Finally, a word about the charts, graphs, maps, and other illustrations found throughout the book, which we call, collectively, “study aids.” Many of these study aids make reference to religious statistics. These statistics come from four primary resources: Johnson and Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity*; Barrett and Johnson, *World Christian Trends*; Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*; and the website of the Central Intelligence Agency (<https://www.cia.gov/index.html>). Not all of these sources and not all contributors to this volume agree when it comes to dates and statistics. Hence, knowing both the temporariness and weaknesses of most religious statistics, we urge the reader to see them, first of all, as estimates, and, second, as having the most value not as absolute numbers but as comparative numbers, best used as relative comparisons with other religions.

Terry C. Muck
Woodhill, Summer 2013

Part 1

Introduction

1



The Christian Study of World Religion

TERRY C. MUCK

This handbook is for Christians interested in non-Christian religions. The essays answer questions Christians ask about religions that are not their own. Christians ask questions about other world religions, indigenous religions, and new religious movements. For that audience—Christians interested in non-Christian religions—the following essays meet four needs.

The Need for Information

First, the essays provide Christian students with basic information about world religions. They answer questions about those religions that Christians might ask precisely because they are Christians. For the most part these essays do not look at the other religions theologically, at least in the traditional way Christian theology is conceived, but neither do they attempt to answer all questions for all people. They take a scholarly look at the non-Christian religions but from a Christian scholar's point of view. What do I want or need to know about Hinduism? Or religion in China?

This approach makes this book unique among religious studies texts. In general, information about the world of religion that one finds in textbooks used by Christian students takes one of two approaches. The first is the *religious studies approach*, typified by the textbook I have used in my Introduction to World Religions class, which I have taught for twenty-five years: John and David Noss's *A History of the World's Religions*. This textbook and others like it attempt to present the teachings of the major world religions as narratives of the history,

beliefs, and practices of those religions. Each of the chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and the others are presented without critique or favor. The focus is on “just the facts” with as little commentary as possible.

The second approach is the *theological approach*, illustrated by textbooks that describe not only what the other religions teach but also what is right and wrong with those religions from a Christian theological point of view. At their best, these textbooks discern God’s creative activity and intent in the whole world of religion, although it is an attempt that begins with the normative standards of classical Christian orthodoxy. Traditionally, we have considered this kind of study of religion “partisan,” while the Noss type of study has been considered “objective.”

In the past, “objective” has been considered “neutral.” More recently, however, postmodern philosophy has joined historic orthodox Christianity in affirming that when it comes to ultimate questions, there is no such thing as neutrality. In that sense, every account of religion, whether Christian or not, is “partisan.” To the extent that each account attempts to be fair to other religions, it is also “objective.” In this way of looking at things, “partisan” and “objective” are not mutually exclusive.

One is tempted to say that the essays in the book you hold in your hands are *neither* partisan *nor* objective, but it would be more accurate to say that they are *both* partisan *and* objective. They are partisan to the extent that they focus on questions Christians ask about other religions; they are objective in the sense that they present the best scholarly understandings of what the other religions teach. Indeed, we would hope that adherents of the religions covered can see themselves in the essays and agree with the way their teachings are presented. For many of the religions covered in this book, we have included what we call an “adherent essay,” an essay written by a scholarly member of the religion being discussed. We believe this is what all serious writing and thinking about religion in the coming decades must be—a combination of objective religious studies and partisan theology (or buddhology or vedology or whatever).

Seeing the Big Picture

Second, the essays in this handbook provide a realistic portrait of religion in our twenty-first-century, postmodern world. The picture they paint is of a religious world where world religions such as Christianity and Islam and Buddhism do not exist in their pure, theoretical forms but always in admixtures with older, indigenous forms of religion, and always tempered, influenced, and sometimes even combined with new religious movements. The world religions may span the globe and have the capacity to penetrate all cultures, but the forms they take are in turn heavily influenced by those cultures and the religions that already exist in them.

The anthropologist nonpareil Clifford Geertz brought this to our attention years ago when he studied Islam in the context of both Indonesia (*Religions of Java*)

and the northern African country of Morocco (*Islam Observed*). He discovered Islam in both countries. Many if not most Muslims acknowledged the orthodoxy of both forms of Islam in that they adhered to the Qur'an, the Five Pillars, and the traditional orthodoxies of all Islamic expressions. But Geertz also discovered different "Islams." The character and nature of Islamic expressions in each of these cultures produced an Islam that was easily distinguishable from its counterpart in the other country, sometimes to the extent that not all Muslims agreed to one another's so-called orthodoxy.

When Christians ask questions about religions, they do well to start with the basics—the history, beliefs, and practices that typify each religion. The history of Buddhism is the same, up to a certain point, for Buddhists everywhere. A core set of beliefs characterize almost all Buddhists. And certain practices tend to run across Buddhist traditions and Buddhist cultures. But at a certain point historical backgrounds diverge, beliefs take on unique nuance depending on cultural setting, and practices can vary widely.

Study Aid #1

Doing a Religious Audit

Answer the following questions:

1. What is the religious history of this place, with particular focus on the "original," indigenous religion?
2. What is the present-day, dominant world religion, and how did it come to dominate?
3. What new religious movements are present in this society? How prevalent are they? How many are there? Which are the strongest and most influential?
4. How do indigenous religious values still express themselves? Are their influences implicit or explicit?
5. Do the relationships between the dominant world religion and the new religious movements tend toward conflict, peaceful coexistence, or cooperation?

Use the following types of books:

1. A history of religion in this place. For example, James Huntley Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History* (Routledge, 2002).
2. A history of the coming of the dominant world religion to this country, area, and culture. For example, Ian Charles Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (University of Hawaii Press, 2008).
3. The story of new religious movements in this country, area, and culture. For example, Helen Hardacre, *Kurozumikyo and the New Religions of Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1986).
4. The continuing influence of indigenous religions. For example, Jack Weatherford, *Native Roots: How the Indians Enriched America* (Ballantine, 1992).

As an example, for a religious audit of religion in Morocco, read the following books and use them to answer the five questions above:

Clifford Geertz. *Islam Observed*. University of Chicago Press, 1971.

David McMurray. *In and Out of Morocco*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Henri Tervasse. *History of Morocco*. Atlantides, 1952.

Malika Zeghal. *Islamism in Morocco*. Markus Weiner, 2008.

This handbook is based on the idea that for a scholar to understand any religious expression in a given geographical locale, he or she must understand at least the indigenous religion on which the culture was (and is) based, the world religion that has come to (usually) dominate, and the new religious movements that have (almost always) come to express the effects of modernity and postmodernity clashing with premodernity in that culture. We call this “doing a religious audit” of a particular culture. To understand Moroccan religion today, using this handbook, one would start by reading the essays on “Islam,” then the essays written on the “Religions of Africa,” and finally add studies of whatever African-initiated religions are growing in the Moroccan area. It is at the intersections of these three religious forces that most local expressions of religion are found today.

Radical Differentiation

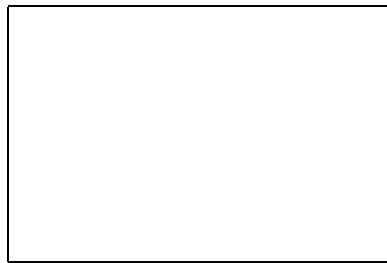
Third, this handbook takes account of the radical differentiation of religion and religious practices in today’s world. Religion in the twenty-first century rarely exists in its premodern form, as part of an undifferentiated tribal culture, where beliefs and practices seem to be part of a seamless and largely unreflected-upon whole. But religion in the twenty-first century has also moved beyond the compartmentalized, often privatized, differentiated phenomena observed by modern sociologists such as Talcott Parsons and sociologists of religion such as Robert Bellah. Religion today is neither undifferentiated nor differentiated, if by differentiated we mean religion has its own little compartment alongside the political compartment, the economic compartment, the culture compartment, and so forth. Instead, religion today is *radically* differentiated. What do we mean by *radically differentiated religion*?

In the 1960s, University of Chicago sociologist Talcott Parsons wrote a book (*The Evolution of Societies*) in which he described a theory of social action that characterized modern Western societies. He suggested that four systems dominate: the political, economic, social, and cultural. He called such societies differentiated because social functions that before had been generalized across social groupings in the premodern age had become specializations in the modern age. In Parson’s theory of social action, he suggested that religion had become a specialty located within the cultural system. One of Parson’s students, Robert Bellah, focused his

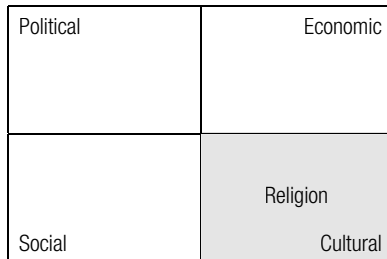
Study Aid #2

Religious Differentiation

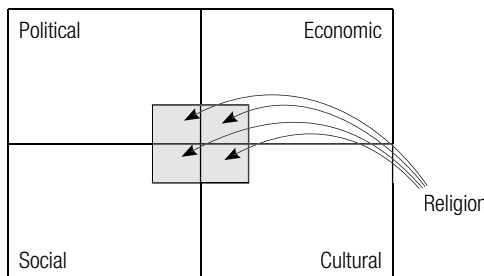
In premodern times, societies tended to be undifferentiated religiously—religion and other social functions tended to blend together. In modern times, societies became increasingly differentiated religiously, with institutions and religious leaders separated and clearly defined over against each other. As we move into postmodernity, societies and cultural systems are becoming radically differentiated. In current cultures, especially in urban areas, one can find manifestations of all three of these types of religion.



Undifferentiated (Premodern)



Differentiated (Modern)



Radically Differentiated (Postmodern)

Sources: Talcott Parsons, *The Evolution of Societies*
 Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief*

work on the religion dimension, writing the well-known essay “Religious Evolution” (1991 [1970]), in which he described in historical detail the increasing complexity, and accompanying differentiation, that characterized modern religion. More recently Bellah turned the basic ideas in his seminal essay into his magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011).

What we see happening in the years since Parsons did his seminal work is an increasing differentiation within each of his major social spheres—the political, economic, social, and cultural. Most interesting to us, however, is that the presence of religion, in the form of new religious movements, is evident in all these spheres, not just the cultural. We have political religious expressions (Hindutva, Christian Identity), economic religious expressions (Marxism, the prosperity gospel), and social religious expressions (Amish religion, the Moonies), as well as cultural expressions. Religion is everywhere and expresses itself in all the societal forms we can imagine. We call this ubiquitous presence of religion in all social forms “radical differentiation.”

Radical differentiation is seen most clearly in the section of the handbook devoted to new religious movements—we will say more about this phenomenon in that section.

Religious Identity

Fourth, this handbook by its structure and approach acknowledges the dynamic nature of religious identities in our complex, fluid world. Individual religious identities change and change often. A recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 44 percent of Americans had made a major religious change at some point in their life. Individuals in much of the world today are faced with unprecedented levels of freedom when it comes to religion. And even in cultures where such freedom does not yet exist (some of the Islamic world, for example), internet access provides what we might call virtual freedom of religion—that is, online exposure to the varieties of religious belief that span the globe.

Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor makes note of this phenomenon in his book *A Secular Age* (2007), where he defines “secular” not as the absence of religion in a culture (its usual definition) but as the absence of compelling social forces mandating a specific choice of religion. The “secular” age we live in, according to Taylor, is one in which an almost bewildering variety of religious choices are available to us—including the choice of “no religion.” The lack of social constraints on religious choice has an overall effect, perhaps, of devaluing religion overall. But its more compelling implication is what it does to individual religious identity, a topic written about in some detail by British sociologist of religion Zygmunt Bauman.

Bauman (2000) writes about what he calls “liquid modernity,” a term that means in part that individual identity formation is no longer the once-for-all, hard-and-fast creation of personal identity (religion included) but a situation

where identity formation (religion included) is a dynamic, fluid endeavor that may last a lifetime. Everything about our lives changes regularly—residence, occupation, family situation, and more—and successfully navigating such cultures requires one to be flexible and multiskilled. In fact, says Bauman, flexibility has replaced solidity as the most desired characteristic of successful identity formation. Recent surveys of Americans and their religious identities have upheld the tenets of Bauman's thesis—they note the overwhelming presence of religious change in people's lives when viewed over time.

Taking into account these trends in religious patterns of adherence around the world, this book is designed to be useful as a textbook for the Introduction to the World's Religions course that needs to be widely taught to Christian students in the future. Such a course differs from those being taught now in several ways.

First, such a course needs to be less oriented along the lines of a course on world religions, or another course on indigenous religions, or another course on new religious movements, and more toward a course that considers all three expressions of religion in a single setting. Given the constraints of time in such a course, this will mean that fewer facts about individual religions can be communicated (although the basic ones are still indispensable) and more about how the three expressions can be identified and how they interact with one another in specific cultures. That is, fewer facts and more methodological training will become *de rigueur*.

Second, religion as a generic category of human existence needs more emphasis. As religious combinations become an increasingly common feature of freely choosing human beings, we need to have students dig deeper into the roots of religion in the human being. It is one thing to make the historical observation that all cultures and peoples at all times have been religious in one sense or another; it is quite another to stimulate students to ask the questions as to why that is so—and how that looks in each discrete social setting. For Christian students, this will inevitably bring in theological discussions, but as we said above, that is unavoidable in the religion courses of the future.

Finally, religion must be increasingly seen as a dynamic quality of the human experience: people and cultures change the way they embrace and express their religions. To use a mathematical analogy, this means the introductory course in religion will need to become more of a calculus capable of observing constantly changing dynamics than either an arithmetic (just the facts, please) or an algebra (religion as symbol systems).

This handbook models what we believe is perhaps the single most important feature of twenty-first-century religious study: an attitude of respect toward religions of the peoples and cultures of the world—especially religions and cultures different from the ones we embrace. It is neither too trite nor too hyperbolic to say that the future of humanity in this nuclear age rests on Christians actualizing the Great Commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I spent some of the summer of 2013 reading the inspiring writings of John Muir, the wilderness explorer and environmentalist of early America. His explorations

of the inland mountains of the California and Nevada ranges reveal a person motivated not by a fear of the unknown but by an almost unparalleled excitement over what he might find in lands rarely trod by human foot. His work has value today precisely because of that excitement. John Muir expected to find great things in the wilderness, and when he did he was pleased almost beyond measure.

As we study and master the basics of religion in our world today, we will help our quest if we model it after John Muir's attitude. In Christian terms it means that as we explore religious vistas we have never seen before, we will be better served by looking for evidences of God's presence in the world God created eons ago, redeemed through Jesus Christ, and unfailingly sustains today by the Holy Spirit. The graces and gifts of that creation are still there. It is up to us to find them and identify them as such for all.

Before we begin the study of specific religions, we will say more about the two approaches to the study of religion: the religious studies approach and the theological approach. We use both in this book. An accurate and faithful understanding of religion for the Christian requires both, and one approach should not be put forward without reference to the other. For the purposes of discussing their complementary methodology, however, two separate essays detailing each are appropriate. And the fourth and final essay of this introductory section will discuss the various ways Christians interact with people of other religions.