

Third Edition

# WORLD RELIGIONS

A GUIDE to the ESSENTIALS



Thomas A. Robinson  
and Hillary P. Rodrigues

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SECOND EDITION

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AND HILLARY P. RODRIGUES

  
**Baker Academic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Contents

Maps and Illustrations ix

Preface xi

1. Studying World Religions 1

2. Ancient Religions 17

## Western Religions

3. Judaism 39

4. Christianity 75

5. Islam 109

## Eastern Religions

6. Hinduism 145

7. Buddhism 177

8. Jainism 209

9. Sikhism 225

10. Chinese Religions 243

11. Japanese Religions 269

12. Other Religions and Major Religious Subgroups 295

Spelling Guide to Terminology 317

Index 321

# Studying World Religions

## What Is Religion?

Religion is a characteristic of the human species, stretching from antiquity to the present, from simple societies to the most complex, from the unlearned to the educated, from the weak to the powerful, from the young to the old, from the peripheral to the centers of power. Yet religion is notoriously difficult to define. Some scholars would argue that no definition can be adequate, since religion as expressed throughout the world and throughout human history is simply too diverse and complex to be neatly captured in a short definition that identifies a common condition. Indeed, most of the common assumptions about religion fail when we try to apply them to all traditions we normally think of as religious.

Surely gods must be present in religion, one might think. No, for some religions deny either the existence of gods or their

relevance. Surely an afterlife must be important in religion. No, for some religions either deny an afterlife or do not divide present and future existence in this way. Perhaps a moral code of some kind captures a common element in religion. No, for in some societies morality is primarily dealt with by philosophers rather than priests, by the academy rather than the temple, and among some peoples codes of behavior provide social order and create stable societies without appeal to religious motives or motifs. Perhaps the common feature among religions is some sense of the “Other”—an awareness of a dimension beyond the visible and the ordinary. But that definition, even if true, is too vague, open ended, and without sufficient content to provide substance to our definition of religion.

Another problem makes it difficult to find a precise definition of religion. It is sometimes not possible to distinguish

## World Religions

Coined in the 1800s, the term *world religions* originally included only Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Later it was expanded to include Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, and Shinto. The term is used much more flexibly today.

### Western Religions

**Western Religions:** Those religions that have roots in the religious per-

spective of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). The primary Western religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Sometimes these are called Abrahamic religions.

**Judaism:** Based on the religion of the ancient Hebrews and reflecting major reforms after the destruction of the first Jewish temple in the 500s BCE and other reforms after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE (rabbinic Judaism).

**Christianity:** A reform movement growing out of Judaism in the first century CE; became the religion of the Roman Empire in 300s; expanded globally, particularly from the 1500s.

**Islam:** A reform movement in the Arabian Peninsula in the 600s CE; within a hundred years became the dominant power from Spain and the North African coast to the Indian Ocean.

neatly the religious dimension from the nonreligious. For example, many political ideologies have offered a comprehensive vision of the world and demanded sweeping commitment of their members, differing little from the sense and scope of religious claims. By the same token, some religious systems are essentially political in nature, while others are predominantly personal. Or consider the world of sports. Normally, sports provide small adventures of escape into the realm of play and relative meaninglessness; sometimes, however, sports become warped into a comprehensive world of conviction and commitment by which an individual's life is inspired and value and meaning determined, and where good and evil battle each other on the playing field for the souls of fans.

The difficulty in finding a fully adequate definition of religion need not lead us to the conclusion that the concept of religion is without substance, though recently some have come to hold that view. There seems to be enough commonality among things that are not easily grouped under any other category to suggest that some

broad phenomenon lies behind them. Further, such matters cross diverse cultures and span vast periods, giving us a sense that at some level religion is a profound part of the human experience.

## Religion and Religions

So difficult is it to specify the defining features of religion that often the study of religion focuses on individual religious traditions themselves, treating each religious tradition as a separate study. It is not religion per se that is studied, but a variety of religions, each a subject in its own right. That is largely our approach in this book.

We examine each major religion individually, as a self-contained system. We observe the complex and sometimes quite distinctive features that have come together to create each religion. We recognize and attempt to understand the world of coherence and meaning that each religion has created for its adherents. In some ways, then, we are examining religion more in the concrete than in the abstract. Our hope is that by taking this approach, we will gradually clarify the answer

## Eastern Religions

**Eastern Religions:** Imprecise division; generally religions of Asia, though Islam is usually treated as Western.

**Hinduism:** A generic term for an array of religions native to India that recognize the Vedas; largely restricted to India and its emigrant communities.

**Buddhism:** A rejection of Vedic religion, developed by the Buddha in 500s BCE in northeastern India; expanded eastward, becoming the dominant religion of Southeast Asia;

based on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

**Jainism:** Founded in 500s BCE by Mahavira in eastern India; rejected Vedas; emphasized asceticism to free soul of karmic matter; confined to India.

**Confucianism:** Founded in 500s BCE by Confucius; emphasized social order and responsibility and reverence of family; largely restricted to East Asia.

**Daoism:** Shadowy beginnings (ca. 500s BCE?); associated with Laozi; teaches about the path (*dao*), con-

sisting of maintaining a harmony of opposite but complementary forces and the natural order; largely restricted to China and Chinese communities.

**Shinto:** The indigenous traditions of Japan, distinguished particularly from foreign implants such as Buddhism; emphasizes ancestors and the *kami*, mysterious divine powers that inspire awe.

**Sikhism:** Hindu reform movement, with elements of Islam, begun by Nanak in 1500s CE; largely confined to the Punjab area of northwest India and emigrant communities.

to the more difficult question “What is *religion*?” as we observe *religions* in their varied and sometimes strikingly similar expressions.

There are, of course, other ways to introduce the subject of religion. Rather than looking at each religion as a unique entity, as we have done in this text, we could have examined the *phenomenon* of religion, looking for those common elements that make religions religious—the religious essence of things. Another approach would have been to introduce religion by looking at the various ways religion is studied across a number of disciplines. These matters are taken up briefly in this introductory chapter, providing a glimpse into the essence of religion and the nature of the academic discipline of religious studies. After that, we turn to the main core of our text—a separate chapter for each major religious tradition.

## What Is a “World” Religion?

The list of religions that one studies in introductory courses on world religions varies

widely on the periphery but is undisputed at the core. Four religions account for the overwhelming majority of religious adherents—over 75 percent of the world’s population, or over 90 percent of the religious population. These are Hinduism and Buddhism (Eastern religions) and Christianity and Islam (Western religions). About 15 percent of the world’s population is classed as “non-religious,” leaving less than 10 percent that belong to other religions. Of these smaller religions, Judaism, Jainism, and Sikhism are usually treated in introductory texts, along with Daoism, Confucianism, and Shinto, whose adherents can be less precisely calculated.

It should be noted that it is extremely difficult to get an accurate count of religious adherents. The figures usually do not discriminate between those who regularly attend religious events and closely observe religious practices and those who do not—between the devotee of a religion and the resident of a country in which a particular religion is dominant. Further, the figures appear to

count different things in different traditions (e.g., residents in the Christian count, but devotees in the Shinto count). Comparative counts of adherents, then, are highly problematic, though the figures we have used here are the ones most often offered in reference works. More discriminating, problem-free criteria need to be developed if we are to make more accurate statements about the size of religious traditions.

In attempting to count religious adherents, animists must be considered too. Animism is a particular old form of belief that sees the physical world acted on and dominated by spirits, who can render benefits or wreak havoc. Every aspect of the physical world, from fiery volcanoes to rippling brooks, reflects the power or the presence of the spirit world. No societies actually labeled their beliefs as *animism*; the term was coined by anthropologists to designate these belief systems because of their similar characteristics. It is difficult to count those who are animists and those who are not. On the one hand, aspects of animistic beliefs often can be found in what we have identified in this textbook as world religions. On the other hand, some world religions less reflective of animistic beliefs have grown by the conversion of groups or individuals whose primary beliefs had been animistic. These older beliefs often continue as a supplement to the newly adopted religion.

Other matters need to be noted in calculating the number of adherents. Many of the larger religions have subgroups with many more members than some religions that are counted as distinctive world religions in their own right. Judaism, for example, is smaller than a great number of the distinctive traditions within Christianity.

Further, some religions counted as world religions are largely confined to a particular people or location (e.g., Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, and Shinto). This is changing, however, as patterns of population shift in our increasingly mobile modern world, marked by considerable emigration of people from their traditional homelands. Even so, only the three great “missionary” religions (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) have a substantial worldwide reach across peoples, cultures, and places.

## Why Study Religious Traditions?

Religion is so much a part of the experience of being human that few areas of human activity and reflection are without some religious influence or association.

### *Personal and Group Identity*

The majority of people define who they are and what they value, partly at least, on a framework of religion. Efforts to understand humans and their behavior will be incomplete unless we recognize the religious component that is often at the center of an individual’s or a society’s reflection. Rarely is religion so peripheral that it can be simply dismissed as inconsequential. In some cases, religion is so closely intertwined with the larger culture that the line between the two is blurred, as is the case with Sikhism and Shinto and, for periods of its history, with Judaism.

### *Religion and the Global Neighborhood*

In a time not so long ago, neighbors were those who shared assumptions and goals. Backgrounds were similar; moral

sensibilities were largely the same. Neighbors met not only over their backyard fences but also in the same social and religious establishments. This is no longer true. Movements of people often have made neighborhoods more diverse than uniform, reflecting the varied nature of the global village. New neighbors bring with them their cultures and religious sensibilities. To understand neighbors in the modern neighborhood, some sense of how they think and what they value is essential.

The frequency, speed, and ease of travel also have helped to bring diverse perspectives together. Travelers to foreign lands usually will acquaint themselves with a map so that unfamiliar geography becomes familiar. They often will refer to a phrase book so that they can communicate somewhat in the local language. They routinely will consult a guidebook to become familiar with the local culture and points of interest. For most cultures, religion will be a prominent part of a tourist's experience of a foreign country. The architecture, literature, and the arts of national and ethnic groups have often been inspired by religion. Religious sites likely will make up a large part of the tourist's must-see places. Further, social taboos and behaviors, by which a culture is most commonly recognized, often are rooted in religious sensibilities. It is important to recognize that people live in their minds as much as they live in their markets and alleys. We would rarely venture into a foreign country without a map of the road system. If we visit a foreign country without learning something of the religious dimensions of its people, we will be traveling without an adequate mental map of the people we encounter.

### *Political Tensions*

Journalists and their news networks often focus on conflicts. Frequently, we first hear of a country because some conflict has broken out there. Sometimes a religious element plays a role in the conflict, either as a primary identifying mark for the different sides of the dispute or as the direct cause that sparked the conflict. Even when religion plays a more peripheral role, it often serves as a convenient loyalty around which a group may be rallied. Efforts to understand societies and their relations with other peoples usually will require some knowledge of the religious dynamics of the situation.

### **Methodologies in the Study of Religion**

No one methodology dominates the field of religious studies. Scholars in the discipline use a variety of methodologies, generally borrowed from other disciplines, though sometimes adjusted to the particular needs of the student of religion.

Although religious studies as a discipline uses a number of methodologies, each religious studies scholar generally can be identified by a dominant methodology. For example, religious studies scholars can be anthropologists, historians, sociologists, theologians, philosophers, psychologists, archaeologists, linguists, or members of a number of other professional disciplines. Sometimes, departments of anthropology, sociology, history, or philosophy, for example, will have a specialist in religion, although just as often such scholars are housed in departments of religious studies.

Part of the reason for the considerable scope of approaches in religious studies is that religion, as a dominant human experience, influences human behavior and environment at a variety of levels. Below, we discuss briefly the major approaches in religious studies, in no particular order of importance. Even within these approaches, methodologies can differ widely.

### *Anthropology of Religion*

Certain subjects once dominated the anthropological study of religion. The experience of “primitive” or tribal cultures, often untouched by previous contact with the “outside” world, was idealized as offering the oldest—and purest—forms of religion. Also of interest was *folk religion*, a term that identifies the religious sensibilities of the common people, often mixed with the ideas of the larger, institutionalized religions but beyond the control or approval of the religious specialists of these traditions. Certain themes dominated early anthropological investigation: rituals, shamanism, altered states, magic, and kinship. Today the themes remain but the subjects have changed. More mainstream religious traditions (or elements within them) are being studied. The familiar and the home environment is as likely a subject for the anthropological researcher as the foreign and the far. Moreover, the “great” traditions (major world religions, such as those studied in this book) now compete for scholarly attention with the “little” traditions, which previously had been the subjects of choice.

### *Sociology of Religion*

People live in societies. Since religion is one of the primary defining human experiences,

we can expect religion to have some clear social dimension. Sociologists of religion study how religion shapes societal conditions and, conversely, how societal factors shape religion. They attempt to understand religious groups as social phenomena and to understand the religious dynamic within the larger society. Sociologists debate among themselves whether the deepest and most accurate insights into the societal dimension of religion are gained by quantitative approaches (large-scale, uniform statistical surveys of adherents) or qualitative approaches (closer observation and individualized discussion with a few of the adherents).

### *History of Religion*

Cultures rise and fall; nations conquer and collapse. Within this ebb and flow of life, religions also rise and fall—and sometimes revive and recover. In some cases religion has simply died with its culture. In other cases religion has sparked a transformation and has enlivened a once-dying culture into a renewed dynamic force. And in some cases religion has carried vital elements from a collapsing society into a new society. Historians of religion attempt to understand the development and transformation of religion as part of the historical process and to understand how religion shapes and is shaped by other forces within its historical environment.

### *Philosophy of Religion*

Religions make truth claims—from statements about the existence of deities, the moral order of the cosmos, and the nature of evil to questions of immortality and the afterlife. This often leads to a discussion of

the very nature of truth and knowledge and the role of reason and revelation. Philosophers of religion examine the rational basis of religious truth claims, often focusing on the nature of religious language.

### *Theological Approaches*

Universities and colleges are not the only places where religion is studied. A vigorous study of religion existed *within* religious traditions themselves long before academics attempted to understand religion as outsiders to the traditions. This theological or confessional study of religion often entails a search for the answer to the question of human significance and meaning, guided by a conviction that the religious tradition under study and to which the researcher has personal attachment offers clarity and comfort about these crucial matters of life. Most traditions have long histories of internal disputes as to what the right solutions are, and often a religion will have a significant number of subgroups with a range of alternative views.

### The “Insider’s” or “Outsider’s” View

The discipline of religious studies attempts to understand the religious dimension of human experience. Religious studies scholars have debated how this is best done, generally recognizing but debating the significance of the difference between the view of an insider and that of an outsider, between the view of a participant and that of an observer, between the subjective perspective and the objective. Although religious studies scholars have been unable to come to a consensus as to the most appropriate approach, they generally recognize the need to

examine each tradition on its own merits, as a system that provides a world of coherence and meaning for its adherents. This means that most religious studies professors will not advocate one religious tradition over another, even if they have religious commitments themselves, nor will the assumptions of any one tradition be permitted to lay the ground rules for the discussion or to have priority.

Approaching the study of religion from the assumptions of one particular religion is called the confessional perspective. The main concern that arises for religious studies scholars is how one’s understanding of one’s own religion and of the religions of others is affected by using confessional rather than nonconfessional assumptions. Working from the assumptions of any one tradition would seem to create an uneven playing field for the other religious traditions.

Some other disciplines have similar problems. For example, in a political science class on Marxism, students may have political affiliations quite opposed to Marxism, yet there is a reasonable expectation that this will not prevent them from understanding Marxism and treating it with fairness and balance. The same is true of a religious studies class. This does not mean there cannot be rigorous debate about religious issues and claims. It does mean that the assumptions of any one tradition will not have pride of place, as is the case in confessional approaches.

### Tolerance and Religious Competition

Religions are always confessional to some extent: they offer a vision of the world that

makes sense and offers coherence, based on a set of often explicitly declared assumptions. Their adherents find a compelling, comprehensive meaning to life and the world about them by that set of assumptions. It is natural that adherents use these assumptions to evaluate the larger world about them. This means that rarely will religions seem to take a “neutral” position, as religious studies scholars often strive to do. Sometimes the dialogue between religions has been sharp, and history offers a long list of conflicts in which religion has played a prominent role.

Many individuals, both inside and outside religious traditions, have tried to encourage greater tolerance and dialogue among religious communities. In this context, attempts by any religion to advance itself at the expense of other religions are often viewed as offensive.

It is unlikely, however, that religious competition will disappear. Much of the course of history has been influenced by the growth of one religion at the expense of another. Some religious traditions have a clear missionary thrust at their core. Indeed, most of those who belong to a religious tradition are adherents of a religion that has grown at the expense of other religions. That process can hardly be reversed, and a good case can be made that the process should not be halted. Suppose we were to freeze the state of religion as it is today, with each religion content with its present membership. We would not necessarily have created a better, richer, or more authentic religious environment. We would simply have frozen, in a most arbitrary way, a historical process.

Religion, as part of human experience, is a dynamic force. Just as empires and

societies rise and fall, expand and shrink, so religious traditions undergo change in the ebb and flow of life. They debate within themselves and with each other. They offer worlds of coherence and meaning that are fresh options for some and failed options for others. This is likely to continue.

## The Ideal and the Real

There is a tendency in brief summaries of a religious tradition to present the religion in terms of the ideal it expresses. But religions, as lived, at best approximate any such ideal. We might compare the situation to the difference between a play as written and a play as performed. The performance is an interpretation of the script. And sometimes actors forget their lines or give a poor performance. But whether it is the script or the performance, both have value; both are “the play.” Similarly, a religion is both what is preached and what is practiced, both what is prescribed and what is performed. The academic study of a religious tradition, then, should not focus exclusively on the elite literary record (the prescribed and the preached), nor should it search for the period that supposedly expresses most authentically the essence of that religion. The whole history of a religion constitutes that religion, from its past to its present, and to whatever it may become in the future. All the adherents of a religion constitute the religious community, from the priestly elite, to the contented devotee, to the protestor on the periphery.

Religions are not static, frozen in a moment of purity and perfection. Religions both change with the times and force the times to change, renewing and being

renewed. Rarely are all individuals within a religion content with every aspect of their tradition. Some see particular elements as stale or distorted, in need of reform. Such challenge and critique are as much part of the dynamism of a religion as is the carefully guarded orthodoxy of a content majority.

### “Sect” and “Cult”

The words *sect* and *cult* often have negative connotations in popular usage. *Cult* brings to mind small, new, popular doomsday movements headed by fanatic religious leaders (e.g., the Peoples Temple headed by Jim Jones), and *sect* is often applied by members of branches within major religions to their sibling traditions or offshoots, which they regard as inauthentic. Despite efforts by anthropologists and sociologists to provide guidance, there is little consistency in the way the terms are applied by scholars, because the configurations of religion are complex. In general, the words do not carry negative connotations in religious studies, even though some sects, cults, or movements may have disturbing worldviews and agendas. Many of the world’s major religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) began as new religious movements within the contexts of more dominant religious traditions that regarded them as heretical or disturbing sects or cults.

The words *sect*, *cult*, and *movement* are often used interchangeably. In general, the word *sect* is used for a subgroup within a major religious tradition, along with words such as *school*, *branch*, and *subsect*. The term *cult* is often applied to a smaller group or a following with a very distinctive focus. Thus one is more likely to speak about the

Druze as a sect of Islam, and not a cult. However, one can talk about the cults of Krishna or the Virgin Mary, since these figures are focal points of veneration that attract followers from within various sects.

### Aspects of Authority

For most of the world religions, religious authority tends to rest in an ancient text and a contemporary priesthood (or some professional class of religious functionaries). The text often is considered to be the very voice of God or an expression of the will of God or of the gods. It is treated as truth of a high order, and its insights are considered to provide a reliable guide to the large questions of life.

The text is usually preserved and interpreted by a body of priests, or clergy, who form the religious hierarchy. Such individuals are selected to act as the religious representatives of the society. These individuals are considered to be the religious experts, trained and authorized to handle certain aspects of the religious apparatus of the tradition. Often a sense of danger is inherent in religious rituals and objects, which may produce harm if handled by a person who is not formally empowered to act in the religious sphere. Empowered, or ordained, individuals often are called priests, though many traditions have dozens of religious functionaries with distinctive titles, ranks, and specific duties. Such members of the religious hierarchy are likely to be primarily concerned with the preservation and performance of the tradition’s current practices and beliefs, and relating such to the foundational text or story.

But religious practice and belief are sometimes challenged. Challenge may come

from individuals who have no recognized status as clergy, or from clergy who act beyond the boundaries assigned to them by their religious commission. Such persons often claim to speak a message directly from the gods. Usually the message is characterized by a call for reform. This reform may have the character of innovation; just as often, though, it calls for restoration of the religion to the principles of a perceived ancient golden age.

Some smaller societies have what anthropologists term *shamans*. These individuals are largely independent religious operators. They are thought by their society to have an unusual sense of the world of the invisible, and they are felt to have power within the world of the gods. Those who have anxieties arising from either spiritual or physical needs often seek out such individuals to act as intermediaries with the gods.

### Sacred Space and Sacred Time

Religious traditions call attention to the religious aspects of life by creating domains of sacred space and time, which interrupt or regulate the flow of everyday life. Various methods are used to create these sacred dimensions.

Sacred space is created by assigning a particular quality of holiness or religious significance to a location. Temples and churches are prominent examples of created sacred space, though rivers, groves, mountains, and stones can be endued with a sacred aura and thus provide sacred space. In some cases, entire cities or countries are considered sacred.

Sacred time often follows an annual calendar, with specific days observed as holy

by generation after generation. Sometimes one day of the week is given special status, as with the Jewish Sabbath or the Christian Sunday. Often sacred time is clearly demarcated by performances that create boundaries for sacred time, such as an opening prayer or a closing benediction that frequently marks a Christian assembly at worship.

In whatever way sacred space and time is created by a tradition, it is expected that adherents will conduct themselves in appropriate ways when they approach the sacred. Attention to such matters does not merely serve to remind adherents of the religious dimensions of life; most traditions consider that sacred space and sacred time in some way secure and sanitize the broader reaches of space and time, guaranteeing humans a more beneficial engagement with the world around them.

### Ritual Behavior

Humans communicate by language. That is obvious to everyone. What we tend at times to overlook is that language, broadly defined, consists of far more than words. We are familiar enough with facial expressions and body gestures as perfectly clear means of communication. Some areas of human behavior are particularly rich in such gestures of meaning. Consider the world of sports, for example. The officials specify the boundaries of the game and the status of the players. In baseball, the game does not start until the umpire calls, “Play ball!” Time is altered from the point of that call. Pitches now become “balls” or “strikes,” not mere throws of a ball. Players are either “safe” or “out.” Marked as

they are by a specific pattern, purpose, and place, such ritualized actions create and control a complete and structured world of meaning.

Religion, like many other aspects of human interaction, frequently uses a varied world of rituals and symbols, by which it creates and controls dimensions of space and time distinct from the world of the ordinary. Making the sign of the cross in Christian traditions is in many ways little different from a military salute. The ceremony for the ordaining of a monk or priest is little different from a convocation for conferring a university degree or the ceremony at which a monarch confers a knighthood. Life is filled with such ritualized actions.

Rituals have certain distinguishing features. As actions that are intended to communicate, they must be patterned and repeatable; otherwise such actions would be viewed as nothing more than random movements. As a form of language, rituals have meanings that generally must be learned, just as the meaning of words must be learned. The meaning of a ritual is generally not self-evident, in much the same way that the meaning of a given combination of letters is not evident until meaning is assigned to it, making it into a “word.” Further, as a form of language, ritual is given its meaning within a particular context. Simply because a particular combination of letters such as *c-a-t* may be assigned the meaning “feline” in one language, there is no reason to expect that the very same combination of letters in another language will mean the same thing. In the same way, one must be aware that the meaning of a ritual is assigned by the group using it; it has no

universal meaning. For example, religious traditions often feature some kind of washing. One cannot assume that the meaning of a washing in one tradition (e.g., Christian baptism) is the same as the meaning of a ritual washing in another religion—or, indeed, even within subgroups of the same religion.

Finally, rituals often are used at major points of transition in the life of a religious adherent. Initiation and ordination rituals, for example, alter the status of the adherent both in the eyes of the one undergoing the ritual and in the eyes of the entire community where the ritual has meaning. Consider marriage ceremonies, whether secular or religious. These show a similar sense of a change in status of the participants, both in their eyes and in the eyes of the wider community.

Rituals, then, are powerful tools by which a society sets boundaries, confers status, and marks changes in some state of affairs. Rituals are particularly useful for religion, since religion often relates to the world of the unseen and attempts to carve out domains of space and time for that unseen world within the world of the ordinary.

## Ethics and Moral Systems

Religion has played a prominent role in the regulation of human behavior. Almost every religious tradition discriminates between acceptable and unacceptable conduct, sometimes capturing the essentials of conduct in a short, easily remembered list, such as the Ten Commandments.

Regulated conduct generally includes aspects of moral and of ritual behavior,

though different traditions may emphasize one more than the other. Primary moral principles are often shared widely among religions, with clear prohibitions against such actions as lying, stealing, and killing. Often sexual propriety is addressed. Sometimes a range of taboos concerning consumption of certain foods and levels of social contact are specified.

Frequently, religious traditions will associate rewards and punishment with good and bad conduct, though the connection is more ambiguous in some traditions than in others. Belief in an afterlife

or in reincarnation often is featured in the broad discussion of behavior and its consequences. Also related to discussions about moral conduct are questions about human nature and the human dilemma, as well as the source and character of good and evil.

### Technical Terminology and Jargon

We have attempted to keep this text as jargon-free as possible. All academic disciplines struggle to maintain the right balance in the use of technical terminology, or what might be called the jargon of the discipline.

#### General Terminology

**Ablution:** A ceremonial washing of the body or of objects.

**Agnostic** (lit., “not” + “knower”): In common usage, synonym for *skeptic*.

**Allegorical:** A method of interpretation that finds hidden or coded meaning in texts.

**Amulet:** An object believed to possess special protective powers, often carried by or worn on a person.

**Ancestor Worship:** Religious actions that are concerned with the spirits of dead relatives.

**Animism:** Belief that spirits inhabit inanimate objects and natural phenomena.

**Anthropomorphism:** A representation of gods in human form or with human characteristics.

**Apocalyptic:** Matters related to the cataclysmic end of the world and final judgment.

**Apologist:** A defender or advocate for a particular viewpoint.

**Apostasy:** The rejection of the faith that one once held.

**Ascetic:** One who rejects ordinary social life for exceptional religious discipline, which often involves poverty, celibacy, and seclusion.

**Atheist:** A nontheist; one who believes that gods and the spiritual world do not exist.

**Auspicious:** Favorable or conducive (as a time or condition) to successful outcomes from religious actions.

**Blasphemy:** Contemptuous or irreverent act or word concerning a deity or something sacred.

**Canon:** The sacred and authoritative scriptures (writings) of a religious group.

**Celibacy:** A rejection of the sexual aspects of life in the interests of focused religious devotion.

**Dualism:** Belief in two primary and competing cosmic powers of good and evil.

**Eschatology** (lit., “study of last things”): A term for concepts related

to the end of the world and of the human order.

**Exorcism:** A ritual to drive out evil forces (demons) from places or people.

**Henotheism:** Worship of one god while not denying the existence of other gods.

**Heresy:** The opposite of orthodoxy; beliefs or practices that are rejected as destructive to the essence of a religious tradition; a negative label imposed by the majority tradition.

**Iconoclast:** Someone opposed to the use of religious images.

**Laity:** The adherents of a religion who are not part of the clergy or the priestly class.

**Liturgy:** The form of public, group worship.

**Martyr:** One who dies, usually voluntarily, for a cause.

**Monasticism:** The practice of asceticism and poverty in order to devote life to constant religious service; often communal.

Often common English words can communicate as clearly as jargon. Too much jargon reshapes normal dialogue into coded and peculiar language that only the initiated can understand. Such jargon is bad jargon.

However, technical terms often capture in one word a complex concept that might otherwise be expressed only by a long paragraph—or an even longer discourse. Such terms are useful shortcuts in communication.

Even the best terminology does not carry a fixed meaning for all users at all times. The student must always be aware of the

context in which documents are written and statements made. Even people within a religion may use the same term in quite different ways. When the same term is used by different religions, one must be especially careful to consider the term's context.

In keeping with our interests to produce a text that is as jargon-free as possible, we have opted to use simple spelling of foreign words. That means restricting the spelling to the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, unlike many books that attempt to reproduce foreign sounds or letters by using nonalphabetical (diacritical) symbols such

**Monotheism:** Belief in one divine being or god.

**Mysticism:** A quest for deeper religious truth, bringing about a sense of union with the divine.

**Myth:** Stories reflecting the great deeds of the gods, which function as foundational stories for religious traditions.

**Orthodoxy** (lit., “correct belief”): The opposite of heresy; the essential beliefs and practices by which a religious community defines itself; the determination of essential beliefs and practices generally made by the majority tradition.

**Pagan:** A pejorative term, once commonly used by Western religions for adherents of polytheistic religions.

**Pantheism:** A view that the universe as a whole is God or is part of God.

**Pantheon:** Full assembly of gods and goddesses in a religion.

**Pilgrimage:** Journey to a sacred place, done as a religious act.

**Polytheism:** Belief in a divine world of many gods and spiritual forces.

**Prayer Beads:** String of beads or knots that aids an individual in performing a cycle of prayers (sometimes called a rosary in Christianity).

**Priest:** A religious official; a range of offices may be found in evolved priesthoods.

**Profane:** The opposite of sacred; the everyday; the ordinary; more negatively: to violate the sacred state of things.

**Proselyte:** A convert from another religion.

**Purity:** A state in which a person or object will not cause the sacred domain to be polluted.

**Reincarnation:** Rebirth of the person (or soul) into one or more successive lives; largely an Eastern concept.

**Revelation:** Knowledge gained by God disclosing truth to humans, often through a text or inspired speech.

**Rites of Passage:** Rituals that mark a change in status of a person within a community, e.g., birth, puberty, marriage, death.

**Sacred:** The opposite of profane; the quality of things (places, objects, times, events, etc.) associated with the domain of the gods.

**Sacrilege:** Any intentional violation of a sacred object.

**Saint:** One who has displayed a heightened degree of devotion or religious accomplishment.

**Sanctuary:** Sacred space, such as a temple or a church.

**Scripture:** The sacred writings of a religion, usually having primary authoritative status.

**Shaman:** A religious healer and wonder-worker who often appears to be possessed by divine spirits and who is perceived to have power within the realm of the invisible.

**Taboo:** A prohibition of a behavior or a restriction on the use of a particular object.

**Theodicy:** An effort to explain the presence of evil in a world created by a god who is good.

## Dating Schemes

**AD:** From Latin phrase *anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord”; developed in the 500s CE. It dates all events from the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and is paired with the abbreviation BC. Since AD has a Christian coloring, most religious studies scholars use the more neutral abbreviation CE (see below) in its place.

**AH:** Abbreviation for “after *Hijra*” or “in the year of the *Hijra*” (Latin: *anno hegirae*); used in the Muslim

calendar, which dates all events from the year of Muhammad’s flight (*hijra*)—or emigration—from Mecca to Medina.

**BC:** Abbreviation of the phrase “before Christ”; paired with AD and first used in the 1600s CE. It dates years prior to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Since it has a Christian coloring, most religious studies scholars use the more neutral abbreviation BCE (see below) in its place.

**BCE:** Abbreviation of the phrase “before the Common Era”; used in place of the conventional BC; paired with CE.

**CE:** Abbreviation of the phrase “Common Era”; used in place of AD, an abbreviation that has Christian confessional coloring; paired with BCE. Some speak of BCE and CE as “before the Christian Era” and “Christian Era,” without the confessional element.

as the apostrophe or single quotation mark, as in Qur’an, which we have spelled simply as Quran. Such symbols do not assist the beginning reader either in terms of comprehension or pronunciation. For those who are interested, we have provided an appendix of alternative spellings with diacritical marks for most foreign terms.

## Dating Schemes

In a guest editorial in *Civilization: The Magazine of the Library of Congress* (June/July 1999), Kofi A. Annan, the then secretary general of the United Nations, spoke of writing on the eve of the third millennium. He commented on his use of the term “third millennium”:

You might say that the millennium is simply a date in the calendar of one civilization. Many other calendars are used in different parts of the world. And yet the Christian calendar no longer belongs exclusively to Christians. People of all faiths have taken to using it simply as a matter of convenience. There is so much interaction between people of different

faiths and cultures—different civilizations, if you like—that some shared way of reckoning time is a necessity. And so the Christian Era has become the Common Era.

It is increasingly the case that publications in religious studies use the abbreviations BCE (before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) in place of the traditional abbreviations BC (before Christ) and AD (*anno Domini*, Latin for “in the year of our Lord”). The new abbreviations first appeared in the late 1800s and were adopted widely by Jewish scholars and more gradually by the wider culture. Such abbreviations avoid the clearly Christian confessional terms such as *Christ* and *Lord* used in the traditional dating scheme with reference to Jesus and his birth.

The contention that the new abbreviations identify a “Common Era” is, however, a bit of an academic fiction, since the dates are still set in terms of the assumed year of the birth of Jesus. Some scholars use the new abbreviations but speak of BCE as “before the Christian Era” and CE as “Christian Era,” recognizing that the dates

mark no significant starting point for any tradition but the Christian.

## A Final Word

In an introductory textbook to ten major religious traditions, it is not possible to give more than a general or broad view of each religion. Thus the description of the beliefs and practices of a particular religion in such a text as ours is likely to apply more fully to the majority tradition or to the tradition considered to be the most original or orthodox. Each major religion is likely to have several subgroups, and these are often further subdivided. Some religions have hundreds—even thousands—of separate groups, each of which understands itself as distinct from all the other groups of that religion.

Many factors account for the differences between groups within the same religious tradition. These can range from cultural and linguistic to structural and theological matters. The consequences of the differences extend from the insignificant to the serious. Some subgroups see themselves as the only true form of their religion—all other subgroups being heretical or tainted

in some way. Others see their subgroup as one of a multitude of valid forms of their religion, with their particular form appropriate for the particular social or cultural context. The nuances of belief and practice of the smaller subgroups generally are the subject of study in more senior courses in a university.

Our aim in this text is to present a clear and condensed portrait—the essentials—of the major religious traditions and to give a sense of the importance and scope of religion in the human experience. Ten chapters deal with specific religious traditions. Each chapter is divided roughly into three equal parts: history, beliefs, and practices. Boxes provide short summaries of the major features of each religion. These are designed as quick study aids and a fast entry into the world of each religious tradition.

## Further Reading

- Harding, J. S., and Hillary Rodrigues, eds. *The Study of Religion: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Olson, Carl. *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
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# Ancient Religions

## The Legacy of Ancient Religions

All religions have histories. They change and develop over time. They both borrow from and exert influence on the religions around them. At times the shifts in a people's religious beliefs and practices can be dramatic; at other times, religious worldviews adapt to changing cultural and intellectual environments through more gradual evolutions

of thought. No new religion appears on the scene without a prehistory. In this chapter, we examine the ancient worldviews that influenced many current world religions. We will concentrate on the influences on the Western traditions, but many of the ideas we will encounter are far more widespread.

Eastern religions generally are not hesitant to recognize their links to more ancient religious aspirations, and this continuity can

### Quick Facts: Ancient Religions

*Various ancient traditions influenced the development of monotheistic traditions in the West. Such ancient traditions have died out long ago.*

**Founders:** No historical founder, though various stories of the creation of humans exist.

**Gods:** Polytheistic and henotheistic. Sometimes younger gods revolt and overthrow the older gods.

**Location:** The oldest traditions developed in the fertile land of

the Nile River Valley in Egypt and in various areas of Mesopotamia, the land along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Numerous other civilizations (such as Greek and Roman) developed in the lands around the Mediterranean Sea.

**Primary Texts:** Various texts, from creation stories, law codes, and adventure epics to flood stories and magic spells. Ancient religions were not textually based, though there are some important religious documents, such as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Code of Hammurabi, and the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer.

**Main Ideas:** Centered on maintaining good divine-human

relationships, especially in regard to political stability and social order and relationships, as opposed to ideas of personal enlightenment or individual salvation, as in many modern faiths.

**Hierarchy:** Divine kingship. Rulers are descendants of the gods or hold a special relation to the gods. Priesthood and monarchy are mutually supportive.

**Major Empires:** Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Classical Greek, Hellenistic, Roman.

be readily traced by scholars. For example, modern Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism have their roots deep in ancient India—a legacy that none of these religions seeks to disown, even though it is obvious the traditions have changed over the millennia. The religions of China and Japan likewise draw on ancient visions of the world from their own locales. Western religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), however, tend to disassociate themselves from the ancient religions that preceded them. They see themselves as unique revelations from God breaking in on and radically replacing (or sometimes reforming or fulfilling) more “primitive” or less sophisticated kinds of religion that had been dominant in the area. A casual observer might agree that there does seem to be considerable discontinuity between these religions and the religions they replaced. The ancient religions had many gods; the Western religions have but one. In Athens, the city that still bears the name of the goddess Athena, most people are now Greek Orthodox Christians, who are hardly likely to think of the goddess as actually existing. Vatican City in Rome is now the seat of power of Catholic Christianity, no longer part of a sprawling metropolis with a semidivine emperor and in whose coliseum Christians were brutally murdered for sport. The pyramids, the great structures intended to grant immortality to the pharaohs, now share Egypt with a predominantly Muslim population that would be outraged to discover anyone praying to the ancient gods.

Yet even in the West elements of that ancient past live on. The Persian (Iranian) religion of Zoroastrianism was the religion of mighty emperors who once held sway

over the whole Middle East, from the borders of Greece into Egypt. It is still practiced some 2,500 years later, although its adherents now number in the thousands, not millions. Modern Judaism has roots that go back well over two thousand years, and in its early formation it developed in the shadows and under the influence of the more dominant ancient cultures. Scholars tend to see Judaism as arising from the slow development of monotheism from an earlier polytheistic Israelite society, not the instantaneous introduction of a fundamentally new “ethical monotheism” when the early Israelite ancestors began to form the nation of Israel. This is one of very many areas in which religious claims about the past are challenged by modern, critical scholarship. Christianity and Islam have their own connections with the ancient Near East through their development of the ancient Jewish theological ideas and traditions, as well as through the influences of the wider cultural contexts in which they arose. Further, in spite of their sense of discontinuity with the past, all the Western religions reflect some of the mentality common in ancient religions of the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian regions in which they developed.

Both areas developed impressive civilizations early on, particularly in Egypt along the fertile Nile and in the equally fertile area along the Tigris and the Euphrates, the two great rivers of Mesopotamia (lit., “land between the rivers”), present-day Iraq and Syria. There the great religions of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia developed. And one must not forget the renowned pantheon of the Greek and Roman Olympian gods and the high cultural achievements associated with these peoples. Although

## Major Ancient Near-Eastern Civilizations

**Sumerian** (3500–2000 BCE): The oldest Mesopotamian civilization. Its many city-states were the first to develop cuneiform writing.

**Assyrian** (2300s–612 BCE): Assyria had a long history but is most famous for being Israel's archenemy during its latter period. Many of its cities, including Nimrud and Nineveh, have provided rich finds in artifacts and texts, some of which are prophetic oracles.

**Babylonian** (1900s–500s BCE): Many phases of dominance and

weakness. Hammurabi's (1728–1686 BCE) law code is a milestone of the powerful Old Babylonian civilization, while Nebuchadnezzar of the brief Neo-Babylonian period conquered Jerusalem in 587 BCE, a significant event in Israelite history.

**Persian** (550–331 BCE): Incorporating the Medes into its structure, Persia defeated Babylonia and became a vast empire from India to Greece. Its westward expansion was halted by the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon.

**Classical Greece** (400s–338 BCE): Various confederations of city-states in Greece and the Aegean. Its mythology, art, architecture, philosophy, and science shaped much of the thinking in the Western world.

**Hellenistic** (333–30 BCE): The empire of Alexander the Great, which spread Greek culture throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

**Roman:** The last great Mediterranean empire. It was Christianized by the 300s CE; the Western Empire fell in the 400s and the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire in the 1400s.

Western traditions have consciously and clearly broken from the worldview of these ancient civilizations, elements of ancient religious reflection linger on in our modern faiths. This chapter will explore some of the general features of ancient religion to identify continuities and discontinuities with the prominent religions of the modern world.

### Religion of the Poor and Religion of the Powerful

The ancient world had many cultures and many religions. There was also diversity within regions. Although we speak of, for instance, “Mesopotamian religion,” we should really be saying “Mesopotamian religions,” for they were many. We have at best a one-sided picture of any religion from these areas. For one thing, little data has survived the ravages of time, and what has survived is often not easy to interpret. For another, in the ancient world very few people could read or write, so the religious sensibilities of most people, particularly

the poor and illiterate, are almost entirely beyond recovery now. The myths, incantations, and hymns that survive do so only because of that wonderful technology called writing, and writing has largely been the tool of the rich and the leisured. We simply do not know the stories, legends, songs, and traditional teachings of the nonliterate, common citizens of these lands—90 percent or more of the population of the ancient world. Something of their religion can be pieced together from other artifacts that have survived, but the oral traditions that expressed their sense of the world and what those artifacts really meant to them are in large part lost forever. It is, therefore, the religions of the powerful elite of city-states and empires that are best attested, not the beliefs of the subsistence farmers barely scratching out a living from their backbreaking work.

We can assume, however, some overlap of the rural and the urban, of the elite and the people they governed. The extent of the overlap and the unique perspectives

of the nonliterate are largely indeterminate. Both would be concerned with similar ideas: prosperity, health, and security for one's family and community—the very things that many modern believers around the world still pray about. Yet since religion tends to adapt to its environment, we would expect some differences in answers to these questions, and indeed even different sets of questions in some areas. The limited world of the low-level agriculturalists, who would rarely travel far from their fields, shaped a religion that concentrated on the factors that made for a meaningful, good life on those small parcels of land and tiny villages. There seems to have been a strong connection with nature: rituals were performed to ensure that crops grew and to guarantee that the deities and spirits of the ancestors looked after the worshiper's own community and region.

The connection between nature and human society is represented in the religion of the powerful, but in a rather different form. The city-state, kingdom, or empire had more on its mind than the well-being of villages and crops, although these remained vitally important. There was the need for the gods' help in maintaining political control over larger territories and even contested lands. Armies were needed, and taxes were raised to pay for them. Masses of labor had to be organized for irrigation projects, city building, manufacturing, and crafts. Scribes were needed to keep records and files. Each of these spheres of life required specialists. Therefore, the religions of the most powerful were somewhat removed from the actual tasks of working the fields and performing the basic labor on which society depended.

All these factors made their mark on the religions. The urban centers could afford and indeed required specialization in religious duties: priests and other temple functionaries, including various diviners and prophets who would speak in the name of the deities; accountants (temples could also function as banks and tax-collecting agencies); and scribes. The religion had to legitimize a complex political structure and express the hopes, fears, and ambitions (sometimes ruthless ambitions) of powerful elites. This was usually done by presenting the king as the representative of the deity on earth. Myths and rituals helped the king establish his power as the legitimate ruler and his relationship with the gods. Such mythology could have a great impact on the economy of a country. For example, the giant pyramids placed a tremendous burden on Egypt's financial and material resources and labor, that otherwise could have been employed toward other tasks.

### **Inclusive and Exclusive**

Western people tend to think of religions as exclusive—that is, a person belongs to only one religion at a time. Indeed, the Jewish and Christian Bibles and the Islamic Quran teach against mixing the “true” religion with beliefs and practices from foreign faiths. This exclusivity is a prominent concern in monotheistic religions, and it reaches back into the early period of our Western religions. But that was not the dominant view in the ancient religious world of polytheism, which reflected an inclusive attitude, providing due reverence to all the gods and receiving from them benefits in the domains they controlled.

## Major Ancient Near-Eastern Texts

**Baal Cycle:** Important Canaanite myths tell of Baal's quest for a suitable palace and his battles with Yam (Sea) and Mot (Death).

**Book of the Dead:** This text, written on tomb walls and on papyrus, provides spells for the deceased to use to survive the tests and judgments of the dead. Praises to the gods are also included.

**Code of Hammurabi:** From the eighteenth century BCE, one of the earliest known legal codes. The laws deal with various property and commercial regulations, violence,

marriage, and social order. Codes like this are often seen as providing models for the biblical collections of Israelite laws.

**Enuma Elish:** Often referred to as the Babylonian creation story, it tells the tale of Marduk, who becomes the chief god after killing Tiamat, whose body was used to create heaven and earth.

**Epic of Gilgamesh:** Often referred to as the Babylonian flood story, it recounts the mythical adventures of a Mesopotamian king and his friend Enkidu. One of the stories recounts

a great flood. It is one of the oldest recorded stories on earth, known as early as the third millennium BCE.

**The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*:** Greek epics traditionally ascribed to the poet Homer (700s BCE), telling tales of the battle at Troy (of Trojan horse fame) and the travels of one of the heroes returning from the war. Deities play major roles.

**Rosetta Stone:** A multilingual stone inscription from the 100s BCE, discovered in 1799. It was the key to deciphering the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system.

In the ancient world, there were often a number of different religious centers in one kingdom, each with its own unique rituals, mythology, and patron deity. Each could expect some support from the local rulers, and each would in turn lend its support to the leadership. In Egypt, for example, priests in different centers offered different views of creation that attributed creative acts to the deities worshiped at their particular shrine. At Heliopolis in northern Egypt, creation was related to the sun-god appearing on a mound that arose in the midst of a watery chaos called Nun. The sun created two other gods, associated with air and water; these two gave birth to two more, the earth (Geb) and the sky (Nut), who in turn engendered four more deities, including Isis and Osiris. These nine deities could still, however, be considered aspects of a single divine power, which was explicitly located in the power of the king. The Memphis theology, however, distinguished itself from nearby Heliopolis in that the god Ptah, holding within himself eight other deities, created

the world through his speech. At Thebes, in central Egypt, creation was spoken of as having four aspects, each represented by a pair of deities. A mound emerged within the unformed chaos. The sun-god Amun emerged from an egg. In Mesopotamia, rival mythologies and temples could coexist. At times there may have been animosity and tensions among them, but for the most part each was taken as revealing some measure of sacred truth that should not be ignored. Solving all the logical inconsistencies was not an issue. More important was the need to maintain an ordered universe within each of the temples' symbolic worldviews.

We often do not know to what extent elite or imperial concerns dictated religion to the masses. At times a new political power would let the common folk carry on as they had done previously, so long as the people did not resist the new elite or openly defy the religious claims made by it. Anyone associated with the power structure itself, however, could be expected to adopt the general ideology of the rulers. On rare



**Sphinx and Pyramid.** The sphinx and the pyramid (the second largest in Giza) date from the third millennium BCE.

occasion, there were even attempts to force a religious exclusivity on people. The Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten rejected the existing belief in the sun as one of the major deities in favor of a radical monotheism. For him, the sun-god, Aten, was the only god. But Akhenaten's attempt to suppress all other forms of worship failed. After his death, the old priesthoods reasserted themselves, and they did their best to wipe the memory of the "heretic king" from history. Another famous case is celebrated to this day. In the last few centuries BCE, many Jews were frustrated at the encroachment of Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) culture and religion on their communities. When Hellenism was forced on Judah and Jerusalem considerable resistance arose, and war erupted in 167 BCE when the Hellenistic king desecrated the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by sacrificing pigs on the altar. The Jewish zealots, led by Judas Maccabbeus, finally recaptured and rededicated the temple in late 164 BCE. The rededication is celebrated every year at the Jewish festival

of Hanukkah. For the Jewish rebels, exclusivity of worship was something for which they were willing to die in order to preserve it against a rival exclusivist position.

Despite all this, it must be remembered that religious differences could often exist without open hostility and that, given changing political and cultural circumstances, various new forms of religion could emerge. Only rarely did this result in a fundamentally new religion; often traditions would evolve and myths would be rewritten to express the new relationships between the gods worshiped by different groups of people or in different locales.

## The Gods

As noted already, Middle Eastern polytheism (many gods) gave way to monotheism (one god). The actual history of this change is very uncertain, however, and one must be careful not to oversimplify the situation. Other kinds of theology fall in some ways

## Primordial and Heroic Characters

**Adam:** In the Genesis tradition, the first human. He lived with his wife, Eve, in the garden of Eden, the primordial paradise, until expelled for disobedience, popularly portrayed as “eating the forbidden fruit.”

**Adapa:** A great Mesopotamian sage before the flood; brought culture to humanity. He provided food for the gods but incurred some disfavor after breaking the wing of the divine South Wind in a storm.

**Aqhat and Danel:** Heroes of two different Ugaritic (Canaanite) leg-

ends. (Danel’s story is named after his ill-fated son Aqhat.) Both stories involve the loss of one’s children and of offending the deities.

**Atrahasis, Utnapishtim, Ziusudra:** Heroes of Mesopotamian legends and myths of a great flood. The hero is instructed to save himself, his family, and the animals by building a great boat.

**Etana:** The king of Kish who ascended on an eagle to Ishtar to request a son. Fearing for his life, he

returned to earth, later succeeding in his hopes for fatherhood.

**Gilgamesh:** A king who became the hero of the legendary Epic of Gilgamesh. He is viewed as partly divine and had initially been a poor ruler. He reformed, and his story recounts a series of adventures as he tries and fails to win immortality.

**Noah:** In the Genesis tradition, the man who built an ark to save humans and animals from a great flood.

between polytheism and strict monotheism. Indeed, many ancient people may be best described as henotheists; that is, they believed in one god as primary in their lives or their region, but they accepted without any difficulty the existence of other deities as being worthy of worship by other people or in other regions. More strictly, the term *monolatry* refers to the acceptance that only one god is worthy of worship and that all other deities are somehow inferior, and this may actually be the best term to describe ancient Israelite religion. All these forms, and many kinds of belief in between, existed at various times in the ancient Near East, though for most of that region’s history a strict monotheism or monolatry was relatively rare.

Even though the modern Western religions declare themselves to be monotheistic, one cannot take monotheism at face value as a permanent fixture of these traditions from their beginnings. The ancient Hebrews (Jews) once believed in various gods, and in some passages the Jewish Bible affirms

that YHWH (often translated as “the Lord” or LORD) is one and the same as Elohim (God), while in other passages the existence of other gods is implied.

The Hebrew Bible also repeatedly and explicitly accuses the ancient Hebrews of “prostituting” themselves by worshipping other gods. Modern Zoroastrians see themselves as monotheists, yet the ancient Persian religion has a strong dualist idea of opposite cosmic principles or spirits of good and evil. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all accept a multitude of angels. Christianity and Islam also have long-held dualist beliefs of a cosmic conflict between good and evil—between the righteous God and his cosmic archenemy, Satan or Iblis. These beliefs grew out of an ancient Jewish concept of God’s battle with rebel angels. What is more, Christians describe their single god as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity are one, and Christians describe themselves as monotheists. For Muslims, however, the idea of the Trinity has a ring

of polytheism, and Muslims criticize Christianity for not adequately maintaining the oneness of God.

The greatest example of blurring the distinction between monotheism and polytheism comes from Hinduism. For most Hindus there are many gods—so many that some writers speak of millions of them. Yet there is a sense in Hinduism that a number of these gods are only different aspects of one of the great deities who has some dealing with other of the great gods and goddesses. The chief gods, then, each take up particular aspects of reality, and worshipers may belong to a sect devoted to one god or another. For some, the greatest god is Vishnu, for others it is Shiva, and for still others, the great goddess Devi, who goes by many names. In this sense Hinduism can be henotheistic or even monolatrous. On an even more philosophical level, these great deities are often described as only aspects of a single deity regardless of what name a worshiper may use; in this sense Hinduism can be, at least for some practitioners, monotheistic. The ancient Indian sages went yet further, articulating a mystical philosophy in which no gods really exist as outside the universe. For them, all is god (pantheism). It should be clear, then, that the categories used to classify religions should not be employed in a heavy-handed way. One has to be careful to make sure the categories fit the evidence, instead of forcing the evidence to fit the categories, which is often the easier task, but also simplistic and inadequate.

## Mythology

One of the most fascinating, if not frustrating, topics in ancient religions is mythology.

Often ancient texts are badly damaged and written in languages that are difficult to decipher. Many times what is published in modern books of mythologies are best-guesses at translation, or modern retellings with only a superficial connection with the originals. Another problem is that the ancient storytellers did not leave us essays explaining what their myths meant. Sometimes they wrote instructions on how and when to recite the text in the course of a ritual, but it is a tough job sorting through the layers of symbolism without a clear guide from the ancients explaining the world behind the symbols. And this raises the most difficult issue of all: what is mythology anyway?

Mythology is notoriously hard to define. Some stories seem to deserve the title *myth* but do not fit into a technical description of myth. In nonacademic contexts, myth often means a lie, a falsehood, or a fairy story. But scholars of religion use the word in an entirely different way. For academics, there is an unclear line between legends, folk stories, and myths. To call a religious story a myth is not to dismiss it or to imply that it is not worthy of belief. Indeed, to call such a story a myth is to acknowledge that a community does, or did, *accept it as true* in a most profound sense. Myths capture, in symbolic ways, a people's sense of the way the world really is. In this sense, even biblical stories of the flood or the creation of the world can rightly be called myth, without implying anything other than that people down through the ages have believed those stories to carry vitally important religious truths.

A number of theories have been advanced to explain what myths are or what

## Mesopotamian Deities

Hundreds of Mesopotamian deities and nonhuman powers are known. Many prominent Babylonian deities can be correlated with Sumerian ones. The Sumerian names are in parentheses.

**Assur:** Patron deity of the city of Assur and of the Assyrian civilization, which identified Assur's consort as Ishtar. Worship of Assur was closely related to Assyrian royal ideology.

**Ea (Enki):** Master of the primeval watery abyss. Ea, like many other deities, is associated with fertility.

**Enlil (Ellil):** A powerful god and father of many of the gods. He guards the sacred Tablet of Destiny, which records the fate of everything.

**Ishtar (Inanna):** Goddess of fertility and war; identified as the planet Venus. Myths tell of her descending to the underworld and of her lover, Dumuzi or Tammuz, who must spend six months of the year in the realm of the dead.

**Marduk:** The god of the city of Babylon. He became the chief god after fighting and slaying Tiamat.

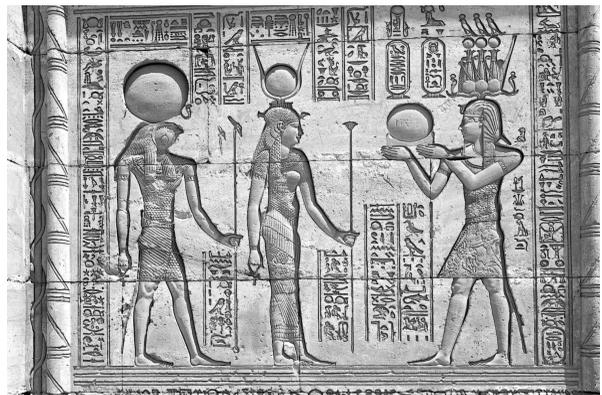
**Shamash (Utu):** A widely worshiped sun-god, even though the sun-deity was not as central a figure in Mesopotamia as in Egypt. Later Assyrian kings consulted him through diviners for advice on political and military affairs.

**Tiamat:** A goddess who tried to destroy the other gods but was herself destroyed by Marduk. Her body was cut into two pieces, which were used to create heaven and earth. Her tears created the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

they do. All the theories explain at least *some* myths, but none explain all of them. Some scholars have proposed that myths are all related to the working of nature—a kind of primitive science. Often the earth is represented by a goddess, such as Ishtar in Babylon. Yet some myths seem to have no immediate connection to nature. They seem more concerned with deeper issues of human values and the meaning of life. Other myths appear to be “charters” for social customs or institutions; that is, they provide a rationale for the existence of ritual actions, social structures, and the like. Other scholars note that myths seem to be closely linked to rituals. The great scholar of religious studies Mircea Eliade argued that by enacting a myth in a ritual, the individual or community believes it can access the creative divine powers the myth describes. He called this process of returning to the sacred time the “myth of the eternal return.” Eliade’s theory can explain many features of myth and ritual, but not all. Myths of culture heroes are frequent exceptions. Other

theories, psychological in focus, such as those of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, hold that myths are metaphorical projections of universal concepts that govern the human unconscious. However insightful at some level, such theories ignore the vast cultural and historical differences in human experience.

None of these theories, in any of their many variants, can really explain the whole range of mythology. Rather than start with



**Egyptian Hieroglyphic Carving.** This carving depicts the sun-god Re and the goddess Isis.

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## Egyptian Deities

Egyptians had over fifty deities, most of whom were native. Only a few of the primary gods are listed here.

**Amun:** An early primeval deity worshiped as a creator and sustainer of the universe, typically shown with a tall, feathered crown.

**Aten:** The sun disk. Akhenaten of the New Kingdom established a monotheism dedicated to Aten, which had only recently been deified.

**Atum:** Another primeval creator deity who became associated with

the sun and was represented in human form.

**Hathor:** A universal mother goddess also associated with death; often portrayed as a woman with horns or as a cow. She is associated with sun iconography.

**Horus:** Son of Osiris and Isis; the sky god who avenged his father's death; closely associated with royalty and depicted in hawk form.

**Isis:** The divine mother and queen of heaven; wife and sister of Osiris who

gathered her slain and dismembered husband.

**Osiris:** Husband and brother of Isis; killed by his brother Seth. He became lord of the underworld and judge of the dead.

**Re (Ra):** The sun-deity had many names and forms. Re was the most important and was considered a creator and sustainer. He was often merged with other deities, such as Re-Atum. Re was depicted in human form.

**Seth:** God of storms and violence. He murdered his brother Osiris.

one firm theory, then, it is better to use the most appropriate elements of the various theories that have been offered and to interpret the stories from a number of perspectives. No one theory seems to hold the key to the rich world of myth.

Just as there is a range of theories attempting to make sense of the world of myth, the myths themselves range widely across subject and theme. We have seen a number of Egyptian creation accounts in which the pharaoh and the gods were closely linked. The life and death of the king and the rise of his successor were seen to parallel a myth of a god whose death could bring new life. Osiris was murdered by Seth, his body cut up into pieces and scattered on the earth. His widow, Isis, gathered up the pieces and, with the help of magical incantations, brought Osiris back to life long enough for the pair to have a child, Horus. Thus, after death, the pharaoh would be associated with Osiris, and his successor became the embodiment of Horus. In this way, the death of a king became a reason to

affirm stability and not chaos; the transition is only the playing out of a primordial truth. One can see many possible explanations for the myth: it explains the continuation of divine presence in the monarchy; it validates the new pharaoh; and it links the fate of the royal line to the natural cycles of the earth. The myth engages meaning on many levels.

## The World

In many ancient religious systems, the world is viewed as having been created by one god or group of gods, but as being ruled by others. A number of myths tell how creation was initiated by a single deity, or the merger of two deities, who in turn produced other gods through a variety of means. In other instances, however, gods fight intergenerational wars, which result in a much younger deity winning the right to rule as monarch over the other gods. The royal god then completes the creation of the natural world, including humanity. This pattern is known

## Canaanite Deities

The best known Canaanite city was Ugarit, on the Mediterranean coast in northern Syria. It was destroyed in the late thirteenth century BCE, though the Canaanite culture was widespread throughout the eastern border of the Mediterranean Sea for many centuries afterward. Its language was close to Hebrew, and its literature has many affinities with the Hebrew Bible. The Israelite god has affinities with both El and Baal.

**Asherah:** A form of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar (Ashtarte),

associated with the morning star; well known from biblical tradition. Some ancient inscriptions combine worship of Yahweh with the goddess or with some ritual item called an asherah.

**Anath:** A major goddess, associated with sexuality and violence. She is an ally of Baal in a number of important myths. Her mourning for Baal after he was swallowed by Mot is a significant theme.

**Baal:** The most important deity, associated with storms, rain, and

fertility. Myths tell of his adventures in obtaining a temple and combating Yam (Sea) and Mot (Death). In the Bible, Baal is the Israelite deity's chief rival.

**El:** The elderly, wise father of the gods. He is less active in mythological dramas than Baal and Anath, but he holds authority over the other members of the pantheon. In Hebrew, the word *el* can be both a proper name for a deity and a common noun indicating "god."

**Kothar:** Craftsman for the other deities with associations with the underworld.

from Greece to Mesopotamia and beyond. For example, the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish* is a creation story telling how Marduk won control of the primordial heavens and the Tablet of Destiny after a terrible battle with the goddess Tiamat, whose body was cut up to create the heavens and the earth. Her demon champion, Qingu, was slain and his blood was used to create humanity. In the ritual performed during the New Year festival, the king would be enthroned as Marduk's fitting representative on earth, after having been slapped and humiliated by the officiating priests. His reaction to this part of the ritual would be an omen for how the upcoming year was to turn out. Despite this, the ritual was all about the king's power. His governors would have to ritually submit, in emulation of the gods' symbolic acceptance of Marduk's sovereignty.

Other creation myths speak of creation as organic; that is, creation is spontaneous, and the creator paradoxically appears as a part of what is being created. In these myths, some kind of chaotic matter (often

represented as water) preexists, and it separates to reveal physical matter and a group of deities who set in motion a series of creative acts.

The concept of "creation from nothing," in which the creator god is perfectly timeless and fully separated from the created world (that is, transcendent), is very familiar to adherents to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is, however, not shared by many ancient religions and is probably quite a late development in the history of religions. Hinduism and Chinese religions, for example, still embrace variations of the organic mythology of creation.

Often mythology attempts to explain the workings of the universe. Gods associated with vegetation, weather, technology, and even death act in dramas expressing the often enigmatic nature of life. Frequently, a powerful deity is temporarily defeated by gods representing chaos or death, only to recover his strength and his throne in the end. Such were the most important myths of Ugarit, a city on the northern shore of



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**The Parthenon.** On the acropolis of Athens, the Parthenon is the most recognized Greek temple, dedicated to Athena, the virgin (Gk. *parthenos*) goddess.

Syria that was abandoned in about 1200 BCE. The storm god Baal sought a palace from the father god El, but before taking his place as the heavenly king, he had to face the wrath of Mot (Death) and Yam (Sea). Several centuries later, Baal would be viewed as the archrival of the ancient Israelite god. Much of the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) warns the Israelites not to worship him.

Although there are many variations on the theme, the world was widely conceived as having three basic layers. The natural world was on the middle one, surrounded by an ocean or river. The heavens (sometimes multilayered) were above and an underworld beneath, where the dead lingered

in a shadowy half-existence—if they had any existence at all.

All three levels of reality were inter-related and interconnected. Pits and caves might lead to the underworld, and sacred mountains could find their tops in the heavens. The ancient world knew of many such mountains: Olympus in Greece, Zaphon in northern Syria, Zion in Jerusalem. The pyramids and Mesopotamian ziggurats were figures of sacred mountains, reaching into the realm of the heavens. Temples were other places where the various levels of the universe could meet. Priests could enter the throne room of the gods by entering the most sacred recesses of the temple.

## The Human Condition

As opinions differ on the nature of the gods in world religions, so too do opinions vary on humanity and the meaning of human life. In some ancient Babylonian mythology, humans were intended to be the servants of the gods, primarily by bringing sacrifices to feed them. This has sometimes rather unfairly been called a pessimistic view of the human condition and purpose, particularly when compared to the ancient Israelite account in the book of Genesis, in which God creates humanity “in his own image.” In that story, humanity’s ties with the divine are not through the blood of a demon, as in some ancient accounts, but through being the ultimate creation of a deity who somehow makes humans a picture of himself. Humanity’s first job is to tend the garden of Eden, a paradise. Even in this supposedly positive story, though, humans soon sin and are expelled from the garden. Now humans must work, not to feed the gods as in the *Enuma Elish*, but to feed themselves. And the work will be hard.

In other stories from Babylonian mythology, we see many points in common as well as some shocking differences with the biblical stories. One of the most intriguing books from the ancient world, the Epic of Gilgamesh, includes an episode closely resembling the biblical story of the great flood and Noah’s ark. Both books talk of divine outrage at humanity, the instructions to one man to build a boat to save his family from a flood, the sending of birds from the vessel to test if any dry land had reappeared, and the offering of sacrifices afterward. Yet the books differ greatly. Gilgamesh’s version has the gods upset at the noise and

commotion humanity creates. In the Bible, God is angry at human sin and wants to save the family of the one righteous person who is left. The biblical myth occurs in the context of the greater story of how the initial created world changed into its present state, with different peoples scattered here and there and human life limited to a relatively short span of years, and how God is willing to go to great lengths not only to punish the wicked but also to preserve the righteous and the pious. Gilgamesh’s flood is told in retrospect as an explanation for why the hero will never attain immortality: it was granted only to the flood’s survivor, Utnapishtim, as a once-only boon. Gilgamesh is doomed to die.

## Divine Kingship

In many instances, an individual could stand out from the rest of humanity and enjoy a special relationship to the gods. Usually this individual was the king, who was held to be the gods’ representative on earth and sometimes even to be a divine being in his own right. Because the king was the only individual with such links to the divine, society depended on him to render in his ritual acts appropriate service to the gods to ensure the stability and renewal of human society and nature. The figure of the divine king is, not surprisingly, a common fixture in the urban societies in the ancient world. The flip side of this special relationship is that organized religion became an instrument of the state.

Although it is difficult for the modern mind to imagine such identification of the ruler as one of the gods or as having a divine nature, one need not look far to

find vestiges of that ancient worldview in modern society. Consider the status of the emperor in Japan. Until the middle of the twentieth century, he was revered as divine by his subjects; indeed, not until the peace treaty imposed on Japan to end World War II did the emperor renounce his divine status. The emperors of China were expected to perform vital rituals to ensure the security and prosperity of the kingdom and the world. These rituals were performed in China up to the overthrow of the imperial system in the early twentieth century. Traces of divine kingship are found in the status conferred on the queen of England at her coronation. She was crowned not by the British Parliament but by the archbishop of Canterbury. Of course, in practical terms, her right to rule is granted by the British people, who have not sought to remove her. The royal ideology, however, says her right to rule comes from God, and it is she, and not the archbishop, who is the head of the Church of England (Anglican Church).

In times of threat, even elected national leaders of secular states sometimes sound more like religious leaders than politicians. What they often imply in speeches is that one should remain faithful to the *national* cause because it is a *religious* duty: the country's cause is just in the eyes of God. Many modern religious leaders attribute perceived national decline to failing religious adherence. In the Western world, this is often the legacy of early Jewish thought as preserved in the Bible, but the ancient Israelites were not the only people to make the connection between ethics and religious observance, on the one hand, and social, political, and economic fortunes, on the other. In these

areas, then, the modern world remains very much like the ancient one.

## Immortality

An integral feature of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism is a belief in an afterlife in which the pious and righteous believers will enjoy a paradise in the presence of God, while a bitter fate awaits disbelievers and wicked people. Each of the three monotheistic faiths has its own variation on this theme (in Judaism it is far less pronounced than in the others). These are, of course, ancient beliefs, and they can be found in ancient Egyptian thought, for example. Yet they are only part of a larger complex of thought about the nature of life and death.

There were other conceptions of what happens after one dies. In many cases, dead ancestors could linger on as spirits or ghosts and influence the affairs of the living (not always to their benefit). Offerings would be made to provide food and other goods to the spirits in order to win their favor. When such offerings or the memory of the deceased ended, so too did their shadowy existence. Great heroes or kings might be eventually regarded as gods, but most people were convinced they themselves would go to the underworld after death. In some conceptions, the deceased faced a trial or judgment before being admitted to the afterlife. Egyptian coffins and tombs were often decorated with texts containing magical spells to help the deceased through the dangerous journey to the great beyond. In Greco-Roman thought, the worthy could find a paradise in the Elysian Fields, although, unlike in later Christian and Islamic thought, this

## The Greco-Roman Pantheon

The twelve Olympian gods formed a family of deities who ruled following their conquest of older gods called the Titans. Sometimes deities were added or dropped, and Hades, god of the underworld, was often excluded. The Roman name for a Greek deity is in parentheses.

**Zeus (Jupiter):** The chief god, who overthrew his father, Cronos. He ruled the sky. His symbol was the thunderbolt. Zeus and his brothers, Poseidon and Hades, divided the rule of the universe (heavens, sea, and underworld).

**Poseidon (Neptune):** Brother of Zeus and Hades. He was the second-most powerful god and ruler of the sea. His symbol was the trident.

**Hades (Pluto):** Brother of Zeus and Poseidon. He was god of the underworld and king of the dead.

**Hera (Juno):** Wife of Zeus and mother of some of his children. Most of the gods and goddesses in the Olympian family were children of Zeus from illicit affairs, which provoked the jealousy of Hera.

Other Olympian deities:

**Aphrodite (Venus)**

**Apollo (Apollo)**

**Ares (Mars)**

**Artemis (Diana)**

**Athena (Minerva)**

**Hermes (Mercury)**

**Hestia (Vesta)**

**Hephaestus (Vulcan)**

Sometimes included:

**Demeter (Ceres)**

**Dionysus (Bacchus)**

was still in the underworld and not in a heaven imagined in the sky.

As noted already, the Epic of Gilgamesh deals with the impossibility of eternal life. Many ancient myths tell of journeys to the underworld to try to win back the life of a loved one, and Gilgamesh goes in search of his friend Enkidu. These journeys are not typically successful; at best, the underworld requires compensation in the form of a replacement or gives up its dead on a temporary basis. In some cases, this temporary respite is linked to symbolism of seasonal cycles of vegetation.

Some ancient philosophers wondered about the meaning of life and death. To them, human efforts in this world seemed to have no effect on one's ultimate fate. Even in the Hebrew Bible there is sometimes a sense that in death, both the righteous and wicked can expect the same treatment:

All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it

is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. (Eccles. 9:1–2)

Beliefs in a judgment and an afterlife did grow in some cultures. Such beliefs became well developed in Persian Zoroastrianism and in Judaism of the Second Temple period (ca. 500 BCE–70 CE) and from there into Christianity and Islam. In the Judaism of the last few centuries BCE, belief in the judgment of the soul developed into a more pronounced dualist worldview. All creation was locked in a struggle between God and rebel angels. Numerous expressions of such beliefs were recorded, and they typically predicted how God would ultimately be victorious. This often required the destruction of the entire earth and the creation of a new

paradise reserved for God's pious followers. All others will face outright destruction or eternal torment in hell.

These apocalyptic views influenced early Christians, who believed that Jesus rose from the dead in a victory that all believers could share: the body would die, but at the end of the age, the body would be raised and the believer would live forever with God. The belief in bodily resurrection also persists in traditional Judaism, even if apocalyptic thought, for the most part, waned as the Common Era progressed. Islam, likewise, has its own vision of an apocalyptic future and of the resurrection of the dead. An undercurrent of thought in more mystical sectors of Western religion, however, accepts reincarnation—that is, the soul of the individual can be born into a succession of physical bodies. Belief in reincarnation is very typical of Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It is plausible that, at least to some extent, Eastern religious thought influenced Mesopotamian and Mediterranean belief. Yet it would be going too far to say that all Western notions of reincarnation are the result of such importation of exclusively Indian conceptions.

### **Ritual Interaction with Nature and with the Divine**

The world for the ancients was typically an interconnected organic whole. The heavens were intimately linked to the earth, and humanity had to stay in balance with both. Myth and ritual expressed this relationship and these desires. The myths were often violent, representing the apparent arbitrariness of life and great forces of

nature that seemed beyond human control. Often, rituals were performed to reawaken the creative energy of the original event, in which the cosmic enemy was defeated, chaos was structured or restructured, and order and life were brought to the world.

As noted above, in the ancient world the fate of the universe was often seen as dependent on the king's performance of certain rituals. Just as the heavens could not function without the deities, so nature could not function without the king and the royal institutions of priests, scribes, and so forth, properly performing their duties for the gods and goddesses. This intricate linking of human royalty and heavenly control over nature seems almost a universal feature of religion in premodern urban societies.

The endless cycles of nature, the unknowable powers behind it, and the uncertainties and ambiguities of human life were mysteries to the ancients, who nevertheless perceived some kind of harmony as the ideal. The ancients often used ritual to influence these powers by replicating something of the cycles of life and death, and to show the divine powers that humans are aware they do not live by their own power. To this end, the gods were offered countless sacrifices and offerings. Sacrifices could consist of different things: crops or wine were often used, as well as incense or even gifts of gold or silver. In many cases, however, the gods demanded blood sacrifices. Animals were ritually slaughtered, and at least part of the animal was burned on altars. Often, some of the meat went to the priests, and some could even be distributed back to the people. The Christian New Testament, for example, advises Christians to avoid eating meat that has been sacrificed

to “idols,” the standard biblical way to describe sacrifices to non-Christian deities. Sacrifices can be offered to glorify a deity, to win the favor of a deity, to mark important dates, or to pay for the sin of a person or the whole nation.

Countless books have been written trying to explain the cultural and psychological origins of sacrifice, and there is probably no end in sight to this significant part of religious studies. From a modern standpoint, most troubling is the fact that occasionally cultures would require human sacrifice. Most famous of all are the religions of ancient Mexico and Central and South America, in which thousands of people, often prisoners of war but sometimes members of the society itself, were sacrificed to ensure the prosperity of the culture. In many cases this seems to have been a response to terrible stresses: the less gruesome system of animal offerings no longer seemed to earn the people reliable weather and harvests, so more drastic measures were called for. The ancient Near East was also the location for at least some human sacrifice, although there were probably more accusations than there was practice of it. Such charges were a good way to demonize one’s enemy.

Sacrifices and ritual killing have marked the religious routine of many cultures. Such ideas run deep in many mythologies. Often the universe comes into being through the death of a primordial being; sometimes the world is created from the carcass of a slain god, who is at times portrayed in the form of a person. The ancient Norse (Vikings) spoke of Odin creating the world from the body of the giant Ymir. The *Enuma Elish* says Tiamat’s corpse was split to make heaven

and earth. Ancient Hindu texts told of the self-sacrifice of the primordial person, Purusha. Most probably, animal sacrifice stems from the awareness that life and death are inextricably linked; human sacrifice is an extreme form of this awareness. In some religions, there are conscious attempts to denounce human sacrifice or to symbolize it in other, less costly ways. Some Hindu texts rewrite myths in a way that seeks to establish animal replacements for an apparent requirement for human sacrifice. Still later texts express how one may even use plants as a replacement for animals in sacrifice. One thing can symbolize another, even in sacrifices. Indeed, the Passover sacrifice of ancient Judaism is no longer practiced, but it is symbolized by placing a shank bone on a plate at the seder meal.

Many religions continue to offer animal sacrifice today. Some forms of Hinduism specify sacrifices, for example, and the Samaritans in northern Israel still celebrate their Passover with the traditional sacrifice of a lamb. In South and Central America, the religions derived from the African practices of those caught up in the slave trade sometimes make such offerings. During the great pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims sacrifice a sheep or other animal on the Festival of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha) to symbolize the patriarch Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son at the insistence of God. In Islam, human sacrifice is abhorrent, as it is in Judaism and Christianity: God stopped Abraham from carrying out this order at the last moment, giving him a sheep to sacrifice instead. While the Islamic festival offends the sensibilities of many Westerners for religious or animal-rights reasons, the meat itself is put to good use. Traditionally, part of

it is retained for the family of the sacrificer, while the remainder is offered to neighbors and the poor. Therefore, the sacrifice also expresses Islamic concern for the plight of the hard-pressed.

In ancient Judaism, many sacrifices were offered for the remission of sins. Such is not done anymore, since the temple, which had become the only authorized place for sacrifice in Judaism, is no longer standing. Yet many Jewish festivals still symbolize the rituals in which such offerings were made—the most important being Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Early rabbinic writings, composed in the aftermath of the fall of the temple in 70 CE, seek to find replacements for the sacrifices in an increased accent on prayer and acts of mercy and kindness. In Christianity, sacrifice is not acceptable, although Christian theology often speaks of Christ as the “Lamb of God,” whose death is the one acceptable sacrifice for the remission of the believer’s sins. The ritual of the Eucharist is a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice, established, according to the New Testament, by Jesus himself on the evening before his death. In Catholic theology, the wine and bread are believed to become the actual blood and body of Christ. While Western religions have long since abandoned blood sacrifice as a means of “feeding” a god, the old ideas of the atoning value of sacrifice and the willingness to offer up to God what is most precious continues.

### **Magic/Astrology**

Because of the perceived interconnection between the realm of the deities, of nature, and of human society, ancient people began trying to understand how it all worked as

a unity. Beliefs arose that by studying certain natural phenomena, or patterns that resulted from seemingly random actions, one could learn the secrets of the universe. Ancient religions from China through the Middle East and into Europe embraced many different kinds of divination and astrology. In many cases, political decisions depended on the patterns of stars, phases of the moon, patterns of cracks in heated bones, or even the pattern of markings on the internal organs of sacrificed animals. Illnesses and misfortune could be ascribed to demons and evil magicians. Gods or the spirits of the dead would be invoked to help one attain one’s desires or to protect one from malicious magic. Sometimes the gods would speak to prophets, who would deliver advice, warnings, or threats to a king. These often reflected the king’s concerns over security and power.

It is too easy to dismiss this kind of religiosity in the modern world as silly or superstitious. What is often denigrated as superstition is actually a misunderstanding about another person’s religion. Behind magic and astrology is a worldview that the universe is interconnected and at least partially knowable and predictable, if only to those willing to become initiated into the mysteries. And more than echoes of this ancient worldview remain with us. New concerns about the environment and the global community have led many people to try to reclaim some of the ancient conceptions about a fully integrated universe. Concerns of this nature explain, in part, the appeal of Buddhism and Hinduism to many in the technologically advanced but depersonalized Western world. The so-called neo-pagan and Wiccan movements are based on ritual activities meant

## Terminology

**Cuneiform** (lit., “wedge shape”): The oldest written script, invented by the Sumerians in about 3000 BCE. Wedge-shaped characters are mainly found on clay cylinders and tablets in various cultures of Mesopotamia.

**Hieroglyphics** (lit., “sacred picture”): The script of ancient Egypt. The discovery in 1799 of a multilanguage inscription (the Rosetta Stone) allowed scholars to decipher the language.

**Ostraca:** Fragments of clay pots on which material has been written; the “scrap paper” of the ancient world.

**Papyrus:** Paper on which many ancient documents were written. The dryness of the Egyptian desert preserved thousands of papyri fragments of ancient documents, in various languages.

**Stele:** An upright stone slab on which inscriptions are carved; some-

thing like an ancient billboard, often with official pronouncements.

**Tel** (lit., “hill” or “mound”): A technical term in archaeology for a mound formed by a settlement lived in and rebuilt over time, reflecting various strata of settlement.

**Ziggurat:** The typical temple architecture in Mesopotamia, shaped as a stepped tower and seen as linking heaven and earth.

to connect the practitioner with the earth (often imagined as “Goddess” or “Gaia”). These rituals include magical acts meant to bring harmony and balance into the life of the practitioner. Alongside this, astrology and other forms of divination are gaining a new audience.

The similarity between these new religions and the ancient faiths they claim they are recovering can easily be overestimated, but the underlying perception about the world is to a large extent comparable. The ancient world was full of beliefs about astrology and divination. The modern zodiac was developed from earlier Mesopotamian models. The *Enuma Elish* discusses the establishment of these arts through the creating of an ordered universe and through Marduk securing for himself the Tablet of Destiny. Witchcraft and magical protection from witches were certainly a part of the religious landscape across the ancient world. Texts have been discovered offering incantations to remedy many kinds of illnesses, toothaches, and even hangovers. It is uncertain how many modern, New Age witches actually believe their spells can have

a material effect on the world, but the basic premise of an integrated universe and the power of symbols to influence one’s interaction with it connects them with a long history of human religious practice. Religions throughout time have been marked by the fear of so-called occult practices as a kind of inversion of “true” religion. The Jewish and Christian Bibles take a sharp stance against any practice of magic. Many Christians to this day believe that the realm of the magical and demonic are substantial, though deformed, aspects of reality. Magic for them is very real: it is a tool of the devil. Exorcisms, the removal of evil spirits dwelling in people, are, for many, no Hollywood fantasy.

## The Road Ahead

Books could be written on the persistence of ancient ideas in modern religions, and here we have but a sampling of some of the main ideas. The field is likely only to grow: answers are sometimes harder to come by than new questions. Yet when you read the

other chapters in this book, try to think of how stories are used to express beliefs about the world and humanity's place in it. Consider how similar themes pop up in different contexts with radically different meanings. All the difficult questions we face in our lives were the very kinds of issues the ancients were confronted with too. Part of what makes religious studies so fascinating is trying to understand the cultural and historical reasons why people have produced so many different religious responses to these issues.

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