

World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials, with CD-ROM

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

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 powers. 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; 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 neatly the religious dimension from the non-religious. 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. Or consider the world of sports. Normally it provides small adventures of escape into the realm of play and relative meaninglessness; sometimes, however, it becomes 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 on the playing field for the souls of fans.

The difficulty in finding a fully adequate definition of religion should not lead us to the conclusion that the concept of religion is without substance. There is 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 sometime 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, the answer to the more difficult question "What is religion?" will become clearer, as we observe religions in their sometimes 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. An equally worthwhile 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—separate chapters 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—some 70% of the world's population, or 85% of the religious population. These are Hinduism and Buddhism (Eastern Religions) and Christianity and Islam (Western Religions). About 15% of the world's population is classed as non-religious, leaving 15% that belong to other religions. Of these smaller religions, Judaism, Jainism, and Sikhism are usually treated in introductory texts, along with Taoism, 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 that religion is dominant. Further, the figures appear to be counting different things in different traditions (e.g., residents in the Christian count but devotees in the Shinto count).

WORLD RELIGIONS

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

WESTERN RELIGIONS

Western Religions: Those religions that have roots in the religious perspective of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). The primary western religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. **Judaism:** Based on the religion of the ancient Hebrews; largely reflecting major reforms after the destruction of first Jewish temple in the 500s B.C.E. and other reforms after the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. (rabbinic Judaism).

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

Islam: A reform movement in the Arabian Peninsula in the 600s C.E.; within a hundred years, dominant power from Spain and the North African coast to the Indian Ocean; suffered as western Europe expanded from the 1500s.

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.

Other matters need to be noted in calculating the number of adherents. Many of the larger religions have sub-groups that have 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 that are 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 an increasing 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, which is often at the center of an individual's or a society's reflection and which is rarely 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 in the case of Sikhism and Shinto, and for periods of its history, of 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 phrasebook 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. Religious sites likely will make up a large part of the tourist's must-see places. Cultural taboos and behaviors, by which a culture is most commonly recognized, often are rooted in religious sensibilities. We would rarely venture into a foreign country without a map of the road system and the streets. 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.

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 recognizes the Vedas; largely restricted to India and its emigrant communities.

Buddhism: A rejection of Vedic religion, developed by the Buddha in 500s B.C.E. in northeast India; expanded eastward, becoming the dominant religion of southeast Asia; based on the "Four Noble Truths" and the "Eightfold Path."

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

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

Daoism: Shadowy beginnings (ca. 500s B.C.E.); associated with Laozi; teaches about the path (tao), consisting of maintaining a harmony of opposite 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 C.E.; primary text is *Adi Granth*; largely confined to the Punjab area of northwest India and emigrant communities.

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 context for the anthropologist 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

Cultures rise and fall; nations conquer and collapse. Within this ebb and flow of life, religion exists in a variety of conditions. Sometimes religion simply

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 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	Anthropomorphic: A representation of gods with human form or 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 non-theist; one who believes that gods and the spiritual world do not exist	Blasphemy: Contemptuous or irreverent act or word concerning 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
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dies with its culture; sometimes religion sparks a transformation and enlivens a once-dying culture into a renewed dynamic force; sometimes religion carries 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 the historical process.

Philosophy of Religion

Religions make truth claims, from statements about the existence of God, the moral order of the cosmos, the nature of evil, immortality and the afterlife to the very nature of truth and knowledge (sometimes expressed in terms 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. In this *theological* or *confessional* study of religion, there is often a clear search for the answer to the question of human significance and meaning, and a conviction that the religious tradition under study offers clarity and comfort about these matters. There may, however, be disputes within the tradition as to what the right answers are.

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 generally Religious Stud-

ies 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 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 the religions of others is affected by using confessional compared to non-confessional 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 a reasonable expectation for 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

GENERAL TERMINOLOGY (continued)

Eschatology: (lit., "study of last things"). A term for concepts related to the end of the world and the human order.

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

Henotheism: Worship of one god but does not deny the existence of other gods.

Heresy: The counter to 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.

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.

Monothelism: 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 counter to 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.

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 between religious communities. In this context, attempts by any religion to advance their religion 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, over seventy percent of those who belong to a religious tradition are adherents of religions that have 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. That 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 it to the difference between a play as written and a play as performed. Both have value; both are "the play." Equally so, 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) or search for the period that supposedly expresses most authentically the es-

sence 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, being renewed and renewing. 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 the carefully guarded orthodoxy of a content majority.

ASPECTS OF AUTHORITY

For most traditions, religious authority tends to rest in an ancient text and a contemporary priesthood. The text often is considered to be the very voice of God or an expression of the will of God. 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. There is often

GENERAL TERMINOLOGY

(continued)

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

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

Profane: The counter to 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 counter to 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

a sense of a danger 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. Members of the religious hierarchy are likely to be primarily concerned with the preservation and performance of the tradition's current practices and beliefs.

But religious practice and belief are sometimes challenged. Challenge may be led by individuals who have no recognized status as clergy or by clergy who act beyond the boundaries assigned to them by their religious commission. Such persons often claim to speak a message directly from God; 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 are largely independent religious operators. They exhibit an unusual sense of the world of the invisible, and they are felt by others 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 endowed 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, for example.

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 of 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 nothing more than random movements. As a

GENERAL TERMINOLOGY (continued)

Saints: 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 wonderworker 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

form of language, the meaning of ritual 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 what is commonly called a word. Further, as 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 second language. (Indeed, even within the same language the same combination of letters may have another seemingly unrelated meaning in another context.) 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 (Christian baptism, for example) is the same as the meaning of a ritual washing in another religion—or, indeed, even within sub-groups of the same religion.

Finally, ritual often is 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 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, as it often plays with the world of the unseen, and carves out domains of space and time for that world out of the world of the ordinary.

ETHICS & 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. Sometime, 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 this discussion are questions of human nature and the human dilemma, and the 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. Sometimes common English words can communicate as clearly as the jargon of the discipline. Too much jargon reshapes normal dialogue into coded and peculiar language; that only the initiated can understand. Such jargon is bad jargon.

On the other hand, 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. Obviously, 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

DATING SCHEMES

A.D. (from Latin phrase *anno Domini*, meaning "in the year of our Lord"). This dating scheme was developed in the 500s C.E. It dates all events from the birth of Jesus, and is paired with the abbreviation **B.C.** Since it has a Christian coloring, most Religious Studies scholars use the more neutral abbreviation **C.E.** (see below) in its place.

A.H. (abbreviation for "after Hijra" or "in the year of the Hijra" [Latin: *anno hegirae*]). This is used in the Muslim calendar, which dates all events from the year of Muhammad's flight (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina.

B.C. (abbreviation of the phrase "before Christ"). Paired with **A.D.**

First used in the 1600s C.E. It is used to count dates in years prior to the birth of Jesus. Since it has a Christian coloring, most Religious Studies scholars use the more neutral abbreviation **B.C.E.** in its place (see below).

B.C.E. (abbreviation of the phrase "before the Common Era"). Used in place of the conventional **B.C.** Paired with **C.E.** (see below).

C.E. (abbreviation of the phrase "Common Era"). Used in place of **A.D.**, an abbreviation that has a Christian confessional coloring.

Paired with **B.C.E.** Some speak of the **B.C.E.** and **C.E.** abbreviations as "before the Christian Era" and "Christian Era," without the confessional element.

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 non-alphabetical symbols such as the apostrophe or single quote mark as letters. It is doubtful that such "letters" assist the beginning reader. For those who are interested, we have provided an appendix of alternative spellings and pronunciations for many foreign terms.

DATING SCHEMES

In a guest editorial in *CIVILIZATION: The Magazine of the Library of Congress* (June/July 1999), Kofi A. Annan, the 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 B.C.E. (before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) in place of the traditional abbreviations B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (*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 in 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 B.C.E. as "before the Christian Era" and C.E. 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. 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 are 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 fine 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 roughly divided into three equal parts: History, Beliefs, and Practices. Boxes on the right side of right-facing pages 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 religious traditions.