
SECOND EDITION

WORLD RELIGIONS

A GUIDE TO THE ESSENTIALS

THOMAS A. ROBINSON
AND HILLARY P. RODRIGUES


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

Thomas A. Robinson and Hillary P. Rodrigues, *World Religions*
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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
World religions : a guide to the essentials / Thomas A. Robinson & Hillary Rodrigues, editors. — 2nd edition.

pages cm. — (World religions)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4971-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Religions—Textbooks. I. Robinson, Thomas A. (Thomas Arthur), 1951– II. Rodrigues, Hillary, 1953–
BL80.3.W645 2014

200—dc23

2014027504

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14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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This book is dedicated to the religious studies
students at the University of Lethbridge.

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Preface

This project was conceived some years ago by professors Tom Robinson and Hillary Rodrigues of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. As the project neared completion, the department hired two new faculty members, James Linville and John Harding, who contributed to the project. The final product is a joint effort by all members of the department, including contributions from our newest faculty member, Atif Khalil.

The second edition incorporates various revisions, in particular the addition for each chapter of a “Quick Facts” box, a section on women, and a list of suggested readings. The chapter “Other Religions and Major Religious Subgroups” has been extensively expanded, and the new edition includes about fifty photos and maps. Summary boxes of key points have been retained since students have found these to be effective tools for quick review.

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.
- Rodrigues, Hillary, and J. S. Harding. *Introduction to the Study of Religion*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.