INTRODUCTION

Religions, to the surprise of some, have not faded from importance in our world today. Everywhere we look, we see religious traditions, beliefs, and practices intertwined with the cultural, political, and economic activities that make up the human enterprise. That is the way it has always been, but as our global village draws ever closer together today, the need to recognize and understand the role of religions becomes vitally important.

Beginning to explore the religious traditions of the East is an exciting, though somewhat daunting, venture. There is so much to see, to sort through, and to comprehend. We are dealing with the deepest hopes and dreams, the most careful thoughts and views, and the most cherished rituals and practices of people all over the world. We are venturing onto the holy ground of others, and a humble, respectful, and grateful attitude is most appropriate.

As we begin this exploration, we need to be aware that we carry preconceived ideas and judgments with us. We may, perhaps, have a certain amount of knowledge about at least one religious tradition (our own, for example), and based on that we have some notions about what religion is. One major hurdle in understanding the religious traditions of the world is getting beyond the normal tendency to look at the religious practices of others through our own filters of understanding, our own unchallenged views and experiences.

Another hurdle comes when we become inundated with the mass of detail and diversity of forms within the Eastern religions. It is easy to become confused and bewildered, losing any coherent sense of what religion is all about. What are we looking for? The answer to that question may seem very different with each new culture that we encounter.

To help get our bearings for this exploration in the sacred paths of the East, it will be beneficial, here at the beginning of our study, to stand back and reflect more generally on the nature of religious experience, on the main themes and forms through which religious experience typically finds expression. Such an exercise can broaden our narrow vision of religion and open new windows of understanding. Thus, in Chapter 1 we begin our exploration with some reflections on the nature of religion within human life. With a preliminary, working definition of religion we then take soundings from the various religious traditions to set up a collage of themes and forms of human religious experience. It is true, of course, that each particular human community has its own unique practices and meanings, and one should exercise great care in making cross-cultural comparisons. Yet we can recognize that humans through all times and places have always experienced similar life concerns related to birth and death, family and community, survival, and all the rest. And so their attempts to construct meaning through ideas and actions—that is, their religious expressions—can be linked together in a provisional way. In this manner, we can set up a tentative structure to guide our explorations into the sacred paths of the East.

Our look at prehistoric human religious developments in Chapter 2 is somewhat brief and tentative, and rightly so, since archaeological data from ancient sites, before any written records, do not give a clear picture of religious feelings and meanings. We may feel a sense of adventure as we reflect on the immense ages during which the human species developed on this planet, surviving, experimenting, and creating cultures. Perhaps
there will awaken in us a sense of indebtedness to our forebears who struggled to live, created religious meanings, and bequeathed their physical and spiritual powers to us. We need to remember that the “world religions” of today are very recent phenomena on the vast scale of humankind’s religious history. We will observe how, after the last ice ages and the agricultural revolution, the ancient classical civilizations finally began to develop, providing the fertile basis from which the world religions of today began to take shape.
Chapter 1

Perspectives on the Religious Path

The human adventure can be viewed from many perspectives—and indeed there should be many perspectives, since there are many dimensions to human life, and there is not just one human story but many stories. Common to these stories is a searching for wholeness and meaning, for some connection to the larger continuity of human life. That searching has often been expressed in what we call religious structures, ideas, practices, and experiences. In this book, we are setting out on a venture of understanding—understanding some of those religious traditions of humanity. To do this, we need to explore their main ideas and teachings, their rituals and art, their societal structures, their whole ways of life. In all of this, we want to get to know the people who practice these religions and live their lives by them.

As we study different religious traditions of the East, we will also be attempting to understand some fundamentals of religion itself as a key human dimension, with similar themes and structures across cultural lines. All religion has to do with fundamental human issues and concerns. Who are we?—the basic question of identity—is crucial to our journey in life. What sense is there in life? How can we find the life that is real and fulfilling? Questions such as these reach to the depths of life concerns that are felt, vaguely or forcefully, by all human beings. Does life actually have meaning—any real meaning—or do we just live and die in the small frame of a pointless, accidental cycle of the universe?

Of course, there are many dimensions of being human, many concerns that are not directly religious ones. We are concerned about our physical makeup, our biological structure, our reasoning capacities, our languages and forms of communication, our historical memories, our forms of society, our psychological makeup, and much more. But no matter what aspect of human existence we happen to look at, deeper questions of meaning and purpose are close at hand: Is there any sense or direction in the living of our lives? How can we be happy and secure? What responsibility do we have for fellow humans? Wrestling with such questions of meaning in their deeper aspects involves us in religious thinking and experiencing. Religion in this sense is not limited to any one dimension of human existence. Rather, it has to do with the overall meaning of human existence: Why is everything the way it is? What is the rhyme or reason behind all this?

Behind all such questions is a fundamental one: How can people be in touch with what is ultimately real, that unlimited source or sources from which they derive life and meaning? It is to that which they feel is ultimately real, the unlimited source that people within the various religions direct themselves in many different ways. We designate this focal point of the religions as the sacred, the ground of ultimate vitality, value, and meaning. The modes of experiencing the sacred, and the responses to this experience, are many and varied; these are the forms and expressions that make up the religious traditions of the world.

STUDYING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Two General Approaches Studying religious experience, like studying any other dimension of human life, always involves a kind of dual stance. That is, we are observers of people as they practice their religious traditions, looking from the outside and constructing our ideas about why they are doing what they are doing. But we also attempt to
see and understand their experiences as they themselves do, looking from the inside, as it were, seeing their own intentions and the meaning they derive from their religious practices. Scholars of religion have elaborated theories of religion and methodologies for studying religion that focus on one or the other of these approaches, and they still debate how these approaches are to be evaluated. Both approaches are important and necessary, and both approaches have specific limitations.

In looking from the outside, the academic study of religion necessarily involves observing, describing, evaluating, organizing, and interpreting the data of religious practice. A major goal is developing theories that explain why these religious practices have developed and what function they fulfill in people’s lives. Theories and methods from sociology, anthropology, political science, historical study, and many other disciplines are useful for interpreting religious data. Scholars pay particular attention to issues of class, power, and authority, as reflected in religious practices.

In looking from the inside, the study of religious practice pays close attention to what the people themselves say about the meaning and purpose of their religious practices. The attempt is to describe the phenomena as carefully as possible without evaluating them according to some outside norm or explaining them in terms of cause or function. Interpretative theories focus on meaning, value, and expectations as expressed by the people themselves. Scholars pay particular attention to issues of understanding the religious practices.

It is true that some scholars of the religions have opted exclusively for one or the other of these general approaches. Some would say that the purpose of religious studies is to create materialistic explanations of religion. That is, they would use social scientific methodology to develop theories that explain religious activities just like any other human activities, bringing out the social, psychological, political, economic, and other dynamics that motivate people in their religious practices. On the other hand, some have argued that scholars of religion should simply describe the phenomenon of religion as it actually exists and as it is interpreted by its practitioners, without imposing value judgments or explaining it on the basis of theories taken from the other human sciences.

This scholarly discussion is complex and ongoing. We might observe here that, while both of these approaches can contribute much to our overall understanding of the religions, each approach taken exclusively also has obvious limitations. For example, explaining religion strictly from the outside could lead the scholar to put forth explanations that would be unrecognized and rejected by the practitioners of that religion. But a strict insistence on describing only the meanings and interpretations put forth by practitioners would foreclose the valuable insights that can come from comparative religious studies and from other humanistic disciplines.

However these approaches are evaluated, it is clear that both the outside and the inside perspectives are important for an integral, rich understanding of the religions. In this book we take the stance that, for readers just beginning to explore the religions, the important first step is to get to know the world’s religious traditions and the people who live by them. So the emphasis will be on the actual stories, teachings, and practices of the people of each religion, presented as much as possible as understood by the people themselves. Of course, we also make much use of the outside perspective in explaining the historical and social contexts of the religious traditions, in structuring our investigation around particular themes, and in attempting to understand them in the context of our own knowledge and experience.

**The Task of Understanding** So our main goal in this exploration is understanding the religions. But that is not an easy task. Whereas many of us may have our own religious tradition, none of us belongs to all the religions. Therefore, we necessarily find ourselves in the position of being outside looking in at the intimate practice of someone else. In doing so, we miss the inner compulsion of commitment and the special meaning the religion provides for the practitioner. Furthermore, our view cannot be completely “objective,” for our own personal presuppositions and beliefs stand in the way and color our perspective.

It is important, then, that we consciously make a deep effort to understand these religious traditions of others. To “understand” is to stand under what gives meaning to the other. It means to stand in her or his religious stance, to look at the universe of religious symbols from the perspective of being on the inside. This is not easy to do, and it is always an incomplete accomplishment. One cannot fully understand Hindu religious experience unless one is a Hindu, and the same is true of Buddhist and Shinto and Christian religious experience, as well as all of the others.
It is possible to understand at least in an incomplete way, however, if a number of important measures are taken. First, an attitude of respect and openness is necessary, a recognition of the value and importance that the religion has for the other person. Second, a conscious effort must be made to become aware of our own presuppositions, since they color our views of the religions of others. By becoming aware of our presuppositions, we can “bracket” them to some extent so they do not hinder us from entering into the worldview of the other religion. Third, it is helpful to refrain, at first, from important critical tasks such as evaluating the truth or appropriateness of religious ideas and practices, or explaining why the people follow such practices. There is a time for engaging in responsible evaluation and explanation. But it seems important first of all to understand, and a rush to evaluate and debate truth or to develop explanatory theories can stand in the way of understanding. Fourth, a willingness to learn from the religious experiences of others and to integrate the new information and insights is an important component of the process of understanding.

Understanding does arise from comparison. And so there is also a certain value in being able to look at several religious traditions from the outside, as it were, if this is done sensitively and with understanding. By comparing various elements in different religions, and especially by comparing what is unfamiliar with elements familiar from one’s own experience, it is possible to see basic structures of religion more clearly. We can see recurrent questions and concerns about life and death, and we can survey the persistent themes in the responses provided in different religious paths. We can see common practices that give structure to life and society and, thus, develop deeper understanding of the common human needs that give rise to the various religious traditions of humankind. At the same time, seeing what is common sets the stage for reflecting on the unique characteristics of each of the traditions.

Grouping the Religious Traditions It is a bit bewildering to look at the great variety of religions in the world, past and present. Each tribal group has its own distinctive way of life, which is its religion. And even the highly developed major religious traditions of the world are quite numerous, each with its unique ideas and practices—and there are significant divisions within many of these traditions. So that we do not get lost in the overwhelming variety of ideas, rituals, and structures found in them, it is helpful to consider some ways of grouping the vast array of religions.

There are various ways of classifying and grouping the religious traditions, based on what we as observers consider significant and helpful. Each classification may well reveal and highlight important dimensions of those particular traditions; at the same time, other significant aspects may be obscured and overlooked. One might approach the religions with an historical scheme, for example, putting emphasis on the continuities and discontinuities as cultures developed over time. Another simple framework would be to locate some religions as indigenous and ethnic, whereas others would be considered cross-cultural or universal. A genetic or family resemblance model is particularly helpful for comparing the religious traditions; one example of this would be putting religious traditions into family groupings depending on whether they emphasize polytheism, monotheism, or monism. Another possible taxonomy would group religious traditions into geographic cultural circles, such as those arising in India, those arising in East Asia, and those arising in the Mediterranean world.

For the purposes of our exploration in this book, we will draw on several such classification schemes as helpful for interpretation and understanding. Our main consideration will be the so-called world religions, those that have impacted beyond local cultures. But we will also give some consideration to the local, tribal, indigenous peoples who exist today (or existed until the recent past) in areas of Africa, Melanesia, Australia, the Americas, and many other places. In the major part of the book, we will follow a geographical framework, focusing on the religious traditions arising in India, those of East Asia, and those arising in the Mediterranean world. We will note how the religions in each of these geographical areas display certain family resemblances even while having their distinctive features.

For example, religions arising in India (South Asia) share a historical development in the first millennium B.C.E. and a set of common perspectives on the world and the path to follow. These religions include the traditions known as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (Sikhism developed much later but shares some of the same perspectives). These religions tend to have a nondualistic (or monistic) worldview, the idea that somehow behind or within all the multiplicity of forms and forces in this universe there is one unified sacred reality. These religions do have gods that are important, but at a deeper level it is felt
that the inner soul of reality or the truth of all reality itself is the sacred ultimate. They agree that human existence is part of the process of samsara, that is, birth and death over and over in an endless cycle. According to this perspective, the highest good for humans is to achieve awareness of ultimate truth through practices of meditation or devotion and to find liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

On the other hand, the religious traditions of East Asia, such as those of China and Japan, form a loose family grouping. There are many gods here, in Japanese Shinto and in the Chinese traditions, Daoism and Confucianism, but at the center is an emphasis on harmony with the divine flow of nature and reverence for the ancestors and for family. Within that harmony, human existence in the world is valued as positive and good. Chinese culture and religion have been particularly influential throughout the lands of East Asia. In particular, the Mahayana form of Buddhism has adapted the Buddhist outlook to the East Asian perspective and, thus, plays a unifying role in the cultural grouping that makes up this East Asian family of religions.

The religions of the Mediterranean world arose historically from the context of cosmic, nature-oriented religions of the ancient civilizations (Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece). Yet the religious traditions that eventually developed—Zoroastrianism and the three “Abrahamic” religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)—constitute a family of religions whose central perspective is basically monotheistic; that is, they envision one God who created everything. Since there is one God, this God must be almighty and in charge of everything in the created world. The highest good for the creation is to fulfill the will and design of this almighty creator, and to do this, humans need revelation from God through prophets. The three Abrahamic religions have a particularly close historical relationship, arising successively from the same Semitic society of the Near East, each tracing its roots in some manner to the ancestor Abraham.

We must keep in mind that any scheme such as this can only suggest the main historical and cultural connections within the different groupings of religions. It is also true that different perspectives can be found in the same religious tradition in varying degrees. Nondualistic Hindus, for example, know a great deal about worshiping the great God who created and sustains everything, with teachings and practices that resemble monotheism. Islam, for all its fierce monotheism, has long harbored the Sufi mystical movement, which has cultivated language that sounds much like the Hindu and Buddhist nondualist thinkers.

**SOME DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

The word *religion*, of course, has a variety of meanings as it is used in the modern world. Although one might hear the question, “Do you have religion?,” there is no “religion in general” but only very many practices and beliefs that have been included, at one time or another, under our term *religion*. The modern term *religion* in Western languages is based on the Latin *religio*, probably meaning a “bond” linking worshipers of a god together. In Western history the term has been associated with ideas of worshiping God or gods as well as associated beliefs, rituals, moral prescriptions, social groupings, and so on. Over the past several centuries a great many scholars have attempted to create definitions of religion that can include spiritual practices of all cultures around the world and at the same time bring out that which is distinctively common to all these practices. Since these definitions come from many perspectives—‗theological, philosophical, sociological, anthropological, psychological, and many more—‘they are widely divergent and serve to expand our sense of the possible meanings of religion. The interested reader can pursue this topic by consulting some of the many books that discuss theories and definitions of religion.¹

For our purposes, it is important to start with an understanding of religion that is broad enough to include all cultures of the world but at the same time narrow enough to give focus and direction to our exploration. Drawing on several scholarly definitions, here is a working description of some key dimensions of religion:

1. Religion is human involvement with what is considered to be the realm of the sacred.
2. It is expressed in thought, action, and social forms.
3. It constitutes a total system of symbols with deep meaning.
4. It is a path of ultimate transformation.
Human Involvement with the Realm of the Sacred
The first part of the definition of religion suggests a relationship between two levels of experience: the limited human level and the level of that which is felt to be the sacred. Of course, we cannot examine the sacred as if it was an objective realm of reality, something to be proved or disproved. Here we are not attempting to define ultimate reality as an objective fact; we are simply exploring how people of different cultures have described their experiences of whatever it is that they consider the ultimate sacred. We see that it is the common experience of many peoples past and present that there is a sacred dimension of reality with ultimate significance, and, furthermore, that the highest good in human life has to do with relating to that dimension.

Although the idea of the sacred is distinctive in each particular religious tradition, we may perhaps discern some general outlines that resonate across religious boundaries. After all, if there are any common human life experiences throughout the different cultures of the world, we should expect some general similarities in the way people describe their experiences of what they consider to be the sacred. One suggestive perspective comes from Rudolph Otto, who studied various types of religious experience and put forth the view that basic to religious experience is a deep sense of the “numinous.” This is a term he coined from the Latin *numen* ("holy, sacred") to express our basic response to experiencing the sacred even before we develop rational and moral notions about it. Experiencing the numinous as ultimate mystery, people feel a strong sense of awe and reverence, at the same time being fascinated and drawn to the mysterious Other.

Drawing on Otto’s suggestion, let us make some observations about experiencing the sacred. First of all, bound up with the numinous is an unlimited, primordial, overpowering quality. The sacred is ultimate, the basis of everything else, and nothing can supersede or encompass it. It accounts for everything, and it holds everything together—but it is its own basis without depending on anything else. The sacred, whether expressed as God (Islam), Brahman (Hinduism), emptiness (Mahayana Buddhism), or some other formulation, is felt to be the universal foundation of all truth, reality, goodness, and value.

We encounter the sacred as Mystery, as the Wholly Other that remains completely “other” even when experienced within the human world. It cannot be completely held by humans, either with their hands or with their reason. Words can attempt to describe the sacred, but it is understood that words can only point to the mystery in a symbolic way. Every word refers to a conditioned human reality, but the sacred both encompasses and transcends human realities. For this reason, people express the experience of the sacred not only by words but also by a variety of other symbolic forms, such as sculpture, ritual actions, meditation, music, dance, silence, and so forth. On the Jewish festival of Simhat Torah, for example, dancing with the
Torah scrolls provides a deep experience of the sacred, more than words can say. Bathing in “Mother Ganges” provides a direct, nonverbal sacred experience for Hindus. After the reception of the Eucharist in a Christian church, a moment of silence is often the most appropriate way of responding to the mystery. The stillness of Buddhist meditation brings one into direct touch with the ultimate truth in a way that words can never do.

Experience of the sacred is accompanied with awe and reverence. The sacred cannot be controlled by human design; it bursts the bounds of human understanding and overwhelms with energy and demand. The human response is awe, respect, and submission. For Muslims, for example, washing the body and prostrating oneself in prayer expresses the proper human relationship to the sacred. Rudolph Otto called this quality of the sacred the *mysterium tremendum* (terrifying mystery). For the ancient Israelites, the mountain of Sinai was the awesome presence of the sacred; touching it could mean destruction. The image of a god or goddess in the Hindu tradition is full of power, so that one should not, for example, take pictures of it.

Experience of the sacred at the same time involves fascination and love; we are compelled and drawn to the ultimate origin of all that is good and true and beautiful, the source of meaning and purpose in life, the fountain of vitality and strength. The sacred is wondrous, marvelous, and compelling. Encounter with the sacred leads to the highest joy, rapture, and love. Buddhists who have experienced awakening describe it as ultimate bliss and rapture. The Muslim pilgrim is drawn to Mecca and to the experience of the sacred there as by a powerful magnet. The Hindu worshiper lovingly performs *puja* to the image of the beloved god or goddess. A Christian writer, Augustine, said that the soul is restless until it finds rest in God.

Since the sacred is the source of ultimate value, the deepest need of human life is to have an ongoing relationship with the sacred. It is this need that is met in the various religious traditions of humankind. Each religious path, in its own way, provides the context so that the human community can experience the presence of the sacred, with the power, value structures, meaning, and purpose that fulfill the religious needs of human beings.

**Expression in Thought, Action, and Social Forms** The second part of our description of religion suggests what goes into the making of that human involvement with the sacred. Since religion is, obviously, a human affair, it necessarily involves human forms or modes of expression. Joachim Wach suggests there are three such modes of expression: theoretical (thinking, speaking), practical (doing, acting), and social (fellowship, community). These are the building blocks of religious expression, and they fit together to form a complex, unique universe of meaning, that is, a religious tradition.

The *theoretical* mode of expression comprises the verbal aspect of religion, what is told and described. The religious path sets forth a way of thinking about the most important, basic issues of life: how the sacred is experienced, where the world came from and where it is going, what the goal of human life is, and how we can achieve that goal. These things are talked about in two basic ways: narrative or story (myth) and theoretical statements about reality (doctrine). All religious traditions have stories or myths that put forth in narrative form the worldview and the important experiences of the sacred on which that religion is founded. Leading thinkers also express their basic perceptions in teachings or doctrines that generalize from the sacred stories to present the fundamental truths that they believe, providing intellectual guidance to the participants in that religious path.

The *practical* level of expression in religion has to do with its visible and performed side: rituals, worship, ethics, and so forth. Religion is not just mental but also physical, and the acting out, the performance, of the involvement with the sacred is just as important as the stories and the doctrines. Prostrating oneself before the sacred presence, going on pilgrimages, sharing in a sacred meal, chanting texts and prayers, sitting in meditation, wearing colorful robes, burning incense, observing moral rules, and hundreds of other religious rituals and types of behavior represent the acting out or performance of the religious experience.

Religion is never simply an individual affair but always a group or communal experience involving *social forms*. It is the religious community that carries on the tradition, even before the individual was born and after he or she dies. And it is in identifying with the religious community that the individual finds personal identity. There are different structures of community depending on the type of religious experience, in family or clan, congregations, religious societies, and whole nations. And there are various types of religious leaders, such as queens, kings, priests, priestesses,
sages, prophets, masters, nuns, monks, shamans, and many more. Participation in the social forms of the religious community is what gives continuity of religious experience.

A Total System of Symbols  Taken together, these modes of religious expression form a total worldview, a “map” of human involvement with the sacred, and this brings us to the third part of our definition. Religion guides and gives meaning by presenting a view of the whole order of existence. This religious map of human existence is made up of symbols—words, ideas, rituals, pictures, gestures, sounds, social groupings—that evoke the deepest feelings and most important meanings in our lives. These are the means by which a group of people expresses their perception of what life is all about. To live as part of this community is to share a whole way of knowing the world and one’s place in it, a whole way of looking at life and death, and a whole set of assumptions about what is real and true and good. The system of symbols upholds deep-seated attitudes and motivations, providing a complete system of values for human life.

Let us consider a few examples of such symbols. In a Buddhist monastery, an ordinary bowl for food becomes a “begging bowl,” an important symbol of the spiritual status of the monk or nun on the path toward the ultimate goal of all people in the community. A rooster and a dove are two very common animals, but used by a priest in a Daoist ritual they embody the operational forces of yin and yang and create the balance of sacred power necessary for the well-being of the human community. Common words can be powerful symbols. The words blood and lamb have ordinary straightforward meanings; but for a Christian to say “The blood of the Lamb has saved me” arouses deep religious feelings and meaning. Normal human activities often give rise to important symbolic meanings. For example, the act of eating a meal is one of the most common human activities and is often done without any particularly deep meaning. But a Jew sitting at the table celebrating the Passover seder with her family experiences deep religious meaning in that human activity. Similarly, washing oneself is an everyday human activity, but all religions have rituals that express sacred meaning in washing, such as baptism, bathing in a sacred river, or purifying oneself with water before entering a shrine.

We can envision the worldview of each religious tradition as a circle with a center. The circle suggests the totality of what the people understand as their existence in the world. It contains their universe of symbols that provides the pattern of life that is their religious path. Within the circle, then, we see the most important symbols of that religion. The meanings these symbols supply have been told in stories, painted and sculpted in art, sung and played by musicians, expressed in poems and dramas, acted out in rituals and worship, and argued and systematized by theologians and philosophers for centuries.

The various symbols fit together in a circle, for they are all related to each other in such a way as to present a comprehensive and persuasive outlook on life. Above all, the circle of symbols is centered—that is, there is a central vision that colors and permeates the whole circle in a pervasive way. We might suggest, for example, that for Muslims the center is the Holy Book, the Quran, whereas for Christians it is Christ. Buddhism centers on the path to nirvana, whereas the center for Shinto is the exhaustless life of the kami. Many Chinese would put the Dao at the center of their universe of symbols; other Chinese might center their world more on ancestors and family. The symbols closest to the center could be considered the primary symbols, those that are most essential to those of that religious path. Toward the outside of the circle appear somewhat more secondary symbols, those that are more inclined to change when new experiences and challenges arise, those that respond to the needs of the religious communities in different times and places. Of course, people do not always agree on whether a particular symbol is primary or secondary; diverse religious experiences lead to different emphases even within one religious tradition.

We should, therefore, keep in mind that a religious tradition is not a static, unchanging affair but rather a living, dynamic organism. Changes and transformations do occur in response to new experiences, new stories, and new challenges. Sometimes what appeared to be a primary symbol to some at one time becomes less important in later ages, whereas a secondary symbol introduced by some new religious experience shifts into a primary position. For example, Indra was one of the most powerful gods for the ancient Aryans, but he shifts to a rather small role in later Hinduism. On the other hand, Vishnu was a minor god for the Aryans, but he rose dramatically to become one of the great gods in Hinduism. For traditional Jews, the idea of bodily resurrection after death was at one time a primary symbol, but in recent times it has faded to secondary importance for some modern Jewish thinkers.
On the other hand, the Land of Israel, which was simply a spiritual idea during the medieval period, has become for many modern Jews a very primary symbol in concrete form. In spite of changes in the circle of symbols, however, there is an ongoing basic continuity, flowing outward from the central vision and maintaining the fundamental pattern of faith and life.

As we look at the issues of human life and focus on specific symbols from the religions, we must keep in mind that a particular symbol must always be viewed in its total context. Some of the symbols will, of course, appear quite similar in a family of religions, and rightly so, given the shared history and culture. The word Dao (“way”), for example, is used by all three religious traditions in China—Confucianist, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions—but with significant differences of meaning. Our task is to see each symbol—each teaching, idea, story, ritual, practice, or community structure—in the light that is reflected from the central vision and from the total pattern of that particular system of symbols.

A Path of Ultimate Transformation The fourth part of our definition points out that a religious tradition is not only a system of beliefs and expressions about the relation to the sacred; it is above all a path, a way of life. Each religious tradition offers something that many humans find essential to human existence: a path of transformation, a path to ultimate meaning.

An important part of religious experience, it appears, is the realization of the defective or fractured nature of human involvement with the sacred, for from this arise the fundamental troubles and anxieties of existence. This awareness of the human problem is coupled with knowledge of the ideal, ultimate relationship to the sacred. One’s religious practice provides a way of overcoming this fracture, of restoring the bridge to the sacred, of transforming oneself to attain the goal of life as expressed in that particular religious tradition. The path continues throughout one’s lifetime, through rituals, symbols, disciplines, study, social relationships, and states of consciousness. Buddhists, for example, follow the Eightfold Path toward the ultimate attainment of nirvana. Christians follow the path of Christ to overcome sin and attain eternal life. For Hindus, the paths of action, worship, and knowledge lead toward spiritual realization and liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Following the life of Torah for Jews is the path toward spiritual perfection. The path is a way of life, a praxis designed to restore wholeness and ultimate meaning to human existence by involvement with the source of life, the sacred.

BASIC HUMAN CONCERNS AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

To help in our exploration of the various religious traditions, our ground plan in this book is to take up a number of common questions and concerns about human existence and use them as windows into the fundamental views and practices of the people in each religious tradition. The goal is not to produce a synthesis of answers from all these religions, for each is unique and distinctive. We must attempt not to impose outside ideas but rather to be sensitive to the way people of each religion frame their own concerns and responses. Still, if done judiciously, looking at common human questions provides opportunities to compare the religions while seeing clearly the unique characteristics of each.

Here are some main questions and religious responses to think about as we find our way into the basic dimensions of religion. The questions and responses fall into three general areas.

1. Sacred Story. The important question of identity—who are we?—finds an answer especially in the sacred stories of each religious path, as those stories originated and were passed on through various historical dynamics to the present community.

2. Worlds of Meaning. Questions of meaning and understanding are answered in the main theoretical teachings of the religious tradition. What’s it all about? What sense is there in life? How can we start living real life? The answers point to teachings about the sacred reality, world origins and human existence, and the path of transformation.

3. Ritual Practices and the Good Life. Some questions relate to practical and social aspects of life: How can we find new power for life? How should we live? The answers point to ritual and worship, on the one hand, and to communal life and ethics, on the other.
It will be helpful to explore these questions and responses in a preliminary way, drawing on examples from across the religious traditions, in order to set the stage for our look at each of the religions in the following chapters.

Sacred Story and Historical Context

One basic human concern is the question of identity: Who are we? Who am I? When a person tries to answer that question, she starts by telling the story of her life. Although there are many parts of her life story she might emphasize, one important aspect would be her religious identity: “I’m Hindu.” “My family has always been Buddhist.” “I can’t imagine not being a Christian.” “Of course, I’m Muslim.” But what does that mean? It means that a person connects his or her own story with the sacred story, the master story, of his or her religious tradition—especially with those crucial events or realities of the founding of the tradition. To express his identity as a Buddhist, a person tells the story of the Buddha and the founding of Buddhism. To renew her Christian identity, a person looks to the sacred story of Christ, for that is the story—the master story—with which her own life story connects. To be a Sikh means to tie one’s own life story into the master story of the Gurus who founded Sikhism. The story of the founding or the revealing of the religious path is of particular concern because it provides the divine authority for one’s religious identity. In this study of the religions we devote considerable attention to the master story and also the historical changes and transformations that shaped each religion.

Myth and Sacred Story

All religious traditions have master stories telling of decisive events and leaders through which the new truths and practices were inaugurated as the basis of the new way of life. These birth-giving events and leaders are told about in their stories, written about in their scriptures, sung about in their songs, depicted in their art, and remembered in their rituals. They form the central focus, the paradigm, by which the people express their religious identity.

These sacred stories, or myths, have a very important function in religion, for they establish the basic outlook and the way of life of the people of that religion. They tell of the central encounters of the people with the sacred, those clear episodes that illumine all aspects of life. Thus, these stories, even though they may seem in some cases to refer to distant mythological ages, are understood to be real and true, for they reveal the bridge to the sacred that is essential for human existence. Although they are presented in story form, they provide a kind of map for human life, a model that can be followed so life can be lived in the fullest way according to the design established by the sacred power. Knowing these stories means the people know how human life is to be lived in a meaningful way; not knowing the stories or forgetting them would be to live a chaotic, subhuman existence.

But knowing and remembering the sacred story are not just intellectual exercises. To perform the stories—repeating them in words and acting them out in rituals—is actually to become participants in the founding events. It is to reactualize the central happenings so they become real and powerful in human life today just as they were in the special time told about in the sacred stories.

In sum, the story provides an answer to the question of identity by making it possible to identify with those events and beings that exemplify in a clear and powerful way the relationship with the sacred that undergirds human life. The master stories may be about human sages and leaders who founded the religious path, or they may be about gods and heroes in mythological ages—or both. But in all cases the stories tell about the beginnings, the origins, of the real, authentic way of human life. And, thus, they tell us who we really are.

Some of the religions are “founded” religions in the sense that their sacred history points to specific persons who had a role in the religion’s origins. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may be cited as examples, though the view of the founders may be quite different among these traditions. Since these religions focus on founders who lived in a particular age amid crucial events of human history, the stories tend to dwell more on actual historical events and human personalities than do the stories of religions that do not have central founding events and leaders.

Peoples of indigenous, tribal societies, even though they often do not remember a particular “founder,” have their myths about the sacred beings and ancestors of the “time of the beginnings” who performed the crucial actions to create life the way it is. These myths are repeated in festivals so
the power and vitality they tell about can become real once more for the people. Also, religious traditions such as Hinduism and Shinto, even though they have no particular founding events or leaders, have their stories about the gods and the cultural heroes, stories that provide the foundation of the authentic way of life.

In presenting and interpreting the stories of these communities, we rely on scholarly work that has clarified the origins and early history of each of the religions, providing a historical context for the stories. It is also our intention, however, to see each story as it is told and interpreted by that religious community. We are, after all, not dealing with history strictly speaking but with sacred history. And that sacred history is expressed not by archaeological findings or history books but in the stories told in the worshiping communities.

Change and Transformation in the Religious Tradition
The history of the religious tradition does not end with the sacred stories of the beginnings. Each religion is a living organism that changes and develops in new situations and experiences. Understanding this dynamic quality of religious tradition is important, for it is the “passing on” (traditio) of the story through many generations of people that finally shapes the religious identity of present-day followers of the path. They receive and interact with the story through the tradition that has brought it to them.

For example, one cannot understand Buddhism in the world today without taking some account of the Mahayana perspectives and also the various developments in Southeast Asia and in East Asia. Judaism has been transformed by the teachings of the rabbis, the medieval persecutions, the emancipation, and most recently the experience of the Holocaust. To understand modern Christianity one must take into account the transformations brought about, for example, by the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire, the medieval synthesis of doctrine and life, and the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. And it would be most difficult to understand Chinese religion without considering the rise of Daoism, the development of the state cult of Confucius, the importation of Buddhism, and so forth. So it is with each religious tradition. Although in this book we cannot focus extensively on the historical developments of each religious tradition, it is important to become aware of the major transformations and the effect they have had on the understanding and practice of that tradition.

Our modern era in particular has been a time of drastic challenges and far-reaching transformations for many of the world’s religions. The rise of science has brought forth questions about traditional religious worldviews, scriptures, and long-accepted teachings. Political and economic turmoil often have caught religious communities up in divisive power struggles or pushed them toward nationalism.
or revivalism. Immigrants and population shifts have resulted in many people living as religious minorities in diaspora situations, where traditional religious supports are limited. Most people have become much more aware of religious pluralism, and religious communities are struggling with the challenge of living together with people of many faiths. And so, as we look at each religious tradition, we will pay attention to their responses to the challenges of the modern world.

Worlds of Meaning: Theoretical Teachings

Sacred Reality What’s it all about? Confronted with the maze of human life in a mind-boggling universe, we wonder how we can make sense of everything that is. How does it all hold together? The answer presented in each religious tradition, in its own distinctive way, is what we call the sacred, the ground of all, the ultimate reality. Each tradition has appropriate terms to point to this ultimate reality: God, Goddess, Brahman, nirvana, Dharma, Dharmakaya, Dao, Heaven, and many more. Without such a vision of sacred reality, religious people feel there would be no center, no order, only a chaos of things and events occurring haphazardly without rhyme or reason. And so since the beginning of human life on this planet, people have always sought after sacred reality as the source and support for this world and human existence within it.

What are some of the ways people think about the sacred? Some people, especially in the ancient world and among indigenous peoples of today, have understood the sacred to be experienced in numerous forms and powers. Some speak of an impersonal sacred power that penetrates and interacts with everything. Wherever we turn, in nature and in society, we encounter Power. Often the sacred is personified as gods and spirits, who are immanent in the various aspects of the world: One god shows power in the rain and storm, another in the healing and creating power of the sun, another in pregnancy and childbirth, and so forth. This view, often called polytheism, means power is shared, with no one sacred being having unlimited sway. Many of these religions do have a supreme god who is the primordial creator and has ultimate authority, but this god delegates the functions of the world to other gods and goddesses. This general vision of the sacred can also be found to be widespread in Asia, within the Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist, and Shinto traditions. It is generally understood, of course, that such divine beings are not ultimate in power or status.

Another general view of the sacred is monotheism, the view that there is one sacred reality, a personal God who created and supports this world and everything in it, with no alternates, no competitors. There is one God and one world, the creation. However, God is not a part of this world. God is transcendent, that is, above and beyond the created world, holy and eternal. At the same time God is present in a personal way to the created world. God encounters us especially in historical events, giving us guidance and challenging us to fulfill the divine will. The three Abrahamic religious traditions are strong advocates of this perspective on the sacred, but it can be found in modified forms in Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and even special Hindu and Buddhist groups.

Still another conception of the sacred is sometimes called nondualism or monism, a broad category of thought and experience with an emphasis placed on the unity of all reality. Nondualism means that there is no real difference between the ultimate reality and the phenomenal world. Monism is the view that all reality is one unified divine reality. There may still be many personal gods, but they may be understood, for example, as facets of the one sacred reality, or as beings on a higher level of the rebirth cycle. Within these traditions, it may be emphasized that the sacred is our inner true self; it may be the suchness of reality; it may be the state of ultimate consciousness; it may be the principle that is found in all reality. This kind of perspective on the sacred ultimate is present in some forms of the Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist, and Neo-Confucianist traditions. Tendencies toward monism can also be found in certain mystical movements in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as in some philosophical thinkers in the Western tradition, such as Plotinus, Spinoza, and Hegel.

So the sacred can be experienced as many in nature, or one beyond nature, or one and many both in and beyond nature, and more. Depending on which vision is dominant, the religious path to the sacred has distinctive features in each particular religion. The crucial question is, how do we encounter the sacred? Is the sacred found in the forces of nature and society? Is the sacred encountered in history and events? Is the sacred met within as one’s real self? Is the sacred experienced as a personal being or as impersonal reality? Is the sacred known as the ultimate truth of reality?
In each of the religions, people have opted for a particular vision of the sacred and, thus, each has a distinctive religious path. Yet people in each religion often explore the other possible perspectives as well in order to add depth to their own vision and experience.

Of course, religious perceptions change over time, and the modern secular worldview has influenced the view of the sacred in most religious communities. In ancient times it was a common assumption of almost all peoples that this world and human life are supported by divine power or powers, although various peoples differed in their conception of the divine realm. In modern times, however, far-reaching questions have been raised in people’s minds about the traditional beliefs concerning the sacred. As science and technology have developed all around the globe, notions of sacred reality have gradually been eased out of the picture. We live our lives in a very secular way, that is, without paying attention to the sacred in most aspects of our existence. Is there really a God who controls all events? Do Vishnu and Shiva actually have power in the world? Is nirvana real? Is it true there is an underlying principle of all reality? Questions about God have bothered Jews and Christians ever since the Enlightenment, but today people of all religions are facing the challenges that modernity and secularity pose for the traditional concepts of the sacred.

In spite of these developments, adherents of the religions still find meaning in the depth dimension of the sacred. There are, of course, questions and problems that have to be dealt with, and modern people cannot easily go back to conceptions of sacred reality as a heavenly grandfather who watches lovingly over all his children, for example, or as gods, goddesses, and demons who cause all good and bad things to happen. Yet it is the experience of many people of the different religions today that a sense of the sacred still is essential and can be retrieved in the tradition and practice of their religious path. How can we find again a way to experience the sacred present and powerful in our lives? Take up the path and see, they would answer.

**World Origins and Human Existence** What sense is there in life? And why are we here? Why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? Questions such as these are at the heart of all religious experience, for they pertain to the deepest needs of human life—the need to understand our own existence within the world and society, the need to feel a purpose or destiny, and the need to integrate evil and death into our view of life without despairing.

The religious traditions deal with questions like these especially in their **cosmogonic** stories, that is, their stories about the creation and maintenance of the world and of humans within it. For it is in knowing the origins of the world that we know its real essence and character.

In the creation stories of the peoples of the world, the origin of the world is attributed to many causes. Often a variety of gods and divine helpers create the world, remaining as ongoing powers within the world. Sometimes the creation of the world is seen as a battle between the various divine forces, and humans get caught up in the conflict. The monotheistic religions insist that the entire creation results from the one creator God. Again, especially among the religions of India, the origin and the operation of the world may be viewed as an eternal recurring process, like waves on an ocean, emanating from the sacred reality.

The cosmogonic myths or stories telling of origins also provide important views about the nature of the world and the role of humans within it. Some of the ancient peoples and indigenous peoples teach that the world is controlled by many divine forces, expressing their wills in the functioning of nature; therefore, the most important role of humans is to serve and propitiate these gods. People of the Abrahamic religions teach that because there is one God, the creator and preserver of all things, this world makes sense as a good and purposeful creation. And humans are to assist God to care for this world, fulfilling God’s design. Other, such as Hindus and Buddhists, teach that the world as we experience it is somewhat illusory and passing. The most important thing for humans to do is to get in touch with that which is ultimate rather than the changing and transitory world. Again, it is sometimes taught, as in the Chinese religions and in Hinduism, that there is a universal world order or harmony into which everything fits, and humans do best by living their lives according to this order.

It seems that all religions have some view of human failure and imperfection. This follows from their vision of what the ideal is. The ideal human existence is sometimes expressed in creation stories, in descriptions of the origins of the world and of humans. There was an age of innocence, for example, a paradisiacal state when people lived peacefully and in harmony. The original human state is
Is human nature fundamentally good or evil? To put the question thus is certainly an oversimplification, for most religious thinkers emphasize human moral responsibility. Somehow humans must be free to make their own choices in decisions of behavior, or they would not be responsible for anything they do. The realities of human existence lead most people to conclude that there is within us a struggle concerning choices about good and evil. Outside forces perhaps influence us; perhaps there are inner inclinations toward good or evil. But finally—in the view of most religious teachers—the choice is authored by the person herself or himself, who bears the final responsibility for it.

What this unsettling state of imperfection, ignorance, struggle, discord, or sin does, when realized against the standard of sacred design and law for human existence, is to impel us toward some change: repentance, seeking help from sacred powers, following a new path to transform our incomplete human existence.

The Path of Transformation and Wholeness  How can we start living real life? Where are meaning and peace to be found? How can we be healed? Questions such as these arise when we come face to face with the existence of failure, imperfection, and evil in our lives, knowing at the same time that this is not the way things should be. These are questions about the possibility of transformation. Many different terms are used in the various religions: salvation, liberation, enlightenment, purification, healing, perfection, and more. This religious transformation in all religious paths means wholeness and rightness—a transformation away from the fragmentation, alienation, sin, and ignorance we feel in our lives, a movement toward peace, health, wholeness, and perfection. Transformation as taught in a particular religious tradition responds to the way in which the human problem is understood and experienced. For example, sin must be transformed by forgiveness, pollution by purification, ignorance by knowledge, fracture by healing, and wandering by guidance on the
straight path. All religions offer some means by which such transformation can be possible.

Functioning as a means of transformation, a religious path provides methods of interaction with the realm of the sacred. This is the ultimate source of life and meaning, and the basic human problem arises when this source is cut off for one reason or another. The first need is for some kind of restoration of this contact so that sacred power can transform life.

Although people of all religions agree that it is the power of the sacred that transforms humans, there are different visions as to how this power arises and operates in restoring the relationship. People in some religions emphasize human depravity and helplessness; in this view, all power and salvation must come from a source outside oneself. A good example of such an approach is Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, which stresses the notion of complete human degeneracy and helplessness in this “age of the end of the Buddhist law.” This means that the only hope for humans to escape an endless series of rebirths in the suffering realms is to rely totally on help from the compassionate Buddha, Amida. On the other hand, some religious teachers emphasize an approach to the means of transformation that relies on power within oneself. Also in Japanese Buddhism, Zen adherents say there is no need to look to Amida Buddha for help or salvation. Each person has the transcendent Buddha nature in herself or himself, and through the practice of meditation each person can awaken to that Buddha reality and reach enlightenment.

These two opposite extremes are from the same religious tradition, namely, Japanese Buddhism. This would suggest that even within one religion we might expect to find both the “outside power” and the “self power” emphases. And this is the case. In Hinduism, for example, one finds both a tradition of worshiping the gods in reliance on their grace, and also a tradition of passing beyond the gods to pure realization of the sacred through discipline and meditation. It is true that people of some religions, such as Christianity, speak more about “grace” (outside power); and people of other religions, such as Islam, place more emphasis on human responsibility for action (self power). But the relation to the sacred is always a two-way relation. Even if salvation comes totally from the sacred power, still humans receive it and live it out in human religious structures. And even if the whole emphasis seems to be on one’s own power in terms of performing disciplines, still these disciplines draw on deep sources of sacred power. One of the distinctive characteristics of each religious tradition, in fact, is its particular vision of the interaction between human practice and sacred gift.

The means of transformation or salvation that a religious tradition offers will involve all three levels of human expression: theoretical, practical, and social. On the theoretical level, the myths and doctrines are to be understood and accepted by faith and/or reason, so that the person’s whole outlook on life can be transformed. On the practical level, ritual, discipline, and practice are means of transformation. Such activities would include praying, baptism, acts of repentance, sitting in meditation, studying, keeping rules of purity, acts of self-discipline, and the like. Means of transformation on the social level would include participating in social structures such as families, congregations, sacred peoples, priesthoods, monasteries, and the like, so that the new way of life can be lived fully as a lifelong practice.

Together, these various means of transformation make up a path to follow. This path of transformation is a dynamic process that goes on throughout life in greater and smaller rhythms. It continually involves a double movement: a distancing and separating from the situation that is fractured and wrong, and a restoration and renewal of the state of wholeness and harmony with the sacred. The movement of separation includes acts such as repentance, vows of abstinence, withdrawal of thoughts from outer things, and rituals of washing and purifying oneself. The movement of restoration and renewal comes through acts such as retelling sacred revelation, feelings of ecstasy in worshipping one’s god, receiving assurance of forgiveness, and awakening the mind in enlightenment.

Furthermore, the path of transformation is both a means and an end in itself. As a means it is a praxis, a method of moving toward a goal: transformation or salvation, restoration of the relationship with the sacred. In one sense, that goal is never fully reached within human life, for the problems of human failure and sin remain until death. For that reason many religious traditions have ideas of the future human state in which the ideal goal is perfectly and completely consummated. There may be some model person who achieves that goal now, such as a savior, saint, prophet, samnyasin, buddha, arhat, or jina. But for the rest
of us, the path is a means toward a goal of transformation that will be a complete, perfect reality only in a transcendent state or a world or lifetime to come.

However, seen from another point of view, the path of transformation is itself the experience of transformation. There is an “already, even though not yet” quality to the experience in following the path. The path is itself the means we have of experiencing contact with the sacred. Zen Buddhists express this most strikingly. Master Dogen insisted that practice (sitting in meditation) and enlightenment (experiencing the Buddha nature) are the same thing, with no difference at all. Other religious teachers would perhaps not identify the path so closely with the transformation it brings. But all would agree that following the path is not just a means to reward in another state or world to come; the goal of transformation is already at least partially present right now as we follow the path.

Ritual Practices and the Good Life

Religion by its very nature is practical and social. Theoretical teachings about the sacred and about life need to be lived, not just believed. And the path provides a structure of life within a religious community. It is never just an individual affair but always involves the person in a larger community of people going on that religious path. The religious community provides daily life with a structure including both sacred time and sacred life. That is, the ordinary time of one’s existence is punctuated by special times of ritual and festival. And the ordinary living of one’s daily existence becomes the arena of the good life in fulfillment of the sacred design for the whole community.

Making Time Sacred Through Ritual, Worship, and Art

Where can we find new power for life? How can we feel more in touch with what is real? These questions and many more like them have to do with our need regularly to renew the meaning and purpose of our lives, day by day, year by year, in family and in community, through ritual, devotion, and worship.

Mircea Eliade⁴ has suggested that, looked at in a completely profane or secular way, human life would be a self-contained, closed system with intervention by sacred power logically excluded. There would be no “breaks” to the sacred, no special or strong (sacred) times that can provide centers of meaning and, thus, give structure and order to life.

Since humans cannot tolerate such a meaningless chaos of existing, we seek out special or strong times. In traditional religious contexts, these are the sacred celebrations, the festivals, holy days, and rituals that periodically punctuate and renew the ordinary day-by-day passage of our existence. Even modern, secularized people who have little use for traditional religious rituals have not transcended the need to have sacred times. Breaks in time, centers of meaning and renewal, are widely sought after in such forms as vacations, national holidays, parties, sports, entertainment, and the like. The purpose of such sacred times is “re-creation,” that is, the renewal and enlivening of our otherwise humdrum routine of existing.

Religious communities have found that the power that motivates life needs constantly to be renewed. Life-power tends to run down, to be exhausted and weak. There is
need regularly to move into sacred time, the time in which the realities of the sacred story are experienced as new and present once again. Ordinary time is transcended, and the people of now become contemporary with the gods and the founders and heroes of the Beginning Time. The rituals and festivals provide a rhythm of periodic renewal.

Rituals and festivals are also sources of orientation for life, centers around which all else makes sense. They establish a pattern of living, derived from the sacred story, that can extend out and sanctify the ordinary hours and days of existing. They make real again the identity shared by the community and the incorporation of the individual within it.

Ritual worship connects the sacred with the common elements of human life. Fundamental to religious ritual is the sense of sacred presence in the most vital areas of human experience: eating, sexuality, birth, death, work, play, family, community, water, earth, sun, and so forth. The materials for ritual celebration stem from these basic elements of the human context. A meal is a most universal form of religious ritual, for example. So also is washing by water, or burying in the earth, or dancing and singing, or offering products of one's labor—the list of religious rituals is as long and diverse as the vital aspects of human life.

Ritual worship not only incorporates the vital human aspects, but it also “returns” them, now sanctified, to life. By the offering of the first fruits of the harvest, all the harvest is sacred. Through the ritual uniting of a woman and a man, all their sexual life is consecrated. By means of the rites of puberty initiation, boys and girls are incorporated as men and women of the community. Ritual washing means all the body is pure and sanctified. Ritual worship, thus, transforms human life by lifting it up, connecting it with the sacred, and returning it, now sanctified and empowered, to daily existence.

Ritual celebration of sacred time, as an activity on the path of transformation, has a movement or structure for renewal. First of all, there needs to be a kenosis, an “emptying out.” With the recognition that power has run down and become exhausted comes the need for an emptying out of the old situation, a distancing so that the renewal can take place. This kenosis takes many different forms in religious practice. Among the most common rituals would be those that symbolize washing or cleansing, removal of impurity, confession and repentance, separation from the usual state, returning to a condition of chaos or disorder, and dying.

Once the emptying out has been established, the plerosis, “filling up,” follows. Having been brought back to the original state, emptied of all exhausted powers, the renewing power of the sacred can be experienced. Rebirth and new life are symbolized by rituals such as emerging from the waters, putting on new clothes, sharing in a meal, receiving a new name, incorporation into a community, singing and dancing, and the like.

Very often the two movements of kenosis and plerosis are connected by an in-between liminal state (from limen, “threshold”). This liminal state can be seen, for example, in puberty initiations. Young boys and girls may be separated from their mothers and removed to the bush (kenosis) before being incorporated back into the community as young men and women (plerosis). During that time in the bush they experience a liminal, threshold state; they are “betwixt and between,” having died to their childhood existence but not yet reborn as adults. In this liminal state they return in a sense to a prebirth existence. Everything may be stripped from them; they may experience ritual death and receive sacred revelations. After this critical threshold experience, they are reincorporated into the community as new, reborn people.

Such a liminal experience can be observed in many rituals and festivals. The New Year festivals of many cultures, for example, typically have a time of cleansing and purifying (kenosis), which leads into a liminal condition of “anti-structure” or chaos; finally renewed structure and order are created (plerosis). The Christian ritual of baptism involves a distancing from evil (renouncing the works of the devil), a liminal passage of symbolic death in the waters, and a renewal ritualized by a new name, white garment, and a burning candle. The ritual of pilgrimage, important in traditions as different as Hinduism and Islam, includes symbols of distancing through a long journey, vows, and a special garment. The liminal period covers several days full of intense rituals and experiences. And the pilgrim has a new spiritual and social status upon completion of the pilgrimage.
festivals, and the like. In some religious traditions, the seasonal festivals are associated with events in the sacred story. For example, the spring festival of Passover celebrates the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the spring festival of Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and a spring festival in Buddhism commemorates the birth of the Buddha. All of these festivals, although they emphasize events in human history, retain symbolism of liberation of nature’s forces from the captivity of winter.

Another very common type of festival occurring periodically is the holy day, a particular day singled out for commemorating and celebrating some aspect of sacred power. These may be lucky or unlucky days determined by the astrological calendar; they may commemorate the birth or death of some great saints or religious founders; they may be critical points in the transitions of the annual seasons, such as the winter solstice; or they may follow a repeating pattern, such as every seven days (Jews, Christians, and Muslims), every nineteen days (Baha’is), or bimonthly on the lunar pattern (Buddhists).

Some rituals recur every day, such as morning devotions for Brahmans or ritual worship at their family kami altar for a traditional Japanese family. And certain rituals even take place periodically throughout every day, such as the five daily periods of prayer in Islam or the daily hours observed by Christian monks and nuns.

These seasonal festivals, periodic holy days, and regular ritual times offer a plenitude of sacred centers in the living of human life, a rhythm of recurring renewal to sustain the community and the individual within the community.

Another major type of ritual celebration is that associated with the vital passages of human life, especially birth, puberty, marriage, and death. These rites of passage are focused on the individual within the context of the community, serving to transform the person into the new stage of life and to integrate her or him into the community at that new spiritual level. Each of these passages of life is liminal—that is, it involves crossing a threshold from one state of existence to another. Each passage is critical to the full human development of the person and to the welfare of the community and, therefore, religious rituals accompany and actualize the passage.

To move from one stage of life to another means, first of all, to put an end to the old stage. Thus, rituals of kenosis, such as separation, distancing, or dying, are most appropriately used as the first movement in the celebration of passage. The end of an infant’s prebirth state may be ritualized by burying the afterbirth or washing the infant for the first time. Children to be initiated into adulthood are typically separated from their homes and parents as the beginning of their initiation. Carrying a bride-to-be away from her home to the marriage hall shows the end of her state of maidenhood. Funeral rituals typically include the removal of the body from the normal life surroundings.

Separated from the old stage, which is now completed and thus done away with, the person enters into a state of liminality, “betwixt and between.” Having moved back to the precreation state, rituals of liminality bring the person into direct contact with sacred power. These include rituals of death and burial, suspension of time and identity, encounter with the ancestors, and so forth. Mother and newborn baby are often confined for a period of time during which various birth ceremonies take place. Children in indigenous societies die symbolic deaths during their initiation rituals, have their sexual organs cut, or engage in battles with mythical monsters. Marriage passage rites often include a period of betrothal during which the man and woman are neither single nor yet joined as one. In funeral rituals, the newly dead person is often felt to be in an in-between state, and the family and community observe a “wake” or sometimes a lengthy mourning period before the dead one is fully incorporated as an ancestor.

Finally, rituals of plerosis, such as rebirth, empowering, and reincorporation into the community, complete the passage. The person has left the previous state, passed over the threshold, and now is recognized and welcomed at the new level of life. The infant is named and, thus, incorporated into the community. The young people now speak a new language and take their places as adults. The marriage is consummated and rituals of establishing a new home take place. The dead one is welcomed back as an ancestor and is enshrined on the family altar.

Other rituals of passage have to do with spiritual rebirth; they follow the pattern of rites of passage but are not necessarily connected with the physical development of human life. Christian baptism, for example, is not simply a birth ritual but also a ritualization of the death of the “old one” and the resurrection of the new spiritual being in whom Christ lives; thus, people of all ages receive baptism as the ritual of entry into the Christian community. In some traditions, initiation into secret religious societies
follows the pattern of the rites of passage. Religious specialists such as shamans, yogins, priests, monks, and nuns enter into their new spiritual level of existence through passage rituals of ordination or consecration, with all of the symbolism of death and rebirth.

Healing Rituals and Practices for Wholesome Life  For traditional peoples, physical health has always been connected with spiritual resources. Today, of course, modern Western scientific medicine, with its power to combat sickness and disease of every kind, has become essential among all peoples of the world. But in many societies, traditional practices of healing and medicine also continue to play an important part in the health and well-being of the people. Although Western medicine developed scientifically without obvious connections to religion, traditional healing rituals are interconnected with the views and practices of the respective religious traditions.

Virtually all religious traditions have spiritual practices intended to help bring healing and wholeness to those who are sick. Although there is great diversity in these practices, corresponding to the worldview of each religion, basic dimensions of religion are involved. Prayer on behalf of the sick is widespread in most religious traditions. The sick one is not left to pray alone, but the community engages in prayer—family, friends, pastor, shaman or shamaness, congregation. Sacred time is created, and the sick one is connected to the sacred by telling the sacred story and performing rituals to reactualize the creative, healing power. Sacred space has an important role in healing. In most traditional societies, the home is the place most conducive to healing, or a shrine, church, or other sacred place to which a healing pilgrimage may be made. A modern hospital can be experienced as an alien environment. So the family and the community attempt to create sacred space, through visits to the hospital room, use of the chapel, congregational prayers to connect the person to the church or temple, and the like. These healing activities create an overall framework in which the illness as well as the healing can be understood, both by the individual and by the community of which he or she is part.

Healing practices in each religious tradition grow out of their worldview, their sense of how sacred power operates. Whatever cause lies behind sickness (unhappy spirits, imbalance of powers, or even medical disease in the scientific sense), religious people believe that their traditional healing rituals can contribute to healing. Navajo people, for example, chant Blessingway and perform sandpainting rituals to connect the sick one with the Holy People of the beginning and their healing powers. Hindu healing specialists perform the intricate Ayurvedic system of traditional medicine, balancing the three doshas (humours) that, according to their sacred texts, make up all life. Chinese medicine relies on the ancient Chinese worldview, with its elaborate techniques (such as acupuncture) of balancing the yin and yang forces and the five agents that operate in the body, to bring healing and wholeness. Traditional African Christian groups such as the Zionists practice prayer and laying on of hands to expel disease-causing spirits and fill the sick person with the power of the Holy Spirit.

In recent years, in all the major religious traditions there has been much renewal of interest in holistic, faith-based healing rituals and practices. And so Jews, Muslims, Anglicans, Catholics, Baha’is, Buddhists, and all the rest turn to meditation, prayer groups, healers, healing pilgrimages, sacramental blessing, and much more. These spiritual resources are seen as complementary to modern medical treatment, providing real healing that supplements and goes beyond the curing offered by modern medicine.

Artistic Expression and the Sacred  In our discussion of sacred time and ritual practices, we need to include some consideration of the arts. In the broad sense, we can consider the arts as all human activities and creations that express the aesthetic sense of beauty and meaning, especially the visual, literary, and performing arts. Art is closely tied to celebration and ritual. Religious experience is expressed largely through aesthetic media, for our contact with the sacred must be grounded in our perception (aesthesis) of reality. People of the different religious traditions have always known that the sacred is experienced through the things of the world and of human existence. Although interior, direct contact with the sacred is also known, the outer forms through which the sacred is experienced have been lovingly cultivated into artistic forms.

As used in religious practice, art forms symbolize the sacred. That is, they point beyond themselves to some dimension of the sacred or of human relationship with the sacred. They are not mere signs or pointers, however. To symbolize the sacred means to share somehow in the sacred reality, to convey the power and the presence of the
sacred. A statue of the Buddha on the altar is not itself, wood or stone, that to which Buddhists direct worship. But it conveys the presence of the Buddha to the worshipers and, thus, participates in the reality to which it points.

Some art is designed mainly to represent the sacred; other art intends actually to “present” the sacred. Art that represents the sacred may be instructional, providing guidance and bringing the sacred to the minds and hearts of the people. A drama acting out the sacred story might have the goal of instructing the people. Images and statues on Hindu temples and Christian cathedrals function as a kind of visual narrative of the story of the religion.

Other art more directly presents the sacred for a worshipful, transformative religious experience. Use of the arts in worship and ritual is often of this more presentational type, evoking and creating the experience of the sacred. In Hindu puja (worship), the god is invoked into the image and worshiped. The artful ritual actions, objects, and chanting of the Shinto priest in a shrine festival present the blessing and power of the kami directly to the worshipers. Of course, art can combine both types. The dramatic Jewish Passover meal (seder), for example, educates by narrating the story, but it also creates the religious experience of being present at the great deliverance of the exodus from Egypt.

From the religious point of view, all aspects of human existence have the possibility of being open to the sacred. Therefore, the religious impulse is to involve all possible human arts, especially in worship and ritual. Since the arts are highly expressive, they can evoke experiences of the sacred at deeper levels than the rational and logical. For example, all the various literary arts make use of the rational structure of language. But there is a difference between a precise philosophical proposition of faith that attempts to define (and, thus, limit) the sacred, and a liturgical poetic expression that makes the sacred powerfully present. The great power that people find in the scriptures of their religion is related to the artistic quality of the sacred literature. The aesthetic sound of mantras (sacred formulas) in Hinduism and Buddhism conveys power even if the literal meaning of the words is not understood.

Visual presentations of the sacred and of the sacred story are used in many religious practices, although there is also reluctance in some religious traditions to portray divine realities in representational visual form. Iconography (pictorial imagery) presents important aspects of the sacred, but it also imbues the sacred with sensuous form—and, thus, limitations. Painting, sculptures, small figurines, and symbolic abstract designs all serve to evoke a sense of the sacred full of aesthetic power and beauty with form, color, and texture.

The art of music has been found to be a powerful presenter of the sacred in almost all religions. The beautiful sounds of music—gripping rhythm, haunting melody, special qualities of different instruments—reach to deep levels of aesthetic sensibility and express many different aspects of the experience of the sacred. It is particularly powerful when words are wedded to music in sacred chants, mantras, hymns, and the like. The art of music, whether a solitary flute or the ringing Hallelujah Chorus of Handel’s Messiah, gathers and directs spiritual emotions and evokes the sacred presence as no other art form does.
Another art form widely cultivated in religious practice is dance, the aesthetic and spiritual expression of body movements. Closely associated with dance would be drama and liturgical rituals. The ritual actions of a Daoist priest very much involve arts of movement and drama, as do the Shinto kagura dances, the Muslim art of ritual prayer, and the Hindu dance-drama festivals.

The sense of sacred place is artistically expressed in different religious traditions by distinctive forms of architecture. Temples and shrines symbolize the *axis mundi*, the center of the world, providing a center of orientation for all the rest of space. The sacred building is often thought of as a microcosm of the cosmic world. The aesthetic quality of architectural forms expresses essential dimensions of the vision of the particular religious tradition. Soaring Gothic cathedrals reaching toward heaven, Muslim mosques filled with openness and light, Hindu temples with their dark and mysterious inner room, simple wooden Shinto shrines in Japan—all give expression to particular spatial-local qualities of the experience of the sacred.

Since artistic forms can evoke deep feelings with powerful presentations of the sacred, occasionally they can be experienced as destructive or demonic. People can look to the art form itself as ultimate, a situation called idolatry (“worship of an idol”) in some of the religious traditions. People in all religions know, however, that the art forms, no matter how beautiful or powerful, are symbols of the sacred. They point beyond themselves to the sacred; they convey and present the sacred; but they are not themselves the ultimate sacred. Still, many art forms have been resisted or banned in the history of the different religions. Poetry has been considered the work of demons. Music of certain types raises dangerous emotions. Dance can become too sensuous and ecstatic. Iconography—imaging the sacred in visual form—has been a controversial art in some religions, because people fear it leads to idolatry or to seeking to gain control over the sacred.

People of each religious tradition choose special aesthetic forms as the most appropriate, sometimes resisting others as useless, misleading, or even dangerous. We might say that each religion or culture has its own distinctive aesthetic sense, closely related to the deep insights of that spiritual vision. To really understand a culture, we must look at its literature, poetry, dance, visual portrayals, architecture, music, and the rest. For example, the Hindu experience of countless gods within an ultimate unity opens the way for the cultivation of all the arts. And the Muslim reluctance to link God together with likenesses of any kind has led to a restriction on representational visual arts and a flowering of decorative and verbal arts. Some religious arts are more conducive to meditation, others to celebration and ecstasy.

In broad terms, the religious traditions of South and East Asia have stressed intuitive, meditative aesthetic experiences, whereas the traditions of the West have often emphasized an aesthetic sense connected with the word, intelligence, and logic. But these differences can easily be overstressed, for the shape of the aesthetic vision is often a matter of emphasis. Even within one religious tradition, significant differences can be found.

Sacred Life: Social Structure and the Good Life  Where do we belong? How should we live in wholeness? What is our responsibility to human society? Religious experience carries with it an imperative to live in a way that conforms to one’s religious identity. A person is always a part of a group, a community, and the good life is structured in that community context. Acting according to one’s religious identity involves, in many religions, a sense of responsibility and mission to others in the world.

As we saw earlier, each religious tradition has a master story that gives identity and purpose to the religious community and sets the model for the right kind of life. The story tells about the original people, special and sacred. These people are set apart for special identity, for special life, and for a special role in the world. The Japanese Shinto myths, for example, tell how the Japanese islands and the Japanese people descended from the kami (the divine beings). The emperor descended from the highest kami, the sun kami Amaterasu. This mythology has supported a sense of the Japanese people as a sacred community and the emperor as the divine head of the nation. Buddhist stories tell how the Buddha, after his enlightenment, gathered a band of disciples into a monastic community of monks and nuns, the sangha. The lay people participate in this religious community by supporting and honoring the sangha. In traditional China, ancient teachings support the strong notion that the clan or extended family is the center of meaning for each individual, and beyond that there are the hierarchically organized village and state within which the individual finds religious identity.
The organization and structures of the religious community are grounded in the sacred history and traditions of the religion. Of course, these structures reflect the configuration of power and authority in the community, and so they may change over time. Provision is made for some kind of religious leadership. Sometimes the religious leaders function by virtue of the power of their office, like kings and priests. In other cases, religious leaders are recognized by virtue of their personal charisma and power, as in the case of sages, prophets, shamans, healers, and diviners. The community also has social structures involving clan relationships, congregations, lay groups, secret societies, masters and disciples, apprentices, and the like.

**Gender Issues in Religious Leadership** Every society has its traditional roles defined for women and men. Since almost all societies have been structured patriarchy, women have everywhere been subordinated to men and have had limited access to leadership roles. Yet we know that women have always been deeply involved in religious activities and experiences in all the traditions. Unfortunately, their intimate, private religious participation has generally been neglected or glossed over by the male-dominated official stories and sacred writings. This makes it all the more important for us to search out material on women’s lives in the different religions and to take note of their important roles.

Looking at the religious traditions from the point of view of women’s experiences leads to new understandings. The significance of women’s perspectives relates to all aspects of religious tradition—how the sacred history is told, the concept of the sacred, ethical precepts, and all else. For example, taking sensitive notice of women in the ancient Israelite tradition—seeing not just Abraham in the stories but also Sarah and Hagar—provides new questions for the sacred story. Where was Sarah during the sacrifice of Isaac? What was Hagar’s understanding of God’s plan when her husband Abraham abandoned her and his son Ishmael in the desert? Sensitivity to women’s perspectives in interpreting the Bible elicits new maternal images for understanding God’s presence, new relational perspectives for interpreting the covenant relationship, and so forth. To realize that one strong and long-ruling Chinese emperor was a woman (Empress Wu), also a powerful Buddhist leader, forces us to rethink our usual images of the subordination and powerlessness of women in the Chinese religious traditions.

Furthermore, we need to see the increasingly active leadership roles of modern women in all these societies, as they find religious resources for breaking out of traditional limitations, helping to renew and transform their societies in the process. In traditional societies as widely different as Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist societies, women have emerged as strong leaders, even heads of state. Women scholars, theologians, masters, and gurus are revitalizing their traditions, creating new models and possibilities for the future, not only for women but also for men at the same time.

**Sacred Space, Sacred Land** The ideal of authentic, wholesome life for the people is often tied together with stories about a sacred land or territory: the sacred islands for the Japanese, the tribal land and burial grounds for the African tribes, Jerusalem for Jews, the pilgrimage sites and sacred rivers in India, and the like. Sacred space is established by the presence of the sacred and, therefore, it is experienced as the center of the world (axis mundi), as Mircea Eliade has elucidated. This center may function, for example, as the connecting point between the human realm and the divine realm. Once the center is established, it provides orientation and a sense of being at home in the world. Sacred space can be a whole land, or it may be a village, mountain, shrine, temple, altar, or even a home. This is the strong space that provides meaning and identity. It gives a feeling of rootedness; cut off from it we feel lost in the chaos of foreign, meaningless space. And so religious communities have always cultivated their bonds with their traditional sacred spaces and have created new sacred spaces as new circumstances arise.

Of course, as religious communities grow and spread, the sense of sacred space is also transformed. Over history, some of the world’s religions (such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) have spread throughout the world, creating new sacred spaces and sacred lands in the process. Obviously, in modern times there have been drastic changes that have seriously eroded the sense of sacred land for many people. Around the globe indigenous peoples have been uprooted from their ancestral lands, wars and famines have caused many refugees and displaced persons, and widespread migrations have created diaspora communities that live as religious minorities in new lands. It is important to see how these peoples have continued to
struggle with the need to create a sense of rootedness even away from their traditional sacred lands.

The Moral Pattern for Authentic Life  The moral pattern for the good life is usually presented in the sacred history, for there we learn what the gods did in the mythological age, or the rules laid down by the ancestors, or the examples provided by the founders.

It is the conviction of people of each religious tradition that this pattern for life is “natural” in a deep sense. It is the way of life that most fits our original nature, as we were intended to be before we turned away or forgot that pattern. Whereas rewards may be promised for living the moral life and punishments threatened for neglecting it, the fundamental motivation for following the ethical guidance of the religion is deeper. This is the model for authentic human life, that which harmonizes with the greater spiritual forces and patterns of the cosmos. To many indigenous peoples, real human life is to do what the gods did in the Time of the Beginning. According to Hindus, living according to the Code of Manu corresponds to the eternal Dharma (cosmic order), and that is right and brings happiness. The Five Classics, according to Confucianists, express the sacred pattern of life according to the will of Heaven, as exemplified by the ancient sages, and, thus, studying and following these Classics will bring peace and harmony. The Shari’ah law code, in Islamic thought, follows perfectly the universal pattern of God’s creation and, thus, it brings peace and harmony.

The ethical life has something to do with how we should be and, therefore, it is based in the religious vision of creation and human nature. The law of morality is often thought to be an authority outside oneself, usually recorded in scripture and tradition, to which one submits. But the religious teachers also talk about how that law becomes internalized, transformed into the inner motivation for right living, so that one naturally does what is right—thus, there occurs a sanctification of life.

It takes practice to live as one ought. Confucius taught that to transform ourselves into people of humanity (ren), it is most helpful to take up the discipline and practice of the principles of propriety (li). Hindus believe that following the Path of Action, doing one’s duty according to one’s place in life without desire for reward, is a way of reaching higher spiritual perfection and better rebirths. The thing that makes Jews distinctive from others is their willingness to take up the discipline of the commandments (mitzvot)—not for the reward that this will bring but because the very doing of the mitzvot is itself the good life. Even Christians and Pure Land Buddhists, with their basic mistrust of the idea of merit coming from good works, know of the sanctification of life, of the careful cultivation of the good tree that bears good fruit.

The religious tradition provides guidance in all areas of life. In personal behavior, often the stress falls on self-control and moderation. One should not be controlled by the passions and desires, but rather these passions and desires should be controlled and redirected toward transformation of self. The religious tradition also spells out the relation of the individual to others and indicates the right and wrong ways of treating others in various situations. The ethical life is lived for the welfare of the community. In following the code of life, strife and competition are avoided and healing and harmony are promoted. The religious traditions usually teach motivations of compassion and sacrifice, giving oneself for the good of the community.

Technically speaking, ethics is the activity of thinking about moral decisions on the basis of the tradition. The religious tradition provides ethical guidance about many or most of the crucial questions in life. But the individual and the community, living in concrete situations with changing circumstances, also continually make ethical decisions about a variety of possible actions. In modern times, the ethical decisions have become increasingly numerous and difficult, involving such questions as abortion, homosexuality, serving in the military, adopting Western customs, and reforming deeply embedded social injustices. Many burning questions today revolve around changing roles for women and men. Thousands of questions like these face people in all the religions today, and as they think about the possible decisions on the basis of the religious tradition, they are engaging in ethical thinking.

Some religions are tribal, which means the people generally have limited opportunity to express solidarity with humans outside the tribe, though they often have codes on how to treat outsiders. People of tribal religious traditions often have a strong sense of relation with the natural world. They promote the welfare and continuation of the whole world that supports human society, made up of vegetation, animals, and the earth itself in a kind of primal ecology, based in a feeling for the sacredness of all life.
Within the world religions there has developed more awareness of the universality of the human race and of the common human welfare in the world. Thus, all the world religious traditions have some vision of the nature and purpose of all humankind and of their own role or mission in the world. In the context of world society, many people of the different religions have developed a sense of responsibility for the good of the larger world, especially in areas such as social justice, education, and relief for the poor and hungry. In recent times, concern for reconciliation and peacemaking has come to the fore in many religions. Today, people in all religious traditions see the need for peace and harmony between different cultures, especially in view of the drastic threat of modern warfare, economic exploitation, ethnic conflict, and all the other ills of the global society.

Inherent in every self-conscious religious tradition is the claim to be the truth, and, thus, the ideal way of life. Whereas tribal peoples generally do not attempt to spread their religious practices beyond the borders of their own tribe, all religions that have a sense of universality also have some feeling of responsibility to share their vision with other peoples of the world. This does not necessarily mean trying to convince others to convert to this religion. This responsibility may simply be having a special role within the world that is of benefit to all, as is expressed in the Jewish idea of a special covenant history within the world. Others, such as Hindus, have a tolerant attitude toward truth embodied at different levels, so they are usually not motivated to promote their religion to other peoples.

The concern that the truth must be shared with all peoples is especially strong in the so-called missionary religions: Christianity, Islam, and to some extent Buddhism, and also some newer branches of the older traditions, such as Baha’i, Nichiren Shoshu, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. People of these religions feel a mission, for example, to Christianize all peoples, Islamicize the world, spread the Dharma, and so forth—for the ultimate welfare of all. For people of these religions, this kind of mission is also an important part of their self-understanding and identity. Apart from Buddhism and some of these new religious movements, the religious traditions of the East generally have not actively tried to convince others to convert to those religions. But as the world shrinks and communication between peoples of the globe increases, Hindus, Sikhs, Daoists, Shintoists, and others increasingly are presenting their visions of truth to be heard and understood by the peoples of the world.

Concern for the welfare of the world, and the realization that people of other religions also have visions for the world and claims to truth, have led to conversation and cooperation among people from different religions. Many people today recognize that religions and ideologies have contributed a great deal to the conflicts in the world. In recent years a new movement of dialogue and cooperation among people from various religions has become a part of the religious happenings of the world. At the very least, there is a widespread sense that peoples of different religious traditions need to work together against the forces of exploitation, violence, and secularization that threaten human society today in an unprecedented way.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Do you think questions such as “Who am I?” and “What is the purpose of life?” are universal human concerns, or are they the product of modern Western thought?

2. What are some aspects of the experience of the sacred that seem to be shared by people of different religious traditions?

3. Give some examples of how symbol systems change over time.

4. What is implied in calling religious practices a “path”?

5. How can a story or myth from ancient times still provide identity for people today? Give some examples.

6. What do cosmogonic stories reveal about the way a particular people look at the world and human existence?

7. What is meant by speaking of “transformation” or “salvation” in the various religious traditions?

8. What is meant by saying that participation in sacred times or festivals brings renewal of human life? What do the ritual phases of kenosis and plerosis mean?

9. What is the difference between art that represents the sacred and art that presents the sacred?

10. Do you think that living the good ethical life is something natural or unnatural?

11. Do you think a sense of universal truth and mission is something essential to a religion?
KEY TERMS: EXPLORING THE SACRED PATHS

aesthetic concerning beauty or artistic perception, important for religious expression

cosmogonic myth sacred story that tells of the creation or founding of the world and of basic human realities

ethics thought and study about moral decisions on the basis of traditions of right and wrong

healing rituals religious rituals devoted to promoting health, often complementary to modern medical practices

kenosis “emptying out”; in ritual, the movement of separation or doing away with the old state; see plerosis

liminal in ritual, the state between separation (kenosis) and restoration (plerosis)

monism view that all reality is one unified divine reality

monotheism belief in one almighty God, separate from the world

myth story about sacred beings in the beginning time, telling how existence came to be as it is and providing the pattern for authentic life

nondualism view that ultimate reality and the phenomenal world are not different

path of transformation practice in a religious tradition that changes one from the wrong or inadequate state to the ideal state

plerosis “filling up”; fulfillment or restoration movement of ritual; see kenosis

polytheism belief that many divine powers share in the world’s operation

religious traditions sacred stories and basic ideas and practices that religious communities “hand over” from generation to generation; that which is handed over (Latin traditio) is thought to maintain a recognizable unity even while changing over time

rites of passage rituals connected with the critical changes or passages in a person’s life, especially birth, puberty, marriage, and death

rituals activities of many kinds that connect people with sacred realities, including prayer, sacrifice, chanting, pilgrimage, festivals, disciplines of meditation, and much more

sacred space space that is made special by connection with the sacred, providing orientation and rootedness for a person

sacred story master story of a religion, providing identity for the adherents; see myth

sacred time special time of ritual and festival, when mythic events are made present once more

sacred, the what is experienced as ultimate reality, the mysterious Other that is the ground of ultimate value and meaning

symbols words, pictures, ideas, rituals, and so on that evoke deep meanings by connecting with sacred reality

transformation the act of reaching the ideal state of wholeness, perfection, or salvation

understanding “standing under” another’s way of thought and life, comprehending it by reference to one’s own experience

worship respectful ritual activity in special times, directed toward sacred beings or realities of ultimate value