

Understanding the World's Religious Heritage

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

- Talk about what you mean by religion, and what a religion includes.
- Discuss religion in terms of the human experience of a split-level universe—as conditioned and unconditioned reality.
- Cite and interpret Joachim Wach's Three Forms of Religious Expression, plus expression in ethics, religious experience, and art.
- Discuss other methods for approaching the study of religion: descriptive, critical, and historical.
- Begin the study of religion, governance, and political life and the role of religion in the lives of women.

A NEW DAY OF RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

The world's many religious pathways are no longer far away.

Think of your friends, neighbors, classmates, or workmates. The chances are many of them are of a different religious background than yourself. Think of the products you buy in today's global economy: electronics from Malaysia, household items from China, chocolate from Africa. The chances are the hands that prepared them for your use belonged to persons of diverse religions, or no religion at all.

The religions of the world—the words themselves may evoke a panorama of colorful images, perhaps drawn from a host of stories, movies, TV documentaries, the Internet, travel, or family background. Incense and temple gongs, yogis in contorted postures, ancient and mysterious chants, joyous shouts of praise, the slowness of ancient rituals—all these and more sweep past our inner eyes and ears. Sometimes, what most fascinates us is that which is far away or long ago. But the study of the religions of the world is no longer a matter of reading about what may seem strange or is faraway. In today's world of **pluralism*** and rapid travel, almost any faith anywhere is a presence and an option throughout the world. The temples of Hindu Americans and the mosques of Muslim Americans embellish larger American cities. American Zen centers, quiet with the great peace of

*Terms in bold throughout this text are defined in the Glossary.

the Buddha, teach Eastern meditation. Christianity and Judaism in all their manifold forms have long existed here side by side, just as Christianity has been carried by American and other missionaries to the homelands of Hinduism and Buddhism.

All of this makes “now” an exciting time to study religion. We who come to the study of religion today bring with us expectations shaped by these times. The presence of many options, and the ferment within most of them, is something we sense inside ourselves as well as in the outside world.

A glance at virtually any morning paper or evening TV news reminds us that now is also an important time to study religion for grimmer reasons. In the post–Cold War world, religion, often linked to passionate nationalism, appears as a major factor in many of the planet's tragic conflicts. Reports from India, the Middle East, the Balkans and, after September 11, 2001, New York and Washington, remind us of this terrible reality over and over. While the religions invoked in these often-bloody disputes cannot usually be solely blamed for them, no full comprehension of the Earth's current crises is possible without an in-depth understanding of the faiths involved. In assessing our own attitudes toward religious belief, we are forced to deal with the fact that religion is not always a good thing by ordinary human values.

Our increasingly global world and economy mean that the adult careers of many American students will bring them in close contact with, perhaps even residence in, societies like those in India, China, Japan, or the Middle East, while many of Americans' counterparts in those countries will come to the United States. Whether one's primary interests are in law, business, diplomacy, or academic study, the greatest success in these endeavors will be achieved by those with a deep understanding of how a society works, including sensitivity to its religious heritage. In this book we will see, for example, how a sense of enduring Confucian values helps one to grasp how both Japanese corporations and the Chinese People's Republic really function.

These examples indicate how complex religion is. It is now time to sort out this complexity by introducing some categories through which religion can be understood. Our task will now be to answer these questions:

- What do we *look for* when we look at the religion of another culture and try to understand what it means in that culture and to the people for whom it is important?
- What are different ways in which religion *expresses* itself? (For example, as beliefs, as ways of worship, as social institutions like churches and temples, through ethical values, in art and literature.)
- What kind of terms do we use when we are just trying to *describe* a religion?
- How do we look at religion *critically*, that is, when it may not be a good thing, in ways that are fair, that try to accept cultures different from our own, yet in ways that are also true to what we consider to be the highest human values?
- What have been the *basic stages* of religious history on planet Earth?
- Can religion be *defined*? or is it always just a fairly elusive word used to cover a variety of things?

VISITING A STRANGE LAND

What is religion, then?

Suppose you are taking a trip to a country whose culture is completely foreign to you, and you want to determine the religion of that culture. Suppose, further, that

because you cannot speak the language of the country well enough to ask anyone about it, you have to look for clues in what you see around you and in what people do. What would you look for?

Most of what you see has obvious explanations—basic human needs for shelter, food, drink, security, and pleasure in this world. Most buildings up and down the streets are houses where people live or shops where craftspeople work or merchants sell goods to meet everyday needs. Most of the people scurrying about are out on business or seeking recreation.

Once in a while, though, you may see something that has no such “ordinary” interpretation. A structure may be neither a home nor a shop, yet it is obviously set apart and perhaps elaborately ornamented. A human activity may be neither work nor play; it may not produce food, exercise the body, or challenge one’s skill in any ordinary way. Yet it is clearly of great importance. It may be marked by a solemn or festive air. Both the building and the activity may be associated with symbols and gestures that make no sense to an outsider; yet they seem to be of deep significance to people.

You suspect these are places and practices connected to the religion of the land. You know you could be wrong. The special building might be a court instead of a temple; the activity, a game or dance instead of a rite. The rites of state and of religion are often intermingled. Often games and dances combine pleasure with celebrating a religious festival or occasion: think Carnival in Rio or Thanksgiving football games in America.

Even ordinary activities like planting or harvest may come with religious “extras” to relate them to the people’s beliefs, like the American harvest-time Thanksgiving festival. These “extras,” like the mysterious buildings and practices, go beyond what it takes to meet everyday needs or ordinary fun and games. They may therefore point to the society’s awareness of more-than-ordinary reality. The rhetoric of preaching and the quiet of meditation, the ornate garb and stylized motions of elaborate ritual, and the gladsome tones of gospel music—all say reality has more to it than the everyday. These “signs” also say that this extraordinary reality, this “something more,” touches human life and can be felt, channeled, and made manifest by special means. Rites and symbols, preaching and meditation, are ways of connecting to that “something more.”

CONDITIONED AND UNCONDITIONED REALITY

What is that “something more”? One thing many religions tell us is that we live in a split-level universe. Or, to use the expression of the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, that reality is “nonhomogeneous.” In homogenized milk, the milk and the cream are thoroughly mixed together. When it is not homogenized, the cream is at the top and the milk at the bottom, making two layers. However, some religions, like Hinduism and many indigenous religions, tell us that reality is actually one homogeneous whole and that we just need to be enlightened to this truth.

Most religious people see two kinds of reality. As we have seen, there is ordinary, everyday reality, and there is also the special reality of the temple, the festival, the “extras” pointing quietly to “something more” mixed in with everyday life. Certain visible places, people, and events are more in touch with that “something more” than others. They are *sacred* places, persons, and activities.

We may think of the layers of this split-level, “nonhomogeneous” universe—the ordinary and the “something more”—as conditioned and unconditioned reality. (These relatively neutral terms are borrowed from Buddhist thought.)

Let's start by talking about **conditioned reality**, because that's what most of us are living in most of the time. To say something is conditioned simply means it is limited or restricted. We are all conditioned in time and space. If we are living in the twenty-first century, we are not also in the ninth century with Charlemagne or in the twenty-third century with *Star Trek*. If we are living in Ohio or Oklahoma, we are not also in Hong Kong or on the planet Neptune.

Furthermore, we are conditioned by the limitations and habits of our minds. We can think about only one thing at a time, and we forget far more than we remember. Even the greatest genius can know only the tiniest fragment of what there is to know or to think more than the minutest fraction of what there is to think. Moreover, we continually put limits around ourselves when we say, "I'm a person who does this but not that," "I believe this but not that," or "I like this but not that."

Consider now what **unconditioned reality**, the opposite of all the above, would be like. It would be equally present to all times and all places. Its knowledge, wisdom, and mental power would be unlimited, and would include all that could possibly be known or thought. If it (or he or she) had preferences as to doing, believing, or liking, they would be based on omniscient (all-knowing) wisdom, not the bundle of ill-informed fears and prejudices by which we too often act—and react.

Unconditioned reality would, in fact, be no different from the Divine, or Ultimate, Reality of religion and philosophy. It goes by different names and has varying degrees of personality, but in most religions, it is believed that some unconditioned pole of reality stands over our very-much-conditioned everyday lives. (Even the legions of secondary entities that inhabit the religious world—the many gods, buddhas, bodhisattvas, angels, spirits—have their significance because of ultimate unconditioned reality. They are in a special relationship to it and send out its light or energy in some special way.)

We can illustrate conditioned and unconditioned reality and its names in various religions like this:

Unconditioned Reality

Brahman (philosophical Hinduism)

Nirvana (Buddhism)

The Dao (Daoism)

Heaven (Confucianism)

God (Judaism, Christianity, Islam [called Allah in Islam])

Awareness of Presence of Spirits (Shamanism)

Conditioned Reality*

Maya (philosophical Hinduism)

Samsara (Buddhism)

Under Heaven (Daoism, Confucianism)

Choice of Death (Judaism)

The "World" (Christianity)

Realm of War (Islam)

Evil Spirits (Shamanism)

*These are only examples of the many terms that are used in different religions. It should be made clear that these "conditioned" categories are not necessarily evil; they are just arenas of ignorance and separateness where evil or sin is possible.

DOORS AND WINDOWS TO THE ULTIMATE

One point remains—a very important one. When religion is seen as split between conditioned and unconditioned reality, the wall between them nevertheless is not hard and solid. It is not as though the two realms are hermetically sealed off from each other. Instead, the main idea behind any religion is that the wall is full of doors and windows.

Gods and people can look through from one side to the other. Revelations, gods, angels, saviors, and spirits can walk through the doors from the other side to visit us; our prayers and good thoughts can go through from this side to the other; and a few favored people—and perhaps the souls of many of us after death—may pass through those doors to join that other level of reality.

This porous borderline, where the action is, is the sphere of religion. All religions believe that certain teachings, practices (such as prayer or meditation, rites, and services), and modes of ethical behavior best express or fit in with the nature of ultimate reality. Those things are therefore like doors and windows. Through prayer, mystical experience, or worship, we can open them and pass through them in spirit. Certain persons or institutions are also in especially close touch with unconditioned reality and are also like those portals. So also are works of religious art, music, and literature. By all these means, religious people may enable themselves to move through the windows or doors.

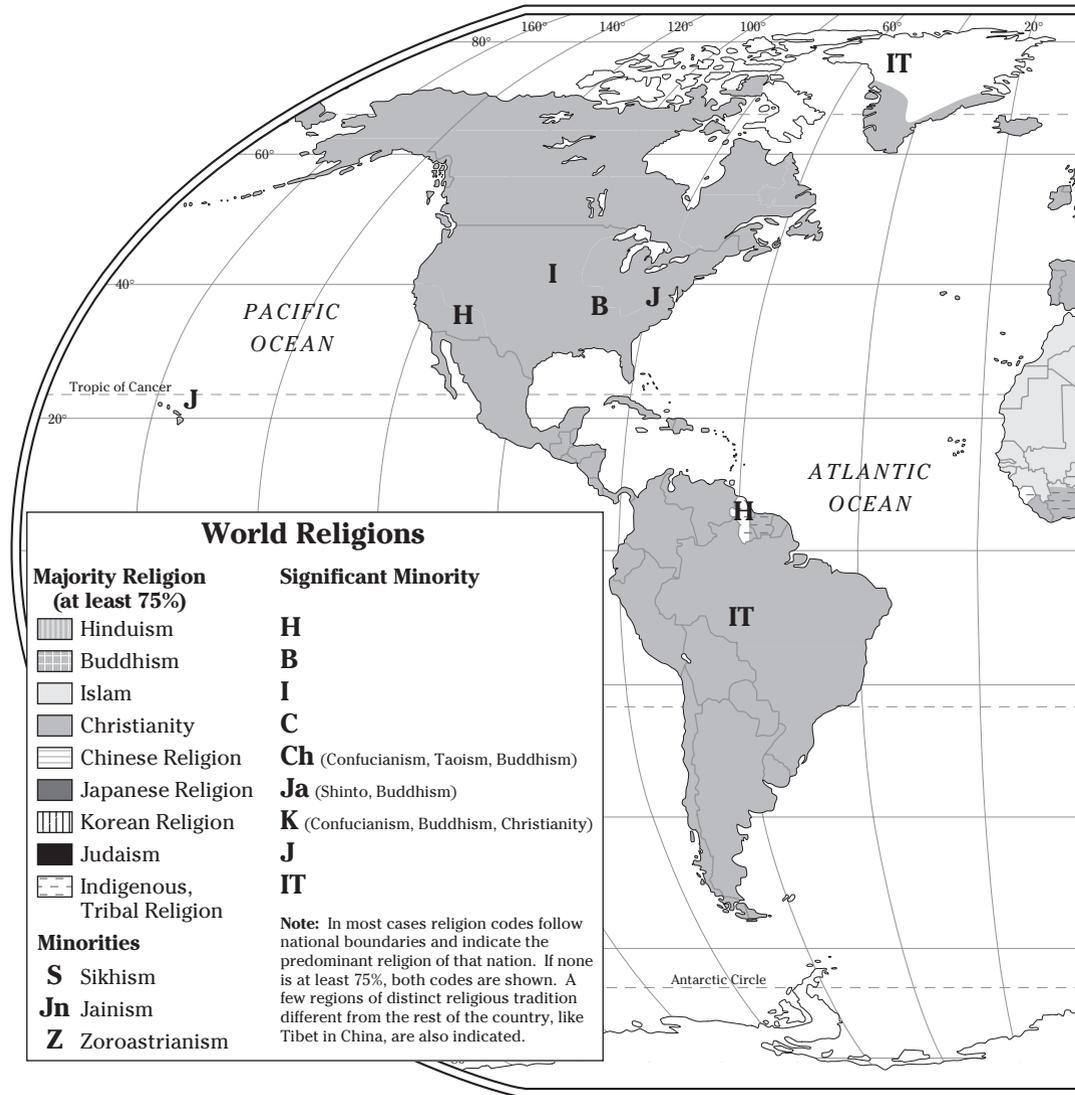
Some will object that not all of what is ordinarily called religious, or that has to do with gods and the like, is really concerned with unconditioned reality. They might point out that people go to church or temple or conduct rituals for social reasons or merely because they like the music. Yet understanding religion should not always be limited by the conscious intention of the religionist, often hard to judge in any event.

Even if a person goes to church only to meet someone, or if a particular hunting chant is a tradition that bonds the tribe, something more is implied. In the church or temple, God will be spoken of and things done that make no sense if there is no God. The hunting chant tells us that there is more to the hunt than just human beings hunting. Both chant and church open up in back, so to speak, to that invisible realm beyond ordinary existence. In the end, they imply doors and windows to ultimate reality.

FORMS OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

What then is this religion with its doors and windows all about? What is it made up of? To start with, it is made up of what people say, do, and form organizations around. The essence of religion may be unconditioned reality, and teaching about that may vary. But the outer forms of these doors and windows have much in common throughout the world. When we look carefully at religion all over the world, we find that certain basic patterns, like old friends, keep reappearing despite all the variety.

The sociologist of religion Joachim Wach (1898–1955) gave us one useful set of pegs for those patterns.¹ While the essence of religion may be beyond words, he tells us, religion expresses itself in human life in three ways. He called these three ways the *theoretical* (meaning what is said: for example, beliefs and stories); the *practical* (meaning what is done: for example, worship, prayer, meditation, pilgrimage); and the *sociological* (meaning the kinds of groups: for example, social institutions and other groups; leadership; and a group's relationship to society). These will be referred to from time to time. Let's now consider more specifically what is meant by each.

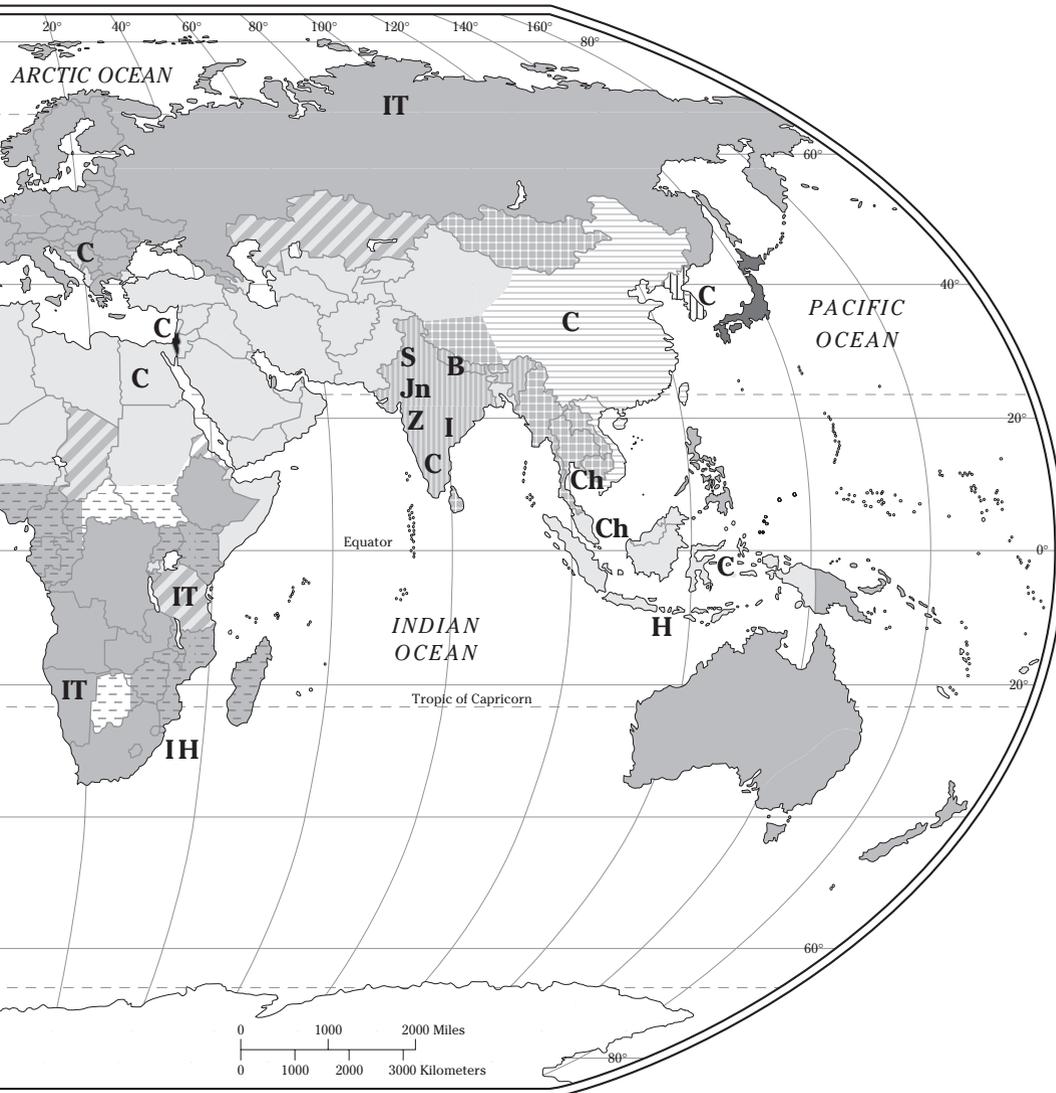


Theoretical Expression: What Is Said in Religion

Here we consider the query, “What do they say?”

People *say* things in religion. They talk about God, angels, salvation, answered prayers, and much more. They tell stories about what God or Gods did in times past and about great religious saints or heroes, and they say what their doctrines or beliefs are. Religions *say* things about certain basic, ultimate issues—how the spiritual universe is set up, what unconditioned reality is, where the world came from and where it is going, and where humans came from and where we are going. Religions talk about how we know ultimate truth and how we are helped to get from here to the ultimate. This is what Joachim Wach refers to as the **theoretical form of religious expression**.

The theoretical is expressed in two fundamental ways: **myth**, or narrative story, and **doctrine**. In the history of religion, the term *myth* is used in a special way to mean stories that express in narrative form the central values of the society and

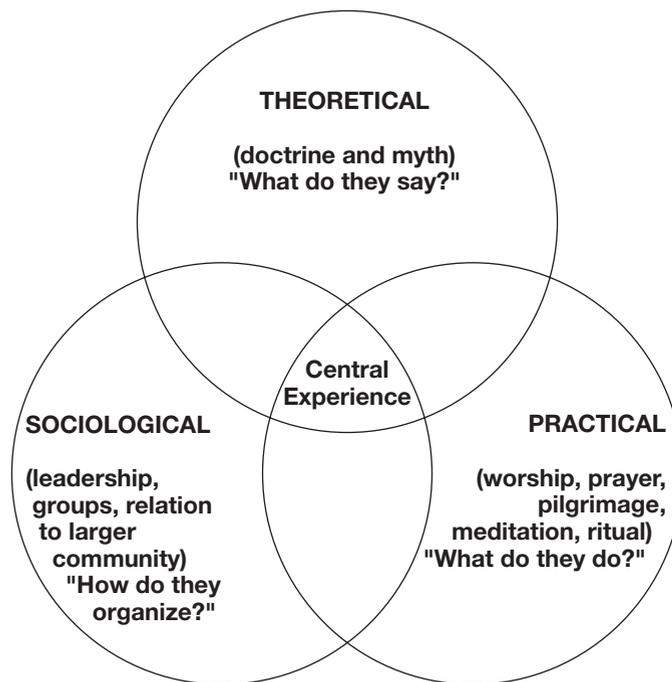


the way it views what the world means. This is different from the popular meaning of the word: a fable or story that is not true, as when we say, “That’s just a myth.” In the history of religion, the use of this word is only a statement of its function, and its use does not imply passing judgment on whether or not the narrative story is true.

What about myth?

A storyteller of the Australian aboriginal Arrernte tribes, an elder man or woman recognized as a lore keeper among these people who for some forty thousand years have inhabited the vast desertlike central areas of the island continent, is speaking to a group of young boys or girls, perhaps preparing them for tribal initiation. He is telling a story of how, according to wisdom now passed on to the latest generation, this immense and seemingly barren world came into being. For those whose lives have been so intimately a part of that rough terrain for so long, the immense emptiness is far from barren; rather, it is full of secrets and hidden wellsprings of life, and the storyteller knows how to crack its code. He recites in a reverent, chanting voice appropriate to ancient mysteries.

The Three Forms of Religious Expression



At first, he tells the young, all was a dark empty plain, containing neither life nor death. Then something stirred beneath the earth, as primal beings sleeping there moved from sleep without dreams to dreaming, then arose into what is called the Dreamtime. In this state they wandered the earth, calling to life plants, animals, and birds; as they wandered and worked, they sang. Their pathways are now called "songlines," and even now, by singing their songs, dwellers on Earth can follow their trails and renew their labors. In time, the Eternal Ones of the Dreamtime found deposits of plant and animal material for the making of human beings, usually near water holes or lakes; these they carved into final form. Labors done, the Eternal Ones then went back to sleep, but they left as marks of their presence sacred rocks and trees, often enhanced by rock paintings to show their presence. Today Arrernte can leave their harsh world to reenter the Dreamtime anew through dance and initiation and by following the songlines.²

Here we see, up close and in action, the theoretical form of religious expression as myth, or narratives that express the fundamental worldview and values of a society. Of these, none is more important than the story of creation, or how our world came into being, for we humans tend to assume that if we know where something came from, we know important things about its meaning and purpose.

What do you think is the basic message about our life as human beings in the Australian myth? Here creation is not an act of divine fiat or sacrifice; rather, it is more like acting out a dream, and the power of those primal times, the Dreamtime, can be accessed through dance and song, and storytelling.

Take another example, the Judeo-Christian creation account. The beginning of the Bible tells us that God created the universe from chaos and that God stood outside it as its maker and master, pronouncing it originally very good. This creation account tells us that God is not to be identified with the creation or with

ourselves but that he is above it as its Lord and is One with whom we can have a deep relationship of faith and love, though not one of absolute identity.

A Hindu myth, in contrast, implies a very different kind of relationship between the Divine and the world. That myth tells us that God made the world out of himself by dividing up his body in a primal sacrifice. Thus, the world is, so to speak, God in disguise; in our innermost nature we are one with that same God.

What about doctrine?

Consider an assembly of bishops, teachers, or leading monks in one of the historical religions, like Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam. They are reflecting on what general statements about religious truth can be deduced from the stories that have long been told about divine beings and their activities. It is as though they are saying, "If the stories tell us that God, or Gods, at different times did this, and this, and this, what can we say about them that is true all the time?"

So they may say that stories and teachings like those of the Bible, the Qur'an, the Hindu Vedas and other sacred texts tell us that God is omnipotent or all-powerful, omniscient or all-knowing, or loving, and that he treasures those who believe and trust in him. They may say that the world was created at one definite point and will end at a later point in time with divine judgment. Or they may say that the universe is cyclical and eternal. Such statements give people something clear and definite to believe in that is relevant to all times and places and to all situations in which they find themselves.

Religions can present still other answers to "What do they say?": sermons, testimonials, lives of saints and heroes, folklore, poetry, novels. The list goes on and on.

Practical Expression: What Is Done in Religion

This form of religious expression answers the question, "What do they do?"

"Practical" here does not mean practical in the sense of something that works; it means "practices," what is *done*. It covers such aspects of religion as worship, rites, ways of prayer and meditation, pilgrimages—everything actually done for the sake of the religion from the most public to the most private. This is what Joachim Wach refers to as the **practical form of religious expression**.

All real religion has some kind of practice. If people were involved only in the realm of theoretical ideas, they would be involved in philosophy and not religion. But religious practices vary immensely, from an ornate ancient ritual to a simple Protestant-type service, from speaking in tongues to Zen meditation, from devotion to Gods in a Hindu temple to prayers in a Muslim mosque without images.

Many years ago, I* had an opportunity to see one of the *noro*, or priestesses, of Okinawa, a now-Japanese island in the Ryukyu chain, south of the main islands. The religion of these islands, though related to the Japanese religion known as Shinto, is often considered the only traditional religion in the world definitely under the full leadership of women, who are its clergy and spokespersons. The woman I saw, pointed out to me as a *noro*, was tall, dressed entirely in long white garments, and impressively dignified.

Four times a year, in one of their many rituals, a small group of *noro* gather at a shrine to the local *kami*, or local god, in the central square of the village. They light incense, pour sake (rice wine) from a cup over three sacred stones; then each takes a sip of the sake as a sort of communion, first offering it toward the altar and praying in a low voice.

*Robert Ellwood

They then proceed to the outer steps of the shrine, where they bedeck themselves in a five-piece white robe and a crown decorated with leaves and straw. This means the women are now, in effect, kami, or local gods, themselves. A male attendant hands each woman a small cup of sake anew; each woman lifts it and prays. The women then join the other villagers by taking assigned seats in the square and receive more offerings, and the occasion gradually becomes one of general festivity.³

Or, by way of contrast, consider the great variety of forms of worship within the Christian tradition. At one pole, there is the traditional Quaker meeting, in which persons sit in rows, or more often today, a circle, waiting in silence for the guidance of the Inner Light. From time to time individuals may feel moved to rise and say a few words or a prayer. At the end of the meeting, usually an hour, everyone stands to shake hands. A traditional Protestant service emphasizes the singing of hymns by the congregation, the reading of scripture, and the offering of prayers by the minister or other leaders, and it centers most of all on the sermon delivered by the minister, giving admonishment, advice, and support to those present who are endeavoring to lead a Christian life in this difficult world.

At another pole, the traditional liturgies of the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches, while different, have in common a feeling of richness and timelessness. There are colorful vestments, offerings of incense, soaring music, and choreographed movements as the priests and others celebrate the offering and distribution of bread and wine by Christ at the Last Supper, now a festive banquet which is the central rite of a large part of Christianity.

What do these and all other “practical” forms of religious expression have in common? First, however different, one knows that these words and actions are “something extra” which cannot be explained solely in terms of ordinary everyday life, but have a special meaning outside it or pointing to something outside it. They construct a special “sacred time” in which, ideally, life is lived on another plane from the ordinary. Very often, this “sacred time” makes the place of worship different, too—a “sacred space”—perhaps a place in which one instinctively acts differently than one does on the street or in the shop. At the same time, worship is supposed to have meaning connected to everyday life, as “doors and windows” transmitting pardon and power for life's living.

The important thing for understanding is to look behind the form of the practice and see what the “message behind the message” is. How do the “doors and windows” of religious practices help people best get in touch with God or unconditioned reality? If it is an ancient rite, then it says we best get in touch with ultimate reality by getting out of the one-dimensionality of the present and entering something that has deep roots in the past, perhaps getting us in touch with family and ethnic heritage. The rite probably has a strong aesthetic component—the sight of gorgeous altars and vestments, the smell of incense, the sound of wonderful music—to make us feel lifted up into another realm. If, on the other hand, the rite is a simple service with emphasis on hearing scripture and sermon, then it says we best get in touch with ultimate reality through hearing and the feelings that hearing truth can evoke. If the rite is inner prayer or meditation, then it says we best get in touch by releasing our inner self, or by letting the Spirit speak freely within us.

Of course, remember that all worship has some kind of set form and in some way comes to us out of the past in a form that is traditional in a particular religion. This aspect of a rite, together with the sacred words used, is what makes it clear it is religious and not just entertainment or a lecture.

Sociological Expression: Groups and Leadership in Religion

This form of religious expression, dealing with the social organization of the religion, must encompass three questions instead of just one like the other two forms: What kind of groups do they form? What kind of leadership does the religion have? What is the religion's relation to the rest of society?

The main idea is that religion, as it appears in actual history and society, is generally social: followed by families, communities, and voluntary groups together. This means that, like any society, it has structure, that is, ways in which decisions are made and tasks assigned, as well as leadership and ways the group defines the boundaries between it and the outside.

From here on one finds countless variations. A moment's reflection should remind one of religious groups that are very democratic and of others that are very authoritarian in structure. Leaders may find their place in "institutional" ways, going through the established schools and ordination procedures of their group or denomination, or a religious group may be "charismatic," claiming a special inward call that manifests itself through the particular power of their preaching and perhaps miracles. Or a religious group may be a combination of each. So also there is considerable variation in the relation of religion to the outside. All of this is what Joachim Wach refers to as the **sociological form of religious expression**.

Religious groups are of many different kinds. Some religions are so dominant in a particular society as to be almost identified with it, as is, at least nominally, Roman Catholicism in Spain or **Lutheranism** in Sweden or Hinduism in much of India. Sometimes the predominant religion is divided into different, often competing groups or **denominations** with their own subsets of beliefs and practices, like Christianity in the United States or Buddhism in Japan. Some religious groups may be small and at odds with the larger society; these may be called **sects** or **cults**, though those words should be used with caution since they have become pejorative and stereotyping.

Like the practical expression, each kind of religious group has its own "message behind the message" about the "doors and windows" that help people to get in touch with ultimate reality. If it is a broad-based religion, having national churches or larger denominations, it will have an important role in that country's history and heritage; its leaders will be recognized as major spiritual figures, and it will doubtless have imposing churches or temples. At the same time, whatever its theoretical stance, because it includes so many people at all levels of spiritual development, in practice it will have to be fairly accommodating and tolerant. For those who sincerely adhere to this kind of religion, the message behind the message is, "It is better to go with a large religious group, even if there are imperfect people in it, than to set oneself apart; one can find everything one needs in that religion and help others in it, and in so doing one is identifying with a rich heritage."

On the other hand, those who join a small, probably more devoted, group are saying, "Large religions are inevitably corrupt and lukewarm; I have to be with a close-knit, intense group of people who are as serious as I am, who practice without compromise and who will give me the kind of support I need in my faith." Or those who join a small group may be saying, "I listen to a different drummer; what resonates with me seems to be a religion of a different kind from that of the majority; I have to seek it out and follow it whether it's popular or not." Without denying the validity of anyone's religious experience, one can probably imagine the kind of childhood and personality type that might go with each of the responses.

Take as an example the Prophet Muhammad and the beginnings of Islam with one man. It became the religion of a whole region, and eventually a major world religion.

As we will see in more detail later on, Muhammad started as a purely charismatic leader, first receiving the revelations that became the Qur'an, the sacred book of Islam, from an archangel while alone in a mountain cave. Soon enough, though, his religion was not purely private. The first convert was his wife Khadijah, who believed in his message. Today Islam is the second largest religion in the world with many sects, each with their own particular theoretical, practical, and sociological expressions of the revelation originally received by Muhammad.

Ethics, Religious Experience, and Art

Three more forms of religious expression, not mentioned by Joachim Wach as separate, ought to be cited: *ethics*, *religious experience*, and *art*. Although these forms could be included in either the theoretical or practical forms of religious expression—or both—each is so important that it ought to be discussed separately. We will look at ethics first.

ETHICS One has to deal with ethical issues all the time. Suppose someone shows you a way—or you figure out a way yourself—that you could cheat on an exam or plagiarize a paper in school, with very low risk of getting caught. How do you respond?

Or when you get home or get together with friends, you get into a hot and heavy argument about sexual morality. Is abortion ever justified? Is sex before—or outside of—marriage ever right? What about homosexuality?

Suppose a homeless person approaches you on the street wanting money. Should you give it to him or her or try to help in some other way, or should you say that just giving money doesn't really help?

Questions like these confront us almost every day. They are closely related to religion, because many people say that their religious teachings, or values, help them decide or actually provide the answers.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE Another important vehicle is religious experience, sometimes called mystical experience. (Some authorities would define mystical experience as a sense of *oneness* with God or infinite reality, while saying a nonmystical religious experience simply offers a sense of divine presence, of deep prayer, or of being profoundly moved by a religious service or music.)⁴

For many people, the most important thing about religion is the experiences it provides: of closeness to or oneness with God, of conversion and inner purification, of prayers answered, of love for all beings. These feelings may be imaged and described in the language of various religions. But they are found in nearly all faiths, and appear to have some points in common everywhere. The recipient reports being inwardly moved, perhaps to sense a new start in life, and to know spiritual truth directly.

At the same time, characteristics of religious experience can vary, too. Shamans and others feel contact with, or possession by, individual deities rather than universal oneness, though these can be very powerful experiences. Sometimes the experience may be of what Rudolf Otto called the *numinous*—the sacred as fearsome as well as compelling.⁵ More common today, though, are religious experiences described as warm and joyous.

Religious experience is not always intensely related to a particular religion. Roger Bannister, the first man to run the four-minute mile, tells of his first experiences running on the beach. After taking in the wonder of the nature all around him (though he says that he “could not absorb so much beauty”), he then started running virtually out of sheer joy: “No longer conscious of my movement I discovered

a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamt existed.” Bannister added that it was from moments like this that his love of running grew.⁶ Bannister’s experience is what others might have termed a union with God.

ART Let us use the term “art” broadly to include painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and literature—anything made by human craftsmanship for the sake of its beauty or truth-bearing capacity. Clearly, all these can serve as “doors and windows” to the Divine. The best analogy is a stained glass window in which the white light of the sun is colored and shaped to take on the form of haloed saints and conventional symbols of faith.

Art has always been important to religion. Indeed, it may well be that the earliest known art, the Paleolithic cave paintings, had religious meaning. The art of the earliest civilizations, in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient India, was heavily religious—obviously because religion deals in beings that are ordinarily invisible—Gods, angels—or in beings from out of the past—saviors, saints, buddhas, prophets, sages. They must be portrayed to make them real. So also must basic religious symbols, or foci for meditation like the mandalas of the East, be made real.

Art can also tell us quite a bit about a religion’s view of human nature and human society in the way it represents persons through art in all sorts of ways: as devout, as sinners, as wise and foolish, as turning to God or showing the nature of a life without religion. This last is especially the province of great novelists who have dealt with religious themes, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky or Graham Greene.

The Interrelationship of the Forms of Expression

In any religion, the forms of expression—three or six—work together to form a unified experience. It is usually a mistake to think that one comes first and the others follow after. Children learn about religion more or less through all forms of expression at once: they hear the stories and feel the special atmosphere of a church, a temple, or a religious rite when they are taken there by their parents, and they pick up the tone of its social life as they play with friends and relatives who share the same faith.

Even an adult convert will probably be drawn by all forms and will participate in all simultaneously. So the forms of religious expression unite to become a single unified experience, which points to the ultimate nature of the sacred and becomes a part of the inner life of each person touched by it.

DESCRIPTIVE AND CRITICAL APPROACHES

You may ask, is it enough just to talk, in a neutral way, about the shape of a religion’s “doors and windows” as they open toward unconditioned reality?

It is not the purpose of a study such as this to decide about the truth or falsity of any religion. We are simply trying to know and understand religion better, using a descriptive and empathic approach—attempting to see each religion, in a sense, from the inside out. Even so, does one look on everything in the religious world—from human sacrifice to the healing work of a Mother Teresa—with exactly the same understanding gaze? Is there no place for a critical look that says one kind of religious practice is simply better than another?

In the twenty-first century, religion seems to have a newly important role in world affairs. The clash of religious beliefs and the cultures they foster have been painfully brought to the fore, making it all too clear that religion can have a dark side. In this environment, too much empathy certainly can get in the way of even seeing where the

problems are, and world religion scholars realize that they need to be a part of the discussion about such matters.

Important questions have been raised around the world about religion and the oppression of women, about religion's role in maintaining exploitative economic systems, about ways in which religion can hinder (through allegedly outmoded religious beliefs) solutions to current problems, like overpopulation—solutions that are deemed more reasonable by those who propose them. The religious rhetoric and energies behind international conflict and terrorism, as well as scandals in major religious institutions, have alienated some people from religion, or at least some forms of it. On the other hand, some of those involved in such conflicts are moved to embrace a more profound commitment to their faith. And in the United States, divisive issues such as the conflict over the appropriate role of religion in politics and the conflict between science and religion (as in battles over teaching evolution or medical research using human stem cells) abound. Such issues have found some religious people on one side and some on the other. In any case, the power of religion to divide as well as to unite, to oppress as well as to uplift, and to seem dark as well as to enlighten is apparent. Yet in the thick of these conflicts, one thing is clear: beneficial change will not occur unless questions are asked and criticisms made.

Nevertheless, faith and effective change require the most accurate information and authentic insight possible. For this reason, there remains a vital place for religious studies that just attempts to present a clear and unvarnished account of the way things are. And that is why it is especially important to maintain an empathetic perspective when studying or observing a religion that is from a cultural context quite different from the one of the student or the observer.

If an attack is made, for example, on a certain religion's endorsement of war, one needs to be sure that one understands how this matter is understood *by believers*, not just how it looks from the outside. One also needs to know exactly who endorses the policy on behalf of the religion: the great majority of members, authoritative leadership, or only certain extremists that take it on themselves to interpret the religion's teaching. It is also important to analyze to what extent this policy differs from the teaching and practice (not always the same thing!) of one's own and other religions. One would also need to be clear about the values to which one is appealing in advancing the criticism and why she or he believes those values should be considered superior to those of the religion itself. Only then would one properly be able to make a critical yet responsible statement challenging the religion to reassess its position on war.

Our main goal in this book is to be descriptive. This is primarily a work that provides information and attempts empathetic insight. But it does not preclude criticism, and the authors hope that what is presented here will help readers to view religion both empathetically and critically.⁷ Criticism made honestly on the basis of knowledge and insight is ultimately necessary if we are to come to our own conclusions about the validity or rightness of a religious expression that is foreign to us in our own cultural context. Criticism is essential in any open and honest inter religious discourse; we must be prepared to deal not only with our criticism of the religions of others, but also with their criticism of ours.

RELIGION THROUGH TIME

Think of pictures you may have seen of paintings on the walls of caves by our early ancestors, some going back as far as 35,000 years or more. They suggest that “something more” was added by human hand, mind, and spirit to nature. We do

not know exactly why the lavish cave paintings were made. In part, they may have been a kind of magic to enhance the availability of animals the people hunted. The depth of the cave may have been considered an otherworldly kind of place, where access to a realm of divine beings or departed spirits was possible and through which animal and even human life entered our realm. There is evidence that the caves were not only art galleries but places of religious rite or initiation. In one cave recently studied, the archeologists found that the sandy floor was trampled by many tiny human feet some thirty millennia ago: children dancing in some ritual, perhaps their initiation?

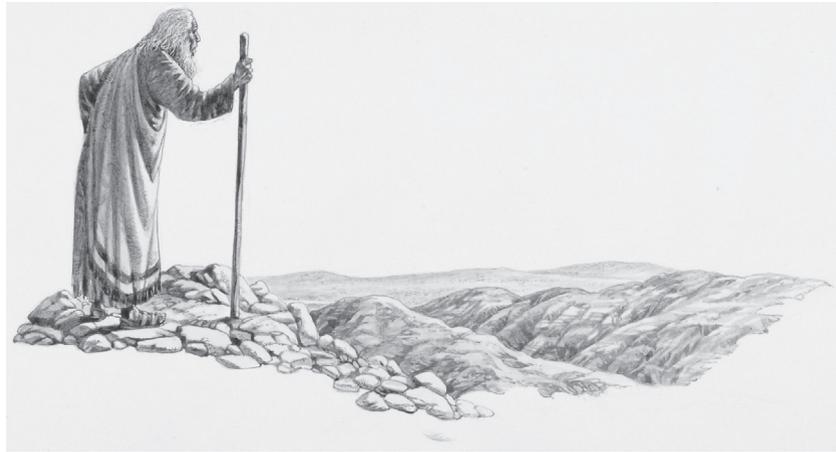
These remains are from the Paleolithic era, or Old Stone Age: the time when hunters and gatherers predominated, before the discovery of agriculture. Religion is oriented, in part, toward what is perceived to be the source of our life, in this case the animal, and also what is perceived to be that other world that is the source of dreams, of the visions of shamans, of life itself and its invisible powers. The cave religion of Paleolithic peoples may be perpetuated in the barrows or underground artificial burial caves or tunnels of ancient Ireland and Britain, or even the pyramids of Egypt, which are like artificial mountains with their internal caves for burial and access to the world of the dead and the Gods.⁸

With the discovery of agriculture, the plant and its cycle of seedtime and harvest, of “death” and then “rebirth” were sacralized. Sometimes this mystery was viewed as a model of human life, and even of the life of the Gods, as well. In ancient Babylonian religion, Ishtar was the most loved and worshiped of all the Goddesses. Her brother and spouse was Tammuz, a vegetation God, and a dying-rising deity. Tammuz was said to die and go to the underworld in the fall. Ishtar then wept for him, descended into the realm of shades, and triumphantly brought him back in the spring with vibrant rejoicing. This myth had great worship expression among the common people. Women wailed with Ishtar for her charming yet dying child, and farmers danced when his return meant the return of fertility and new crops in a new year. This pattern was commemorated by the great temples of Babylon and by Babylon's kings as well.

That worship hints at something else too: agriculture meant people stayed in the same place, meaning villages, then towns, then great cities and empires like those of Egypt or Babylon or China. Such great civilizations meant bountiful trade, together with surplus wealth that could support priests and philosophers. That brought a momentous development, one even more important than cities, empires, trade, and priests, though it was related to them: the invention of writing. Writing first originated perhaps in the records kept by men of commerce. But soon it meant chronicles of kings and the sacred books of the priests. Oral traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation took on new significance as they were reified in the written word.

A quick glance at chronicles going back over years and centuries told readers that things change and do not change back. Empires rise and fall, peoples move about, plagues come and go. Take the Chronicles of the Hebrew Scriptures. They told ancient readers, as they tell us, that the people of Israel went through many vicissitudes: slavery in Egypt, entry under Moses into the Promised Land, innumerable wars, and exile. Each age brought new challenges, and none were quite the same as those of yesteryear.

This discovery of a sense of history called for a larger religious perspective than that of cave or tribe. In the new civilizations, lives were more specialized and individual than in the old tribes. In religion, too, there was more emphasis on individual responsibility, on one's own sin and guilt, on one's merit and salvation, and on how one's own life fit in the larger society.



Moses standing on the top of Mount Nebo.

All this was reflected in new religious visions, which were provided by a just a handful of persons—Moses, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, Jesus, Muhammad—who were the founders of major religions, several of which came to dominate the spiritual landscape of vast expanses of the globe. Although their traditional lives have no doubt been mythologized, it is significant that the founders were, or were taken to be, historical personages who lived at a definite time in human history, not mythological beings. For the most part these founders lived over a relatively brief period within the whole scope of human history, from about 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. This period, or its first century, has sometimes been called the Axial Age, because on it so much turned.⁹ Not least of this was the use and institution of sophisticated writing, which enhanced the awareness of historical time (mentioned above) and centered religion on set texts rather than oral tradition, which could evolve in its telling over time.

Although the major religions to come out of this period carried over much from before, cumulatively they marked a tremendously important new start in Earth's spiritual history. Believing that a definite word was delivered by a divine voice within the midst of human history, which was memorialized in sacred texts, like the Bible, the Sutras, or the Qur'an, they could sometimes be stricter and more intolerant than what went before. Yet they also showed that the onward march of human history can have sacred meaning: God or the Gods are working in it. In India, at approximately the same time as the emergence of the founder religions, the traditions that were to become Hinduism produced written texts of such teachings as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita. In them the central theme is the oneness of the true self with the Divine, transcending history through making absolute the state of consciousness or angle of philosophical vision in which timelessness shows is above time.

The founder religions that were successful, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and parallel developments in Hinduism, became associated with major empires, like Christianity and the late Roman Empire under Constantine, Buddhism with the Ashoka in India, Islam with the Caliphate, and Confucianism in the Han dynasty of China, which gave them a foothold from which they spread, sometimes over continents and many diverse cultures. Parallels among them can be seen in how they developed devotional patterns, had an era of reformation like that of Europe in the sixteenth century, and produced philosophies and literatures, ancient and modern.¹⁰

Looking Forward

It is clear, then, that religion is always in a state of flux and transition. Each generation has always been melting into the next. There are always constant themes in religion, but their ways of expression continually shape themselves anew. The process is a complex interaction of tradition and new ideas, working through expression in word, act, and group formation, expressed through symbols or concepts that may be as old as cave art or inspired and imaginatively created only yesterday. And it should be remembered that virtually nothing of significance that appears in the long history of a religion is ever really lost.

RELIGION, GOVERNANCE, AND POLITICAL LIFE

In 1953, Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of England and the United Kingdom in a solemn and highly religious ceremony in Westminster Abbey. The actual coronation took place in the heart of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, the central rite of much of traditional Christianity, celebrated according to the usage of the Church of England.

Later, in 1990, Akihito was made Emperor of Japan in ceremonies which included a very ancient Shinto rite called the **Daijosai**. Virtually alone, the ruler prayerfully took sips of rice wine twice in the dead of night in thatch-roofed structures, apparently communing with Shinto deities and his divine ancestors in this quiet and mysterious ceremony.

In the twentieth century, these impressive rituals had resonances of something from another era, when a state church or some other form of union of religion and government had real authority. For that matter, neither the British nor the Japanese sovereign possesses real political authority, but each is considered the embodiment of the whole people—a check on ordinary state power but whose function is actually symbolic. For traditionalists, the symbolic religious enthronement of symbolic rulers evokes warm nostalgia, from others, criticism for the apparent presumption that all citizens share one religion or that government has any business so endorsing a religion.

In the West, we tend to think of religion as a phenomenon more or less different from the public life of politics and government. Thus it may surprise many a Western reader to discover that in most cultures around the world, throughout time, there was not even a word to identify religion as something different from the society and culture as a whole.¹¹

Even today, nearly all of what we now refer to as “religion” aims toward an ideal not only for individuals, family, and the religions’ own institutions but also for all of society. So to study a religion without addressing its vision of society, including governance and political life, would be taking it out of context.

What we find is that the world religions’ aspirations for government and society have much in common, in that they address common fundamental questions: How can society achieve stability, safety, justice, prosperity, and fairness for its people? What kinds of characteristics and character do we want our governors to exemplify? What role should religion play in politics or government, if any at all? What is a good society? Differences arise, of course, in the various ways in which the world religions have attempted to answer such questions. And the reader will want to keep these questions in mind as we explore religion, governance, and political life in the sections on that topic throughout this text.

WOMEN IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

One might ask: Why have the authors included special sections on women in the chapters that follow and not a complementary one on men? The reason is that too often what we study about religion is a generalization of human experience using men's experience as the norm. This is called being **androcentric**. The study of women in religion is an effort to undo this androcentric perspective to provide a more holistic understanding of religion.

We have already looked at one example of women in religion, the Okinawan *noro* or priestesses. But a more typical situation would be that in medieval Europe, where women had no hope of a leadership position in the official hierarchy, from village priest to pope, but who might participate in what is sometimes referred to as the “**little tradition**” of folk myths and practices that were intermingled with officially sanctioned doctrines or through unofficial but sometimes significant influence from the sidelines as saint and advocate.

Take St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380). This medieval Italian woman claimed to have had an ecstatic vision of Jesus when she was only five or six years old, and at sixteen she was asked by her family to marry the widower of her recently deceased sister, Bonaventura. Utterly unwilling to enter into this union, Catherine adopted a tactic she had learned from Bonaventura. The latter, callously treated by her spouse, had refused to eat until he changed his ways; he finally did so. Now Catherine, aware of the power as well as of the status fasting could give women in a society controlled by men, declined to eat until her father relented and let her remain unmarried.

Catherine later became a Dominican sister, and in a famous mystical experience, she believed she was inwardly wedded to Jesus. She now reportedly ate very little but the Holy Communion, and as a now-celebrated ascetic, she sent letters and traveled about, promoting church reform and, particularly, striving to end the papal schism, in which rival popes reigned in Rome and in Avignon in France. Gregory XI in Avignon was apparently sufficiently impressed by the spiritual power of this impassioned woman, evidenced by her fasts, that he returned his administration to Rome.

The role of women in religion will be a major concern of this book all the way through. Occasionally, as with the Okinawan *noro* and, more recently, in some religious communities in which reforms have equalized the genders, women have had positions of institutional leadership. But most of the traditional major faiths that, since the Axial Age, have dominated the spiritual landscape have been governed by males, regardless of what their founders may have intended. That is, a patriarchal social pattern, or



Woman praying at a temple in Thailand.

Fundamental Features of Religions

Theoretical

Basic Worldview	How the universe is set up, especially in its spiritual aspect—the map of the invisible world.
God or Ultimate Reality	What the ultimate source and ground of all things is.
Origin of the World	Where it all came from.
Destiny of the World	Where it is going.
Origin of Humans	Where we came from.
Destiny of Humans	Where we are going.
Revelation or Mediation between the Ultimate and the Human	How we know this and how we are helped to get from here to our ultimate destiny.

Practical

What Is Expected of Humans: Worship, Practices, Behavior	What we ourselves must do.
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Sociological

Major Social Institutions	How the religion is set up to preserve and implement its teaching and practice; what kind of leadership and groups it has; how it interacts with the larger society.
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“**patriarchy**” developed where the patriarch or the father is the authority. Because of this, women were subject to male religious leaders, fathers, husbands, and even sons on the basis of religious tenets that did not permit individual status and authority for women.

Still, the positions of women have been varied. As wives and mothers they have, of course, had a role in the shaping spiritual life and wisdom on the domestic level. Sometimes, perhaps like the *noro*, perpetuating shamaness and priestess roles going back long before the Axial Age, they have been folk religion visionaries and ritualists. Sometimes, as nuns and abbesses, they have carved out a niche with definite, though limited, authority within the system. Certain women, like Catherine of Siena, have exercised no small influence through their own inner spiritual charisma, whether as ascetics, saints, writers, counselors, or even founders of new religious movements, from Christian Science in the United States to Tenrikyo in Japan.

More often, though, women have found that their gender has caused them to face implacable barriers in life, whether in exercising institutional or intellectual spiritual leadership or in marriage, where the prevailing religion has often taught wifely submission to the husband and has made divorce or even remarriage after widowhood very difficult. Some women have invented ways around these situations; some have known deep inner happiness, nonetheless; some have found life very hard. All these matters will be reflected in the upcoming sections on women in the various world religions, as they ask the “woman question” what are the proper roles and status of women in religion and society?

FUNDAMENTAL FEATURES OF RELIGIONS

That each of the world's religions has a history and encompasses each of the forms of religious expression means that they all have common patterns. They usually ask and answer certain questions. All have a basic worldview, ideas about the Divine or Ultimate Reality, ideas about the origin and destiny of the world and of individual humans, a revelation or authority or mediation between the Divine and humankind, standards about what is expected of humans (that is, patterns of worship, spiritual practices, and ethics or behavior), and an institutional or sociological expression.

In order to provide a convenient guide to these fundamental features, a chart that presents the three forms of expression from Joachim Wach (the theoretical, practical, and sociological) has been prepared for each religion discussed in this text. An introductory outline for the charts is presented on page 19 so that the reader can see what will be covered in each of the categories used.

It should be remembered that these charts are able to present only the dominant or traditional interpretation of the religion; variations often exist but cannot be taken into account in the charts, although they may be in the text.

It is now time to turn to the religions themselves.

✔ • **Study and Review** on [myreligionlab](#)

Summary

This chapter has tried to present some basic perspectives for understanding the religions of the world comparatively. We discussed religion as the “doors and windows” between conditioned and unconditioned reality. We presented the forms of religious expression: theoretical (narrative and doctrine), practical (styles of worship), sociological (forms of group life), ethics, religious experience, and art. We reflected on ways in which both descriptive and critical approaches to religion are valid and important. We discussed religion's aspirations for the political dimensions of society. We talked about the problems and possibilities inherent in discussing religion in terms of its history and summarized the

major historical periods of human religion. We also discussed the “woman question” in the world religions and how the answer to that question impacts women's lives and shapes the societies in which they live. Finally, we indicated that each actual, living religion contains tensions and seemingly conflicting motifs that it tries to resolve into a pattern.

This may all make religion appear very complex and difficult, but if you will look within yourself, you will see that your own life is ordered in much the same way. By increasing your understanding of yourself as a human being, you will grow in your ability to understand the complexity of human religion.

Questions for Review

1. Discuss whether or not you agree with the contention that today is a particularly exciting time to study world religions.
2. Describe some of the problems in today's world that seem to be involved with religion and some ways religion can help intergroup and international understanding.
3. Explain the difference between conditioned and unconditioned reality and religion's role regarding them.
4. Name and explain Joachim Wach's three forms of religious expression, together with ethics, religious experience, and art.
5. Describe how religious doctrine develops from myths and narratives.
6. Discuss what sort of messages might be transmitted nonverbally by the practical (style of worship) and sociological expressions of a religion.
7. Explain how the forms of religious expression interact.

8. Present the values of both descriptive and critical approaches to the world religions. Give examples of both based on your own observation.
9. Discuss the advantages and possible pitfalls of an historical approach to understanding a religion.
10. Summarize the main periods in the history of human religion with an understanding of the importance of the Axial Age.
11. Indicate the main ways in which religion has responded to the experience of the “discovery of history.”
12. Describe some common characteristics of founder religions, especially Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.
13. Explain some of the major characteristics of the modern experience and how religion has responded to them.
14. Discuss some of the issues raised by postmodern consciousness and how religion has responded to them.
15. Summarize the main issues involved in the study of religion, governance, and political life.
16. Discuss the “woman question” in the world religions and how an androcentric point of view might provide only a limited perspective of religion.
17. Discuss how religions both contain and try to resolve the tensions common to human existence.

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