

## CHAPTER 1

# RELIGIOUS RESPONSES



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Before sunrise, members of a Muslim family rise in Malaysia, perform their purifying ablutions, spread their prayer rugs facing Mecca, and begin their prostrations and prayers to Allah. In a French cathedral, worshipers line up for their turn to have a priest place a wafer on their tongue, murmuring, “This is the body of Christ, given for you.” In a South Indian village, a group of women reverently anoint a cylindrical stone with milk and fragrant sandalwood paste and place around it offerings of flowers. The monks of a Japanese Zen Buddhist monastery sit cross-legged and upright in utter silence, which is broken occasionally by the noise of the *kyosaku* bat falling on their shoulders. On a mountain in Mexico, men, women, and children who have been dancing without food or water for days greet an eagle flying overhead with a burst of whistling from the small wooden flutes they wear around their necks. In Jerusalem, Jews tuck scraps of paper containing their personal prayers between the stones of the ancient Western Wall, which once supported their sacred Temple, while above that wall only Muslims are allowed to enter the Dome of the Rock to pray.



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*Jewish women praying at the Western Wall. Many scraps of paper with personal prayers are tucked into the cracks between the ancient stones.*

These and countless other moments in the lives of people around the world are threads of the tapestry we call **religion**. The word is probably derived from the Latin, meaning “to tie back,” “to tie again.” All of religion shares the goal of tying people back to something behind the surface of life—a greater reality, which lies beyond, or invisibly infuses, the world that we can perceive with our five senses.

Attempts to connect with or comprehend this greater reality have taken many forms. Many of them are organized institutions, such as Buddhism or Christianity. These institutions are complexes of such elements as leaders, beliefs, rituals, symbols, myths, scriptures, ethics, spiritual practices, cultural components, historical traditions, and management structures. Moreover, they are not fixed and distinct categories, as simple labels such as “Buddhism” and “Christianity” suggest. Each of these labels is an abstraction that is used in the attempt to bring some kind of order to the study of religious patterns that are in fact complex, diverse, ever-changing, and overlapping.

## Attempts to define religion

The labels “Buddhism,” “Hinduism,” “Taoism,” “Zoroastrianism,” and “Confucianism” did not exist until the nineteenth century, though the many patterns to which they refer had existed for thousands of years. Professor Willard G. Oxtoby (1933–2003), founding director of the Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto, observed that when Western Christian scholars began studying other religions, they applied assumptions based on the Christian model to other paths, looking for specific creedal statements of belief (a rarity in indigenous lifeways), a dichotomy between what is secular and what is sacred (not helpful in looking at the teachings of Confucius and his followers), and the idea that a person belongs to only one religion at a time (which does not apply in Japan, where people freely follow various religious traditions).

Lisa Bradley, *Passing Shadow*, 2002.



Not all religious behavior occurs within institutional confines. The inner dimensions of religion—such as experiences, beliefs, and values—can be referred to as **spirituality**. This is part of what is called religion, but it may occur in personal, noninstitutional ways, without the ritual and social dimensions of organized religions. Personal spirituality without reference to a particular religious tradition permeates much contemporary artistic creation. Without theology, without historical references, such direct experiences are difficult to express, whether in words, images, or music. Contemporary artist Lisa Bradley says of her luminous paintings:

*In them you can see movement and stillness at the same time, things coming in and out of focus. The light seems to be from behind. There is a sense something like a permeable membrane, of things coming from one dimension to another. But even that doesn't describe it well. How do you describe truth in words?*

Religions can be dynamic in their effects, bringing deep changes in individuals and societies, for good or ill. As Professor Christopher Queen, world religions scholar from Harvard University, observes:

*The interpersonal and political realms may be transformed by powerful religious forces. Devotion linking human and divine beings, belief in holy people or sacred space, and ethical teachings that shape behaviors and attitudes may combine to transform individual identities and the social order itself.<sup>2</sup>*

Frederick Streng (1933–1993), an influential scholar of comparative religion, suggested in his book *Understanding Religious Life* that the central definition of religion is that it is a “means to ultimate transformation.” A complete definition of religion would include its relational aspect (“tying back”), its transformational potential, and also its political dimensions.

Current attempts to define religions may thus refer more to processes than to fixed independent entities. Professor of Religious Studies Thomas A. Tweed, for instance, proposes this definition in his book *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*:

*Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries—terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic.... This theory is, above all, about movement and relation, and it is an attempt to correct theories [of religion] that have presupposed stasis and minimized interdependence.<sup>3</sup>*

Religion is such a complex and elusive topic that some contemporary scholars of religion are seriously questioning whether “religion” or “religions” can be studied at all. They have determined that no matter where and at what point they try to define the concept, other parts will get away. Nonetheless, this difficult-to-grasp subject is central to many people’s lives and has assumed great political significance in today’s world so it is important to try sincerely to understand it. In this introductory chapter, we will try to develop some understanding of religion in a generic sense—why it exists, its various patterns and modes of interpretation, its encounters with modern science, its inclusion or exclusion of women, and its potentially negative aspects—before trying in the subsequent chapters to understand the major traditions known as “religions” practiced around the world today.

## Why are there religions?

In many cultures and times, religion has been the basic foundation of life, permeating all aspects of human existence. But from the time of the European Enlightenment, religion has become in the West an object to be studied, rather than an unquestioned basic fact of life. Cultural anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and even biologists have peered at religion through their own particular lenses, trying to explain what religion is and why it exists to those who no longer take it for granted. In the following pages we will briefly examine some of the major theories that have evolved. They are not mutually exclusive.

### Materialist perspective: humans invented religion

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, **scientific materialism** gained considerable prominence as a theory to explain the fact that religion can be found in some form in every culture around the world. The materialistic point of view is that the supernatural is imagined by humans; only the material world exists.

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An influential example of this perspective can be found in the work of the nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). He reasoned that deities are simply projections, objectifications of human qualities such as power, wisdom, and love onto an imagined cosmic deity outside ourselves. Then we worship it as Supreme and do not recognize that those same qualities lie within ourselves; instead, we see ourselves as weak and sinful. Feuerbach developed this theory with particular reference to Christianity as he had seen it.

Other scientific materialists believe that religions have been created or at least used to manipulate people. Historically, religions have often supported and served secular power. The nineteenth-century socialist philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883), author of *The Communist Manifesto*, argued that a culture's religion—as well as all other aspects of its social structure—springs from its economic framework. In Marx's view, religion's origins lie in the longings of the oppressed. It may have developed from the desire to revolutionize society and combat exploitation, but in failing to do so it became otherworldly, an expression of unfulfilled desires for a better, more satisfying life:

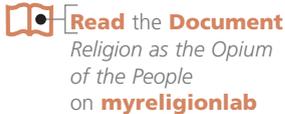
*Man makes religion: religion does not make man. ... The religious world is but the reflex of the real world. ... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.<sup>4</sup>*

According to Marx, not only do religions pacify people falsely; they may themselves become tools of oppression. For instance, he charged Christian authorities of his times with supporting “vile acts of the oppressors” by explaining them as due punishment of sinners by God. Other critics have made similar complaints against Eastern religions that blame the sufferings of the poor on their own misdeeds in previous lives. Such interpretations and uses of religious teachings lessen the perceived need for society to help those who are oppressed and suffering. Marx's ideas thus led toward twentieth-century atheistic communism, for he had asserted, “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.”<sup>5</sup>

### Functional perspective: religion is useful

Another line of reasoning has emerged in the search for a theory explaining the universal existence of religions: They are found everywhere because they are useful, both for society and for individuals. Religions “do things” for us, such as helping us to define ourselves and making the world and life comprehensible to us. Functional explanations have come from many disciplines.

One version of the functional explanation is based on sociology. Pioneering work in this area was done by French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). He proposed that humans cannot live without organized social structures, and that religion is a glue that holds a society together. Surely religions have the potential for creating harmony in society, for they all teach social virtues such as love, compassion, altruism, justice, and discipline over our desires and emotions. Political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell concluded from a survey of religiosity in the United States that people who are involved in organized religions are generally more generous toward their neighbors and more conscientious as citizens than those who do not participate in religions.<sup>6</sup> The role of religion in the social process of identity



formation at individual, family, community, and national levels is now being carefully examined, for people's identification with a particular religion can be manipulated to influence social change—either to thwart, moderate, or encourage it.

Biology also offers some functional reasons for the existence of religion. For instance, John Bowker, author of *Is God a Virus?*, asserts that religions are organized systems that serve the essential biological purpose of bringing people together for their common survival. To Bowker, religion is found universally because it protects gene replication and the nurturing of children. He proposes that because of its survival value, the potential for religiosity may even be genetically inherent in human brains.

Medical professionals have found that religious faith is good for our health. Research conducted by the Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health at Duke University found that those who attend religious services or read scriptures frequently are significantly longer lived, less likely to be depressed, less likely to have high blood pressure, and nearly ninety percent less likely to smoke. Many other studies have indicated that patients with strong faith recover faster from illness and operations.

Many medical studies have also been done on the potential of prayer to heal illness, but results have been mixed. However, meditation has been proved to reduce mental stress and also to help develop positive emotions, even in the face of great difficulties. Citing laboratory tests of the mental calmness of Buddhists who practice “mindfulness” meditation, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama points out that:

*Over the millenniums, many practitioners have carried out what we might call “experiments” in how to overcome our tendencies toward destructive emotions. The world today needs citizens and leaders who can work toward ensuring stability and engage in dialogue with the “enemy”—no matter what kind of aggression or assault they may have endured. If humanity is to survive, happiness and inner balance are crucial. We would do well to remember that the war against hatred and terror can be waged on this, the internal front, too.<sup>7</sup>*

From the point of view of individual psychology, there are many explanations of the usefulness of religion. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1938) suggested that religion fulfills neurotic needs. He described religion as a collective fantasy, a “universal obsessional neurosis”—a replaying of our loving and fearful relationships with our parents. Religious belief gives us a God powerful enough to protect us from the terrors of life, and will reward or punish us for obedience or nonobedience to social norms. From Freud's extremely sceptical point of view, religious belief is an illusion springing from people's infantile insecurity and neurotic guilt; as such it closely resembles mental illness.

On a more positive note, the twentieth-century psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1900–1980) concluded that humans have a need for a stable frame of reference, and that religion fulfills this need. As Mata Amritanandamayi, a contemporary Indian spiritual teacher, explains:

*Faith in God gives one the mental strength needed to confront the problems of life. Faith in the existence of God makes one feel safe and protected from all the evil influences of the world. To have faith in the existence of a Supreme Power and to live accordingly is a religion. When we become religious, morality arises, which, in turn, will help to keep us away from malevolent influences.*

*We won't drink, we won't smoke, and we will stop wasting our energy through unnecessary gossip and talk. ... We will also develop qualities like love, compassion, patience, mental equipoise, and other positive traits. These will help us to love and serve everyone equally. ... Where there is faith, there is harmony, unity and love. A nonbeliever always doubts. ... He cannot be at peace; he's restless. ... The foundation of his entire life is unstable and scattered due to his lack of faith in a higher principle.*<sup>8</sup>

For many, the desire for material achievement offers a temporary sense of purposefulness. But once achieved, material goals may seem hollow. A longing for something more lasting and deeply meaningful may then arise. The Buddha said:

*Look!  
The world is a royal chariot, glittering with paint.  
No better.  
Fools are deceived, but the wise know better.*<sup>9</sup>

Religions propose ideals that can radically transform people. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was an extremely shy, fearful child. His transformation into one of the great political figures of the twentieth century occurred as he meditated single-mindedly on the great Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, particularly the second chapter, which he says was “inscribed on the tablet of my heart.”<sup>10</sup> It reads, in part:

*He is forever free who has broken  
Out of the ego-cage of I and mine  
To be united with the Lord of Love.  
This is the supreme state. Attain thou this  
And pass from death to immortality.*<sup>11</sup>

People need inner strength for dealing with personal problems. Those who are suffering severe physical illness, privation, terror, or grief often turn to the divine for help. Agnes Collard, a Christian woman, reported that her impending death after four painful years of cancer was bringing her closer to God:

*I don't know what or who He is, but I am almost sure He is there. I feel His presence, feel that He is close to me during the awful moments. And I feel love. I sometimes feel wrapped, cocooned in love.*<sup>12</sup>

Conviction that Someone or Something that cannot be seen exists may be an antidote to the discomforting sense of being alone in the universe. This isolation can be painful, even terrifying. The divine may be sought as a loving father or mother, or as a friend. Alternatively, some paths offer the way of self-transcendence. Through them, the sense of isolation is lost in mystical merger with the One Being, with the Ultimate Reality.

According to some Asian religions, the concept that we are distinct, autonomous individuals is an illusion; what we think of as “our” consciousnesses and “our” bodies are in perpetual flux. Thus, freedom from problems lies in accepting temporal change and devaluing the “small self” in favor of the eternal self. The ancient sages of India, whose teachings are preserved in the Upanishads, called it “This eternal being that can never be proved, ... spotless, beyond the ether, the unborn Self, great and eternal, ... the creator, the maker of everything.”<sup>13</sup>

Buddhists see the problem of human existence differently. What humans have in common, they feel, is the suffering that comes from life's imper-

manence and our craving for it to remain the same. For Buddhists, reliance on an Absolute or God and the belief in a personal self or an Eternal Self only makes the suffering more intense. The solution is to let go of these ideas, to accept the groundlessness and openness of life, and to grow in clear awareness and humanistic values.

We may look to religions for understanding, for answers to our many questions about life. Is life just a series of random and chaotic incidents, or is there some meaning and order behind what is happening? Who are we? Why are we here? What happens after we die? Why is there suffering? Why is there evil? Is anybody up there listening? We have difficulty accepting the commonsense notion that this life is all there is. We are born, we struggle to support ourselves, we age, and we die. If we believe that there is nothing more, fear of death may inhibit enjoyment of life and make all human actions seem pointless. Confronting mortality is so basic to the spiritual life that, as the Christian monk Brother David Steindl-Rast observes, whenever monks from any spiritual tradition meet, within five minutes they are talking about death.



*It appears that throughout the world man [sic] has always been seeking something beyond his own death, beyond his own problems, something that will be enduring, true and timeless. He has called it God, he has given it many names; and most of us believe in something of that kind, without ever actually experiencing it.*

*Jiddu Krishnamurti<sup>14</sup>*

*For some, religion offers relief from feelings of loneliness and isolation.*

For those who find security in specific answers, some religions offer **dogma**—systems of doctrines proclaimed as absolutely true and accepted as such, even if they lie beyond the domain of one's personal experiences. Absolute faith provides some people with a secure feeling of rootedness, meaning, and orderliness in the midst of rapid social change. Religions may also provide rules for living, governing everything from diet to personal relationships. Such prescriptions may be seen as earthly reflections of the order that prevails in the cosmos. Some religions, however, encourage people to explore the perennial questions by themselves, and to live in the uncertainties of not knowing intellectually, breaking through old concepts until nothing remains but truth itself.

### **Faith perspective: Ultimate Reality exists**

From the point of view of religious faith, there truly is an underlying reality that cannot readily be perceived. Human responses to this Supreme Reality have been expressed and institutionalized as the structures of some religions.

How have people concluded that there is some Unseen Reality, even though they may be unable to perceive it with their ordinary senses? Some simply accept what has been told to them or what is written in their holy books. Others have come to their own conclusions.

One path to faith is through deep questioning. Martin Luther (1483–1546),

father of the Protestant branches of Christianity, recounted how he searched for faith in God through storms of doubt, “raged with a fierce and agitated conscience.”<sup>15</sup> Jnana yoga practitioners probe the question “Who am I?” Gradually they strip away all of what they are not—for instance, “I am not the body, I am not the thinking”—and dig even into the roots of “I,” until only pure Awareness remains.

The human mind does not function in the rational mode alone; there are other modes of consciousness. In his classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the philosopher William James (1842–1910) concluded:

*Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. ... No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.*<sup>16</sup>

To perceive truth directly, beyond the senses, beyond the limits of human reason, beyond blind belief, is often called **mysticism**. George William Russell (1867–1935), an Irish writer who described his mystical experiences under the pen name “AE,” was lying on a hillside:

*not then thinking of anything but the sunlight, and how sweet it was to drowse there, when, suddenly, I felt a fiery heart throb, and knew it was personal and intimate, and started with every sense dilated and intent, and turned inwards, and I heard first a music as of bells going away ... and then the heart of the hills was opened to me, and I knew there was no hill for those who were there, and they were unconscious of the ponderous mountain piled above the palaces of light, and the winds were sparkling and diamond clear, yet full of colour as an opal, as they glittered through the valley, and I knew the Golden Age was all about me, and it was we who had been blind to it but that it had never passed away from the world.*<sup>17</sup>

*Sufi dervishes in Sudan chant names of God's qualities as a way to God-realization.*



Encounters with Unseen Reality are given various names in spiritual traditions: **enlightenment**, **realization**, **illumination**, **satori**, **awakening**, **self-knowledge**, **gnosis**, **ecstatic communion**, “coming home.” Such a state may arise spontaneously, as in near-death experiences in which people seem to find themselves in a world of unearthly radiance, or may be induced by meditation, fasting, prayer, chanting, drugs, or dancing.

Many religions have developed meditation techniques that encourage intuitive wisdom to come forth. Whether this wisdom is perceived as a natural faculty within or an external voice, the process is similar. The consciousness is initially turned away from the world and even from one’s own feelings and thoughts, letting them all go. Often a concentration practice, such as watching the breath or staring at a candle flame, is used to collect the awareness into a single, unfragmented focus. Once the mind is quiet, distinctions between inside and outside drop away. The seer becomes one with the seen, in a fusion of subject and object through which the inner nature of things often seems to reveal itself.

Kabir, a fifteenth-century Indian weaver who was inspired alike by Islam and Hinduism and whose words are included in Sikh scripture, described this state of spiritual bliss:



*A sense of the presence of the Great Unnamable may burst through the seeming ordinariness of life. (Samuel Palmer, The Rising of the Skylark, 1839, National Museum of Wales.)*

*The blue sky opens out farther and farther,  
the daily sense of failure goes away,  
the damage I have done to myself fades,  
a million suns come forward with light,  
when I sit firmly in that world.<sup>18</sup>*

*[The “flash of illumination” brings] a state of glorious inspiration, exaltation, intense joy, a piercingly sweet realization that the whole of life is fundamentally right and that it knows what it’s doing.*

*Nona Coxhead<sup>19</sup>*

Our ordinary experience of the world is that our self is separate from the world of objects that we perceive. But this **dualistic** understanding may be transcended in a moment of enlightenment in which the Real and our awareness of it become one. The *Mundaka Upanishad* says, “Lose thyself in the Eternal, even as the arrow is lost in the target.” For the Hindu, this is the prized attainment of liberation, in which one enters into awareness of the eternal reality. This reality is then known with the same direct apprehension with which one knows oneself. The Sufi Muslim mystic Abu Yazid in the ninth century CE said, “I sloughed off my self as a snake sloughs off its skin, and I looked into my essence and saw that ‘I am He.’”<sup>20</sup>

An alternative kind of spiritual experience brings one into contact with what the German professor of theology Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) called the “Wholly Other.” Otto referred to this as **numinous**—a nonrational, non-sensory experience of that which is totally outside the self and cannot be described. In his landmark book *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto wrote of this mysterious experience as the heart of religion. It brings forth two general responses in a person: a feeling of great awe or even dread and, at the same time, a feeling of great attraction. These responses, in turn, have given rise to the whole gamut of religious beliefs and behaviors.

Though ineffable, the nature of religious experience that leads to faith is not unpredictable, according to the research of Joachim Wach (1898–1955), a German scholar of comparative religion. In every religion, it seems to follow a certain pattern: (1) It is an experience of what is considered Unseen Reality; (2) It involves the person’s whole being; (3) It is the most shattering and intense of all human experiences; and (4) It motivates the person to action, through worship, ethical behavior, service, and sharing with others in a religious grouping.

## Understandings of Sacred Reality

In the struggle to understand what the mind cannot readily grasp, individuals and cultures have come to rather different conclusions. Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) was a very influential scholar who helped to develop the field of **comparative religion**. This discipline attempts to understand and compare religious patterns found around the world. He used the terms “sacred” and “profane”: the **profane** is the everyday world of seemingly random, ordinary, and unimportant occurrences. The **sacred** is the realm of extraordinary, apparently purposeful, but generally imperceptible forces. In the realm of the sacred lie the source of the universe and its values. However relevant this dichotomy may be in describing some religions, there are some cultures that do not make a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. Many indigenous peoples who have an intimate connection with their local landscape feel that spiritual power is everywhere; there is nothing that is not sacred. Trees, mountains, animals—everything is perceived as being alive with sacred presence.

Another distinction made in the study of comparative religion is that between “immanent” and “transcendent” views of sacred reality. To understand that reality as **immanent** is to experience it as present in the world. To understand it as **transcendent** is to believe that it exists outside of the material universe (e.g., “God is out there”).

The concept of sacred Being is another area in which we find great differences among religious traditions. Many people perceive the sacred as a personal being, as Father, Mother, Teacher, Friend, Beloved, or as a specific deity. Religions based on one’s relationship to a Divine Being are called **theistic**. If the being is worshiped as a singular form, the religion is called **monotheistic**. If many attributes and forms of the divine are emphasized, the religion may be labeled **polytheistic**. Religions that hold that beneath the multiplicity of apparent forms there is one underlying substance are called **monistic**.

Unseen Reality may also be conceived in **nontheistic** terms, as a “changeless Unity,” as “Suchness,” or simply as “the Way.” There may be no sense of a personal Creator God in such understandings; in nontheistic traditions,

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*Buddhism is sometimes referred to as a nontheistic religion, for its beliefs do not refer to a personal deity. Practitioners try to perceive the impermanence and interdependence of all things.*

Ultimate Reality may instead be perceived as impersonal.

Some people believe that the sacred reality is usually invisible but occasionally appears visibly in human incarnations, such as Christ or Krishna, or in special manifestations, such as the flame Moses reportedly saw coming from the center of a bush but not consuming it. Or the deity that cannot be seen may be described in human terms. Christian theologian Sallie McFague thus writes of God as “lover” by imputing human feelings to God:

*God as lover is the one who loves the world not with the fingertips but totally and passionately, taking pleasure in its variety and richness, finding it attractive and valuable, delighting in its fulfilment. God as lover is the moving power of love in the universe, the desire for unity with all the beloved.<sup>21</sup>*

Throughout history, there have been exclusivist religious authorities—in other words, those who claim that they worship the only true deity and label all others as “pagans” or “nonbelievers.” For their part, the others apply similar negative epithets to them. When these rigid positions are taken, often to the point of violent conflicts or forced conversions, there is no room to consider the possibility that all may be talking about the same indescribable thing in different languages or referring to different aspects of the same unknowable Whole—a position which may be called **universalism**.

**Atheism** is the belief that there is no deity. Atheists may reject theistic beliefs because they seem to be incompatible with the existence of evil in the world, or because there is little or no concrete proof that God exists, or because they reject the concept of God as an old man in the sky, or because theistic beliefs seem unscientific, or because they inhibit human independence. In 2009, atheists in England mounted a major campaign to put up billboards and signs on buses proclaiming, “There’s probably no God. Now



*The concept of God as an old man with a beard who rules the world from the sky has been supported by the art of patriarchal monotheistic traditions, such as William Blake’s frontispiece to “Europe,” The Act of Creation, 1794.*



*Atheists in England ran a large-scale campaign to advertise their point of view, posting large “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” signs on buses and in public places.*

## EXCLUSIVISM VS. UNIVERSALISM

## A Letter from I. H. Azad Faruqi

In this letter, the highly respected Muslim scholar Dr. I. H. Azad Faruqi, Professor of Islamic Studies and Honorary Director of the Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi, gives his views on exclusivist and universalist standpoints.

*Despite the attitude of the majority of the followers of world religions justifying the claims of exclusive nature found in almost all world religions, there are sufficient grounds in the scriptures of these traditions which allow a universalistic interpretation of the phenomenon of the multiplicity of religions. That is, the scriptures of the various world religions within themselves contain the elements which can be interpreted to claim a viewpoint looking at various religious traditions as so many paths leading to the same Goal.*

*Secondly, almost all world religions contain a vision of a Supreme Reality, which ultimately is considered beyond the categories of the rational thought, Incomprehensible and Unlimited. Thus, by their own admission these traditions appear to claim their vision of, and approach to, the Supreme Reality as short of exhausting It, and limited to a particular view of It.*

*Otherwise also, although almost all the basic truths and aspects of religious life are represented in each of the religious traditions, each of these traditions tends to emphasize certain dimensions of the religious experience more than others. And these particular accentuations, at the core of the*

*spiritual experience of these traditions, are the factors which appear to determine the special hue or distinctiveness of these traditions. Thus, each of the different religious traditions can be claimed to express some particular aspects of the Ultimate Reality which, in spite of its myriad manifestations, remains unfathomable and far beyond the sum of all Its expressions. Seen from this perspective, the uniqueness of each religious tradition, and Its particular experience of the Supreme Reality, should no more remain as a hindrance in the cordial relations amongst them, as the usual case has been hitherto. Rather, these very particularities and distinctions would turn into the grounds for mutual attraction between them.*

*Thirdly, the individualistic claims of various religions can be taken as true only in a relative sense. Each of the religious traditions being a close and complete world in itself, these are bound to claim their particular standpoints as absolute. Perhaps these could not develop into self-sufficient traditions in their own right without their exclusivist claims of being the only truly guided ones. But today, in the pluralistic societies of modern times, the claims of these traditions having the monopoly of the Supreme Truth can be considered as relatively absolute only, if the term of a relative absolute can be permitted. That is, we can attempt to approach and study these traditions on their own grounds, with a more humble attitude, and let them speak from within their own world, while being aware that this is only one world out of many such worlds.<sup>22</sup>*

stop worrying and enjoy your life.” A movement called “New Atheism” is attacking religious faith as being not only wrong, but actually evil because it can be used to support violence. As we will see throughout this book, extremist religious views have indeed been used throughout history to justify political violence and oppression. The leading figure in the New Atheism movement is Richard Dawkins, Oxford Professor of the Public Understanding of Science and author of *The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*. Around him a debate is raging about whether science itself is fully “scientific,” in the sense of being totally objective, or whether it is a culturally shaped enterprise based on unproven assumptions—the same criticism that its atheistic proponents make about religious faith.

Agnosticism is not the denial of the divine but the feeling “I don’t know whether it exists or not,” or the belief that if it exists it is impossible for humans to know it. Religious scepticism has been a current in Western thought since

classical times; it was given the name “agnosticism” in the nineteenth century by T. H. Huxley, who stated its basic principles as a denial of metaphysical beliefs and of most (in his case) Christian beliefs since they are unproven or unprovable, and their replacement with scientific method for examining facts and experiences.

Beyond agnosticism, there is secularism, in which people go about their daily lives without any reference to religion: all focus in on material life. This trend is particularly pronounced in contemporary Europe.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, so attempts to apply the labels can sometimes confuse us rather than help us understand religions. In some polytheistic traditions there is a hierarchy of gods and goddesses with one highest being at the top. In Hinduism, each individual deity is understood as an embodiment of all aspects of the divine. In the paradoxes that occur when we try to apply human logic and language to that which transcends rational thought, a person may believe that God is both a highly personal being and also present in all things. An agnostic may be deeply committed to moral principles. Or mystics may have personal encounters with the divine and yet find it so unspeakable that they say it is beyond human knowing. The Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135–1204) asserted that:

*the human mind cannot comprehend God. Only God can know Himself. The only form of comprehension of God we can have is to realize how futile it is to try to comprehend Him.*<sup>23</sup>

*Jaap Sahib*, the great hymn of praises of God by the Tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, consists largely of the negative attributes of God, such as these:

*Salutations to the One without colour or hue,  
Salutations to the One who hath no beginning.  
Salutations to the Impenetrable,  
Salutations to the Unfathomable ...  
O Lord, Thou art Formless and Peerless  
Beyond birth and physical elements. ...  
Salutations to the One beyond confines of religion. ...  
Beyond description and Garbless  
Thou art Nameless and Desireless.  
Thou art beyond thought and ever Mysterious.*<sup>24</sup>

Some people believe that the aspect of the divine that they perceive is the only one. Others feel that there is one being with many faces, that all religions come from one source. Bede Griffiths (1906–1993), a Catholic monk who lived in a community in India attempting to unite Eastern and Western traditions, was one who felt that if we engage in a deep study of all religions we will find their common ground:

*In each tradition the one divine Reality, the one eternal Truth, is present, but it is hidden under symbols. ... Always the divine Mystery is hidden under a veil, but each revelation (or “unveiling”) unveils some aspect of the one Truth, or, if you like, the veil becomes thinner at a certain point. The Semitic religions, Judaism and Islam, reveal the transcendent aspect of the divine Mystery with incomparable power. The oriental religions reveal the divine Immanence with immeasurable depth. Yet in each the opposite aspect is contained, though in a more hidden way.*<sup>25</sup>

## Ritual, symbol, and myth

Many of the phenomena of religion are ways of worship, symbols, and myths. Worship consists in large part of attempts to express reverence and perhaps to enter into communion with that which is worshiped or to request help with problems such as ill health, disharmony, or poverty. Around the world, rituals, sacraments, prayers, and spiritual practices are used to create a sacred atmosphere or state of consciousness necessary to convey the requests for help, to bring some human control over things that are not ordinarily controllable (such as rainfall), to sanctify and explain the meaning of major life stages such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, or to provide spiritual instruction.

When such actions are predictable and repeated rather than spontaneous, they are known as rituals. Group rituals may be conducted by priests or other ritual specialists or by the people themselves. There may be actions such as recitation of prayers, chants, scriptures or stories, singing, dancing, sharing of food, spiritual purification by water, lighting of candles or oil lamps, and offerings of flowers, fragrances, and food to the divine. Professor Antony Fernando of Sri Lanka explains that when food offerings are made to the deities:

*Even the most illiterate person knows that in actual fact no god really picks up those offerings or is actually in need of them. What people offer is what they own. Whatever is owned becomes so close to the heart of the owner as to become an almost integral part of his or her life. Therefore, when people offer something, it is, as it were, themselves they offer. ... Sacrifices and offerings are a dramatic way of proclaiming that they are not the ultimate possessors of their life and also of articulating their determination to live duty-oriented lives and not desire-oriented lives.<sup>26</sup>*

Music, chants, and other kinds of sound play very significant roles in religious rituals, whether it is the noisy bursting of firecrackers to scare away unwanted spirits at Chinese graves or choral singing of *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord

*Places of worship are often designed as visual symbols of religious ideals. The Baha'i Temple in New Delhi was crafted in the shape of a lotus, symbol of beauty and purity rising divinely above stagnant water, and its nine-sided structure symbolizes the unity of all world religions.*



have mercy) in a sublime composition by the eighteenth-century composer Johann Sebastian Bach. Ethnomusicologist Guy Beck identifies many purposes for which sacred sounds may be used in religions: to ask for favors or blessings, to ask forgiveness for sins, to praise and thank the Creator, to chase away demons, to invoke the presence and blessings of deities, to make prayerful requests, to develop a mood of inner quietude or repentance, to purify the worshiper, to paint pictures of a future state of being, to create communion between the human and divine worlds, to teach doctrines, to create states of ecstasy and bliss, to empty and then fulfill, to invigorate, and to express jubilation.<sup>27</sup> The effects of sounds on mind and heart are so touching that sacred texts or messages are often chanted or sung rather than simply read or recited. Speaking from a theistic point of view, nineteenth-century musicologist Edmund Gurney reflected:

*The link between sound and the supernatural is profound and widespread. ... If we are believers, then we can believe that the spirit is moving us in our ritual music. Ritual sound makes the transcendent immanent. It is at the same time ours, our own sounds pressing in around us and running through us like a vital current of belief, molding us into a living interior that is proof against the unbelieving emptiness that lies around.*<sup>28</sup>

What religions attempt to approach may be considered beyond human utterance. Believers build statues and buildings through which to worship the divine, but these forms are not the divine itself. Because people are addressing the invisible, it can be suggested only through metaphor. Deepest consciousness cannot speak the language of everyday life; what it knows can be suggested only in symbols—images borrowed from the material world that are similar to ineffable spiritual experiences. For example, attempts to allude to spiritual merging with Unseen Reality may borrow the language of human love. The great thirteenth-century Hindu saint Akka Mahadevi sang of her longing for union with the Beloved by using powerful symbolic language of self-surrender:

*Like a silkworm weaving her house with love  
From her marrow and dying in her body's threads  
Winding tight, round and round, I burn  
Desiring what the heart desires.*<sup>29</sup>

*Our religious ceremonies are but the shadows of that great universal worship celebrated in the heavens by the legions of heavenly beings on all planes, and our prayers drill a channel across this mist separating our earthbound plane from the celestial ones through which a communication may be established with the powers that be.*

*Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan*<sup>30</sup>

Tracing symbols throughout the world, researchers find many similarities in their use in different cultures. Unseen Reality is often symbolized as a Father or Mother, because it is thought to be the source of life, sustenance, and protection. It is frequently associated with heights, with its invisible power perceived as coming from a “place” that is spiritually “higher” than the material world. The sky thus becomes heaven, the abode of the god or gods and perhaps also the pleasant realm to which good people go when they die.

*This symbolic representation of a World Tree comes from 18th-century Iran. It is conceived as a tree in Paradise, about which the Prophet Muhammad reportedly said, “God planted it with His own hand and breathed His spirit into it.”*



A vertical symbol—such as a tree, a pillar, or a mountain—is understood as the center of the world in many cultures, for it gives physical imagery to a connection between earth and the unseen “heavenly” plane. The area beneath the surface of the earth is often perceived as an “underworld,” a rather dangerous place where life goes on in a different way than on the surface.

Some theorists assert that in some cases these common symbols are not just logical associations with the natural world. Most notably, the psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) proposed that humanity as a whole has a collective unconscious, a global psychic inheritance of archetypal symbols from which geographically separate cultures have drawn. These archetypes include such symbolic characters as the wise old man, the great mother, the original man and woman, the hero, the shadow, and the trickster.

Extended metaphors may be understood as **allegories**—narratives that use concrete symbols to convey abstract ideas. The biblical book attributed to the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, for instance, is full of such allegorical passages. In one he says that God’s spirit led him to a valley full of dry bones. As he watched and spoke as God told him, the bones developed flesh and muscles, became joined together into bodies, and rose to their feet. The voice of God in the scripture explains the allegorical meaning: the bones represent the

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## TEACHING STORY

## Descendants of the Eagle

A long time ago, a really long time when the world was still freshly made, Unktehi the water monster fought the people and caused a great flood. Perhaps the Great Spirit was angry with us for some reason. Maybe he let Unktehi win out because he wanted to make a better kind of human being.

The waters got higher and higher. Finally everything was flooded except the hill next to the place where the sacred red pipestone quarry lies today. The people climbed up there to save themselves, but it was no use. The water swept over that hill. Waves tumbled the rocks and pinnacles, smashing them down on the people. Everyone was killed, and all the blood jelled, making one big pool. The blood turned to pipestone and created the pipestone quarry, the grave of those ancient ones. That's why the pipe, made of that red rock, is so sacred to us. Its red bowl is the flesh and blood of our ancestors, its stem is the backbone of those people long dead, the smoke rising from it is their breath. I tell you, that pipe comes alive when used in a ceremony; you can feel the power flowing from it.

Unktehi, the big water monster, was also turned to stone. Maybe Tunkashila, the Grandfather Spirit, punished her for making the flood. Her bones are in the Badlands now. Her back forms a long, high ridge, and you can see her vertebrae sticking out in a great row of red and yellow rocks. I have seen them. It scared me when I was on that ridge, for I felt Unktehi. She was moving beneath me, wanting to topple me.

When all the people were killed so many generations ago, one girl survived, a beautiful girl.

It happened this way: When the water swept over the hill where they tried to seek refuge, a big spotted eagle, Wanblee Galeshka, swept down and let her grab hold of his feet. With her hanging on, he flew to the top of a tall tree which stood on the highest stone pinnacles in the Black Hills. That was the eagle's home. It became the only spot not covered with water. If the people had gotten up there, they would have survived, but it was a needle-like rock.

Wanblee kept that beautiful girl with him and made her his wife. There was a closer connection then between people and animals, so he could do it. The eagle's wife became pregnant and bore him twins, a boy and a girl. She was happy, and said, "Now we will have people again. *Washtay*, it is good." The children were born right there, on top of that cliff. When the waters finally subsided, Wanblee helped the children and their mother down from his rock and put them on the earth, telling them: "Be a nation, become a great Nation—the Lakota Oyate." The boy and girl grew up. He was the only man on earth, she was the only woman of child-bearing age. They married; they had children. A nation was born.

So we are descended from the eagle. We are an eagle nation. That is good, something to be proud of, because the eagle is the wisest of birds. He is the Great Spirit's messenger; he is a great warrior. That is why we always wore the eagle plume and still wear it.

*As told by Lame Deer to Richard Erdoes<sup>31</sup>*

people of Israel, who have been abandoned by their self-serving leaders and become scattered and preyed upon by wild beasts, like the sheep of uncaring shepherds. God promises to dismiss the shepherds, raise the fallen people and restore them to the land of Israel, where they will live peacefully under God's protection (Ezekiel 34–37). Such allegories may assume great significance in a people's self-understanding, as in the Lakota myth of the eagle (see Box).

Symbols are also woven together into myths—the symbolic stories that communities use to explain the universe and their place within it. Like many cultures, Polynesians tell a myth of the world's creation in which the world was initially covered with water and shrouded in darkness. When the Supreme Being, Io, wanted to rise from rest, he uttered words that immediately brought light into the darkness. Then at his word the waters and the heavens were separated, the land was shaped, and all beings were created.

Myths may purport to explain how things came to be as they are, perhaps incorporating elements of historical truth, and in any case are treated as sacred history.

Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), who carried out extensive analysis of myths around the world, found that myths have four primary functions: mystical (evoking our awe, love, wonder, gratitude); cosmological (presenting explanations of the universe based on the existence and actions of spiritual powers or beings); sociological (adapting people to orderly social life, teaching ethical codes); and psychological (opening doors to inner exploration, development of one's full potential, and adjustment to life cycle changes). Understood in these senses, myths are not falsehoods or the works of primitive imaginations; they can be deeply meaningful and transformational, forming a sacred belief structure that supports the laws and institutions of the religion and the ways of the community, as well as explaining the people's place within the cosmos. Campbell paid particular attention to myths of the hero's journey, in which the main character is separated from the group, undergoes hardships and initiation, and returns bearing truth to the people. Such stories, he felt, prepare and inspire the listener for the difficult inward journey that leads to spiritual transformation:

*It is the business of mythology to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and "unreal": they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs. The passage of the mythological hero may be overground, [but] fundamentally it is inward—into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world.<sup>32</sup>*

## Absolutist and liberal responses to modernity

Traditional religious understandings are under increasing pressure from the rapidly growing phenomenon of **globalization**. Complex in its dynamics and manifestations, globalization has been defined by Global Studies Professor Manfred Steger as "the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space."<sup>33</sup> Local cultures and community ties have rapidly given way to hybrid homogenized patterns that have evolved in countries such as the United States. "McDonaldization" of the world, fueled by ever faster and more accessible means of communication and transportation, transnational corporations, free trade, urbanization, and unrestrained capitalism, has made deep inroads into traditional local cultural ways. As a result, there is increasing tension between those who want to preserve their traditional ways and values and those who open doors to change.

Within each faith people may thus have different ways of interpreting their traditions. The **orthodox** stand by an historical form of their religion, strictly following its established practices, laws, and creeds. Those who resist contemporary influences and affirm what they perceive as the historical core of their religion could be called **absolutists**. In our times, many people feel that their identity as individuals or as members of an established group is threatened by the sweeping changes brought by modern global industrial culture. The breakup of family relationships, loss of geographic rootedness, decay of clear behavioral codes, and loss of local control may be very unset-

ting. To find stable footing, to attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people in the face of modernity and secularization, some people may try to stand on selected religious doctrines or practices from the past. Religious leaders may encourage this trend toward rigidity by declaring themselves absolute authorities or by telling the people that their scriptures are literally and exclusively true. They may encourage antipathy or even violence against people of other religious traditions.

The term **fundamentalism** is often applied to this selective insistence on parts of a religious tradition and to highly negative views of people of other religions. This use of the term is misleading, for no religion is based on hatred of other people and because those who are labeled “fundamentalists” may not be engaged in a return to the true basics of their religion. A Muslim “fundamentalist” who insists on the veiling of women, for instance, does not draw this doctrine from the foundation of Islam, the Holy Qur’an, but rather from historical cultural practice in some Muslim countries. A Sikh “fundamentalist” who concentrates on externals, such as wearing a turban, sword, and steel bracelet, overlooks the central insistence of the Sikh Gurus on the inner rather than outer practice of religion.

A further problem with the use of the term “fundamentalism” is that it has a specifically Protestant Christian connotation. The Christian fundamentalist movement originated in the late nineteenth century as a reaction to liberal trends, such as historical-critical study of the Bible, which will be explained below. Other labels may, therefore, be more cross-culturally appropriate, such as “absolutist,” “extremist,” or “reactionary,” depending on the particular situation.

Those who are called religious **liberals** take a more flexible approach to religious tradition. They may see scriptures as products of a specific culture and time rather than the eternal voice of truth, and may interpret passages metaphorically rather than literally. If activists, they may advocate reforms in the ways their religion is officially understood and practiced.

While absolutists tend to take their scriptures and received religious traditions as literally true, liberals have for several centuries been engaged in a

## Angels Weep

Wherever there is slaughter of innocent men, women, and children for the mere reason that they belong to another race, color, or nationality, or were born into a faith which the majority of them could never quite comprehend and hardly ever practice in its true spirit; wherever the fair name of religion is used as a veneer to hide overweening political ambition and bottomless greed, wherever the glory of Allah is sought to be proclaimed through the barrel of a gun; wherever piety becomes synonymous with rapacity, and morality cowers under the blight of expediency

and compromise, wherever it be—in Yugoslavia or Algeria, in Liberia, Chad, or the beautiful land of the Sudan, in Los Angeles or Abuija, in Kashmir or Conakry, in Colombo or Cotabato—there God is banished and Satan is triumphant, there the angels weep and the soul of man cringes; there in the name of God humans are dehumanized; and there the grace and beauty of life lie ravished and undone.

*Dr. Syed Z. Abedin, Director of the  
Institute for Muslim Minority Affairs,  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia<sup>34</sup>*

different approach to understanding their own religions and those of others: **historical-critical studies**. These are academic attempts to reconstruct the historical life stories of prophets and their cultures as opposed to legends about them, and to subject their scriptures to objective analysis. Such academic study of religion neither accepts nor rejects the particular truth-claims of any religion.

Non-faith-based methods of **exegesis** (critical explanation or interpretation of texts) reveal that “sacred” scriptures may include polemics against opponents of the religion, myths, cultural influences, ethical instruction, later interpolations, mistakes by copyists, literary devices, factual history, and genuine spiritual inspiration. This process began with historical-critical study of the Bible at the end of the eighteenth century and has expanded to include scriptures of other traditions, such as the Holy Qur’an of Islam, the *Dao de jing* of Daoism, and Buddhist and Hindu texts.

One area of research is to try to determine the original or most reliable form of a particular text. Another focus is ferreting out the historical aspects of the text, with help from external sources such as archaeological findings, to determine the historical setting in which it was probably composed, its actual author or authors, and possible sources of its material, such as oral or written traditions. Such research may conclude that material about a certain period may have been written later and include perspectives from that later period, or that a text with one person’s name as author may actually be a collection of writings by different people. A third area of research asks, “What was the intended audience?” A fourth examines the language and meanings of the words. A fifth looks at whether a scripture or passage follows a particular literary form, such as poetry, legal code, miracle story, allegory, parable, hymn, narrative, or sayings. A sixth focuses on the **redaction**, or editing and organizing, of the scripture and the development of an authorized canon designed to speak not only to the local community but also to a wider audience. Yet another approach is to look at the scripture in terms of its universal and contemporary relevance, rather than its historicity.

Although such research attempts to be objective, it is not necessarily undertaken with sceptical intentions. To the contrary, these forms of research are taught in many seminaries as ways of reconciling faith with reason. Nevertheless, such analyses may be seen as offensive and/or false by orthodox believers. In any case, they are not perfect, for there are gaps in the available data and they can be interpreted in various ways. Scriptures also serve different purposes in different traditions, and these differences must be understood.

## The encounter between science and religion

Like religion, science is also engaged in searching for universal principles that explain the facts of nature. The two approaches have influenced each other since ancient times, when they were not seen as separate endeavors. In both East and West, there were continual attempts to understand reality as a whole.

In ancient Greece, source of many “Western” ideas, a group of thinkers who are sometimes called “nature philosophers” tried to understand the world through their own perceptions of it. By contrast, Plato (c.427–347 BCE) distrusted the testimony of the human senses. He thus made a series of distinctions: between what is perceived by the senses and what is accessible

through reason, between body and soul, appearance and reality, objects and ideas. In Plato's thought, the soul was superior to the body, and the activity of reason preferable to the distraction of the senses. This value judgment dominated Western thought through the Middle Ages, with its underlying belief that all of nature had been created by God for the sake of humanity.

In the seventeenth century, knowledge of nature became more secularized (that is, divorced from the sacred) as scientists developed models of the universe as a giant machine. Its ways could be discovered by human reason, by studying its component parts and mathematically quantifying its characteristics. However, even in discovering such features, many scientists regarded them as the work of a divine Creator or Ruler. Isaac Newton (1642–1727), whose gravitational theory shaped modern physics, speculated that space is eternal because it is the emanation of "eternal and immutable being." Drawing on biblical quotations, Newton argued that God exists everywhere, containing, discerning, and ruling all things.

During the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, rational ways of knowing were increasingly respected, with a concurrent growing scepticism toward claims of knowledge derived from such sources as divine revelation or illuminated inner wisdom. The sciences were viewed as progressive; some thinkers attacked institutionalized religions and dogma as superstitions. According to scientific materialism, which developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the supernatural is imaginary; only the material world is real.

The old unitary concepts of science and religion received another serious challenge in 1859, when the naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published *On the Origin of Species*, a work that propounded the theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwin demonstrated that certain genetic mutations give an organism a competitive advantage over others of its species. As evolutionary biology has continued to develop since Darwin through genetic research,



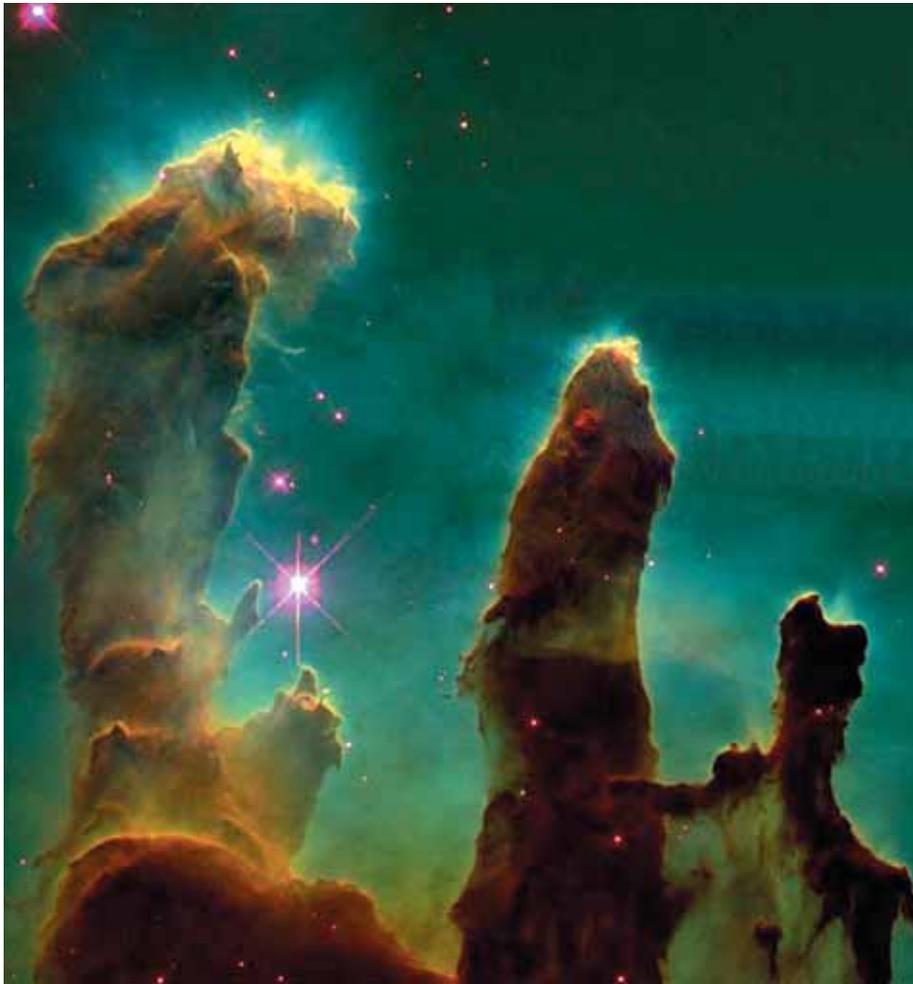
*Mapping of human DNA reveals that its six-and-a-half-foot- (two-meter-) long chain, carrying trillions of times more data than a computer chip, is super-dense, folding without tangles into the nucleus of a cell which is only one-fifth the width of a human hair.*

it shows that those carrying advantageous genes statistically produce more offspring than others, so the percentage of the new gene gradually increases in the gene pool. Evolutionary studies are revealing more and more evidence of what appear to be gradual changes in organisms, as recorded in fossil records, footprints, and genetic records encoded in DNA. According to evolutionary biology theory, over great lengths of time such gradual changes have brought the development of all forms of life. The theory of natural selection directly contradicted a literal understanding of the biblical Book of Genesis, in which God is said to have created all life in only six days. By the end of the nineteenth century, all such beliefs of the Judeo-Christian tradition were being questioned.

However, as science has progressed during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has in some senses moved back toward a more nuanced understanding of religious belief. Science has always questioned its own assumptions and theories, and scientists have given up trying to find absolute certainties. From contemporary scientific research, it is clear that the cosmos is mind-boggling in its complexity and that what we perceive with our five senses is not ultimately real. For instance, the inertness and solidity of matter are only illusions. Each atom consists mostly of empty space with tiny particles whirling around in it. These subatomic particles—such as neutrons, protons, and electrons—cannot even be described as “things.” Theories of quantum mechanics, in trying to account for the tiniest particles of matter, uncovered the Uncertainty Principle: that the position and velocity of a subatomic particle cannot be simultaneously determined. These particles behave like energy as well as like matter, like waves as well as like particles. Their behaviors can best be described in terms of a dynamic, interdependent system which includes the observer. As physicist David Bohm (1917–1994) put it, “Everything interpenetrates everything.”<sup>35</sup>

Our own bodies appear relatively solid, but they are in a constant state of flux and interchange with the environment. Our eyes, ears, noses, tongues, and skin do not reveal absolute truths. Rather, our sensory organs may operate as filters, selecting from a multidimensional universe only those characteristics that we need to perceive in order to survive. Imagine how difficult it would be simply to walk across a street if we could see all the electromagnetic energy in the atmosphere, such as X-rays, radio waves, gamma rays, and infrared and ultraviolet light, rather than only the small band of colors we see as the visible spectrum. Though the sky of a starry night appears vast to the naked eye, the giant Hubble telescope placed in space has revealed an incomprehensibly immense cosmos whose limits have not been found. It contains matter-gobbling black holes, vast starmaking clusters, intergalactic collisions, and cosmic events that happened billions of years ago, so far away that their light is only now being captured by the most powerful instruments we have for examining what lies far beyond our small place in this galaxy. We know that more lies beyond what we have yet been able to measure. And even our ability to conceive of what we cannot sense may perhaps be limited by the way the human brain is organized.

As science continues to question its own assumptions, various new hypotheses are being suggested about the nature of the universe. “Superstring theory” proposes that the universe may not be made of particles at all, but rather of tiny vibrating strings and loops of strings. According to superstring theory, whereas we think we are living in four dimensions of space and time, there may be at least ten dimensions, with the unperceived dimensions “curled up”



*The Hubble space telescope reveals an unimaginably vast cosmos, with billions of galaxies in continual flux. The Eagle nebula shown here is giving birth to new stars in “pillars of creation” which are six trillion miles (ten trillion kilometers) high.*

or “compactified” within the four dimensions that we can perceive. According to another current theory, the cosmos is like a soccer ball, a finite closed system with many facets.

New branches of science are finding that the universe is not always predictable, nor does it always operate according to human notions of cause and effect. Physicist Murray Gell-Mann says that we are “a small speck of creation believing it is capable of comprehending the whole.”<sup>36</sup> And whereas scientific models of the universe were until recently based on the assumption of stability and equilibrium, physicist Ilya Prigogine observes that “today we see instability, fluctuations, irreversibility at every level.”<sup>37</sup>

Physicist Hans-Peter Dürr, winner of the Right Livelihood Award (often described as the “Alternative Nobel Prize”), describes the dilemma that these discoveries pose to human understanding:

*We found out that matter is not existent. At the beginning, there is only something which changes. How can something which is in-between create something which can be grasped? ... We are part of the same organism which we cannot talk about. If I explain it, try to catch it with language, I destroy it. The Creation and the Creator cannot be seen as separate. There is only oneness.<sup>38</sup>*

*The most beautiful and profound emotion that we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness. ... A human being is part of the whole. ... He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. ... Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures, and the whole [of] nature in its beauty.*

*Albert Einstein*<sup>39</sup>

In the work of physicists such as David Bohm, physics approaches **meta-physics**—philosophy based on theories of subtle realities that transcend the physical world. Bohm described the dimensions we see and think of as “real” as the *explicate* order. Behind it lies the *implicate* order, in which separateness resolves into unbroken wholeness. Beyond may lie other subtle dimensions, all merging into an infinite ground that unfolds itself as light. This scientific theory is very similar to descriptions by mystics from all cultures about their intuitive experiences of the cosmos. They speak of realities beyond normal human perceptions of space and time. The Hindu term “*Brahma*,” for instance, means “vast”—a vastness perceived by sages as infinite dimensions of a Supreme Consciousness that started without any material and then Itself became the Creation. In the realization of Guru Nanak, first of the Sikh Gurus, God is “*Akal Murat*”—Reality that transcends time.

Science is moving beyond its earlier mechanical models toward more dynamic biological models. For instance, James Lovelock has proposed the Gaia Theory of the earth as a complex, self-regulating organism of sorts, but he does not see it as the work of any Grand Planner. He explains:

*Gaia theory sees the earth as a complete system made up of all the living things—all of them, from bacteria all the way up to whales, from tiny algae living in the ocean all the way up to giant redwood trees, and all of the great ecosystems of the forests and so on. All of that life part is not alone but tightly integrated with the atmosphere, the ocean, and the surface rocks. The whole of that constitutes a single system that regulates itself, keeps the climate constant and comfortable for life, keeps the chemical composition of the atmosphere so that it's always breathable. [The earth] is not alive like an animal. What I am implying is alive in the sense of being able to regulate itself. It's a system that evolved automatically, without any purpose, foresight, or anything. It just happened and has been in existence now for about three and a half to four billion years. A very tough system... .<sup>40</sup>*

In the United States, the conservative Christian community has objected to mechanistic scientific theories of biological evolution, preferring **Creationism**, the concept of intentional divine creation of all life forms. **Intelligent design** theory has been cited to support the religious concept of Creationism. According to intelligent design theorists, scientific discoveries of the complexities and perfections of life can be said to prove the existence of an Intelligent Designer. For instance, if the weak force in the nucleus of an atom were a

## RELIGION IN PRACTICE

## When Science Approaches Religion

Theoretical physicist Paul Davies (b. 1946) has won the Templeton Prize, a prestigious international award for contribution to thinking about religion. He suggests that science approaches religion when it asks fundamental questions:

*If you are a biologist and you get stuck, you might go to a chemist to help you out. If a chemist gets stuck, you might get a physicist. If you're a physicist and you get stuck, there's nowhere to go except theology, because physics is the most basic science. It's at the base of the explanatory pyramid upon which everything else is built. It deals with the fundamental laws of nature. And that inevitably prompts us to ask questions like, "Why those laws? Where have they come from? Why are they mathematical? What does it mean? Could they be different?" Clearly these are questions on the borderline between science and philosophy, or science and theology.*

*The early scientists perceived this natural order and its hidden mathematical content, and they thought it derived from a creator-being. What happened in the centuries that followed was that science accepted the existence of a real order in nature. You can't be a scientist if you don't believe that there is some sort of order that is at least in part comprehensible to us. So you have to make two enormous assumptions—which don't have to be right. But to be a scientist, you've got to believe they're true. First, that there is a rational order in nature. Second, that we can come to understand nature, at least in part. What an extraordinary thing this is to believe in! There is a rational, comprehensible order in nature. Science asserts that the world isn't arbitrary or absurd.*

*If I use the word "God," it is not in the sense of a super-being who has existed for all eternity and, like a cosmic magician, brings the universe into being at some moment in time on a whimsical basis. When*

*I refer to "God," it is in the sense of the rational ground in which the whole scientific enterprise is rooted. The God I'm referring to is not really a person or a being in the usual sense. In particular, it is something that is outside of time. That is a very significant issue, and one on which there can be a very fruitful exchange, in my opinion, between physics and philosophy.*

*Almost all of my physics colleagues, and scientists from other disciplines, even if they would cast themselves as militant atheists, are deeply inspired by the wonder, the beauty, the ingenuity of nature, and the underlying, law-like mathematical order.*

*It could be that there are some things that are simply going to be forever beyond scientific enquiry—not because we're lacking the money or the expertise or something of that sort, but because there are inherent limits to how far rational enquiry can take us. If science leaves us with mystery, is there a way that we can come to know about the world, about existence, not through scientific enquiry but through some other method? I'm open-minded as to whether that is the case. I'm talking here about revelatory or mystical experiences, where somehow the answer is grasped—not through rational enquiry, nor through experimentation, but by "knowing" in some internal sense.*

*Nothing I have said deals with the sort of issues we struggle with in daily life, which are ethical and moral issues. The weakness of restricting to a God who's just some sort of abstract, mathematical, rational ground for the world is that it doesn't provide us with any sort of moral guidance. Most people turn to religion not because they want to understand how the universe is put together; but because they want to understand how their own lives are put together, and what they should do next. You don't go to a physicist to ask about right and wrong.<sup>41</sup>*

small fraction weaker, there would be no hydrogen in the universe—and thus no water. Biologists find that the natural world is an intricate harmony of beautifully elaborated, interrelated parts. Even to produce the miniature propeller that allows a tiny bacterium to swim, some forty different proteins are required.

The intelligent design movement concludes that there must be a Creator. However, science is a method of proposing testable hypotheses and testing them, whereas the intelligent design hypothesis is not testable. In 2005, the judge in a landmark case in Dover, Pennsylvania, ruled that intelligent design could not be recommended to ninth-grade biology students because intelligent design does not qualify as science—unless the definition of science is changed to include supernatural explanations—and because the First Amendment of the Constitution prevents government officials from imposing any particular religion or religious belief.

In the current dialogue between science and religion, four general positions have emerged. One is a conflict model, which is most apparent in issues such as creation, with some scientists holding onto faith in scientific method and some religionists holding onto faith in a Creator God whose existence cannot be proved by scientific method. A second position is that science and religion deal with separate realms. That is, religions deal with matters such as morality, hope, answers to philosophical questions (“Why are we here?”), and ideas about life after death, whereas science deals with quantifiable physical reality. In this position, a person can live with “two truths,” and neither side is required to venture into the other’s domain. A third position is that of dialogue, in which scientists and religious believers can find common ground in interpreting religious propositions as metaphors and bases for the moral use of scientific research. Claims to absolute truth are softened on each side. A fourth position is that of integration, in which science and religion overlap. One example is illustrated by the boxed excerpt from physicist Paul Davies; another is what is sometimes called “creation theology,” referring to scientific enquiries by people who believe in a creative deity or deities. Environmentalist Ellen Bernstein explains this exploration from a Jewish perspective:

*Creation theology refers to any kind of reflection on God and the world as a whole, or the elements of the world. It is interested in the nature of nature, and the nature of humanity, and the interplay of the two. It understands God as the continual, creative Presence in the world. . . . Jews who accept the logic of evolution theory should be relieved to learn that embracing a theology of creation in no way requires a suspension of rational thought or scientific integrity.<sup>42</sup>*

At the cutting edge of research, scientists themselves find they have no ultimate answers that can be expressed in scientific terms.

## Women in religions

Another long-standing issue in the sphere of religion is the exclusion of women in male-dominated systems. Most institutionalized religions are **patriarchal**, meaning that men lead like father figures. Women are often relegated to the fringes of religious organizations, given only supporting roles, thus reflecting existing social distinctions between men and women. In some cases, women are even considered incapable of spiritual realization or dangerous to men’s spiritual lives. Founders of religion have in many cases attempted to



*Even when denied access to public leadership roles in religions, women have been spiritually influential as mothers, nurses, Sunday school teachers, and the like.*

temper cultural restraints on women. Jesus, for example, apparently included women among his close disciples, and the Prophet Muhammad gave much more respect to women than had been customary in the surrounding culture. However, the institutions that developed after the prophets often reverted to exclusion and oppression of women, sometimes giving a religious stamp of approval to gender imbalances.

Although women are still barred from equal spiritual footing with men in many religions, this situation is now being widely challenged. The contemporary feminist movement includes strong efforts to make women's voices heard in the sphere of religion. Women are trying to discover their own identity, rather than having their identities defined by others, and to develop full, purposeful lives for themselves and their families. Scholars are bringing to light the histories of many women who have been religious leaders. Feminists are challenging patriarchal religious institutions that have excluded women from active participation. They are also challenging gender-exclusive language in holy texts and authoritarian masculine images of the divine. Their protests also go beyond gender issues to question the narrow and confining ways in which religious inspiration has been institutionalized. Many Buddhist centers in the West and some in Asia are run by women, and female scholars are having a major impact on the ways that Buddhist teachings are being understood. At prestigious Christian seminaries in the United States, women preparing for the ministry now outnumber men and are radically transforming views of religion and religious practice. Many women are deeply concerned about social ills of our times—violence, poverty, ecological disaster—and are insisting that religions be actively engaged in insuring human survival, and that they be life-affirming rather than punitive in approach.

Even in traditional roles, women are redefining themselves as important spiritual actors. Buddhist practitioner Jacqueline Kramer observes:

*The life occupation of mothering and homemaking has been both glorified and demeaned, but seldom has it been seen as the valid spiritual path it can be. Yet, the practices the mothers engage in, day in and day out—selfless service, generosity, letting go, developing a deep love for all beings, patience, faith, and mindfulness—are the way of practice for monks and nuns of all the world’s wisdom traditions.<sup>43</sup>*

## Negative aspects of organized religions

Tragically, religions have often split rather than unified humanity, have oppressed rather than freed, have terrified rather than inspired. Institutionalization of religion is part of the problem. As institutionalized religions spread the teachings of their founders, there is the danger that more energy will go into preserving the outer form of the tradition than into maintaining its inner spirit. Max Weber (1864–1920), an influential early twentieth-century scholar of the sociology of religion, referred to this process as the “routinization of charisma.” Charisma is the rare quality of personal magnetism often ascribed to founders of religion. When the founder dies, the center of the movement may shift to those who turn the original inspirations into routine rituals, dogma, and organizational structures.

Since the human needs that religions answer are so strong, those who hold religious power are in a position to dominate and control their followers. In fact, in many religions leaders are given this authority to guide people’s spiritual lives, for their perceived wisdom and special access to the sacred are valued. Because religions involve the unseen, the mysterious, these leaders’ teachings are not verifiable by everyday physical experience. They must more often be accepted on faith and it is possible to surrender to leaders who are misguided or unethical. Religious leaders, like secular leaders, may not be honest with themselves and others about their inner motives. They may mistake their own thoughts and desires for divine guidance.

Another potential problem is exaggeration of guilt. Religions try to help us make ethical choices in our lives, to develop a moral conscience. But in people who already have perfectionist or paranoid tendencies, the fear of sinning and being punished can be exaggerated to the point of neurosis or even psychosis by blaming, punishment-oriented religious teachings. If people try to leave their religion for the sake of their mental health, they may be haunted with guilt that they have done a terribly wrong thing. Religions thus have the potential for wreaking psychological havoc on their followers.

Another potentially negative use of religion is escapism. Because some religions, particularly those that developed in Asia, offer a state of blissful contemplation as the reward for spiritual practice, the faithful may use religion to escape from their everyday problems. Psychologist John Welwood observes that Westerners sometimes embrace Eastern religions with the unconscious motive of avoiding their unsatisfactory lives. He calls this attempt “spiritual bypassing.”

Because religions may have such a strong hold on their followers—by their fears, their desires, their deep beliefs—they are potential centers for political power. When church and state are one, the belief that the dominant national religion is the only true religion may be used to oppress those of other beliefs within the country. Religion may also be used as a rallying point for wars against other nations, casting the desire for control as a holy motive.

Throughout history, huge numbers of people have been killed in the name of eradicating “false” religions and replacing them with the “true” religion. Rather than uniting us all in bonds of love, harmony, and mutual respect, this approach has often divided us with barriers of hatred and intolerance.

In our times, dangerous politicized polarizations between religions are increasing in some areas, albeit cooling off in others. Some of the most worrisome conflicts are pitting Christians and Jews against Muslims to such an extent that some have predicted a catastrophic “clash of civilizations.” No religion has ever sanctioned violence against innocent people, but such political clashes have given a holy aura to doing just that, posing a grave threat to life and peace. Sadism, terrorism, wars over land and resources, political oppression, and environmental destruction can all be given a thin veneer of religious sanctification, thus obscuring their evil aspects.

His Highness the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of Isma’ili Shia Muslims, maintains that the real problem today is a “clash of ignorance.”<sup>44</sup> This is not the time to think of the world in terms of superficial, rigid distinctions between “us” and “them.” It is the time when we must try to understand each other’s beliefs and feelings clearly, carefully, and compassionately, and bring truly religious responses into play. To take such a journey does not mean forsaking our own religious beliefs or our scepticism. But the journey is likely to broaden our perspective and thus bring us closer to understanding other members of our human family.

## Lenses for studying religions

Scholars of different disciplines have their own lens through which they attempt to describe and explain religions. In this book we will look through various lenses, including history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, theology, politics, economics, feminist studies, and **phenomenology**—a special field devoted specifically to the study of religions. Phenomenology involves an appreciative investigation of religious phenomena from the perspective of the practitioners and believers—an “insider’s” rather than an “outsider’s” point of view. This includes “thick description,” a term used by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006)—not only reporting outward behaviors but also attempting to explain their meaning for members of particular cultural systems. This approach follows real people into the depths of their search for meaning, order, and inner peace in a world that may otherwise seem chaotic and sometimes violent.

Ultimately, such exploration may have an impact on our own inner landscape. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), philosopher of hermeneutics, uses the term “intersubjectivity” to refer to this possibility. **Hermeneutics** is the study of the theory and practice of interpretation. It covers not only exegesis of written texts but also interpretation of all other forms of communication—written, oral, artistic, geopolitical, sociological, and so forth—and it delves into past conditions such as prior understandings and suppositions. Intersubjective hermeneutics is the effort to fully understand, internalize, and perhaps be transformed by what we learn. As Dr. Rita Sherma, editor of the *Journal of Dharma Studies*, explains:

*The Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity assumes that the “Other” is not just an object of study, but also a subject from whom I can learn. ... According to*

*Gadamer's vision, intersubjective dialogue provides a means for the extension of one's own possibilities for growth and understanding. ... We grow conceptually when we take the Other's self-understanding seriously and find the lacuna in our own vision filled by new insights gleaned. This conceptual growth does not include the uncritical legitimation of every view held, and every practice engaged in, by the Other. The keyword here is understanding, not legitimation. Clearly, the Other may be beholden to highly problematic worldviews and lifestyles. ... [But] no actual comprehension of the impact of the ideas and practices of the Other—whether positive or negative—is possible without understanding how these things are actually experienced by the Other.<sup>45</sup>*

Therefore, in addition to exploring various scholarly perspectives, we will try to listen carefully to individuals of all faiths as they tell their own stories.

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## Key terms

- absolutist** Believing in one's received traditions as completely and exclusively true.
- agnosticism** Belief that if there is anything beyond this life it is impossible for humans to know it.
- allegory** Narrative using symbols to convey abstract ideas.
- atheism** Belief that there is no deity.
- awakening** Full awareness of invisible Reality.
- charisma** Magnetic attraction, a quality often ascribed to spiritual leaders.
- comparative religion** A discipline that attempts to compare and understand patterns found in different religious traditions.
- Creationism** Belief that all life was created by God.
- dogma** Doctrines proclaimed as absolutely true by religious institutions.
- enlightenment** Wisdom that is thought to come from direct experience of Ultimate Reality.
- exclusivism** Belief that one's own tradition is the only true religion and that others are invalid.
- fundamentalism** Insistence on what is perceived as the historical form of one's religion.
- gnosis** Intuitive knowledge of spiritual realities.
- immanent** Present in the visible world.
- incarnation** Physical embodiment of the divine.
- intelligent design** Theory that scientific discoveries prove the existence of an all-encompassing Designer, since they reveal complexities that seem to be beyond chance or evolutionary process.
- liberal** Taking a flexible, nondogmatic approach.
- metaphysics** Philosophy based on theories of subtle realities that transcend the physical world.
- monotheism** Belief that there is only one deity.
- mysticism** The intuitive perception of spiritual truths beyond the limits of reason.
- myth** A symbolic story expressing ideas about reality or spiritual history.
- orthodox** Strictly standing by received traditions.
- phenomenology** Study of religious practices to comprehend their meaning for their practitioners.
- polytheism** Belief that there are many deities.
- profane** Worldly, secular, as opposed to sacred.
- realization** Personal awareness of the existence of Unseen Reality.
- redaction** Editing and organization of a religion's scriptures.
- religion** A particular response to dimensions of life considered sacred, as shaped by institutionalized traditions.

**ritual** Repeated, patterned religious act.

**sacred** The realm of the extraordinary, beyond everyday perceptions, the supernatural, holy.

**scientific materialism** Belief that only the material world exists and that the supernatural is only imagined by humans.

**secularism** Personal disregard of religion; government policy of not favoring one religion.

**spirituality** Any personal response to dimensions of life that are considered sacred.

**symbol** Visible representation of an invisible reality or concept.

**theism** Belief in a deity or deities.

**transcendent** Spiritual reality that exists apart from the material universe.

**universalism** Acceptance that truth may be found in all religions.

## Review questions

1. In what ways has the term “religion” been defined?
2. What are some of the different perspectives available for understanding religion?
3. Describe absolutist and liberal interpretations of religious traditions, how they relate to globalization and modernity, and how each might react to historical-critical studies of religious texts.
4. What are the major positions that have emerged in the dialogue between science and religion?

## Discussion questions

1. To what extent do you find materialistic arguments rejecting the reality posited by religion and spirituality useful in understanding religion?
2. What relationship does spirituality have to institutional religion?
3. In what ways is the patriarchal nature of institutionalized religions changing?
4. What factors do you believe contribute to the negative aspects of organized religions?
5. Discuss possible benefits and disadvantages to using different lenses for the study of religion.

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