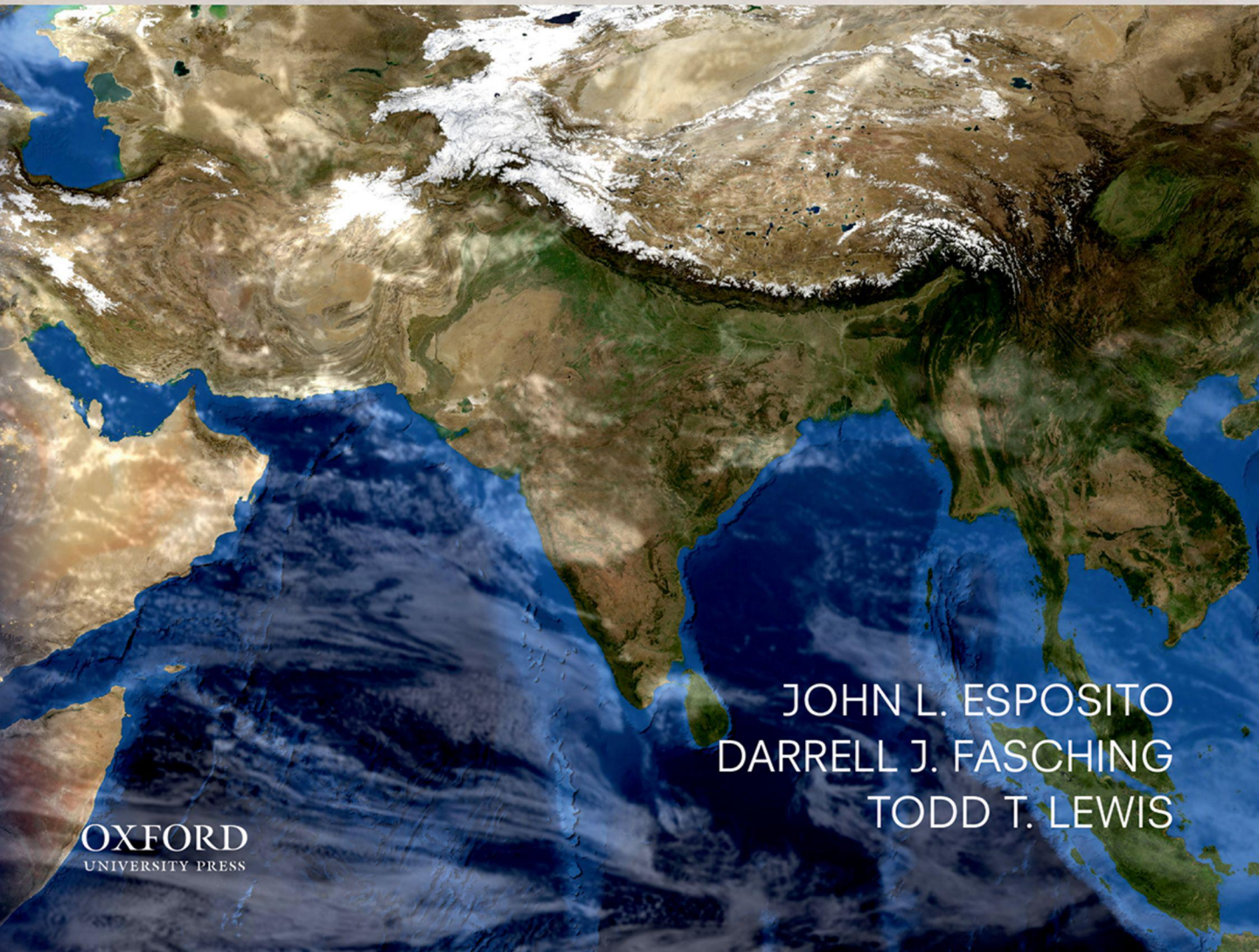
RELIGIONS OF ASIA TODAY

FOURTH EDITION



JOHN L. ESPOSITO
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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Fourth Edition

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This edition is dedicated to the memory of our colleague and co-author Darrell J. Fasching, a masterful teacher and scholar.

BRIEF CONTENTS

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PREFACE

Religion is unquestionably a dynamic spiritual and political force in the world today. Around the globe religious experiences and beliefs profoundly change individual lives even as they influence politics and play a powerful role in international affairs. This new volume, *Religions of Asia Today*, comprises one-half of the new sixth edition of our textbook *World Religions Today* and addresses this reality by providing an introductory volume for college and university students.

Religions of Asia Today grew out of our several decades of experience in teaching world religions. It is a product of our conviction that, for our students to understand the daily news accounts of religions in our global situation, they need more than just the ancient foundations of the world's religions. Textbooks on world religions too often have tended to emphasize historical origins and doctrinal developments, focusing on the past and giving short shrift to the "modern" world. Many stressed a textual, theological/philosophical, or legal approach, one that gave insufficient attention to the modern alterations of these traditions. Most gave little attention to their social institutions and their connections to political power. As a result, students came away with a maximum appreciation for the origins and development of the classical traditions but a minimum awareness of the continued dynamism and relevance of religious traditions today. So, despite the growing visibility and impact of a global religious resurgence and of the unprecedented globalization of all world religions, most textbooks have not quite caught up. *Religions of Asia Today* extends our commitment to address this situation for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with short chapters also devoted to indigenous religions and global religions.

A short comment on the selection of this volume's title, *Religions of Asia Today*, and that of its companion volume, *Religions of the West Today*. While illustrating our contemporary emphasis, these titles also highlight the difficulties of choosing apt language in our postmodern, globalized world. The authors engaged in a spirited debate to find agreement on the question of what terms to use as titles of the two new volumes. Going back to the nineteenth century, a Eurocentric vantage point on the world created the dichotomy "Western" religions versus "Eastern" (or "Oriental") religions. While it is true that any geographic, directional terms are arbitrarily constructed, the fact remains that the power of imperial Europe and its creation of the new field of knowledge of religious studies coined these terms, and they endure. As Kipling wrote, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." In so doing, Islam was commonly—and erroneously—shunted away from the "West" and

distanced from the "Western" monotheisms of Christian and Judaism. All of Asia was likewise lumped together, misleadingly, as "Eastern religions," despite the extraordinary diversity found there.

So we, as authors, found it problematic either to assent to this now-archaic dichotomy or to find a completely satisfactory concise alternative. How could we craft a textbook for the twenty-first century that highlights postcolonial and postmodern perspectives while labeling our textbooks with nineteenth-century, colonial terms? Such words recall stereotypes of the East as mysterious, mystical, and unchanging (and therefore backward and unscientific). And yet today, in an age of globalization, our students learn advanced mathematics, chemistry, and physics from their professors from India, China, Japan, and other Asian countries. Moreover, they are most likely to associate the term *the East* with the superiority of Japanese and Korean automobiles, cutting-edge electronic technology, and the growing international prominence of the Chinese economy. Nevertheless, there are those who remember the preglobalization era and fear that the old colonial stereotypes may still linger.

Our solution is a somewhat awkward one that suggests scholarship still being in transition to a new way of looking at the world. We chose to mix geographic metaphors. So we have *Religions of the West Today* to highlight the grouping of the Abrahamic faiths together; and we grouped Hinduism, Buddhism, and the traditions of East Asia all under the title *Religions of Asia Today*, with the plural word *religions* underlining their plurality. One of the problems with this choice is that Islam today is also a major religion in Asia, with substantial communities in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and China. We include a chapter on Islam in the present volume to reflect this reality. We believe that this addition empowers instructors to include in their courses the discussion of Islam in Asia, a possibility that recent events in the world certainly justify. Of course, this still leaves the growing role of Christianity in China and the major social and political role of Christianity in South Korea, treated only in passing (in the "East Asian Religions" chapter). These are among the reasons why we, as authors, had an extended and not fully resolved conversation about both content and titles. It is a conversation that mirrors the complexities and perplexities of our new global situation.

Religions of Asia Today continues the approach of the previous five editions of *World Religions Today*, using historical coverage of religious traditions as a framework to help students understand how faiths have evolved to the present day. Indeed, we open most chapters with an "Encounter with Modernity." These encounters illustrate the tension between the premodern religious views and modernity. Each chapter then returns to the origins of the tradition to trace the path that led to this confrontation with "modernity." We attempt to show not only how each tradition has been changed by its encounter with modernity but also how each religion in turn has influenced modernity. We would like to point out that we have included the short chapter "Indigenous Religions" in this new edition. While we realize that many instructors do not cover indigenous religions in their courses,

growing numbers do; however, those who wish can skip this chapter without negative impact.

The major theme and chapter structure of the earlier editions of *World Religions Today* have been retained, though they have been updated, revised, and significantly shortened. Chapter 2, on "Indigenous Religions," has been improved by reflecting current scholarship on the beliefs and practices that predate or live outside the global traditions of Asia that make up the bulk of this book. A survey of indigenous religions' beliefs and practices could fill an entire book on its own, but we hope this chapter manages to survey the range of traditions without making artificial generalizations.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

The book's major theme and chapter structure have been retained from the earlier editions, though they have been updated and revised. Responding to reviewers, we have shortened each chapter roughly 20 percent from the previous edition, while trying to keep central issues in the spotlight. We have also updated chapter content to reflect recent events at the time of writing. In response to reviewer suggestions, we have included the following new content:

- NEW marginal definitions of Key Terms help students understand each term within its immediate context.
- EXPANDED coverage of Sikhism (Chapter 3), Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses (Chapter 7)

FEATURES

Each chapter is enriched by a wide variety of thematic and special-topic boxes that explore particular ideas or practices in some depth. It is our hope that these lively and interesting boxes are seen as an integral part of the text, allowing students to imagine how religion today is among the most colorful, lively, and striking of human endeavors.

- "Gender Focus" boxes present additional information, beyond that in the regular text, about different practices by believers of different sexes.
- "Rituals and Rites" boxes describe the ritual practices of believers, often with a focus on ways these rites have changed over time.

- "Contrasting Religious Visions" boxes compare the beliefs of two significant adherents of a faith who see the demands of their religion calling believers in very different directions in the modern age. These demonstrate that, no matter what religion we are examining, that very same religious tradition can be used to promote both peacemaking and conflict.
- "Teachings of Religious Wisdom" boxes offer some of the primary texts and formal teachings of different religions.
- "Tales of Spiritual Transformation" offer descriptions of religious experiences in the believers' own words.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Supplementary materials are available on the Oxford University Press **Ancillary Resource Center** (ARC), a convenient, instructor-focused single destination for resources to accompany your text. Accessed online through individual user accounts, the ARC provides instructors with access to up-to-date ancillaries at any time while guaranteeing the security of grade-significant resources. In addition, it allows OUP to keep instructors informed when new content becomes available. Available on the ARC:

- The **Instructor's Manual**, which includes the following:
  Chapter Summaries
  Chapter Goals
  Key Terms with definitions
  Lecture outlines
  Suggested web links and other resources
- A **Computerized Test Bank**, including 40 fill-in-the-blank, 40 multiple-choice, 40 true/false, and 12 essay/discussion questions per chapter
- **Lecture outlines** as PowerPoint®-based slides

A link to the ARC is available on the Companion Website (www.oup.com/us/esposito).

For the student: The **Companion Website** (www.oup.com/us/esposito) includes the following student resources:

- Chapter goals
- Flashcards of Key Terms
- Suggested web links and other resources

- Self-quizzes, containing 20 fill-in-the-blank, 20 multiple-choice, 20 true/false, and 6 essay/discussion questions per chapter, selected from the Test Bank in the ARC

The Instructor's Manual and Computerized Test Bank, as well as the student material from the Companion Website, is also available in **Learning Management System** Cartridges, in a fully downloadable format for instructors using a learning management system in their courses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This fourth edition of *Religions of Asia Today* has been substantially revised in light of the valuable comments we continue to receive from colleagues across the country who have used it and in light of our own subsequent experiences and reflections. We offer special thanks to the following professors and to the other, anonymous, reviewers. This edition is much stronger because of their thoughtful comments:

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Although this is a multiauthored text, with each of us taking primary responsibility for different chapters, it has truly been a collaborative project from start to finish. Throughout the entire process we shared and commented on one another's material. Finally, just as these volumes were going to press, we learned of the sudden death of our long-term collaborator and co-author in these textbooks, Darrell J. Fasching. We dedicate these new editions to a fine scholar and generous colleague.

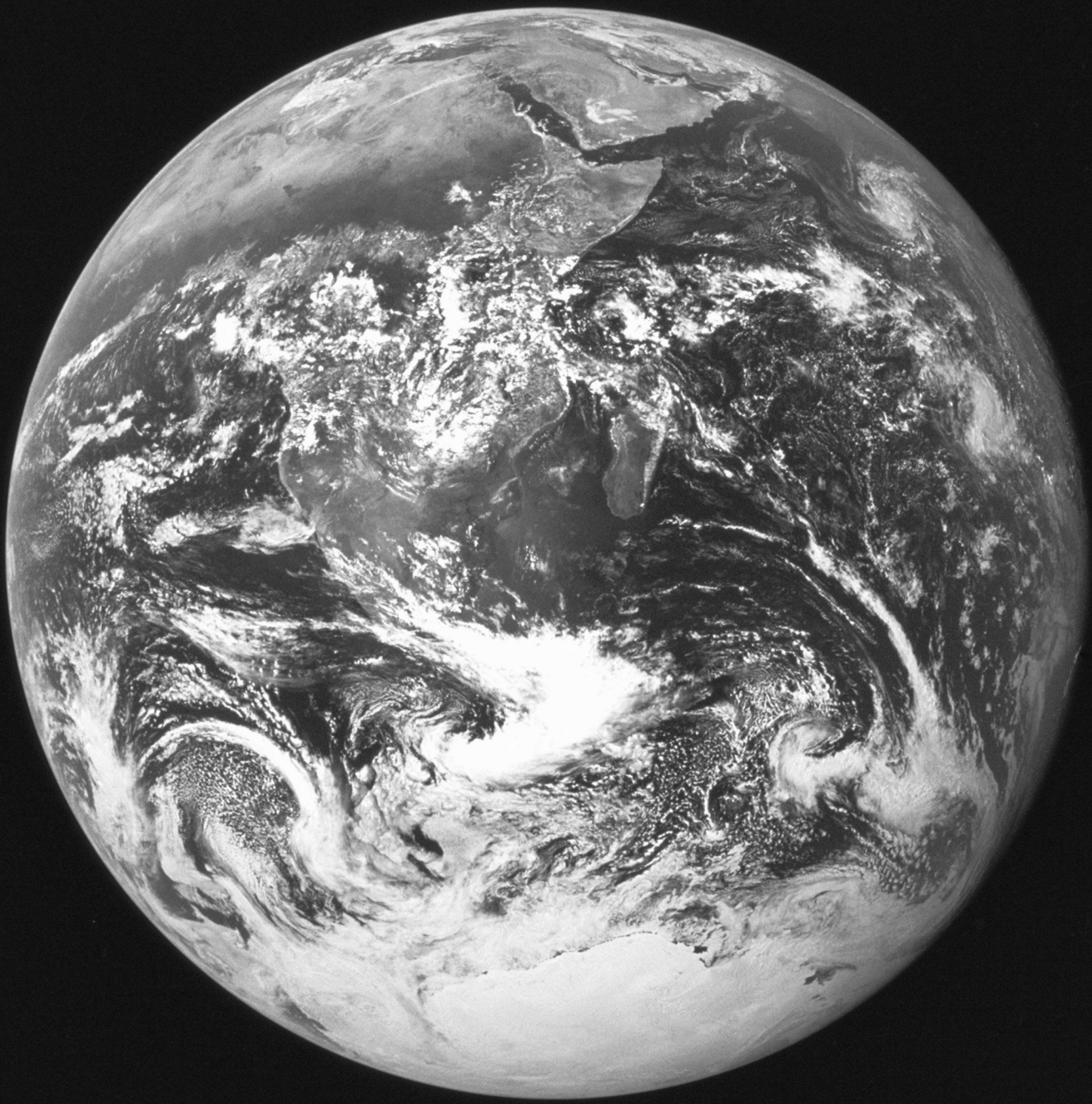
John L. Esposito
Todd T. Lewis

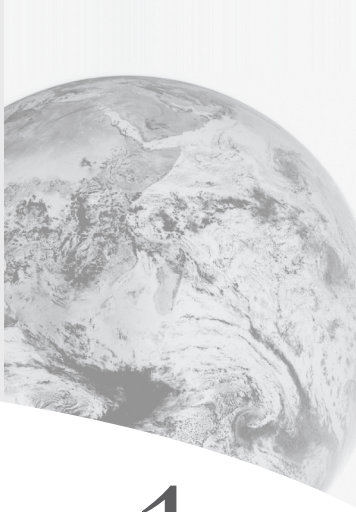

GREENLAND
Arctic Circle
ICELAND
CANADA
UNITED KINGDOM
IRELAND
FRANCE
NORTH PACIFIC OCEAN
UNITED STATES
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
PORTUGAL
SPAIN
MOROCCO
Tropic of Cancer
MEXICO
HAITI
CUBA
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
WESTERN SAHARA
BELIZE
PUERTO RICO
MAURITANIA
CAPE VERDE IS.
MALI
JAMAICA
TRINIDAD and TOBAGO
SENEGAL
GUATEMALA
GAMBIA
EL SALVADOR
GUYANA
GUINEA BISSAU
VENEZUELA
NICARAGUA
SURINAM
GUINEA
COSTA RICA
FRENCH GUIANA
SIERRA LEONE
PANAMA
COLOMBIA
LIBERIA
Equator
BURKINA FASO
GHANA
ECUADOR
IVORY COAST
SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE
PERU
EQUATORIAL GUINEA
BRAZIL
WESTERN SAMOA
BOLIVIA
TONGA
PARAGUAY
Tropic of Capricorn
CHILI
SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN
ARGENTINA
URUGUAY
SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
Antarctic Circle

Key to numbered countries

1.	MACEDONIA	16.	GERMANY
2.	MONTENEGRO	17.	DENMARK
3.	BOSNIA	18.	POLAND
4.	SERBIA	19.	GREECE
5.	CROATIA	20.	BULGARIA
6.	SLOVENIA	21.	ROMANIA
7.	HUNGARY	22.	MOLDOVA
8.	SLOVAK REPUBLIC	23.	UKRAINE
9.	CZECH REPUBLIC	24.	BELARUS
10.	AUSTRIA	25.	LITHUANIA
11.	SWITZERLAND	26.	LATVIA
12.	ITALY	27.	ESTONIA
13.	LUXEMBOURG	28.	GEORGIA
14.	BELGIUM	29.	ARMENIA
15.	NETHERLANDS	30.	AZERBAIJAN

RELIGIONS OF ASIA TODAY





1 INTRODUCTION

Understanding World Religions in Global Perspective

In an age of **globalization**, human events reach through time and around the world to transform our personal, social, economic, and political lives. Until the modern period, the great world religions had largely divided the globe among them, with some modest overlap. But in our postmodern era, all the world's religions have members in every country or society. Just as Christians had migrated to every city in the world by 1850, today Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are now found in significant numbers in all large American and European cities and increasingly in smaller ones. Today, anyone using the Internet can observe and even participate in live webcam services in major temples, shrines, churches, mosques, and monasteries from around the world; devotees can offer prayers, order rituals, or make monetary offerings through their websites. This is globalization.

globalization: in terms of world religions, the idea that all the world's religions have members in almost every country or society; and that technology affords access to all key religious sites, practices, and teachers

Essential to understanding globalization in the United States is the Immigration Act of 1965, signed by President Lyndon Johnson. This act abolished the immigration system set up in 1924 and modified in 1952. The earlier system heavily favored immigration from Europe and severely restricted immigration from other parts of the world, especially Asia. The 1965 legislation dramatically changed the face of America. As of 1950 in the United States, according to government figures, about 3.6 percent of immigrants were from Asia; by the year 2000, more than 30 percent were.

In the 1950s, when people thought about religious diversity, it was limited largely to Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. In the twenty-first century the situation is

◀ With the Space Age, awareness that all humans share life in a global village has come to the religions and cultures of the earth.

dramatically different. Almost daily the media takes note of new religious members of the community—for example, a meditation retreat at a Korean Zen center in the suburbs of Providence, Rhode Island; the opening of an Islamic mosque in St. Louis, Missouri; or the dedication of a Hindu temple in Tampa, Florida.

Figure 1.1, compiled from Pew Foundation reports, census data, and other studies, offers an approximation of the number of adherents of the various religions found in the world today, and their numbers in relation to one another. There is no reliable exact count available or even possible for many reasons: the lack of surveys utilizing the same criteria; disagreements about what is a branch of a world religion and what is a "new religion"; and the paucity of census/survey data from the world's two most populous nations, India and China. Existing surveys that summarize religious identity on a global level are extremely problematic due to these issues of definition, limited global scope, and affiliation.

Central to any survey data is the assumption that a person can be listed under one variable and be only that; but such an exclusive choice of one and only one religion does not very well capture the reality of world religions today. (For this reason, the estimated percentages assigned to each tradition in Figure 1.1 exceed 100%.) Even among those professing to be monotheists, there are now many hyphenated identities (such as Buddhist Jew, Zen Christian, or agnostic Yoga devotee). Singular identity is even more problematic for representing the religious reality for most people in Asia and the various indigenous peoples across the world, where many follow more than one tradition. Demographers too often give a false sense of certainty to the pluralistic and fluid boundaries of the world's religions today.

Why Study World Religions?

In the emerging global economy, most neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools reflect this diversity as well. The beliefs and practices of world religions have become part of the mosaic of American society. It is more and more likely that our neighbors, classmates, and colleagues are ethnically, politically, and, yes, even religiously diverse—coming from many parts of the globe (see Map 1.1). Understanding diverse religions is necessary because it is now about understanding our neighbors. If we do not understand each other, our misunderstandings may well lead to prejudice, conflict, and even violence.

The academic study of religion is one of the newest disciplines in the modern university. Its beginnings go back to the emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century, with the appearance of such fields as anthropology, sociology, and comparative linguistics. One of the great founding fathers of this study was the Indologist Max Müller (1825–1900), who argued that "the person who knows only one religion understands none."[1] It is only by studying the diverse expressions of religion throughout history and across cultures that we come to understand its unity and diversity.

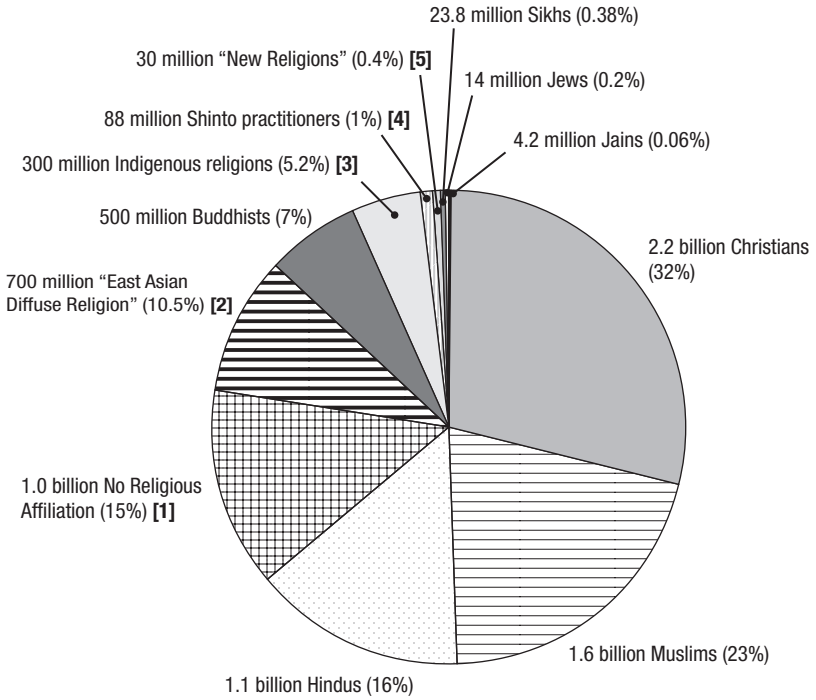


Figure 1.1 The world's major religions (percentage of global population).

Notes:

[1] Includes atheists, agnostics, and people who do not self-identify with any particular religion in surveys. Studies have also revealed that many of the "religiously unaffiliated" do have some religious beliefs. Some of the religiously unaffiliated, for example, do express belief in God or a higher power, a view shared, for example, by 7% of Chinese unaffiliated adults, 30% of French unaffiliated adults, and 68% of unaffiliated U.S. adults. Some of the unaffiliated also engage in certain kinds of religious practices. For example, 7% of unaffiliated adults in France and 27% of those in the United States say they attend religious services at least once a year.

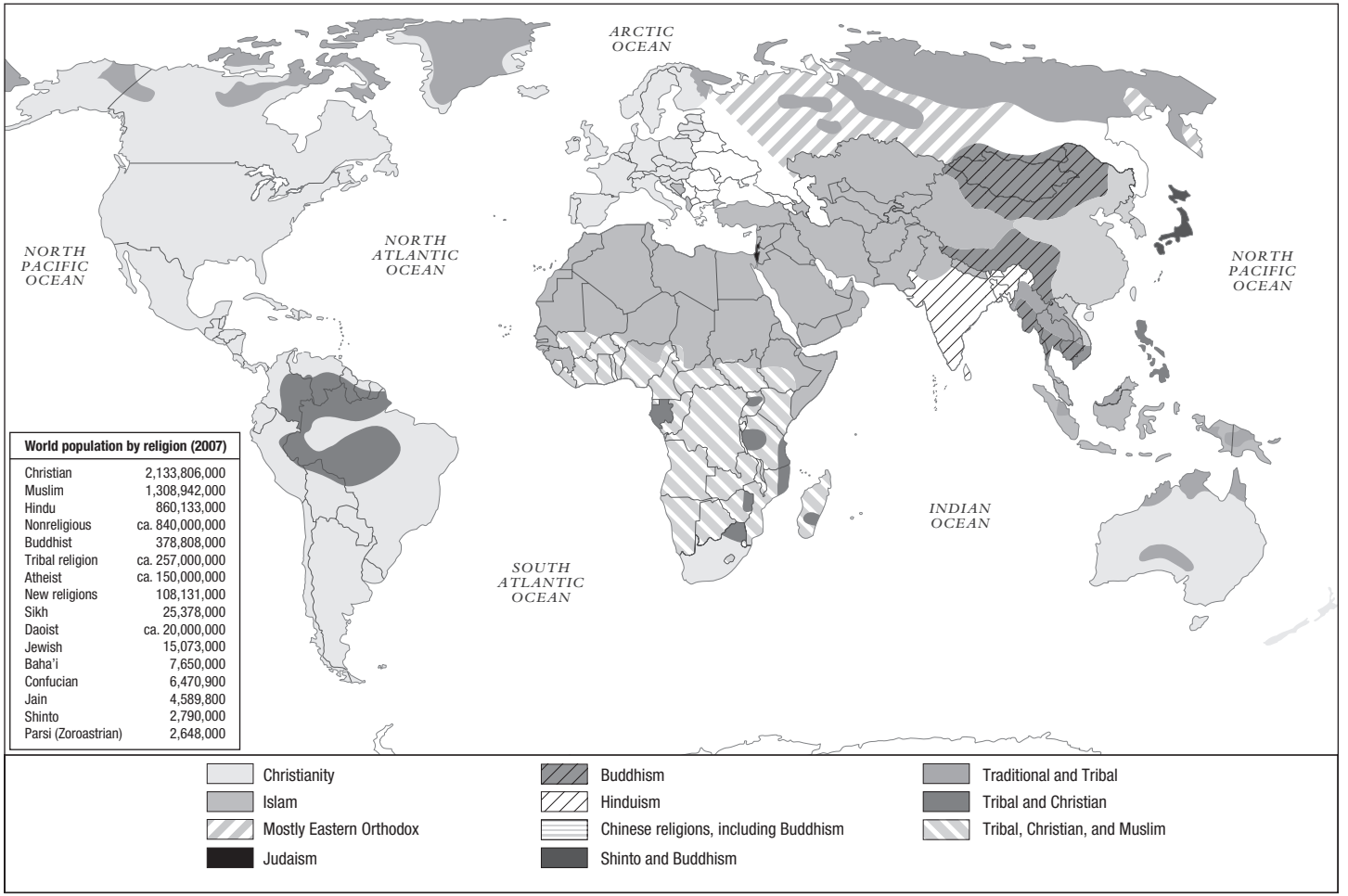
[2] A combination of Confucian, Daoist, and local religious devotions. This figure was estimated based on a Chinese government statistic indicating that 44% of adults reported that they had worshipped at a graveside or tomb in the survey year.

[3] Practice various folk or traditional religions, including African traditional religions, Indian tribal traditions, Native American religions, and Australian aboriginal religions.

[4] This number for adherents to Shinto in Japan is based on recent surveys that have shown that 80% of Japanese register their newborn children at a Shinto shrine, and that roughly the same number visit these temples on New Year's Day and other major traditional holidays.

[5] The formation of new religions has been a key hallmark of global religious life since 1750, and it has been recorded on every continent. Some have come and gone (such as the "Shakers" in Colonial America); some have arisen but to this day command the loyalty of few; most have arisen and spread in a particular region; a few have become global in membership.

Prior to the 1960s, in the United States, one could not have studied religions comparatively in secular and state universities. Only religious colleges and universities offered courses and degrees in religion, and these were typically on the teachings of their own denominations. If other religions came up for discussion it was usually to



Map 1.1 Distribution of world religions today.

point out their "errors." Then in the 1960s departments of religious studies began to appear in nonreligious colleges and secular state universities. Responding to the new diversity brought on by globalization, these departments began to offer courses on non-Western as well as comparative religions. What they attempted was completely new in history: They sought to understand and appreciate the diverse religious traditions of the world without prejudice toward any of them.

The academic study of religion requires the courage and compassion to empathetically understand the diverse worldviews of others and the willingness to learn from each. Its goal is not to show one religion is "right" and all others "wrong," but rather to show what humans have found compelling in each and how each tradition has shaped history. The task in the study of world religions today is to overcome stereotypes and glimpse the wisdom found in each of these traditions. To judge another's religion without understanding it and what it means to its members is to "prejudge" them—that is the meaning of the word *prejudice*. When encountering beliefs and practices we do not understand, it is easy to fall into the trap of ridiculing them, saying, "How can anyone possibly believe that?" Certainly each of us wants to be understood and respected, not stereotyped and dismissed. We need to extend that same courtesy to all others as well. So in the academic study of religion we agree to set aside our own beliefs and prejudices and to simply try to understand and appreciate the meaning others find in their beliefs and practices.

In surveying world religions today, we shall not be able to cover everything that could be said about them. Our selection will be governed primarily by the following question: What do we need to know about the past to understand the role of religion in the world we live in today?

Our Task

In this book we focus on the diverse ways in which human beings have been religious in the past and are religious today. Indeed, the last decades of the twentieth century brought a global religious resurgence. This development defied earlier predictions that civilization was becoming more secular, with a worldview increasingly based on modern science. As a result, many scholars believed that religion would inevitably disappear. The ongoing clash of traditional religions with contemporary scientific and secular society is a major concern of this textbook. Awareness of this conflict is essential if we are to understand the interactions between religions and cultures in the world today. Every chapter thus begins with examples of a major controversy or significant tension each religion now faces.

We describe our present time as one in transition between "modernity" and a new "postmodern" era of globalization. To understand what is "new" about postmodernity, we first have to understand the premodern period of the different religious traditions and how the premodern worldview of each relates to and contrasts with the modern period. In particular, we will have to compare the premodern period in each tradition with the changes brought about by the "modern" era, which began with the rise of modern science after 1500 and declined after World War II. In surveying world

religions today, we shall not be able to cover everything that could be said about them. Our selection will be governed primarily by the following question: What do we need to know about the past to understand the role of religion in the world we live in today? In order to understand many of the conflicts that we hear about in the news, we need to understand how religious traditions profoundly shaped the world to be the way it is today. Since religious beliefs are often at the center of the individual's identity, and because religious communities are major actors in our world today, studying world religions provides crucial insights for understanding our world. And to do that, we must begin by introducing some basic concepts.

Understanding Religious Experience and Its Formative Elements

Wherever we find religious practice, we will find certain key elements:

The Experience of Sacredness
Myth or Symbolic Story (typically embodied in sacred writing or *scripture* and expressed in a system of *beliefs*)
Ritual
Community
Morality
Religious Leaders/Experts

religion: the sense of being tied or bound by sacred obligations to powers believed to govern our destiny

Let us begin with a working definition of the term ***religion***. The word *religion* has its roots in Latin, the language of the Romans. Although its exact root is uncertain, it is probably derived from the Latin *religare*, which literally means "to tie or bind" and has the connotation of "acting with care." It expresses our sense of being "tied and bound" by relations of obligation to whatever powers we believe govern our destiny—whether these powers are natural or supernatural, personal or impersonal, one or many. Because our word *religion* comes from the Roman, it will be helpful to understand their use of the word.

If you were to ask a group of Romans in the first century CE, "What religion are you?", they would not understand the question. However, if you asked instead, "Are you religious?", they would understand immediately. They might even respond: "Of course, but who isn't?"

In the first version of the question, the word *religion* is used as a noun. It suggests that *religion* is a social group to which people can belong, and that you can be a member of a specific religion only if you are not a member of another. This way of understanding religion naturally arises among monotheists, who by definition have chosen one god and excluded all others. However, the Romans did not have

such an exclusive concept of religion. In rephrasing the original question as "Are you religious?" you are no longer treating *religion* as a noun, describing something you join. Instead, you are treating it as an adjective, describing a way of seeing, acting, and experiencing all things. In most times and places throughout history, people did not think of their practices as "a religion"—a separate reality they had to choose to the exclusion of all others. Today in Japan, for instance, it is possible for a person to practice Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. This may seem odd from the monotheistic perspective of Western religions, where one can be, for instance, a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew but not two or more at the same time. And yet, paradoxically, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim to worship the same God.

The Sacred

Religion is about what people hold sacred, what matters more than anything else to them—namely, their destiny individually and collectively. For all human beings in all places and all times throughout history, religion has been about power and meaning in relation to human destiny. The word *religion* is derived from the Latin word *religio* that had two roots: the verb *religare*, which literally means "to tie or bind," and the adjective *religere*, meaning "careful or respectful [to the supernatural]."

Ancient peoples everywhere believed that the powers governing their destiny were the forces of nature. Why? Because nature was experienced as that awesome collection of powers that surround and, at times, overwhelm human beings. On the one hand, nature provides life and many of its necessities (food, clothing, shelter, etc.); but on the other hand, nature may turn on people, destroying them through earthquakes, storms, or floods. Therefore the forces of nature evoke in human beings the ambivalent feeling of both fascination and dread. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), a pioneer in the comparative study of religions, argued that the presence of these two ambivalent emotions is a sure sign that one is in the presence of the sacred. A defining mark of religious experience across cultures, these emotions are stirred by the uncanny experience of being in the presence of a power (or powers) that determines not only how well one lives, but whether one lives or dies.

Religion as a form of human experience and behavior, therefore, is not just about purely "spiritual" things. Nor can the study of religion globally be defined only by gods or God. People's religiousness has proven to be as diverse as the forms of power they believe govern human destiny. These powers have ranged from gods as forces of nature to the unseen ancestral spirits or spirits associated with sacred places, to more impersonal sacred forces or energies; or even the mysterious power(s) that govern history. Hence, whatever powers we believe govern our destiny will elicit a religious response from us and inspire us to wish "to tie or bind" ourselves to these powers in relations of ritual obligation. Thus tied or bound, we will act respectfully and carefully in relation to these powers, to ensure that they will be on our side.

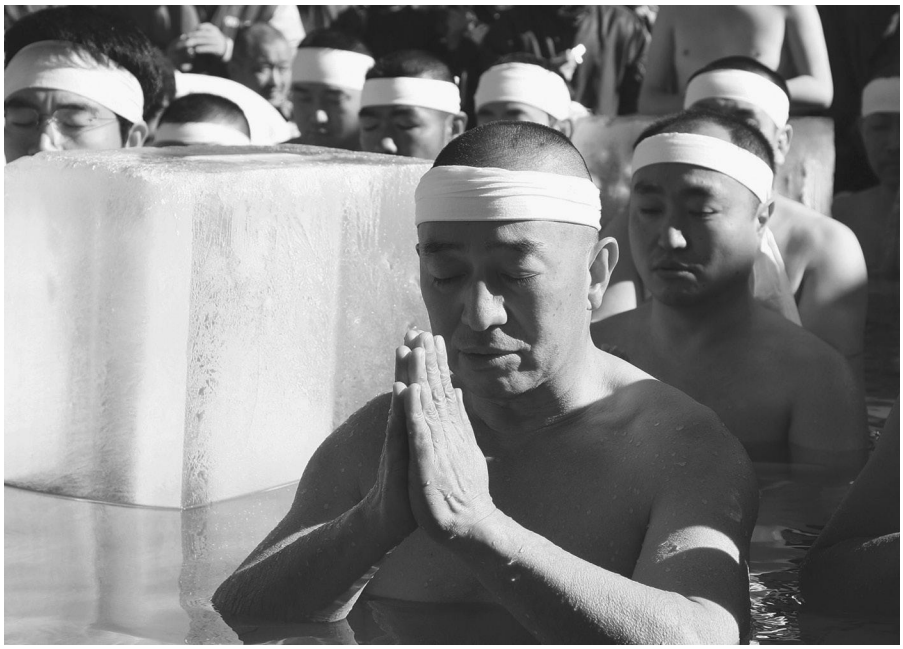
How do we know what our obligations to these powers are? Throughout history this knowledge has been passed down from one generation to the next through myth and ritual.

Myth, Scripture, and Beliefs

myth: symbolic story about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world

Our word **myth** comes from the Greek *mythos*, which means "story." Myth, we could say, is a symbolic story about the origins of the world and destiny of human beings. Myth "ties and binds" human beings in relations of obligation to whatever powers they believe govern their destiny and explains what these powers expect of them. Unlike the contemporary English use of *myth* to indicate an untrue story or a misunderstanding based on ignorance, every religious tradition uses myth to convey the deepest and most profound truths about life. These truths are expressed through grand stories of creation and destiny rather than in abstract theories. After the invention of writing (about 3000 BCE), these stories came to be written down, creating what we now call the "scriptures" of the various religions. Because these scriptures tell the stories about the power or powers that govern human destiny, they have been treated as sacred scriptures and passed on from one generation to the next.

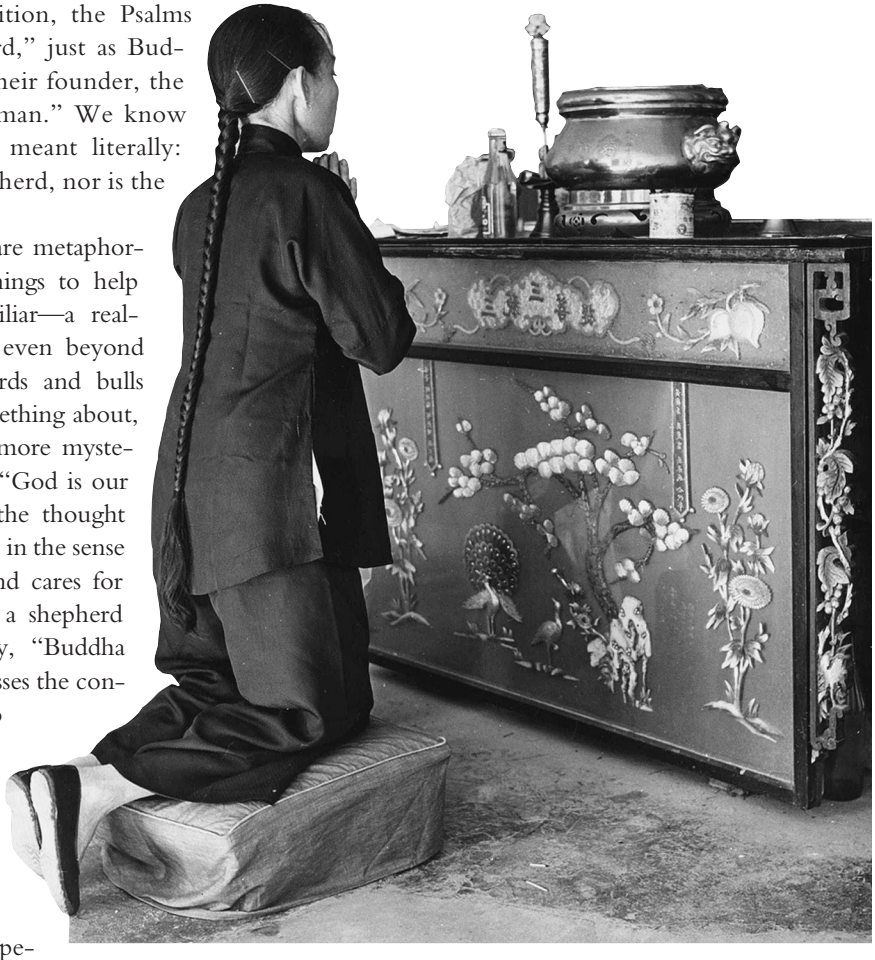
For students of world religions, understanding the symbolic nature of much of religious language is a key challenge. To understand a religious story literally can often lead to misunderstanding its meaning and so make it seem false. For example,



A Shinto priest and believers purify their bodies in icy water for the New Year's ceremony at the Teppozu Shrine in Tokyo.

in Western biblical tradition, the Psalms say: "God is my shepherd," just as Buddhist scriptures refer to their founder, the Buddha, as "a bull of a man." We know such statements are not meant literally: God is not literally a shepherd, nor is the Buddha literally a bull.

Statements like these are metaphorical. They use familiar things to help explain what is less familiar—a reality that is mysterious or even beyond human language. Shepherds and bulls we can see and know something about, but God or a Buddha is more mysterious. A person who says "God is our shepherd" has expressed the thought that God is like a shepherd, in the sense that God watches over and cares for persons in the same way a shepherd tends his sheep. Similarly, "Buddha was a bull of a man" expresses the conviction that the man who achieved enlightenment was strong and powerful. These metaphors both assert that the Buddha and God are realities that can always be relied upon.



To live well, have many descendants, and live a long life—these are three great treasures in Chinese culture. A Chinese woman prays for prosperity, posterity, and longevity at a Buddhist temple on the island of Lantau.

Not all religious experiences are theistic, reflecting belief in one or more gods. Theravada Buddhists in ancient India refused to use the Hindu words roughly equivalent to the English word *God* to describe their religious understanding. Instead they spoke of the emptiness and inadequacy of all spoken metaphors to explain their goal, the blissful state of *nirvana* (see Chapter 7). And yet they too used metaphors to try to help people understand what they had experienced as the "blowing out of the flame of desire," which leads to liberation from all suffering.

In fact, the word *God*, which is so central to the Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), is just one of many diverse terms used in different religions and cultures across the world to designate the **ultimate reality**, that which is the highest in value and meaning for the group. This class of terms includes not only the personal God of Western theism but also the impersonal Brahman of Hinduism, the transpersonal nirvana of Buddhism, and the impersonal power of the *Dao* at work in all things that is central to Chinese religions.

ultimate reality: that which has the highest value and meaning to a group

sympathetic imagination: empathy; necessary to understand the religious languages and messages of different times and places

via analogia: a way of explaining spiritual reality by using analogies from particular finite qualities and characteristics

via negativa: a way of explaining spiritual reality by negating all finite qualities and characteristics

transcendent: beyond all finite things

Here lies the challenge, mystery, and fascination of studying the religions of the world: Do differences in religious terminology reflect experiences of different realities? Or are they different expressions or ways of describing the same reality? Because religious metaphors come out of particular historical contexts and because they are symbolic forms of expression, to understand the religious languages and messages of different religious traditions requires that we put ourselves in the time and place of their origins. We must use our **sympathetic imagination** to understand the metaphors used. Different cultures and different generations have each contributed to the rich variety of metaphors used to illuminate the mystery and meaning of human existence.

Religious language, as symbolic language, can take one of two forms: analogy or negation. The metaphor "God is my shepherd" is an example of the way of analogy (***via analogia***). In these metaphors, we use familiar words to create an analogy that describes something less familiar. However, there is another form of religious language, the way of negation (***via negativa***). This way of speaking religiously proceeds not by asserting what God or ultimate reality is (or is like) but by saying what it is not. This approach is very typical of mystical traditions. The Muslim mystic declares that Allah is "nothing," stating that Allah (God) is beyond (i.e., transcends) or is different from anything in our material universe and experience. Allah is not this thing and not that thing. Allah is in fact no "thing" at all. Being beyond all finite things and thus **transcendent**, Allah must be said to be no-thing.

In general, Western monotheism has emphasized the way of analogy by saying that there is one God who is like humans, able to "know" and to "love," but in a superior fashion. Thus, God is described as all-knowing, all-loving, or all-powerful. By contrast, Buddhism, of all the religions, has emphasized most strongly the way of negation, insisting that what is most valuable or true cannot be either named or imaged. Yet both ways are found in all traditions. Some Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics have referred to God as a "Nothingness," even as some Hindus have referred to the ultimate reality as a cosmic person rather than an impersonal power. Moreover, we should note that these two ways do not really conflict, for the way of analogy itself implies the way of negation. That is, every time we say God is *like* some thing, we are at the same time saying God is not literally that thing. Every analogy implies a negation.

Our discussion of religious language should help us to appreciate just how challenging it can be to study and compare various religious traditions. Just as religious communities and religious traditions from different parts of the world use different metaphors and symbols, they also mix the way of analogy and the way of negation. Therefore, two different traditions sometimes talk about the same human experience in ways that seem to be totally contradictory. For example, it may seem that a Jewish theist and a Theravada Buddhist hold diametrically opposed religious beliefs, for Jews believe in a personal God who created the universe and Theravada Buddhists do not. Yet, when we look more closely at Jewish beliefs, we discover that Jews believe that God can be neither named nor imaged, even as Theravada Buddhists believe that

ultimate truth is beyond all names and images. And yet, in both traditions, experiencing the nameless is said to make one more human or compassionate, not less.

After learning about the traditions covered in this book, you might conclude that perhaps theistic and nontheistic religious experiences are really not far apart. However, it is also possible that they might be seen as truly different. To pursue this great human question, we must begin by withholding judgment and simply try to understand how stories and rituals shape people's views, values, and behavior. Perhaps the real measure of comparison should be how people live their lives rather than the apparently diverse images and concepts they hold. If both Jews and Buddhists, for example, are led by their religious experiences and beliefs to express compassion for those who suffer or are in need, then clearly the two faiths are similar in that very important respect.

Ritual

ritual: actions that link the individual and the community to each other, through the sacred

Ritual actions, like myths, "tie and bind" the individual and the community to the sacred. Such actions often involve the symbolic reenactment of the stories that are passed on from one generation to the next. Typically myth and ritual are closely tied to the major festivals or holy days of a religious tradition and illuminate the meaning of human destiny in relation to sacred powers. By celebrating a cycle of festivals spread throughout the year, people come to dwell in the stories that tell them who they are, where they came from, and where they are going.

Religious rituals recall important events in the history of each faith: the "Night Journey" of the Prophet Muhammad, the enlightenment of the Buddha, the death of Jesus Christ, the birthday of Confucius. In other rituals, the faithful offer gifts to the supernatural beings to whom they ascribe a power to profoundly affect their lives. Still other rituals require circumcision, tattoos, or burn marks to set the believers off from nonbelievers, fostering in-group solidarity. The consumption of certain foods as part of some rituals suggests that the believer can acquire the "same essence" as the **divine** through ingestion, as in the Christian communion, Hindu puja, or tribal eating of a totemic animal to affirm common identity.

divine: highest spiritual reality; representative of the gods

We should not assume that rituals only communicate ideas or beliefs. Religions are not confined to doctrines regarding the sacred. Rather, they include rituals that, in their own right, tie and bind people to each other and to cosmic meaning. Being religious thus entails taking decisive action at certain times, while abstaining from activities at other times. For example, at specific times gifts may be offered to supernatural beings or pilgrimages made to sacred places. At other times, religion might require abstaining from food (fasting).

orthopraxy: practice of "right actions" as prescribed by sacred traditions

For many believers, acting in the prescribed manner, called **orthopraxy** (correct practice), is more important than **orthodoxy** (correct belief)—acceptance of the doctrines set forth in texts and formulated by scholars. Performing the five daily Muslim prayers, visiting a Buddhist or Hindu temple to offer flowers on the full moon day, cleaning a Chinese family's ancestral grave during the spring festival, or being baptized

orthodoxy: acceptance of "right beliefs" based on sacred texts as explained by religious authorities

as a Christian—all these acts are as central to "being religious," as is adopting beliefs or doctrines defined as orthodox.

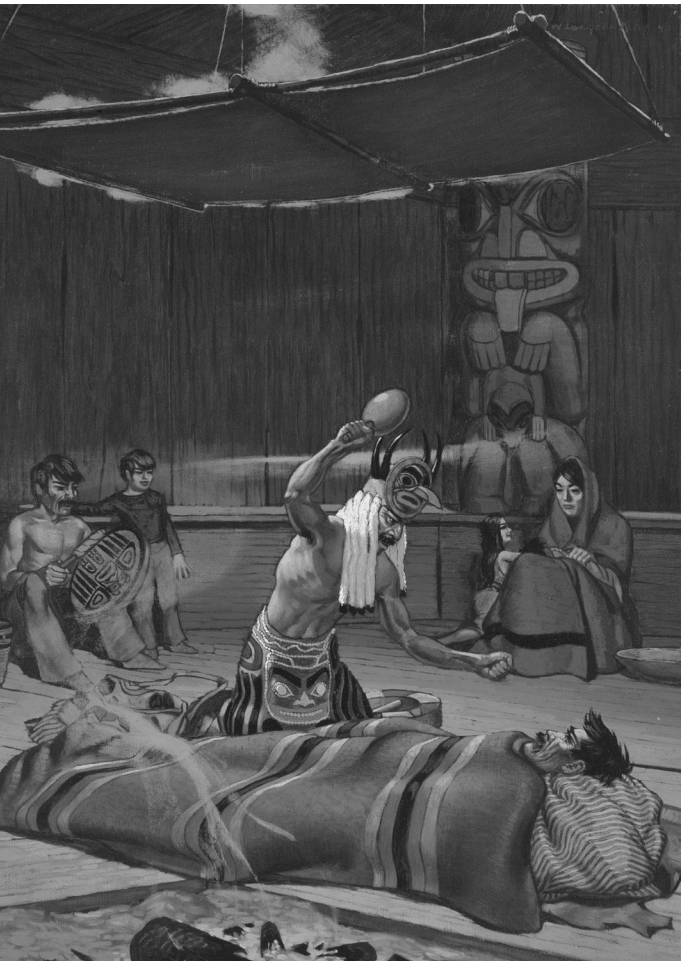
The great annual festivals in the world's religions give devotees a break from the profane time of normal working life and reinforce important ties with family and fellow devotees. The need to orchestrate such crucial ritual actions leads followers to create the religious institutions that occupy central places in their societies.

Community and Morality

Myth and ritual shape unique communities to foster the way of life that emerges out of their religious experiences. Religion not only ties us to the sacred powers we believe govern our destiny; it also binds us to each other. Consequently, in most religious traditions, ritual and **morality** have been closely intertwined. "Right" is often defined by "rite"—the ritual patterns of behavior that keep life sacred. Morality is an inherent dimension of religious experience, for religion not only concerns sacred powers but also describes the way of life to be followed.

morality: right action

A Tlingit shaman performing a healing ceremony.



The sacred—what matters most to a given community—provides the ground for the moral experience of the virtuous life. The blueprint for what is just or moral is expressed in myth and ritual. Take, for example, the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur. This is the occasion at the beginning of a new year for each person to repent, to seek and offer forgiveness for the ways each has harmed others. Each person also resolves to live more compassionately and justly in the new year.

Once we realize that religion is about what people hold sacred and the way of life that is called for by such beliefs, then it makes sense to say that all morality has a religious dimension, because every morality is grounded in religious experience, namely in the experience of what is held sacred in a given community. In this sense even the morality of atheists or others, who may not think of themselves as religious, can be said to have a religious dimension—to the degree that certain values are held sacred. Such an observation still leaves open the philosophical question of the degree to which a tradition's sacred morality is truly ethical, for ethics is the questioning of sacred moralities, asking whether what people customarily say is good or virtuous really is good or virtuous.

Religious Leaders/Experts

In every religion we will find specialists: the shamans, priests, ministers, monks, rabbis, scholars, and teachers who mediate between the sacred power(s) and the community by explaining the myths and performing the rituals. The world's oldest religious specialist is the shaman. This man or woman goes into a trance to leave his or her body and go to the spirit realm. There, he or she communicates with sacred ancestors and supernatural beings (spirits, gods, demons, ghosts). Practitioners of this art (also called mediums or oracles) are depicted on cave walls across Eurasia from the Neolithic period 25,000 years ago. Shamans still exist in many parts of the world, not only among indigenous peoples but also within or alongside the great world religions (see Chapter 2).

Since the invention of writing in 3000 BCE, the great world religions have relied on written materials and on scholars who have learned to write and read and thereby interpret the sacred texts. These keepers of the sacred writings translate their meanings for the great majority of followers, most of whom, until the modern era, were illiterate. The Confucian masters, the Muslim ulama, and the Hindu brahmin are examples of this religious specialist. And then there are those who specialize in being spiritual teachers, such as the Hindu guru, the Jewish rabbi, or the Sufi Muslim shaykh. Although we can point to interesting comparative patterns among religious rituals and between religious teachers, it is also true to say that each tradition can and must be known by its own unique set of religious practitioners and institutions.

A two-year-old Muslim boy, living in predominantly Catholic East Timor, prays alongside his father at a mosque in Dili.

The Great Religious Stories of the World

As human beings, we are not just storytellers, we are "storydwellers." We live in our stories and make sense of the world through them. Even our understanding of what is good and evil is shaped by the kind of story we see ourselves in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story. Although religious stories need not be about gods and other spiritual beings, most of the earliest stories that have shaped human religious life have been.

There are four main types of religious stories, each of which presents a symbolic story of the origins and destiny of human beings and the challenges they face in striving to realize their sacred destiny. (Consult Figure 1.2, the "World Religions in Perspective" chart, when reading this section.) These four main types of sacred story are:

myths of nature
myths of harmony
myths of liberation
myths of history

Myths of Nature

The earliest religious stories are myths of nature. These are stories about the powers of nature that govern human destiny and portray them as either personal beings (gods, spirits, and sacred ancestors) or impersonal powers. Such religions tend to see time as cyclical, always returning to the moment just before creation. Just as winter and death are followed by spring and new life, starting the earthly cycles all over again, time is an endless loop. Myth and ritual are the means to erase the distance between "now" and the time of origins, "in the beginning," when the gods or ancestral spirits first created the world. In such stories the problem of life is time. Time inevitably brings sickness, decline, and death. The ideal in human life is to return to the newness of life at the beginning of creation, before time began.

The means for bringing about this return is the recitation of the myths and the performance of rituals reenacting creation. Hunter-gatherer stories emphasize the fertility of the earth, the relations with animals and plants, the need for the ritual renewal of life in harmony with the seasons, and the role the tribe plays in maintaining the eternal cosmic order. In many of these societies, a shaman is the spiritual leader; as will be seen in Chapter 2, the shaman's trance journeys restore harmony between the human community, spirits, and the forces of nature.

China and the Myths of Harmony

In China the great cosmic story was that of the Dao (sometimes rendered Tao). The universal Dao, which all beings share, is the source of harmony in the universe.

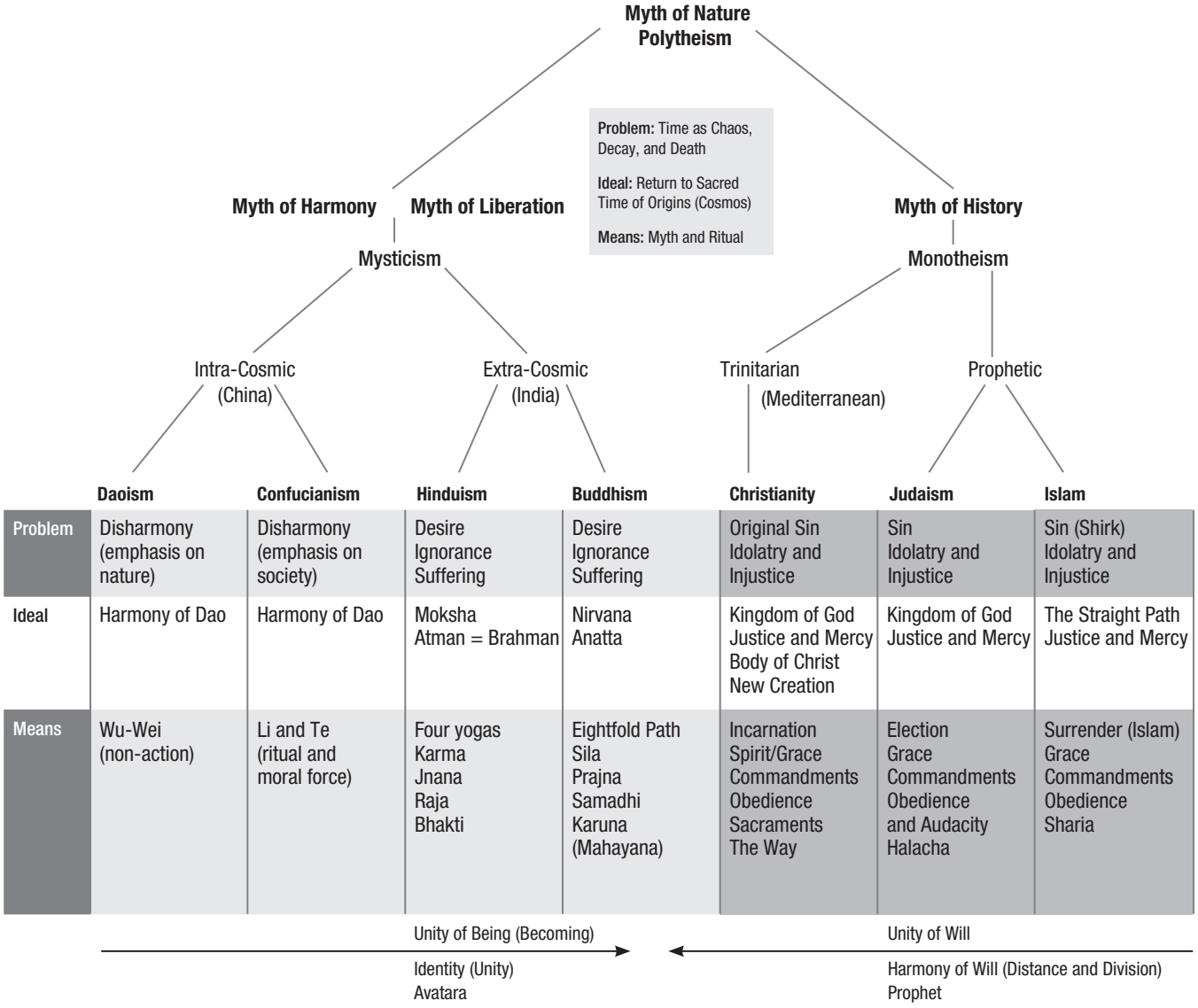


Figure 1.2 The world's religions in perspective.

The Dao is at work, hidden in all the forces of nature. One's true self is knowable only in relation to the Dao. All of creation works through combinations of complementary opposites of *yin* and *yang*, of dark and light, of earth and heaven, of female and male. Yin and yang are never polar opposites; rather, each flows into the other with no absolute division, the way day flows into night and night into day. The ideal for human life, then, is balance and harmony. The great problem of existence is the disharmony that occurs when the elements of self, society, and/or the universe are out of balance.

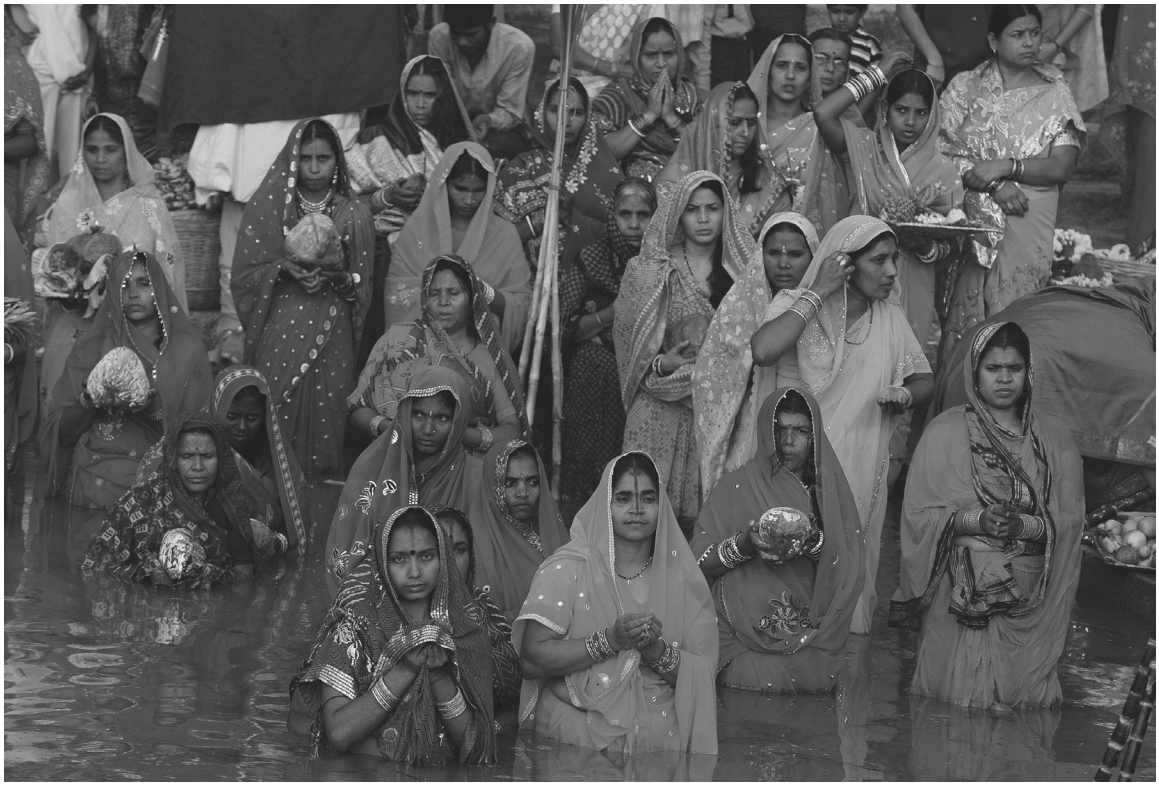
To restore balance, two different religions emerged in China: Daoism and Confucianism. Both sought to bring harmony between heaven and earth, self and society. These two traditions offered very different means to overcome the problem and realize the ideal. Daoist sages urged humans to seek harmony with the rhythms of nature through cultivating *wu-wei*, the art of "not doing," or not interfering with the natural flow of life. By contrast, the Confucian sages urged humans to establish harmony in society through the practice of *li*, the ritual observance of obligations attached to one's station in society. They taught that people can be in harmony with the rhythms of the universe only when individuals know their place in the social order, (as child, parent, citizen etc.), cultivate their character, and sacrifice their self-interest for the good of the whole society.

India and the Myths of Liberation

In ancient India, life was also seen in relation to the cycles and rhythms of nature. Its priests enacted powerful rituals to control the gods behind all cosmic activity. But in India these rhythms were ultimately to be escaped, not affirmed. Human existence is seen as unsatisfactory not because there is nothing good about life but because it is transient and always ends in old age, sickness, and death. The problem of life is human entrapment in an endless cycle of suffering and rebirth; the highest goal was to overcome these traps. The ultimate goal of all the great religions originating in India is to destroy the delusions fostered by our selfish desires, for only when these are mastered can humans be freed from the wheel of death and rebirth. In that moment of liberation or enlightenment, one will find blissful union with ultimate reality and liberation from rebirth.

For most Hindus, the true self (*atman*) is the same as the eternal Brahman in either the personal or impersonal form. Buddhism suggests that an eternal self is a delusion, for all selves are empty; one who realizes the illusion of a permanent self advances on the path to nirvana or enlightenment, and closer to liberation from rebirth.

Hinduism and Buddhism developed a variety of means, called yogas, for achieving liberation or enlightenment. These range from disciplined ritual activity and the selfless performance of one's duties, to seeking spiritual knowledge through meditation, or cultivating selfless devotion toward a particular god or goddess.



Hindu women pay homage to the god of the sun during the Chat Puja festival on the banks of the Hooghly River in the eastern Indian city of Calcutta. Thousands of Hindu devotees reached the riverside at sunset and will spend the night praying.

The Middle East and the Myths of History

The myths of nature, of harmony, and of liberation use the human experience of the rhythms and cycles of nature as the basis for religious metaphors and symbolic language expressed in sacred stories. In the myths of history, by contrast, it is not nature but history from which the metaphors for religious experience are primarily drawn. While all religions communicate their traditions by telling stories, only the religions of the Middle East, beginning with Judaism, make "story" itself the central metaphor of religious expression. Unlike the eternally cyclical rhythms of nature, stories have a beginning and an end. Ancient Judaism conceived of the cosmos as a great unfolding story told by a great divine storyteller (God): In the beginning God spoke, the world was created, and the story of revelation began.

Three versions of this story of revelation arose in the Middle East—first the Judaic, then the Christian, and finally the Islamic. For each of these, human beings are considered human by virtue of being children of the one God who created all things. All three traditions tell the myth of Adam and Eve as the first human beings, and venerate the patriarch Abraham, whom each considers the true model of faith and obedience to divine revelation. In all three, the problem of life is viewed as "sin"—failing to

All that remains of the great temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, is the Western Wall. It is considered to be the holiest of sites where observant Jews come to pray.

follow God's will or laws, a combination of idolatry and human selfishness that leads to injustice. The ideal goal of life is for humans to be in harmony with the will of God, whereupon peace and justice will reign and death will be overcome.

While all three religions believe that the means for bringing about this era of peace and triumph over death are obedience to the will of God, each has its own unique complement to that obedience. In Judaism, it is study and debate over the meaning of God's Word; in Christianity, acceptance of divine aid through the incarnation of God; and in Islam, submission to the will of God. Although each of the three Abrahamic religions has its own story of the cosmos, full of many trials, triumphs, and tragedies, each tells of the human-divine story having a happy ending. In contrast to the myths of nature, harmony, and liberation, traditions founded on myths of history regard time not as the enemy but as the vehicle for encountering the ultimate reality, which is God. The goal is not to escape time by returning to the beginning through ritual, nor rising above time in mystical ecstasy, but to meet God in time and make a journey with God through time. Time for the faithful is promising, and the future is ultimately hopeful.

Religious Diversity and Historical Change: The Structure of This Book

Each of these religious traditions speaks to the problem of morality by helping the individual to get beyond the self-centeredness that came with urban individualism and to grasp the essential unity and interdependence of all human beings. And each sought

to provide life with meaning by depicting individuals and communities as participating in a great cosmic story that gives drama and purpose to human life. In addition, these stories show individuals a way to overcome the finality of death.

We need to refine the picture of the world's religions we have just created. When we stand back at a great distance we can use the four types of myth or story—those of nature, harmony, liberation, and history—to classify the various religions. As we get closer, we discover that each of these stories has variations expressing internal differences in doctrine and in practice.

In the chapters to come we will examine how human beings struggle to continue the religiousness of their ancestors in a radically different, fast-changing, and globalizing world. We will see how Western civilization gave birth to modernity and, through its colonial expansion, spread its religious and cultural influence around the world, disrupting premodern religious cultures everywhere. **Colonialism** is part of the story of virtually all religions and civilizations, East and West. But after 1492, modern Western colonialism came closest to achieving global domination. Propelled by European colonialism, Christianity became the first faith to spread globally, forcing every religion to reckon with its beliefs, its practices, and its critiques of other religions.

colonialism: the political, social, cultural, and economic domination of one society by another

We will also describe how colonialism, in turn, provoked postcolonial reactions that have divided those in each religious tradition into three groups:

1. ***Fundamentalists***, who reject important aspects of modernity and want to go back to what they perceive as the purity of an "authentic" social/political order manifested in the sacred way of life of their ancestors.
2. *Modernists*, who seek an accommodation of their religious tradition to the insights of science and the social and political realities of modern life.
3. *Postmodernists*, who, while rejecting the dominance of science and Western modernity, seek a new situation that affirms the role of religion in public life in a way that embraces religious and cultural diversity. Postmodernists are open to change in their religious tradition in this regard.

fundamentalist: one who rejects aspects of modernity and wants to return to the perceived foundational purity of an ancestral sacred social/political order, or way of life

While some fundamentalists reject everything modern, most accept modern technology while rejecting changes suggested by the sciences that would call into question the fundamentalists' religious worldview. Earlier we spoke of "orthodoxy" as "right belief," and while many fundamentalists would consider themselves orthodox, not all those who call themselves orthodox would consider themselves fundamentalists. Very often orthodox movements will interpret their scriptures allegorically or symbolically, while fundamentalists tend to interpret their scriptures literally. For instance, an orthodox Christian might interpret the seven days of creation as symbolic periods of undetermined length. A fundamentalist, however, would be inclined to say, "No, we are talking about creating the world literally in seven 24-hour periods of time, so scientific accounts of the origin and development of the universe over millennia are false."

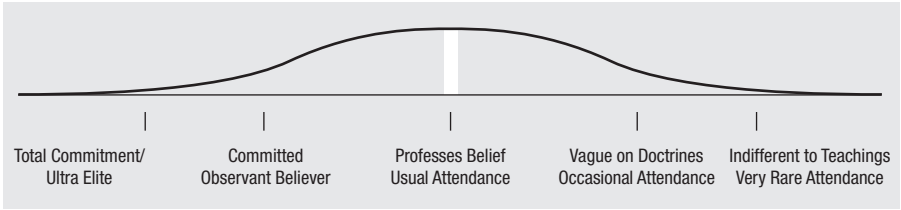


Figure 1.3 Mapping the typical spectrum of believers in religious communities.

Among modernists and postmodernists, most argue that some parts of the religious tradition must change. What is distinctive about the modernist view is that human understanding of religious truth and practice is subject to historical change and development, a notion that fundamentalists find abhorrent, even blasphemous.

As Figure 1.3 indicates, religions should not be studied as abstract beliefs but as the beliefs and practices of real people. The range of beliefs that humans adopt in any religious tradition range from the virtuosos to the average believers and the hardly observant. The elite have a complete commitment and lifestyle to the highest religious ideals. At the other extreme are those who are indifferent to doctrine or who disbelieve. In learning about world religions, being attentive to this variance offers clues about how religion has brought out the best and worst of humanity in history.

Our treatment of the history of each tradition in each chapter will be organized as follows:

- Overview
- Encounter with Modernity
- Premodern
- Modern
- Postmodern
- Conclusion

The overview at the start of each chapter introduces the basic worldview of the religious tradition. The section that follows, "Encounter with Modernity," describes a particular moment in which premodern religious traditions clashed with the modern worldview and explains the diverse responses that emerged from that encounter. Next, each chapter will shift back to the premodern period and the origins and development of the tradition, to better explain why modernity represents a challenge to it. This period is accounted for in two phases—a formative period, which traces the origins of the traditions, and a classical period, which explains its fully developed premodern beliefs, rituals, and institutions.

The section on modernity traces the diverse fundamentalist and modernist responses that developed in each tradition as it was challenged and threatened by Western colonialism and its modern scientific/technological worldview. This is followed by a postmodern section, in which we survey the most recent reactions to the

adaptations each tradition has made to the modern world. These reactions tend to be postcolonial revolutions (in most regions, after 1945) to reclaim religious and cultural identities that existed before the advent of modern Western colonialism. In this way we show why the world, with all its possibilities for coexistence and conflict, is the way it is today. The conclusion to each chapter addresses the implications of this history for the future of each tradition.

Historical Overview: From Premodern to Postmodern

The structure of this book revolves around two great transitions in human history:

Premodern to Modern
Modern to Postmodern

The first began with urbanization, and the second begins with globalization.

From about 8000 BCE the domestication of plants and animals made village life possible. Acquisition of agricultural skill then allowed the development of the first great cities, from approximately 3000 BCE, bringing about a great transformation in human experience. Urban life drew people together out of different tribal groups. In the earliest indigenous human groups, everyone lived close to the rhythms of nature, in extended families or clans that shared a common way of life and lived by the same myths and rituals. In the cities people came together from different groups, bringing with them different stories, different rituals, and different family identities.

The complexities of urban life led to the specialization of labor. Whereas in indigenous societies everyone shared in hunting and gathering or simple agriculture, in the cities society became more complex and differentiated into classes (peasants, craftsmen, noblemen, priests, etc.). In a parallel fashion, elaborate and detailed new mythologies emerged in the cities, assigning special powers and tasks to each of the many gods and spirits of the different tribes now embraced as the gods of the city.

These changes fundamentally transformed the economies and cultures of the new urban centers. In earlier indigenous groups, identity was collective because everybody shared the same stories and hunting and gathering activities. The cities, by contrast, were communities of strangers. People did not automatically share a collective sense of identity.

The loss of collective sense of identity and the emergence of large, impersonal urban city-states in Egypt, India, China, and Mesopotamia led to growing populations for whom the experience of the world was marked by suffering and cruelty. Populated by strangers and ruled by emperors, kings, or pharaohs considered divine or representatives of the gods, these new city-states eventually faced a threefold crisis.

First, indigenous tribal collective identity was experienced as eternal—the tribe never dies. However, in urban contexts, humans began to think of themselves as individuals, and death suddenly loomed as a personal problem even as life seemed more cruel and uncertain. With the greater development of individual self-awareness, death presented people with a new and unsettling problem: What happens to my (individual) "self" when I die?

Second, urban life created the new problems of law and morality. In the indigenous group the right thing to do was prescribed by ritual, and the same rites were known and respected by all. In cities, people from a variety of religious traditions lived together; yet as individuals, each looked out for his or her own good, if necessary at the expense of others. Thus in the cities law emerged to set the minimum order necessary to sustain human life. It also became necessary to develop a system of ethics to persuade people to live up to even higher ideals.

Third, life in the city-state evoked a crisis of meaning. Can life really have any meaning if it is filled with injustice and ends in a meaningless death? The first written expression of this great question appeared in the ancient Near East at the beginning of the urban period (ca. 3000–1500 BCE) and is known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The great world religions emerged in the three centers of civilization in the ancient world—China, India, and the Middle East—as their founders and prophets responded to critical questions about the meaning of life, mortality, and morality. Between 800 BCE and 600 CE all developed their classical expressions, dividing much of the world among them (see Map 1.2) in the context of the formation of great empires that united peoples of various tribes and city-states into larger political entities. These new political orders created a need for a more inclusive understanding of human identity. Sages and prophets arose who redefined the meaning of being human in terms beyond the boundaries of the tribe and the city-state, seeing a higher unity to reality beyond the many local gods and spirits. These ideas about the meaning of the divine–human relationship remain central to the world's great religions.

premodern: civilization in which there is no separation between a dominant religion and society

modern: civilization that separates its citizens' lives into public and private spheres, restricting religion to private life

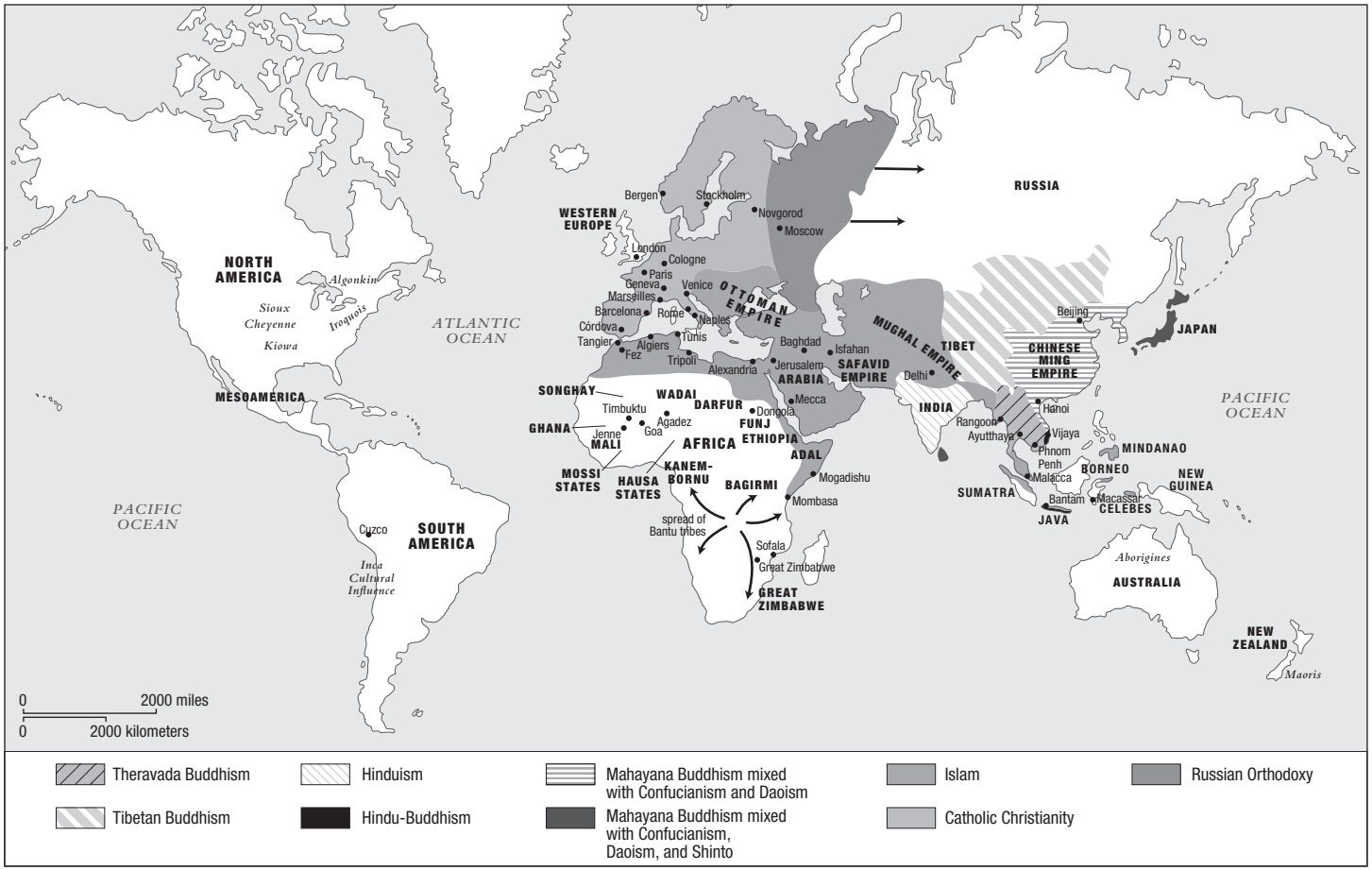
postmodern: society typified by accepting public diversity in both religious beliefs and social practices

Today the secularizing influences of modernization and unprecedented international migration are transforming the ancient geographic division of the world's religions. Before we can move on to explore the struggle of peoples everywhere to continue the religiousness of their ancestors in today's very different world, we need to be clear about the terms **premodern**, **modern**, and **postmodern**.

In general, premodern history describes a range of cultures in which religion played the decisive role in explaining and ordering life. In premodern societies, religion provided the most certain knowledge one could have of the world, and consequently religious authority played a central role in each culture's social, political, and economic ordering of public life. In this respect, all premodern cultures have more in common with each other than with modern **secular** (i.e., nonreligious) culture.

secular: sociologically used to mean "nonreligious"

With the advances in science made in the eighteenth century, the scientific worldview spread globally and, for many, came to replace religion as the most certain form of knowledge. The modern period is marked by a tendency for individuals to view religion as a matter of personal faith or opinion. Gradually most areas of public life



Map 1.2 Distribution of world religions circa 1500 CE.

were secularized. That is, religious doctrines and officials no longer played central roles in politics, economics, or public education. The most dramatic institutional expression of this change in the West was the emergence of the separation of church and state. The secular state was the expression of "modern" reality—politics governed a society's public life, and religion was a private matter for individuals and their families. From the end of the nineteenth century up until the early 1970s, many scholars even predicted the end of religion and a coming nonreligious, or secular, stage in world history.

Every premodern society saw the universe through explicitly religious eyes and pronounced its vision of life sacred. Since all premodern societies were dominated by the influence of religious authority, they all understood their worlds through religious myths and rituals that had been passed down for many generations. Modern culture, by contrast, tends to emphasize the centrality of rational and empirical science. In addition, the modern view held that history represented inevitable progress toward an ideal future, progress that could only be accomplished through science, with its "objective view" of the world. For modernists, science and the progress of history would finally end the centuries of human bloodshed caused by religions.

metanarrative: grand cosmic and/or historical story accepted by majority of a society as expressing its beliefs about its origins, destiny, and sacred identity

While the contrast between premodern and modern is dramatic and clear, our third term in this sequence—postmodern—needs clarification. According to the postmodernist thinker Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98), this era is characterized by the collapse of the all-encompassing sacred stories or "grand narratives" through which human beings interpreted life in their respective cultures.[2] In ancient societies, these **metanarratives** (to use another of Lyotard's terms) were the religious myths of the four types we have described; the notion that they were true for all times and places went virtually unquestioned. In modern culture the primary metanarrative has been the story of history as progress driven by science and technology. However, the globalization of religious and cultural interaction that began in the twentieth century has tended to "relativize" them all—that is, to see each as a historical construction, and regard none as ultimately, universally true. Significantly, this includes the modern myth of inevitable scientific progress.

In the premodern world a single grand narrative or religious worldview was typically experienced as true and meaningful by the majority of people. It is this kind of metanarrative that has collapsed for many in our day. For Lyotard, "postmodern" is more a style of thinking than a stage of history. It invites pluralism and rejects imposing a single truth on all. In our postmodern world a new type of metanarrative is arising globally, an anti-metanarrative accepting the reality of religious and cultural pluralism. In this anti-metanarrative, no single story is all-encompassing for all people in a given culture—especially as a global culture emerges. The grand stories of the world religions have thereby become miniaturized and globalized. Everyone has his or her own stories, and acknowledges that other people live by other stories.

In this textbook, we also suggest a correlation between the postmodern challenge to modernity and the postcolonial challenge to colonialism. A postcolonial era typically begins with a rejection of the modern Western historical metanarrative of scientific-technological progress, opening the door to postmodern awareness and critiques. However, that door swings two ways: Some seek a return to premodern

fundamental notions of religious truth and practice, insisting that there is only one true religious story and way of life; while others embrace the postmodern situation and seek to accommodate the reality of diversity. What these fundamentalisms and postmodern pluralisms have in common is a rejection of the modern strategy of privatizing religion. Both insist that religion ought to play a role in influencing not only private but also public life. Fundamentalists advocate accomplishing this by returning to an absolute religious metanarrative and work to impose a political order that should shape public life for everyone. In contrast, postmodernists accept a plurality of narratives, recognizing the public benefits of embracing religious pluralism in an age of globalization. Today, all the world's religions are caught up in the struggle between their premodern, modern, and possible postmodern interpretations.

An adult pilgrim is baptized in the Jordan River, Israel.

Because Christianity is the dominant religion of Western civilization, the civilization that produced modernization, it went through the trauma of accommodation to modernity first. Being the first, it had the luxury of embracing modernization in slower stages than those religions that did not encounter modernization, until it had attained a more developed form. Therefore Chapter 4, on Christianity, will have to tell two stories. One is an outline of the intellectual and social history of the West that resulted in modernization, and the other is the story of the role that Christianity played in that history, both in promoting modernization and in resisting it.

Some have charged that modernization is a form of Western cultural and perhaps even religious imperialism that has been forced on other cultures. However, modernization and secularization challenge all sacred traditions and identities, including those of Western religions. As we shall see in this book, modernization did not have an impact on all religions simultaneously, nor did all react in exactly the same way, although there are striking similarities. Therefore, we should not expect all religions and societies to exhibit exactly the same patterns and responses.

The Modern/Postmodern Transition: Colonialism, Socialism, and the End of Modernity

In the nineteenth century the synergy of Western science, economics (capitalism), and technology fostered among the dominant European nations, especially England and France, a thirst for building colonial empires. These colonial ambitions were paralleled

in the modern period by only one Asian nation—Japan. By 1914 most of the world was under the domination of Western European culture. Geographically the Russians and the British controlled about a third of the globe. In terms of population, the British Empire controlled about a fifth of the human race—nearly 400 million people—while France controlled over 50 million colonial subjects (see Map 1.3).

Colonial dominance, and often governance or rule, and paternalism (the British spoke of "the white man's burden" and the French of their "mission to civilize") were accompanied by the spread of science, technology, and capitalism, which proved traumatic to indigenous cultures and their religious traditions. The impressive achievements of Western civilization often prompted elites to initially embrace modernization and secularization. Almost inevitably, however, there was a religious and political backlash, seen in struggles for national liberation as indigenous peoples sought to reclaim their independence and autonomy and to reaffirm the value of their original ways of life. This backlash often included a resurgence of religious influence as a force in anticolonial struggles. Most independence movements readily adopted a key element of Western civilization—**nationalism**—in their attempts to resist foreign occupation and to protect their religious and cultural identities by resisting exploitation.

nationalism: Belief in the nation as a sacred entity

Many of these movements paradoxically struck an alliance with socialism, the philosophical and political movement that arose in the nineteenth century in Europe among the new urban working class as a protest against the poverty and social dislocation created by early capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. Socialism was itself a modernist movement, sustained by a vision of scientific progress, yet it also championed premodern values of community against the rampant individualism of modern capitalism. In Karl Marx's formulation of "scientific socialism," it became an international movement that had an impact on world history as profound as that of any world religion. Indeed, as religious societies around the globe revolted against European imperialism, most experimented with some form of socialism as a modern way of protesting modernity itself. The twentieth century produced examples around the world of Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and neo-Confucian forms of socialism. In its secular form socialism or communism became the dominant element in Russian culture, spreading throughout Eastern Europe and across Asia like a new missionary religion, most prominently "converting" China, the largest country of Asia, by 1949.

Consistent with the myth of modernity, the German socialist Karl Marx (1818–83) saw history as progressively unfolding in three stages defined in terms of a class theory of society:

1. First, primitive communism (tribal societies), in which all were equal
2. Next, the rise of complex urban civilizations, which led to societies ruled by bureaucracies and pitted privileged classes against the masses
3. Finally, the last stage of history in which society would once more be communistic. In this last age all would once again be equal—for all complex, class-defined institutions would wither away, and people would live together in spontaneous harmony.