World Religions

Eastern Traditions

FIFTH EDITION

Roy C. Amore | Amir Hussain | Willard Oxtoby

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Edited by

Roy C. Amore

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Oxford New York

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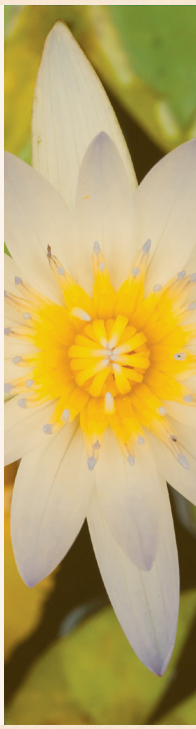

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The late Willard G. Oxtoby, the original editor of this text, was Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto, where he launched the graduate program in the study of religion. His books include *Experiencing India: European Descriptions and Impressions* and *The Meaning of Other Faiths*.

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Preface

This is the fifth edition of a successful textbook project started by the late Professor Will Oxtoby of the University of Toronto. He believed that only those who loved classroom teaching could write a good textbook, and he wanted authors who could write about each religion in a scholarly but appreciative way. In choosing contributors, Amir Hussain, the co-editor of the companion volume, *World Religions: Western Traditions*, and I have tried to be true to Will's vision.

The *Eastern Traditions* and *Western Traditions* volumes include contributions from both female and male contributors. Furthermore, all the contributors were committed to the goals of including both male and female voices and giving attention to women's experiences throughout each chapter.

Both volumes also strive to understand the role of the various religious traditions within current cultural and political affairs. Will Oxtoby wrote in his original foreword that before 1979, many people used to ask him why he was wasting his time on something as unimportant as religion, but that those questions stopped after Iran's Islamic Revolution. I have a similar story. Sometimes political science students used to ask me why anyone interested in politics would bother with religion. Since the attacks of September 2001, and more recently the almost-daily news stories involving religions, students no longer question the relevance of studying religions. On the contrary, understanding the world's major religious traditions seems more important now than ever before. We now live in a global village, one in which most readers of this volume will often interact with adherents of Asian religions at school, at work, on social media, or through travel.

New to This Edition

This fifth edition of the *Eastern Traditions* volume, like its *Western Traditions* counterpart, has updated and revised chapters throughout. It continues the color features and the extensive use of Focus boxes and Sites boxes so appreciated by readers of the fourth edition, while adding two new features: Interview boxes and Women in the Traditions boxes. The Interview boxes report on a short interview with an important or influential member of one of the traditions discussed in each chapter. The Women in the Traditions boxes examine an issue relating to women's practice or women's lives within a tradition.

The introductory chapter has been enhanced in several ways. In the fourth edition the introductory chapter, "About Religion," was shared by both Eastern and Western volumes. For this fifth edition the introductory chapter, now titled "Studying Eastern Religions," has been newly written to incorporate several goals. It focuses more exclusively on Asian religions, and it gives more attention to theories about religion and methods for the study of religion.

The "Current Issues in Eastern Traditions" chapter now focuses more exclusively on Asian traditions. It has been extensively updated to include important new developments such as

those in China, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Current issues also received enhanced treatment at the end of each chapter.

Features and Pedagogy

In this book, we have provided students with a variety of ways to engage with religion in a readable manner. They include the following:

- **Traditions at a Glance Boxes**, which give readers a summary of the basics at the start of each chapter
- **Timelines**, which help to place religious developments in historical context
- **Maps**, which provide useful reference points
- **Art Program**, which highlights practitioners' lived experiences
- **Sacred/Foundational Texts Tables**, which give students a convenient summary of the most important texts in each tradition, how and when they were composed, and the uses made of them
- **Sites Boxes**, which draw Attention to locations of special significance to each tradition
- **Document Boxes**, which provide a generous selection of excerpts from scripture and other important writings
- **Focus Boxes**, which offer additional information on selected subjects
- **Interview Boxes**, which offer replies to interview questions by an important or interesting adherent of a religious tradition discussed in the chapter
- **Women in the Traditions Boxes**, which provide examination of some issue relating especially to women or women's issues within a tradition discussed in the chapter
- **End-of-Chapter Discussion Questions**, which enhance students' critical understanding of key concepts
- **Glossaries**, which explain key terms
- **Further Readings and Recommended Websites**, which provide excellent starting points for further research

Student and Instructor Resources

A rich set of supplemental resources is available to support teaching and learning in this course. These supplements include an Instructor's Manual, Computerized Test Bank, PowerPoint lecture outlines, and Student Resources on the Oxford University Press **Ancillary Resource Center (ARC)** and **Learning Management System Cartridges** with Instructor and Student Resources.

The Oxford University Press **Ancillary Resource Center (ARC)** at oup-arc.com houses the following **Instructor Resources**:

- A Computerized Test Bank, including multiple-choice, true/false, short answer, and essay questions
- An Instructor's Manual, including
  - A "pencil and paper" version of the Computerized Test Bank
  - Chapter Summaries
  - Chapter Learning Objectives
  - Key Concepts

  - Lecture Outlines
  - Discussion Questions
  - Web Links to sites of further interest
  - Suggestions for further reading
- PowerPoint lecture outlines
- PowerPoint art database

The **Student Resources** on the **ARC** contain the following:

- Self-Assessment Quizzes
- Chapter Learning Objectives
- Key Terms
- Study and Reflection Questions
- Research Paper Topics
- Additional resources

Learning Management System Cartridges are also available for *World Religions: Eastern Traditions,* Fifth Edition. For more information on this, please contact your OUP representative or call 1-800-280-0280.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my appreciation to all the teacher-scholars who have contributed to this volume. They have produced a sound and engaging text, and several of them also contributed photographs for their chapters. I enjoyed working with my co-editor Amir Hussain on the project as a whole and on the chapters that open and close this book. I also deeply appreciate the support and advice on content I have received from my wife, Michelle Morrison, and from so many of my students at the University of Windsor.

Previous editions were published by Oxford University Press, Canada. This edition is published by Oxford University Press, USA, and I would like to thank Robert Miller, Alyssa Palazzo, Sydney Keen, and all the OUP team who did great work in such a timely fashion.

I am also grateful to all the reviewers whose comments helped to shape this volume, both those whose names are listed below and those who wished to remain anonymous:

Emily Bailey, Towson University
Melanie Coughlin, Carleton University
Wendell Eisener, Saint Mary's University
Justine Noel, Camosun College
Marcel Parent, Concordia University

Finally, on behalf of all the authors, I wish to thank the many practitioners of Eastern religious traditions who, over the years, have answered our questions, posed for our cameras, and allowed us to observe them at worship, sometimes even inviting us to take tea with them or share their food. It is, after all, their spiritual lives that this book is all about.

Roy C. Amore
January 2018
University of Windsor

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Studying Eastern Religions

Roy C. Amore &
Amir Hussain

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The uncertainty of interpreting ancient rituals, such as those conducted at Harappa
- Some basic characteristics of human religion from ancient times
- A number of patterns that can be observed in more than one religious tradition
- Various theories of why humans are religious
- Various methods used for studying religions
- Some reasons for studying religion

This volume focuses on the several religions that arose in and continue to be important in South, Southeast, and East Asia, ranging from India to Japan. In the modern era the Asian traditions have spread well beyond the continent through migration or missionary conversions. Christianity and Islam are also widespread in Asia but are discussed in this book's companion volume, *World Religions: Western Traditions*, which deals mainly with the religions that arose in the Middle East and have spread to the West and elsewhere.

This volume's title, *Eastern Traditions*, uses the term "traditions" in the plural because the religions of this part of the world, such as Buddhism or Hinduism, have several subdivisions. For example, Buddhism includes three main divisions, called vehicles, and those divisions have their own subdivisions.

Basic Human Religion: Looking Both Ways from Harappa

Harappa is an archaeological site in the Punjab (Five River) region of modern Pakistan. It is named after a nearby village, and we do not know what name its ancient inhabitants gave it. The Harappan culture, as described in the Hindu Traditions chapter, was named after this site. Also known as the Indus Valley civilization, the Harappan culture survived for millennia (from before 2600 BCE through 1600 BCE). It extended over much of what is now Pakistan and most of eastern India, making it the largest of the civilizations of its era. We know a lot about its careful town planning, sewer system, sources of food, extensive bead jewelry industry, and use of seals, usually made of clay, but we do not yet know anything definitive about the language or religious culture of its population. The pictographic writing characters on its seals are our only clue to its language, but we still have not been able to decipher them.

The Harappan religion remains obscure as well, so scholars must rely on speculative interpretations. Some speculate that the remains of the Great Bath at Harappa suggest that a religious structure was located there. Perhaps the bath served as a place for purification before worshiping, along the lines of the "temple tanks" of later Hinduism, or perhaps it was an ancient version of some of the historic temples of southern India in which young women dedicated to the goddess performed mating rituals with males representing male deities. A different interpretation would be that the bath served as a brothel imbued with religious ritual meaning.

A seal from the Harappan culture depicts a ritual scene, with a priest figure bowing before a tree spirit as part of a sacrifice, accompanied by seven attendants.

◄ Great bath or swimming pool, Mohenjo-daro, Sindh, Pakistan (De Agostini/W. Buss)

Sites

Pashupatinath Temple Area, Kathmandu, Nepal

The Pashupatinath temple area in Kathmandu, Nepal, includes not only a main temple to Shiva, but also a cremation area, several smaller shrines, a large hospice where near-death Hindus can reside so they can die in this holy place, and a complex of caves and huts serving as homes for holy men. Only the holy men can go into the caves, and access to the temple building is limited to Hindus, but the rest of the vast complex is open to all.

Photo courtesy of Roy C. Amore

Hindu priests, dressed in various garb according to their sect, pose for tourists and Hindu pilgrims visiting the sacred Pashupatinath (Shiva) temple on the bank of the Bagnati River in Kathmandu, Nepal. After posing for pictures, the priests expect to receive some money.

Several seals from the Harappan culture's cities seem to depict religious rituals. One seal pictures an elaborate rite likely performed in the context of a festival. A horned male appears to be kneeling before a spirit or god in a pipal tree. Horns are associated with a male deity in several ancient cultures, so a good guess is that this figure is a human wearing a horned headdress to symbolize his function as a priest or **shaman**. We can discern that the tree is the species known in India as a pipal because of the characteristic shape of its sharply pointed leaves. The pipal tree is a species of fig tree that grows very tall and lives for centuries. Pipal trees are still considered sacred by Hindus. They are also especially revered in Buddhism as the Bodhi tree, the kind of tree under which the Buddha is said to have sat on the night of his enlightenment (Bodhi). The figure inside the tree has a humanlike body, but with hooves characteristic of a goat or other animal. His arms are similar to a human's except that they have plant-like features from the shoulder down to the pincher-like hands—or perhaps the hands are actually animal feet. The elaborate headdress has water buffalo–like horns and what looks like long, braided hair with plant rings like those of the arms. We can only wonder about what this deity composed of human, animal, and plant features meant to its Harappan worshipers. Did this tree spirit symbolize the power of fertility in nature? We do know that the veneration of tree spirits was a feature of later Indian religion.

Whatever the name and nature of the god in the tree, we can discern that it is the center of attention in this ritual. Perhaps the attending priest is about to offer the bovine animal behind him as a sacrifice to the god. There is some object on a short stand in front of the priest figure that some have interpreted as a sacrificial human head. The seven mysterious figures in the foreground also seem to combine human, animal, and plant features similar to those of the tree god. This suggests that they also represent spirits, or else attending priests dressed like spirits. Some scholars have interpreted them as representing the seven stars of an asterism, perhaps the "Seven Sisters" of the Pleiades constellation. We know that later Hinduism

A seal presumably depicting a ritual sacrifice of a water buffalo performed in the presence of a god associated with the pipal tree.

made numerous associations between its deities and heavenly objects such as the visible planets and prominent constellations.

Looking Back from Harappa

There are a few concepts, shared by virtually all human cultures, that seem fundamental to what we call religion: powerful gods, sacred places, a life of some kind after death, and the presence in the physical world of spirits that interact with humans in various ways. These concepts are so old and so widespread that no one can say where or when they first emerged.

Three Worlds

Historically, it seems that humans around the globe have imagined the world to consist of three levels—sky, earth, and underworld. The uppermost level, the sky, has typically been considered the home of the greatest deities. Exactly how this concept developed is impossible to know, but we can guess that the awesome power of storms was one contributing factor. The apparent movement of the sun, the stars, and the planets across the sky was very likely another. Observing the varying patterns could well have led early humans to believe that the heavenly bodies were living entities animated by their own individual spirits—in effect, gods and goddesses.

The very highest level, located in the heavens above the clouds and stars, was thought to be the home of the highest deity, typically referred to by a name such as Sky Father, Creator, or King of Heaven. This deity—invariably male—was the forerunner of the god of the monotheistic religions. Under the earth the spirits of serpents (surviving as the cobras, or ***nagas***, in the religions of India) or reptilian monsters (surviving in dragon lore) were thought to dwell; perhaps because they were associated with dark and hidden places, they were usually imagined as evil. Finally, between the sky and the underworld lay the earth: the intermediate level where humans lived.

Sacred Places

Around the world, there are certain types of places where humans tend to feel they are in the presence of some unusual energy or power. Such places are regarded as set apart from the everyday world and are treated with special respect. Among those places, often described as "sacred," meaning "set aside," are mountains and hilltops—the places closest to the sky-dwelling deities. In the ancient Middle East, for instance, worship was often conducted at ritual centers known simply as **high places**. People gathered at these sites to win the favor of the deities by offering them food, drink, praise, and prayer. One widely known example is the altar area on the cliff above the ancient city of Petra in Jordan (familiar to many people from the *Indiana Jones* films).

Great rivers and waterfalls are often regarded as sacred as well. And in Japan virtually every feature of the natural landscape—from great mountains and waterfalls to trees and stones—was traditionally believed to be animated by its own god or spirit (*kami*).

Animal Spirits

Another common and long-standing human tendency has been to attribute spirits to animals, either individually or as members of a family with a kind of collective guardian spirit. For this reason, traditional hunting societies have typically sought to ensure that the animals they kill for food are treated with the proper respect, lest other members of those species be frightened away or refuse to let themselves be caught.

In addition, body parts from the most impressive animals—such as bulls, bears, lions, or eagles—have often been used as "power objects" to help humans make contact with the spirits of these animals. People in many cultures have attributed magical properties to objects such as bear claws or eagle feathers, wearing them as amulets or hanging them in the doorways of their homes as protection against evil spirits.

John Marshall/Harappa.com

A seal from the Harappan culture depicts a ritual killing of a bull in the presence of the tree god, depicted above.

Death and Burial

From ancient times, humans have taken great care with the burial of their dead. The body might be positioned with the head facing east, the "first direction," where the sun rises, or placed in the fetal position, suggesting a hope for rebirth into a different realm. These burial positions in themselves would not be enough to prove a belief in an afterlife; however, most such graves have also contained, along with the remains of the dead, "grave goods" of various kinds. Some of these provisions for the afterlife likely belonged to the person in life, while some appear to be specially made replicas, and some are rare, presumably costly items such as precious stones. Apparently the living were willing to sacrifice important resources to help the dead in the afterlife.

The belief that deceased ancestors can play a role in guiding the living members of their families appears to be especially widespread. Traditions such as the Japanese **Obon**, the Mexican **Day of the Dead**,

Photo by Buddhika Weerasinghe/Getty Images

In Japan the return of the souls of the dead is celebrated at the Obon festival.

and the Christian **All Saints Day** and **Hallowe'en** all reflect the belief that the souls of the dead return to earth once a year to share a ritual meal with the living.

Why Are Humans Religious?

The reasons behind human religiosity are complex and varied. All we can say with any certainty is that religion seems to grow out of human experiences: out of the fear of death, which religion transforms into the hope for a good afterlife, and out of the uncertainty surrounding natural events, which becomes a sense of control over nature through the intervention of a priest capable of predicting the change of seasons and the movement of the planets. Religion emerges through the experience of good or bad powers that are sensed in dreams, in sacred spaces, and in certain humans and animals.

Religion has many emotional dimensions, including fear, awe, love, and hate. But it also has intellectual dimensions, including curiosity about what causes things to happen, the recognition of a sense of order in the universe that suggests the presence of a creator, and the drive to make sense out of human experience.

The nature of religious belief and practice has changed through the centuries, so we must be careful not to take the religion of any particular time and place as the norm. What we can safely say is that religion is such an ancient aspect of human experience that it has become part of human nature. For this reason some scholars have given our species, *Homo sapiens*, a second name: *Homo religiosus*.

Looking Forward from Harappa

Looking forward from ancient Harappa, we can see a number of patterns emerge in different parts of the world, some of them almost simultaneously.

Since most of the chapters in this book focus on individual religions, it may be useful to begin with a broader perspective. What follows is a brief overview of some of the major developments in the history of what the late Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) called "religion in the singular," meaning the history of human religiosity in the most general sense.

Shamanism

One very early pattern of human religiosity involves a ritual specialist—in essence, a kind of priest—that we know today as a shaman. The word "shaman" comes from a specific central Asian culture, but it has become the generic term for a person who acts as an intermediary between humans and the spirit world. Other terms include "medicine man," "soul doctor," and "witchdoctor."

Shamans are still active in a number of cultures today. The way they operate varies, but certain patterns seem to be almost universal, which in itself suggests that the way of the shaman is very ancient. Sometimes the child of a shaman will follow in the parent's footsteps, but more often a shaman will be "called" to the role by his or her psychic abilities, as manifested in some extraordinary vision or revelation, or perhaps a near-death experience.

Candidates for the role of shaman face a long and rigorous apprenticeship that often includes a vision quest, in the course of which they are likely to confront terrifying apparitions. Typically the quester will acquire a guiding spirit, sometimes the spirit of a particular animal (perhaps a bear or an eagle, whose claws or feathers the shaman may wear to draw strength from its special powers) and sometimes a more humanlike spirit (a god or goddess). That spirit will then often continue to serve as a guide and protector throughout the shaman's life.

To communicate with the spirit world, the shaman enters a trance state (often induced by rhythmic chanting or drumming). According to Mircea Eliade in his classic *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964 [1951]), contact is then made in one of two ways. In the first, described as "ecstatic" (from a Greek root meaning "to stand outside"), the shaman's soul leaves his or her body (which may appear lifeless) and travels to the realm where the spirits live. In the second, the shaman calls the spirit into

NHAC NGUYEN/AFP/Getty Images

This picture, taken on August 13, 2016, shows professional shaman La Thi Tam performing a "Len Dong" dance at a temple in Hanoi. The Len Dong dance is said to cure prolonged illness, spiritual possession, and stress over family troubles. The ancient practice—previously restricted by colonial French and Vietnamese authorities—is enjoying a renaissance in the communist nation as officials ease constraints against it.

his or her own body and is possessed by it; in such cases the shaman may take on the voice and personality of the spirit or mimic its way of moving.

In either case, after regaining normal consciousness the shaman announces what he or she has learned about the problem at hand and what should be done about it. Typically, the problem is traced to the anger of a particular spirit; the shaman then explains the reason for that anger and what must be done to appease the spirit. In most cases the appropriate response is to perform a ritual sacrifice of some kind.

Hunting Rituals

Many ancient cave drawings depict hunting scenes in which a human figure seems to be performing a dance of some kind. Based on what we know of later hunting societies, we can guess that the figure is a shaman performing a ritual either to ensure a successful hunt or to appease the spirits of the animals killed.

It's not hard to imagine why such societies would have sought ways to influence the outcome of a hunt. Indeed, it seems that the more dangerous the endeavor, the more likely humans were to surround it with rituals. As the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out in his book *Magic, Science and Religion* (1948), the Trobriand Islanders he studied did not perform any special ceremonies before fishing in the lagoon, but they never failed to perform rituals before setting out to fish in the open ocean. This suggests that religious behavior is, at least in part, a way of coping with dangerous situations.

In addition, though, as we have seen, early humans believed that the spirits of the animals they hunted had to be appeased. Thus a special ritual might be performed to mark the first goose kill of the season, in the hope that other geese would not be frightened away from the hunting grounds.

Such rituals reflect humans' concern over the future food supply, but they also reveal something about the nature of human belief in spirits. From very ancient times, it seems, humans have believed that the spirit—whether of an animal killed for food or of a human being—survives death and can communicate with others of its kind.

Coping with Unfriendly Spirits

The spirits associated with natural phenomena—whether animals or storms, mountains or rivers—have typically been thought to behave toward humans in the same ways that humans behave toward one another. Strategies for dealing with unfriendly spirits have therefore usually been based on what has worked with humans.

Many cultures have believed wild, uninhabited areas to be guarded by resident spirits. In some cases, these spirits have taken the form of monsters

or mythical beasts; in others, such as the folklore of Scandinavia, they have assumed the guise of "little people" such as trolls.

In ancient times, unfriendly spirits were of particular concern to those who ventured into the forest as hunters or gatherers, but they were not confined to the wilderness. Pain and disease of all kinds—from toothache to appendicitis to mental illness—were also attributed to possession by malevolent spirits or demons. In Sri Lanka, those suffering from certain illnesses were advised to have a shaman sacrifice a chicken as an offering to the "graveyard demon," effectively bribing him to go away; in such cases a second chicken, still alive, would be given to the shaman who performed the ritual. Another approach was to frighten the demon away, either by threatening to invoke another, stronger spiritual power, such as the spirit guide of the shaman, to drive him off, or by making threatening gestures or loud noises. The firecrackers still used in some East Asian rituals are examples of the latter approach.

Connecting to the Cosmos

A second pattern that emerged as religion developed across the globe is the one that inspired the building of structures like **Stonehenge**. People of the Neolithic ("new rock") era went to extraordinary lengths to create sacred areas by assembling huge stones in complex patterns. In some cases the motivation may have been political: perhaps a leader wanted to demonstrate his power over the people under his command. In others, however, the main reason undoubtedly had something to do with religion, such as the need for a public space where the rituals essential to the society—weddings, puberty rites, funerals—could be performed.

Discerning the Cosmic Cycles

Ritual centers such as Stonehenge may also have served purposes that we might today think of as scientific or technical, but that their builders would have associated with religion. One very important function of priests was to track the seasons and determine the best time for seasonal activities such as planting. In addition to tracking the north–south movements of the sun, the people of the Neolithic era paid careful attention to the phases of the moon and the positions of certain constellations at their rising. The horizon was divided into segments named after the planet or constellation associated with that section. What we now call astrology developed as a way of understanding the cycle of the seasons and how humans fitted into it, collectively and individually. In ancient times no important decision would have been made without consulting an expert in the movements of the sun, moon, planets, and constellations. Even in modern times, many people, including political leaders, will consult an astrologer before making a major decision.

Hilltop Tombs

We suggested earlier that two powerful motivators of human religion are the fear of death and the idea of an afterlife. Ancient cultures around the world appear to have favored high places as burial sites. Where there were no hills, artificial ones were sometimes built, at least for the most important members of the society. The pyramids of Egypt and the stupas of Asia are both examples of this practice. In the pyramids, shafts extending from the burial chambers toward important stars connected the deceased with the cosmos. Similarly, in Buddhist stupas, a wooden pole—later replaced by a vertical stone structure—extended above the burial mound to connect the earth with the heavens. Scholars refer to this kind of symbolic link between earth and sky as an *axis mundi* ("world axis").

Animals and Gods

Another common feature of Neolithic religion was a tendency to associate certain animals with specific deities. One very early example comes from the ancient (c. 7000–5000 BCE) city of Catalhoyuk ("forked mound"), near Konya in modern Turkey, where a small sculpture of a woman flanked by two large felines was found. James Mellaart, the archaeologist who first excavated the site in the 1960s, believed she represented a mother goddess seated on a throne. Although this interpretation has been disputed, we know that

the ancient Egyptians had a cat goddess named Bast who was revered as a symbol of both motherliness and hunting prowess. And the fierce Hindu goddess Durga is usually depicted riding either a lion or a tiger. (One Christmas card from modern India shows the Virgin Mary riding a tiger in the same fashion.)

A similar pattern of association linked the most powerful male deities of Neolithic societies with the strength and virility of the bull. In Greek mythology, the great god Zeus took the form of a white bull when he abducted the Phoenician princess Europa. A creature known as the minotaur—half man, half bull—was said to have been kept in a labyrinth beneath the ancient palace of Knossos, on the island of Crete, where frescos show people leaping over the horns of a bull. Greek temples often displayed bull horns near their altars. And in India a bull named Nandi is the sacred mount of the great god Shiva and continues to serve as a symbol of him.

The association of the bull with the creator god can be seen even in Judaism, which strictly forbids the use of any image to represent its invisible deity. In the Hebrew Bible, when Moses returns from the mountain where he encounters God and finds that his brother Aaron, the first high priest, has allowed the people to worship an image of a golden calf or bullock, he denounces this practice as idolatry. Centuries later, one of Solomon's sons is severely chastised for installing bull images in the temples he has built.

Temple Religion

A third pattern that emerged as religions spread featured the construction of larger temples, the creation of more elaborate sacrificial rituals, and the development of a priestly class endowed with unusual power, prestige, and wealth. This pattern, beginning at least 3,000 years ago, played an enormous

Jeremy Horner/Corbis/VCG

Hindus venerate the bull Nandi as a manifestation in animal form of the divine power of the god Shiva.

role in shaping many traditions, including Judaism, Chinese religion, and Hinduism.

Indo-European Priests

"Indo-European" is a modern term referring to a language family and cultural system that eventually stretched from India all the way through Europe; it does not designate any particular ethnic group. The Indo-European (IE) cultural system has been one of the most important in human history. It may have originated in the region around the Black Sea, but that is only one of many theories that scholars have proposed. From the vocabulary of "proto-IE," as reconstructed by linguists, it is clear that the IE people hunted, practiced metallurgy, rode horses, drove chariots, and waged war, among other activities. Farming, however, appears not to have been part of their culture: the fact that the IE vocabulary related to agriculture differs from one place to another suggests that when it came to farming the Indo-Europeans simply adopted existing local practices.

Everywhere the IE warriors conquered, they set up a social system with four basic divisions, the top three of which consisted of priests, warriors, and middle-class commoners. In India these groups are known respectively as the *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, and *vaishyas*. In ancient times each of these groups had a special clothing color; thus, today in India *varna* ("color") is still the standard term for "class." The priests performed rituals, kept the calendar, taught the young, and advised the kings; within the warrior class, the top clans were the rulers; and the middle-class "commoners" earned their living as merchants or farmers. Finally, all people of local origin, no matter how wealthy or accomplished, were relegated to the servant (*shudra*) class.

The four-level social system was given mythic status in the *Rig Veda*, according to which the world came into being through the sacrifice of a "cosmic person" (*Purusha*). Out of his mouth came the brahmin priests, whose job was to chant the sacred hymns and syllables. The warriors came from his arms, the middle class from his thighs, and the servants from

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The Social Role of Sacrifice

These selections show how ritual sacrifice helps define social roles. In the first selection from the Hindu Vedas the sacrifice of a primal Person defines the norm for the social roles of the four social classes. The second selection makes it normative for the Israelites to bring a sacrificial offering to the temple three times each year.

> When they divided the Man [*Purusha*, the primal Person sacrificed by the gods to create the world], into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth was the brahmin, his arms were made into the nobles, his two thighs were the populace, and from his feet the servants were born. (Doniger O'Flaherty 1975: 26)

> Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place which he will choose: at the feast of unleavened bread, at the feast of weeks, and at the feast of booths. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed: All shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you. (From Moses's instructions to the people of Israel; Deuteronomy 16:16–17)

his feet. Even today, this ancient hymn continues to buttress the social structure of India.

Over a period of about a thousand years, beginning around 2500 BCE, the Indo-Europeans took control of the territories that are now Afghanistan, northwest India, Pakistan, Turkey, Greece, Rome, central Europe, and, for a while, even Egypt. Their religious culture was similar to those embraced by most of their counterparts 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, with many deities, including a "sky father" (a name that survives in the Greek Zeus Pater, the Latin Jupiter, and the Sanskrit Dyaus Pitar) and a storm god (Indra in India, Thor in Scandinavia). They also sang hymns to female deities, such as the goddess of dawn, and had a hereditary priesthood to offer sacrifices to the gods.

Although the IE people did not necessarily invent the system of hereditary priesthood, they certainly contributed to its spread. In addition to Hindu brahmins, ancient Roman priests and Celtic Druids inherited their priestly status. These priests enjoyed great power and prestige, and sometimes were resented by nonpriests. (One ancient Indian text includes a parody in which dogs, acting like priests, dance around a fire chanting, "*Om* let us eat, *om* let us drink" [*Chandogya Upanishad* I, xii, in Zaehner 1966: 84].)

Priests and Temples Elsewhere

We actually know when the first Jewish temple was built. After David had been chosen as king of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, he captured the Jebusite city now known as Jerusalem. He transformed the city into a proper capital, complete with a grand palace for himself and an organized priesthood. His son Solomon took the next step, building the first temple in the mid-tenth century BCE. The priests attached to the temple soon made it the only site where sacrificial rituals could be performed.

The Jewish priesthood was hereditary. All those who served in the temple as assistants to the priests were required to be Levites (members of the tribe of Levi), and priests themselves had to be not only Levites but direct descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, who was the original high priest.

Priests became a powerful social class in many other parts of the world as well, including Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Although priests had to be from a particular birth group in India and Israel, in some other traditions they were recruited according to their interest and abilities from the population at large. Typically, the role of priest was reserved for males, females being considered impure because of the menstrual cycle. The Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome, who tended the sacred fires and performed rituals, were among the very few exceptions to the general rule. There is evidence that in India and elsewhere, women sometimes served as temple prostitutes, embodying the goddess in sexual union with males who represented the god.

Middle Eastern Prophets and Asian Sages

By 700 BCE or even earlier, several new religious traditions had begun to form under the leadership of a great prophet or sage—a fourth pattern in the development of religiosity. The word "prophet" derives from Greek and has two related meanings, one referring to a person who speaks on behalf of a deity and one referring to a person who foresees or predicts the future. The terms are often conflated because prophets delivering messages from the deity often warned of disasters to come if God's will was not obeyed. The site of the temple at Delphi, Greece, where a virgin priestess said to be under the inspiration of Apollo delivered prophecies, had been considered sacred for centuries, maybe millennia, before the glory days of classical Greece. It must have seemed a natural spot for making contact with the divine and receiving sacred knowledge: high up a mountainside, close to the gods, with a natural cave that resembled the entrance to a womb (*delphys* in Greek, representing the mysterious female energy) and a standing stone or *omphalos* (navel of the earth), representing the male energy and the connection between heaven and earth.

Zarathustra, Prophet of the Wise Lord

Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) was a prophet figure who lived more than 2,500 years ago, probably in the region of eastern Iran or Afghanistan. Although we know little about his life, he left behind a collection of poems devoted to a "wise lord" called Ahura Mazda. The religion that developed around his teachings, which came to be known as Zoroastrianism, played an important part in the development of monotheism. The concepts of heaven and hell also owe a lot to the Zoroastrians, who believed that evildoers would be condemned to hell at their death, but that eventually a great day of judgment would come when the souls of all the dead would be made to pass through a fiery wall. Those who had been virtuous in life would pass through the fire without pain, while the rest would be cleansed of their remaining sin and permitted to enter paradise (a term believed to derive from a Persian word meaning garden). The threat of hell and the promise of heaven were powerful tools for any prophet seeking to persuade people to behave as he or she believed the deity demanded. Followers of Zarathustra later migrated from Persia (modern-day Iran) to India, where they continue as a small religious and ethnic group known as Parsees, meaning Persians.

Among Asian religions the great moral leaders are typically referred to as sages rather than prophets. Whereas a prophet brings a message from a god, a sage is a wise person who speaks the wisdom of the ages. The ethical content of both figures' messages may concern how humans should live together harmoniously, but for the sage the authority of the message resides in its inherent wisdom rather than it being the word of a god. While Western (Middle Eastern) religions have typically been founded by prophets, Asian religions are generally traced back to sages such as Buddha (Buddhism), Mahavira (Jainism), Confucius (Confucianism), or Laozi (Daoism).

The Energy God

Yet another important pattern emerged as religions spread around 2,500 years ago. In it the divine is understood not as a humanlike entity but as the energy of the cosmos. The energy god does not issue commandments, answer prayers, or in any way interact with humans as a human. It does not create in the usual fashion of gods; it does not direct the course of history or dictate the fate of individuals. In fact, some have suggested that this god may have more in common with the principles of modern physics than with the traditional gods of most religions. This divinity simply exists—or rather "underlies" everything that exists. Among the traditions that developed around the energy god concept were Chinese

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Divine Energy

The Chinese sage Laozi taught that the divine energy of the universe was beyond human description.

The Dao that can be told of
Is not the Absolute Dao;
The Names that can be given
Are not Absolute Names.
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Named is the Mother of All Things.
(*Daodejing*, in Lin Yutang 1948: 41)

This finest essence, the whole universe has it as its Self: That is the Real: That is the Self: That *you* are, Svetaketu!

(*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.9, in Zaehner 1966: 110)

Daoism, the Upanishadic wisdom of India, and the pre-Socratic philosophy of the early Greek world.

Finding the Dao Within

The sage who became known as Laozi ("Master Lao") lived in northern China around 600 BCE. According to legend, he worked for the government as an archivist. At night students would visit his home to hear his words of wisdom about life, especially how to live in harmony with one's inner nature. But Lao had what we might call a midlife crisis. Dissatisfied with his job and the social and political life of his time, he is said to have left home and set out to the west, riding on a water buffalo (an event that became a favorite subject for artists). Apparently he had not even said goodbye to his students, but one of them happened to be working as a guard at the border. Shocked to learn that his master was leaving China, he begged Lao to record his teachings before leaving. So Lao paused at the border long enough to write down the fundamentals of his thought in a series of beautiful, if cryptic, verses that were eventually collected in a small volume called ***Daodejing*** (or *Tao De Ching*), meaning the book (*jing*) about the Dao and its power (*de*). It became and remains one of the world's most influential books.

What did Laozi write that has spoken to so many through the millennia? He began with what became one of the most famous opening lines in history: "The Dao that can be described is not the eternal Dao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name." In general usage the word "Dao" means "the way," but here it refers to the mysterious energy that underlies all things. Laozi was warning readers that words cannot adequately describe the Dao. Ogden Nash, a twentieth-century poet noted for combining insight and humor, captured the same idea this way: "Whatever the mind comes at, God is not that."

In traditional cultures, people talk about the characteristics of various deities—their loving nature or anger or jealousy or desire for a particular kind of behavior. But the absolute, the eternal Dao, has no such attributes. Unlike Athena, Zeus, Yahweh, or Indra, the Dao does not have a "personality," and there is no reason for humans to fear, love, or appease it. Thus Laozi used poetic imagery to give us some insights into its nature. The Dao, he wrote, is like water: it will take on the shape of whatever container we pour it into. Falling from the sky, it may seem content to lie in the hollow made by the hoof of an ox in the muddy road. Raining on the rocky mountaintop, it tumbles all the way down. Water seems malleable, passive, and without a will of its own. Yet a mountain will be worn down by the water over time. The water in the hoofprint will evaporate and return to the sky, to fall again when the time is right.

"That Is You": Sitting near the Sages of Old India

A worldview similar to that of Daoism took shape in northern India around the same time. It is reflected in the ***Upanishads*** (a Sanskrit term meaning literally "sitting-up-near" the master), a series of philosophical texts composed beginning around 600 BCE.

What the Daoist sages called the Dao the Upanishadic masters called *sat* (usually translated as "being," "truth," or "the real"). One Upanishad tells the story of a young man named Svetaketu who has just completed his studies with the brahmin priests. Back at home, his father, who is a king and therefore a member of the warrior class, asks Svetaketu what his priestly teachers taught him about the original source of all things. When Svetaketu admits that he was not taught about that subject, his father undertakes to instruct him in the secret wisdom.

The first lesson has to do with the need for sleep and food, but then the real teaching begins. The father has Svetaketu bring a bowl of water and taste it. Then he has him put a lump of sea salt into the water. The next morning Svetaketu sees that the lump of salt is no longer visible; he tastes the water and finds it salty. We can imagine his impatience at being instructed in something he already knows. But his father has a bigger point in mind. He tells Svetaketu that just as the salt is invisible yet present in the water, so also there is a hidden essence present throughout the world. That hidden essence, the force that energizes everything, is the highest reality, the father says, and that reality is you (*tat*

tvam asi; "that you are"). The Upanishadic master is initiating his son into a new religious worldview that understands "god" as an energy hidden within and sustaining everything. And that great energy, that ultimate reality, *tat tvam asi*—that is you.

The First Principle: Greek Philosophy Before Socrates

Around 2,500 years ago the Greek-speaking philosophers of Ionia (now southwestern Turkey) began to ask the same questions as Svetaketu's father: What is the first principle, the first cause, the source from which all else comes? Starting from the science of the day, they tried to determine which of the four primal elements—earth, air, fire, and water—came first. Although their methods were those of philosophy rather than scientific experimentation, their attempt to understand the causal principle underlying all things—without bringing in a god as the final cause—marked a major advance toward the development of the scientific worldview.

Purity and Monasticism

At almost the same time that the "energy god" worldview was establishing itself in China, India, and Greek culture, another spiritual movement of great importance was developing in India. The earliest historical records of this tradition come from the region of what is now northern India around 2,500 years ago, but the tradition itself claims to have much older roots. Its followers typically sought spiritual enlightenment through asceticism—intense bodily discipline. Their ethic was one of nonviolence toward all creatures, and their goal was perfect purity of mind.

Ganges Spirituality

English has no specific term for the new type of religion that came into bloom in the region of the Ganges River around 500 BCE. By that time the Indo-European cultural system, including the religion of the brahmin priests, was firmly established in what is now northern India. We can never know for certain what earlier traditions that religion displaced, since the written sources on which we rely for such information were the products of the brahmins themselves. However, linguistic and archaeological data lend support to the theory that two of the world's great living religions—Jainism and Buddhism—were rooted in the prebrahminic traditions of the Ganges region.

Along the banks of the river were many camps where spiritual masters of various persuasions operated what were in effect open-air seminaries. Though some of the teachers were brahmins who practiced animal sacrifice, others were committed to the idea that it is wrong to harm any living creature. Their followers rejected the killing of animals for food, and some even objected to farming, because hoeing and plowing harm organisms living in the soil. While the brahmin masters continued to perform their animal sacrifices, the masters committed to the principle of nonharm (*ahimsa*) denounced that tradition. Some of the latter—among them the Jaina master Mahavira—went so far as to require their disciples to cover their mouths and noses and strain their drinking water in order to avoid causing harm to microscopic insects.

Leaving the world of day-to-day life to follow the path of spiritual enlightenment through rigorous ascetic discipline, the students who gathered around these masters took vows of poverty and celibacy and considered themselves to have "departed the world." The Buddhist and Jaina monastic traditions trace their roots to these ascetics, and it is possible that Indian monasticism played a role in the development of Western monasticism as well.

One more difference between the Indo-European and "Gangetic" cultural systems is worth mentioning here. In the IE system, priests were recruited only from the brahmin social class. In the Ganges tradition, by contrast, the notion of a hereditary priesthood was rejected entirely: anyone, however humble, was permitted to choose to lead the life of a holy person. As the Buddha would teach his followers, the status of the "true brahmin" is not a birthright but must be earned through meritorious conduct.

Mystery Religion

"Mystery religion," yet another significant pattern that emerges in the history of religiosity, refers to a type of Greek and Roman tradition in which the core teachings and rituals were kept secret from outsiders and were revealed only to those who were prepared to undergo initiation in the hope of securing blessings during this life and a heavenly paradise in the afterlife. Such religions became so popular during the Roman period that they presented a threat to the power and influence of the official Roman priesthood (not to be confused with the Roman Catholic priesthood).

The Eleusinian mystery tradition may be the oldest of these religions. Named for an ancient Greek town called Eleusis, it grew out of the myth of the young Persephone, or Kore ("girl"), who is abducted by the god of the dead, Hades, and taken down into the underworld. With the disappearance of this young girl—a potent symbol of growth and fertility—everything on earth begins to die. This imperils not only humans but also the gods themselves, who depend on humans to feed them through sacrifices. The girl's mother, Demeter, is therefore allowed to descend into the underworld and bring her back. Scholars understand the Persephone myth to be based on the seasonal cycles of stagnation during the winter and renewal in the spring. Members of her cult believed that by identifying themselves with the dying and rising goddess through the celebration of seasonal rituals, they too would triumph over death.

Initiates into the mysteries associated with the god Dionysus also followed a very ancient tradition. Through rituals that included the drinking of wine, ecstatic dancing, and perhaps the eating of mind-altering plants, participants were able to enter into ecstatic states of consciousness in which they believed that their god would ensure a pleasant afterlife. Another popular mystery cult, dedicated to the goddess Isis, had Egyptian origins.

Many scholars have suggested that mystery cults such as these may have influenced the development of Christianity. The early Christians were initiated into the new cult by undergoing baptism. They then joined an inner circle of people whose faith centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus and who hoped that by following Christ they would secure blessings during this life and a place in heaven after death. Although Christianity developed out of Judaism, its theological structure does seem to have been influenced, however indirectly, by mystery religion.

Theistic Mysticism

European religious thought eventually reflected mysticism as well. German Christian mystics such as Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) would use terms such as Ungrund ("ungrounded") or Urgrund ("original ground") to refer to the divine as the primal cause. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim mystics all believed in a god beyond the reaches of human understanding. In India the important philosopher and theologian Shankara taught that the absolute God is without characteristics, meaning God is beyond human knowing.

Mystery religions, with their elaborate rituals of death and resurrection, are not common among the Asian religious traditions. Some forms of Hindu tantra, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Daoism do, however, reserve their most secret spiritual wisdom for those followers who have achieved advanced status.

Avatar: God on Earth

Long before anyone thought of an "avatar" as either a blue-skinned movie humanoid or an on-screen image representing a player in a computer game, *avatar(a)* was a Sanskrit theological term for the "coming down" to earth of a god. By the first century of the Common Era, the idea of a god born in human form had taken root in many parts of the world. In the earlier stages of the development of religion there were many stories of gods and goddesses who came down to earth, but there are two major differences between these accounts and the avatar stories.

First, whereas the ancient gods came down to earth as gods, the avatar is a god in a truly human form—as a later Christian creed put it, "fully God and fully man." For example, in the ancient Indian story of Princess Dhamayanti, her father holds a party to which he invites all the marriageable princes from various kingdoms. Four gods also attend the party, however, all disguised as the handsome prince Nala,

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Avatar Gods

These two selections, one Hindu and one Christian, reflect the concept that the divine can come down (avatar) in human form in order to help the world.

> For the protection of the good,
> For the destruction of evildoers,
> For the setting up of righteousness,
> I come into being, age after age.
> (Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, in Zaehner 1966: 267)

> Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself. (St. Paul to the Christians of Philippi, in Philippians 2:6–7)

whom the princess already plans to choose. At first she is disturbed to see five look-alikes, but finally she finds that she can distinguish the four divine imposters because they do not sweat and are floating slightly above the ground. She marries the human prince, and they live happily ever after.

Unlike the gods at Dhamayanti's party, the avatar gods walk on the ground, sweat, get hungry, sleep, and are in every way human. They are incarnated in a human womb, are born, grow up, teach, save the world from evil, and eventually die. As a Christian lay man once explained, "You have to understand that we Christians worship a god in diapers." His choice of words was unusual, but his theology was solid, and it leads us to the second major innovation that came with the concept of the avatar god.

This second innovation is the idea that the avatar god is a savior figure in at least two ways. Not only does he save the world from some evil power, such as Satan or a demonic king, but he also saves from hell those who put their faith in him and secures them a place in heaven. In avatar religions, the ritual of sacrifice is replaced by the ritual of placing faith in the savior god.

The biography of the savior god follows a well-known pattern. Typically, the avatar god has a special, nonsexual conception. His mother is chosen to bear him because she is exceptionally pure, and an angel or prophet announces to her that the child she is carrying has a special destiny. The savior's birth, usually in a rustic setting, is surrounded by miracles, which often include a fortuitous star or constellation pattern in the night sky. Wise persons foresee the child's greatness. An evil king tries to kill the baby but kills another baby, or other babies, instead. The child has special powers and as an adult is able to work miracles. He typically marries and has a child before embarking on his religious mission. His death represents a triumph over evil, and the cosmos responds with earthquakes and other natural signs. Upon dying, he returns to the heavens to preside over a paradise in which his followers hope to join him after they die.

The avatar concept took root in Asia and the Middle East at least 2,000 years ago. Among Hindus its impact was reflected in the worship of Krishna; among Buddhists in the veneration of Amitabha Buddha (the figure who would become Amida in Japan); and among Jews in the rise of Christianity.

Krishna, Avatar of Vishnu

In some Hindu stories Vishnu is the ultimate deity, the god who lies at the origin of everything there is, including the creator god Brahman. Vishnu is said to lie on his cosmic serpent, sometimes identified with the Milky Way, with a lotus plant growing out of his

Art Directors & TRIP/Alamy Stock Photo

The name Krishna means "dark one," and he is usually pictured as dark blue or black. Here the youthful Krishna and his older brother Balarama are pictured stealing ghee (clarified butter) from storage pots, thus earning him his nickname "The Butter Thief." In Hindu tradition Krishna is both an avatar of God and a naughty human boy.

navel. From the lotus Brahman is born as the first of all creations; then the universe and all its material and spiritual energies follow. This is not exactly a mythic version of the big bang theory, but it comes close. Life evolves, over an unimaginable number of years, out of the divine energy at the center of the universe. After the universe has run its allotted course, the process reverses from evolution to involution. Over an equally long period of time, eventually all things return into Vishnu, as if crossing the event horizon into a black hole. There all energy lies dormant as Vishnu sleeps, before the whole process begins again.

Another story about Vishnu sees him as the protector of the world. When earth gets into trouble, he comes down to save it. The first five avatars of Vishnu take the form of animals that protect the world from natural disasters in its formative millennia. The next four avatars are humans, the most important of whom is Krishna, whose exploits are narrated in several different Hindu sources. The most famous is the *Bhagavad Gita*—the *Song of the Lord*. A small section of the epic *Mahabharata*, the *Gita* tells of a great war between two houses of the royal family. Krishna is a relative of both houses and is recruited by both armies but chooses to fight for neither. Instead, he agrees to drive the chariot of Arjuna, one of the five princes who lead one army.

At the beginning of the *Gita*, just before the battle, Arjuna asks Krishna to drive the chariot into the neutral zone between the two great armies so

that he can get a better look at the enemy. But when he sees his adversaries more closely, he loses his will to fight, telling Krishna that he recognizes among them his cousins, his old teachers, and others he remembers from childhood.

Krishna counsels him to take up his bow and fight, for that is his duty as a warrior. Arjuna has misgivings, however, and they begin a long conversation about morality or duty (*dharma*) and the eternal soul that cannot die even though the body may be killed in battle. Krishna teaches with such great authority that soon Arjuna asks how he knows so much. Krishna replies that he is a god of gods, that he is the energy behind all the categories of spirits and gods. When Arjuna asks for proof, Krishna grants him the eye of a god, with which he sees the splendors and mysteries of the universe as a god would.

In the end, Arjuna accepts the divinity of his chariot-driving cousin, acts on his advice, fights alongside his brothers, and wins the war. More important, however, is what Arjuna learns from Krishna about the many ways to lead a good religious life. These lessons include the *yoga* (way) of good works (*karma yoga*), the way of deep spiritual wisdom (*jnana yoga*), and the way of faithful devotion to Krishna (*bhakti yoga*). Of these, the path of faithful devotion is the most highly recommended because it is the easiest and the most certain. The real saving power comes not from the wisdom or discipline of the individual, but from the saving power of the god. Krishna promises that those who practice devotion to him will go to his heaven when they die.

Another source, the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, offers stories about other parts of Krishna's life. We learn from it that Krishna was born under the rule of an evil king named Kamsa who was secretly part of a demonic plot to take over the world. One day Kamsa is driving the wedding chariot of a female relative when an old man—a prophet figure—yells out to the king and tells him he is assisting in the marriage of a woman whose eighth child will grow up to kill him. The king is about to call off the wedding, but the bride pleads with him to reconsider, even promising that when she has children, Kamsa can do with them as he wishes. Kamsa agrees, the marriage takes place, and he proceeds to kill her children as they are born. On the night of the fateful eighth birth, the father is told in a dream to take the baby to safety with relatives across the river. This he does, replacing his child with a baby girl born the same evening.

When the king's guards hear the baby crying, they awaken the king, who smashes the infant's head on the ground. As the baby's soul rises toward heaven, it tells Kamsa that the baby who will grow up to kill him is still alive. That child is Krishna, and when he grows up he fulfills his destiny, saving the world from the evil represented by Kamsa and his demons.

Amitabha, the Buddha of Saving Grace

The avatar concept also gave Buddhism the story of Amitabha Buddha, in which a prince intent on achieving buddhahood makes 48 vows, a number of which focus on helping others toward the same goal. Among them is a promise to establish a paradise free of all suffering, disease, and ill will, in which those who put their trust in Amitabha Buddha will be reborn after their death. His followers hope that if they sincerely profess their faith in his saving power, they will be rewarded with rebirth in that "Pure Land."

Jesus the Christ: God Come Down

The Christian doctrine of the trinity affirms that the one God exists in three persons: those of the father, the son, and the holy spirit. In formulating this doctrine, the Christians departed radically from the theology proclaimed by Abraham and Moses. There is no room in Jewish thought for an avatar god, but that was the direction in which Christian thought developed. The prologue to the Gospel of John identifies Jesus with the divine Logos—the word of God that was present before creation. The New Testament says that Jesus "emptied himself of divinity" and came down for the salvation of the world after being conceived in the womb of a virgin by the spirit of God. An angel announces the pregnancy and its significance to his mother. The birth is associated with a special star. According to the Gospel of Luke, shepherds overhear the angels rejoicing and come to revere the infant. In Matthew's Gospel, magi

(wise men) from the East follow a special star and bring gifts to the child.

For Christians, Jesus became the ultimate god, one who died on the cross on behalf of his followers and rose on the third day after his death. By participating in the sacred rituals—the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist (in which consecrated bread and wine are consumed in commemoration of the Last Supper)—and placing their trust in Jesus as Lord, Christians hope to secure a place in heaven after their death.

In this way Christianity started with the Hebrew scriptures and the monotheism of Moses and incorporated into them the avatar pattern, along with elements of the mystery traditions, to form a new religion. Most Jews resisted these changes, but some accepted them in the belief that God had in fact offered the world a new dispensation.

Scriptural Religion

The beginning of scriptural religion, a pattern seen in the development of religion worldwide, is hard to date. The earliest scriptures we have are the Zoroastrian Avesta of Persia, the Hindu Vedas, and the Torah of Judaism, all of which took shape approximately 3,000 years ago. Religions based primarily on scripture came much later, however, when different groups began to insist that their particular scriptures were the literal words of God, and to make adherence to those scriptures the focus of their religious life.

Scripturalism manifested itself in rabbinic Judaism in the centuries that followed the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. It emerged in full force with the rise of Islam, destined to become one of the two most influential religions of all time, in the seventh century. It also played a large role in Protestant Christianity, starting in the sixteenth century, in which the authority of scripture replaced that of tradition and the papacy.

Living by Torah

During the Jews' exile in Babylon the priests were not able to perform the traditional temple rituals, and so the Jews turned to the rabbis—scholars of the Torah with special expertise in Jewish law and ritual. In this way scripture began to play a more important role in Jewish life, a role that became even more important after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. Since that time, Jewish religious life has centered on the interpretation of the scripture.

The Word of God

The Gospels were not written until two or three generations after the death of Jesus, and the Christian canon did not take final shape until well into the third century CE. But once the books of the canon were fixed, the church came to emphasize scripture as a divinely inspired source of faith and practice. The Bible became

Document

The Word of God

> We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, in order that you may learn wisdom. (Qur'an 12:2)
>
> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1–3, King James Version [KJV])
>
> And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:14, KJV)

as central to Christianity as the Torah was to Judaism. Christians commonly refer to their scriptures as the word of God, and some believe that the Bible was literally dictated by God to its human authors.

God's Final Prophet

The scriptural approach to religion reached its greatest height in Islam. The *surahs* that make up the Qur'an are believed to be the sacred words of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by an angel, recorded by scribes, and compiled as a collection after his death. In its essence, therefore, the Qur'an is considered to be an oral text, meant to be recited—always in the original Arabic—rather than read. Nevertheless, the written Qur'an is treated with great respect. No other book is to be placed on top of the Qur'an, and before opening the book, the reader is expected to be in the same state of ritual purity required to perform the daily prayers.

The Lotus Sutra

The teachings of the Buddha were transmitted orally for centuries before they were first written down, some 2,000 years ago. Although Buddhists revered these texts, their practice did not center on them. Later, the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools added many more texts to their respective canons, but Buddhists in general did not attribute any special properties to the scriptures themselves. That changed in the 1200s, when a Japanese monk named Nichiren instructed his followers to place their faith in the power of his favorite scripture, the *Lotus Sutra*, and chant their homage to it, just as followers of the Pure Land school chanted homage to Amitabha/Amida Buddha.

Creation Through the Word of God

A number of scriptural traditions have maintained that their scriptures were in existence before the world was created. The medieval book of Jewish mysticism known as the *Zohar*, for example, teaches that the Torah played a role in creation. The prologue to the Gospel of John in the New Testament talks about creation through the Word (*Logos* in Greek). And Islam understands the Qur'an to have existed in the mind of God before the world itself was brought into existence.

This idea has very old roots. In ancient Israel, Egypt, India, and elsewhere, it was assumed that the deities would not have performed the physical work of creation themselves, as ordinary humans would have done; rather, like kings, they would have commanded that the work be done: "Let there be light." Thus the divine word took on a special role in later theologies. In traditional Hindu thought, the goddess of speech, Vac, played this role. How could the scriptures—the actual words of the Torah, Bible, or Qur'an—be present in the mind of God at the time of creation, thousands of years before the historical events they describe? The answer for believers is that God knows the future. Outsiders might argue that this calls into question the concept of free will: If the deity knows everything in advance, how can humans be free to choose? What use is it to try to persuade people to do the right thing if the deity has already determined what each of them will do? Such questions have led to lively theological debates in many religious traditions.

What Is Religion?

Many scholars trace the derivation of the word "religion" to the Latin verb *religare*, "to bind." Others argue that the root is *relegere*, "to go over again." From the beginning, then, there has been no universal definition of religion. We can describe religion as being concerned with the divine, but even that raises questions. Is there one god that is worshiped, or many gods—or even no gods, as in atheism? Most of us would probably not think of atheism as a religion, but what about Theravada Buddhism, which is clearly a religion but has nothing to do with an Abrahamic-style god? The same problem arises with religious texts. Is there one text or a set of texts that is particularly authoritative for a particular tradition? Is that set a closed "canon," or can new materials be added to it? What are the distinctions between established religions and newer ones (sometimes referred to pejoratively as "cults")? We may accept, for example, the validity of a man

(Moses) receiving revelations from God on Mount Sinai 3,200 years ago or another man (Muhammad) receiving similar revelations in Mecca 1,400 years ago but reject the idea of a third man (Joseph Smith) receiving revelations in upstate New York 200 years ago. There is some truth in the saying "today's cult, tomorrow's religion." Although this text focuses mainly on established traditions, some new religions in East Asia will be introduced.

Another way of looking at religion is in terms of its functions. For example, a simple functional definition might be that religion is a way of creating community. For some people, "church" has less to do with piety or Sunday worship than with a community that offers a sense of belonging and activities to participate in. Karl Marx defined religion in terms of economics; Sigmund Freud, in terms of interior psychological states. Other scholars have approached the question from the perspective of sociology or anthropology, looking at religion as a social phenomenon or a cultural product. The academic study of religion is usually a secular, nonconfessional enterprise, undertaken without a particular faith commitment. One of the key scholars in this area was Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) of the University of Chicago. His work on the history of religions has had a profound impact on scholarly understanding of key terms such as "myth" and "ritual," as well as the way comparisons are made both within a single religious tradition and across different traditions.

Why Study Religion?

The first and most obvious reason to study religion is that it exists. Not all humans might lay claim to religious beliefs, but humans in general have been religious from time immemorial.

A closely related reason is that religion has played such an important role in human affairs. People organize their communities around religious identities, go to war over religious beliefs, make great art in the service of religion, and seek to change social norms or prevent change out of religious conviction. In short, religion so pervades the human world that it demands our attention regardless of whether it plays a direct role in our own lives.

It is also common to study religion for more personal reasons. You may want to know more about the tradition you, or someone close to you, grew up in. You may want to study other religions in order to understand other people's beliefs, or to look at your own beliefs from a different perspective. You may also want to arm yourself with knowledge in order to bring others around to your way of thinking, or to defend your beliefs against the arguments of those who might try to convert you to theirs.

Insider Versus Outsider

Most people learn about their own religion from their parents, their teachers at religious schools, or other members of the same religious community. Naturally, we tend to accept the teachings of our own religion as true and assume that the teachings of other religions are false, or at least less true. As "insiders" we may find it disturbing when "outsiders" challenge our beliefs or suggest that the history of "our religion" may not be exactly as we have been taught. In his 1962 book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith famously wrote: "Normally persons talk about other people's religions as they are, and about their own as it ought to be" (Smith 1962: 49).

One of the advantages of a book such as this is that it helps us appreciate our own traditions from both insider and outsider points of view. When approaching an unfamiliar religious tradition, outsiders need to be sensitive to the ways in which it serves the needs of its followers. For their part, insiders need to understand how their own tradition looks from the outside.

The insider–outsider matter is more complex than we might imagine, for there are many kinds of insiders. Is your Muslim friend a Sunni or a Shi'i? If a Shi'i, does she belong to the Twelver branch or one of the Sevener branches? Which variety of Buddhism does your classmate practice—Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana? If Mahayana, which school? Is your Christian neighbor Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox? A Protestant may well be an outsider to other Protestant groups, let alone to Catholic Christianity. A Zen Buddhist could have trouble seeing any connection between his practice and an elaborate Vajrayana ritual. Because each religion has

many subdivisions, we will speak of traditions in the plural. We hope our readers will keep in mind the diversity behind the monolithic labels.

Methods for the Study of Religion

There are many different ways in which religion is studied in higher education. The American Academy of Religion is the largest scholarly organization in the world for the study of religion. It recommends the **religious studies** or **study of religion** approach, which it defines as follows:

> A religious studies approach provides students with tools to analyze religion from an academic perspective. There are many different methods that can fall under the category of the academic study of religion (e.g., anthropological, sociological, textual, historical, etc.), but religious studies scholars share the following five overarching assertions about religion:
>
> 1. There is distinction between the devotional expression of a religious belief and the study of diverse devotional expressions.
> 2. Religions are internally diverse.
> 3. Religions are always evolving and changing.
> 4. Religions are enmeshed in virtually all dimensions of human agency and expression.
> 5. Religions are historically embedded. (American Academy of Religion n.d.)

A religious studies approach gives students the ability to discern and analyze the intersections of religion with personal, social, political, and cultural life. Other methods for the study of religion are **faith-based**, **interfaith**, and **experiential**. Faith-based teaching about religion promotes an explicit belief in and/or practice of religion. Faith-based approaches can often be found on college campuses in either chaplaincy or campus ministry programs, or in some classes offered in religiously affiliated schools. The faith-based approach advances understanding of particular interpretations of faith and tradition. It also responds to the religious and spiritual needs of students. The faith-based approach differs from the academic study of religion described earlier by promoting a specific religious perspective. The central assumption of an interfaith approach is that people of differing religious traditions (within and among traditions) can communicate important elements of their faith experience to others through story and other forms of mutual exploration and sharing. This approach can include a decision to embrace a religious studies content focus, but the framework of exploration emerges from one's own experience and understanding of faith and conversations with others about their faith. The experiential approach focuses on introducing students to religious traditions and expressions through encounters with religious leaders, practitioners, and/or significant physical sites such as places of worship or other locations designated as holy. The educational purpose of this approach is to provide students with experiential learning encounters that can ground their studies in the lives of real people and places. This approach can be compatible with a religious studies approach when these encounters are framed within the context of ethnographic research. Without this framework, however, this approach can be problematic, since individual practitioners and specific religious settings always represent particular interpretations of a tradition, and highlighting them through an experiential encounter privileges them in unintentional but nevertheless concrete ways.

There are other issues, of course, in the academic study of religion. One of the important scholars in this area is Russell T. McCutcheon of the University of Alabama. He makes an important distinction between the study of religion and theology:

> The academic study of religion is fundamentally an *anthropological enterprise*. That is, it is primarily concerned with studying people (*anthropos* is an ancient Greek term meaning "human being"; *logos* means "word" or a "rational, systematic discourse"), their beliefs, behaviors, and

> institutions, rather than assessing "the truth" or "truths" of their various beliefs or behaviors. An anthropological approach to the study of religion (which is not to say that the study of religion is simply a sub-field of anthropology) is distinguished from a confessional, religious, or theological approach (*theos* is an ancient Greek term for "deity" or "god") which is generally concerned with determining the nature, will, or wishes of a god or the gods. Traditionally, the term "theology" refers to specifically Christian discourses on God, though the term now generally applies either to any religion's own articulate self-study or to its study of another religion (e.g., evangelism or religious pluralism are equally theological pursuits). (McCutcheon n.d.)

Some Practical Matters

The East–West division of our two volumes is quite conventional, but it's problematic for several reasons. For one thing, the so-called Western religions arose in what we now term the Middle East: they are Western only in the sense that they have been widely adopted in the West. A related problem is that there is no clear dividing line between East and West. As the late Will Oxtoby pointed out in an earlier edition of this text,

> Well into the twentieth century, the East was everything to the east of Europe. The Orient began where the Orient Express ran: Istanbul. For some purposes, it even included North Africa and began at Morocco. A century ago, Islam was thought to be an Eastern religion, and Westerners who studied it were called orientalists.

For those of us living in the twenty-first century, the biggest problem with the East–West division is that all the religions discussed in these volumes may be found anywhere in the world. In any event, our Eastern volume focuses on traditions that developed in the East and are still centered there, while its Western counterpart focuses mainly on traditions that developed in the Middle East and now predominate in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

For dates we use BCE ("before the Common Era") rather than BC ("before Christ"), and CE ("Common Era") rather than AD ("Anno Domini," Latin for "in the year of our Lord"). For dates that are obviously in the Common Era, the "CE" will be implied.

Finally, it is difficult to decide whether a book like this should use diacritical marks on foreign words. Scholars of religion writing for other scholars typically use diacritics for precision in transliterating foreign terms into English. Since this is an introductory text, we have chosen not to use diacritics because students often find them more confusing than helpful. Anyone who wishes to do more research on a religious tradition will soon encounter them, however.

Whether or not you are religious yourself, we invite you to delve into the study of several religious traditions that have played central roles both in the lives of individual humans and in the civilizations they have built around the world.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some concepts that are fundamental to what we call religion?
2. What are some of the major developments or patterns in the history of human religiosity?
3. What is an avatar? Give an example from both an Eastern and a Western tradition to illustrate your answer.
4. What are some of the ways to study or approach religions?

Glossary

All Saints Day A Christian festival honoring all the departed saints; held in the West on November 1.
Daodejing The Daoist "Classic of the Way and Power," compiled roughly 2,500 years ago and traditionally attributed to Laozi.
Day of the Dead A Mexican festival honoring the dead.
experiential An approach to understanding religions through the experience of various devotional services, often at that religion's place of worship, prayer, or meditation.
faith-based A way of studying religion from the perspective of a particular faith.
fundamentalists/fundamentalism Persons who ascribe total authority to their scriptures or doctrines, rejecting any conflicting secular or religious alternatives.
Hallowe'en A holiday originally celebrated as the "Eve" of All Saints Day and now a popular secular celebration held on October 31.
high places Sacred areas located on hill- or mountaintops; such places existed throughout the ancient Near East.
interfaith An approach in which, typically, persons of one faith share their experiences and worldview with persons of other faiths.
naga A mythical cobra living in the underworld, often associated with water and fertility in Indian religions.
Obon A Japanese festival honoring ancestors.
religious studies/study of religion An academic, rather than confessional or doctrinal, approach to describing religions and their personal, social, political, and cultural roles.
shaman A type of priest, widespread among hunter-gatherer societies, who communicates with the spirit world on behalf of the people.
Stonehenge One of several ancient rock structures thought to have been constructed for ritual purposes.
Upanishads Hindu religious texts thought to have been composed around 600 BCE.

Further Reading

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Recommended Website

www.harappa.com
A portal for slide shows, site maps, articles, and Q & A about all aspects of the Harappan civilization.

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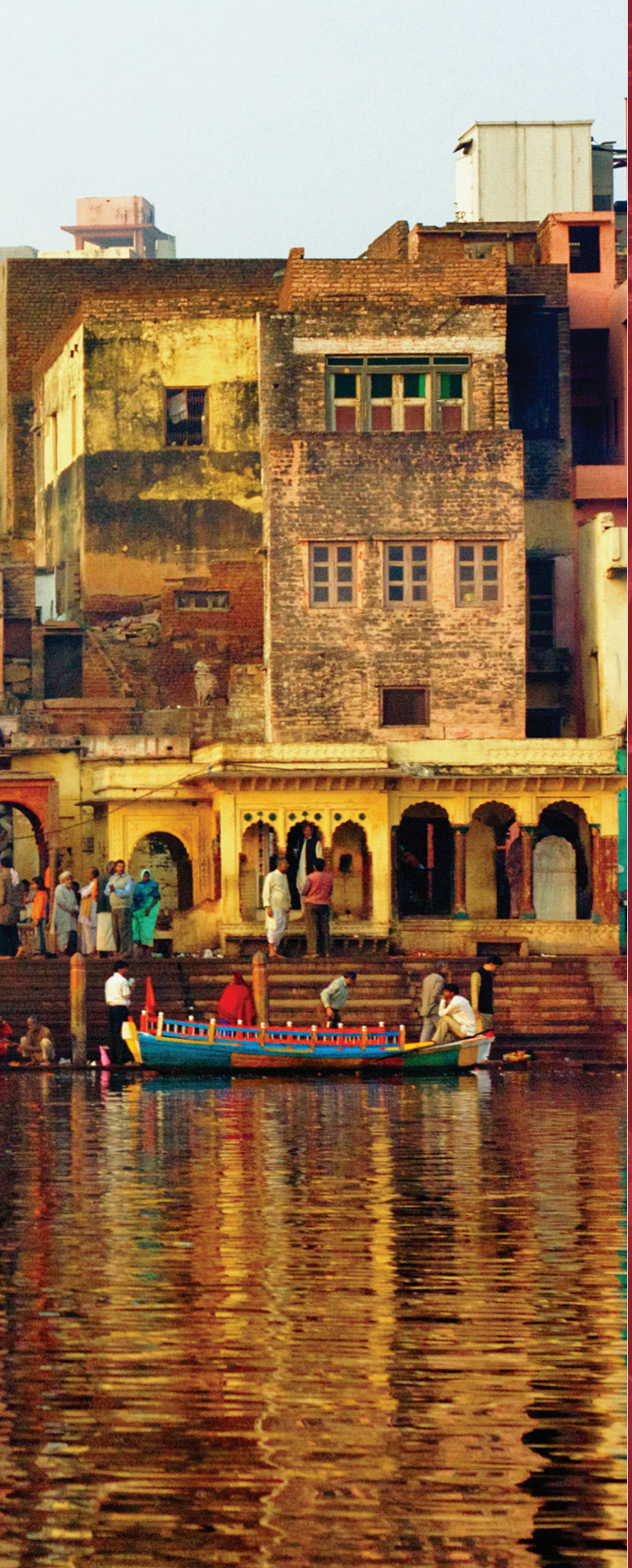


2

Hindu Traditions

Vasudha Narayanan

Traditions at a Glance

Numbers

There are approximately 950 million to 1 billion Hindus around the world today.

Distribution

Hindus are primarily concentrated in India, although there are also large numbers in other regions of South Asia, as well as the United States, Canada, Australia, western Europe, and many parts of Southeast Asia.

Principal Historical Periods

Key moments in Hinduism's history include the period of the Indus Valley civilization (c. 2500–600 BCE), during which the Vedas were composed; the composition of the epics and *Puranas* between 500 BCE and 1000 CE; the millennium stretching from 600 to 1600, during which devotional poetry was composed in local languages and major temples were built in South and Southeast Asia; the period of Muslim rule over North India, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century; and the British colonial period, from the mid-1700s to 1947.

Founders and Leaders

Important figures include Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Ramananda, Chaitanya, Swami narayanan, Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda. Among the hundreds of teachers who have attracted followings in the last century alone are Aurobindo, Ramana Maharishi, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Sathya Sai Baba, Anandamayi Ma, and Ma Amritananda Mayi.

Deities

Hindu philosophy recognizes a supreme being (the ineffable Brahman), who is not limited by gender and number and who may take countless forms, with classical rhetoric typically placing the number at 330 million. Some sectarian traditions identify the supreme deity as Vishnu, some as Shiva, and some as a form of the Goddess. The Supreme Being may be understood as male, female, androgynous, or beyond gender.

Authoritative Texts

The Vedas are technically considered the most authoritative texts within Hinduism, although the epics (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, including the *Bhagavad Gita*), the *Puranas*, and several works in regional languages have also been very important. In some cases, local texts may even be considered to be more important than the Vedas.

Noteworthy Teachings

In general, most Hindus recognize a supreme being, variously conceived—personal for some, impersonal for others. Most think of the human soul as immortal and believe that when it reaches liberation it will be freed from the shackles of karma and rebirth. Specific teachings vary depending on sectarian tradition, region, and community.

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The history of the Hindu traditions in South Asia
- The diversity of Hindu traditions and the common threads they share
- Significant texts, both in Sanskrit and in vernacular languages
- Major philosophical traditions and religious teachers
- The importance of devotion (*bhakti*)
- The significance of temples in South and Southeast Asia and North America
- The place of the performing arts in the Hindu traditions

◀ The Vishram Ghat, Mathura (Himanshu Khagta/Getty Images)

The earliest compositions in any Hindu tradition are the **Vedas**: four collections of hymns and texts that are said to have been "revealed" to ***rishis*** (visionaries or seers) through both sight and sound; thus, the sacred words are called ***shruti*** ("that which is heard"). This dual emphasis on seeing and hearing the sacred is characteristic of all Hindu traditions.

When Hindus go on a pilgrimage or visit a temple, they seek an experience known as a ***darshana***, in which they see and are seen by a particular deity or **guru**. But Hindus also believe in the importance of reciting or singing prayers aloud. Reciting Sanskrit and vernacular texts in the temple and at home, telling stories of the gods, singing devotional songs, or meditating on a holy **mantra**—these are just some of the ways in which Hindus actively live their tradition through its sacred words. In short, Hindus experience the divine through both sight and sound. Although sacred texts have been important to the religion, for most Hindus the primary source of knowledge about their traditions has been performance, whether in the form of rituals, recitations, music, dance, or theater.

Hinduism is characterized by diversity. While some texts and some deities are widely accepted, there is no single text, deity, or teacher that *all* Hindus consider supremely authoritative. The tradition has a large corpus of holy works, but many nonliterate Hindus may not even have heard of them. Similarly, there are many local deities with local names who may or may not be identified with pan-Indian gods. The Hindu tradition is in fact many traditions encompassing hundreds of communities and sectarian movements, each of which has its own hallowed canon, its own sacred place, and its own concept of the supreme deity.

"Hinduism"

The word "Hinduism" itself has often been contested. It is used here as a very fluid shorthand for the diverse philosophies, arts, branches of knowledge, and practices associated with people and communities who have a connection (whether geographic, biological, intellectual, or spiritual) with the Indian subcontinent. Knowledge of the Vedas is not necessarily required for a person to qualify as Hindu. In fact, there are probably millions of people in India who have never heard of them—yet all of those people would be considered Hindu as long they did not belong to a faith tradition that explicitly denies the exalted status of the Vedas. In other words, at least in legal terms, "Hindu" is a kind of default category.

The word "Hinduism," like "India" itself, is derived from "Sind," the name of the region—now in Pakistan—around the river Sindhu (Indus). The term was given currency by the British colonizers of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To them, "Hinduism" essentially meant the religion of those Indians—the majority of the population—who were not Muslims, although a few smaller groups, including Jainas, Parsis, Christians, Jews, and sometimes Sikhs, were also recognized. As a term for a religious identity, "Hinduism" did not catch on until the nineteenth century. Thus, although there is considerable evidence to show that there was consciousness of a loosely unified tradition in precolonial times, anyone who tries to look for the term "Hinduism" in books printed earlier is unlikely to find it.

There are approximately a billion Hindus in the world today, yet when these individuals are asked about their religious identity, they are more likely to refer to their particular caste or community than to Hinduism. An alternative term designating a comprehensive tradition is *sanatana dharma* ("eternal faith"), but it is common in only a few parts of India and only certain classes of society. The term is seldom used to refer to local manifestations of the faith.

In India, "Hindu law" applies not only to members of Hindu "denominations" such as Vira Shaiva or Brahmo Samaj, but also to "any other person domiciled in the territories to which [the Hindu Family Act] extends who is *not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi, or Jew* by religion" (italics added). In effect, India's legal system uses "Hindu" to refer to anyone who does not profess one of the specified religions, all of which originated outside India. Thus, while we can

Timeline

c. 3300–1900 BCE	Evidence of Indus Valley civilization (early to mature phases)
c. 1750?–1500	Earliest Vedic compositions
c. 600	Production of *Upanishads*
c. 500	Production of Hindu epics begins
326	Greek armies enter India under Alexander
c. 272	Accession of King Ashoka
c. 200	First Indian contacts with Southeast Asia
c. 200 BCE–200 CE	Composition of *Bhagavad Gita*
c. 200 CE	Compilation of *Laws of Manu* and *Natya Sastra* completed
c. 500	Beginnings of tantric tradition
c. 700–900	Era of Alvars and Nayanmars, Tamil *bhakti* poets
c. 700–800	Shankara develops his *advaita* Vedanta
c. 1008–1023	Mahmud of Ghazni raids kingdoms in India several times, strips temples of their wealth; Somnath Temple in Gujarat destroyed
1017	Traditional birth date of Ramanuja, Vaishnava philosopher (d. 1137)
1100–1150	Angkor Wat built in Cambodia
1398	Traditional birth date of Kabir, North Indian *bhakti* poet (d. 1518)
c. 1400	Major endowments made at Tirumala-Tirupati temple
1486	Birth of Chaitanya, Bengali Vaishnava *bhakti* leader (d. 1583)
c. 1543	Birth of Tulsidas, North Indian *bhakti* poet (d. 1623)
1757	British rule established in Calcutta
1828	Ram Mohan Roy founds Brahmo Samaj
1836	Birth of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (d. 1886)
1875	Dayananda Sarasvati founds Arya Samaj
1893	Vivekananda attends World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago
1905–1906	Vedanta Temple built in San Francisco
1926	Birth of Sathya Sai Baba
1947	India and Pakistan partitioned on religious lines, resulting in almost a million deaths
1959	Maharishi Mahesh Yogi brings Transcendental Meditation to America and Europe
1965	A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of ISKCON, sails to America
1977	Hindu temples consecrated in New York and Pittsburgh
2005	Major earthquake levels historic temples in Durbar Square, Kathmandu
2014	Pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party coalition forms government in India

make some generalizations about and trace some important lines of historical continuity within the tradition, we must keep in mind their limitations.

The very concept of religion in the Western, post-Enlightenment sense is only loosely applicable to the Hindu tradition. Some Hindus think that the Sanskrit word **dharma** comes close to "religion," but they recognize that this is true in only a limited way. "Dharma" for Hindus means righteousness, justice, faith, duty, and religious and social obligation, but it does not cover all that is sacred in specific contexts for Hindus. Hindus may consider many things—from astronomy and astrology to music and dance, from phonetics to plants—essential to the practice of their religion. Therefore the following discussion will include a number of features not usually covered by the term "religion" in the Western world.

Western scholars have sometimes challenged the existence of Hinduism as a "unified" tradition. Although there is considerable diversity within it, there are also many patterns of commonality between far-flung regions and communities. Some people have compared Hinduism to a large banyan tree; others have said it is like a Venn diagram. Over the millennia, the dynamic engagement between elitist Sanskrit and "higher"-caste traditions and many local practices and beliefs has produced an unusual synergy. Thus almost every area has its own practices and sometimes deities; these local deities may be occasionally identified by larger, pan-Hindu names but continue to retain their own histories. Nevertheless, many lines connect people, communities, and regions in the subcontinent and globally. A list of connections and what unifies diverse bodies of people into a religious system under one capacious canopy includes social organizations within castes, subcastes, and communities; philosophical communities; networks of pilgrimage; similarities in ritual vocabulary for rites of passage; worship; festival calendar; acceptance of a large (and at times) open-door pantheon; common texts; beliefs such as the immortality of the soul, karma, and a supreme being, albeit one variously described and depicted; an accepted grammar of music, dance, storytelling, and other types of performance; and ideas of purity, pollution, auspiciousness, and inauspiciousness. We will discuss many of these common themes in this chapter, but keep in mind that they may not be universally accepted.

Origins

The origins of Hinduism have been much debated. The view in the early twentieth century was that the tradition had grown from a fusion of the Indigenous religions of the Indus Valley with the faith of the Aryans, an Indo-European people usually thought to have migrated to the region sometime between 1750 and 1500 BCE. More recently, however, other theories have been proposed. Some scholars maintain that the Indo-Europeans migrated into India from other parts of Asia; others insist that there is demonstrable evidence that the Indian subcontinent itself was their original homeland.

The Harappan Culture

Although excavations in the mid-nineteenth century revealed the remains of several large towns on the banks of the Indus River in what is now Pakistan, historians began to understand their significance only in the early twentieth century. Two of these towns, known today as Mohenjo Daro ("Mound of the Dead") and Harappa, are more than 300 miles apart, yet archaeological evidence suggests connections between their cultures across the entire northwestern part of the subcontinent. Similar objects found in towns hundreds of miles apart, such as Lothal and Dholavira in Gujarat, also suggest continuous travel and communication between them. The civilization that encompassed all of these towns seems to have flourished in the larger river basin of the Indus and the Ghaggar-Hakra, a network of rivers that is sometimes identified with the mythical Sarasvati of the Rig Veda. Although the culture is still widely identified with the Indus Valley, many scholars today prefer to call it the Harappan culture, because it extends well beyond the Indus basin itself.

Scientists have recently suggested that the isotope and archaeological data indicate that this people may have inhabited the area where the

Ghaggar-Hakra is fed by monsoons as early as 7000–5000 BCE. While many stages of the civilization have been uncovered, and the dating and origins of this civilization are much debated, it is generally believed that the towns were in existence by about 2750 BCE.

Inscriptions on carved seals show that this culture had a written language, though no one has yet been able to decipher the script with any assurance. What we do know is that the people of the Harappan civilization were impressive builders who lived in what appear to have been planned cities. In the citadel mound at Mohenjo Daro, there is a huge swimming pool–like structure (archaeologists call it "the Great Bath"), surrounded by porticoes and flights of stairs. The care with which the complex was built has led scholars to believe that it was designed for religious rituals of some sort. Some of the houses also appear to have included a room with a fire altar, suggesting that there was a domestic fire ritual.

Stone sculptures and terracotta statuettes of what looks like a mother goddess have also been uncovered and may have been used as icons in worship. These figures wear a short skirt, abundant jewelry, and a fan-shaped headdress with two little cups on either side. Smoke stains in the cups suggest that they were used for offerings of fire or incense. Some Western scholars believe that goddess worship is indicative of a society in which women enjoyed high status, but we have no hard evidence to support this thesis in the case of the Harappan civilization. And though goddesses have certainly been worshiped in the later Hindu tradition, women historically have not necessarily been held in high esteem in all strata of society.

In addition, excavations around the Indus River have yielded approximately 2,000 flat seals and many amulets. A few of the seals represent a man seated on a low throne in what looks like a **yoga** posture. The man's headdress and the animals around him suggest that he may be a prototype of the deity who came to be known as Shiva. On some seals a horned person is shown emerging from a *pipal* tree in front of which stand seven figures with long braids. As the notion of seven beings is important in later Hindu mythology, some commentators have identified these figures as seven holy men (*rishis*); others, as seven goddesses.

Scholars are not yet sure how the people who lived in these cities disposed of their dead. Since the manner of disposal frequently reveals religious convictions, this is an important gap in our knowledge. No large burial sites have been found, though it is possible that some land used for this purpose was later flooded and now lies underwater. Of the few graves that have been discovered, most are oriented on a north–south axis. In a small number of them objects were buried with the bodies, perhaps to serve the dead in an afterlife. It is possible that both cremation and burial were practiced.

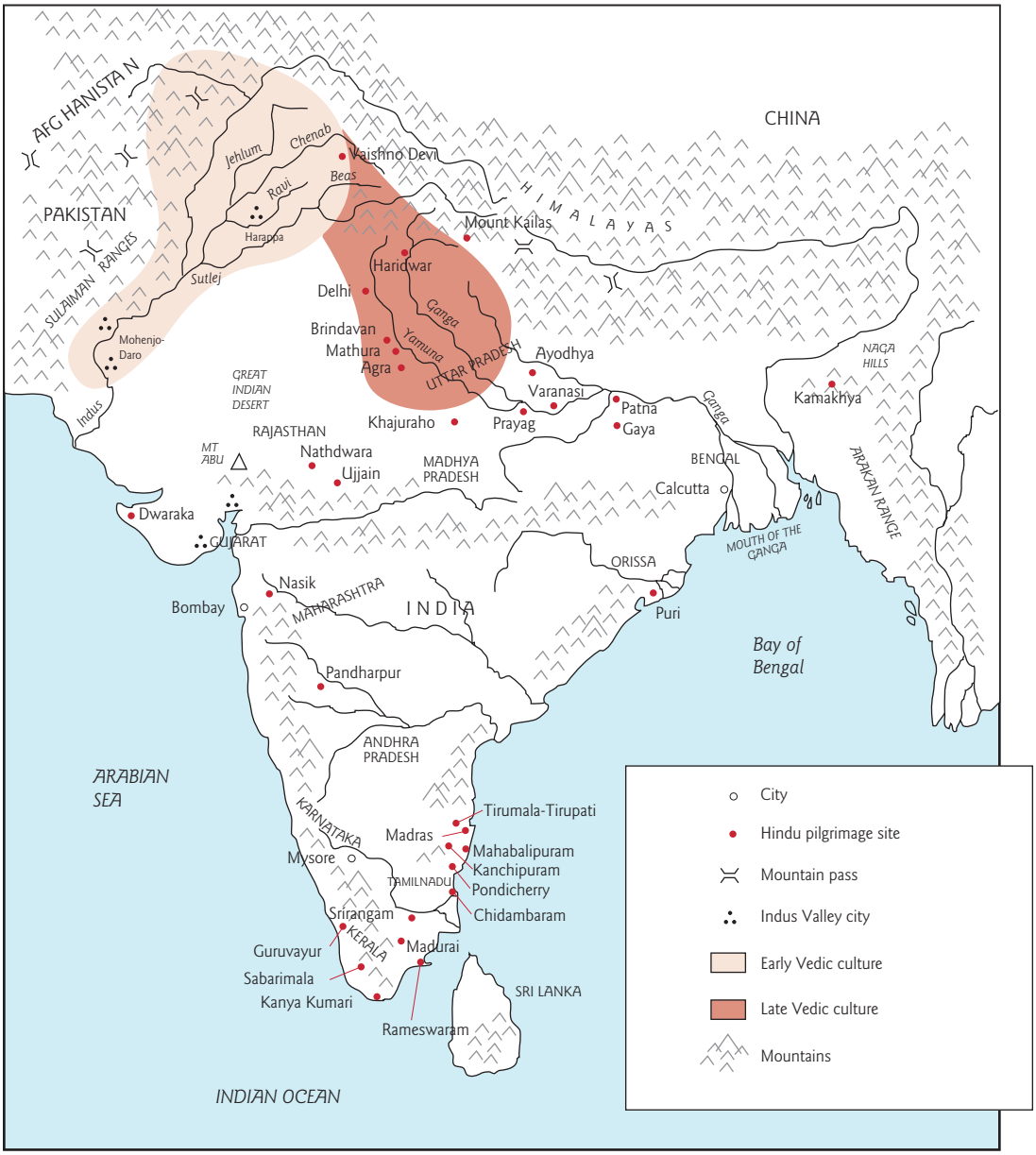
What might have brought the Indus Valley civilization to an end? Some scholars think it was the arrival of the Indo-Europeans around 1750 BCE. Others suggest that flooding, drying of the river, climate change, or epidemics might have driven the population farther east. Recent scientific studies suggest that the failure of monsoons and a subsequent change in subsistence strategy—that is, changing crop patterns, rather than climate change—led to the eventual collapse of the Harappan civilization. Whatever the answer, from the fragmentary evidence found in the Indus Valley we can tentatively say that some features of the Hindu religion as practiced today go back before 1750 BCE, to Mohenjo Daro and Harappa.

We know even less of the early history of other parts of the subcontinent than we do of the Indus Valley civilization. Nevertheless, scholars have noticed an intriguing correspondence between sites that were inhabited between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago and sites that are of religious significance today. It seems likely that at least some elements of Hinduism as we know it have been part of the religious culture of the subcontinent for as long as five millennia.

The Indo-Europeans

The language of the Vedas, the earliest Hindu compositions, is Sanskrit, a member of the language family known as Indo-European (or "Indo-Aryan").

Map 2.1 Hinduism



Source: Adapted from Nielsen et al. 1993: 85.

Western scholars in the nineteenth century noted the similarities between some Indian and European languages. For example, the Sanskrit word ***jnana*** is a cognate of the English word "*kn*owledge," while "lack of knowledge" is ajn*ana* in Sanskrit and "*ign*orance" in English. There are hundreds of similar cognates, including the words for "father" and "mother." The Indo-European languages also have many grammatical structures in common. Based on linguistic evidence, nineteenth-century scholars

posited a theory of migration according to which people from Central Asia began migrating to widely distant regions at some time between 2000 BCE and 1500 BCE. According to this theory, some moved west and north into what is now Europe, dispersing from Ireland to Scandinavia. Others headed south or east and settled in the region of Iran, where they called themselves Aryans—a name that eventually acquired a class connotation, coming to mean "noble ones."

While many scholars hold that the Indo-Europeans originated in Central Asia and that the migration began around 2000 BCE, others think the migrants left the general region of modern Turkey and began spreading out as much as 4,000 years earlier. The latter suggest that this migration was peaceful, undertaken by a growing agricultural population in need of additional land. Yet another school of thought holds that the original home of the Indo-Europeans was actually the Indian subcontinent. Proponents of this theory base their arguments on astronomical data and evidence concerning a great river that was said to have flowed from the mountains to the sea in the region of the Harappan civilization. They identify this river as the legendary Sarasvati, which according to the ancient Hindu text known as the *Rig Veda* was home to five Aryan tribes but has been shown by geologists to have run dry by the time that the Aryans were supposed to have entered India (i.e., around 1750 BCE). If the Aryans were actually there before the Sarasvati dried up, the theory goes, the dates of their migration must be pushed back to the time of the Harappan civilization or even earlier.

None of the evidence is conclusive, and some theories have been motivated by political, racial, religious, and nationalist agendas. Evidence from many areas of study has been drawn into the debate, including work in Vedic philology, comparative philology, linguistic paleontology, linguistics, archaeology, astronomy, geography, and geology, as well as religious traditions.

What we do know is that the authors of the Vedas composed or, some say, "transmitted" many poems and, eventually, manuals on rituals and philosophy. They committed these traditions to memory using various mnemonic devices to ensure correct pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation and passed them from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The Vedas

Hindus consider the **Vedas** (from the Sanskrit for "knowledge") to be their earliest sacred texts; these are the works collectively known as *shruti* ("that which was heard"). The Vedic *rishis* "saw" the mantras and transmitted them to their disciples, starting an oral tradition that has continued to the present.

Traditionally regarded as revealed scripture, the Vedas are now generally thought to have been composed between roughly 1500 BCE (some scholars put the earliest date closer to 1750 BCE) and 600 BCE. There are four Vedic collections: *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur*, and *Atharva*. Each of these collections in turn consists of four sections: hymns (*Samhitas*; the earliest parts), directions for the performance of sacred rituals (***Brahmanas***), "compositions for the forest" (*Aranyakas*), and philosophical works called the ***Upanishads*** ("sitting near [the teacher]").

The earliest section of the *Rig Veda* contains 1,028 hymns. The hymns of the *Sama Veda* and *Yajur Veda* are largely borrowed from the *Rig*, and the *Sama Veda* was meant to be sung. The *Upanishads* are the most recent sections of each collection, composed around 600 BCE. The famous *Chandogya Upanishad* belongs to the *Sama Veda*, and the *Brihadaranyaka* and *Taittiriya Upanishads* to the *Yajur Veda*.

The *Atharva Veda* differs from the other three Vedas in that it includes material used for purposes other than sacrificial rituals, such as incantations and remedies to ward off illness and evil spirits. One verse (7.38), for example, refers to the use of herbs to make a lover return, and another (7.50) requests luck in gambling.

In the Hindu tradition, the term "Vedas" denotes the whole corpus, starting with the hymns, continuing through the ritual treatises, and concluding with the texts of a more philosophical character. Many Orientalists and Western Indologists,

however, have used "Veda" only to refer to the hymns, the *samhita* portion of each collection. This narrower use of the term is generally not accepted by Hindus.

The Status of the Vedas

Almost all educated Hindus would describe the Vedas as their most sacred texts, yet most would be hard-pressed to identify their contents. Despite their importance to philosophers and theologians, the Vedas are not books that people keep in their homes. Rather, they are ritual texts that are understood to represent eternal sound and eternal words passed on through the generations without change. A few hymns from them are recited regularly at home as well as in temple liturgies, and the philosophical sections have often been translated and commented upon, but the rest of the Vedas are known only to a handful of ritual specialists and to Sanskrit scholars familiar with the early Vedic form of the language.

For many centuries, and even now for the many traditions within Hinduism, acceptance as an orthodox member of the society we call Hindu depended on acceptance of the Vedas as authoritative. As custodians of the Vedas, the brahmins reserved for themselves the authority to study and teach these holy words. Though members of two other classes were technically "allowed" to study the Vedas, in time this privilege was lost and, in some cases, abandoned.

Historically, the Vedas were treated as "revealed" scripture, though the source of the revelation was not necessarily understood to be a deity. In medieval times brahmin commentators considered the Vedas to represent "eternal truth," coeval with God. All schools of medieval thought agreed on the Vedas' transcendental aspect and authoritative nature. Where they differed was on the significance of their status as divine (*apauruseya*, literally "superhuman," not composed by man).

Followers of the Nyaya ("logic") school of philosophy believed that God was the author of the Vedas and that, since God is perfect, the Vedas were infallible. Many other Hindu schools took different views. Two that continue to be influential, the Mimamsa and Vedanta schools, say that the Vedas are eternal and of nonhuman origin. In this view, the Vedic seers (*rishis*) "saw" the mantras and transmitted them; they did not invent or compose them, and the words have a fixed order that must be maintained by a tradition of recitation. Subsequently, the Vedic seers transmitted the words to their disciples, establishing an oral tradition that has come down to the present. Since they were not composed by human beings, the Vedas are considered faultless, the perfect and supreme source of knowledge. From them we can learn about the Supreme Being, and their authority grants credibility to particular doctrines.

The Vedic collections have served as manuals of ritual for all the many strands of the Hindu tradition. Some sections have been recited and acted on without major changes for more than 2,000 years. Interpretations have not been static, however. In every generation, specialists in Vedic hermeneutics have worked to make the texts' messages relevant to the particular time and place.

Several works have been more popular among Hindus generally, but the theoretical, ritual, and epistemological significance of the Vedas has been unquestioned. Thus the highest honor that can be given to any Hindu religious text is to describe it as a "Veda." Among the works that have been accorded this title are the ***Mahabharata***, one of two great Hindu epics; Bharata's *Natya Sastra*, an important treatise on dance and performance composed around the beginning of the Common Era; and a number of Tamil-language compositions from South India, especially the *Tiruvaymoli* ("sacred utterance") of Nammalvar (ninth century) and the *Periya Puranam* (twelfth century), a collection of the life stories of saints who were devotees of Shiva. These texts made no attempt either to imitate the Vedas or to comment on them. They are called "Vedas" only because Hindus have thought they also contain the wisdom embodied in the four original Vedas, making their eternal truth relevant to a new place and time.

The Vedic Hymns

The figures that were to become the principal Hindu deities—goddesses like Lakshmi and gods like Narayana (Vishnu)—are rarely mentioned in the *samhitas*; only the later Vedic hymns address them directly. Rather, the earliest hymns of the Vedas speak of many deities who in time would be superseded, and many of the stories to which they allude would not be familiar to most Hindus today.

Indra, for instance, appears in the early hymns as a warrior god who battles other cosmic powers. Agni is identified as the god of fire who was believed to serve as a messenger, carrying to the deities the offerings that humans placed in the sacrificial fire. Soma is the name of a god identified with the moon, as well as the name of a plant-based elixir used for ritual purposes.

Sarasvati, as we have seen, was the name given by the Vedic people to a great river. But Sarasvati is also the name of a goddess described in the *Rig Veda* as beautiful and fortunate, the inspirer of noble thoughts, giving rise to truthful words. By the time the ritualistic sections of the Vedas called the *Brahmanas* were composed, Sarasvati had taken over the attributes formerly associated with the goddess Vac ("speech"). As a result, Sarasvati came to be understood as speech incarnate, the power of the word, and the mother of the Vedas. In addition, some texts refer to Sarasvati as Gayatri ("singer") and Savitri ("sun"), and in this guise she is associated with learning. To this day, young boys recite the *Gayatri* mantra, dedicated to the sun, as part of the ceremony that marks their initiation into the life of a student.

The early hymns typically offer praise to the gods; thus the Indus River is praised for giving cattle, children, horses, and food. But many of them also include petitions—not for salvation or eternal bliss (in fact, the idea of an afterlife is rarely mentioned in these

Document

"The Creation Hymn," *Rig Veda*

This is an unusual creation story in that it suggests that the mysterious process of creation happened even before the gods were created.

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know. (*Rig Veda* 10.129, in Doniger O'Flaherty 1981: 25–26)