

A Concise Introduction to World Religions

Fourth Edition

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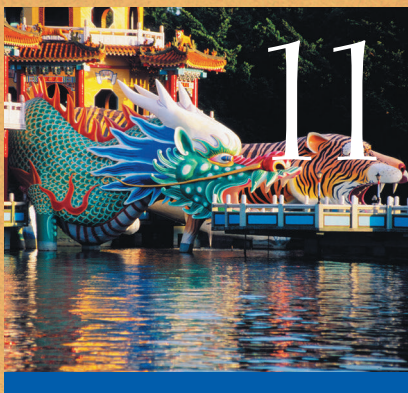
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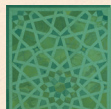
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Preface

It has been an honor for us to edit this fourth edition of *A Concise Introduction to World Religions*. The late Will Oxtoby was an outstanding researcher, but his true excellence was as a teacher. It is no coincidence that the publications for which he will be remembered best are the textbooks *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* and *World Religions: Western Traditions*. It was also as a teacher that Will first met Alan Segal, who became a colleague, a close friend, and eventually a collaborator on those books. After Will's death early in the planning of the first edition of *A Concise Introduction to World Religions* (2006), it was Alan who took over as general editor and saw the work through to completion. He also oversaw the development of the second edition of the present work, but just before it went to press, in 2011, he died—barely three months into his retirement from Barnard College.

With Alan's death, new authors were required for the chapters on Judaism and Christianity. In choosing his original contributors, Will Oxtoby looked for people who combined scholarship with sympathetic appreciation of the traditions in question. We have tried to be true to that vision in choosing our own contributors. This is the first *Concise* edition to include Michael Desrochers's excellent work on the religions of antiquity.

In his original foreword, Will wrote that people often used to ask him why he would waste his life on something as unimportant as religion, but that no one ever asked that question after the Islamic revolution in Iran. We have had the same experience: since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, not a single student has raised the issue of relevance. On the contrary, the study of world religions is now seen as more important today than ever before.

Important Features of This Edition

This fourth edition of *A Concise Introduction to World Religions* builds on and further refines the significant changes made to the third edition. The introductory chapter has been enhanced in several ways. Now titled “Studying Religion,” it has been newly written to give more attention to theories about religion and methods for the study of religion. In addition, at the suggestion of reviewers, we've added a new chapter on the religions of antiquity.

We have also added three new features: Interview boxes, Practice boxes, and Women in the Traditions boxes. The Interview boxes offer a short interview with an important or influential member of one of the traditions discussed in each chapter. The Practice boxes invite students to glimpse facets of religion as observed in daily life. The Women in the Traditions boxes expand the coverage found in the chapters by examining an issue related to women's practice or lives within a tradition.

Dynamic Pedagogical Program

- **Traditions at a Glance boxes** provide thumbnail summaries of numbers and distribution of participants, founders and leaders, deities, important texts, and noteworthy doctrines.
- **Timelines** help to place religious developments in historical context.
- **Informative maps** provide useful reference points.
- **A vibrant art program** highlights practitioners' lived experiences.
- **Sacred Texts tables** give students a convenient summary of the most important texts in each tradition, how and when they were composed, and how they have been used.
- **End-of-chapter discussion questions** enhance students' critical understanding of key concepts, **glossaries** explain key terms, and lists of **further readings and recommended websites** provide excellent starting points for further research.

Compelling Boxed Features

- **Document boxes** provide generous excerpts from scripture and other important writings.
- **Sites boxes** draw attention to locations of special significance to each tradition.
- **Focus boxes** give students greater understanding of certain aspects of each tradition.

Extensive Ancillary Package

Online resources provide an outstanding array of teaching and learning tools for both instructors and students.

Instructors can benefit from a suite of ancillaries designed to support their teaching goals. An **instructor's manual** contains chapter summaries, learning objectives, student activities, class discussion topics, essay topics, and lists of multimedia resources for each chapter. **PowerPoint slides** cover all key concepts and are easily adapted to suit a particular course.

Students have access to a wealth of additional information in the **student study guide**, which offers chapter summaries, learning objectives, short-answer questions (with answers), reflection questions, research paper topics, and multimedia resources.

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First, our thanks to the contributors without whom this book would not exist: Ken Derry, Michael Desrochers, Wendy Fletcher, Michele Murray, Vasudha Narayanan, John Nelson, Pashaura Singh, Anne Vallely, and Terry Tak-ling Woo. At Oxford University Press we would like to thank Katherine Skene and Stephen Kotowych for their encouragement, Leah-Ann Lymer and Meg Patterson for their developmental guidance, and Sally Livingston for her editorial work on earlier editions of this text, including abridgement of the two-volume material. For their work on this new edition, we would like to thank Robert Miller, Lisa Ball, Anna Deen, Meg Botteon, Sydney Keen, Alyssa Palazzo, and Sarah Vogelsong. Finally, we are

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We dedicate this volume to Will Oxtoby and Alan Segal. May their memories be a blessing.

Roy C. Amore, University of Windsor
Amir Hussain, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

A Concise Introduction to World Religions

1

Studying Religions

Roy C. Amore and Amir Hussain



In this chapter you will learn about:

- Some basic characteristics of human religion from ancient times
- Some reasons for studying religion
- Some methods used for studying religion
- A number of patterns that can be observed in more than one religious tradition
- Various theories of why humans are religious

⊕ 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 is there just a set of deep spiritual or moral practices? Most of us would probably not think of atheism as a religion, but what about Theravada Buddhism or Jainism, which are considered to be religions but do not promote belief in 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 work focuses mainly on established traditions, some new religions will be introduced in the final chapter, along with a discussion of the terms “cult,” “sect,” and “new religious movement.”

Another way of looking at religion is in terms of its functions. For example, a simple functional definition might be that religion is one way of creating community. For some people, belonging to a religion has less to do with piety or worship than with a community that offers a sense of belonging and social activities. Many other understandings of religion have been put forward. 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, one undertaken without a



Jonathan Z. Smith. (Chris Salata / The Chicago Maroon)

← Ethiopian Orthodox pilgrims at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. (Yaacov Dagan / Alamy Stock Photo)