

LIVING RELIGIONS

EIGHTH EDITION — MARY PAT FISHER

CONSULTANTS

JOSEPH A. ADLER *Kenyon College*

AFE ADOGAME *University of Edinburgh*

ROBIN RINEHART *Lafayette College*

KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO *University of San Diego*

MINQING WANG (王敏琴) *Hunan University, China and Cornell University*

VANESSA OCHS *University of Virginia*

AMY DEROGATIS *Michigan State University*

ALI IHSAN YITIK *Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey*

DR. MOHINDER SINGH *Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi*

CHRISTINE GUDORF *Florida International University*

ARVIND SHARMA *McGill University, Montreal*

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CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES



Before sunrise, members of a Muslim family rise in Malaysia, perform their purifying ablutions, spread their prayer rugs facing Mecca, and begin their prostrations and prayers to Allah. In a French cathedral, worshipers line up for their turn to have a priest place a wafer on their tongue, murmuring, "This is the body of Christ." In a South Indian village, a group of women reverently anoint a cylindrical stone with milk and fragrant sandalwood paste and place around it offerings of flowers. The monks of a Japanese Zen Buddhist monastery sit cross-legged and upright in utter silence, which is broken occasionally by the noise of the *kyosaku* bat falling on their shoulders. On a mountain in Mexico, men, women, and children who have been dancing without food or water for days greet an eagle flying overhead with a burst of whistling from the small wooden flutes they wear around their necks.

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

Attempts to connect with this greater reality have taken many forms. Many of them are organized institutions, such as Buddhism or Christianity. These institutions are complexes of such elements as leaders, beliefs, rituals, symbols, myths, scriptures, ethics, spiritual practices, cultural components, historical traditions, and management structures. Moreover, they are not fixed and distinct categories, as simple labels such as "Buddhism" and "Christianity" suggest. Each of these labels is an abstraction that is used in the attempt to bring some kind of order to the study of religious patterns that are in fact complex, diverse, ever-changing, and overlapping. In addition, not all religious behavior occurs within institutional confines. The inner dimensions of religion—such as experiences, beliefs, and values—can be referred to as **spirituality**. This is part of what is called religion, but it may occur in personal, noninstitutional ways, without the ritual and social dimensions of organized religions.

Religion is multifaceted. The influential scholar of world religions, Ninian Smart, distinguished seven dimensions of religion:

KEY TOPICS

- WHY ARE THERE RELIGIONS? 3
- UNDERSTANDINGS OF SACRED REALITY 10
- RITUAL, SYMBOL, AND MYTH 14
- ABSOLUTIST AND LIBERAL INTERPRETATIONS 18
- THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION 20
- WOMEN IN RELIGIONS 26
- NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF ORGANIZED RELIGIONS 28

- 1 Ritual (public or private ceremonies).
- 2 Narrative and mythic (stories, including overall accounts of the universe and its creatures).
- 3 Experiential and emotional (feelings of guilt, dread, awe, devotion, ecstasy, peace, etc.)
- 4 Social and institutional (group dimensions involving shared beliefs, identity, membership).
- 5 Ethical and legal (rules concerning human behavior).
- 6 Doctrinal and philosophical (systematic belief structure and intellectual framework).
- 7 Material (things and places representing or manifesting the sacred).

Any of these dimensions may be thought to be divinely revealed and manifested, but in a religion all of them will in some way refer to the sacred.

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

From candles and oil lamps to sacred fires, light is universally used to remind worshipers of an invisible reality. At Gobind Sadan, outside New Delhi, worship at a sacred fire continues twenty-four hours a day.



Why are there religions?

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

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The Study of
World Religions
LEE W. BAILEY

MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVE: HUMANS INVENTED RELIGION

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

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

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

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Religion as the
Opium of the People
KARL MARX

Man makes religion: religion does not make man. ... The religious world is but the reflex of the real world. ... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.¹

According to Marx, not only do religions pacify people falsely; they may themselves become tools of oppression. For instance, he charged Christian authorities of his times with supporting “vile acts of the oppressors” by explaining them as due punishment of sinners by God. Other critics have made similar complaints against Eastern religions that blame the sufferings of the poor on their own misdeeds in previous lives. Such interpretations and uses of religious teachings lessen the perceived need for society to help those who are oppressed and suffering. Marx's ideas thus led toward twentieth-century atheistic communism, for he had asserted, “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.”²

FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION IS USEFUL

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

One version of the functional explanation is based on sociology. Pioneering work in this area was done by French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). He proposed that humans cannot live without organized social structures, and that religion is a glue that holds a society together. Surely religions have the potential for creating harmony in society, for they all teach social virtues such as love, compassion, altruism, justice, and discipline over our desires and emotions. The role of religion in the social process of identity formation at individual, family, community, and national levels is now being carefully examined, for people’s identification with a particular religion can be manipulated to influence social change—either to thwart, moderate, or encourage it.

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

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

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

Over the millenniums, many practitioners have carried out what we might call “experiments” in how to overcome our tendencies toward destructive emotions. The world today needs citizens and leaders who can work toward ensuring stability and engage in dialogue with the “enemy”—no matter what kind of aggression or assault they may have endured. If humanity is to survive, happiness and inner balance are crucial. We would do well to remember that the war against hatred and terror can be waged on this, the internal front, too.³

From the point of view of individual psychology, there are many explanations of the usefulness of religion. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1938) suggested that religion fulfills neurotic needs. He described religion as a collective

fantasy, a “universal obsessional neurosis”—a replaying of our loving and fearful relationships with our parents. Religious belief gives us a God powerful enough to protect us from the terrors of life, and will reward or punish us for obedience or nonobedience to social norms. From Freud’s extremely sceptical point of view, religious belief is an illusion springing from people’s infantile insecurity and neurotic guilt; as such it closely resembles mental illness.

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

Faith in God gives one the mental strength needed to confront the problems of life. Faith in the existence of God makes one feel safe and protected from all the evil influences of the world. To have faith in the existence of a Supreme Power and to live accordingly is a religion. When we become religious, morality arises, which, in turn, will help to keep us away from malevolent influences. We won’t drink, we won’t smoke, and we will stop wasting our energy through unnecessary gossip and talk. ... We will also develop qualities like love, compassion, patience, mental equipoise, and other positive traits. These will help us to love and serve everyone equally. ... Where there is faith, there is harmony, unity and love. A nonbeliever always doubts. ... He cannot be at peace; he’s restless. ... The foundation of his entire life is unstable and scattered due to his lack of faith in a higher principle.⁴

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

*Look!
The world is a royal chariot, glittering with paint.
No better.
Fools are deceived, but the wise know better.⁵*

Religions propose ideals that can radically transform people. In fact, Frederick Streng (1933–1993), an influential scholar of comparative religion, proposed that the central definition of religion is that it is a “means to ultimate transformation.” Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was an extremely shy, fearful child. His transformation into one of the great political figures of the twentieth century occurred as he meditated single-mindedly on the great Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, particularly the second chapter, which he says was “inscribed on the tablet of my heart.”⁶ It reads, in part:

*He is forever free who has broken
Out of the ego-cage of I and mine
To be united with the Lord of Love.
This is the supreme state. Attain thou this
And pass from death to immortality.⁷*

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

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The Future
of an Illusion
SIGMUND FREUD

I don't know what or who He is, but I am almost sure He is there. I feel His presence, feel that He is close to me during the awful moments. And I feel love. I sometimes feel wrapped, cocooned in love.⁸

Rather than seeking help from without, an alternative approach encourages the idea of changing our ways of thinking. According to some Asian religions, the concept that we are distinct, autonomous individuals is an illusion; what we think of as "our" consciousnesses and "our" bodies are in perpetual flux. Thus, freedom from problems lies in accepting temporal change and devaluing the "small self" in favor of the eternal self. The ancient sages of India called it "This eternal being that can never be proved, ... spotless, beyond the ether, the unborn Self, great and eternal, ... the creator, the maker of everything."⁹

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

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

Jiddu Krishnamurti¹⁰

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

A final need that draws some people to religion is the discomforting sense of being alone in the universe. This isolation can be painful, even terrifying. The divine may be sought as a loving father or mother, or as a friend. Alternatively, some paths offer the way of self-transcendence. Through them, the sense of isolation is lost in mystical merger with the One Being, with the Ultimate Reality.

The existential loneliness some feel is hauntingly depicted by the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti, such as his Walking Man, c.1947–1948.



BELIEF PERSPECTIVE: ULTIMATE REALITY EXISTS

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

How have people of all times and places come to the conclusion that there is some Unseen Reality, even though they may be unable to perceive it with their ordinary senses? Some simply accept what has been told to them or what is written in their holy books. Others have come to their own conclusions. In general, we have two basic ways of apprehending reality: rational thought and nonrational modes of knowing. Both modes have been highly developed in Indian religious traditions. The eminent twentieth-century philosopher and erstwhile president of India, S. Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) observed:

Every attempt at solving the problem of the ultimate basis of existence from a religious point of view has come to admit an Absolute or God. Rationalistic logic and mystic contemplation favour as a rule the former conception, while ethical theism is disposed to the latter. Hindu thought believes in the evolution of our knowledge of God. We have to vary continually our notions of God until we pass beyond all notions into the heart of the reality itself, which our ideas endeavour to report.¹¹

Another path to belief is through deep questioning. Martin Luther (1483–1546), father of the Protestant branches of Christianity, recounted how he searched for faith in God through storms of doubt, “raged with a fierce and agitated conscience.”¹²

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

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. ... No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.¹³

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

not then thinking of anything but the sunlight, and how sweet it was to drowse there, when, suddenly, I felt a fiery heart throb, and knew it was personal and intimate, and started with every sense dilated and intent, and turned inwards, and I heard first a music as of bells going away ... and then the heart of the hills was opened to me, and I knew there was no hill for those who were there, and they were unconscious of the ponderous mountain piled above the palaces of light, and the winds were sparkling and diamond clear, yet full of colour as an opal, as they glittered through the valley, and I knew the Golden Age was all about me, and it was we who had been blind to it but that it had never passed away from the world.¹⁴

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



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

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

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

*The blue sky opens out farther and farther,
the daily sense of failure goes away,
the damage I have done to myself fades,
a million suns come forward with light,
when I sit firmly in that world.¹⁵*

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Ground of Being
TARTHANG TULKU

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

Nona Coxhead¹⁶

Our ordinary experience of the world is that our self is separate from the world of objects that we perceive. But this dualistic understanding may be transcended in a moment of enlightenment in which the Real and our awareness of it become one. The *Mundaka Upanishad* says, "Lose thyself in the Eternal, even as the arrow is lost in the target." For the Hindu, this is the prized attainment of liberation, in which one enters into awareness of the eternal reality. This reality is then known with the same direct apprehension with which one knows oneself. The Sufi Muslim mystic Abu Yazid in the ninth century CE said, "I sloughed off my self as a snake sloughs off its skin, and I looked into my essence and saw that 'I am He.'"¹⁷

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



A sense of the presence of the Great Unnamable may burst through the seeming ordinariness of life. (Samuel Palmer, The Waterfalls, Pistyll Mawddach, North Wales, 1835–1836.)

myreligionlabSacred Cosmos
MIRCEA ELIADE

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



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

Understandings of Sacred Reality

In the struggle to understand what the mind cannot readily grasp, individuals and cultures have come to rather different conclusions. Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) was a very influential scholar who helped to develop the field of comparative religion. This discipline attempts to understand and compare religious patterns found around the world. He used the terms "sacred" and "profane": the profane is the everyday world of seemingly random, ordinary, and unimportant occurrences. The sacred is the realm of extraordinary, apparently purposeful, but generally imperceptible forces. In the realm of

the sacred lie the source of the universe and its values. However relevant this dichotomy may be in describing some religions, there are some cultures that do not make a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. Many indigenous peoples who have an intimate connection with their local landscape feel that spiritual power is everywhere; there is nothing that is not sacred. Trees, mountains, animals—everything is perceived as being alive with sacred presence.

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

The concept of sacred Being is another area in which we find great differences among religious traditions. Many people perceive the sacred as a personal being, as Father, Mother, Teacher, Friend, Beloved, or as a specific deity. Religions based on one's relationship to a Divine Being are called theistic. If the being is worshiped as a singular form, the religion is called **monotheistic**. If many attributes and forms of the divine are emphasized, the reli-

gion may be labeled **polytheistic**. Religions that hold that beneath the multiplicity of apparent forms there is one underlying substance are called **monistic**. Unseen Reality may also be conceived in **nontheistic** terms, as a "changeless Unity," as "Suchness," or simply as "the Way." There may be no sense of a personal Creator God in such understandings; in nontheistic traditions, Ultimate Reality may instead be perceived as impersonal.

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

*God as lover is the one who loves the world not with the fingertips but totally and passionately, taking pleasure in its variety and richness, finding it attractive and valuable, delighting in its fulfilment. God as lover is the moving power of love in the universe, the desire for unity with all the beloved.*¹⁸

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

Atheism is the belief that there is no deity. Atheists may reject theistic beliefs because they seem to be incompatible with the existence of evil in the world, or



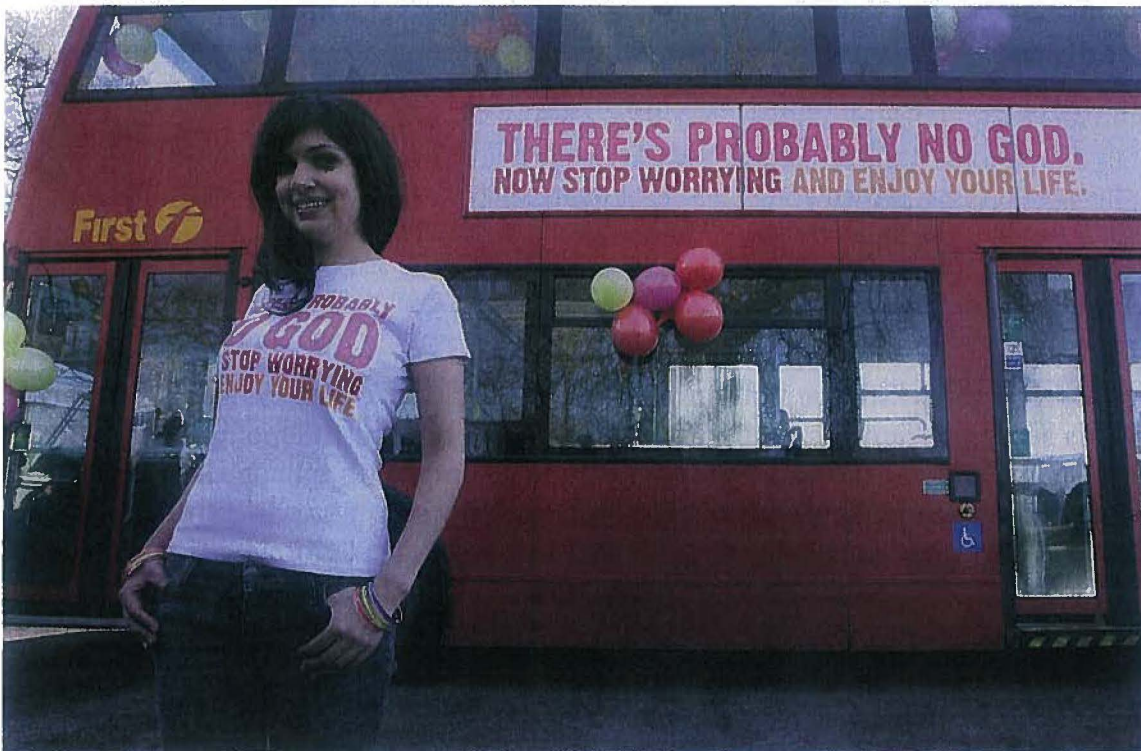
Buddhism is sometimes referred to as a nontheistic religion, for its beliefs do not refer to a personal deity. Practitioners try to perceive the impermanence and interdependence of all things.

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Oneness of the Divine
ABRAHAM HESCHEL

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New Polytheism
DAVID MILLER



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

EXCLUSIVISM VS. UNIVERSALISM

A Letter from I. H. Azad Faruqi

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

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

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

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

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

"Thirdly, the individualistic claims of various religions can be taken as true only in a relative sense. Each of the religious traditions being a close and complete world in itself, these are bound to claim their particular standpoints as absolute. Perhaps these could not develop into self-sufficient traditions in their own right without their exclusivist claims of being the only truly guided ones. But today, in the pluralistic societies of modern times, the claims of these traditions having the monopoly of the Supreme Truth can be considered as relatively absolute only, if the term of a relative absolute can be permitted. That is, we can attempt to approach and study these traditions on their own grounds, with a more humble attitude, and let them speak from within their own world, while being aware that this is only one world out of many such worlds. And ultimately, they all revolve around the same Sun."¹⁹

because there is little or no concrete proof that God exists, or because theistic beliefs seem unscientific, or because they inhibit human independence. In 2009, atheists in England mounted a major campaign to put up billboards and signs on buses proclaiming, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." A movement called "New Atheism" is attacking religious faith as being not only wrong, but actually evil because it can be used to support violence. As we will see throughout this book, extremist religious views have indeed been used throughout history to justify political violence and oppression. The leading figure in the New Atheism movement is Richard Dawkins, Oxford Professor of the Public Understanding of Science and author of *The Selfish Gene* and *The God*

Delusion. Around him a debate is raging about whether science itself is fully "scientific," in the sense of being totally objective, or whether it is a culturally shaped enterprise based on unproven assumptions—the same criticism that its atheistic proponents make about religious faith.

Agnosticism is not the denial of the divine but the feeling, "I don't know whether it exists or not," or the belief that if it exists it is impossible for humans to know it. Religious scepticism has been a current in Western thought since classical times; it was given the name "agnosticism" in the nineteenth century by T. H. Huxley, who stated its basic principles as a denial of metaphysical beliefs and of most (in his case) Christian beliefs since they are unproven or unprovable, and their replacement with scientific method for examining facts and experiences.

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

*the human mind cannot comprehend God. Only God can know Himself. The only form of comprehension of God we can have is to realize how futile it is to try to comprehend Him.*²⁰

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

*Salutations to the One without colour or hue,
Salutations to the One who hath no beginning.
Salutations to the Impenetrable,
Salutations to the Unfathomable ...
O Lord, Thou art Formless and Peerless
Beyond birth and physical elements. ...
Salutations to the One beyond confines of religion. ...
Beyond description and Garbless
Thou art Nameless and Desireless.
Thou art beyond thought and ever Mysterious.*²¹

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

In each tradition the one divine Reality, the one eternal Truth, is present, but it is hidden under symbols. ... Always the divine Mystery is hidden under a veil, but each revelation (or "unveiling") unveils some aspect of the one Truth, or, if you

like, the veil becomes thinner at a certain point. The Semitic religions, Judaism and Islam, reveal the transcendent aspect of the divine Mystery with incomparable power. The oriental religions reveal the divine Immanence with immeasurable depth. Yet in each the opposite aspect is contained, though in a more hidden way.²²

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



NOTES

CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

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