CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

Before dawn, 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, 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, non-institutional 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:

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 any case 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 grab the thing, other parts will get away. Nonetheless, this difficult-to-grasp subject is central to many people’s lives and has assumed great political significance in today’s world so it is important to try sincerely to understand it. In this introductory chapter we will try to develop some understanding of religion in a generic sense—why it exists, its various patterns and modes of interpretation, its encounters with modern science, its inclusion or exclusion of women, and its potentially negative aspects—before trying in the subsequent chapters to understand the major traditions known as “religions” practiced around the world today.

Why are there religions?

In many cultures and times religion has been the basic foundation of life, permeating all aspects of human existence. But from the time of the European Enlightenment religion has become in the West an object to be studied, rather than an unquestioned basic fact of life. Cultural anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and even biologists have peered at religion through their own particular lenses, trying to explain what religion is and why it exists to those who no longer take it for granted. In the following pages we will briefly examine some of the major theories that have evolved.

MATERIALISTIC 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:

*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 …*

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.”

**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 functional—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 this theory 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 religions are a glue that holds a society together, for they 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.

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

Religious faith is also good for our health. Research 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 90 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, but with mixed results. However, meditation has been proved to reduce mental stress and 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:

*Over the millenniums, many practitioners have carried out what we might call “experiments” in how to overcome 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 internal front, too.*

From the point of view of individual psychology, there are many explanations of the usefulness of religion. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) 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.

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

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

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.” 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.*
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. 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.”

We may look to religions for understanding, for answers to our many questions about life. We have difficulty accepting the 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.

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

Jiddu Krishnamurti

For those who find security in specific answers, some religions offer **dogma**—systems of doctrines proclaimed as absolutely true and accepted as such. 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.

**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? 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.

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.”

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.

To perceive truth directly, beyond the senses, beyond the limits of human reason, beyond blind belief, is often called mysticism. The Irish writer George William Russell (1867–1935) describes lying on a hillside:

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 … 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 …

Encounters with Unseen Reality are given various names in spiritual traditions: enlightenment, realization, illumination, kensho, awakening, self-knowledge, gnosis, ecstatic communion, “coming home.” Such a state may arise spontaneously, as in near-death experiences, or may be induced by meditation, fasting, prayer, chanting, drugs, or dancing.

Many religions have developed meditation techniques that encourage intuitive wisdom, perceived as a natural faculty within or an external voice, to come forth. The consciousness initially is turned away from the world, even from one’s own feelings and thoughts. Often a concentration practice, such as 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 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:
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.13

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.’”14

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

**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 tribal cultures 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.

Approached by different ways of knowing, by different people, from different times and cultures, the sacred has many faces. The Ultimate Reality may be conceived as immanent (present in the world) or transcendent (existing above and outside of the material universe). Many people perceive the sacred as a personal Being, as Father, Mother, Teacher, Friend, Beloved, or as a special deity. Religions based on one’s relationship to the divine Being are called theistic. If the Being is worshiped as a singular form, the religion is monotheistic. If many attributes and forms of the divine are emphasized, the religion may be labeled polytheistic. Religions that hold that beneath the multiplicity of apparent forms there is one
underlying substance are called **monistic**.

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. 

There have always been **exclusivist** religious authorities who claim they worship the only true deity and label all others as “pagans” or “nonbelievers.” When such 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 because there is little or no concrete proof that God exists, or because theistic beliefs seem unscientific, or because they inhibit human independence. 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.

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

These categories are not mutually exclusive, so attempts to apply the labels can sometimes confuse us rather than help us understand religions. 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. 

**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 …
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; all religions come from one source.

**Ritual, symbol, and myth**

Many of the phenomena of religion are ways of worship, symbols, and myths. Worship consists in large part of attempts to express reverence and perhaps to enter into communion with that which is worshiped or to request help with problems such as ill health, disharmony, or poverty. Around the world, rituals, sacraments, prayers, and spiritual practices are used to create a sacred atmosphere or state of consciousness necessary to convey requests for help, to sanctify and explain the meaning of life stages such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, or to provide spiritual instruction.

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

> Even the most illiterate person knows that in actual fact no god really picks up those offerings or is actually in need of them. What people offer is what they own … Sacrifices and offerings are a dramatic way of proclaiming that they are not the ultimate possessors of their life and also of articulating their determination to live duty-oriented lives and not desire-oriented lives.\(^{19}\)

Believers build statues and buildings through which to worship the divine, but these are not the divine itself. Because people are addressing the invisible, it can be suggested only through metaphor. Deepest consciousness cannot speak the language of everyday life; what it knows can be suggested only in **symbols**—images from the material world that are similar to spiritual experiences.

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

> *Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan*\(^{20}\)

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

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

Symbols are also woven together into myths—symbolic stories that communities use to explain the universe and their place within it. Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), who analyzed myths around the world, found that they have four primary functions: mystical (to evoke awe, love, wonder, gratitude); cosmological (to explain the universe through the existence and actions of spiritual powers or beings); sociological (to create an orderly society, teach ethical codes); and psychological (to open doors to inner exploration, the development of one’s full potential, and adjustment to life cycle changes). Understood in these senses, myths are not the work of primitive imagination; they can be deeply meaningful and transformational, forming a sacred belief structure that supports the laws and institutions of the religion and the ways of the community, as well as explaining the people’s place within the cosmos.

**Absolutist and liberal interpretations**

Within each faith people often have different ways of interpreting their traditions. The orthodox stand by an historical form of their religion, strictly following its established practices, laws, and creeds. Those who resist contemporary influences and affirm what they perceive as the historical core of their religion could be called absolutists. In our times, many people feel that their identity as individuals or as members of an established group is threatened by the sweeping changes brought by modern industrial culture. The breakup of family relationships, loss of geographic rootedness, decay of clear behavioral codes, and loss of local control may be very unsettling. To find stable footing, to attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a person in the face of modernity and secularization, some people may try to stand on selected religious doctrines or practices from the past. Religious leaders may encourage this trend toward rigidity by declaring themselves absolute authorities or by telling the people that their scriptures are literally and exclusively true. They may encourage antipathy or even violence against people of other religious traditions.

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

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

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

While conservatives tend to take their scriptures and received religious traditions as literally and absolutely true, liberals have for several centuries been engaged in a different approach to understanding their own religions and those of others: historical-critical studies. These are academic attempts to reconstruct the historical life stories of prophets and their cultures as opposed to legends about them, and to subject their scriptures to objective analysis. Such academic study of religion neither accepts nor rejects the particular truth-claims of any religion.

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

One area of research is to try to determine the original or most reliable form of a particular text. Another is to ferret out its historical aspects, with help from sources such as archaeological findings. Such research may conclude that material about a certain period may have been written later and include perspectives from that later period, or that a text attributed to one person may be a collection of writings by different people. Other areas of research are the intended audience, the language and meanings of the words, and whether a scripture or passage follows a particular literary form, such as poetry (for instance, narrative) or sayings. Another area is the redaction, or editing and organizing, of the scripture and the development of an authorized canon that speaks not only to the local community but also to a wider audience. Yet another approach looks at the universal and contemporary relevance of the text, rather than its historicity.

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

Divisions among absolutist, liberal, and sceptical interpretations of religion are related to the development of modern science. Like religion, science is engaged in searching for universal principles that explain the facts of nature. The two approaches have influenced each other for thousands of years.

In ancient Greece “nature philosophers” tried to understand the world through their own perceptions of it. By contrast, Plato (c. 427–347 BCE) distrusted the testimony of the human senses. He distinguished between what is perceived by the senses and what is accessible through reason, between body and soul, appearance and reality, objects and ideas. He believed the soul was superior to the body, and the activity of reason preferable to the distraction of the senses, a value judgment that dominated Western thought through the Middle Ages.

In the seventeenth century knowledge of nature became more secularized as scientists developed models of the universe as a giant machine, whose ways could be discovered by human reason. However, even though they studied its component parts and mathematically quantified its characteristics, many scientists regarded these as the work of a divine Creator or Ruler.

During the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, rational ways of knowing were increasingly respected. The sciences were viewed as progressive; some thinkers attacked institutionalized religions and dogma as superstitions. And the old unitary concepts of science and religion received another serious challenge in 1859 when the naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published *The Origin of Species*, which propounded the theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwin demonstrated that certain genetic mutations give an organism a competitive advantage over others of its species. As evolutionary biology has continued to develop since Darwin through genetic research, it shows that those carrying advantageous genes statistically produce more offspring than others, so the percentage of the new gene gradually increases in the gene pool. Evolutionary studies are revealing more and more evidence of what appear to be gradual changes in organisms, as recorded in fossil records, footprints, and genetic records encoded in DNA. According to evolutionary biology theory, over great lengths of time such gradual changes have brought the development of all forms of life. The theory of natural selection directly contradicted a literal understanding of the biblical Book of Genesis, in which God is said to have created all life in only six days. By the end of the nineteenth century all such beliefs of the Judeo-Christian tradition were being questioned.

However, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries science has in some senses moved back toward a more nuanced understanding of religious belief. Science itself is now being questioned. Scientists have given up trying to find absolute certainties. Contemporary scientific research makes it clear that the cosmos is mind-boggling in its complexity and that what we perceive with our five senses is not ultimately real. For instance, the inertness and solidity of matter are only illusions. Each atom consists mostly of empty space with tiny particles whirling around in it. These subatomic particles—such as neutrons, protons, and electrons—cannot even be described as “things.”

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

New branches of science are finding that the universe is not always predictable. Whereas scientific models of the universe were until recently based on the assumption of stability and equilibrium, physicist Ilya Prigogine observes that “today we see instability, fluctuations, irreversibility at every level.”

In the work of physicists such as David Bohm (1917–1992), physics approaches metaphysics—philosophy based on theories of subtle realities that transcend the physical world. Bohm described the dimensions we see and think of as “real” as the explicate order. Behind it lies the implicate order, in which separateness resolves into unbroken wholeness. Beyond may lie other subtle dimensions, all merging into an infinite ground that unfolds itself as light. This scientific theory is very similar to descriptions by mystics from all cultures about their intuitive experiences of the cosmos. They speak of realities beyond normal human perceptions of space and time.

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

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

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

Albert Einstein
In the United States the conservative Christian community has objected to mechanistic scientific theories of biological evolution, preferring Creationism, the concept of intentional divine creation of all life forms. Intelligent design theory has been cited to support the religious concept of Creationism. According to intelligent design theorists, scientific discoveries of the complexities and perfections of life can be said to prove the existence of an Intelligent Designer. For instance, if the weak force in the nucleus of an atom were a small fraction weaker, there would be no hydrogen in the universe—and thus no water. Biologists find that the natural world is an intricate harmony of beautifully elaborated, interrelated parts. Even to produce the miniature propeller that allows a tiny bacterium to swim, some forty different proteins are required.

The question then arises: Can the complex maps that produce life be the consequences of chance arrangements of atoms, or are they the result of deliberate design by some First Cause? The intelligent design movement concludes that there must be a Creator. However, science is a method of proposing testable hypotheses and testing them, whereas the intelligent design hypothesis is not testable. In 2005 the judge in a landmark case in Dover, Pennsylvania, ruled that intelligent design could not be recommended to ninth-grade biology students because intelligent design does not qualify as science—unless the definition of science is changed to include supernatural explanations—and because the First Amendment of the Constitution prevents government officials from imposing any particular religion or religious belief.

In the current dialogue between science and religion, four general positions have emerged. In the conflict model, which is most apparent in issues such as creation, some scientists have faith in scientific method and some religionists have faith in a Creator God whose existence cannot be scientifically proved. A second position is that science and religion are separate. Science deals with quantifiable physical reality, religion with the unquantifiable. A third position is dialogue, in which scientists and religious believers find common ground in interpreting religious propositions as metaphors and bases for the moral use of scientific research. A fourth is integration, in which science and religion overlap. An example is the intelligent design movement, which suggests that the odds against chance evolution of life’s complexities and perfections may lead to belief in a Creator.

Scientists themselves have no answers that can be expressed in scientific terms. The renowned theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking asks, “What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?”

Women in religions

Another long-standing issue in the sphere of religion is the exclusion of women in male-dominated systems. Most institutionalized religions are patriarchal, meaning that men lead like father figures. Women are often relegated to the fringes of religious organizations, given only supporting roles, thus reflecting existing social distinctions between men and women. In some instances women are even considered incapable of spiritual realization or dangerous to men’s spiritual lives. Founders of religion have in many cases attempted to temper cultural restraints on women. Jesus, for example, apparently included women among his close disciples, and the Prophet Muhammad gave much more respect to women than the surrounding culture had. However, the institutions that developed after the prophets often
reverted to exclusion and oppression of women, sometimes giving a religious stamp of approval to gender imbalances.

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

**Negative aspects of organized religions**

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

Since the human needs that religions answer are so strong, those who hold religious power are in a position to dominate and control their followers. In fact, in many religions leaders are given this authority to guide people’s spiritual lives, for their perceived wisdom and special access to the sacred are valued. Because religions involve the unseen, the mysterious, these leaders’ teachings are not verifiable by everyday physical experience. They must more often be accepted on faith, and it is possible to surrender to leaders who are misguided or unethical. Religious leaders, like secular leaders, may not be honest with themselves and others about their inner motives. They may mistake their own thoughts and desires for divine guidance. Some people believe, however, that the most important thing for the disciple is to surrender the ego; even an unworthy leader can help in this goal simply by playing the role of one to whom one must surrender personal control.

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

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

Because religions may have such a strong hold on their followers—by their fears, their desires, their deep beliefs—they are potential centers for political power. When church and state are one, the belief that the dominant national religion is the only true religion may be used to oppress those of other beliefs within the country. Religion may also be used as a rallying point for wars against other nations, casting the desire for control as a holy motive. Throughout history, huge numbers of people have been killed in the name of eradicating “false” religions and replacing them with the “true” religion. Rather than uniting us all in bonds of love, harmony, and mutual respect, this has often divided us with barriers of hatred and intolerance.

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

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

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

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**Review questions**

1. What are some of the different perspectives available for understanding religion?
2. Describe absolutist and liberal interpretations of religious traditions, and how each might react to historical-critical studies of religious texts.
3. What are the major positions that have emerged in the dialogue between science and religion?

**Discussion questions**

1. To what extent do you find materialistic arguments rejecting the reality posited by religion and spirituality useful in understanding religion?
2. In what ways is the patriarchal nature of institutionalized religions changing?
3. What factors do you believe contribute to the negative aspects of organized religions?

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