

INTRODUCTION TO WORLD RELIGIONS

COMMUNITIES AND CULTURES

EDITED BY
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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

A "HUMANLY RELEVANT" COSMOS:

WHAT WE STUDY WHEN WE STUDY RELIGION

William Scott Green

Religion is a powerful force in contemporary life. It both unites nations and divides peoples. It both teaches charity and generates suspicion. It both offers solace and causes anxiety. It provides hope and inspires fear. It promotes human rights and preserves social inequity. It advances social justice and obstructs social mobility. It calls for peace and causes war. It preaches love and breeds intolerance. Americans in particular think religion is a significant part of human experience. Because religion is so consequential, it also is controversial. Some see it as a destructive delusion,¹ and others as a mode of evolutionary adaptation.² We study religion to make sense of all this to understand what religions advocate, what religious people do, why they do it, and why it matters. In doing so, we use disciplined investigation to find the rationality—or irrationality—in what religions teach and how their adherents behave. We will look at these issues in the rest of this introduction.

Why Religion Matters

Religion matters for two reasons. First, globally, religion is an increasingly important part of contemporary life. Second, religion is

a basic element in American politics, society, and culture. Let us take these up in turn.

Contemporary research shows that in the past thirty or forty years, religion has grown significantly in the world's cultures.³ Consider the following data:

- "The world's largest religions have expanded at a rate that exceeds that of global population growth."⁴
- "A greater proportion of the world's population adhered to *each* of" the religious systems of Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Hinduism "in 2000 than in 1900."⁵
- "The overwhelming preponderance of this growth occurred between... 1970 and 2000."⁶
- More people in the world hold "traditional religious beliefs" than ever before.⁷
- "Today religion is the most common source of civil wars currently raging.... Since 2000, fully 47 percent of civil wars have been religious."⁸
- "Religious ideology is the leading motivator for most translational terrorist attacks, particularly but not exclusively those committed by al Qaeda."⁹
- Religion's influence appears to increase with democracy and democratization.¹⁰
- "Far from stamping out religion, modernization has spawned a new generation of say, organizationally sophisticated, and technologically adept religious movements."¹¹
- The new religious movements are "politically capable."¹²

These data show the expanding influence of religion in the world's population and emphasize its impact on world politics. The correlation of religion's growth with the "economic and political modernization"¹³ of the past three-or four decades suggests that religion will be significant in global life well into the future.

Why We Care about Religion

Even if religion were less important than it is in the contemporary world, it still would matter to Americans because the U.S. Constitution, in the First Amendment, mandates and privileges the category of religion. Indeed, religion may be the only field in the

humanities whose subject matter is explicitly named and governed by the U.S. Constitution.

The First Amendment states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It assumes that religion and government are different and distinct, and it sets religion apart as a particular kind or sphere of experience. In so doing, the First Amendment makes religion into a fundamental component of American life. Indeed, religion is so familiar in American discourse that it can be called a native category for Americans.¹⁴ It is something we inherit as an assumed part of our national and personal lives. This does not mean that all Americans practice religion, but rather that religion is a culturally legitimate marker both of Americans' individual and national identities. Americans routinely define themselves in terms of being either religious or not religious. Because of the First Amendment, in America religion is—and historically has been—a matter of choice and therefore of fundamental freedom. American culture assumes that religion exists and that it matters enough to be protected from government imposition and government interference. The freedom of religion as expressed in the First Amendment shapes a distinctive context for the practice of religion, and this is one primary reason American colleges and universities teach and study religion as they do.

To say that religion is an American native category means that it is not a global one. Other nations, societies, or cultures do not necessarily have the term *religion* or use it as American culture does. But what we might call the American ethnocentrism of religion does not invalidate religion as a lens through which to make sense of human experience. So long as we remain aware that we use the term in a culturally specific way—that it is native to us but may be alien to others—we can draw analogies from our culture to others' to see which aspects of other cultures we might call "religion" in ours. In this way, the study of religion provides a mirror for American self-reflection and self-awareness.

What Religion Means

Now that we have an idea of why religion matters and why it is worthy of attention, we need to try to determine what it means. This introduction takes two approaches to this question. One is theoretical. It defines religion abstractly in terms of a set of intellectual

suppositions. The second is more descriptive. It supplements the theoretical definition with, and assesses it against, some representative examples—ideas, practices, behaviors, and so on—drawn from well-known religions.

Our theoretical definition begins with some basic assumptions that are essential to studying religion rationally. First, the term *religion* refers to a human, this-worldly construction, something created and maintained by human beings. Second, the study of religion must be based on empirical evidence, on what we can see and observe. If we assume otherwise on these two points, then religion becomes by definition something uncanny and unseen, mysterious and indiscernible, and therefore unintelligible. Without putting religion into some kind of preliminary limiting framework, studying it risks becoming undisciplined, notional, and aimless. When we study religion we have to start somewhere, with the full awareness that, in accord with the process of reason, an initial definition is always provisional.

Religion Refined

Anthropologist Melford Spiro devised one established and particularly useful definition of religion. He defined *religion* as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”¹⁵ This scholarly and academic definition contains several important elements that help sketch out distinctive traits of religion.

First, it understands the distinguishing trait of religion to be “culturally postulated superhuman beings.” This means that religion differs from politics or economics or philosophy because it has in it “superhuman beings.” These are beings regarded as more powerful than humans. On their own, they are believed able to do things to and for humans that humans cannot do in return or unaided.

The variable of “superhuman beings”—in contrast to a religiously specific category like “faith,” for instance—is primarily descriptive and reasonably neutral. Without imposing or presupposing too much of a Western or American system, we can observe empirically if a culture attributes greater than human powers to beings it regards as real. In this sense, the category “superhuman beings” usefully can be applied across cultures.

Second, the definition posits that the culture in which a religion exists shapes the kinds of superhuman beings a religion has and the

way humans are to interact with those superhuman beings. Some cultures envision a pantheon, multiple superhuman beings with limited powers and spheres of action, while others suppose a single, unique superhuman being who is all-powerful. Superhuman beings might be deities, spirits, saints, deceased ancestors, or sages with extraordinary powers of discernment and understanding; to list a few more obvious examples.

Interaction with superhuman beings includes both behavior that reflects the “will or desire of the superhuman beings or powers” and behavior that “influence[s]” them to respond to humans’ “needs.”¹⁶ It can take varied and nuanced forms: prayer, obedience, meditation, trances, veneration, imitation, consumption, textual study, healing, illness, fasting, asceticism, exorcism, pacifism, violence, and war, to name just a few. For some cultures—as in ancient Greece and Rome—it makes sense to think that humans can have sexual relations with superhuman beings; for others it does not. In some religions, humans interact by studying the teachings of superhuman beings; in others, the superhuman beings inhabit humans’ bodies or speak directly to humans without mediation. Humans’ interactions with superhuman beings are empirical. We can observe them in the ways human beings speak, dress, eat, do business, marry, and manage death, among other behaviors.

Third, the definition understands religion to be an institution, “an attribute of social groups, comprising part of their cultural heritage”; as such, “its beliefs are normative, its rituals collective, its values prescriptive.”¹⁷ On this account, religion is public rather than personal. Because religions are embedded in culture, institutional forms vary. Some religions are hierarchical, others more egalitarian. The social and cultural—in Spiro’s terms, institutional—nature of religion means that religious speech and behavior are neither random nor arbitrary nor idiosyncratic. They have social meaning because they are pieces of a shared cluster of ideas and values. Thus, even intense individual religious experiences, such as trances and “speaking in tongues” (glossolalia), typically occur not in isolation but in community where they are recognized, understood, and validated.

Spiro’s general definition provides an empirical framework for a disciplined comparison of multiple religions that can chart both similarity and difference. Although discrete cultures postulate superhuman beings, humans’ patterned interaction with those beings can

diverge—sometimes sharply—from culture to culture. Consider the example of men's head-covering in religious communities. In Judaism men are expected to cover their heads during prayer as a sign of respect to the deity. Many Jewish men wear a small skullcap—called a *yarmulke* or *kippah*—throughout the day for the same purpose. Sikhism mandates that men cover their heads when they pray and when they engage with the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth*. Many Sikh men also wear a turban in public as a mark of religious, cultural, or political identity.¹⁸ In Islam, it is customary,¹⁹ but not religiously mandated, that men wear headgear during worship, but some communities would be offended by a bareheaded male worshiper. In most forms of Christianity, however, men remove their hats as a sign of deference to the deity. The bareheadedness derives from the comments of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:4 that “a man who keeps his head covered when he prays or prophesies brings shame upon his head” (NEB).²⁰ To make matters a bit more complicated, some Roman Catholic clerics wear a skullcap, customarily called a *zucchetto*, as a sign of office—so the head-covering has institutional religious significance—but they remove it at various points during the Mass as a gesture of respect to God. Thus, men's head-covering in religious communities can have multiple meanings. Covering the head during worship can be a religious act. It also can be a gesture of humility or identity but not necessarily a religious practice. Covering the head during worship also can be an act of irreligion. Finally, both wearing and removing the head-covering can be religious acts. The framework of Spiro's definition helps us see difference despite similarity and illustrates how understanding specific religious practices requires knowledge of cultural patterns.

If we use Spiro's definition to study religions, we will pay attention to the concrete observable ways people relate to beings they regard as more powerful than themselves. We will ask how cultures construct their superhuman beings, how they instruct people to engage with them, and how that engagement is institutional.

Religion Described

Spiro's definition provides an analytical focus for understanding how religion works. The best way to use a definition, however, no matter how useful, is to read it together with empirical evidence to see both how well it distinguishes religion from other things and if and where it requires modification. To do that we can enrich the

three foci of Spiro's definition—superhuman beings, interaction, and religion as an institution—with broadly conventional, mainstream, uncontroversial, and widely acknowledged examples of religion from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.²¹

Superhuman Beings and the Normative Cosmos

In Spiro's definition, the difference between religion and other aspects of a culture is the postulation of superhuman beings, who are regarded as more powerful than human beings. This suggests that to understand a religion we will want to know how that religion conceives of the distribution of power between humans and superhumans. What does a religion claim are the limits of human activity in the world? Which capacities do humans not have that superhumans possess?

If we follow this line of questioning, then “superhuman beings” points to another characteristic. Religions certainly claim that there are superhuman beings, but they typically profess more than that. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism all aver that there is an order to existence—a reality, a set of life conditions and circumstances—that humans did not make and in principle cannot change. Superhuman beings normally play a role in bringing this order about or in discerning it, or both. This cosmic order constitutes the foundation and framework for human action in the world. Traditions in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament illustrate and capture the tone of the superhuman creation of the cosmic order. Consider the well-known first verses of the book of Genesis 1:1-5 (*TANAKH*):

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

Or this passage from the Gospel of John 1:1-5 (NEB):

When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no

single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never quenched it.

In Islam, the first revelation received by the prophet Muhammad by God provides a succinct outline of the purpose of the Divine Creations (Qur'an 96:1-5):

Recite in the name of your Lord and Cherisher, Who created
Created man, out of a mere clot of congealed blood:
Recite! And your Lord is Most Bountiful
He Who taught the use of the Pen
Taught man that which he did not know.²²

In the Hindu tradition, the Vedic hymn *Rg Veda* (10.90), grounds the system of social castes in the sacrificial act of a primordial being:

When they divided up the Man,
into how many parts did they divide him?
What did his mouth become: What his arms?
What are his legs called? What his feet?

His mouth became the brahmin; his arms
became the warrior-prince, his legs
the common man who plies his trade.
The lowly serf was born from his feet.²³

These texts nowhere suggest that humans played any role in shaping the structure of reality. Human beings did not produce themselves; nor did they create light and darkness, time and space, day and night, or Brahmins and serfs. Humans did not vote these conditions into being, and they cannot vote them out of existence. Rather, the cosmos establishes the givens of existence and constitutes the prerequisites of human experience.

In religion, this cosmic structure is neither speculation nor conjecture nor provisional hypothesis. To the contrary, it is objective, factual, and true. More important, it is normative. It depicts not only how things are but also how things should be. Religion claims not only to account for this world as it is but also to perceive a structure beneath or beyond it. For instance, although the cosmos contains an array of animals and plants that humans can consume, some reli-

gions—Judaism, Hinduism, and Jainism, for example—prohibit the consumption of certain animals or plants on the grounds that eating them requires taking life or otherwise violates a deep cosmic structure. Religion's claim to know the normative structure of the cosmos shapes the character of religious behavior or at least the religious view of human behavior.

Interaction: Adhering to the Normative Cosmos

The core of religion is the human interaction with superhuman beings. These interactions are not arbitrary. Our definition stipulates that the broader culture shapes them. But another factor also applies. Religion is not merely operational. It also is purposive. Religion has goals to achieve, problems to solve, and the means to do both.

Religion operates on the assumption that humans on their own are, can be, or will be out of sync with the normative cosmic order and the superhuman beings who created, discovered, and understand it. Humans' incongruity with the cosmic order is the result either of humanity's willful intent, inherent weakness, human ignorance, or some combination of the three. Religion further claims to know how to correct and prevent this inconsonance. Religion expects human behavior—which includes attitudes as well as actions—to take the form of adherence, loyalty, fealty, devotion, or commitment to the cosmic order and conformity to its contours. It further supposes that there are serious negative consequences to humans' failure to do this and that only the religion can both explain those consequences and relieve them. Religions teach their adherents how the world should work, why it should work that way, what humans should do to live in accord with that normative structure, and what will happen to them if they do or do not do so.

A religion's knowledge of the normative nature and structure of the cosmic order is particular rather than generic. Since a religion's superhuman beings either created, discovered, or revealed that order, full and correct knowledge and understanding of it necessarily is highly specific, if not exclusive, to the religion itself. Discrete religions typically do not claim that people can randomly, accidentally, or independently acquire what the religion knows about how the universe works and how humans are to act in it. Buddhism does not teach that reading Shakespeare is the path to discovering the truth of the Buddha's teachings. Likewise, Christianity does not preach that learning computer software will demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth

is the Messiah. Each religion has its own particular sources of authority—texts, canons of scripture, revelations, sages, enlightened ones, prophets, chains of tradition, and so on—that reveal, transmit, and certify its privileged knowledge of the cosmic order. Even when religions exhibit awareness of and respect for one another—and many do—they typically do not suggest that their teachings lead to one another. Neither Judaism nor Buddhism, for instance, teaches that keeping kosher will lead one to achieve nirvana. The tendency toward exclusivity raises the stakes in religious teaching and, particularly when religion is entwined in politics, can impede interreligious communication and tolerance.

Religion assumes that only by adhering to the religion's own teachings, which entails proper interactions with its superhuman beings, can humans either repair a breach with the created order or prevent one from happening. Within religion, humans' interactions with the superhuman beings largely serve one of these two broad purposes.

The Comprehensiveness of Religion

Religion expects from its adherents—and teaches them how to achieve—cognitive recognition of, and behavioral conformity to, the cosmic order. Because of its cosmic orientation, religion is distinctively comprehensive in its scope. We can observe this trait in religion's tendency to totalize, to extend its reach. Religious teachings cover an astonishing range: cosmology (stories of the origin of the world), eschatology (stories of the end of the world), and theories of nature, birth, ethics, commerce, sexuality, suffering, and death. The most cursory perusal of the world's religions shows that there is almost no aspect of human activity—physical or mental—that religion does not touch. It emerges in the gamut of human expression: music, art, morality, intellect, ethics, sexuality, family, economics, education, politics, dress, food, and civility. Religions are full of instructions on what to wear, what to eat, whom to marry, how to do business, and so forth. Even the decision of some religions not to follow dress codes or observe food taboos is cast as made for religious reasons. For instance, the Gospel of Mark's announcement that Jesus "declared all foods clean" (7:19), makes unrestricted consumption into an act of religious principle. In a way that philosophy, politics, economics, or law does not and cannot, religion makes claims on the total human being.

Religion's comprehensiveness exceeds the worldly and the experiential. The religious cosmos includes a domain of space that humans occupy in this world and other realms of space beyond it, where superhuman beings reside. It also includes a dimension of time humans experience in this world and realms of time that both precede and follow this one.

These extrawordly realms of space and time are ordinarily invisible to humans, immune to unmediated mortal observation. Humans may see partial manifestations of these realms, but in general they are beyond routine human perception. In this respect, religious knowledge of superhuman beings differs from scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is based on repeatable empirical observation and is always provisional until better observations or explanations come along. By contrast, religious knowledge of superhuman beings is nonempirical, definitive, and absolute. Unlike atoms or parts of atoms, religion's superhuman beings are not material but minuscule; rather, they are immaterial and invisible. Unlike the subatomic particles or natural forces of the scientific cosmos, the superhuman beings of the religious cosmos are highly sentient. They are agents who act with purpose and respond—sometimes unpredictably—to human stimuli. The adherents of a religion know the superhuman beings are active because the privileged knowledge of their religion teaches them how to recognize a reality others cannot see. On their own, people cannot know whether a saint, a *jinn*, an angel, or a demon helped them. Only their religion can identify the superhuman agent, and that identification cannot be verified by any neutral or independent process. The proof of a religion's specialized claims about the cosmos comes from living them, not from a laboratory experiment.

Religion's comprehensiveness is temporal as well as spatial. Temporal limits define secularity. Lifetime ends with death. Extensive temporal limits—eternal or immortal—characterize religion. In some way, life continues after death. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam hold that there is resurrection of the dead. Hinduism and Buddhism, in different ways, subscribe to the doctrine of karma, or reincarnation. All these religions, with appropriate cultural variation, hold that one's life in this world is relevant to what happens after death.

To see concretely how religion's otherworldly framework shapes and motivates human behavior, consider the example of altruism, the act of serving others without benefit or at a cost to oneself. Altruism is deliberate action you perform for the sake of another person that produces either no benefit or a negative cost to you. The extreme form of altruism is self-sacrifice, giving up your life to save another, but there are countless other acts of kindness to others and care for others—the equivalent of helping older adults cross the street—that also seem to us altruistic. Perhaps because of its association with self-sacrifice, people often assume that altruism is a religious virtue. But religion's framework of eternity means that earthly experience is only a part of religion's realm. A loss in this world is not the end of the story. Compensation can come in the next world as well as, or instead of, in this one. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism all teach the value and practice of charity and beneficence. Consequently, at the very least they affirm—and must affirm—that their adherents will not suffer for following the religion's teachings, for doing what the superhuman beings commend. But religions are more ambitious than that. They typically claim that selfless action on behalf of others will be rewarded, either in this life or the next.²⁴ Religion's comprehensive compass means in principle and in practice that everything humans do can be religiously consequential.

Because religion covers the extended—if unobservable—realms of space and time, it can promise humans unique results. Religion not only understands the problem of human incongruity with the cosmos; it offers people an eternity—or at least extra time—in which to set things right. For example, an Islamic teaching holds that heaven and hell are permanent realms. After death, the angels Nakir and Munkar question the deceased in their graves. If one answers properly that there is only one God, and Muhammad is God's prophet, one experiences the reward of paradise in the grave. If one answers incorrectly, there is punishment in the grave. According to some reports of Muhammad's teaching (*hadith*), after the resurrection at the Final Judgment, God can still exempt people from the punishment of hell, and even an atom of faith can gain one entry into paradise.²⁵ This is a kind of promise no secular institution can make.

Religion as an Institution: System and Integration

Religion's power lies not only in its unusual comprehensiveness. It also has a distinctive capacity to integrate the realms of space, time,

and world into a coherent structure. The discrete components of religion—myths; classifications of time, space, nature, and humanity; rituals; behavioral and food taboos; canons of scripture; nonscriptural traditions; ethics; customs; cosmologies; and eschatologies—in multiple ways reinforce one another. In Judaism, for example, the Sabbath commemorates God's creation of the world and would be meaningless otherwise. The elements of religion are not random collections. They are components of a system in which they are linked through a network of relationships that gives meaning to the system as a whole and its discrete parts as well.²⁶ By discerning those interrelationships, we understand how a religion works and gain insight into its rationality.²⁷

An illustration of religion's integrative power is the Nicene Creed,²⁸ composed in the fourth century C.E. and recited in both Orthodox and Catholic liturgies:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us men and our salvation He came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit, He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day He rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son, He is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

All the elements of religion we have observed are evident in this creed. It tells us about the superhuman beings ("maker of heaven and earth," Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Virgin Mary), interactions with those beings (fulfillment of Scripture, baptism, worship, glorification), religion as an institution ("one, holy, catholic, and apostolic

Church"), realms of space ("all that is seen and unseen"), and realms of time ("resurrection of the dead" and "world to come").

In Islam, the *Arkan al-Islam*, the Five Pillars (or Foundations) of Islam, achieve the same result, though in a somewhat different way. The Five Pillars outline the basic obligations of all members of the Muslim religious community. They are present but not stated formulaically in the Qur'an, but do appear formulaically in the *hadith*—oral traditions assigned to Muhammad, his family, and companions—and in Islamic legal manuals. The Five Pillars are:

1. The *shahada* (profession of faith): "I bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Adherents must recite this confession aloud once during their lifetime, with proper pronunciation and full cognitive awareness.
2. Prayer: the five daily prayers, recited facing the holy city of Mecca.
3. *Zakat*: the obligatory tax, used primarily to support the poor.
4. Fasting: the obligatory abstention from food, water, and sexual intercourse from dawn until dusk during the month of *Ramadan*.
5. The *hajj*: the pilgrimage to Mecca, to be made once in one's lifetime provided one is able to afford it.

The Five Pillars entail, but do not independently state, the articles of faith of the Islamic tradition. They are as follows:

- Belief in God's uniqueness (*tawhid*)
- Belief in the angels
- Belief in prophecy from Adam to Muhammad, who is the "Seal of the Prophets"
- Belief in revealed books (*Torat* of Moses, *Zabur* of David, *Injil* of Jesus, and the *Qur'an* of Muhammad)
- Belief in the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment
- *Qadr*: the measuring out of God's mercy, kindness, and testing of humanity

Together, the Five Pillars and the articles of faith integrate superhuman beings ("the uniqueness of God," Muhammad as the Seal of

the Prophets, angels), interactions with those beings (profession of faith, prayer, tax, fasting, pilgrimage, God's mercy, kindness, and testing of humanity), religion as an institution (Mecca, revealed books), realms of space (the place of angels), and realms of time (resurrection). These components all reinforce one another so that the two sources combined produce a succinct and systemic account of Islam as a religion.

Diversity and Change within Religion

The recognition that religion is a system does not mean that religion is internally uniform, static, or monolithic. Not all adherents of a religion regard it with equal seriousness or necessarily take it seriously at all. Even if the superhuman beings are present at your wedding, you may not care that they are there.²⁹ Moreover, all religions exhibit a history of change and adaptation, and many have grown from one another. Christianity emerged from Judaism, and Islam uses elements common to both. Buddhism developed out of Hinduism. Within each of these discrete traditions, moreover, there are multiple divisions or denominations. To get a sense of the internal diversity, we merely have to list just some of the better-known divisional names in each religion: Christianity: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal; Judaism: Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist; Islam: Sunni, Shiite; Hinduism: Vaishnavah, Shaiva, Shakta; Buddhism: Nikaya, Mahayanaya, Vajrayana. To organize this diversity it might be useful to envision each of these traditions as a kind of religious family in which all members partake of a common system, structure, and heritage but understand it and adopt it in distinctive ways. Although the adherents of a religion cannot change the cosmic structure or the content of the religion's revealed truth or its privileged knowledge, they can and do interpret that legacy differently. Some of the major factors that affect these diverse interpretations are regional and tribal identities, immigration, political constraints (or the lack of them) on religion, religious pluralism, and issues of gender, social class, and ethnic heritage.

Religion as Transformative

It could reasonably be argued that religion's capacity to integrate and systematize its cosmic comprehensiveness gives it the pervasive

pertinence in human life that other elements of culture do not have. Through this cosmic integration religion frees human existence from the vagaries of immediate experience. Because of its long view it anchors human experience in constancies, transcendences, and superstructures that help people know that they matter and that what they do has consequence. Religion marks off permanent structures in time and fixed orientations in space that together invest ordinary human conduct with overarching value.

The conception of religion as fealty to a transcendent cosmic order immune to human alteration is consistent with—and likely undergirds—the First Amendment's idea that religion and government are distinct realms of experience. Some of the differences between religion and secular law or politics underscore the plausibility of that judgment. Religion rewards proper attitude and action—in the routine aspects of life—as opposed to merely restraining or punishing improper behavior. Secular legal systems do not reward people for paying taxes, following the law, visiting the sick, being kind to others, and so on. Politics does not require adoption of a cosmology or an eschatology. In politics and law people simply have to give assent, or at least adapt, to the established political and legal order as the state defines it. Religion goes beyond that realm, and its rewards for and constraints on behavior are different from those of the state. The comprehensiveness of religion means that, unlike law or politics, religion is transformative, designed to create and develop a particular kind of humanity that reflects the unshakable structure of the cosmos. Religion is not simply about keeping the peace, but about creating, maintaining, and advancing a superstructure that brings distinctive meaning and purpose to human individual and collective experience. Religion's normative cosmic structure shapes and informs what humans do, and everything humans do can have cosmic implications. As Peter L. Berger says, "Religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly relevant."³⁰

Religion Is Natural

In conceiving a "humanly relevant" cosmos, religion becomes a high-stakes enterprise. As such, it has promulgated ideas and practices of enormous insight and benefit to humanity, and it has generated extraordinary beauty in art and music. For the same reason, it

also has caused misery, distrust, oppression, and death. Because of what it represents, people who accept religion are loath to give it up. Some are prepared to die, or to kill, in its name.

Behind religion's transformative impact is a critical and deterministic fact. Religion is natural, an expression of our human character. Religion is a commonplace of humanity's past and a prevalent trait of humanity's global present. The First Amendment assumes the naturalness of religion and takes it as a given. Religion is historically pervasive and demographically inclusive. Throughout human history people of all types—rich, poor, educated, ignorant, smart, stupid—have made religion part of their lives. It probably does not overstate to suggest that historically religion is the norm in human experience and irreligion the exception. The more fantastic elements of religion—including but not limited to its postulated superhuman beings—certainly make it seem exotic, far-fetched, improbable, and odd, but in fact religion is a very conventional and ubiquitous piece of the mundane world it claims to transcend. As you work your way through this book, it is important to recognize that religion is as old and as consequential as any subject in the academy. Human beings have always been religious. How they have been, why they have been, and why it matters are what we study when we study religion. In the end, without the study of religion, we overlook in some very basic way an elemental part of our nature as humans and we cannot fully know either one another or ourselves.³¹