

✿ LOOKING BOTH WAYS FROM STONEHENGE: BASIC HUMAN RELIGION

Standing on the west side of **Stonehenge**, we watch the sun rise through the circle of massive standing stones. Within the outer circle is a grouping of paired stones capped by lintels and arranged in a horseshoe pattern, opening towards the rising sun. At the centre of the horseshoe lies a flat stone that was once thought to have served as an altar for sacrifices. Today, however, it is believed that the centre stone originally stood upright, marking the spot where an observer would stand to watch the movements of the sun and stars.

The Stonehenge we know today is what remains of a structure erected between 3,500 and 4,000 years ago. But the site had already been used as a burial ground for centuries before that time: researchers believe that the remains of as many as 240 people, probably from a single ruling family, were interred there between roughly 3000 and 2500 CE.¹ The structure itself is generally believed to have been used for ceremonial purposes, and its orientation—towards the point where the sun rises at the summer solstice—is what has led many to think it might have been designed to serve as a kind of astronomical observatory.

Ignoring the crowd of tourists, we position ourselves behind the central stone to note the position of the rising sun in relation to the 'heel stone' on the horizon more than 60 metres away. Today, on the morning of the summer solstice, the sun rises in the northeast, just to the left of the heel stone. It's easy to imagine that this day—the longest of the year and the only one on which the sun rises to the north side of the heel stone—would have been the occasion for some kind of ceremony in ancient times; that the entire community would have gathered at dawn to watch as someone with

special authority—perhaps a priest, perhaps the local chief or ruler—confirmed the position of the rising sun. It's also easy to imagine the sense of order in the universe that would have come from knowing exactly when and where the sun would change course.

Tomorrow the sun will rise behind the heel stone, and it will continue its (apparent) journey towards the south for the next six months. Then in late December, at the winter solstice, the sun will appear to reverse course and begin travelling northwards again. Many centuries after people first gathered at Stonehenge, the Romans would celebrate this day as marking the annual 'rebirth' of the sun—the high point of the festival they called Saturnalia. And in the fourth century CE, the Christians in Rome would choose this same time of the year to celebrate the birth of their risen lord. Christmas was to combine the unrestrained revelry of the Roman midwinter festival, marked by feasting, gift-giving, and general merriment, with the celebration of the coming to earth of a deity incarnate.

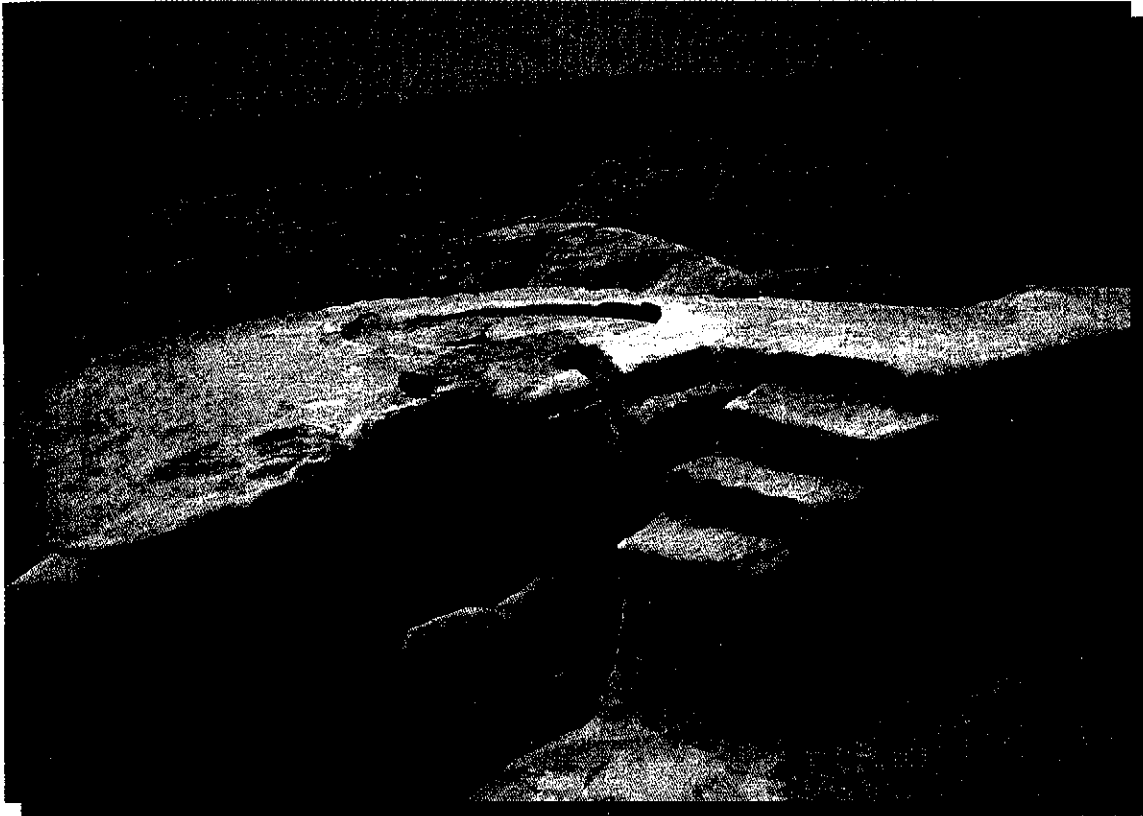
Looking Back from Stonehenge

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

Three Worlds

Historically, it seems that humans around the globe have imagined the world to consist of three levels—sky, earth, and underworld. The uppermost level, the sky, has typically been considered the home of the greatest deities. Exactly how this concept developed is impossible to know, but we can guess that the awesome power of storms was one contributing factor. Another was very likely

◀ Stonehenge (© Nick Hawkes/Alamy).



The 'high place' at Petra, Jordan (Roy C. Amore).

the apparent movement of the sun, the stars, and the planets across the sky. Observing the varying patterns could well have led early humans to believe that the heavenly bodies were living entities animated by their own individual spirits—in effect, gods and goddesses.

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

lay the earth: the intermediate level where humans lived.

Sacred Places

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

in Jordan (familiar to many people from the Indiana Jones films).

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

Animal Spirits

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

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

Death and Burial

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



A reconstruction of an Egyptian burial from the fourth century BCE at the British Museum in London; the naturally preserved body of a man is surrounded by a variety of grave goods (Alex Segre/Alamy).

as precious stones. Apparently the living were willing to sacrifice important resources to help the dead in the afterlife.

The belief that deceased ancestors can play a role in guiding the living members of their families appears to be especially widespread. Traditions such as the Japanese **Obon**, the Mexican **Day of the Dead**, and the Christian **All Saints Day** and **Hallowe'en** all reflect the belief that the souls of the dead return to earth once a year to share a ritual meal with the living.

Why Are Humans Religious?

The reasons why humans tend to be religious are far too numerous and complex to be reduced to a single answer. All we can say with any certainty is that religion seems to grow out of human

experiences: from the fear of death to the hope for a good afterlife, from the uncertainty surrounding natural events to the sense of control over nature provided by a priest who could predict the change of seasons and the movement of the planets. Religion emerges through the experience of good or bad powers that are sensed in dreams, in sacred spaces, and in certain humans and animals.

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

The nature of religious belief and practice has changed through the centuries, so we must guard against taking the religion of any particular time and place as the norm. What we can safely say is that religion is such an ancient aspect of human experience that it has become part of human nature. For this reason some scholars have given our species, *Homo sapiens*, a second name: *Homo religiosus*.

✿ TEN WAVES OF RELIGION

Most of the chapters in this book focus on individual religions, but it may be useful to begin with a broader perspective. What follows is a brief overview of some of the major developments in the history of what the late Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith called 'religion in the singular', meaning the history of human religiosity in the broadest sense.

Looking forward from ancient Stonehenge, we can see a number of patterns emerge in different parts of the world, some of them almost simultaneously. Around 500 BCE, for example, several new religious traditions began to form under the

leadership of a great prophet or sage. And by the first century of the Common Era, the concept of a god born in human form was taking root in many parts of the world.

The history of religion is complex, and any attempt to explain broad patterns and trends runs the risk of oversimplification. Even so, if we want to understand how apparently similar ideas might have taken root in cultures that are otherwise very different, it may be useful to think of the way, over time, an island is shaped by the waves that break on its shores. At the most fundamental level, every wave adds some sand and takes some away, so that the contours of the shoreline are constantly changing. In addition, however, great storms occasionally carry the seeds of new vegetation from one island to another, modifying the environment of the second island and creating new conditions that will support other new species, some of which may be very similar to those already living on the first island.

In the same way, some religious ideas may actually have been carried from their places of origin to other cultures, while others may have developed more or less independently, in response to changing environmental—or social, or economic—conditions.

Just as a great storm will bring new plants to the shore, some of which will take root and eventually choke out earlier arrivals, so from time to time major 'waves' have introduced new religious concepts and practices to different human cultures. Where the soil and climate were suitable, the new elements were able to take root, and in time some of them may have replaced older ones.

Countless small waves have undoubtedly caused additional changes of local importance, but we will focus on the big waves, the ones that have brought similar changes to several traditions around the world. Although the following discussion identifies ten such waves, they are by no means the only ones: other scholars would likely propose somewhat different lists.

Wave 1: Shamanism

One very early wave appears to have carried the ritual specialist—in essence, a kind of priest—that we know today as a **shaman**. (Other terms include 'medicine man', 'soul doctor', and 'witchdoctor'.) The word 'shaman' comes from a specific central Asian culture, but it has become the generic term for a person who acts as an intermediary between humans and the spirit world.

Hunting Rituals

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

It's not hard to imagine why such societies would have sought ways to influence the outcome of the hunt. Indeed, it seems that the more

dangerous the endeavour, the more likely humans were to surround it with rituals. As the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out in his book *Magic, Science and Religion*, the Trobriand Islanders he studied did not perform any special ceremonies before fishing in the lagoon, but they never failed to perform rituals before setting out to fish in the open ocean. This suggests that religious behaviour is, at least in part, a way of coping with dangerous situations.

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

Such rituals reflect humans' concern over the future food supply, but they also reveal something about the nature of human belief in spirits. From very ancient times, it seems, humans have believed that the spirit—whether of an animal killed



Animal images from the Chauvet cave in southern France, dated c. 30,000 BCE (AP photo/Jean Clottes).

for food or of a human being—survives death and can communicate with others of its kind.

Coping with Unfriendly Spirits

The spirits associated with natural phenomena—from animals to storms or mountains and rivers—have typically been believed to behave towards humans just as humans behave towards one another. Strategies for dealing with unfriendly spirits, therefore, are usually based on what works with humans.

Many cultures have believed wild, uninhabited areas to be guarded by resident spirits. In some cases these spirits have taken the form of monsters or mythical beasts; in others, of 'little people' such as trolls (common in the folklore of Scandinavia, for example).

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

The Shaman

The most important resource of all, however, has been the shaman. Shamans are still active in a number of cultures today. The way they operate varies, but certain patterns seem to be almost universal, which in itself suggests that the way of the shaman is very ancient. Sometimes the child of a shaman will follow in the parent's footsteps, but more often a shaman will be 'called' to the role by

his or her psychic abilities, as manifested in some extraordinary vision or revelation, or perhaps a near-death experience.

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

To communicate with the spirit world, the shaman enters a trance state (often induced by rhythmic chanting or drumming). According to Mircea Eliade in his classic *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, contact is then made in one of two ways. In the first, the shaman's soul leaves his body (which may appear lifeless) and travels to the realm where the spirits live; this way is described as 'ecstatic' (from a Greek root meaning to 'stand outside'). In the second, the shaman calls the spirit into her own body and is possessed by it; in such cases the shaman may take on the voice and personality of the spirit, or mimic its way of moving.

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

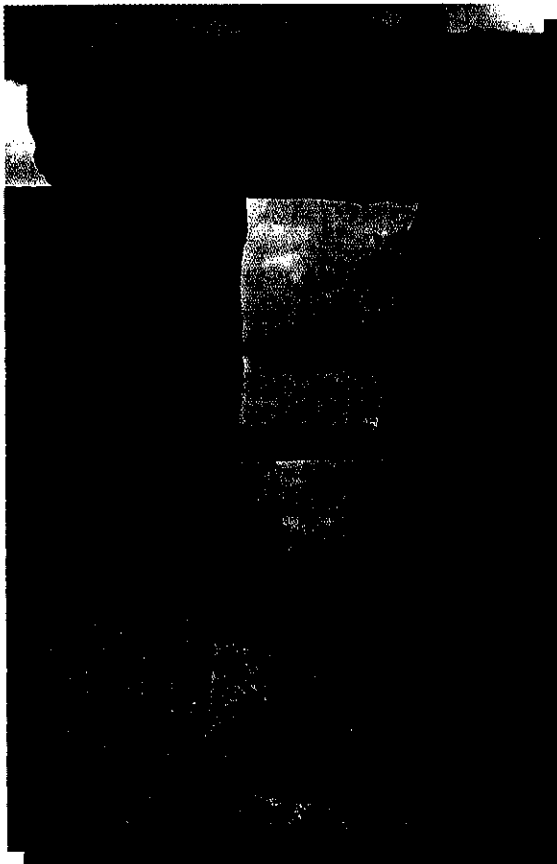
Wave 2: Connecting to the Cosmos

Our second wave is the one that inspired the building of structures like Stonehenge. People of the Neolithic ('new rock') era went to extraordinary lengths to create sacred areas by assembling

huge stones in complex patterns. In some cases the motivation may have been political: perhaps a leader wanted to demonstrate his power over the people under his command. In others, however, the main reason undoubtedly had something to do with religion—for instance, the need for a public space where the rituals essential to the society—weddings, puberty rites, funerals—could be performed.

Discerning the Cosmic Cycles

Ritual centres such as Stonehenge may also have served purposes that we might think of as scientific or technical, but that their builders would have associated with religion. One very important function of priests was to track the seasons and determine the best time for seasonal activities such as



Stonehenge (David MacDonald).

planting. In addition to tracking the north–south movements of the sun, the people of the Neolithic era paid careful attention to the phases of the moon and the rising positions of certain constellations. The horizon was divided into segments named after the planet or constellation associated with that section. What we now call astrology developed as a way of understanding the cycle of the seasons and how humans fitted into it, collectively and individually. In ancient times no important decision would have been made without consulting an expert in the movements of the sun, moon, planets, and constellations. Even in modern times, many people, including political leaders, consult an astrologer before making major decisions.

Hilltop Tombs

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

Animals and Gods

Another common feature of Neolithic religion was a tendency to associate certain animals with specific deities. One very early example comes from the ancient (c. 7000–5000 BCE) city of Catalhoyuk ('forked mound'), near Konya in modern Turkey, where a small sculpture was found of a woman flanked by two large felines. James Mellaart, the

archaeologist who first excavated the site in the 1960s, believed she represented a mother goddess seated on a throne. Although this interpretation has been disputed,² we know that the ancient Egyptians had a cat goddess named Bast who was revered as a symbol of both motherliness and hunting prowess. And the fierce Hindu goddess Durga is usually depicted riding either a lion or a tiger. (One Christmas card from modern India shows the Virgin Mary riding a tiger in the same fashion.)



A statue of the Hindu bull god Nandi at Lepakshi, Andhra Pradesh (© Hornbil Images / Alamy).

The Bull God

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

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

Wave 3: Temple Religion

A third wave brought larger temples, more elaborate sacrificial rituals, and, with the latter, the development of a priestly class endowed with unusual power, prestige, and wealth. This wave played an enormous role in shaping many traditions, including Judaism, Chinese religion, and Hinduism, beginning roughly three thousand years ago.

Indo-European Priests

'Indo-European' is a modern term referring to a language family and cultural system that eventually stretched from India all the way through Europe; it does not designate any particular ethnic group. The Indo-European (IE) cultural system has been one of the most important in human history. It may have originated in the region around the Black Sea, but that is only one of many theories that scholars have proposed.

From the vocabulary of 'proto-IE', as reconstructed by linguists, it is clear that the IE people hunted, practised metallurgy, rode horses, drove chariots, and waged war, among other things. Farming, however, appears not to have been part

The Sacrifice

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

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

of their culture: the fact that the IE vocabulary related to agriculture differs from one place to another suggests that in farming the Indo-Europeans simply adopted existing local practices.

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

The four-level social system was given mythic status in the *Rig Veda*, according to which the world came into being through the sacrifice of a 'cosmic person' (*Purusha*). Out of his mouth came the brahmin priests, whose job was to chant the

sacred hymns and syllables. The warriors came from his arms, the middle class from his thighs, and the servants from his feet. Even today, this ancient hymn continues to buttress the social class structure of India.

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

Although the IE people did not necessarily invent the system of hereditary priesthood, they certainly contributed to its spread. In addition to Hindu brahmins, examples include the ancient Roman priests and Celtic Druids. These priests enjoyed great power and prestige, and sometimes

were resented by non-priests. (One ancient Indian text includes a parody in which dogs, acting like priests, dance around a fire chanting 'Om let us eat, om let us drink'.³)

Priests and Temples Elsewhere

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

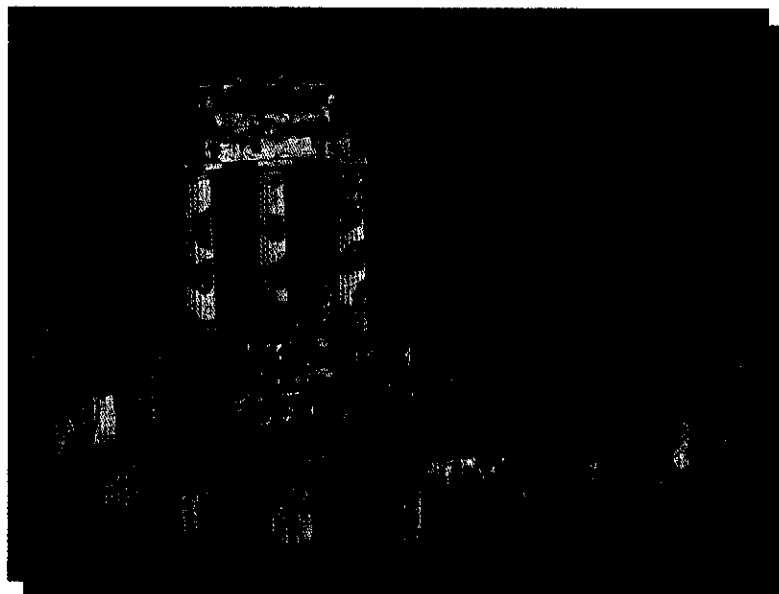
The Jewish priesthood was hereditary. All those who served in the temple as assistants to the priests were required to be Levites (from the tribe of Levi), and priests themselves had to be not only Levites but direct descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses who was the original high priest.

Priests became a powerful social class in many other parts of the world as well, including Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In some cultures they were a hereditary class, and in others they were recruited. Typically, the role of priest was reserved for males, females being considered impure because of the menstrual cycle; the Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome, who tended the sacred fires and performed rituals, were among the very few exceptions to the general rule.

Wave 4: Prophetic Religion

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

This sacred site dates back at least three thousand years, to a time before the rise of classical



The ruins of the temple at Delphi (Steven Vidler/Eurasia Press/Corbis).

Greece, when the oracle was believed to be inspired not by Apollo but by the earth goddess Gaia. Eventually males took control of the sacred site, but even in classical times the virgin priestesses would prepare themselves to receive Apollo's message by bathing in an artesian spring and breathing intoxicating fumes from a fissure in the earth—both water and fumes issuing from Gaia, the earth.

Those wishing to consult the oracle had to climb the mountain, make known their request, pay a fee, and sacrifice a black goat before their question would be put to the oracle. The priestess would take her place over the fissure and, in an ecstatic trance, deliver Apollo's message, which was typically unintelligible and had to be translated into ordinary language by a male priest. Interpreting the real-world significance of a prophecy was not so simple, however. In one famous case, a Greek leader who asked what would happen if he went to war with another state was told that a great country would fall; accordingly, he went to war—but the country that fell was his own. Similarly in the Oedipus myth, the oracle's prophecy that the infant would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother was fulfilled in spite of the measures taken to avoid that fate.

Abrahamic Prophetic Traditions

In 586 BCE the people of Israel were forcibly removed from their homeland and exiled to Babylon. The centuries that followed the 'Babylonian captivity' were the defining period for the concept of prophecy as it developed in the three monotheistic traditions that trace their origins to the prophet Abraham. Often, the Jewish prophets' messages were directed towards the people of Israel as a whole, warning of the disasters that loomed if they did not follow God's demands.

Christianity saw Jesus and certain events surrounding his life as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies. And Islam in turn recognized the Hebrew prophets, beginning with Abraham and including Jesus, as the forerunners of the Prophet

Muhammad, the last and greatest of all, the messenger (*rasul*) who received God's final revelations. Muslims understand Muhammad to have been the 'seal of the prophets': no other prophet will follow him, since he has delivered the message of God in its entirety. As with earlier prophetic traditions, the Day of Judgment (or Day of Doom) and the concepts of heaven and hell are central to Islam.

Zarathustra, Prophet of the Wise Lord

Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) was a prophet figure who lived more than 2,500 years ago, probably in the region of eastern Iran or Afghanistan. Although we know little about his life, he left behind a collection of poems devoted to a 'wise lord' called Ahura Mazda. The religion that developed around his teachings, which came to be known as Zoroastrianism, played an important part in the development of monotheism.

The concepts of heaven and hell also owe a lot to the Zoroastrians, who believed that evil-doers were condemned to hell at their death, but that eventually a great day of judgment would come when the souls of all the dead would be made to pass through a fiery wall. Those who had been virtuous in life would pass through the fire without pain, while the rest would be cleansed of their remaining sin and permitted to enter paradise (a term believed to derive from a Persian word meaning garden).

The threat of hell and the promise of heaven were powerful tools for any prophet seeking to persuade people to behave as they believed the deity demanded.

Wave 5: The Energy God

Yet another important wave of change arrived around 2,500 years ago. Among the ideas it carried was one that, although it has never been the focus of a major tradition, continues to inspire important minorities in cultures around the world. That

Divine Energy

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

This finest essence, the whole universe has it as its Self: That is the Real: That is the Self: That you are, Svetaketu! (from the *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.9; Zaehner 1966: 110)

idea concerns the nature of the divine and where it is to be found. Specifically, it suggests that the divine is neither a 'sky-father' nor an 'earth-mother', but a force, an energy, that is found by looking within. This is not a god that issues commandments, answers prayers, or in any way interacts with humans as a human. It does not create in the usual fashion of gods, or direct the course of history, or dictate the fate of individuals. In fact, some have suggested that it may have more in common with the principles of modern physics than with the traditional gods of most religions. This divinity simply exists—or rather, 'underlies' everything that exists.

Among the traditions that developed in the wake of this wave were the Daoism of China, the Upanishadic wisdom of India, and the pre-Socratic philosophy of the early Greek world.

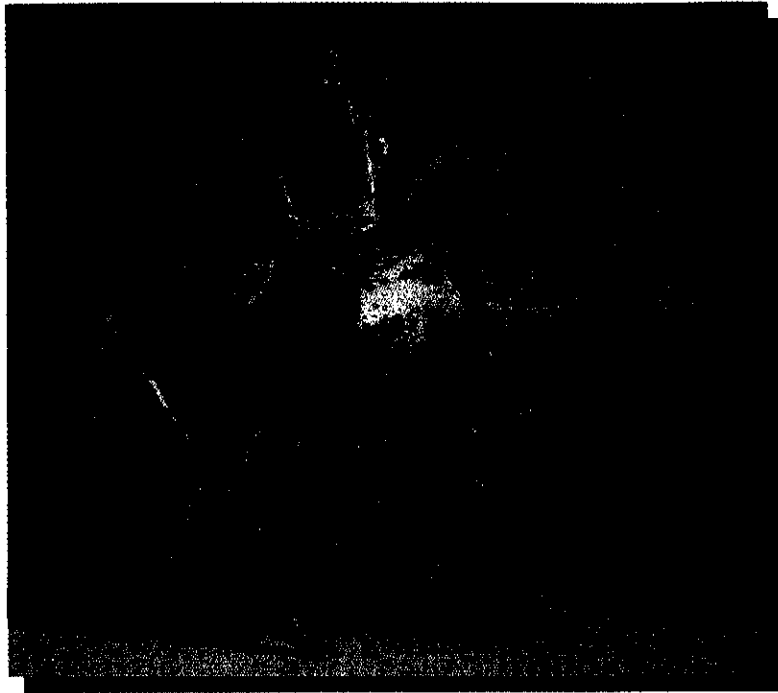
Finding the Dao Within

The sage who became known as Laozi ('Master Lao') lived in northern China around 600 BCE. According to legend, he worked for the government as an archivist. At night students would visit his home to hear his words of wisdom about life, especially how to live in harmony with one's inner nature. But Lao had what we might call a

mid-life crisis. Dissatisfied with his job and the social and political life of his time, he is said to have left home and set out to the west, riding on a water buffalo (an event that became a favourite subject for artists). Apparently he had not even said goodbye to his students, but one of them happened to be working as a guard at the border. Shocked to learn that his master was leaving China, he begged Lao to record his teachings before leaving.

So Lao paused at the border long enough to write down the fundamentals of his thought in a series of beautiful, if cryptic, verses that were eventually collected in a small volume called *Daodejing* (or *Tao De Ching*), meaning the book (*jing*) about the *Dao* and its power (*de*). It became and remains one of the world's most influential books.

What did Laozi write that has spoken to so many through the millennia? He begins with what became one of the most famous opening lines in history: 'The *Dao* that can be described is not the eternal *Dao*. The name that can be named is not the eternal name.' In general usage the word *Dao* means 'the way', but here it refers to the mysterious energy that underlies all things. Laozi is warning readers that words cannot adequately describe the *Dao*. Ogden Nash, a twentieth-century poet noted



Laozi and the water buffalo; a sculpture from the Song dynasty (960–1279) (Burnstein Collection/Corbis).

for combining insight and humour, captured the same idea this way: 'Whatever the mind comes at, God is not that.'

In traditional cultures, people talk about the characteristics of various deities—their loving nature, or anger, or jealousy, or desire for a particular kind of behaviour. But the absolute, the eternal *Dao*, has no such attributes. Thus Laozi uses poetic imagery to give us some insights into its nature. Unlike Athena, Zeus, Yahweh, or Indra, the *Dao* does not have a 'personality', and there is no reason for humans to fear, love, or appease it.

Rather, Laozi says, the *Dao* is like water: it will take on the shape of whatever container we pour it into. Falling from the sky, it may seem content to lie in the hollow made by the footprint of an ox in the muddy road. Raining on the rocky mountaintop, it tumbles all the way down. Water seems malleable, passive and without a will of its own. Yet a mountain will be worn down by

the water over time. The water in the ox hoofprint will evaporate and return to the sky, to fall again when the time is right.

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

A worldview similar to that of Daoism took shape in northern India around the same time. The texts it produced, known as the *Upanishads* (a Sanskrit term meaning literally 'sitting-up-near' the master), were reserved for the most advanced students when they were composed, between roughly 1500 and 600 BCE.

What the Daoist sages called the *Dao* the Upanishadic masters called *sat*

(usually translated in English as 'being', 'truth', or 'the real'). In one Upanishad there is the story of a young man named Svetaketu who has just completed his studies with the brahmin priests. Back at home, his father, who is a king and therefore a member of the warrior class, asks Svetaketu what his priestly teachers taught him about the original source of all things. When Svetaketu admits that he was not taught about that subject, his father undertakes to instruct him in the secret wisdom.

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

a hidden essence present throughout the world. That hidden essence, the force that energizes everything, is the highest reality, the father says, and that reality is you (*tat tvam asi*; 'that you are'). The Upanishadic master is initiating his son into a new religious worldview that understands 'god' as an energy hidden within and sustaining everything. And that great energy, that ultimate reality, '*tat tvam asi*'—that is you.

The First Principle: Greek Philosophy before Socrates

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

Later Theistic Mysticism

European religious thought eventually reflected the influence of this wave as well. German Christian mystics such as Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) would use terms such as *Ungrund* ('ungrounded') or *Urgrund* ('original ground') to refer to the divine as primal cause. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim mystics alike believed in a god beyond the reaches of human understanding.

Wave 6: Purity and Monasticism

At almost the same time that the 'energy god' worldview was establishing itself in China, India, and Greek culture, another spiritual development of great importance was forming in India. The

earliest historical records come from the region of what is now northern India around 2,500 years ago, but the tradition itself claims to have much older roots. Its followers typically sought spiritual enlightenment through asceticism—intense bodily discipline. Their ethic was one of non-violence towards all creatures, and their goal was to perfect the human potential for purity of mind.

Ganges Spirituality

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

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

Leaving the world of day-to-day life to follow the path of spiritual enlightenment through rigorous ascetic discipline, the students who

gathered around these masters took vows of poverty and celibacy, and considered themselves to have 'departed the world'. The Buddhist and Jaina monastic traditions trace their roots to these ascetics, and it is possible that Indian monasticism played a role in the development of Western monasticism as well.

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

Wave 7: Mystery Religion

'Mystery religion' refers to a wave of Greek and Roman traditions in which the core teachings and rituals were kept secret from outsiders and revealed only to those prepared to undergo initiation in the hope of securing blessings during this life and a heavenly paradise in the afterlife. Such religions became so popular during the Roman period that they presented a threat to the power and influence of the official Roman priesthood (not to be confused with the Roman Catholic priesthood).

The Eleusinian mystery tradition may be the oldest. Named for an ancient Greek town called Eleusis, it grew out of the myth of the young Persephone or Kore ('girl') who is abducted by the god of the dead (Hades) and taken down into the underworld. With the disappearance of this young girl—a potent symbol of growth and fertility—everything on earth begins to die. This imperils not only humans but the gods themselves, who depend on humans to feed them through sacrifices. The girl's mother, Demeter, is therefore allowed to descend into the underworld and bring her back.

Scholars understand the Persephone myth to be based on the seasonal cycles of stagnation during the winter and renewal in the spring. Members of her cult believed that by identifying themselves with the dying and rising goddess through the celebration of seasonal rituals, they too would triumph over death.

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

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

Wave 8: God on Earth

The Avatar

Long before the word 'avatar' came into use in computer games, *avatara* was a Sanskrit theological term for the 'coming down' of a god to earth. In the earlier stages of religion there were many stories of gods and goddesses who came down to earth, but there are two major differences in the avatar stories.

First, the avatar is a god in a truly human form—as a later Christian creed put it, 'fully God and fully man'—whereas the ancient gods

Avatar Gods

For the protection of the good,
For the destruction of evildoers,
For the setting up of righteousness,
I come into being, age after age.

(Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*; Zaehner 1966: 267).

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

came down to earth as gods. For example, in the ancient Indian story of Princess Dhamayanti, the father of a beautiful princess holds a party to which he invites all the marriageable princes from various kingdoms. Four gods also attend the party, however, all disguised as the handsome prince Nala, whom the princess already plans to choose. She is disturbed to see five look-alikes, but is finally able to distinguish the four imposters from the real Prince Nala because the gods do not sweat and are floating slightly above the ground. She marries the human prince, and they live happily ever after.

Unlike the gods at Dhamayanti's party, the avatar gods walk on the ground, perspire, get hungry, sleep, and are in every way human. They are incarnated in a human womb, are born, grow up, teach, save the world from evil, and eventually die. As a Christian layman once told me, 'You have to understand that we Christians worship a god in diapers.' His choice of words was unusual, but his theology was solid, and it leads us to the second major change brought by the avatar wave.

This second innovation is the fact that the avatar god is a saviour figure in at least two ways. Not only does he save the world from some evil

power, such as Satan or a demonic king, but he saves those who put their faith in him from hell and ensures that they have a place in heaven. In the religions of the avatar wave, the ritual of sacrifice is replaced by the ritual of placing faith in the saviour god.

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

The avatar wave hit Asia and the Middle East approximately two thousand years ago. Among Hindus its impact was reflected in the worship of Krishna; among Buddhists in the veneration of Amitabha Buddha (the figure who would become Amida in Japan), and among Jews in the rise of Christianity.

Krishna, Avatara of Vishnu

In some Hindu stories Vishnu is the ultimate deity, the god who lies at the origin of everything there is, including the creator god Brahman. Vishnu lies on his cosmic serpent, sometimes identified with the Milky Way, and out of his navel grows a lotus plant. From the lotus Brahman is born as the first of all creations; then the universe and all its material and spiritual energies follow. This is not exactly a mythic version of the big bang theory, but it comes close. Life evolves, over an unimaginable number of years, out of the divine energy at the centre of the universe. After the universe has run its allotted course, the process reverses from evolution to involution. Over an equally long period of time, eventually all things return into Vishnu, as if crossing the event horizon into a black hole. There all energy lies dormant as Vishnu sleeps, before the whole process begins again.

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

At the beginning of the *Gita*, just before the battle, Arjuna asks Krishna to drive the chariot into the neutral zone between the two great armies, so that he can get a better look at the enemy. But when he sees his adversaries more closely, he loses his will to fight, telling Krishna that he recognizes among them his cousins, his old teachers, and others he remembers from childhood.

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

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

Another source offers stories about other parts of Krishna's life. We learn from it that Krishna was born under the rule of an evil king who was secretly part of a demonic plot to take over the world. One day King Kamsa is driving the wedding chariot of a female relative when an old

man—a prophet figure—yells out to the king and tells him he is assisting in the marriage of a woman whose eighth child will grow up to kill him. The king is about to call off the wedding, but the bride pleads with him to reconsider, even promising that when she has children, Kamsa can do with them as he wishes. Kamsa agrees, the marriage takes place, and he proceeds to kill her children as they are born. On the night of the fateful eighth birth, the father is told in a dream to take the baby to safety with relatives across the river. This he does, replacing his child with a baby girl born the same evening.

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

Amitabha, the Buddha of Saving Grace

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

Jesus the Christ: God Come Down

The Christian doctrine of the trinity affirms that the one God exists in three persons: those of the father, the son, and the holy spirit. In formulating this doctrine, the Christians departed radically from the theology proclaimed by Abraham and Moses. There is no room in Jewish thought for an avatar god, but that was the direction in which Christian

thought developed. The prologue to the Gospel of John identifies Jesus with the divine Logos—the word of God that was present before creation. The New Testament says that Jesus 'emptied himself of divinity' and came down for the salvation of the world. His conception is through the spirit of god rather than by normal sexual intercourse. An angel announces the significance of the pregnancy to his mother. The birth is associated with a special star. Shepherds overhear the angels rejoicing and come to revere the infant, according to Luke's gospel. In Matthew's gospel, magi from the East follow a special star and bring gifts to the child.

For Christians, Jesus became the ultimate god who had died on the cross on behalf of his followers and rose on the third day. By participating in the sacred rituals—the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist—and placing their trust in Jesus as Lord, Christians could expect to go to heaven after their death.

So Christianity starts with the Hebrew scriptures and the monotheism of Moses and incorporates into them the avatar pattern, as well as elements of the mystery traditions, to form a new religion. Many Jews resisted these changes, but some accepted them in the belief that God had in fact offered the world a new dispensation.

Wave 9: Scriptural Religion

The ninth wave is hard to date. The earliest scriptures we have are the Zoroastrian Avesta of Persia, the Hindu Vedas, and the Torah of Judaism, all of which took shape approximately three thousand years ago. This wave came much later, however, when different groups began to insist that their particular scriptures were the literal words of God, and to make adherence to those scriptures the focus of their religious life.

The scripturalism wave manifested itself in Rabbinic Judaism in the centuries following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. It emerged in full force with the rise of Islam, destined

The Word of God

We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, in order that you may learn wisdom (from the Qur'an, 12:2).

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made (John 1:1–3, KJV).

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14, KJV).

to become one of the two most influential religions of all time. It also played a large role in Protestant Christianity, in which the authority of scripture replaced that of tradition and the papacy.

Living by Torah

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

The Word of God

Two or three generations passed after the death of Jesus before the gospels were written, and the Christian canon did not take shape until well into the third century CE. But once the books of the canon were fixed, the Church came to emphasize scripture as a divinely inspired source of faith and practice. The Bible became as central to Christianity as the Torah was to Judaism. Christians commonly refer to the scripture as the word of God,

and some believe that the Bible was literally dictated by God to its human authors.

God's Final Prophet

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

The Lotus Sutra

The teachings of the Buddha were transmitted orally for centuries before they were first written down, some two thousand years ago. Although Buddhists revered these texts, their practice did not centre on them. Later, the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools added many more texts to their respective canons, but Buddhists in general did

not attribute any special properties to the scriptures themselves. That changed in the 1200s, when a Japanese monk named Nichiren instructed his followers to place their faith in the power of his favourite scripture, the *Lotus Sutra*, and chant their homage to it, just as followers of the Pure Land school chanted homage to Amitabha/Amita Buddha.

Creation through the Word of God

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

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

Wave 10: Fundamentalism

Our final wave began to take shape in the mid-twentieth century and is still unfolding today. In time it may prove to have been merely a sub-wave of scripturalism. Nevertheless, for those of us living in the aftermath of 9/11, it often seems as if the current wave of violent religious fundamentalism represents something new in the human experience.

The term 'fundamentalism' was first used in the early twentieth century to refer to a variety of American Protestantism characterized by a fervent belief in the absolute, literal truth of the Bible. Adherents of this type of Protestantism reject all forms of secularism that they perceive as inconsistent with biblical tradition. Thus many send their children to religious schools because the public system teaches 'secular' values; some even refuse to vote because the democratic system is a human creation not mentioned in scripture. Not surprisingly, Protestant fundamentalists reject the authority of science and strongly object to the concept of evolution and the idea that the universe is billions of years old. In addition, many scholars have noted that fundamentalist groups tend to be male-dominated and to understand male-female relations and roles from a hierarchical, patriarchal perspective.

Similar movements exist within most religious traditions. Yet however convinced these groups are that their god is the only true one, and that their way of believing and worshipping is the only true way, the majority of their adherents have no desire to force their convictions on others. At the same time, within all these groups there are militant minorities who are prepared to use violence, whether to convert others, to defend the true believers, or to take revenge on perceived enemies. To understand how this wave has taken shape and is developing today, we will look at both regular religious fundamentalism and the more militant varieties in our concluding chapter.



A re-enactment of the crucifixion at a Christian rally in Washington, DC (Erik Freeland/Corbis).

✿ WHY STUDY RELIGION?

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

A closely related reason is that religion has played such an important role in human affairs. People go to war over religious identities, make great art to serve religious communities or express their spirituality. People spend significant amounts of their time, money, and energy on religious activities and institutions. People seek to change social norms, or to prevent change, out of religious conviction. In short, religion so pervades the human world that it demands our attention regardless of

whether it plays a direct role in our own personal life.

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

Insider versus Outsider

Most people learn about their own religion from their parents, their teachers at religious schools, or

other members of the same religious community. Naturally, people tend to accept the teachings of their religion as true and assume that the teachings of other religions are false, or at least less true. As 'insiders' we may find it disturbing when 'outsiders' challenge our beliefs or suggest that the history of 'our religion' may not be exactly as we have been taught.

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

The insider-outsider matter is more complex than we might imagine, for there are many kinds of insiders. Is your Muslim friend a Sunni or a Shi'i? If a Shi'i, does she belong to the Twelver branch or one of the Sevens branches? Which variety of Buddhism does your classmate practise—Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana? If Mahayana, which school? Is your Christian neighbour Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox? A Protestant may well be an 'outsider' to Catholic Christianity. A Zen Buddhist could have trouble seeing any connection between his practice and an elaborate Vajrayana ritual. Because each religion has many subdivisions, in these volumes we will speak of traditions in the plural. We hope our readers will keep in mind the diversity behind the monolithic labels.

Some Practical Matters

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

out in an earlier edition of this text, 'the East was everything to the east of Europe' until well into the twentieth century:

The Orient began where the Orient Express ran: Istanbul. For some purposes, it even included North Africa and began with Morocco. . . . A century ago, Islam was thought to be an Eastern religion, and Westerners who studied it were called orientologists.

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

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

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

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

Glossary

All Saints Day A Christian festival honouring all the departed saints; held in the West on 1 November.

Daodejing The Daoist 'Classic of the Way and Power', compiled roughly 2,500 years ago and traditionally attributed to Laozi.

Day of the Dead A Mexican festival honouring the dead.

Hallowe'en Now a popular secular holiday, held on 31 October; originally celebrated as the 'Eve' of All Saints Day.

high places Sacred areas located on hill- or mountain tops; such places existed throughout the ancient Near East.

naga A mythical cobra living in the underworld, often associated with water and fertility in Indian religions.

Obon A Japanese festival honouring ancestors.

shaman A type of priest, widespread among hunter-gatherer societies, who communicates with the spirit world on behalf of the people.

Stonehenge One of several ancient rock structures thought to have been constructed for ritual purposes.

Upanishads Hindu religious texts thought to have been composed between 1500 and 600 BCE.

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Notes

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