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Comparative Religion

Course Guidebook

Professor Charles Kimball
University of Oklahoma



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Dr. Kimball's articles have appeared in a number of publications, including *Sojourners*, *The Christian Century*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Boston Globe*. He is the author of four books, including *When Religion Becomes Evil* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), published in a revised and expanded edition in 2008. *When Religion Becomes Evil* was named one of the Top 15 Books on Religion for 2002 by *Publishers Weekly*. It was also selected as one of the Top 10 Books for 2002 by the Association of Parish Clergy. It has been published in Swedish, Indonesian, Korean, and Danish translations. Dr. Kimball's three other books are *Striving Together: A Way Forward in Christian-Muslim Relations* (Orbis Books), *Religion, Politics and Oil: The Volatile Mix in the Middle*

East (Abingdon Press), and *Angle of Vision: Christians and the Middle East* (Friendship Press).

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Dr. Kimball has been interviewed by some 500 TV and radio stations, as well as major newspapers and broadcast outlets throughout the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Sweden, France, Korea, Australia, and South Africa.

Professor Kimball and his wife, Nancy, have two children: Sarah is a high school math teacher; Elliot is pursuing a career in social work.

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Comparative Religion

Scope:

Religion is a central feature of human life. The vast majority of human beings perceive themselves to be religious. We see many indications of religion every day, and we all know it when we see it, but religion is surprisingly difficult to define or comprehend adequately. This 24-lecture course provides a systematic and comparative framework for understanding the complex and multidimensional nature of religion. It explores the many similarities that link all religions, as well as major differences among many of the world's religious traditions.

The course unfolds in a logical sequence with different components of religions building on the foundations of previous presentations. Key terms and concepts will be defined throughout the course as the building blocks are put in place.

Beginning with the first presentation, the lectures illustrate and emphasize the importance of self-conscious awareness of one's presuppositions. We all have worldviews and frames of reference that include many presuppositions about "religion." These are not necessarily bad or wrong, but they are often limiting. The comparative study of religion helps people learn to expand their categories and ways of thinking about human religious life in a more comprehensive way than most traditions and social contexts present. We will learn how to ask questions and how to "see with a native eye" in ways many will not have seriously contemplated previously.

The course uses both a structural and comparative approach. The challenges of adequate definitions and explication of 12 major similarities that religions share help establish the value of the comparative approach we will use. Multiple efforts to identify the "origin" of religion by Freud, Durkheim, and others both reveal the inadequacy of limited disciplinary approaches and set the stage for consideration of three broader frameworks introduced by Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Basic features of their respective contributions will be highlighted and used in various ways throughout the course. For example, Eliade's model for the ways people assign sacred and profane status to objects, time, places, and people (prophets, sages, saviors, and others) is a valuable resource in the comparative study of religion.

Clarifying the universal roles of symbols facilitates understanding of the various human efforts to know and describe God, gods, the transcendent Ultimate Reality, and so on. Many of those symbols appear in sacred stories or myths (from creation stories to the accounts of Jesus's Crucifixion and Resurrection and Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem before his ascent into heaven) that provide the framework for religious worldviews, doctrines, and practices. Many of the key sacred stories are preserved in sacred texts of the various religions. They serve identifiable purposes for adherents even as the stories convey vital information about different roles of sacred people, places, times, and objects. Exploring the functional similarities in the context of quite distinct differences and histories of sacred scriptures is illuminating.

Of particular relevance to our study are the distinct but interrelated conceptualizations of divinity among religious people. This element of our course unveils yet another way in which the religions are both strikingly similar and distinctive at the same time.

The critical components of religion that have been introduced and illustrated in earlier presentations are seen to converge in the numerous rituals at the heart of the religions. All religions include various ongoing, repetitive rituals based on the calendar, as well as one-time, lifecycle rituals that mark one's life journey in the context of the religious worldview. As well, we will see that the central role of sacrifice is manifest in ritual life with three primary interpretations applied within and among the religions.

The key to understanding the nature of the human predicament and the path to overcoming it is another concern that every religion addresses. Although the primary obstacles blocking the path to fulfillment, bliss, or heaven are obviously different in various religions, the structural similarities are compelling. Something is dreadfully wrong. Life in this world is not the way it could or should be. Through divine revelation or the insights of sages, the fundamental predicament is identified and paths to the goals are prescribed for people of faith. Although the religious traditions agree on the existence of a fundamental problem that must be overcome, they differ markedly in the nature of the problem and the descriptions of the desired goals. The religions identify four primary paths for faithful adherents to follow. These four paths, individually and in combination, are practiced in parallel ways in what would seem to be very different religions.

The course concludes with a consideration of two other common elements of the religions: the phenomenon of the mystics within each religion and the

institutional structures of religions. The two lectures on these topics should intrigue different people in somewhat different ways. And, combined with the previous 21 lectures, they set up the final presentation, which poses questions and outlines primary options for those seeking to make sense of particularity and distinctive truth claims in the midst of religious diversity and pluralism.

Lecture One

Comparative Religion—Who, What, Why, How

Scope: Religion is a universal and visibly prominent component of human societies. We know it when we see it, but religion is surprisingly difficult to define because it includes a wide range of stories, leaders, doctrines, rituals, and institutional forms manifest in tribal societies and major world traditions. Understanding what we mean by “religion” is the first step. This introductory lecture outlines the comparative and structural approach we will employ throughout the course. This presentation also addresses questions of our subjectivity and the increasing importance of understanding human religiousness. The more clarity we have about how our presuppositions and circumstances shape our thinking, the more likely we are to ask relevant questions and make connections across religious traditions. We close the lecture by identifying five major reasons that the comparative study of religion is particularly important today.

Outline

- I. Religion is a powerful, pervasive, visible, and sometimes enigmatic component of human societies.
 - A. Manifestations of religion are evident all around us and at all times.
 1. People encounter and experience religion virtually every day through religious leaders, ceremonies, festivals, and places of worship.
 2. Legal, moral, and ethical codes of conduct are rooted in religious traditions that inform most societies.
 - B. The broad, inclusive nature of religion makes it difficult to define.
 1. Five definitions of religion—from philosopher Immanuel Kant, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, theologian Paul Tillich, anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and an encyclopedia—underscore this difficulty.
 2. Coming up with a definition that is inclusive of various religions is a complex form of the study of comparative religion in itself.

- II.** A structural and comparative approach to the study of religion helps clarify major similarities and important differences among and within religions.
- A.** The five major religions we will examine are Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We can identify organic links between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions and among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
1. The Buddha was a spiritual seeker in the 6th century B.C.E. in India. Like the insights and teachings of many others who shaped movements within the emerging Hindu tradition, the Buddha’s insights include an affirmation of common themes, such as the ideas of *karma* (the law of the deed and its result) and rebirth. At the same time, the Buddha’s thinking departed significantly from the central Hindu understanding of the *atman*, or “soul essence,” as that which is ultimate and real about our existence.
 2. Followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the great Monotheistic religions—all trace themselves to the common patriarch, Abraham.
- B.** Major religions share many key structural components.
1. Particularly gifted individuals, such as Moses, Siddhartha Gautama, Jesus, and Muhammad, are recognized as foundational figures in the development of religions.
 2. Sacred texts record and preserve teachings in most religions.
 3. Religious people practice both repetitive and one-time rituals in remarkably similar ways across various religious traditions.
 4. Disagreements over orthodox teaching and/or practices lead to significant divisions within religious communities, as we see among Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians; Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims; Orthodox and Reform movements in Judaism; Theravada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism; and so forth.
- C.** A comparative approach to the study of religion has important limitations.
1. The assumption that Jesus and Muhammad are “founders” and function in similar ways or that the Bible and the Qur’an are sacred scriptures that function in the same way in Christianity and Islam, respectively, can be misleading.

2. Divisions within communities (for example, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians; Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims) may be traced to internal disagreements, but they cannot be equated without making important distinctions.

III. Recognizing our subjectivity is important in the comparative study of religion.

- A. All people are shaped and influenced by a variety of factors: family, religious traditions, national and cultural contexts, and so on.
 1. No matter how objective we seek to be, we are never free of subjective biases.
 2. A debate during my first month as a graduate student at Harvard illustrates the challenges posed by subjective influences.
 3. We all have images and ideas about different religions, but we need to take a nonjudgmental approach.
- B. Understanding key elements of my life history and experience will be helpful at the outset of the course.
 1. My paternal grandfather was Jewish, and my paternal grandmother was Christian.
 2. My academic study of religion was intertwined with my personal religious experiences and sense of vocation.
 3. My professional career has included both the academic study of world religions and extensive work in interfaith understanding in the Middle East and the United States.

IV. James Livingston, Professor of Religious Studies Emeritus at William and Mary, describes five major reasons that the comparative study of religion is particularly important at the beginning of the 21st century.

- A. We study religion in order to better understand the human capacity for spiritual self-transcendence.
- B. We study religion to overcome our ignorance about the beliefs and practices of others, for example, the Jewish Passover seder, the five daily prayers required of Muslims, and so on.
- C. We study religion to understand our culture, which is rooted in the Abrahamic religions, and the richly diverse pluralism in evidence today.

- D. We study religion to achieve a global perspective, which is a vital but often missing component in our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world community.
- E. We study religion to help formulate our personal beliefs and philosophy of life.

Suggested Readings:

Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, 2nd ed.

James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 5th ed.

Questions to Consider:

1. How would you define “religion”?
2. What are the primary ways your experience of, and orientation toward, religion—the religion closest to you and other religions with which you have some familiarity—might influence your approach to the comparative study of religion?

Lecture Two

Exploring Similarities and Differences

Scope: The comparative study of religion reveals many striking similarities and distinct differences between and among religions. We first consider the historical interplay among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, followed by a study of the historical and organic connections between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Author Niels Nielsen’s illustrations of 12 common features found in all religious traditions provide a helpful overview of the major ways religions address similar human concerns. We see, however, that these common features do not mean that all religions are the same, as we focus on some of the real differences between and among the religions we are studying. Finally, we recognize the need to “see with a native eye”—that is, to be aware of our own frames of reference as we question and explore the world’s religions.

Outline

- I. Our study will include an exploration of the similarities and differences among five major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.
 - A. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are historically and organically linked as Monotheistic religions that trace their origins to their common ancestor, Abraham.
 1. A brief introduction to Judaism establishes the foundation for understanding the common ties and distinctive features of these Abrahamic religions.
 2. A brief introduction to Christianity reveals both the deep roots in, and the clear departure from, the religion of biblical Israel.
 3. A brief introduction to Islam clarifies the close ties with the other “People of the Book” (Jews and Christians); Muslims understand that all these religions began with the same revelation from God.
 - B. The historical and organic connections between various forms of Hinduism and Buddhism explain why the lines separating these traditions are often far less distinct than many in the West imagine.

1. What is called Hinduism is actually hundreds of religious traditions in India linked by the ideas of *karma* (the law of the deed and its result) and *samsara* (the cycles of existence that include reincarnation of one's soul essence).
2. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was an Indian spiritual seeker whose insights included some core beliefs shared by most Hindus and diverged from others.

II. In his book *Religions of the World*, Niels Nielsen presents 12 common characteristics found in most religions.

- A.** Most religions include belief in the supernatural (spirits, gods, God) or belief in some other Ultimate Reality beyond, yet connected to, human experience and existence.
 1. Hindus acknowledge 330 million gods and one Ultimate Reality, the Brahman, which is beyond all names and forms.
 2. Christians consider themselves Monotheists, but Muslims reject the doctrine of the Trinity as a dangerous possible form of Polytheism.
- B.** Religions distinguish between the sacred and profane (or ordinary) in terms of time, space, objects, and people.
 1. Mecca is different from Milwaukee for Muslims.
 2. Christmas and Easter are the most sacred days in the Christian calendar.
- C.** Religions strongly encourage or require prescribed ritual activities for individuals and communities of faith.
 1. Rituals connected to birth and death frame the lifecycle in all religions.
 2. Most religions celebrate and reenact sacred stories through annual rituals.
- D.** Religions commonly promote a moral code or ethical principles to guide individuals and communities.
 1. The Ten Commandments anchor legal and moral requirements in the biblical tradition, while *shari'ah* ("Islamic law") should ideally govern Muslims in an Islamic state.
 2. Following the path of the Buddha includes vows of poverty and chastity, as well as dietary restrictions, for monks.
- E.** Religious life engages and incorporates common emotional and intuitive human feelings.

1. These feelings include a sense of the wonder and mystery of existence, joy, guilt, and the bond experienced in the community.
 2. Religious worship often appeals to feelings of guilt and remorse, as well as joy and thanksgiving.
- F.** Religions both encourage communication and provide ways to communicate or connect with the divine.
1. Individual and corporate prayers are visible among Christians, Muslims, and Jews.
 2. Hindus and Buddhists refine meditative techniques in order to discover the truth that is accessible within.
- G.** Through sacred stories, the religions provide a coherent worldview.
1. The meaning of creation has to somehow fit into a logical pattern that explains how we get from where we are to where we hope to be.
 2. Stories about the lives and teachings of the great religious leaders underscore the nature of the human predicament and offer guidance on how to realize the fullness of a hopeful future.
- H.** Religions organize life for individuals—including dress codes, personal sacrifices, and appropriate occupations—in the context of their respective worldviews.
1. A Buddhist monk wears a saffron robe and has a shaved head.
 2. A Muslim woman wears the *hijab*, a traditional, loose-fitting covering that may include a veil.
- I.** Religions require and promote social organization and institutional forms to carry out the necessary functions of worship and leadership, preserving orthodox teachings and practices.
1. Protestant Christians don't have a pope, and Sunni Muslims don't have *ayatollahs* (supreme religious leaders) as Shi'ite Muslims do.
 2. All communities, however, have religious functionaries and institutional structures.
- J.** Religions promise an inner peace and harmony despite the vicissitudes of life.
1. Discovering meaning that transcends physical existence enables people of faith to overcome the challenges posed by disease, evil, and injustice that permeate life and society.

2. The religions that have stood the test of time have offered hope and meaning that move beyond mere physical survival.
- K.** Religions typically offer a future hope through the coming of a new age or a better existence in the afterlife.
1. Most religions anticipate the coming of a gifted person (for example, the Jewish messiah, the Second Coming of Jesus, one final incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, or one last manifestation of the Buddha) who will help usher in a new age of peace and tranquility.
 2. The future hope may be realized in a new heaven or new Earth or a blissful existence beyond this physical life.
- L.** Religions must propagate themselves through the recruitment of new members and procreation within the community of faith.
1. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are the primary “missionary” religions in the world.
 2. Most religions require marriage and procreation within the community as the primary source of new adherents.

III. Very real differences also exist among and within religions.

- A.** Religions identify ultimate goals and share important rituals, but the meanings attached to some common features can vary dramatically.
1. The ultimate Hindu goal of *moksha* (release from the cycle of existence) is distinctly different from Muslim images of heaven.
 2. Catholics and Baptists affirm and practice baptism, but the age of the individual being baptized, the method of baptism, and the meaning attached to this common sacrament are distinctly different.
- B.** Learning to “see with a native eye” can help us avoid common pitfalls and erroneous conclusions.
1. We need to be sure that the questions we ask are not shaped more by our own perspective than they are by the reality of the world and the worldview of the people involved.
 2. A phenomenological approach can help us to avoid making value judgments based on inaccurate understanding.

Suggested Readings:

John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, eds., *World Religions Today*, 2nd ed.

Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, rev. ed.

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, rev. ed.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what ways has this exploration of striking similarities and differences among and within religions challenged or confirmed your perspective?
2. Whether or not you are personally religious, how do you think your worldview and the worldviews of people close to you have been shaped by the dominant religious traditions in your setting?

Lecture Three

The Sacred, the Holy, and the Profane

Scope: The effort to understand and explain the origin of religion can be seen in the work of sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and theologians. Comprehensive approaches from within academic disciplines are helpful but limited, as seen in the views of sociologist Émile Durkheim and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. We look at three different 20th-century frameworks for understanding the origin of religion: those found in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*. These scholars of world religions introduce unique terminology (for example, Otto's "numinous experience," Eliade's "heirophany" and "theophany," and Smith's "faith and the cumulative tradition") and make valuable contributions that will be used in various ways throughout the course. Finally, we look at the contributions of Karen Armstrong and Diana Eck to the study of comparative religion.

Outline

- I. Scholarly efforts to comprehend and analyze the origin and phenomena of human religiousness have yielded different theories and frameworks for understanding in the context of various academic disciplines during the past two centuries.
 - A. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)—author of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)—and others thought that Aboriginal groups provided a lens into the most basic forms of religious behavior.
 1. Durkheim identified the primary force behind religion as the sacred and argued that the sacred serves as a mirror of a particular society. A society holds up symbols so that, in effect, it can worship itself and propagate its value system.
 2. Durkheim viewed religion as an expression of social cohesion in human societies.
 - B. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) understood and critiqued religion as outward manifestations of basic psychological causes.
 1. Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1918), *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) endeavor to link

religion to underlying psychological causes and historical events.

2. Freud believed religion to be a form of wish fulfillment.
3. He identified three great fears that troubled all human beings: fear of the demands of life, fear of the danger posed by the forces of nature, and fear of death.

- II. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), a theologian, argued for a comprehensive approach to human religious awareness and behavior in *The Idea of the Holy* (1923). For him, God, or what Otto called the Holy, is the reality that stands beyond and behind all the phenomena that we observe and call religion.
 - A. The numinous experience (“a nonrational awareness of the Holy”) is at the heart of human religiousness.
 - B. The innate awareness of the Holy produces a creature-consciousness that retains elements of mystery (what Otto terms *mysterium*).
 - C. Human responses to the Holy include fear and feelings of unworthiness (*tremendum*) that lead to sacrificial rituals, confessions of sin, and prayers for forgiveness.
 - D. Human responses to the Holy also include fascination, joy, and a desire to draw closer to the Holy (*fascinans*) that lead to worship, celebration, and hymns of praise.
- III. Various approaches and contributions to the understanding of religion can be explored in detail in Professor Charles Jones’s course for The Teaching Company, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*.
- IV. The 20th-century Romanian-born scholar Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), author of *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), builds on the insights of Durkheim and Otto.
 - A. Eliade suggests that at the heart of religious experience is human awareness of the sacred.
 - B. He argued that the sacred is made known through heirophanies (manifestations of the sacred) and theophanies (manifestations of God).
 - C. When people perceive a manifestation of the sacred, everything changes—objects, people, places, and even time.

- V. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) was another monumental 20th-century figure in the comparative study of religion. His *Meaning and End of Religion* (1963) argues that the common way of organizing thinking about religions is misleading and a new framework is needed.
- A. Smith explains religion as vibrant, ever-changing, and growing manifestations of cumulative traditions.
 - B. Individuals connect to and help shape the cumulative traditions by means of faith.
- VI. Our course will draw on the insights and contributions of Otto, Eliade, Smith, and selected scholars whose comparative approaches to the study of religion influence discussion in the 21st century. Among those scholars are Karen Armstrong and Diana Eck.
- A. Former Catholic nun Karen Armstrong is a prolific writer and prominent analyst of religion.
 - 1. Armstrong’s work includes biographies of the Buddha and Muhammad, as well as comparative studies, such as *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (1993) and *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (1996).
 - 2. Her book *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (2006) focuses on the Axial Age, when many of the great religious traditions that we know today seem to have taken shape.
 - 3. Armstrong has also published intimate accounts of her personal struggle after leaving the convent as well as accounts of her personal spiritual journey.
 - B. Harvard historian of religion Diana Eck interweaves personal exploration of the meaning of religious pluralism with pressing local, national, and international challenges confronting the world.
 - 1. Her book *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (2001) emerged from her Pluralism Project, which she initiated to map the religious landscape in the United States.
 - 2. In that project, she presents some stunning facts and raises important questions about religious diversity in the United States.

- C. Serious students of comparative religion, such as Eck and Armstrong, show us that whatever we can learn about one another can help us find more constructive and healthy ways to live together on this fragile planet.

Suggested Readings:

Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed.

Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Mircea Eliade begins *The Sacred and the Profane* with an affirmation of Rudolf Otto's work on the numinous experience. To what extent do you agree with Otto that a nonrational awareness of the Holy is at the heart of human religiousness?
2. In what ways has the quest to identify and explain the origin of religion been helpful, and how might such efforts be understood to be misleading?

Lecture Four

Sacred Time, Sacred Space, Sacred Objects

Scope: Religious historian Mircea Eliade observed that whenever people perceive a manifestation of God (“theophany”) or a manifestation of the sacred (“hierophany”), everything changes. As a result, religious traditions assign sacred meaning to time, place, and objects based on experiences in which the sacred is manifest. The sacred stories or myths recounting these manifestations of the sacred become a foundational building block for religions. Fascinating examples that illustrate the point abound, including such times as Easter, *Yom Kippur*, Ramadan, and the Hindu festival of *Holi*; such places as Jerusalem, Mecca, and sites associated with the life of the Buddha; and such objects as the Ark of the Covenant, the Black Stone from the original Ka’bah in Mecca, the bread and wine of communion, relics of the Buddha, and the waters of the Ganges River.

Outline

- I. Human beings routinely attach special meaning and significance to time, places, and objects in nonreligious contexts.
 - A. One’s birthday is experienced and celebrated differently than the other days in the calendar year.
 - B. Alumni perceive and experience the campuses of their alma maters differently than they do the physical grounds of any other college.
 - C. A baseball signed by a favorite major-league player is charged with meaning that far transcends its value as a baseball.
- II. Mircea Eliade argues that the history of religions—from the most primitive to the most developed—begins with manifestations of the sacred.
 - A. A theophany is a manifestation of God.
 1. Moses encountered God and received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.
 2. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the sky opened, a dove descended, and God’s resounding voice declared, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased!”

3. At a pivotal moment in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a dialogue takes place between Arjuna (a warrior about to go into battle, who is the focus of the *Bhagavad Gita*) and his chariot driver. The chariot driver reveals himself as Krishna, the incarnation of the Lord Vishnu.
 4. From the Islamic tradition comes the time when, during an interlude of prayer and meditation, Muhammad was first called to be a prophet.
- B.** A hierophany is a broader category indicating a manifestation of the sacred. For example, according to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama was conceived during a miraculous vision by his mother and was born through her side as flowers bloomed out of season. Sages appeared to visit the newborn and make prophecies about his auspicious career.
- C.** Because God or gods are at the heart of most of the religious traditions we are considering, for our purposes, the category of theophany is the primary one that applies when considering manifestations of the sacred.
- III.** Eliade observed that whenever and wherever religious people perceive a theophany, time, space, and objects become charged with sacred meaning.
- A.** Sacred time is a universal category in the religions.
1. Easter Sunday is the most sacred day in the Christian calendar. Sunday, then, became the sacred day of the week—a shift from the Jewish Sabbath that starts Friday evening and lasts until sundown Saturday.
 2. Muslims are required to fast and refrain from all pleasurable activities from sunrise until sunset throughout the sacred lunar month of Ramadan each year.
 3. For Jews, the most holy day of the year is *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Traditionally, *Yom Kippur* is understood as the date on which Moses received the Ten Commandments for the second time.
 4. The Hindu festival of *Holi* is celebrated each spring; devotees imitate Krishna’s frivolous play with the *gopis* (cowherds’ wives).
- B.** Sacred space is also a universal category in the religions.
1. Jerusalem is sacred space for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

2. The Ka’bah in Mecca, the most sacred space for Muslims, is the focal point of the *hajj* (the pilgrimage taken by more than two million people each year).
 3. According to Buddhist tradition, devout people should visit and look with reverence upon four sites associated with the Buddha: his birthplace, the place he attained enlightenment, the site of his first sermon, and the place of his physical death.
- C. Sacred objects are powerful components of religious traditions.
1. The Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred object in ancient Israel, was placed in the Holy of Holies within the Temple in Jerusalem.
 2. When the priest consecrates the bread and wine during Catholic Mass, the elements become the body and blood of Christ.
 3. In the Ka’bah in Mecca, inside an oval-shaped, silver cornerstone, is a concave, black stone that Muslims believe is the one stone that remains from the original Ka’bah built by Abraham and Ishmael. People touch or kiss it as an object of devotion.
 4. Any relic associated with the Buddha—a bowl, a staff, a tooth, and so on—will have a temple built around it and will be an object of pilgrimage for Buddhists.
 5. Millions of Hindus bathe in the sacred waters of the Ganges River, which they believe has curative powers.

Suggested Readings:

Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*.

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Whether or not you consider yourself to be religious, can you identify 10 ways that religions have influenced the way you differentiate between “ordinary” and “special” or “sacred” time, space, and objects?
2. If you or someone you know well has made a pilgrimage to a sacred place (for example, the Holy Land, Mecca, or a site where many people believe the Virgin Mary has appeared), how would you describe and explain the impact of the experience of physical connection with such a place?

Lecture Five

Sacred People—Prophets, Sages, Saviors

Scope: In the first of two lectures on sacred people, we will examine three prominent types: prophets, sages, and saviors. Prophets are those who are understood as conveying God’s Word to their communities and, through them, to humankind. Prophetic figures are understood and function in different ways in different religions. We compare and contrast the biblical prophets Moses and Jeremiah with the Islamic understanding of the prophet Muhammad. Sages are distinguished by their perceived wisdom and ability to teach and guide others toward the knowledge of what ultimately matters. The Buddha and the Hindu *sannyasin* are classic examples of sages. Jesus and Krishna are the most influential savior figures. Jesus is at the center of the world’s largest religion (Christianity), and Krishna is the most widely venerated deity among more than a billion Hindus. These saviors are perceived as actual incarnations—Jesus of God and Krishna of Vishnu—whose teachings and actions provide the key for humans to overcome obstacles blocking the path to salvation.

Outline

- I. Three major types of foundational religious leaders play a pivotal role and are revered as uniquely gifted sacred people in the major religions: prophets, sages, and saviors.
- II. Prophets, who are perceived as conveying God’s Word or message to their communities, exhibit similarities and differences in the Monotheistic religions connected to Abraham.
 - A. Prophets are not necessarily people peering far into the future and making predictions; rather, their messages are focused on a particular time, a particular place, and a particular community.
 - B. Prophets often warn of future consequences.
 - C. Moses and Jeremiah exemplify the essential role of prophets in ancient Israel.
 1. Moses’s response to being told by God that he will lead his people out of slavery is one of unworthiness, thus establishing a pattern that we will see mirrored in other prophets.

Miraculous events, such as the parting of the Red Sea and Moses's meeting of God on Mount Sinai, are clear signs of Moses's role as a prophet.

2. Jeremiah was called to be a prophet as a child and was later told by God to write down all the things he had been preaching for decades. Like Moses, Jeremiah felt unworthy of the task.

D. Muhammad was called to be a prophet at age 40.

1. Like many prophets, he responded to the call with a sense of unworthiness. He was, after all, illiterate.
2. Over time, he accepted the mission and responsibility.

E. The prophets of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam directed their respective messages to particular times and places.

1. Moses's leadership of the children of Israel toward the Promised Land is quite different from Jeremiah's searing words to a corrupt political and religious establishment in Jerusalem.
2. Although Muslims perceive the Qur'an to be the eternal Word of God, containing truths that transcend time and place, to interpret the Qur'an—and Muhammad's role as a prophet—one first must know the settings in which a particular passage was revealed; these are called the "occasions of revelation."

F. Judaism and Islam present the role of the prophet somewhat differently.

1. In the Hebrew context, the prophet's own voice often speaks the Word of God or puts it into a human context.
2. When Muhammad spoke the words that became the Qur'an, they were literally understood as God's Words placed into him.

III. Sages derive their wisdom from within themselves and are able to teach others based on that wisdom.

A. After an early life of privilege and protection, the Buddha encountered sorrow and suffering for the first time and chose to pursue a spiritual quest as a sage-like figure.

1. After achieving enlightenment, he proclaimed the Four Noble Truths: All life is *dukkha* (suffering); suffering is caused by our grasping nature; there is hope to gain release from this realm of dissatisfaction; and the way forward is the Noble Eightfold Path.
2. Although Buddha embraced the teachings of *karma* and rebirth, he rejected the notion of a divine reality, believing

instead that we must work out our own salvation through the Noble Eightfold Path.

- B. One can also find a sage-like figure within the Hindu tradition in the *sannyasin* figure.
 - 1. The *sannyasin* is one who is both world-affirming and world-denying.
 - 2. This life is one of many in the thousands that constitute the cyclical pattern of birth and rebirth, with the final goal, ultimately, one of release from the cycle of existence. The *sannyasin* figure is one who is seen as on that last leg of the journey.

IV. Savior figures are perceived to be incarnations of the divine whose teachings and actions provide the way for faithful adherents to overcome obstacles blocking the path of salvation.

- A. The New Testament Gospels depict Jesus as one who speaks and acts with great authority. But he is also understood to be the very incarnation of God. Moreover, according to the Christian message, he is a savior, able to save us from our sins in a way that we can't save ourselves.
- B. Another manifestation of a savior figure is the Lord Krishna, who is, for many Hindus, the most important manifestation and incarnation of the god Vishnu. Through the way of devotion to Lord Krishna, the Lord of the Universe, another path to ultimate salvation opens up.

Suggested Readings:

David N. Freedman and Michael J. McClymond, eds., *The Rivers of Paradise: Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus and Muhammad as Religious Founders*.

Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. ed.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. How would you compare and contrast different understandings of revelation among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus through their respective approaches to prophets and savior figures?
- 2. How much interplay and overlap do you perceive between the categories of “prophet,” “sage,” and “savior” when considering Christian understandings of Jesus or Buddhist perceptions of the Buddha?

Lecture Six

Sacred People—Clergy, Monastics, Shamans

Scope: This second lecture on sacred people continues our examination of different types of religious figures. First, we will study the role of priests, rabbis, and clergy, religious figures who are ordained to carry out functional roles in their religious communities. We then move to discuss monks, nuns, and monastics, people who traditionally pursue a vocation of prayer and devotion as they live apart from society. The shaman is the last type of sacred person we consider, found in tribal cultures all over the world but also in evidence in major religions. Shamans can be benevolent or malevolent. Because they are both feared and respected, they tend to live apart from their tribes. Finally, we look at both changes and resistance to change in the roles and functions of these sacred people over time.

Outline

- I. In all religions, religious leaders are identified and set apart in order to carry out important functions in the religious life of the community.
- II. Priests are set apart for religious service as leaders in worship and to carry out prescribed rituals on behalf of the community or individuals. Priests usually occupy an honored place because they have dedicated themselves to the service of God or gods.
 - A. From the earliest records until the present day in India, priests have come from the powerful Brahman caste. Because Brahmans knew the sacred texts and the sacred rituals and formulas, they had great power in the system.
 - B. Moses's brother Aaron was Israel's first high priest. In the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, several passages detail the functions of Aaron and his descendants, including specific requirements for sacrificial rituals.
 - C. Roman Catholic priests, for the most part, must be males who take vows of poverty and chastity. Priests can marry in some Uniate churches; these are churches that developed out of the Orthodox tradition but are in union with Rome.

- III.** The broader category of “clergy” includes priestly and other leadership functions.
- A.** Sunni Muslims have recognized leaders, such as *imams* and religious scholars, but they have no formal clergy because they believe that everyone is equal before God.
 - B.** The Shi’ites believe that God designated people within the family of Muhammad to be the leaders of the community. Over time, a hierarchy of clergy has developed with different ranks and status, the most familiar being *ayatollah*.
 - C.** The roles of the rabbi have evolved in Judaism, particularly as Jews were scattered in the Diaspora. In fact, any group of responsible people can constitute a Jewish community and have a service; a rabbi does not need to be present. In the past 200 years or so, many rabbis have assumed some of the same functions as Protestant clergy.
 - D.** Anglican and Baptist clergy frame the High and Low Church traditions in Protestant Christianity.
 - 1.** The primary function of the clergy in the Low Church tradition is less related to ritual activity and more connected to proclamation of the Word.
 - 2.** In the High Church tradition, the focus of the clergy is on celebrating the sacraments, such as Mass or the Lord’s Supper.
- IV.** Monks, nuns, and monastic devotees pursue a vocation of prayer and devotion as they live apart from society.
- A.** The *sannyasin* (“one who renounces”) is a wise, sage-like figure in traditional Hinduism, a sacred person who is far along the path toward the ultimate goal.
 - B.** Some Buddhist monks follow hundreds of strict requirements for monastic life.
 - C.** Monks and nuns fulfill influential roles in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity.
 - 1.** Since the beginning of the monastic movement in the 4th century in Egypt and Syria, numerous orders of monks and nuns have emerged.
 - 2.** Christian monks and nuns are now involved in various forms of service in the community.

- V. Shamans, medicine men/women, or witch doctors often connect the physical and spiritual realms. They are most commonly associated with tribal societies worldwide, but they are sometimes seen in the major religions, as well.
- A. These sacred people often play the role of transporting the spirits of the dead to the afterlife because they move back and forth between the world of the living and the world of the dead, which they believe is a more tangible way of guiding the community than through funeral rituals.
 - B. Shamans have often had powerful spiritual experiences, after which they are forever changed.
 - C. Male and female shamans are feared and respected as both benevolent and potentially malevolent figures living apart from the tribe.
 - D. In the story of King Saul and the medium at Endor, we find the appearance of a shaman-like figure and an early biblical image of life after death.
 - E. Contemporary forms of classical Hindu understandings of reincarnation are reflected in those who practice past-life regression.
- VI. Patterns of change and rigid resistance to change governing religious leaders often mirror changes in the societies in which the religions function.
- A. Celibacy for priests and monks is not required in all Christian and Buddhist traditions.
 - B. Ordained women serving as rabbis, priests, and clergy are common in contemporary Judaism and Christianity, yet the idea of women in these roles is still fiercely resisted in some cases. The difference is not always a question of theology but one of culture.

Suggested Readings:

Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*.

William Placher, ed., *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the primary reasons for and against changing the traditional parameters defining which persons do and do not qualify to serve as priests, rabbis, or clergy in the different religions?
2. In what ways might the study of shamans and witch doctors in tribal cultures contribute to a better understanding of sacred people in the major religions?

Lecture Seven

Sacred Signs, Analogues, and Sacraments

Scope: Human beings communicate through the use of symbols. In overt and subtle ways, we use gestures, body language, and metaphors to convey meaning. Languages are large symbol systems. If you don't know written and spoken symbols, you can't understand what is being communicated. This lecture identifies two main types of symbols: representational and presentational. Representational symbols are those to which meaning is assigned and must be learned; for example a plus sign in math (+) means "add" or a red light on the highway means "stop." Presentational symbols work at a deeper level. They are organically linked to that which is being symbolized. We use different types of both representational and presentational symbols all the time in our secular lives. Presentational symbols are also used widely in religion, where there are three main types: signs, analogues, and sacraments. Examples illuminate particular religions, but some symbols—light, water, fire, and earth—are central in all religions.

Outline

- I. Human beings communicate in overt and subtle ways through the use of symbols.
 - A. Languages are large symbol systems employing visual and auditory symbols that must be learned.
 - B. Symbols influence our behavior in everyday life and can produce an array of both positive and negative feelings.
 1. Traffic signals and painted lines on the highway are essential symbols for the safe movement of vehicles.
 2. Presenting the flag and playing the national anthem are symbolic cues to obligatory behavior prior to athletic events.
 3. Zealous sports fans with raised arms shake their index fingers into cameras to symbolize that their team is number one!
 4. Making a "V" sign with the index and middle finger symbolized victory in the context of World War II, while the same symbol signified peace for antiwar activists during the Vietnam era.

5. Some arm and hand gestures, such as open arms, are powerful invitations to closeness, while others, such as those used by annoyed motorists, convey hostility and the potential for physical confrontation.
- II.** Representational symbols, according to convention, are a common type of symbol that we encounter in both secular and sacred contexts.
- A.** In a secular context, we use representational symbols continually.
1. Languages use words, such as “fire” or “*shalom*,” to convey meaning.
 2. Mathematical symbols (+, %, >) are meaningless until one learns what functions they represent.
- B.** In religious contexts, words, gestures, and objects function as powerful representational symbols.
1. The first and last letters in the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *omega*, stand for Jesus Christ. The combination of these letters is the symbolic way of saying that he is the beginning and the end.
 2. Circumcision of males on the eighth day is a symbol of God’s covenant with the Jews.
 3. Hindu devotees of Shiva are identified by three horizontal lines on their foreheads, a symbol of Shiva’s functions as creator, preserver, and destroyer.
- III.** Presentational symbols, in contrast, are not learned by convention; instead, we come to understand them through experience. James Livingston describes how signs—the first of three types of presentational symbols—work at a deeper level; these symbols participate in, or have an organic link with, that which is being symbolized.
- A.** Signs are invaluable presentational symbols we encounter every day.
1. Doctors look for signs (a fever, chills, a cough, pain, and so on) as symbols organically linked to internal problems or conditions that cannot be observed visually.
 2. A sink that will not drain is a sign of a clog or blockage somewhere in the pipes.
- B.** In a religious context, signs point to sacred truths in many ways.
1. Jesus’s miracles are signs of his connection to God’s power in a way that is distinctive from the connection of others.

2. In the same way, Moses, empowered by God, performed mighty acts to persuade the pharaoh to free the children of Israel. Likewise, Elijah called down fire from heaven to consume the priests who were worshiping Baal on Mount Carmel.
3. Muslims have always pointed to the unparalleled beauty and majesty of the poetic lyricism of the Qur'an as a sign that it is of divine origin, not a human composition. Muhammad's night journey (*mi'raj*) to Jerusalem is also a sign of his place among the prophets.

IV. Analogues are the second type of presentational symbols.

- A.** Symbolic communication through analogues is widespread and readily understood in ordinary society.
 1. Maps are small-scale analogies of a campus, city, state, or other location. The specific symbols—of roads, buildings, or cities—must mirror precisely the larger reality or the symbols are of no value.
 2. Road signs that indicate a sharp turn ahead provide a pictorial analogue to the conditions the driver will soon encounter.
- B.** Analogues are compelling presentational symbols in all religions.
 1. Psalm 23 expresses beautifully the biblical symbol of God as a shepherd.
 2. In the Hindu tradition, the hideous goddess Kali is a shocking symbol of the reality of existence when the illusion (*maya*) is stripped away.
 3. In the Buddhist tradition, a stunningly beautiful lotus flower floating on top of the muck and mire of a dirty pond is analogous to an enlightened being who remains connected to, but not tainted by, this physical world.

V. In some religions, sacraments are highly charged presentational symbols that serve to make the Holy physically present.

- A.** For Hindus, certain sounds (*mantras*), such as the chanting of “Om,” are understood as literally making the Holy present.
- B.** In the Roman Catholic sacrament of Holy Communion, when the priest blesses the wine and the bread, it is understood that they are literally changed, through the doctrine of transubstantiation, into the body and blood of Christ.

- C. With the sacrament of baptism, Christians emulate the baptism of Jesus. The Christian community differs, however, on whether or not to baptize children before they reach the age of accountability, on the purpose of baptism, and on its efficacy.
- VI. Light, water, fire, and earth are universal presentational symbols found in all religions.
- A. Light is a presentational symbol for knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.
 - B. Water is a presentational symbol for both cleansing and destruction.
 - C. Fire is a presentational symbol for both purification and destruction.
 - D. Earth is a presentational symbol connected to both new life and death.

Suggested Readings:

David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbols: A Visual Key to Symbols and Their Meanings*.

Lawrence Mick, *Understanding the Sacraments Today*, 2nd ed.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the five or six most important religious symbols you observe on a daily or weekly basis?
2. As a result of this lecture, in what ways have your views on the powerful and pervasive role of symbols been challenged or changed?

Lecture Eight

Creation Myths and Sacred Stories

Scope: The terms “myth” and “sacred story” are used interchangeably in the comparative study of religion. In contrast to its popular usage, “myth” in comparative religion studies does not mean something that is patently false or untrue. Myths or sacred stories are profoundly true for those who embrace them. The story does not have to be historically or literally true in order to convey profound meaning to religious adherents. Creation myths reflect two types of etiologies, that is, explanations of important components of the religious worldview. Joseph Campbell, in his study *The Power of Myth*, has further identified four distinct functions served by various sacred stories of creation quite apart from the historicity of the events they describe.

Outline

- I. Sacred stories or myths are foundational components in all religions. In the study of comparative religion, the terms “sacred story” and “myth” are often used interchangeably. Rather than signifying something false or untrue, myths are sacred stories that are profoundly true to those who embrace them.
 - A. In many instances, the impact of a sacred story is not dependent on its historical veracity.
 - B. In some instances, the meaning of the sacred story is deeply connected to historical events.
- II. Creation myths are the most common type of sacred story. All religions have one or more creation myths to explain existence and the place of human beings in the physical world. Creation myths embody two types of etiologies, or explanations of important components of the religious worldview.
 - A. The origins of sacred rituals, places, and objects are often found in creation myths.
 1. The story of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt is reenacted in the ritual of the Passover seder.
 2. The story of Muhammad’s *mi’raj* validates his identity as a prophet and Jerusalem as a sacred place for Muslims.

- B. Explanations of why certain things exist are also woven into creation myths. For example, the creation accounts in Genesis tell us why pain accompanies childbirth and why humans must die.
- III. Barbara Sproul has collected a number of creation stories in a book called *Primal Myths: Creating the World*. These creation myths, which number in the hundreds worldwide, can be grouped into several basic types.
- A. The sexual union of a primal male and female and creation emerging from a “cosmic egg” are patterns widely embraced in many tribal societies and in the Hindu tradition.
 - B. The emergence from a primal substance or the ordering of chaos into creation is seen in the Hindu *Upanishads* and early Buddhist texts.
 - 1. Examples from the *Rigveda* and *Puranas* illustrate the variation present within Hindu scriptures.
 - 2. The Buddha was uninterested in creation accounts but explained how those who attribute creation to the god *Brahma* mistakenly came to that understanding.
 - C. Creation by divine decree out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) is the central tenet of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim accounts.
 - 1. Passages from Genesis 1 and 2 reveal two versions of the creation story. The order of creation and the creation of man and woman are different in the two stories.
 - 2. Short passages in the Qur’an add to the Muslim understanding of God as an all-powerful Creator of all that exists.
- IV. In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell identifies four main functions of sacred stories.
- A. Sacred stories elicit a sense of awe before the wonder of existence and in the face of God’s creative activity.
 - B. Sacred stories provide a sense of living in an ordered cosmos rather than chaos. That is, creation can be understood and is ordered, and there is a place for human beings within it.
 - C. Sacred stories function sociologically to help human beings identify who we are and how we should behave in the community. Creation accounts help us understand our place in the scheme of creation and existence.

- D. Sacred stories help guide individuals through the challenging stages of life: birth, puberty, adulthood, and death. Most of those components are lodged within the stories of the various religious traditions, most notably in the exemplary lives of the foundational figures, such as Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, and others.

Suggested Readings:

Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*.

David A. Leeming and Margaret A. Leeming, *A Dictionary of Creation Myths*.

Barbara C. Sproul, *Primal Myths: Creating the World*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Given that hundreds of different sacred stories of creation are profoundly true for the people who embrace them, what might a student of comparative religion conclude about the nature of religious truths?
2. In what ways might contemporary scientific theories and understandings about the origin of the cosmos be compatible with sacred stories of creation?

Lecture Nine

From Sacred Stories and Letters to Doctrine

Scope: Successful religious traditions must make the transition from the teachings of their founding figures and the first disciples to orthodox doctrines and practices guiding later generations. As long as Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad or the first generation of adherents are present, people know where and how to seek authoritative guidance on all types of issues and practices. Divergent views inevitably arise and different mechanisms are used to resolve disputes and define “orthodoxy.” The early histories of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam vividly illustrate the similarities and distinctive ways adherents in the three great missionary religions developed the framework for their respective communities of faith.

Outline

- I. The stories of Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad identify their respective sources of authority and their roles as founders and reformers of religious traditions.
 - A. Moses assumes leadership to fulfill God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants.
 1. Moses was God’s appointed leader of the Hebrews’ Exodus from Egypt toward the Promised Land.
 2. Moses spoke to God “face to face, as a friend,” then conveyed the Laws and Commandments that constituted the framework for Israel’s religious life.
 3. Traditionally, Moses was thought to be the author of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), although we now know that several authors contributed to the text.
 4. These writings set forth the legal structure, the religious calendar, and the rituals that provide the framework for the Israelite religion.
 - B. Siddhartha Gautama was an Indian ascetic who embraced some key tenets of his day, such as *karma* and reincarnation, and reformulated other central teachings.

1. Although he affirmed the spiritual ideal of the wandering seeker who sought truth by going “within,” the Buddha rejected severe asceticism in favor of the Middle Way.
 2. The Buddha rejected metaphysical speculation and the belief that a “soul” is the central essence of human beings.
 3. The story of the Buddha’s “going out” is a powerful, universal symbol.
 4. Some 30 years after the death of the Buddha, his disciples gathered to agree upon and preserve his teachings.
- C. Jesus’s teachings and actions reflected a new and demanding interpretation of what is required of those who seek to follow God.
1. Jesus reinterpreted the Law of Moses in the Sermon on the Mount.
 2. Jesus often taught in parables, such as the parable of the good samaritan and the parable of the sower.
 3. Collections of Jesus’s teachings and stories about his actions were circulated in oral and written form in the years following his ministry.
- D. Muhammad brought the same revelation as other prophets in the tradition of Abraham and helped shape a new community of faith amidst those who were believed to have changed or corrupted God’s revelations.
1. Muhammad was the “seal of the prophets,” the last of the prophets.
 2. Muhammad was also a “beautiful model,” whose sayings and actions are collected and recorded in the *hadith*, the second source of authority—after the Qur’an—for Islamic law.
 3. When Muhammad was uttering the Qur’an, people memorized it and began to write it down. The collection of the Qur’an took place within about 20 years of Muhammad’s death.
 4. Eventually, the *hadith* collections came to contain far more stories than could possibly be true, and some were contradictory. A science of *hadith* was developed to determine which parables and stories were authentic.
- E. The Hindu tradition cannot be traced to the teachings of a particular gifted founder or reformer in the same way as the other four religions.

- II.** The teachings of and about the foundational figures in the three great missionary religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—were propagated by their disciples and companions even as they were challenged by major disagreements and disputes threatening the new communities of faith.
- A.** Early disciples of the Buddha disagreed on the precise requirements of those who could join the *sangha* (community of monks).
1. Some rules established early seemed to be agreed upon, but later, some divergences occurred in the rules governing monastic life.
 2. Different teachings began to arise related to a myriad of sacred texts that some believed the Buddha had revealed and others thought had been fabricated. The different schools of thought diverged, depending on how they approached those materials.
- B.** The New Testament records substantial disputes among Jesus’s disciples and the Apostle Paul.
1. Was the “Good News” that the followers of Jesus were commissioned to share intended for the Jews or for all people? Did a male non-Jew, a Gentile who embraced the way of Jesus, have to be circumcised before joining the church?
 2. The letters of Paul helped guide newly established churches and gave shape to doctrine, as we see in I Corinthians.
- C.** The division between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims can be traced to the death of the prophet Muhammad.
1. The majority of Muslims, the Sunni (“orthodox”), prevailed in their view that the most righteous person should be the one to lead the community of faith. At the same time, the Shi’ites believed that Muhammad’s family continued to have the guidance of God’s divine light, and therefore, leadership should go to Ali, the prophet’s first cousin and son-in-law.
 2. Although the Qur’an is the same for both groups, some differences emerge in the collections of *hadith*.
 3. The Sunni principle of selecting the most righteous person to be caliph gave way to dynastic rule in 661 C.E., just 29 years after the death of Muhammad.
 4. Today, the questions of who should lead the community and how an Islamic state should be formed are still disputed.

III. Every religious community needs fixed texts that will preserve the authentic teachings of the key figures as the community grows, particularly as it moves beyond the first generation of followers.

Suggested Readings:

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*.

Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*.

William M. Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How would you compare and contrast the pedagogical methods of Moses and Muhammad with those of the Buddha and Jesus, who often taught in parables?
2. What can be discerned from a comparative analysis of the ways the quest for “orthodox doctrine” has led adherents in all religions to split into major groups and many subgroups over the centuries?

Lecture Ten

Sacred Texts—The Bible and the Qur'an

Scope: Sacred scriptures are central components of many religious traditions. As with other features of different religions, we can discern common approaches and understandings, as well as distinctive differences within and across the religious communities. The first of two lectures on sacred texts focuses on the scriptures connected with the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The processes by which these venerated writings became fixed as sacred or inspired are both fascinating and instructive. Although there is a great deal of interplay and overlap within the religions tracing themselves to Abraham, the Bible cannot be equated casually with the Qur'an. This lecture also illustrates how and why authoritative scriptures must be understood and interpreted in their own context.

Outline

- I. Sacred texts are an essential component of the ancient Near Eastern religions tracing themselves to Abraham, their common patriarch. The processes by which the Bible and the Qur'an became finalized were both distinctive and interconnected.
- II. The Bible and the Qur'an began primarily as oral tradition.
 - A. Long before the people of Israel recorded their sacred texts, they told stories of God's Creation, of Noah and the Great Flood, of God's promise to Abraham, of exile and slavery in Egypt, of Moses and the giving of the Law, and so forth.
 - B. The New Testament includes only one brief reference to Jesus writing anything. Instead, he told stories and parables about the coming Kingdom of God, responded to questions, and challenged the religious status quo he encountered within his Jewish tradition.
 - C. Muhammad was illiterate, unable to read or write. Muslims understand his poetic utterances not as the words of Muhammad but as the Word of God mediated through the human instrument of the prophet.

- III.** The formation of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament as established texts took place over many centuries.
- A.** A few of the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible are anthologies, such as the Psalms and Proverbs. Most of the other materials in the Hebrew Bible developed through a four-step process: composition, collection, redaction (editing), and canonization.
 - B.** The prophetic Book of Jeremiah illustrates this process.
 - 1.** Jeremiah is told to write down all the things that he has been preaching. The composition, then, is part of the oral tradition.
 - 2.** The scribe Baruch records and collects what Jeremiah dictates.
 - 3.** The editorial process takes over as the stories are recorded.
 - 4.** Ultimately, a decision is made about which books to include in the canon.
 - C.** Over a period of centuries, from around 400 B.C.E. until late in the 1st century C.E., the canon was fixed for the three portions of the Hebrew Bible: the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), the Prophets (Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and others), and the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, the Book of Job, the Song of Solomon, and so forth).
- IV.** Twenty-one of the 27 books of the New Testament canon were fixed by 325 C.E., while the remaining 6 books were still being debated, along with at least 5 others that were not included.
- A.** The first portion of each Gospel provides an invaluable clue about the orientation of the one collecting and presenting the different accounts about Jesus.
 - B.** In studying the four Gospel accounts, we can see that Matthew and Luke had access to Mark, but they both have some material that is not in the other Gospels. Matthew and Luke share a body of about 200 verses from what is called the “Q source.”
 - C.** The letters of Paul provide a doctrinal framework for the emerging church. For example, the four Gospels tell of Jesus’s death and Resurrection; Paul is the one who interprets the meaning of the Resurrection in I Corinthians 15.
 - D.** The work of biblical criticism has helped identify sources for the Bible and reconstruct the likely original text.

- V. From the beginning of Muhammad’s prophetic utterances in 610 C.E. until his death in 632 C.E., Muslims memorized and wrote down his words. Except in the case of Islam, the process of developing the scriptures of the great world religions happened over hundreds and hundreds of years.
- VI. Regardless of how Jews, Christians, and Muslims understand their sacred texts to be “inspired” by God, the texts must be interpreted.
- A. Many people claim that sacred scriptures should be interpreted literally at every point, but how can we take the Song of Songs, for example, literally? It is an erotic love poem in which God is not mentioned.
 - B. When Jesus tells a story or parable about judgment after death (for example, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus), are the details to be understood literally?
 - C. Muslims widely affirm the Qur’an as the literal Word of God, but numerous sects and schools of thought illustrate a wide variety of ways the text has been interpreted.

Suggested Readings:

Farid Esack, *The Qur’an: A User’s Guide to Its Key Themes, History and Interpretation*.

Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It? A History of the Scriptures through the Ages*.

Robert E. Van Voorst, ed., *Anthology of World Scriptures*, 6th ed.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what ways might a scholarly study of the history of the formation of the Bible support or call into question different ways of understanding the text as “inspired” by God?
2. Although Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are separate religions, they are linked historically and organically. How would you describe the interplay among the sacred texts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims?

Lecture Eleven

Sacred Texts for Hindus and Buddhists

Scope: The body of literature deemed sacred by various Hindus and Buddhists is massive and somewhat bewildering. This second lecture on sacred texts will help demystify the major types of sacred literature in these traditions—from the ancient *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Bhagavad Gita* of India to the most prominent collections embraced by various schools of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. The ways in which Hindus and Buddhists appropriate their sacred texts are as diverse as the various schools of thought and paths to the ultimate goal present within these traditions.

Sacred texts play an important, authoritative role in conveying and preserving central teachings embraced by all religions, and our study reveals both common approaches and decidedly different attitudes and practices toward their use.

Outline

- I. Sacred texts are an important component of both the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. In this lecture, we will survey the major categories of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, examine selected representative texts, and conclude by comparing and contrasting sacred texts in the five religions.
- II. The body of literature deemed sacred by various Hindu and Buddhist groups is both massive and diverse. It is, therefore, somewhat bewildering to outside observers.
 - A. Hindu texts appeared in their present form in various parts of India over many centuries.
 - B. Buddhist texts emerged in South and East Asia over many centuries. Some texts have become available for study in the West only in the past century; and some have yet to be translated.
 - C. The volume of Buddhist texts is estimated to be 50 to 60 times larger than the Bible.

- D. Although our introduction to these materials can provide only a sampling, the endeavor illustrates the great diversity and some parallels in the ways sacred texts are embraced.

III. Indian sacred texts can be divided into two main categories: *Shruti* (literally, “hearing”) and *Smrti* (literally, “memory”).

- A. *Shruti* refers to the eternal texts that were “heard” and are repeated and passed down. These are the *Vedas* (eternal wisdom), which consist of three layers of texts.

1. *Samhitas* (“collections” of hymns and formulas) include the *Rigveda*, collections of hymns; the *Samaveda*, a collection of chants and songs; the *Yajurveda*, a collection of sacred formulas; and the *Atharvaveda*, a collection of magic spells and hymns. In a brief recording, young boys are taught the correct way to memorize and recite the *Vedas*.
2. The *Brahmanas* are sacrificial texts.
3. The *Aranyakas* are “forest treatises,” ending with the speculative, esoteric collections called the *Upanishads*.

- B. *Smrti* refers to that which has been “remembered,” including great epics, ancient tales, and myths about creation, as well as bodies of teaching.

1. The *Mahabharata* (including the *Bhagavad Gita*) and the *Ramayana* are the two great Hindu epics. These lengthy poems substantially influence popular religious practices and piety.
2. The *Puranas* are ancient myths about creation, destruction, and re-creation of the universe, as well as tales about gods and rulers.
3. *Itihasas* include popular literature dealing with legends, traditions, and history.
4. *Shastras* are bodies of teaching or treatises to guide individuals and communities. We will learn more about these texts when we consider the caste system as a form of disciplined action that can advance one toward the desired goal.

IV. Buddhism includes numerous sects and schools, many of which have their own scriptures. The authoritative writings for the major branches of Buddhism comprise hundreds of thousands of pages.

- A. Theravada Buddhists, who still constitute the majority in Sri Lanka; Burma, or Myanmar; and many parts of Southeast Asia, embrace the Pali canon as the earliest authoritative collection of canonical writings. These teachings—which were passed down orally for several centuries before taking written form in some 45 volumes—make up the *Tipitaka*, or three “baskets.”
1. The first basket, the *Sutta Pitaka*, includes discourses of the Buddha.
 2. The second basket, the *Vinaya Pitaka*, contains the discipline for the *sangha*, or order of monks who carried out the Buddha’s teaching (*dhamma* in Pali; *dharma* in Sanskrit).
 3. The third basket, the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, contains the analysis of the teaching.
 4. The Pali canon also includes other kinds of writings besides the discourses of the Buddha, for example, tales about lives of the Buddha in previous existences, previous Buddhas, and so forth.
- B. Following the fragmentation of Buddhism into numerous sects in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E., the body of sacred texts expanded significantly. Many new materials were embraced by Mahayana Buddhists in India, China, and Japan during the following millennium.
1. Whereas many Theravada Buddhists view the “new” materials as erroneous fabrications, many Mahayana Buddhists recognize selected texts as authentic teachings that some early followers were not ready to hear or embrace.
 2. Among the many hundreds of volumes of Mahayana texts, the *Lotus Sutra* is perhaps the most famous. The text, which presents a discourse of the Buddha late in his life, first appears in the 1st century C.E. Some 1,200 years later, the influential Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–1282) insisted that the *Lotus Sutra* is the ultimate Buddhist teaching.
 3. The *Diamond Sutra* is a short treatise in which the Buddha tries to help a senior monk unlearn his preconceived and limited notions of reality, compassion, and enlightenment. It is often chanted in monasteries and has been particularly popular among Chan/Zen Buddhists.

- V. The overview of sacred texts in this lecture and the last one helps clarify some key points of agreement and divergence among the religions.
- A. Sacred texts play an important, authoritative role in conveying and preserving central teachings embraced by diverse groups of Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims.
1. For some, the sacred texts are the primary or only valid source of authority on which the community of faith can rely. We see examples of this view in Martin Luther's appeal of *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") and modern "back to the *Vedas*" movements among Hindus.
 2. Some Muslims, Protestant Christians, and Orthodox Jews make this same kind of argument—their sacred texts are literally the Word of God.
 3. For Roman Catholics, early authoritative texts are supplemented by the wisdom of tradition and the leadership of the church over the centuries.
 4. For some religious seekers—for example, some Zen Buddhists and Hindu *sannyasins*—sacred texts are no longer needed when one achieves an advanced stage of enlightenment.
- B. In his final major work, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith explores the history and use of scripture in the world's religious traditions. His erudite reflections illustrate how a comparative approach can illuminate beautifully the common and richly diverse manifestations of human engagements with the transcendent.

Suggested Readings:

Jean Holm and John Bowker, eds., *Sacred Writings* (Themes in Religious Studies).

Wilfred C. Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How might the necessity of interpretation influence different understandings of sacred texts?
2. If you have attempted to read sacred texts from religions other than your own, what did you find most engaging, confusing, and insightful and why?

Lecture Twelve

Polytheism, Dualism, Monism, and Monotheism

Scope: Almost all religions include some conceptualization of divinity. Understandings of the divine can be grouped into four major categories: Polytheism, Dualism, Monism, and Monotheism. This lecture illustrates different ways various religions fit these categories. Among the major world religions, the 330 million gods of the Hindu tradition give us the most obvious example of Polytheism. The Conflicting Dualism of Zoroastrianism, which heavily influenced understandings of good and evil in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is distinct from the Complementary Dualism (e.g., *yin/yang*) in Chinese traditions.

Mystics in various religions often transcend Polytheistic and Monotheistic views and describe what appear to be Monistic or Pantheistic understandings of Ultimate Reality. Christians consider themselves to be Monotheist, but Muslims understand the doctrine of the Trinity to be a dangerous form of Polytheism. The question “What do we mean when we say God?” is far more provocative than we imagine.

Outline

- I. Almost all religions are organized around one or more conceptualizations of the divine. Four major—and sometimes interweaving—understandings of divinity are manifest in various religions: Polytheism, Dualism, Monism (Pantheism), and Monotheism.
 - A. Some people—even people within the same religious tradition—affirm two or three different conceptualizations of divinity simultaneously.
 - B. These images of the divine come from stories about creation, from stories about perceived theophanies or manifestations of God, from metaphysical speculation, and from the intuitive wisdom of gifted or wise people.
 - C. Some of the conceptualizations are simple and concrete, while others are far more enigmatic and mystical.

- II. The first of the four conceptualizations, Polytheism, or religions with “many gods,” is found in religions all over the world.
 - A. Most people are generally familiar with the Polytheism found in ancient Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia.
 - B. Among the major world religions, the 330 million gods of the Hindu tradition give us the most obvious—and overwhelming—example of Polytheism.
- III. Dualism is the term used to describe religions centered on two primary deities or ultimate forces shaping life as we know it.
 - A. Conflicting Dualism was the dominant framework shaping the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia. The images of God versus the devil, angels and demons, and a final judgment where the forces of good and evil are consigned to heaven or hell became central features of the Abrahamic religions of the ancient Near East.
 - B. Complementary Dualism, with its two equal and opposite forces—the *yin* and the *yang*—is at the heart of Chinese traditions, and it was woven into some branches of Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) Buddhism.
- IV. Monism and Pantheism (“god in everything”) are conceptual understandings that move beyond the notion of God to identify an Ultimate Reality outside the capacity for human descriptions of the divine.
 - A. In classical Hindu thought, the Brahman is the Ultimate Reality, unknown and unknowable, that stands beyond all names and forms. *Tat tvam asi* (“That, art thou”) is an affirmation that one is, in fact, a part of the Brahman.
 - B. Manifestations of Pantheism or Monism are prominent in the understanding of the mystics in the various religious traditions.
- V. Monotheism refers to those religions that affirm only one true God.
 - A. The Hebrew Bible includes different images of the divine as the understanding of Monotheism developed over many centuries.
 - 1. In primitive images, we find that God is very much like human beings but more powerful.
 - 2. In *God: A Biography*, theologian Jack Miles identifies the various images of God, particularly in the Hebrew Bible, as a

lawgiver, a conqueror, a father figure, a wife figure, a friend, and so forth.

3. Miles raises some intriguing questions about what it means when we are told that God created human beings “in his image.”
- B.** Christian self-understanding as Monotheists produced various formulations explaining Jesus as both human and divine, as well as the doctrine of the Trinity.
1. In the early church, we find people appropriating these ideas in somewhat different ways to try to make sense of this dual nature, with some groups that focus more on the humanity of Jesus and some that focus more on his divinity.
 2. The real issue was how to understand the nature of Christ and how to understand the notion of the Trinity.
- C.** Monotheism is the foundational affirmation in Islam. The statement of faith begins with this declaration: *La ilaha illallah* (“There is no god but God”).
1. The 99 names of God are revealed in the Qur’an, and through them, we can learn much about God’s attributes—attributes that don’t change the oneness of God but that give human beings indications about what God is like.
 2. In Islam, the most dangerous sin is *shirk*: associating something with God. Christians receive strong warnings in this regard: God is one, not three.

Suggested Readings:

Jack Miles, *God: A Biography*.

Deidre Sullivan, *What Do We Mean When We Say God?*

Questions to Consider:

1. How have your understandings about God changed as you grew up and moved through adolescence into adulthood?
2. Can you identify major problems with, or liberating wisdom from, someone who believes in many gods, one true God, and ultimately, no god simultaneously?

Lecture Thirteen

From Birth to Death—Religious Rituals

Scope: Rituals are a central feature in human society. We all participate in a variety of ritual activities all the time—from the protocol involved in greeting one another or the playing of the national anthem before sporting events to graduation or initiation rituals. In both secular and religious contexts, we can identify two major types of rituals: those based on the lifecycle and those based on the calendar. This lecture explores the common features of religious rituals that mark key stages in the lifecycle: birth, childhood, coming-of-age, marriage, and death.

Rituals embody obligatory and repetitive components charged with symbolism; they are dramatic, engaging all the senses; and they are necessary to change the participants' life status permanently. Lifecycle rituals in all religions encompass three distinct stages: separation, transition, and reincorporation. In this lecture, we find examples of these stages in baptism, Bar or Bat Mitzvah, marriage, Buddhist and Christian ordination, and funeral rituals.

Outline

- I. Rituals are a central feature of human life, both individually and in community. Rituals are a prescribed set of actions that often employ powerful symbols to accomplish both religious and secular purposes.
 - A. People in all cultures participate in rituals based on both the human lifecycle and the calendar.
 1. In the United States, secular lifecycle rituals include graduation from high school, a swearing-in ceremony for a public official, initiation into a fraternity or sorority, a celebration on reaching the age of 21, and so on.
 2. Common secular calendar rituals in the United States include such activities as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to start the day at public school, ritual traditions around Thanksgiving, and birthday celebrations.

- B. James Livingston defines a religious ritual as “an agreed-upon, formalized pattern of ceremonial movements and actions carried out in a sacred context.” We will examine common features of both religious lifecycle and calendar rituals in this and the next lecture.
 - C. Rituals share several common elements. The words, actions, and symbols are repetitive and obligatory, and they engage multiple senses in the process of accomplishing specific goals.
- II.** French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep identified three stages commonly found in lifecycle rite-of-passage rituals: separation, transition, and reincorporation. A brief consideration of the structure of a high school graduation ceremony illustrates the three stages.
- III.** Religious lifecycle rituals occur one time (theoretically) during the course of an individual’s lifecycle. The major religions we are considering incorporate rituals to mark four stages in the human lifecycle: birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. In the rituals associated with these events, we can identify the three stages of separation, transition, and reincorporation.
- A. Religious rituals associated with birth welcome or initiate the new life into the community of faith.
 - 1. In Judaism, males are circumcised on the eighth day after birth, according to the covenant given in the Book of Genesis.
 - 2. Many Christian denominations—Catholics, Orthodox, and some Protestants (such as Lutherans and Presbyterians)—practice infant baptism. Others practice “dedication of babies” in the belief that the ritual of baptism should take place only after one has made an adult profession of faith.
 - B. Religious coming-of-age rituals are often associated with physical maturation around the time of puberty.
 - 1. The Hindu sacred thread ceremony (*upanayana*) initiates boys into their new role as students who will learn the teachings and practices required of their religion.
 - 2. A Jewish boy or girl becomes a “son/daughter of the Commandment” through the prescribed ritual known as Bar or Bat Mitzvah. From this point forward, the young man or woman must follow Jewish Law, tradition, and ethics and participate fully in all aspects of Jewish community life.

- C. Marriage rituals mark a new stage of life—socially and legally—as individuals formally leave their families to form new homes.
1. Christian marriage ceremonies follow prescribed patterns (instruction, vows) and incorporate many religious symbols and dramatic elements, such as special music and visual effects to appeal to the senses.
 2. The ordination of a Buddhist monk or a Christian monk, nun, or priest who takes a vow of celibacy is a parallel form of commitment within the respective religions.
- D. Rituals associated with death mark the end of an individual’s lifecycle and provide powerful moments to educate the religious community about the meaning of life and the changing human community of faith.
1. Muslim funeral practices prescribe burial of the deceased before sundown of the day after death and emphasize equality before God with burial in simple garments. The body is placed facing in the direction of Mecca.
 2. Jewish rituals also require burial before sundown of the day following death, with the grave close to Jerusalem, if possible, in preparation for the coming of the messiah on the day of resurrection. Relatives and close friends stay with the body until the time of burial.
 3. The traditional Hindu practice of cremation is based on the belief that the soul does not enter another body until the original body is returned to the basic elements.
 4. Buddhist practices vary a great deal. Tibetan Buddhists, for example, engage in a lengthy, intricate ritual to help the deceased make the proper transition into a blissful state.
 5. Christian funeral rites include many of the same components of separation, transition, and reincorporation visible in other religions.

Suggested Readings:

Catherine Bell, ed., *Teaching Ritual*.

Jean Holm and John Bowker, *Rites of Passage*.

Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Identify and describe five or more religiously connected lifecycle rituals with which you have personally been involved. In what ways have these been stale and perfunctory? In what ways have they been powerful, engaging, and memorable events for you or those you have observed obtaining a new status through the ritual event?
2. What might the rituals marking major stages of the human lifecycle in the different religions suggest about commonality across religious lines?

Lecture Fourteen

Daily, Weekly, Annual Religious Rituals

Scope: The second major type of religious ritual activity is based on the calendar. These repetitive rituals share some characteristics of lifecycle rituals but are distinctly different in structure and purpose. Sacred stories, sacred time, sacred space, and sacred objects are commonly featured in calendar rituals. Examples of such rituals abound: daily Mass in the Roman Catholic Church; Friday noon prayers in mosques; weekly Christian worship services; annual celebrations of Easter; the *hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca; and so forth. Most religions incorporate rituals that recount and reenact their sacred stories on an annual basis. The dramatic reenactments of key events in the religion, such as the birth of Jesus in the Christian calendar, serve important pedagogical, sociological, and psychological functions for participants.

Outline

- I. Religious rituals repeated daily, weekly, annually, or at some other interval are dramatic events that engage the senses and often re-create sacred stories in ways that enable the participants to feel present at defining religious events.
 - A. Daily rituals, a common feature of the religions we're studying, are designed to help adherents stay focused on what matters most.
 1. *Salat* (the performance of the five daily prayers prescribed for Muslims) is one of the Pillars of Islam (required ritual devotional duties). The act of saying the prayers is related to a fundamental problem plaguing humans: forgetfulness.
 2. Hindu devotees of the Lord Krishna typically conduct daily devotional rituals in their homes—a series of acts designed to show hospitality toward the deity Krishna.
 3. Catholic Mass is celebrated daily around the world.
 4. Orthodox Jews conduct evening, morning, and afternoon prayer services daily in synagogues. In the Orthodox tradition, 10 responsible adult men (those who have undergone the Bar Mitzvah ritual) must be present at these services. Most Conservative and Reform synagogues allow both men and women to form the *minyan*.

5. Many Mahayana Buddhists seek assistance daily from Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*.
 6. Theravada monks practice daily meditation, sometimes in the form of walking meditation.
- B.** Weekly communal rituals of worship are a common feature in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
1. The division of time into seven-day weeks is rooted in the creation stories found in Genesis. After six days of creation, God rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath. Jews commemorate the Sabbath (from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday) through worship and rest. The Sabbath service is a celebration with songs and recitations from the Torah and includes a special family meal.
 2. The Sabbath for almost all Christians is Sunday, the day of Jesus’s Resurrection. Although many other services may be held in churches, Sunday worship at 11:00 am is the most widely practiced form of weekly worship.
 3. The daily prayers for Muslims can be performed anywhere. Typically, adherents gather each Friday at noon for community prayer and to hear a sermon at the local mosque.
 4. Hindus and Buddhists normally do not conduct weekly congregational services but focus more on prescribed festivals.
- C.** Annual ritual celebrations often reenact the highlights of the sacred stories of the religion, both to continue the process of education and to symbolically make the adherents “present” at the major events defining the religion.
1. Jews celebrate two major annual events—*Rosh Hashana* (the Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) during the High Holy Days each year.
 2. Christians reenact the stories of Jesus’s death and Resurrection annually in the festivities associated with Easter, when Lent and Holy Week include practices and services retelling the sacred story. Jesus’s birth is celebrated through song, dramatic presentations, and gift-giving each December 25 (for Catholics and Protestants) and in early January (for Orthodox Christians).
 3. More than two million Muslims participate in the *hajj* (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), during which they reenact events associated with Abraham and with Muhammad’s

farewell trip to Mecca. The *hajj* is a very powerful, life-changing experience for many Muslims.

4. Hindus and practitioners of other religions in India celebrate *Diwali*, a festival of lights, each year to commemorate enlightenment and the triumph of good over evil. *Diwali* is a celebration of the realization of the *atman* within us.
5. The Buddha's birth and enlightenment are also celebrated annually in various festivals.

II. We can identify several differences and similarities between lifecycle rituals and calendar rituals.

- A. In both, we find performative dimensions—things that are being accomplished in the process of the ritual—as well as repetitive practices. Sacred symbols, sacred time, and sacred space also converge in both types of rituals.
- B. A lifecycle ritual, however, is theoretically performed only once in a lifetime, changing the status of the participant as he or she moves through the lifecycle. Because calendar rituals repeat, they tend to encompass a quality of renewal, which may be rekindled daily, weekly, or annually.

III. James Livingston identifies four main stages that characterize calendar or seasonal religious rituals of renewal: mortification, purgation, invigoration, and jubilation. These stages are evident in the practices associated with *Yom Kippur*, in Christian worship services, and in other religious rituals.

IV. As we will see in the next lecture, sacrifice, the principle of giving up something in order to achieve something else, is often a central feature among the many elements woven into religious rituals.

Suggested Readings:

Jean Holm and John Bowker, *Worship (Themes in Religious Studies)*.

Geoffrey Parrinder, *Worship in the World's Religions*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Can you identify several different ways religious calendar rituals influence your community and the wider society?

2. How can an awareness of the common components and predictable patterns in calendar or seasonal rituals be used to enhance your family traditions and rituals?

Lecture Fifteen

Ritual Sacrifice in the World's Religions

Scope: Sacrifice is often a key feature of religious rituals. At first glance, ancient practices involving animal or even human sacrifice are shocking to modern sensibilities. The universal practice of sacrificial rituals begs intriguing questions about this phenomenon that unites religious understanding and practice around the globe: What is going on? Why do human beings engage in sacrificial rituals?

A comparative examination of ritual sacrifice reveals common understandings and anticipated outcomes. The practice of giving up something to achieve something else is deeply rooted in all our lives. Almost all people engage in sacrificial behavior everyday—as students, as athletes, in business, and in family life. The same basic principles apply in religious contexts, where three common interpretations can be discerned: sacrifice as a simple bargain or exchange, as a means to secure a social bond in the community, or as an atonement or expiation for sins. The more valuable the sacrifice, the more people expect in return. Enlightening illustrations from different religions clarify the ways religious people sacrifice time, money, and physical pleasures to achieve desired goals.

Outline

- I. Sacrifice is a universal human phenomenon. The idea of sacrificing something—such as an animal—to achieve divine favor seems bizarre initially, but the principle is rooted in daily experience.
 - A. The principle of sacrifice is readily visible with athletes, musicians, students, and others who routinely forego more pleasurable activity to realize goals that require great time and effort.
 - B. The principle of sacrifice is universally seen in the religions we are studying.
 1. The Hindu *Vedas* describes the self-sacrifice of Purusha, a god whose systematic dismemberment links to the elements of creation.

2. Early Buddhist monks took five vows: not to engage in sexual activity, not to handle money, not to sleep on soft beds, not to drink alcohol, and not to eat after noon. Many monks today still follow these and many other precepts as a part of the discipline that is expected and required of them.
3. Catholic priests, monks, and nuns take vows of poverty and chastity. In some orders in the Catholic tradition, in fact, a monk may take a vow of silence, sacrificing verbal communication and community in an even deeper solitary pursuit of the vocation of prayer, meditation, and worship.
4. The early Christians sacrificed property and possessions so that no one in the community of faith was in need.

II. Ritual sacrifice is a central feature in biblical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The term “sacrifice” comes from Latin and means “to make holy.”

A. The Torah, the first five books of the Bible, is filled with numerous stories and specific instructions about the ritual sacrifices required by God.

1. In Genesis 22, Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac at God’s command. In other parts of the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that all things come from God and that the first portion of what God has given, he expects to be returned.
2. In Leviticus 4, sacrifice of an unblemished she-goat is prescribed for those who commit a sin unintentionally.
3. Elaborate sacrificial rituals were performed at the Temple in Jerusalem until its destruction in 70 C.E. As the role of priests disappeared, the Jewish tradition changed so that prayer and acts of loving-kindness became the new forms of offering to God.

B. Muslims practice animal sacrifice to this day.

1. The Qur’an includes the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son—in this case, Ishmael. Muslims continue to commemorate this event with the practice of animal sacrifice.
2. Ritual sacrifice of sheep (and other animals) is an important component of *Eid al-Adha*, the great festival commemorating Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son at the conclusion of the *hajj*.

3. Rituals of self-sacrifice to identify with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (Muhammad's grandson) are part of the most solemn annual *Ashura* events among Shi'ite Muslims.

C. In the Christian tradition, Jesus, the "lamb of God," is sacrificed to erase the sins of the world.

1. Although the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus are the central events in the Gospel narratives, Christians have always debated how to understand and interpret Jesus's self-sacrifice in relation to the doctrine of the atonement.
2. The Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, is the Christian sacrament that celebrates the sacrifice of Christ: "Take and eat. This is my body which is broken for you. . . . Take and drink. This is my blood which is poured out for you." The meaning and interpretation of this sacrificial ritual and its continued application vary tremendously within Christianity.

III. The Hindu *sannyasin* gives up material things—family, friends, name, all attachments to this world—in pursuit of the ultimate goal of *moksha*, release from the cycle of existence.

IV. Three common interpretations are applied to ritual sacrifice.

- A. At a basic level, sacrifice can be interpreted as a simple bargain or exchange. The greater the value of the offering, the more is expected in return for it, a principle that can be seen in devotional acts, such as taking vows of poverty and chastity, as well as actual sacrifices of animals or human beings.
- B. Sacrifice can also be interpreted as a means to secure a social bond in the community. The practices of *Yom Kippur* can be seen in this light, as well as the sacrificial rites associated with *Eid al-Adha*: The wholeness and well-being of the community are affirmed in these ritual activities. Martyrdom can be seen in this context, as well.
- C. Sacrifice can be interpreted as an atonement or expiation for sins—a ritual sacrifice as a propitiation for sins or a means to appease God's wrath.

Suggested Readings:

Jeffrey Carter, ed., *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader (Controversies in the Study of Religion)*.

S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What connections can you identify between common expressions of sacrifice and religious ritual sacrifice with which you are familiar?
2. How might the comparative study of religious sacrifice and rituals associated with sacrifices help clarify, deepen, or confuse the meaning or interpretation of Jesus's Crucifixion?

Lecture Sixteen

The Human Predicament—How to Overcome It

Scope: Every religious tradition is predicated on the notion that something is dreadfully wrong. The world as we experience it is not ideal. At least one major impediment blocks the path toward fulfillment in the physical world and, often, in the afterlife. The religions are united in presenting worldviews that explain the nature and purpose of existence. Sacred stories convey vital information about the human predicament, namely, what went wrong or why people are blocked from experiencing the ideal state of existence. The structural patterns are the same, though the actual “problem” humans must overcome varies significantly.

This lecture establishes the broader framework for the following five lectures, including a consideration of the universal problems posed by evil and injustice. At this point, many of the components we have been examining come together to illuminate that which is at the heart of the religions. In future lectures, we’ll explore the nature of the human predicament in more detail and the four major paths to achieve the desired goal or goals of the religions.

Outline

- I. Every religion begins with the assumption that the world as we experience it is not ideal—something is dreadfully wrong—and each religion identifies and addresses the fundamental predicament hindering or blocking realization of the desired goals. This lecture will outline the framework to be explored in detail in the following five lectures.
 - A. Stories of creation and other sacred stories identify the nature and purpose of creation and offer a glimpse of the possible return to the ideal.
 1. In the creation accounts in Genesis, God creates the heavens and the Earth, human beings, and the various animals and declares his Creation to be “very good.”
 2. Hindu understanding of creation, dissolution, and re-creation establishes a recurrent pattern within which humans can comprehend their place in the cycle of existence.

- B. The nature of the human predicament is woven into the religious worldview, framed by creation accounts and other sacred stories within the religions.
 - 1. Genesis 3 records the story of human disobedience and separation from God. This story is foundational for Judaism and Christianity and is affirmed in Islam, as well, but with different interpretations in the three religions.
 - 2. Islam identifies the fundamental problem for human beings as forgetfulness. Human beings know that they were created by God and that they will be accountable to God, but they get distracted.
 - 3. For Hindus and Buddhists, ignorance about the nature of reality is the predicament that must be overcome if one is to be released from the cycle of reincarnation. We are misguided by *maya*, “illusion,” in the physical realm.
 - C. Although we find a general consensus among religions about the ultimate goal, we also see wide variations on the nature of the desired end (for example, heaven; *nirvana*, full consciousness, *moksha*, release from the cycle of existence) within and across religious lines.
 - 1. For some contemporary Jews and most Christians and Muslims, the desired goal is heaven. But for many Jews today, there is no belief in an existence beyond this life.
 - 2. The ultimate goal of Hindu religious life is *moksha*, release from the cycle of existence into a state where one’s soul is fully reintegrated with the Brahman.
 - 3. Buddhists speak of *nirvana* as the blissful state that can be realized with right effort and guidance.
 - D. In different ways, all the religions affirm that full awareness or an experiential realization of the ultimate goal is available now in this life, although it may be incomplete.
- II.** The religions present four primary paths to reach the desired goal or goals.
- A. Although one path may be the primary focus of a particular religion, many people embrace two or more approaches.
 - B. The four paths are the way of faith, the way of devotion, the way of disciplined action, and the way of meditation. These will be described and illustrated in detail in Lectures Twenty and Twenty-One.

- III.** What of those who don't reach the desired goal of heaven, or *nirvana*, or *moksha*? All the religions include some bad news along the way: hell, purgatory, or rebirth, perhaps rebirth at some lower station.
- A.** Some parts of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions include heavens and hells, but these tend to be subsumed back into the larger process of creation and re-creation.
 - B.** Some ideas of hell take hold in what becomes Orthodox Judaism, but for most Conservative and Reform Jews, the notions of hell are not well developed and not embraced with the same vigor that is found among many Christians and Muslims in their view of hell.
- IV.** Challenging questions and issues posed by the reality of evil and injustice are woven into the worldview and the nature of the human predicament presented by the different religions.
- A.** How can one account for, or make sense of, disease, starvation, disasters, and so on? Why do injustice and calamity fall on the righteous as much as or even more than the unrighteous?
 - B.** Hindu and Buddhist responses to evil and injustice are framed by understandings of *karma*.
 - C.** Religions that embrace a view of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent must wrestle with these questions in the context of "theodicy" (the "justice of God"). If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present, then how do we explain evil and injustice?
 - 1.** This question has been central in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and it explains the existence of the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible.
 - 2.** Some Christian leaders in the United States have declared that somehow God's judgment was involved in such tragedies as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina. Although most Christians would not agree, perhaps those leaders are trying to understand God as being all-powerful and all-knowing, connected to events on Earth and issuing warnings to those he created.
 - 3.** Why are prayers sometimes answered and sometimes not? Does God pick and choose? People wrestle with such questions in the context of theodicy.

Suggested Readings:

Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Leslie Stevenson, *The Study of Human Nature: A Reader*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Do you agree that there is a “human predicament” and, if so, how would you describe it?
2. Can you identify four or five ways the problem of theodicy has surfaced in your experience, either personally or as an observer of challenges confronting others?

Lecture Seventeen

The Problems of Sin and Forgetfulness

Scope: Jews, Christians, and Muslims understand the fundamental human predicament in different but related ways. The sacred stories in the early chapters of Genesis tell of the Creation and the separation of human beings from God through human sinfulness. The Jewish tradition pivots around these stories and the legal and sacrificial requirements that enable the people of Israel to seek reconciliation with God. Christians affirm that Jesus, through his self-sacrifice, overcomes sin and death to make reconciliation with God possible. These teachings appear to be simple and straightforward. Over the centuries, however, some groups of Jews and Christians have promulgated and lived out different understandings of the meaning of the Law and sacrifice and Jesus's death and Resurrection.

Muslims agree that humans are sinful, selfish, and prideful, but the fundamental problem is one of forgetfulness. There is no doctrine of original sin in Islam. Human beings are born with the knowledge of God and the awareness that one day we will all be accountable to the Creator. Left to our own devices, we are easily distracted by personal and selfish pursuits. At the heart of Islam are teachings and practices, especially the Five Pillars of Islam, that help Muslims remain focused on God and prepare for the Day of Judgment.

Outline

- I. For Jews, sin is the primary impediment separating human beings from God. The creation stories in Genesis 1–2 are followed by the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience, fall from grace, and expulsion from the idyllic life in the Garden of Eden. The religious structure for biblical Israel builds on the foundation of these stories in pursuit of reconciliation with God through obedience to God's decrees and laws.
 - A. There is no doctrine of original sin in Judaism. People are born innocent and have a propensity to sin.
 - B. The Hebrew Bible reflects an ongoing pattern of human failures, followed by new beginnings. God establishes the nature of the relationship and sets forth specific guidance for religious rituals

and moral and legal mandates, but the people repeatedly abandon or disobey God's laws. A series of prophets, sacred people who speak God's messages to a particular time and place, arise to call the people of Israel back to God.

1. The pattern of human failure, God's forgiveness, and new beginnings is woven into the fabric of Israel's prehistory, found in Genesis 1–11, and continues throughout the Hebrew Bible.
2. The people of Israel repeatedly lose their way, even on the Exodus from Egypt.
3. Israel's first three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—are heroic but also flawed. In the attempt to reconcile themselves with God, David and Solomon build the Temple in Jerusalem and create the sacrificial rites that will come to be centered there.
4. What God is concerned about is moral and ethical behavior, righteousness, justice, deeds of loving-kindness, and so forth.

II. For Christianity, a religion growing out of Judaism, the fundamental problem is also lodged in the Genesis story of human disobedience and sinfulness. The way to be reconciled to God is no longer found in the observance of sacrificial rituals but in the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, the incarnate son of God.

- A.** The four Gospels depict the Crucifixion and Resurrection but do not interpret these events.
 1. Paul links the meaning of Jesus's sacrificial death to the sin of Adam in I Corinthians 15:21–22.
 2. The Qur'an speaks of Jesus as a great prophet. In fact, Jesus figures prominently in Islam and is mentioned frequently in the Qur'an, even in schemes of "eschatology," the teachings about the end of time.
- B.** Augustine, the influential 5th-century theologian, articulated the doctrine of original sin, a view that explained the human predicament and the necessity of Jesus's sacrificial death. His views had an enormous impact on Catholic and Protestant theology.
 1. Original sin is linked to the practice of infant baptism.
 2. John Calvin, the father of the reform movement that produced the Presbyterian Church and other denominations, was convinced that human existence was framed by predestination.

In his view, original sin resulted in total depravity for humanity; people will be saved by Jesus, but only those whom God has elected.

3. Understanding the human predicament in the Christian tradition elicits a number of questions: Once we are forgiven our sins, can we still fall from grace? What must we do to benefit from the sacrifice of Jesus? Do we have to pray? Do we have to confess our sins? Do we have to ask God for forgiveness?

III. In Islamic understanding, human beings are sinful, prideful, and selfish, but the fundamental problem is that humans are forgetful and easily distracted from what ultimately matters, namely, God. The Muslim confession of faith—“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God”—is both straightforward and comprehensive.

- A. There is no doctrine of original sin in Islam.
- B. Islam teaches that all human beings are born with the knowledge of God.
- C. In Islam, God is the Creator, the Sustainer, and ultimately, the judge. God is the one to whom we are all accountable. Most people have the image of God, Allah, as the Creator and the judge at the end of time, but many overlook God as the Sustainer.
 1. The one God who is transcendent over all the universe is also intimately connected to each of us: “God is closer to you than your jugular vein” (Qur’an 50:16).
 2. The only reason we are alive is that God created us and sustains our lives from moment to moment.
- D. The second half of the confession of faith, “... and Muhammad is the messenger of God,” affirms that God has not left us alone but has revealed through many prophets and messengers what humans need to know.
- E. The Five Pillars of Islam are all connected with the problem of human forgetfulness. These ritual devotional duties can help the faithful to remember God constantly.
 1. The *shahadah* is the confession of faith—“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God”—that Muslims should reaffirm daily.
 2. *Salat* refers to the five daily prayers of Islam. Believers should stop whatever they are doing, ritually cleanse themselves, and

- conduct the prayers at five prescribed times every day to stay focused on what ultimately matters.
3. *Zakat* is charitable giving; Muslims are supposed to give 2½ percent of their overall wealth annually to those in need. All that we have comes from God, and those who are most fortunate should be eager to give to religious and charitable causes.
 4. *Sawm* is the fast from sunrise until sundown each day during the lunar month of Ramadan. By refraining from food, drink, and other pleasurable activities during the daylight hours, Muslims are reminded that all things come from God and that spiritual growth can be enhanced by physical self-denial.
 5. The *hajj* is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. It is a powerful, life-changing event that underscores equality before God.

Suggested Readings:

I Corinthians 15.

Book of Job.

Genesis 3.

Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, new ed.

Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*.

Questions to Consider:

1. A central affirmation of Christianity is that Jesus died for the sins of the world. What has been the primary way you have understood or been taught the meaning of this declaration, and how does it relate to other major theories of the atonement?
2. What ritual and devotional practices in Judaism or Christianity specifically assist the faithful in addressing the human predicament in a manner parallel to the function of the Five Pillars of Islam?

Lecture Eighteen

Breaking through the Illusion of Reality

Scope: Hinduism and Buddhism are broad categories that include hundreds of religious traditions that vary dramatically in many ways. These traditions are linked by similar worldviews that include the law of *karma* and the notion of cycles of existence, *samsara*. In different ways, Hindu and Buddhist traditions identify ignorance of the nature of reality or the “illusion of reality” as the predicament that keeps people trapped in the cycles of death and rebirth. This lecture identifies the orientations to time and existence (that is, megacycles of creation and rebirth) rooted in the Indian subcontinent.

Outline

- I. At one level, the Hindu religious tradition includes a wide variety of beliefs and practices that shape the orientation of many followers while recognizing diversity. At a deeper level, most Hindus are united around the ideas of *karma* and reincarnation within the cycles of existence (*samsara*) as the problem to be overcome.
 - A. *Karma* and reincarnation explain how the cycles of birth and rebirth work for those—the vast majority of people—who are trapped in the illusion (*maya*) of the physical realm.
 1. The human predicament is that most people live and function in the context of the physical world—an illusion, not reality.
 2. A famous story about a man in a terrible predicament illustrates the depth and foolishness of the illusion in the sensual world.
 - B. From the creation of the world to the destruction of the world is a day, or a *kalpa*, in the life of the Creator god Brahma, which calculates to 4.32 billion years for humans. When that time has passed, dissolution will take place, and the process of creation will start again.
 - C. The great truth articulated in the *Upanishads* is that, ultimately, only the Brahman is real. And that which is “real” in us, our “soul essence,” or *atman*, is actually part of the Brahman: *Tat tvam asi*.

- D. The Hindu tradition includes many paths that can, over many lifetimes, enable people to move toward the spiritual awareness that will allow release from the cycles of birth and rebirth in this world.
 - E. *The Matrix* is a popular film that reflects Hindu and Buddhist teaching about the illusion of reality in the physical realm.
- II.** Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was an Indian seeker who achieved enlightenment under the Bo tree near Banaras. His first sermon included four points; the first two spelled out the fundamental predicament humans face, while the last two offered a hopeful way forward.
- A. The Buddha's first point zeros in on the reality of impermanence, loss, and suffering: "All life is *dukkha*."
 - 1. Suffering comes in many forms: injury, illness, old age, death, and so on.
 - 2. Everything in our world is impermanent. Human failure to recognize this fact and respond accordingly fuels suffering.
 - 3. Our lives are enmeshed in impermanence and loss. The result is many different forms of disappointment.
 - 4. Even when we get what we want, we feel little satisfaction.
 - B. The second Noble Truth identifies the cause of human suffering as desire.
 - 1. Desire leads to attachment—to things, people, power, status, and so forth.
 - 2. To seek fulfillment and satisfaction through attachment to objects of one's desire reveals the problem of ignorance about the nature of reality.
 - 3. To become enlightened, we must let go of these attachments. Interestingly, this surrender seems to produce a sense of joy and fulfillment. This is one of the reasons that Buddhism has had such a strong appeal in recent decades in the Western world.
- III.** The doctrines of *karma* and *samsara* provide a coherent answer to the questions of theodicy.
- A. We are who we are and things happen as they happen in the context of the law of *karma*.

1. A child born with a physical defect or the misfortune of an individual can be attributed to karmic consequences in a previous existence or this existence.
 2. Recognizing *karma* and the “justice” of one’s circumstances should lead individuals to seek to do what is right and good within the context of their station in life.
 3. The Buddha put forth the notion of *karma* as the reason for the manifest inequalities of human fate and fortune.
- B.** The situation is not hopeless. In the third and fourth Noble Truths, the Buddha offers hope through the discipline of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Suggested Readings:

Vasuda Narayanan, “Hinduism,” chap. 4 in *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions*, Michael D. Coogan, ed.

Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, chaps. 1–3.

Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, chaps. 2–3.

Questions to Consider:

1. Do you think the Buddha has articulated a powerful, universal truth with the assertion “All life is *dukkha*”? Why or why not?
2. In addition to *The Matrix*, what other films have drawn on prominent Hindu and Buddhist understandings of the human predicament?

Chapter Nineteen

The Goals of Religious Life

Scope: All religions identify intermediate and ultimate goals. Although the most obvious goals are often other-worldly (for example, heaven/paradise, *nirvana*), adherents claim it is possible to experience something of the ultimate goal here and now. This lecture elucidates the different ways—literal, metaphorical, mystical—in which leaders in several major religions describe the ultimate goal of human existence.

Once again, we find numerous parallels and similarities between and within the religions. One key connecting point is discerned in the shared understanding that ultimate meaning must be found beyond physical existence. Life on this Earth is fleeting. The religions provide a framework for meaning in existence that can enable devotees to let go of the physical.

Outline

- I. In most religions, the ultimate goal may be realized fully only after physical death. But the spiritual realm is not always completely divorced from the physical world of our experience.
 - A. Sacred stories and texts reflect different types of interplay between the physical world and the spiritual realm.
 1. On the night before he is to die, King Saul seeks out a medium at Endor (I Samuel 28) to summon up the spirit of the deceased Samuel, hoping that Samuel will give him guidance that has not been forthcoming from God.
 2. The Apostle Paul writes of what appears to be an out-of-body spiritual experience in which he ascends to the third heaven (II Corinthians 12:2); there, he sees and learns things he cannot describe.
 3. In many branches of Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha and *bodhisattva* figures sit in heaven and dispense grace and merit to those who call out to them for assistance.

- B.** The founding figures of religions often make the linkage between this world and the heavenly realm.
1. Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, opens his mouth to reveal the universe to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.
 2. The Gospel of John begins with the declaration of Jesus as the eternal creative Word of God that has been made flesh and dwelt among us.
 3. Although the Buddha achieves *nirvana*, rather than remain in that blissful state, he decides to return to this realm out of compassion and to teach others the way.
 4. Muhammad's famous *mi'raj* (night journey) includes a miraculous spiritual journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and an ascent into heaven for a vision of paradise.

II. The goals of religious life are sometimes framed as a present or future reality in this world.

- A.** It is possible to achieve—fully or partially—the ultimate religious experience here and now.
1. The Hindu *sannyasin* is one who, though physically present in the body, has cut all ties with this world.
 2. For Zen Buddhists, the goal is *satori*, deep, lasting enlightenment.
 3. For many Reform Jews, particularly those who do not believe in an afterlife for humans as sentient beings, doing God's will and what is right are great rewards here and now.
 4. The parables of Jesus present a picture of the Kingdom of God that is both future and dawning. One can experience something of God's Kingdom even now.
 5. The Qur'an and *hadith* materials are rather explicit in terms of heaven and hell and the nature of judgment, but upon closer inspection, Islamic eschatology (the study of end times) can be as convoluted and confusing as Christian eschatology.
- B.** Sometimes, the hoped-for goal may be realized in the future on this Earth.
1. Orthodox Jews anticipate and pray for the day when they believe God miraculously will bring down a new Temple complex from heaven to restore Jerusalem.
 2. Many millions of Christians (mostly Western Protestants) embrace a premillennial theology that teaches that Jesus will

soon return to defeat the forces of Satan and establish a thousand-year reign of peace in this world.

III. The most common understanding of the ultimate goal involves a future state to be experienced on the other side of death.

A. Christianity and Islam focus on heaven as the ultimate goal and reward for the people of God.

1. In the New Testament, Paul reminds the Christians at Corinth “for now we see through a glass, darkly, not yet face to face,” and he tells the Philippians that to die is to be with Christ.
2. Jeffrey Russell traces the development of popular Christian views of heaven in *A History of Heaven*. Many Christians seem to have an idea of heaven that has more to do with Dante’s *Inferno* and *Paradiso* than with material that is actually in the Bible.
3. The Qur’an and *hadith* materials clearly depict heaven as a rich, green, cool “garden with fruit near at hand” and many other sensual delights.

B. Hindu and Buddhist ideals of release and achievement of a blissful state are connected to the ultimate goals.

1. *Moksha* is release or liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of existence. The state may not be permanent, however, because the cycle of dissolution and re-creation recurs every 4.32 billion years.
2. *Nirvana*, a concept more subtle and difficult to grasp, transcends rational description or understanding.

IV. However the various conceptions of the afterlife or ultimate goals are framed, the religions are united in recognizing that the meaning of existence is ultimately to be found beyond the physical.

Suggested Readings:

Harold Coward, ed., *Life after Death in World Religions*.

Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*.

Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*.

Rifat Sonsino and Daniel Syme, eds., *What Happens After I Die? Jewish Views of Life After Death*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What might be some possible explanations for the widespread religious convictions about various types of meaningful interplay between life on Earth as we know it and a spiritual realm associated with afterlife?
2. Think of five or six popular ways “heaven” is depicted in films, religious texts, *New Yorker* magazine cartoons, and so on. How might one understand such images and ideas in relation to the far less anthropomorphic teachings about existence beyond the physical found among Hindus and Buddhists?

Lecture Twenty

The Way of Faith and the Way of Devotion

Scope: Amidst the myriad ways practitioners pursue religious life, four primary paths to the ultimate goals can be discerned: the way of devotion, the way of faith, the way of disciplined action, and the way of meditation. Parallel manifestations of these paths are present in varying degrees within most religious traditions, though the nature of the human predicament to be overcome varies. Although some adherents strictly follow a particular path, many others in the same religion follow more than one path simultaneously.

In this lecture, we consider the differences between faith and belief. The way of faith is illustrated in the teachings of both Martin Luther (and the Protestant tradition that resulted from Luther's theology) and Shinran, the influential monk who helped shape the popular Pure Land school of Buddhism in Japan. The way of devotion is illustrated in the most popular form of piety in contemporary India, the *bhakti* devotional practices associated with the gods Krishna and Shiva.

Outline

- I. Identifying the nature of the human predicament and clarifying the goals religious adherents hope to realize raise a fundamental question: How can one get from here to the goal? The religions provide variations on four basic paths for faithful followers. (The latter two paths will be discussed in future chapters.)
 - A. The four paths are the way of faith, the way of devotion, the way of disciplined action, and the way of meditation.
 - B. We will examine these four approaches pursued by Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims in this and the following lecture, after describing some of the interplay among these paths within the religions.
 1. In some of the religions, such as Zen Buddhism, one path is highlighted as *the way*.
 2. In many religious traditions, different groups or sects emphasize different paths as primary.

3. In some instances, such as classical approaches within the Hindu tradition, multiple paths are affirmed based on the recognition that different people have different orientations and cognitive abilities.
- C. Although four distinct paths can be discerned, the lines separating these approaches to religious practice are not rigidly fixed. Many people, in fact, actively pursue two or more paths simultaneously.
- II.** The way of faith is the first of the four paths.
- A.** Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546 C.E.) was a highly visible and influential advocate of this approach.
1. Despite his rigorous efforts as a monk and a scholar, Luther could not achieve a sense of righteousness before God.
 2. Lecturing on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Luther seized on the insight “the just shall live by faith.” He concluded that no amount of good works, penance, or indulgences could overcome one’s sinfulness and unrighteousness before God.
 3. Luther declared that God’s forgiveness and our reconciliation were free gifts of grace, received by faith.
 4. Luther was troubled by the inclusion in the New Testament of the Book of James, which declares, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20).
- B.** Four centuries before Martin Luther, Shinran (1173–1263 C.E.), an influential monk who helped shape the Pure Land school of Buddhism in Japan, advocated the way of faith.
1. Shinran’s teachings appear to diverge substantially from fundamental teachings of Siddhartha Gautama.
 2. Whereas the Buddha taught that individuals must work out their own salvation, Shinran argued that it was not possible to achieve the goal apart from the grace and assistance of Amida Buddha. This savior figure sits in the Western paradise and will dispense grace and merit on all who call out to him in faith: “*Namu Amida Butsu*” (“I call upon the name of Amida Buddha”).
 3. Shinran, like Luther, rejected the practice of celibacy for monks. Both men married and established the tradition of married clergy in their respective movements.
 4. Pure Land Buddhism is the most popular and widely practiced form among the 13 schools of Buddhism in Japan today.

- C. In his landmark book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that faith is a fundamental component of what we call religion.
1. Smith acknowledges some interplay between faith and belief but argues that the two are fundamentally different.
 2. Belief involves a kind of intellectual assent to a proposition. Beliefs change; they are more flexible and are always being refined.
 3. Smith describes faith as a fundamental human quality, one found in people—sometimes to a great extent, sometimes hard to detect—in all religious traditions.
 4. Smith offers a fascinating, inclusive, and provocative definition of faith. Faith, he argued, is a quality of human living that takes the form of serenity, courage, loyalty, and service. For Smith, faith is a quality that defines not only a religious life but human life.

III. The way of devotion is the second major path to ultimate goals.

- A. The way of devotion is generally found in combination with faith and disciplined action, but there are distinctive features associated with this path.
1. Practitioners of devotional piety often emphasize personal feelings and emotional connection with the divine.
 2. The religious practice of those who follow the way of devotion is frequently less structured than those focused on disciplined action.
 3. The Sufi mystics of Islam and mystics in other religions often describe God and their spiritual practices in the language of devotion.
- B. Amidst the tremendous religious diversity in the Hindu tradition, the way of *bhakti* (devotion) is the most popular form of piety today.
1. *Bhakti* is associated with the two most popular deities: Vishnu and Shiva.
 2. Krishna, an *avatar* or incarnation of Vishnu, is made known through several forms, including the chariot driver at the center of the dialogue in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the enticing one who lures the wives of the cowherds out into the forest at dusk.

3. Daily rites focused on showing hospitality and devotion to the Lord Krishna are practiced widely by Hindus all over the world.

Suggested Readings:

John S. Hawley and Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 2nd rev. ed.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, new ed.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do you respond to W. C. Smith's assertion that important distinctions between faith and belief have been obscured in the English-speaking world and that this confusion has contributed to a less dynamic understanding of human religious life?
2. What are some possible implications for interpreting the parallel paths of faith and devotion in different religions?

Lecture Twenty-One

The Way of Action and the Way of Meditation

Scope: The way of disciplined action is the most widely practiced path to the ultimate goal. This path is readily observed in the legal traditions of biblical Israel and Islam, the rigid Hindu caste system, and elsewhere. Muslims can overcome forgetfulness by following the Five Pillars of Islam and obeying a range of legal injunctions guiding personal and communal life. Those who remain on the straight path hope that they will be found worthy when the book recording their deeds is presented on the Day of Judgment. Similarly, in the Hindu tradition, doing the duty defined by one's caste and station in life may result in rebirth in a more advanced state on the path to ultimate release from the cycle of existence. Disciplined meditation is another form of "action" that is particularly efficacious among Buddhists and Hindus.

Outline

- I. The vast majority of believers express their convictions and hopes through prosaic and visible patterns of religious activities, such as rituals and obligatory moral codes. This is the way of disciplined action.
 - A. In this lecture, we'll explore the way of disciplined action primarily through examples from the Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish traditions.
 - B. Disciplined action in carrying out one's prescribed duties in worship, rituals, family life, ethical behavior, and so on has many benefits for the individual, the religious tradition, and society.
 1. The religious worldview is sustained and reinforced as adherents live out the sacred stories, nurture the next generation, and maintain religious and societal institutions through morally sanctioned behavior.
 2. Disciplined action reflects obedience to the ordinances mediated through prophets, priests, sages, saviors, and others recognized as sacred figures.
 3. Disciplined action helps adherents function meaningfully and constructively in the context of the human predicament.

4. Finally, disciplined action underscores the widespread conviction that relates behavior in the physical world to one's future status beyond death.
- II.** The Hindu religious tradition recognizes various paths for different people. In India, for the large majority who have embraced the classical caste system throughout the centuries, the way of disciplined action is paramount—often in combination with another path, such as the way of devotion.
- A. The *Dharma-shastras* are ancient sacred texts that detail one's duty (*dharma*) based on one's caste and stage of life.
 - B. The elaborate caste structure that emerged in India is called the *varnashrama dharma* system. The *varna* ("caste") into which one is born is fixed based on the laws of *karma*, but one's *ashrama* ("stage of life") changes as one moves through the lifecycle. An individual's *dharma* ("duty or obligation") is determined by a combination of caste and station in life.
 1. The four main castes, within which are hundreds of subcastes, are Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (military and political leaders), Vaishyas (farmers, businessmen, and so on), and Shudras (workers). The outcastes or untouchables are below the Shudras. Only boys in the top three castes may take part in the sacred thread investiture ceremony, which launches them on the stages of life with the accompanying duties.
 2. The four *ashramas*, or stages of life, are as follows: student (beginning between the ages of 8 and 12), married householder (the stage in which most Hindus remain for a given life), forest dweller (a retreat or retirement to the forest once family duties have been fulfilled), and *sannyasin* (the stage of the recluse who has cut all ties to this world, including family, possessions, and obligations).
 - C. Much has changed in India during the past century. Mahatma Gandhi visibly challenged this rigid system and openly embraced outcastes. In modern India, discrimination based on the caste system is illegal. At the same time, much of this traditional system remains and guides the religious life of hundreds of millions of Hindus today.

III. The Five Pillars of Islam and the systems of Islamic law provide a solid structure to guide Muslims on the straight path so that they may be found worthy on the Day of Judgment.

A. The Five Pillars address the problem of human forgetfulness by providing disciplined ways to remain focused on the God who created, sustains, and will one day judge us all.

1. The daily prayers (*salat*) begin at sunrise and are spaced throughout the day into early evening. The process of carrying out the prayers requires ritual cleansing, prescribed bodily postures, orientation toward Mecca, and recitation of Qur'anic passages. All elements remind the believer of what ultimately matters: God.
2. The fast (*sawm*) during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan is also a challenging discipline, reinforcing the idea that everything comes from God and encouraging those who have been blessed to share willingly with the less fortunate.

B. The entire system of Islamic law developed as a framework for clarifying what is required, permissible, allowed, and forbidden. The social, political, and legal structures within Islam reflect the view that Muslims (and others) need structure and disciplined action in all aspects of life.

1. The premise behind the ideal of an Islamic state—a much-debated topic globally in the 21st century—is that Islam provides a comprehensive way of life that encompasses religion, politics, economics, the military, and so on.
2. Although Muslims are far from united on what precisely an ideal state should look like in a given nation, the ideal itself remains compelling to people in more than 50 countries with Muslim majorities.

IV. The Torah, or the Law, the first five books of the Bible, details many laws, prescribed rituals, and moral imperatives that God requires of the people of Israel.

A. The Book of Leviticus spells out the requirements for different annual rituals and festivals marking the calendar year.

B. The Ten Commandments appear in several forms as the cornerstone of a much-expanded legal system to guide Israel.

1. Traditionally, there are 613 *mitzvot*, that is, requirements, that are set forth in the Torah.

2. Contemporary Orthodox and many contemporary Conservative Jews work diligently to follow commandments spelled out in the Torah, such as strict dietary laws.
- C. Although most Reform Jews today interpret the meaning of the stringent legal requirements less rigidly than the Orthodox Jews, they still embrace a path of disciplined action in various ways.
1. The observance of the Sabbath as a day for worship, rejoicing, and rest is widespread among practicing Jews.
 2. Many rituals—from circumcision of eight-day-old boys and Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrations at age 12 or 13 to annual celebrations of Passover and *Rosh Hashana*—are faithfully embraced by Jews whose theological views differ markedly from the Orthodox.
- V. The Buddhist tradition also embraces many forms of disciplined action.
- A. The rigorous practices of meditation are, by definition, a form of disciplined action.
 - B. Lay Buddhists provide for certain needs of the monastic community in the hope that they will accrue good *karma*.
- VI. Among Christians of all persuasions, we can see many manifestations of the way of disciplined action: worship, tithing or financial support, and moral and ethical behavior.
- VII. The fourth major path, the way of meditation, requires disciplined action as the individual turns inward in pursuit of the goal of liberation or full awareness. This path has been practiced primarily by spiritual seekers in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.
- A. Indian seekers developed and refined *yoga*, challenging techniques involving both physical discipline (posture and breathing) and mental discipline (mindfulness and concentration) to detach from the illusory physical realm.
 1. In classical Hinduism, the forest dweller “retires” to the forest to develop and practice this spiritual discipline.
 2. The *Upanishads* include the philosophical insights of spiritual seekers. As we have seen, *tat tvam asi* (“That, art thou”) is a major Upanishadic insight that underscores the value of this path of meditation.
 3. One of the cherished manifestations of Shiva is that of the detached ascetic sitting in the lotus position high in the Himalayan Mountains.

- B.** Siddhartha Gautama was following the classic path of the spiritual seeker when he left his home and family in pursuit of enlightenment.
1. He rejected extreme asceticism in favor of the middle path, which allowed for enough physical nourishment to enable him to think clearly.
 2. In the Buddha's first sermon, he articulated the Eightfold Path as the way to *nirvana*. The eight parts of the Noble Eightfold Path are right view, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation.
 3. Among the wide variety of Buddhist groups today, practitioners of Zen exemplify this path through sitting meditation that may last for hours at a time.

Suggested Readings:

Dale Cannon, *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are some of the primary images and commonly held beliefs about judgment and afterlife that are tied to the way of disciplined action?
2. During the past 50 years, many Christians, Jews, and people who don't self-identify with a major religion have embraced the discipline of meditation—sometimes for purely physiological reasons, sometimes for both physical and spiritual reasons. How might this and other forms of borrowing across religious lines affect the way you think about the comparative study of religion?

Lecture Twenty-Two

The Way of the Mystics

Scope: Virtually all religions include adherents whose orientation and religious practice centers on the mystical path. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, the lines separating religious traditions become blurred or erased altogether. The mystics tend to eschew outward and literal manifestations of religious life in favor of meanings conveyed through metaphor and esoteric insights.

This lecture explores several key commonalities and differences among Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim mystics. What can we learn through a comparative approach to the mystical traditions? What can the mystics illuminate about the various religious traditions?

Outline

- I. Every religion includes some adherents who call themselves mystics.
 - A. The way of the mystics interweaves with the way of meditation and the way of devotion for many religious seekers. In this lecture, we will examine the nature of mysticism, look at two major types, and illustrate how believers in very different traditions find common ground through mysticism.
 - B. The diverse phenomena associated with mysticism prevent a simple, inclusive definition of the term, but some general observations can be noted.
 1. The term “mysticism” is historically connected with the mystery cults of the ancient Greeks. Only those in an inner circle of initiates were considered capable of receiving the knowledge not available to people generally.
 2. Central to mysticism is the experience of union, though different religions seek different types of union and have different understandings of that with which union is achieved.
 3. Mysticism affirms a connection between the individual soul and the divine or Ultimate Reality; purification of the sensual self is vital to the path of the mystic.
 4. Mystics often place great importance on a teacher or guide on the spiritual path.

5. Mystics may recognize outward meanings, but they focus on inner, esoteric, or hidden meaning in sacred texts, sacred stories, and ritual acts.
6. The mystical path almost always involves a disciplined way of life.

II. Geoffrey Parrinder identifies two major types of mysticism in his study *Mysticism in the World's Religions*. The first of these is mystical Monism, found in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

A. For Hindus, Brahman is the Ultimate Reality that stands beyond all names and forms.

1. The 8th-century philosopher Shankara was the most famous exponent of Nondualism (teachings found in the *Advaita Vedanta*) in India.
2. The 330 million gods of Hinduism are, in some sense, like icons, pointers toward a reality beyond.
3. The *sannyasin* is one who no longer needs to study or recite sacred texts or partake in rituals. The *sannyasin* leaves behind name, family, gods—all of which can impede the final realization of oneness with the Brahman.

B. The experience and teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, as presented in the Theravada schools of early Buddhism, can be described as mystical, but this mysticism is clearly distinct from that in other major religions.

1. The Buddha appears to have rejected the notion of Brahman and the idea of a soul essence.
2. There is no continuation of a soul or self; the goal is to be liberated from the cycle of transmigration.
3. When the flames of desire and attachment are blown out, stillness and peace are achieved.

III. The second major type of mysticism, theistic mysticism, is present in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

A. Biblical Judaism includes the seeds of the mystical tradition, but as Gershom Scholem's classic book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, makes clear, the primary forms of mysticism are found in Kabbalism and Hasidism.

1. In addition to many stark images of God in the Hebrew Bible, one also finds descriptions of God as friend, shepherd, father, and mother. The Song of Songs employs the mystical imagery

- of sensual love to convey the love of God and the union with God's people.
2. During the Middle Ages, schools of mysticism developed into the Kabbalah, defined as "tradition that has been received."
 3. The *Zohar* ("splendor") is a long and complicated text dealing with mystical speculation. The *Zohar* teaches that love is the secret of divine unity.
- B.** Christian mysticism, rooted in the New Testament, was first manifest in the monastic movement and continues to the present day.
1. Jesus is depicted in the Gospels as one who is intimately connected to God. In Mark 9, Jesus is again declared to be God's beloved son, but he is also spiritually linked to Elijah, the first in the great line of biblical prophets, and to Moses, the great lawgiver.
 2. The developing understanding of Jesus as somehow both fully God and fully human in the early church, as well as the mystical doctrine of the Trinity, provide additional foundation for the emergence of Christian mysticism.
 3. Fourth-century Christians, such as Anthony in Egypt and Simeon in Syria, practiced rigorous asceticism and lived as hermits in isolation seeking communion with God.
 4. Numerous monastic thinkers have appeared through the centuries, including Bernard of Clairvaux (1099–1153) and Meister Eckhart (1270–1327/28).
 5. Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) described the ascent of the soul in four stages in her autobiography: the heart's devotion, the devotion of peace, the devotion of union, and the devotion of ecstasy or rapture.
 6. In the 20th century, Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) stands in a long line of Christian mystics.
- C.** Annemarie Schimmel's masterpiece, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, describes the wide range of schools and forms of practice among Sufis, the mystics of Islam.
1. For Sufis, Muhammad's night journey is the template for the spiritual life. Sufis affirm that all Muslims must make a similar journey to find God's presence.
 2. The Sufi understanding that the Word of God has more than one level of meaning has deep implications for mystical self-understanding.

3. Al-Hallaj's (c. 858–922 C.E.) mystical realization, announced in his famous declaration "*Ana al-Haqq*" ("I am the Truth"), led to his execution for heresy.
4. Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (c. 717–801 C.E.) was revered for her singular focus on the love of God as the path to unity with the Creator, Sustainer, and Beloved Friend.
5. Perhaps the best known and most celebrated Sufi of all is Jalaluddin Rumi, the prolific poet and founder of the well-known Whirling Dervishes.

IV. The mystical tradition provides common ground in what seem to be radically different religions.

- A. Sufism provided the link between Islam's uncompromising Monotheism and the Hindu veneration of 330 million gods.
- B. Celebrated Christian mystic Thomas Merton discovered that he often had more in common with Buddhist monks than with many of his fellow Christians.

Suggested Readings:

Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*.

Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what ways, apart from full participation in it, might one understand the mystical experience?
2. What explanations could be presented to account for the commonality of orientation and experience that mystics in various religions appear to share?

Lecture Twenty-Three

The Evolution of Religious Institutions

Scope: As religious communities take root and grow, they must inevitably develop and construct institutional structures. Institutions are necessary for many reasons: to perpetuate the religion, to organize worship and other ritual activities, and to establish structures of authority for clarifying differences and determining orthodox doctrine and practice. This lecture examines ways in which the first followers of the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad confronted and attempted to resolve emerging challenges and sometimes heated controversies through institutional structures. As the examples will illustrate, some institutional organizations are new creations; some are borrowed and adapted from existing social and political institutions.

Like all institutions in society, religious institutions are both necessary and limited. Designed to accomplish specific tasks, institutional structures rarely adapt easily to changing needs and circumstances. Thus, religious institutions are constantly in need of reform and renewal.

Outline

- I. Regardless of how major religions begin, in order to grow, develop, and perpetuate the religion, it is necessary to create viable institutional structures. All religions must have defined ways to organize the community, preserve and propagate orthodox teachings, carry out essential rituals, and provide structure for individuals and the community seeking to follow the prescribed paths to the desired goals.
- II. Following two observations about institutional developments in Judaism and Hinduism, this lecture will focus on the parallel dynamics in the three great missionary religions: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.
 - A. The first five books of the Bible set forth a precise institutional structure for Israel's religion. The common bonds, the ritual calendar, the adaptive ways of worship we have noted have contributed to a vital, enduring community of faith.

- B.** We can also identify and describe institutional developments and structures among Hindus. For example, organization and coherent structures are required to build and maintain temples over many centuries.

III. Founding figures are frequently reformers of existing religion, not necessarily leaders creating something entirely new.

- A.** Siddhartha Gautama, for example, embraced many of the teachings that shaped classical Hinduism but also reformed some of its major tenets, including the idea that humans have a soul essence.
- B.** Jesus was a Jewish rabbi who reinterpreted the meaning and requirements of the Law in several ways. The Sermon on the Mount challenged the traditional teaching of “an eye for an eye” and called upon offended parties to practice forgiveness rather than retribution.
- C.** Muhammad is understood as the last, or “seal,” of the prophets. Muslims affirm that the revelation delivered through the prophet is not new but is the same revelation given through other prophets and messengers. Because the teachings of Moses, Jesus, and earlier prophets had been distorted or altered, God provided the true revelation one last time, which has been recorded faithfully in the Qur’an.

IV. In Christianity, when Jesus passed from the scene, the need for structure and clear lines of authority became evident.

- A.** When the followers of Jesus could no longer appeal directly to him for guidance, the disciples, those who were closest to Jesus, assumed leadership of the burgeoning community.
- B.** The Book of Acts includes several examples in which the disciples must make decisions about the emerging institutional structure of the early church.
- C.** Later, the decisions recorded and the guidance proffered by Jesus and the earliest disciples became fixed as sacred Scriptures and played an essential role in maintaining orthodoxy.
- D.** The developing institutional structures of the Roman Catholic Church built on the efficient model of the Roman political governing system.

- V. The earliest Buddhist community was more prepared than most for the physical departure of the Buddha. Even so, issues requiring decisions about religious practices began to surface over time.
- A. The community of monks (*sangha*) and the fairly simple structures governing the monks (*bhikku*) were put in place during the Buddha’s lifetime.
 - B. According to some Buddhists, a council was convened circa 486 B.C., soon after the Buddha’s death (c. 483 B.C.), to preserve his teachings and the rules for monastic discipline.
 - C. About 100 years later (c. 386 B.C.E.), a major council was convened to adjudicate between varying practices in different monastic communities.
- VI. The death of Muhammad precipitated a major crisis. Everyone understood that Muhammad was the final prophet, but it was not clear who should assume leadership of the community. The caliph (*khalifa*) would be responsible for leadership in the realms of religious, political, economic, and military affairs.
- A. Some of the early Muslims claimed that Muhammad had specifically named Ali, the first male convert to Islam and Muhammad’s first-cousin and son-in-law, to be his successor. These were the Shi’ah (“partisans” of Ali).
 - B. The majority of the community of Muslims in Medina selected Abu Bakr to be the first caliph.
 - C. Ali was later selected by the community to be the fourth caliph (656–661 C.E.). After his rule, the Umayya family took control of the caliphate, moved the administrative center of Islam to Damascus, and established dynastic rule.
 - D. As Islamic communities grew and continued to spread north, east, and west of Arabia, clear guidance was required on all types of questions—from political and military structures to matters of personal piety. The importance of the *ulama* (scholars of the Qur’an and *hadith*) grew, along with the need to establish authoritative collections of the *hadith*.
- VII. Contemporary examples reveal the adaptation of the religions to changing circumstances with new institutional structures.
- A. The organizational structures for many Christian denominations in the United States illustrate the point clearly.

1. The Southern Baptist Convention, which emerged from the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, is organized at different levels to accomplish various tasks set out for the followers of Jesus: the local church, regional “associations” of churches, state Baptist conventions, and the national Southern Baptist Convention. Other denominations have similar organizations.
2. The modern ecumenical movement began in the mid-20th century. Within city, state, and national ecumenical organizations (such as the National Council of Churches in the United States), many different denominations—Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, Quakers, Greek Orthodox, and so on—come together to share resources in pursuit of common commitments in mission and service to others.

B. Muslim organizations have been created in recent decades in an effort to meet the needs of Muslims living as minority communities in the United States.

1. In the 1980s, the U.S. Council of Masajid (“Mosques”) helped place leaders in various mosques and community centers across the country.
2. The American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA) was formed in 1997 to foster an American-Muslim identity and build bridges between American Muslims and the American public.

VIII. Religious institutions, like other institutions in society—business, educational, governmental—have predictable limitations.

A. As we have seen, religions must develop institutional structures to carry out their mission and provide structure and guidance to their adherents. As needs change, the institutions must be flexible enough to change also, or they can become obstacles to advancement.

B. Changing forms of Christian worship in the past half century illustrate these points succinctly.

1. Before the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II (1962–1965), the Roman Catholic Mass was conducted in Latin all over the world. Conducting Mass in local languages was one of many major changes authorized by the Catholic Church in the last half century.

2. Many of the major Christian denominations, including Lutherans, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, and Methodists, began to ordain women as pastoral ministers during the past half century. In many seminaries, women today make up more than 50 percent of the student body. Other churches and denominations, including Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and many Baptists, have remained steadfast against this major change in policy.
3. Many mainline churches now have both traditional worship services and contemporary worship services on Sunday mornings. Some churches now incorporate Christian rock music in worship, a phenomenon that would have been unimaginable 40 years ago, when many clergy routinely railed against rock music as demonic.

Suggested Readings:

Michael Coogan, gen. ed., *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions*.

Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions*, 7th ed.

Questions to Consider:

1. Identify two or three ways the same sacred texts have been reinterpreted to facilitate changing societal perspectives and the structures of religious institutions for which the texts are authoritative.
2. What are some of the parallels between religious and other types of institutions you have observed wrestling with major changes?

Lecture Twenty-Four

Religious Diversity in the 21st Century

Scope: The comparative study of religion invariably raises important questions about self-understanding in the midst of religious diversity. Our course concludes with a consideration of how people in different religions understand their particular experience and tradition in the context of religious diversity and pluralism. Although the world has always been religiously diverse, our self-conscious awareness of diversity—within and across religious lines—now shapes thinking in theological and practical ways.

This final lecture includes a presentation on the primary ways in which Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have understood their truth claims amidst multiple and often conflicting truth claims of others. Three broad approaches to the question of religious diversity are now part of the 21st-century landscape: exclusivity, inclusivity, and pluralism. More inclusive worldviews are, in large part, the result of the more accurate and comprehensive understanding made possible through the comparative study of religion.

Outline

- I. As we conclude our introduction to comparative religion, we return again to the first lecture to reflect on the five major reasons such study is particularly important in the 21st century. It is my hope that you will have several new ways to think about and engage these five points as a result of this course.
 - A. The study of comparative religion enables us to understand better the human capacity for self-transcendence.
 - B. Our study has introduced and clarified key aspects of many different religions about which many people are poorly or partially informed.
 - C. In addition to learning more about the Western Christian roots of our culture, we can now see various ways other religions contribute substantially to Western civilization—both in the past and in the context of the religious diversity that characterizes society today.
 - D. The study of comparative religion is an essential step in developing a global perspective. Accurate information about, and awareness

of, the worldviews of others with whom we share this planet is increasingly important, particularly when religious worldviews are often used to justify violent and destructive behavior.

E. The study of comparative religion also raises questions, challenges presuppositions, and encourages new reflection on our respective belief systems and philosophies of life.

II. One of the major issues raised by the comparative study of religion relates to self-understanding. How do individuals and religious traditions understand particular worldviews and truth claims in the midst of such diversity and pluralism?

A. The world has always been religiously diverse. In the 21st century, however, large numbers of adherents are far more self-consciously aware of, and confronted by, religious diversity.

1. For most people throughout recorded history, the parameters of the religious world were quite limited. European Christians in the Middle Ages might be aware of Judaism and Islam, but most would not have met or engaged Jews or Muslims, not to mention Hindus or Buddhists.

2. In the past century, several factors have converged in ways that alter the landscape dramatically, including the mass migration of people in the past century, the rise in the academic study of religions and cultures, instantaneous communications, and other manifestations of globalization.

3. For most people through the millennia, their religious tradition has been a fact of birth. The idea of consciously “choosing” a different religion or incorporating elements from another tradition into one’s own is a new phenomenon for all but a few.

4. For the past 20 years, Harvard scholar Diana Eck has guided the Pluralism Project, a remarkable effort to map the changing religious landscape in the United States. Eck’s book *A New Religious America* documents the growth of the United States into the world’s most religiously diverse nation and presents the challenging issues that arise from pluralism.

B. Questions about particularity, diversity, and pluralism are addressed in different ways in each of the major religions we have considered. We look briefly at how Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims have understood the truth claims of their religions in the wider context of multiple religious truth claims. We then focus in more detail on Christian responses to pluralism.

1. We may find narrowness and rigidity among some Hindus throughout history and even today, but the broader tradition has always recognized that people have different abilities and that several paths can lead to the desired goals. As one friend put it to me succinctly some years ago: “We are all Hindus. Some people just don’t know it!”
2. Under the broad umbrella of Buddhism, we can find almost any approach to diversity. On one extreme, a few Buddhists have argued that one particular sacred text was the only valid scripture and that those who disagreed were destined for hell. But the world’s most visible Buddhist leader today, the Dalai Lama, proclaims an inclusive message of peace and harmony that can be discovered and lived out in many religious traditions. Further, the Buddhist emphasis on working out one’s own salvation does not focus on the questions of conflicting truth claims of other religions.
3. Despite the image of exclusivity conveyed by the notion that Jews are God’s chosen people, most Jews have not understood their corporate role as being the only people in relation to God. Rather, their spiritual responsibility is to be a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) and, thereby, a light unto the nations. Through the people of Israel, all the people of the Earth are promised God’s blessing (Genesis 12:3).
4. Although many Muslims can be seen and heard articulating a narrow exclusivism—rejecting all non-Muslims and many other Muslims as “infidels”—the message of Islam has always been inclusive. Islamic self-understanding begins with the conviction that God has revealed his truth through many prophets and messengers. Other religions—most notably, Judaism and Christianity—are the products of true revelation. Most Muslims believe that Jews and Christians have distorted the revelations brought by Moses and Jesus, but the Qur’an still holds out the possibility of paradise for the People of the Book (Qur’an 2:62 and 5:69).

III. During the past century, many Christian theologians, clergy, missionaries, and scholars have engaged questions of particularity and pluralism very directly. Broadly, three major positions are openly advocated today within Christianity, the world’s largest religion: exclusive, inclusive, and pluralist theology.

- A. The large majority of Christians throughout history and, possibly, today would categorize themselves as exclusive in their theology. The fundamental premise of this stance is that Jesus is the only way to God and salvation. Within this exclusivist camp, however, many Christians readily acknowledge that God alone determines who is saved and who is not.
- B. The inclusive position is one that also affirms Jesus as the way to salvation, but the salvation made possible by Jesus is available to people outside the church.
 - 1. Inclusive theology became the official position of the Roman Catholic Church during Vatican II.
 - 2. The writings, speeches, and action of the late Pope John Paul II clearly reflect this new day in Catholic theology.
- C. The pluralist position recognizes Christianity as one among many valid religions.
 - 1. Theologian John Hick first described the pluralist position as a kind of Copernican revolution in theology. Rather than the traditional view of Jesus as the center of the solar system around which everything orbits, Hick advocated a God-centered model.
 - 2. Diana Eck speaks eloquently of different religious traditions creating a beautiful symphony and describes herself as a “Christian pluralist” who both contributes to, and is enriched by, the affirmation of pluralism.
- IV. The comparative study of religion is not a panacea, but it can challenge us all to think in new ways about the similarities and differences between and among religions. Although problems in the world today defy simple solutions, thoughtful, self-critical study of the powerful and pervasive phenomenon we call “religion” may help us respectfully engage and embrace our neighbors—in our town, our nation, and around the world—as we seek new and better ways to live together in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world community.

Suggested Readings:

Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.

S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What would you list as main points or significant examples of how this introduction to the comparative study of religion has contributed toward the five major benefits of such a study?
2. In what ways can you see examples of exclusive, inclusive, and pluralist theology in some of the most visible religious figures and groups? If applicable, do you see examples of these different approaches to particularity and pluralism within your own community of faith?

Timeline

The key below indicates significant events in each respective religion.

B: Buddhism

C: Christianity

H: Hinduism

I: Islam

J: Judaism

- c. 1800 B.C.E.–c. 1600 B.C.E..... Period of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). **J/C/I**
- c. 1600 B.C.E..... Start of Israel’s bondage in Egypt. **J**
- c. 1500 B.C.E..... Composition of the *Rigveda*. **H**
- c. 1250 B.C.E..... Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. **J**
- c. 1000 B.C.E..... Kingdom of David and Solomon; First Temple built in Jerusalem (completed c. 950 B.C.E.). **J**
- c. 922 B.C.E..... King Solomon’s death; division of Israel into northern and southern kingdoms. **J**
- c. 800–200 B.C.E..... Composition of the *Upanishads*. **H**
- 586 B.C.E..... Southern kingdom (Judah) conquered by Babylonians; First Temple destroyed. **J**
- 563–483 B.C.E..... Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. **H/B**
- 516 B.C.E..... Second Temple established in Jerusalem. **J**
- c. 486 B.C.E..... First Buddhist Council. **B**
- c. 386 B.C.E..... Second Buddhist Council. **B**
- c. 400 B.C.E.–400 C.E..... Composition of the *Mahabharata*. **H**

272–231 B.C.E.	Reign of Indian King Asoka; introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. B
c. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Ramayana</i> . H
c. 200 B.C.E.–100 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> . H
c. 29–32 C.E.	Ministry and Crucifixion of Jesus. C
c. 34–c. 64	Paul’s ministry and correspondence. C
c. 50–c. 110	New Testament written. C
70	Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. J
c. 300–1500	Composition of the <i>Puranas</i> . H
325	Ecumenical Council at Nicaea; 21 of the 27 books of the New Testament canon fixed. C
354–430	Life of Augustine of Hippo. C
6 th century	Bodhidharma, founder of the Ch’an school in China. B
c. 570	Birth of Muhammad. I
574–622	Prince Shotoku establishes Buddhism in Japan. B
610	Muhammad receives call to prophethood with first revelation of the Qur’an. I
620	Muhammad’s night journey (<i>mi’raj</i>) to Jerusalem. I
622	Flight of Muhammad and early Muslim community to Medina from Mecca; first year of the Muslim lunar calendar. I
632	Death of Muhammad. I
632–661	Formative period for Sunnis during which the first four caliphs led the Muslim community from Arabia. I
661–750	Umayyad caliphate. I

680	Martyrdom of Husayn and followers in Karbala. I
742–814	Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor. C
750–1258	Abbasid caliphate, high point of Islamic civilization in art, culture, law, agriculture, industry, and commerce. I
1095–1453	Crusades. CII
1173–1263	Shinran, founder of the True Pure Land school in Japan. B
1182–1226	Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan order. C
13 th century	Appearance of the <i>Zohar</i> in Spain. J
1222–1282	Nichiren, founder of the Nichiren school in Japan; he believed the <i>Lotus Sutra</i> to be the ultimate Buddhist teaching. B
1225–1274	Thomas Aquinas, foremost Scholastic theologian. C
1265–1321	Life of Dante, Italian poet, author of <i>The Divine Comedy</i> . C
1281–1924	Ottoman Empire. I
1483–1546	Martin Luther, German theologian and religious reformer. C
1492	Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. J
1509–1564	John Calvin, French theologian and Protestant reformer. C
1869–1948	Mohandas K. Gandhi, Indian political and spiritual leader, known for his doctrine of nonviolence. H
1933–1945	Nazi control of Germany; Second World War and the Holocaust. J
1948	Establishment of the State of Israel. J

1948	World Council of Churches founded in Amsterdam. C
1947	Indian independence and partition. H
1962–1965	Vatican II. C
1978/79–1981	Iranian Revolution and foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini; seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamic militants. I
2001	Attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by terrorists in the name of Islam. I

Glossary

Allah: The Arabic word for God; Muslims understand the one true God as the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians.

Ark of the Covenant: The ornate carrying case in which the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments were placed; the most sacred object in ancient Israel, the Ark is a symbol of God's Law and presence residing in the Jerusalem Temple.

ashrama: Stage of life in the Hindu tradition: student, married householder, forest dweller, and *sannyasin*.

atman: The "soul" in the Hindu tradition; traditionally understood as part of the Brahman.

avatar: The "descent" or incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu; Rama and Krishna are the two most popular of the *avatars* of Vishnu.

ayatollah: Title for the most senior Shi'ite religious authorities; literally means a "sign" (*ayah*) from God (Allah).

Banaras: City on the Ganges River in northern India that many Hindus consider the most sacred space to visit and the best place to die.

Bar or Bat Mitzvah: The Hebrew term for "son or daughter of the Commandment"; the coming-of-age ceremony after which Jewish boys (at age 13) and Conservative and Reform Jewish girls (at age 12) assume full responsibilities to keep the Commandments as adults.

Bhagavad Gita: The most popular Hindu sacred text, which recounts the dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and his chariot driver, the Lord Krishna; the *Gita* affirms diverse paths while introducing the way of devotion.

bhikku: "One who lives by alms"; an ordained Buddhist monk, the community of whom form a *sangha*.

bodhisattva: A future "Buddha-to-be," the *bodhisattva* is one who postpones *nirvana* and remains connected to the phenomenal world in order to help others.

Book of Genesis: The first book of the Bible, containing the prehistory of Israel (stories of creation, human disobedience and the Fall from grace, and

the Great Flood) and stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs (Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, and Jacob and his 12 sons).

Book of Job: Ancient Hebrew poem dealing with the challenging question of why the righteous suffer.

Brahman: The Ultimate Reality, unknown and unknowable; the Hindu term referring to the eternal reality beyond all conceptualization.

caliph: The religious, political, economic, and military leader of the Islamic community following Muhammad's death in 632 C.E. The Sunni Muslims believed initially that the caliph should be the most righteous person in the *ummah*, whereas the Shi'ites believed the leadership of the community should be passed down through the family of the prophet.

caste: Term designating the stratification of Hindu society related to birth; the four major castes are the Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra.

Christmas: The Christian holiday celebrating Jesus's birth in Bethlehem; celebrated by Catholics and Protestants on December 25 and by Orthodox Christians on January 7 each year.

dharma: The "way" or "teaching" discovered and taught by the Buddha.

dhikr: Arabic word for "remembrance." Islam teaches that human beings are born with knowledge of God but are often lazy and forgetful; the Pillars of Islam and various Sufi practices are designed as ways to "remember" who we are and our relationship with God.

Diwali: A major Hindu festival of light; in north India, it is associated with the return home of Rama, the *avatar* of Vishnu who is the hero of the *Ramayana*.

Easter: The most sacred day in the Christian calendar; Easter celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus, a sign of victory over sin and death.

Eid al-Adha: The great festival commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, celebrated at the conclusion of the *hajj*.

Eightfold Path: The fourth Noble Truth of the Buddha's teaching identifies the path toward enlightenment, which embodies right view, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation.

Four Noble Truths: The first sermon of the Buddha after enlightenment set forth the foundation for Buddhism in the Four Noble Truths; these truths

describe the nature of the human predicament and offer a hopeful prescription.

Ganges River: India's most sacred river, the Ganges originates in the Himalayas and empties 1,500 miles away in the Bay of Bengal.

hadith: The sayings and actions of Muhammad, whom Muslims understand to be an exemplar of the faith; the *hadith* is the second source of authority in Islamic law after the Qur'an.

hajj: The fifth Pillar of Islam; the annual pilgrimage to Mecca that each Muslim who is financially and physically able should make at least once during his or her life.

hierophany: A manifestation of the sacred.

Holi: The popular spring festival of colors celebrated in India.

Holy Communion: The Christian sacrament commemorating the sacrifice of Christ in which the faithful eat bread (symbolizing the body of Christ) and drink wine (symbolizing the blood of Christ); the ritual is based on Jesus's final Passover meal with the disciples.

Holy of Holies: The sacred space where the Ark of the Covenant was kept in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Jordan River: The 250-kilometer river that flows from the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel to the Dead Sea; the Jordan River is particularly noted as the body of water in which Jesus was baptized.

Ka'bah: The cube-shaped building that is the object of the *hajj* to Mecca and the most sacred space for Muslims, toward which they orient themselves for *salat*.

karma: The law of the deed and its result. *Karma* is the principle of justice that connects the effects of one's actions with one's future station in the ongoing process of death and rebirth.

Lotus Sutra: A Mahayana text that played a major role in several Buddhist sects and is highly revered among many Chinese and Japanese Buddhists.

Mahabharata: The longer of the two great epics of India, the other being the *Ramayana*. The *Mahabharata* includes 18 books detailing a great conflict; the *Bhagavad Gita*, India's most popular sacred text, is lodged within the *Mahabharata*.

Mahayana Buddhism: The “Great Vehicle”; the Mahayana schools first appeared in India a few hundred years after the Buddha and spread as the dominant form of Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan in subsequent centuries.

mantra: A mystical word or sacred phrase believed to have power in its utterance and repetition.

maya: The “illusion” of reality for Hindus; caught in the phenomenal world of existence, people are blocked by *maya* from apprehending the oneness of being with the Brahman.

Mecca: The most sacred city in Islam; located in Saudi Arabia, Mecca is the site of the Ka’bah and the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad.

Middle Way: The school of Mahayana philosophy that advocates avoiding the extremes of indulgence on one hand and self-denial on the other; developed in India in the 2nd or 3rd century C.E.

mi’raj: The “night journey” during which Muhammad is believed to have been taken from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he prayed at the Al-Aqsa Mosque with the prophets of old before ascending to heaven for a vision of paradise.

moksha: Release from the cycle of existence or *samsara*; the ultimate goal for Hindus that is conceptualized in different ways and achieved through different paths.

mosque: The Islamic place of worship during the five daily prayers and, especially, the Friday noon prayer.

Mount Sinai: The sacred mountain in the Sinai Peninsula on which Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Namu Amida Butsu: “I call upon the name of Amida Buddha”; in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, those who call upon the name of Amida Buddha can receive merit and grace.

National Council of Churches: The New York-based ecumenical organization formed in 1950 to represent more than three dozen denominations (Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Greek Orthodox, Quakers, American Baptists, and so on) in their common concerns for mission and ministry.

nirvana: The ultimate goal for Buddhists, referring to the end of the cycle of existence in the phenomenal world.

“Om”: The most sacred sound in India; “Om” symbolizes Ultimate Reality.

Pali canon: The earliest authoritative collection of canonical writings used by the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

parable: A brief story in prose or verse that illustrates a moral or religious teaching; a favorite method of teaching used by the Buddha and Jesus.

“People of the Book”: Islamic term for Jews, Christians, and others whose communities of faith emerged from divine revelation resulting in a sacred text, such as the Torah and the Gospel.

Pillars of Islam: The basic ritual devotional duties expected of all Muslims; the pillars include the *shahadah*, *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, and *hajj*.

Qur’an: The sacred text of Islam; understood by Muslims as the literal Word of God revealed through the prophet Muhammad.

Ramadan: The sacred month during which Muslims are expected to fast during the daylight hours.

Ramayana: The shorter of the two great epics of India, the other being the *Mahabharata*; the *Ramayana* tells of the adventures of Rama and his wife Sita.

Rigveda: The oldest and most important of the *Vedas*, compiled in early Sanskrit circa 1500 B.C.E.; it consists of more than 1,000 hymns to various Vedic gods.

Rosh Hashana: The Jewish New Year beginning the High Holy Days that culminate with *Yom Kippur*.

Sabbath: The weekly day of rest and worship observed by Jews and Christians. This sacred time commemorating God’s day of rest after creation begins at sundown on Friday for Jews; Christians moved the Sabbath to Sunday, the day of Jesus’s Resurrection.

sacred thread ceremony: The coming-of-age ritual for Hindu boys in the top three castes; the ceremony is comparable to the Jewish Bar Mitzvah and Christian confirmation, whereby a child begins to take on educational and social responsibilities of adulthood.

salat: The second Pillar of Islam, prescribed prayer five times a day beginning at dawn and ending in the evening. Following a ritual cleansing, Muslims orient themselves toward the Ka’bah in Mecca and recite passages from the Qur’an.

samsara: The Hindu understanding of the cyclical process of rebirth in different bodies at different levels of existence in the phenomenal world of change.

sangha: The community or assembly of monks established by the Buddha.

sannyasin: One who renounces family, possessions, and other connections to this world in order to seek *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of *samsara*; in classical Hindu thought and practice, this fourth stage, or *ashrama*, is normally reserved for a select few upper-class Hindus.

satori: The Japanese Buddhist term for “understanding” or “enlightenment”; the goal of Zen Buddhism, *satori* can be achieved through sitting meditation or in a flash of understanding.

sawm: The fourth Pillar of Islam; *sawm* is the fast (no food, drink, or pleasurable physical activity) during the daylight hours during the month of Ramadan.

seder: The ceremonial meal and recitation of the Haggadah on the first night of Passover, during which the Exodus from Egypt is commemorated.

Sermon on the Mount: Jesus’s most famous teaching (found in Matthew 5–7), which includes the Beatitudes and new, more rigorous interpretations of God’s Laws.

shahadah: The first Pillar of Islam; the declaration that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

shari’ah: Islamic law; *shari’ah* is developed using the Qur’an, *hadith*, analogical reasoning, and the consensus of scholars.

Shi’ite: “Partisan”; originally applied to the “partisans” of Ali, those Muslims who believed the leadership of the community should be passed down through Ali and the descendants of Muhammad. Approximately 15 to 20 percent of Muslims worldwide are Shi’ites.

shirk: Associating something (other gods, oneself, other people) with God or worshiping something (a leader, wealth) other than God; the most heinous sin in Islam.

Shruti: The most sacred religious literature among Hindus; the *Shruti*, that which was “heard,” includes the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*.

Smrti: The second type of Hindu sacred literature; the *Smrti*, that which is “remembered,” includes the *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata* (and the *Bhagavad Gita*), and the *Ramayana*.

Sufi: The mystics of Islam.

Sunni: “One who adheres to the *sunnah*” (the “trodden path” or “way of the prophet”). Approximately 80 to 85 percent of the Muslims worldwide are Sunnis.

Tat tvam asi: “That, art thou”; an Upanishadic affirmation that one’s soul essence (*atman*) is a part of the Brahman.

Temple of Jerusalem: The focus of ancient Israel’s religious life; the Temple was built by Solomon in the 10th century B.C.E., destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., rebuilt, and destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.

Ten Commandments: The decrees God promulgated through Moses at Mount Sinai following the Exodus from Egypt.

theodicy: The “justice of God”; theodicy wrestles with the questions of God’s relationship to evil and injustice in the world.

theophany: A manifestation of God.

Theravada Buddhism: The “teaching of the elders”; the Theravada schools are often considered the earliest forms of Buddhism. This form of Buddhism continues to reflect the majority in Southeast Asia.

Torah: The Jewish designation for the first five books of the Bible, also called the Law or the Pentateuch. The Torah can also stand for the entire tradition of learning gleaned from the Bible as a whole.

transubstantiation: The doctrine that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ when the priest blesses these elements during Holy Communion.

Trinity: The Christian understanding of the one true God who is manifest in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

ummah: Arabic word for community of believers; the *ummah* created a new social order based on religious faith as it cut across political, economic, tribal, and racial lines that often divide people in communities.

Upanishads: A continuation of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* are collections of philosophical reflections that date between approximately 800–200 B.C.E. These writings speculate about the nature of Ultimate Reality, the self, and the connection between the two.

varna: The term used for “caste” in India Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The literal translation is “color.”

varnashrama dharma: The elaborate system detailing a Hindu’s duty, or *dharma*, depending on his or her caste, or *varna* Brahman,, Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Shudra, and stage of life, or *ashrama* (student, married householder, forest dweller, or *sannyasin*).

Vatican II: The ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and concluded by Pope Paul VI in 1965. Vatican II built upon the work of 10 specialized commissions; many major changes resulted from this four-year process, including changing the Mass from Latin to various vernacular languages, teachings on Christian unity, and interfaith relationships.

Wesak (Vesak): Annual celebration of the Buddha’s birth and enlightenment; in some places, *Wesak* also commemorates the Buddha’s physical death.

Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement; the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar, observed 10 days after *Rosh Hashana*. A full day of fasting, prayer, and repentance is observed, primarily as a means of seeking atonement for sins.

zakat: The third Pillar of Islam; Muslims are expected to give 2.5 percent of their overall wealth to religious and charitable causes each year.

Zen Buddhists: One of 13 primary schools of Buddhism in Japan; Zen is focused on meditation and on the guidance and transfer of knowledge from a Zen master to the student.

Zohar: The classical text of Jewish Kabbalah; the *Zohar* emerged in 13th-century Spain but was attributed to the 2nd-century-C.E. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai.

Biographical Notes

Abraham (fl. early 2nd millennium B.C.E.). The common patriarch of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Abraham appears in the Bible as a Monotheist who responds to God’s call and promises to create a great nation from the descendants of his sons Ishmael and Isaac.

Abu Bakr (c. 573 C.E.–634 C.E.); first caliph (632 C.E.–634 C.E.). Companion, advisor, and father-in-law to Muhammad; also the first Sunni caliph. During his rule, Abu Bakr brought central Arabia under Muslim control.

al-Hallaj (c. 858–922 C.E.). Well-known Sufi whose close identification with God led him to declare, “*Ana al-Haqq*” (“I am the Truth”); al-Hallaj was executed for his perceived blasphemy.

Ali (600 C.E.–661 C.E.), fourth caliph (656 C.E.–661 C.E.). One of the first converts to Islam, Ali was the first cousin and, later, son-in-law of Muhammad. Some early Muslims, partisans of Ali (Shi’ites), believed that he and his sons—Hasan and Husayn—should succeed Muhammad as the leader of the community. Ali became the fourth caliph, but the majority of the community did not affirm his sons as successors.

Amos (fl. 8th century B.C.E.). A simple man from Tekoa in Judah, Amos emerges as an early prophet who tells us God’s justice will “roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Arjuna. A key figure in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna is a warrior who is troubled by the prospect of a looming battle in which he will be fighting cousins and friends. The heart of the *Gita* is a dialogue between Arjuna and his chariot driver, who turns out to be the Lord Krishna. In teaching Arjuna, Krishna affirms major elements of classical Hindu understanding even as he introduces *bhakti*, the way of devotion, as the best way to reach the ultimate goal.

Karen Armstrong (b. 1944). British scholar, a former nun, and a prolific author whose comparative studies include histories of God, Jerusalem, Muhammad, the Buddha, and the Axial Age.

Saint Augustine (354 C.E.–430 C.E.). Bishop of Hippo in North Africa; Augustine’s writings and theology are among the most influential in all of Christian history.

King David (d. c. 962 B.C.E.). Second Israelite king after Saul, David united the Kingdom of Israel and established a monarchy that lasted until the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. According to the New Testament, Jesus was of the lineage of David.

Diana Eck (b. 1945). Harvard historian of religion who created and directs the Pluralism Project, a comprehensive study of religious diversity in the United States.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). Rumanian historian of religion whose lifelong study of major world and tribal religions informed his prolific writing and decades of teaching at the University of Chicago.

Isaac (fl. early 2nd millennium B.C.E.). Son of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac is the heir of God’s promise that Abraham’s descendants would become a great nation. In Genesis, Abraham is told to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (later the Temple Mount in Jerusalem) as a test of faith.

Isaiah (fl. 8th century B.C.E.). One of the major prophets of Israel. The Book of Isaiah is a compilation of prophetic narratives from two or three periods covering some 200 years.

Ishmael (fl. early 2nd millennium B.C.E.). The son of Abraham and Hagar, the handmaid of Abraham’s wife Sarah. Muslims understand Ishmael to be the primary descendant and heir of Abraham, while Jews and Christians follow the biblical narrative in which Ishmael is promised a great nation, but Isaac is the heir of God’s promise resulting in the nation of Israel.

Jeremiah (c. 650 B.C.E.–c. 570 B.C.E.). One of Israel’s most beloved prophets, Jeremiah was an incendiary figure who confronted the political and religious leaders prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. Jeremiah is also a classic symbol of hope because he bought land in Jerusalem during captivity, affirming that one day—long after his lifetime—Israel would return from captivity.

Jesus of Nazareth (c. 6–4 B.C.E.–c. 34 C.E.). Founder of Christianity whose followers believe him to be the messiah or the Christ and the son of God. The four Gospels of the New Testament tell the stories of key events of his life, including his birth as a Jew to the Virgin Mary; his baptism; his teachings and miraculous deeds; and finally, his arrest, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.

Kali. In the Hindu tradition, the hideous, terrifying deity who haunts the cremation grounds with blood dripping from her fangs while wearing a

garland of skulls. Devotees of Kali say that she represents the reality of life in this phenomenal world.

Krishna. One of the primary *avatars* of Vishnu and the key figure in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Krishna's dialogue with Arjuna synthesizes many key Hindu teachings while elevating *bhakti*, the way of devotion, as the best path to the ultimate goal.

Martin Luther (1483–1546 C.E.). German Protestant reformer who taught that salvation is a free gift of God's grace that comes through faith. Luther affirmed marriage for priests and rejected many teachings of the Catholic Church that he believed had been corrupted over time.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968 C.E.). A well-known Trappist monk whose writings were highly influential during the second half of the 20th century. In his later years, Merton was especially drawn to the mystical writings and teachings of Buddhists and some Taoists, where he saw and celebrated commonality and convergence across religious traditions.

Muhammad (570 C.E.–632 C.E.). The prophet of Islam who received his first revelation at age 40. For 22 years, he proclaimed the message of the one God (Allah in Arabic) to whom everyone will return for judgment. In Mecca (610–622) and Medina (622–632), he led the Muslim community in all areas of life—religion, politics, economics, and civil and military affairs. In addition to the revelation that became the Qur'an, Muhammad's sayings and actions (*hadith*) became the second source of authority in developing Islamic law.

Nichiren (1222–1282 C.E.). A hard-line Buddhist reformer who argued that the *Lotus Sutra* contained the true teachings of the Buddha.

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). German theologian whose influential book, *The Idea of the Holy*, presented a comprehensive framework for understanding religion as rooted in the nonrational awareness of the Holy.

Paul (4 B.C.E.?–62/64 C.E.). The chief persecutor of the early Christian community, Paul experienced a dramatic conversion (Acts 9) on the road to Damascus and became the most ardent missionary of Christianity. In addition to his travels and teachings recorded in Acts, Paul's letters to the churches he helped found, are the earliest New Testament documents.

Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (c. 717–801 C.E.). One of the most well-known and beloved early Sufis, Rabi'a was a slave girl set free by her master. She is

associated with introducing selfless love into the austere teachings of Muslim mystics.

Sarah (fl. early 2nd millennium B.C.E.). The wife of Abraham who traveled with her husband to the Promised Land and miraculously conceived Isaac at age 90.

Satan. The biblical name for the devil; the same figure in Islam is known by the Arabic name Shaytan.

King Saul (fl. 11th century B.C.E.). The first king of Israel, Saul was a great warrior who became a tragic figure when he failed to carry out God's will and lost God's favor.

Shinran (1173–1263). A Buddhist reformer who affirmed marriage and taught the way of faith, a cornerstone of Pure Land Buddhism.

Shiva. One of the primary Hindu deities, Shiva is known through various popular manifestations as the dancing Shiva, the rigorous ascetic, his son, the elephant-headed Ganesha, and several female deities, including Kali.

Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.E.). The name of the historical Buddha. Born a prince in north India, Siddhartha left his home and family in pursuit of the spiritual life; he “woke up,” or became enlightened, at age 35 and spent the next 45 years teaching others.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000). Canadian-born historian of comparative religion whose writings explored the nature of faith, sacred scriptures, and religious traditions.

King Solomon (fl. 10th century B.C.E.). The son of David and Bathsheba, Solomon became the third king of Israel. Known for his wisdom, Solomon's rule included the building of the Temple in Jerusalem and the expansion of Israel's power and influence to its maximum extent. The Proverbs and other selections of wisdom literature are associated with Solomon.

Virgin Mary (fl. early 1st century C.E.). The mother of Jesus who, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, was a virgin when she conceived and gave birth to Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary is particularly revered among Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

Vishnu. The most popular of the pantheon of Hindu deities, Vishnu is made known through 10 *avatars*. Rama and Krishna are the two most well-known and beloved incarnations of Vishnu. Devotees of Vishnu primarily express their religious faith through devotion, or the way of *bhakti*.

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Suggested Readings:

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Fisher, Mary Pat. *Living Religions*, 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007. One of the best introductions to world religions; widely used in colleges and universities throughout North America.

Fontana, David. *The Secret Language of Symbols: A Visual Key to Symbols and Their Meanings*. San Francisco: Chronicle, 1994. One of the few resources of its kind, this book includes more than 300 full-color illustrations and numerous essays designed to illuminate the historical and cultural meanings of symbols.

Freedman, David Noel, and Michael J. McClymond, eds. *The Rivers of Paradise: Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad as Religious Founders*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001. This 700-page book is valuable both to scholars and interested nonspecialists. Thoughtful scholars present chapters detailing what we can know about the lives of five major religious “founders.” In the process, the book serves as an introduction to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Harner, Michael. *The Way of the Shaman*, 3rd ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1990. A classic introduction to the global phenomenon of shamans presented from the perspective of a practitioner of shamanic healing.

Harvey, Graham, ed. *Ritual and Religious Belief: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2005. This scholarly collection includes 16 chapters on varying aspects of ritual studies. Some of the chapters should be useful for advanced students and scholars.

Hawley, John S., and Mark Jurgensmeyer. *Songs of the Saints of India*, 2nd rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Delightful translations with interpretative essays on the influential roles of six Hindu poets who represent the way of devotion and the blend of Hindu and Muslim teachings in the Sikh tradition.

Heim, S. Mark. *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995. This intriguing exploration seeks to move beyond the categories of exclusive and pluralist approaches to a theology of religions. Heim offers a different framework for a Christian theology, one that affirms both the finality of Christ and the independent validity of other religions.

———. *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006. Heim challenges some traditional understandings of the sacrifice of Christ as he examines the issue of “sacred violence” from Genesis through Job to the Gospels. The book is a refreshing reminder that violence and sacrifice—elements found in all religions and at the heart of the Christian Gospels—elude simplistic analysis.

Holm, Jean, ed., with John Bowker. *Myth and History, Picturing God, Rites of Passage, Sacred Place, Sacred Writings, Women in Religion, Worship*. London: Pinter, 1994. This collection of eight edited books presents valuable contributions from noted scholars. Each volume focuses on a major theme in comparative religious studies. Each book includes chapters (with bibliographies) on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and Chinese and Japanese religions, as well as an introduction and index.

Hopkins, Thomas J. *The Hindu Religious Tradition*. Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1971. An excellent introduction to the complexities of the Hindu tradition. Hopkins presents the material in an exceptionally clear, concise, and scholarly fashion.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997. A thoughtful, scholarly presentation on what can be known about Jesus by a gifted teacher/scholar of several Teaching Company courses.

Kimball, Charles. *Striving Together: A Way Forward in Christian-Muslim Relations*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991. This book offers an accessible introduction to the history of Christian/Muslim relations and the contemporary Christian/Muslim dialogue movement. The book highlights

the obstacles and opportunities facing adherents of the world's two largest religions.

———. *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*, rev. ed. New York: HarperOne, 2008. In an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world community, the dangers posed by religious zealots have global ramifications. This book looks across the religions and through the centuries to identify five major warning signs of religion going awry. The revised edition includes a study guide for college and seminary classes, church study groups, and book clubs.

Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Schocken Books, 1981; Anchor Books edition, 2004. This runaway bestseller explores the longstanding questions of theodicy, namely: What is God's relationship to evil and injustice? Kushner's moving analysis and reflections are rooted in his experience both as a rabbi and a father whose son was stricken with a rare, deadly disease.

Leeming, David A., and Margaret A. Leeming. *A Dictionary of Creation Myths*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. A useful reference work for the comparative study of creation stories.

Leeming, David Adams. *The World of Myth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. This anthology of myths is valuable for comparative study because Leeming organizes the sacred stories according to common themes: creation, a great flood, the end of the age, the afterlife, heroic figures, sacred places, and deities.

Livingston, James A. *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005. This introductory textbook employs a comparative approach drawing on the major world religions and numerous tribal groups.

Mick, Lawrence. *Understanding the Sacraments Today*, 2nd ed. Collegeville, MD: Liturgical Press, 2006. A basic analysis of the sacraments as understood by Catholics.

Miles, Jack. *God: A Biography*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. This extraordinary book relentlessly explores the many biblical images of God, including: creator, destroyer, friend, liberator, lawgiver, conqueror, father, wife, and counselor. Miles, a former Jesuit trained in religious studies, is erudite, creative, and powerfully engaging in this Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller.

Neusner, Jacob. *World Religions in America*, 3rd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000. The United States—and many

medium to large cities within it—is now a microcosm of the world. This book describes the changing religious landscape and the ways different religions have adapted to the American context.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. John W. Harvey, trans. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958. A classic and influential study by the German theologian who made the case for common features at the heart of all religions.

Pals, Daniel L. *Seven Theories of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. This volume includes a series of articles attempting to explain religion—from E. B. Tylor, Émile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud to Mircea Eliade and Clifford Geertz.

Parrinder, Geoffrey. *Mysticism in the World's Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. A good introduction to mysticism through the lens of the major religions as understood by a prolific British scholar of comparative religion.

———. *Worship in the World's Religions*. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1961. As the title suggests, Parrinder outlines the primary ways people and communities organize and carry out acts of worship in the various religions.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Whose Bible Is It? A History of the Scriptures through the Ages*. New York: Viking Press, 2005. An illuminating overview of the history of the Bible by a celebrated church historian.

Peters, F. E. *The Children of Abraham*, rev. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. This volume is arguably the best short introduction to the formative development of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. The revised edition of this classic text underscores the imperative of respectful interfaith engagement in the 21st century.

———. *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. This three-volume set presents classical texts and interpretations on common themes in the Abrahamic religions. The collection includes a wealth of information for comparative analysis of revelation, covenant, community, law, sacred spaces, and so on.

Placher, William, ed. *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005. A useful collection of essays.

Rahula, Walpola. *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu: The Buddhist Tradition of Service*. New York: Grove Press, 1974. A clear and compelling account of a

Buddhist monk's life as a seeker and servant who works for the betterment of humanity.

———. *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. 2nd ed. New York: Grove Press, 1974. This book is arguably the single best, most accessible, and most authoritative introduction to the Buddhist religious tradition, written by a Buddhist monk and scholar.

Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. This intriguing volume traces the history of Christian views on heaven from the biblical materials and Greek thought through the masterful poetry of Dante.

Saint-Laurent, George E. *Spirituality and World Religions*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 2000. An examination of the pursuit of spiritual growth by religious adherents. Chapters on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Hindu and Buddhist traditions facilitate a comparative approach in this college-level text.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1978. The definitive study of Sufism; an indispensable resource.

Sharpe, Eric J. *Comparative Religion: A History*. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986. As the title intimates, this volume details the historical development of the comparative study of religion. A very useful text for those who want to understand the contemporary efforts in historical context.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, rev. ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Smith's book was one of the first and remains by far the most popular general introduction to world religions. With more than two million copies sold, the revised edition continues to reach a wide audience of interested nonspecialists and students enrolled in various college classes on world religions.

Smith, Jane I., and Yvonne Y. Haddad. *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, new ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. This detailed, well-researched, and well-written study provides unparalleled insights into the myriad teachings and traditions informing Islamic eschatology.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, new ed. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991. A modern classic, this erudite study exposes the flawed thinking of most Westerners in relation to "religions." Smith proposes and expounds on categories of "faith" and "cumulative traditions"

as a more accurate and constructive way to understand human religious history and behavior.

———. *Patterns of Faith around the World*, rev. ed. Oxford: Oneworld, 1998. Published originally as written versions of Canadian radio lectures in 1962, this insightful book explores the different religions through the lens of one major teaching, ritual, or creed. Smith illuminates the meanings of these elements for Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and others, as well as their universal meanings.

———. *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's last major book is a masterful examination of the ways texts become "scripture" and how these diverse texts can, through comparative study, illuminate constructive paths toward a shared future on the planet.

Sonsino, Rifat, and Daniel Syme, eds. *What Happens After I Die? Jewish Views of Life After Death*. New York: UAHC Press, 1994. This collection of essays from rabbis, scholars, and intellectuals presents an eye-opening, diverse range of opinions among contemporary Jews.

Sproul, Barbara C. *Primal Myths: Creating the World*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979. A helpful collection of hundreds of creation stories from the major religions and tribal cultures around the world.

Stevenson, Leslie, *The Study of Human Nature: A Reader*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. A fine collection of ancient, modern, and contemporary perspectives on human nature. The new edition includes essays directly related to Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist views.

Sullivan, Deidre, ed. *What Do We Mean When We Say God?* New York, Doubleday, 1991. This short collection includes views of famous religious and political leaders alongside those of an array of men, women, and children from all walks of life. The text is both humorous and profound as it reflects beliefs most people have embraced at different points in life.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960. A classic study of the stages of lifecycle rituals.

Van Voorst, Robert E., ed. *Anthology of World Scriptures*, 6th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2006. A superb anthology of sacred writings from the different religions. Ideal for college classrooms or individuals pursuing a serious study of major world religions.

Watt, William M. *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974. The one-volume condensed version of Watt's

definitive biography presented in *Muhammad at Mecca* and *Muhammad at Medina*. This text requires more effort than other popular biographies, but the effort will be rewarded.

Webb, Val. *Like Catching Water in a Net: Human Attempts to Describe the Divine*. New York: Continuum, 2007. This thoughtful and nuanced book goes beyond the biblical and Abrahamic foci of Jack Miles and Karen Armstrong. Webb includes views from Buddhist, Hindu, and tribal cultures to suggest fresh ways to think about the ineffable.

Wiley, Tatha. *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*. New York: Paulist Press, 2002. This book offers a helpful exploration of the dominant view of the human predicament within the world's largest religion.

Internet Resources:

Beliefnet. A superb Web site covering developments in all major religions. www.beliefnet.com.

The Pluralism Project. The Web site for Harvard University's Pluralism Project. www.pluralism.org.

Religious Movements Homepage Project. A comprehensive Web site from the University of Virginia covering a wide array of religious movements. www.joeant.com/DIR/info/get/3948/61187.