



saint mary's press

World Religions

A Voyage of Discovery

Third Edition



World Religions

Nihil Obstat: Rev. William Becker, STD
Censor Librorum
August 26, 2008

Imprimatur: †Most Rev. Bernard J. Harrington, DD
Bishop of Winona
August 26, 2008

The nihil obstat and imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the nihil obstat or imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions, or statements expressed, nor do they assume any legal responsibility associated with publication.

The publishing team included Michael Wilt, Jerry Windley-Daoust, Amy Kuebelback, and Christine Schmertz Navarro, development editors; Barbara Allaire, John Ferrie, and Stephan Nagel, consulting editors; Lorraine Kilmartin, reviewer; Maps.com, cartographers; prepress and manufacturing coordinated by the production departments of Saint Mary's Press.

Front cover: *top left*, © Bob Krist/CORBIS; *top middle*, Medford Taylor/SuperStock; *top right*, © Christophe Boisvieux/Corbis; *middle left*, © Burstein Collection/CORBIS; *center*, Roberto M. Arakaki/Imagestate; *bottom left*, © Wolfgang Kaehler/CORBIS; *bottom middle*, Gene Plaisted, The Crosiers; *bottom right*, © Penny Tweedie/CORBIS

Copyright © 2009 by Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1320, www.smp.org. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

1142 (PO3190)

ISBN 978-0-88489-997-6, Print
ISBN 978-1-59982-473-4, Kno
ISBN 978-1-59982-125-2, Saint Mary's Press Online Learning Environment

World Religions

A Voyage of Discovery
Third Edition

Jeffrey Brodd

With a Foreword by Gregory L. Sobolewski



saint mary's press

Contents

Foreword	
The Roman Catholic Church and Non-Christian Religions	6
Chapter 1	
Studying the World's Religions	11
A Global Village	12
The Nature of a Religious Tradition	13
Some Challenges and Rewards of Studying the World's Religions	18
Chapter 2	
Primal Religious Traditions	21
The Nature of Primal Religions	21
Religion of the Australian Aborigines	23
An African Tradition: The Religion of the Yoruba	26
Religion of the North American Plains Indians	28
A Mesoamerican Religion: The Aztecs and Their Legacy	32
Common Themes, Diverse Traditions	37

South Asia

Chapter 3

Hinduism 41

Many Rivers to One Ocean	41
Human Destiny: From Worldly Realms to the Divine Beyond	42
Hindu Society: Mapping the Individual's Identity	48
Three Paths to Liberation	53
Hinduism in the Modern World	61
The Ever Changing Currents of Hinduism	64

Chapter 4

Buddhism 69

A Therapy for Living from One Who "Woke Up"	69
The Life of Gautama	70
The Dharma: Buddhist Teachings	75
Three Rafts for Crossing the River: Divisions of Buddhism	84
The Enduring Wisdom of the Buddha	88

Chapter 5

Jainism 93

<i>Ahimsa</i> and Asceticism: Jainism's Ideals	93
Makers of the River Crossing	94
Knowing the Universe: Cosmology and Salvation	96
The Religious Life	99
Jains in Today's World	104

Chapter 6

Sikhism 107

Identity and Community	107
The Development of Sikhism: From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth Sahib	109
Religious Teachings: God, Humans, and Salvation	114
The Religious Life: Worship, Ritual, and Lifestyle	116
Sikh Identity and Community: Work, Worship, and Charity	119

East Asia

Chapter 7

Confucianism 123

The Ethical Foundation of East Asia 123

Great Master K'ung: The Life and Legacy of Confucius 125

Learning to Be Human: Confucianism's Central Project 128

Self, Family, Nation, Heaven: Confucian Harmony 133

A Legacy for East Asia, Lessons for the World 136

Chapter 8

Taoism 139

Living in Harmony with the Way of Nature 140

Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu: Legendary Sages, Mystical Texts 140

The Philosophy of Tao 142

Taoism in East Asia and the World 149

Chapter 9

Zen Buddhism 153

Zen: The Spirit of Buddhism 153

Transmission of Zen Teachings 154

Zen Teachings 155

Zen Life 161

In Conclusion . . . 163

Chapter 10

Shinto 167

"Way of the *Kami*" 167

Shinto in the Religious Life of Japan 171

Traditional Shinto in Modern Japan 176

The Ancient West

Chapter 11

Ancestors of the West 179

The "Cradle" of the West 179

Religion in Ancient Iran: Zoroastrianism 180

Religion in Ancient Greece 185

Religion in the Roman World 193

Legacies from Ancient Times 198

Chapter 12

Judaism 201

The People of the Covenant 201

Judaism's Central Teachings: On God and Torah 202

The History of the Chosen People: Blessings and Tribulations 205

The Sanctification of Life: The Way of Torah 213

The Tradition of the Chosen People 219

Chapter 13

Christianity 223

Who Is a Christian? 223

Christ: Son of God, Savior 224

Creed: What Christians Believe 230

Church: The "One Body" of Christ 232

United in Christ 243

Chapter 14

Islam 247

Submission to the One God 247

The Foundations of Islam 248

Basic Practices and Social Teachings 253

The Expansion of Islam 257

Varieties of Islam 260

Islam and the World 263

Chapter 15

Religion

in the Modern World 267

A Changing Religious Landscape 267

Modern Influences 268

New Religious Movements 275

Religion and Science 285

The Persistence of Mystery 291

Pronunciation Key 294

Index 295

Acknowledgments 307

Foreword

The Roman Catholic Church and Non-Christian Religions

by Gregory L. Sobolewski

My mother's Lutheran father was trouble for my father when my father first started dating her. My grandfather seldom went to church, but he complained to my Catholic dad in a heavy accent about "those damn Cadlics." Dad felt a lot better when he discovered that his future father-in-law was talking about automobiles rather than members of a religion.

Until that discovery my dad feared my grandfather, because my dad loved his fiancée deeply, and he didn't want religion to get in the way. He also never talked with my mom's father about their religious differences, and so he presumed the worst. This example of a misunderstanding in one family in particular serves as an analogy for situations often encountered in the human family at large. We sometimes fear that which we do not understand; we sometimes ignore it; we sometimes even attack it.

When our misunderstandings are about things like automobiles, little is at stake. But when matters of faith are at issue, the stakes can be high. Matters of faith are serious for those whose faith matters. Christians learn from the Bible that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Thus Christians believe that love of God casts out fear, ignorance, and hostility, and transforms our lives. In a word, Christians *hope*. Christians hope that differences can be first tolerated, then understood, and finally celebrated. The inspiration offered by the Bible's promise of things working together for good, along with Christian discussions of faith, are causes of hope for good relations among the world's many religions.

Together with all Christians, Roman Catholics strive to view the truth about people and their relationships with God, with one another, and with the world, through the lens pro-

vided by the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus made the outstanding claim that his very presence brought the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is not a place or an institution, but “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17) that come from knowing God through Jesus. Because the Kingdom of God is all about recognizing God’s reign over the world, it is also called the Reign of God.

Jesus stated: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus could see that his hearers recognized the presence of the Kingdom of God through the choices they made in their lives. He prompted them to see God more clearly and then to act accordingly, with love. Knowing that it is difficult to do this, Jesus stated further: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him” (John 14:16–17). Christians believe that this Holy Spirit is the actual presence of God in our lives today—even as we do things like read this page.

Through Jesus of Nazareth, the family of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) became the family for all people. As God’s Son, Jesus invited human beings to know God fully. In God’s Holy Spirit, the family prospers with inspired acts of love. The love within those who believe in Christ heals their wounds, promotes their dreams, and guides their relationships with God, other people, and the planet. For Christians, the presence of this love is not a matter of preference—it is not the same as saying they love a certain type of automobile, video game, or nail polish more than others. For the Christian family, the presence of this love is a matter of truth, because Jesus of Nazareth is experienced through the ages as the only complete revelation of God’s familial love for all people.

Together with other Christians, Roman Catholics do not negotiate God’s love among life’s spiritual options. Rather, Catholics accept that Jesus of Nazareth conclusively extended God’s irreversible and full love out of the family of God and into the family of humanity. Thus Christians can really live hopefully, restraining fear and not being paralyzed by it. Christians are at home with God, even as they are amazed by the unsurpassable mansion that Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

Catholics believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the seed and beginning of the Reign of God preached by Jesus, and that it is therefore obligated to bring the good news of God’s family of love to all people. Within the Catholic Church, the biblical promises of hope are fully preserved even as they are understood and applied freshly for people in every age. Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910 to 1997) is a remarkable example of how the love of God hopes without fear. She cared unconditionally for society’s discarded people—cast out because of poverty, disease, age, or uselessness.

Roman Catholic leaders attempt to clarify how the Kingdom of God can be seen today, and how it might become more effective. They have never been more welcoming of non-Christian religions than they have been since the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965). At that gathering the Catholic Magisterium (the teaching authority of Roman Catholic popes, cardinals, and bishops) stated:

The catholic church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what it holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone. (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, number 2)

This insight is remarkable! The family of God includes not only people who are baptized in Jesus Christ but also those who entered into other relationships with God. Non-Christians can, and do, speak truthfully of God. Church teaching encourages Catholics to recognize that non-Christian religions strive for the common good of the human family.

In the New Testament, we read that God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” and that the one mediator between God and humanity is Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:4–5). Given the Catholic Church’s respect for non-Christian religions, it should come as no surprise that the Church teaches that salvation through Christ is available to all. We would not deny the necessities of life to a member of our family simply because she or he lived in a different place

or pursued a different lifestyle. So it is with God in his desire that all be saved:

There are those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart and, under the influence of grace, try to put into effect the will of God as known to them through the dictate of conscience: these too can obtain eternal salvation. (Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, number 16)

The Church itself is a necessary sign of God’s saving actions in Jesus Christ. The Church is Christ’s body on earth, testifying to and advancing his saving actions for all people, Christians and non-Christians alike.

Having affirmed what is true and holy in non-Christian religions, as well as the availability of salvation to all, one might ask: Has Roman Catholicism traded away the truth of Jesus? Has it trampled on the memories of the Catholic missionaries who for centuries brought faith in Jesus to lands far and wide? The Gospel according to Matthew ends with the resurrected Jesus saying:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (28:18–20)

With these words Jesus gave his followers, for all time, a missionary mandate. God loves all people and desires that all be saved. The Church is obligated to be missionary, to “go and make disciples,”

because it believes and participates in God's all-encompassing plan for salvation. This mandate goes hand in hand with the Church's respect for non-Christian religions. For example, some years ago Pope John Paul II and representatives of many religions spent a day praying for peace. It was the pope's Christian "faith conviction," he said, that made him turn to the representatives of the world's religions "in deep love and respect" ("The Challenge and the Possibility of Peace," number 2). Christian faith conviction, with its missionary mandate, promotes genuine understanding among the world's many faiths.

My grandfather and his new son-in-law, my father, may have had different tastes in automobiles, politics, and sports, but they were united in loving the woman who was daughter to one and wife to the other. They established a friendship based not on particular details of cars and sports, but on the welfare of the one woman they each loved differently. In a similar way, the Church encourages Catholics to advance the common truths of God that are recognized by different religions, even as Catholics observe their own particular and unsurpassable truth known by faith in Jesus Christ, and even as the various religions practice faith in their own unique ways.

Roman Catholics continuously offer God's familial love to all humanity when they present the love of God as taught and demonstrated by Jesus Christ. Today Catholics are required to increase their respect for the truth found in non-Christian religions. On the day John Paul II and representatives of many religions prayed for peace, the pope recognized the common ground among the religions. In the following excerpt from his address to the

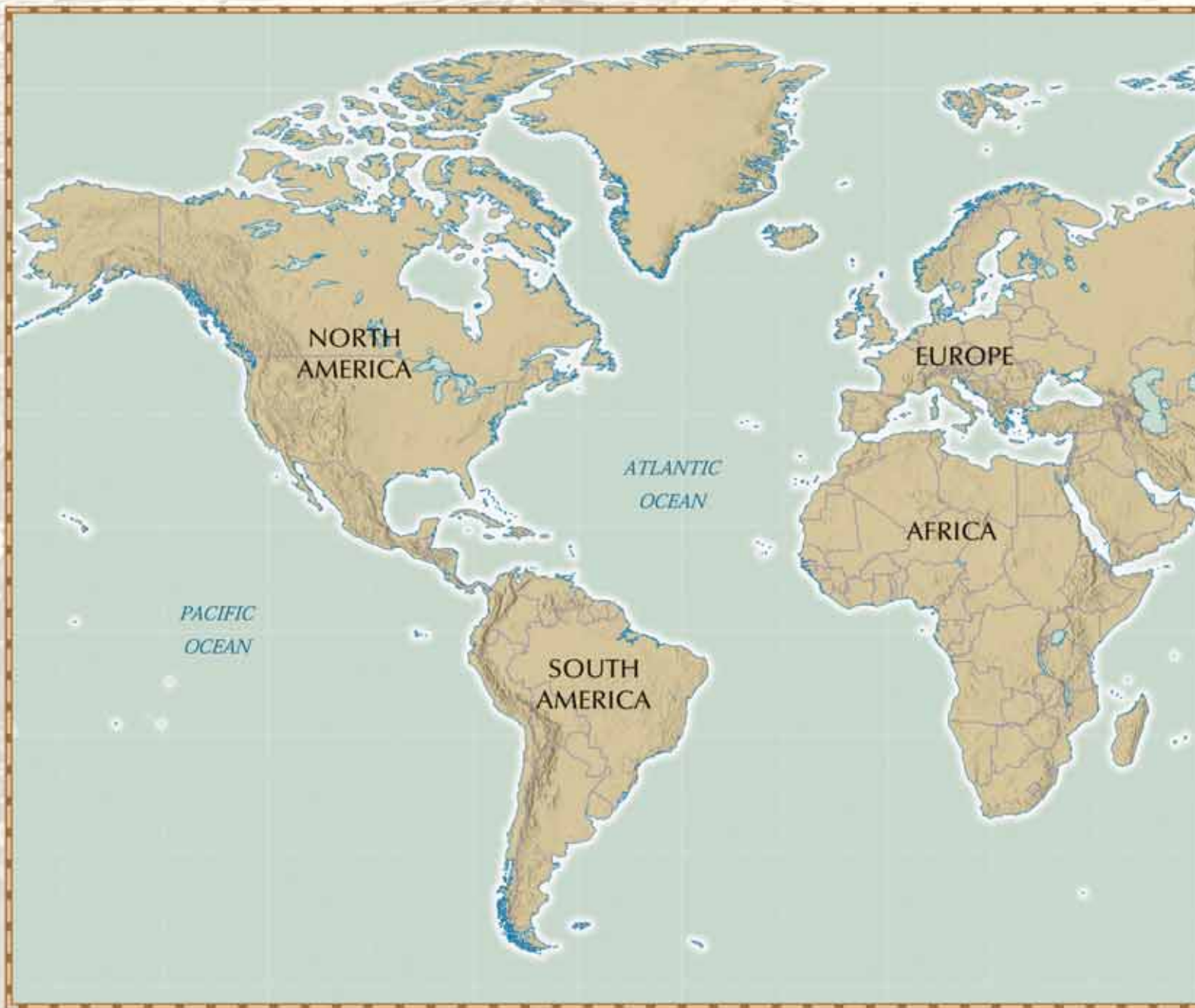
gathering, he highlights the importance of this common ground, which is at the heart of creating a peaceful world:

With the world religions we share a common respect for and obedience to conscience, which teaches all of us to seek the truth, to love and serve all individuals and peoples, and therefore to make peace among individuals and among nations.

Yes, we all hold conscience and obedience to the voice of conscience to be an essential element in the road toward a better and peaceful world. Could it be otherwise, since all men and women in this world have a common nature, a common origin and a common destiny?

If there are many and important differences among us, there is also a common ground whence to operate together in the solution of this dramatic challenge of our age: true peace or catastrophic war. ("The Challenge and the Possibility of Peace," number 2)

Jeffrey Brodd's exposition of our world's religions in this book is a fascinating exploration of thousands of years of humans' spiritual hunger and satisfaction. The leaders of the Roman Catholic Church encourage Catholics to honor Jesus Christ as they develop esteem for non-Christian religions. Like new in-laws, Catholics rely on the biblical promise of hope, which is that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).





1 Studying the World's Religions

Scan the news on any given day, and you will probably find examples of how religion influences everyday life around the world. Consider these newspaper excerpts:

Increasingly, Muslim women in Britain take their children to school and run errands covered head to toe in flowing black gowns that allow only a slit for their eyes. . . . Their appearance, like little else, has unnerved other Britons, testing the limits of tolerance [in Britain] and fueling debate over the role of Muslims in British life. . . . Many veiled women say they are targets of abuse. Meanwhile, there are growing efforts to place legal curbs on full-face Muslim veil, known as the niqab. (From “Muslims’ Veils Test Limits of Britain’s Tolerance”)

No longer exclusive to traditionally Buddhist countries, Buddhist temples such as this one on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, are becoming more common all over the world.



More than 800 people registered for the six yoga sessions held throughout the day yesterday, starting at 7:30 a.m., said Tim Tompkins, a yoga enthusiast and president of the Times Square Alliance, the sponsor of the event, which was scheduled to coincide with the summer solstice. “What better way to bring in the summer solstice in the most chaotic place in the city?” Mr. Tompkins said. (From “A Yoga Class’s Path to Serenity Leads Through Times Square”)

Evan Almighty, in which Steve Carell, playing a newly elected congressman from Buffalo, is commanded by God (Morgan Freeman) to build an ark, is a movie far less interesting than its premise. . . . But there is nonetheless a fruitful franchise in the making here, a potentially endless series of movies with popular, sometimes naughty comedians acting out wholesome modern-day versions of well-known Bible stories. (From “Niceness Counts in Ark-Building, Too”)

The Sunnis have had recent experiences with the Iraqi Army. The commander of Iraq’s Fifth Division, a Shiite, was replaced by the government this year after American officers

accused him of pursuing an overtly sectarian agenda by arresting and harassing Sunnis. (From “In Sweep of Iraqi Town, Sectarian Fears Percolate”)

A Global Village

The preceding quotations are drawn from four different articles in the same newspaper on the same day—the *New York Times*, June 22, 2007: compelling evidence that the world’s religions are part of people’s everyday world. We cannot call ourselves informed citizens without having at least a basic knowledge of them.^A

Today more than ever before, we live in a global village. Thumbing through the newspaper, logging on to the Internet, flying across the ocean, buying clothes and goods created by people far away, and a host of other activities have made us all, in a real sense, neighbors. This unprecedented variety of interactions offers an abundance of opportunities to enrich our lives, by connecting us with people who think and live differently than we do. But it also poses challenges. For one thing, it is more difficult than ever to be adequately informed about one’s community—now that that “community” includes the entire world. And part of meeting this challenge is gaining a sound understanding of the world’s religious traditions.

As the global community grows ever more close-knit, the relevance of religion in our day-to-day lives will continue to increase, not only at the level of international affairs, but locally as well. Most people already have—or soon will have—friends, classmates, or coworkers who belong to religious traditions quite different from their own.

Recognizing the need to understand the world’s religions is one thing; achieving such an understanding is another. This book aims to help. In certain ways, the study of world re-

A Search newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and other sources for at least three stories that mention religion. Answer this question: How does religion affect people’s daily lives in each example?

ligions is especially challenging, as the following section explains. But it also offers a great opportunity for discovering the many ways of being human.

The Nature of a Religious Tradition

Religion begins with mystery. Being human inevitably prompts deep questions about our existence: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? For that matter, what is “here”? That is, what is the nature of this world? What is the nature of the supreme or ultimate reality? Beset with such questions, we find ourselves confronting mystery on all sides. By responding to the questions, religion provides a way of living and dying meaningfully amid the mystery.

This book explores the various responses to mystery that are offered by the world’s religions. Anything so intimately involved with mystery is bound to be difficult, so it will help if the study itself is demystified as much as possible. The process of demystification begins by probing the nature of the questions most religious traditions address.

Religious Questions

Human beings, presumably unlike any other members of the animal kingdom, have the capacity to question such fundamental things as the source and the meaning of their existence. We are self-conscious beings. Along with being physical, rational, and emotional, we have the capacity for self-reflection; we have a conscience; we can ponder our own nature. We are spiritual (although the term *spiritual* is open to interpretation). And by virtue of our spirituality, we ask—and answer—life’s most basic questions. Because these questions are more or less pertinent to each religious tradition, they can be organized into a kind of framework for studying the world’s religions.^B

Not everyone chooses to answer these basic religious questions by following a religious tradition. Some people, even though they regard themselves as spiritual, are not members of a specific religion. But others find that a religion helps them grapple with religious questions. Religions offer responses that have been tested by time, in some cases by thousands of years. They are also fortified by the richness of tradition and by the shared experience of community.

Regardless of how we choose to respond to them, religious questions are inevitable. Studying these questions can help us better understand the nature of each religious tradition. Let us consider the primary ones.

What Is the Human Condition?

The initial religious question concerns the basic nature of the human condition: What is our essential nature? Are we merely what we appear to be—physical bodies somehow equipped with the capacity to think and to feel? or are we endowed with a deeper spiritual essence, some form of soul? Are human beings by nature good, or evil, or somewhere in-between, perhaps originally good but now flawed in some way?

Often a religion’s view of the basic nature of the human condition is set forth in its account of human origins. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, told in the Jewish and Christian bibles and also in the Qur’an (or Koran, the sacred book of Islam), is one clear example.

Suffering is an important aspect of the human condition. All religions recognize that we suffer. The question is, Why do we suffer? If we are by nature good and in no need of greater perfection, then of course suffering is not our fault. But if we are evil, or somehow flawed, perhaps we deserve to suffer. A religion typically describes a means of overcoming suffering—and of responding to the human condition in general—through the

B

The terms *spiritual* and *religious* often mean different things to different people. What does each term mean to you?

attainment of some higher state of spiritual maturity.^C

C

Contemplate the human condition by comparing the situation of humans with that of a favorite animal (it could be a pet). Does the animal think or feel, like people do? Does it seem to have a spiritual essence or soul? Does it seem to be by nature good, or evil, or somewhere in-between?

What Is Spiritual Perfection?

Almost every religion describes what is needed to fulfill our spiritual potential most perfectly. Some religions teach a form of spiritual perfection that can be attained in this life. Others teach that perfection comes only in an afterlife. In either case perfection is a difficult thing to attain; in fact some religions teach that it is impossible to attain on our own, without divine assistance. Therefore religions tend to acknowledge the goodness of being as spiritually mature and near to perfection as possible, and do not always propose that perfection is a simple all-or-none condition.

Later in this study of religions, you will encounter specific examples that explore various approaches to spiritual maturity and spiritual perfection. For now briefly consider three questions about the way a religion defines spiritual perfection: What is ethical—that is, how are we to act while living in the world? How do we transcend the human condition? And how do we attain salvation?

What is ethical? Religions typically prescribe an ethical life as a basic requirement for the journey toward spiritual perfection. Indeed teachings regarding right and wrong

constitute a significant part of most religious traditions.

How do we transcend the human condition? Some forms of spiritual perfection can be attained in this life, either temporarily or eternally. Buddhist enlightenment is one example. These forms all involve a type of **transcendence**, or overcoming of the normal limitations imposed by the human condition. Of course, we can respond to the challenges of being human in a variety of ways. Some people simply try to ignore them by allowing a certain numbness of the spirit. Others become workaholics to block them out. Some hide behind a veil of drugs or alcohol. Religions normally insist on a different type of response, a form of transcendence that brings one face-to-face with the human condition, and then raises one above it or allows one to see through it. (The precise descriptions of this transcendence vary by religion.) The Buddhist who has attained enlightenment, for example, while continuing to inhabit a physical body with the usual discomforts and needs, is said to maintain a state of indescribable spiritual tranquillity and bliss.

How do we attain salvation? Most religions teach that spiritual maturity or perfection is closely related to some form of salvation from the ultimate limitation imposed by the human condition: death. Religions that emphasize forms of transcendence typically hold that there is a direct connection between the transcendence attained in this life and final salvation. Some forms of Buddhism teach that the attainment of enlightenment in this life leads to *nirvana*, the final liberation. Religions such as Christianity and Islam, which teach that salvation depends on the divine, tend to maintain that final spiritual perfection awaits in the afterlife, sometimes after the individual's salvation has already been assured. According to this view, spiritual maturation continues even in a heavenly afterlife.



IMAGE: SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY

In Christianity the cross is often used as a symbol of salvation. This mosaic is from a church in Ravenna, Italy.

What Is Our Destiny?

As spiritual beings, we ponder our destiny. We wonder, Where are we going, ultimately? Most (though not all) religions provide answers to that question, and their answers are closely linked to the issues of spiritual perfection.

According to some religions, human beings face two possible destinies: one leads to reward, typically eternal life in paradise, and the other leads to condemnation. Individual destiny is linked to the question of spiritual maturation: the degree to which one has achieved perfection naturally corresponds to one's prospects for reward in the afterlife.

The question of destiny is more complex for religions that teach that human beings live more than one lifetime—religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In this case the immediate destiny after this life is generally not the ultimate, final destiny, but just another step toward the final destiny. Nevertheless, the need to seek spiritual maturity (if not perfection) in this life remains vital, because the level of one's maturity (or perfection) tends to determine the nature of one's future life.

What Is the Nature of the World?

Along with answering questions about human beings, religions also answer questions about the world. Where did the world come from? Is it real, or is it just some kind of cosmic illusion? Is it sacred, perhaps even living? or is it merely matter? Is it a help or a hindrance to the religious quest?

Such questions belong to the general category **cosmology**—the understanding of the nature of the universe. The answers to cosmological questions tend to determine a religion's degree of interest in the natural world. Some religions express such interest through support of scientific inquiry and theories regarding the natural world, while others tend to be suspicious of science.^D

What Is Ultimate Reality, and How Is It Revealed?

Finally, there is the religious question of ultimate reality (or for Western traditions especially, God). Theistic religions hold a belief in God or in multiple gods. These religions teach a certain theology, or doctrine regarding the divine. The theologies of the world include a range of basic perspectives: **monotheism** (belief in only one God), **polytheism** (belief in many gods), and **pantheism** (belief that the divine reality exists in everything), to name but a few.

Nontheistic religions do not hold a belief in a god who is essentially relevant for us, although they sometimes do hold a belief in various divine or semidivine beings. Some of these religions teach that all reality is essentially one thing, and that human beings are part of the ultimate reality.

Most religions also teach that the supreme or ultimate reality, whatever form it takes, is somehow revealed to humans. This **revelation** usually takes place through sacred stories or myths, or through various types of religious experience.

Seven Dimensions of Religion

Exploring the basic questions to which religions respond helps us understand the functions of religions. Considering the elements that make up religions helps us understand the forms of religions. Scholar Ninian Smart suggests that all the religious traditions manifest seven dimensions: experiential, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, ritual, social, and material. These dimensions are not exclusive of one another: for example, myths often set forth patterns of ritual. Indeed the seven dimensions are intertwined and complementary, weaving a rich tapestry through which religions respond to humans' basic questions, offering a doctrine here, prescribing a ritual there, and so forth. All religions use the same seven elements to

D

Summarize your personal cosmology—your own understanding of the nature of the world. Focus especially on the following questions: Where did the world come from? Is the world somehow a living, organic entity, or is it merely inorganic matter?

E

Like the terms *religious* and *spiritual*, *faith* tends to mean different things to different people. What does *faith* mean to you?

create their own unique tapestry, often emphasizing one dimension more, another dimension less. Zen Buddhism, for example, has a strong experiential dimension but says relatively little about doctrines.

Experiential

Religions commonly begin with the religious experiences of individuals. Some of these beginnings are famous and easy to identify. When a young prince named Gautama experienced enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree, he became the Buddha, and Buddhism was born. When Muhammad began to experience revelations from Allah, Islam began to take form. Other beginnings are not so easily identified. Moreover, religious experiences can be part of anyone's religious life; they do not always result in a new religion.

Faith generally belongs to the category religious experience, although it also has doctrinal aspects. In the New Testament, for instance, the Apostle Paul describes faith as being closely related to experience of the Holy Spirit, and involving more than just intellectual belief.

The world's major religions acknowledge numerous types of religious experience, some of them astounding. Generally speaking, in theistic religions God is experienced as a holy

presence who is other (that is, as a being distinct from the individual). This experience of God is often characterized by two separate emotions: awe-inspiring fear, and fascination. A well-known example of this type of experience is the revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai, through the burning bush. Moses was fearful of God, yet drawn in fascination toward the divine presence.

In nontheistic religions, religious experience usually takes the form of **mysticism**. In one basic type of mysticism, found in Hinduism and other religions, the individual becomes one with the divine through inward contemplation. Another form of religious experience, known as the vision quest, is found in many primal religions, which include Native American traditions.^E

Mythic

The concept of **myth** may not be familiar to us because most people no longer hold a predominantly mythic worldview. The matter is further complicated by our tendency to use the term *myth* in various ways. Typically we equate myths with falsehoods—but in the study of world religions, myths actually convey important truths.

We Westerners tend to base our perspectives on history and science, acquiring knowl-

The religious experience of Moses is depicted in *Moses Before the Burning Bush*, by the Italian painter Raphael (1483 to 1520).



IMAGE: SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY

edge through empirical observation and rational thinking. Myths are both nonhistorical and nonrational. But they do not necessarily conflict with history and science, nor are they necessarily false or irrational. Myths are sources of sacred truth and are therefore powerful, for they give meaning to life.

Myths take the form of sacred stories that are passed along from one generation to the next. Many are conveyed orally, though some are recorded in scripture. Myths are often set in primordial time, a period in the distant past somehow set apart from the ordinary present. They commonly tell of the origins of humans and the world. Myths set forth fundamental knowledge regarding the nature of things and the proper way to live.

The Genesis account of the world's creation is one such story or myth. It provides knowledge about a number of basic issues: the world was created by God; human beings were created in the image of God and are by nature good; humans are meant to have "dominion" over the other creatures of the world; and so forth. These mythic ideas depend neither on history nor on science, but they remain sacred truths for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.^F

Doctrinal

For many people, the most obvious and basic aspect of religion is belief. Adherents of a religion believe in something, namely, the creeds, doctrines, or teachings of their religion. Christians believe, for example, in the Apostles' Creed and in the doctrine of the Trinity. The belief aspect of religion is categorized as the doctrinal dimension.

Doctrines, creeds, and other teachings commonly originate in lived religious experience. They also derive from myths. Whereas myth and experience tend in some ways to defy the rational impulses of the mind, doctrines make sense of the content of experience and myth. They are often recorded in sacred texts, or scriptures, along with the myths and

the accounts of revelation and other religious experiences that serve as the foundations of religions.

Ethical

Religions tend to devote much attention to **ethics**: How are we to act while living in the world? The ethical dimension includes many sets of teachings that respond to that question: for example, the Ten Commandments in the Christian tradition, which have striking parallels in some other traditions. The ethical dimension also incorporates more general ethical principles, such as the Buddhist ideal of compassion, which is notably similar to the Christian ideal of love for one's neighbor.

Ritual

Worship is a common aspect of religions, taking a variety of forms and occupying much of an individual's religious life. Most forms of worship are carried out through some formal practice, or **ritual**. Like belief, ritual is very familiar to most of us. Many religious rituals reenact a myth or sacred story. For example, every Muslim ideally will make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca, the most holy city of Islam. Various aspects of the pilgrimage reenact the sacred story of Muhammad's original journey to Mecca, a leading event in the founding of the religion.

Social

Religions naturally involve communities, and most people consider the communal aspect of religion significant and attractive. A sense of community, of belonging to a group such as a tribe or parish or congregation is usually empowering for individuals. The shared experience of community also fortifies religions themselves, and often results in some form of organization, typically including a hierarchy of leadership. For example, religions usually recognize one level of membership for officials or priests, and another level for common adherents. Often

F

Myth is not as strong an element in the modern, scientific world as it was in earlier ages. Still, as the Creation story in Genesis suggests, some of our basic perspectives about life are derived from mythic sources. What other mythic truths—truths that are based on neither history nor science, but that give life meaning and direction—are prevalent in your society?

particular figures are thought to embody the ideals of spiritual perfection: the Taoist sage and the Christian saint are two such figures.

Material

The sacred architecture of cathedrals, temples, and other structures of worship, and the art within them, are among humanity's beautiful cultural achievements. Icons, such as the crucifix and statues of the Buddha, are part of this material dimension of religion. So too are books of scripture. Other types of sacred entities, whether natural (such as mountains) or of human construction (such as cities), also are highly significant for some religions. In India, for example, Hindus consider almost every major river sacred.^G

Some Challenges and Rewards of Studying the World's Religions

Several issues might make studying the world's religions unsettling. For example, it would seem that by definition, ultimate reality must be the same for all humans. Certainly the monotheistic religions consider God to be the God of all. But if that is the case, can there be more than one true religion? Are the religions saying essentially the same thing, even though they are using different words filtered through different historical and cultural frameworks? Are they in basic agreement about the truth? If so, does the matter of choosing a religion simply come down to personal preference?

These are difficult questions, and it is unrealistic to hope they will all be answered satisfactorily by the end of this study. Besides, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, religion is grounded in mystery, and surely we should not expect to penetrate such mystery entirely. We can, however, make progress toward understanding, by clarifying a proper perspective from which to examine the world's religions.

Two Approaches

A study of the world's religions is enriched when it is approached in two ways. First, it should be approached using a comparative methodology. Friedrich Max Müller, one of the founders of the study of comparative religions, pointed out that to know just one religion is to know none. As we move from chapter to chapter in this book, the dimensions of religion, along with the common questions to which different religions respond, should become clearer. Studying many religions should enable us to know each one, including our own, more precisely.

Second, the study of religions should be approached with **empathy**, which is the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective. We are familiar with the saying that we should never judge a person until we have walked a mile in his or her shoes. Empathy requires the use of the imagination, and can be quite challenging. It is rewarding too, providing a needed tool for gaining insight into the ways of others. The study of religions would not advance far if it lacked such insight.^H

Objectives

What can we hope to gain from a broad study of the world's religions? For one thing, we can strive to become knowledgeable about their responses to the most fundamental religious questions asked by human beings all over the world. All religions are treasure troves of wisdom, and everyone can benefit from exploring them. For another thing, we can try to become better acquainted with the seven dimensions of religion through the study of abundant examples. Finally, we can expect to emerge from this study with a greatly enhanced understanding of the people who follow the religions we have explored. That, in turn, can enrich us in our roles as citizens of the global village.

G

Identify at least two examples of sacred entities, art, or architecture in your community. Compare the examples in terms of how they express religious ideas and provoke emotions.

H

It is important to cultivate empathy—the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective—when studying the religions of others. Try applying the saying about empathy, that we need to walk in another person's shoes, to a family member or close friend. What do you think life looks like from that person's perspective?

Chapter Review

1. What issues do people usually address when they ask questions about the human condition?
2. How does spiritual maturity or perfection relate to the quest for salvation?
3. Briefly explain how religions differ over the question of destiny.
4. Name some ways religions perceive the nature of the world.
5. Describe the difference between theistic and nontheistic religions.
6. How do most religions teach that the ultimate reality is usually revealed?
7. Describe in general terms the religious experience of the theistic religions. Then briefly compare it with the religious experience of the nontheistic religions.
8. Briefly explain the concept of myth.
9. Identify at least two dimensions of religion, in addition to the mythic, doctrinal, and experiential.
10. What is one benefit of using a comparative approach to study the world's religions?
11. What is empathy, and how is it applied to the study of world religions?

Glossary

cosmology. The understanding of the nature of the universe.

empathy. The capacity for seeing things from another's perspective, and an important methodological approach for studying religions.

ethics. A dimension of religion that deals with how we are to act while living in the world.

faith. Experience of the divine or holy presence, sometimes involving intellectual belief and sometimes emphasizing personal trust.

monotheism. The belief in only one god.

mysticism. A category of religious experiences characterized by communing or uniting with the divine through inward contemplation.

myth. A story (often recorded in scripture) that tends to answer questions of origins and serves as a source of sacred truth.

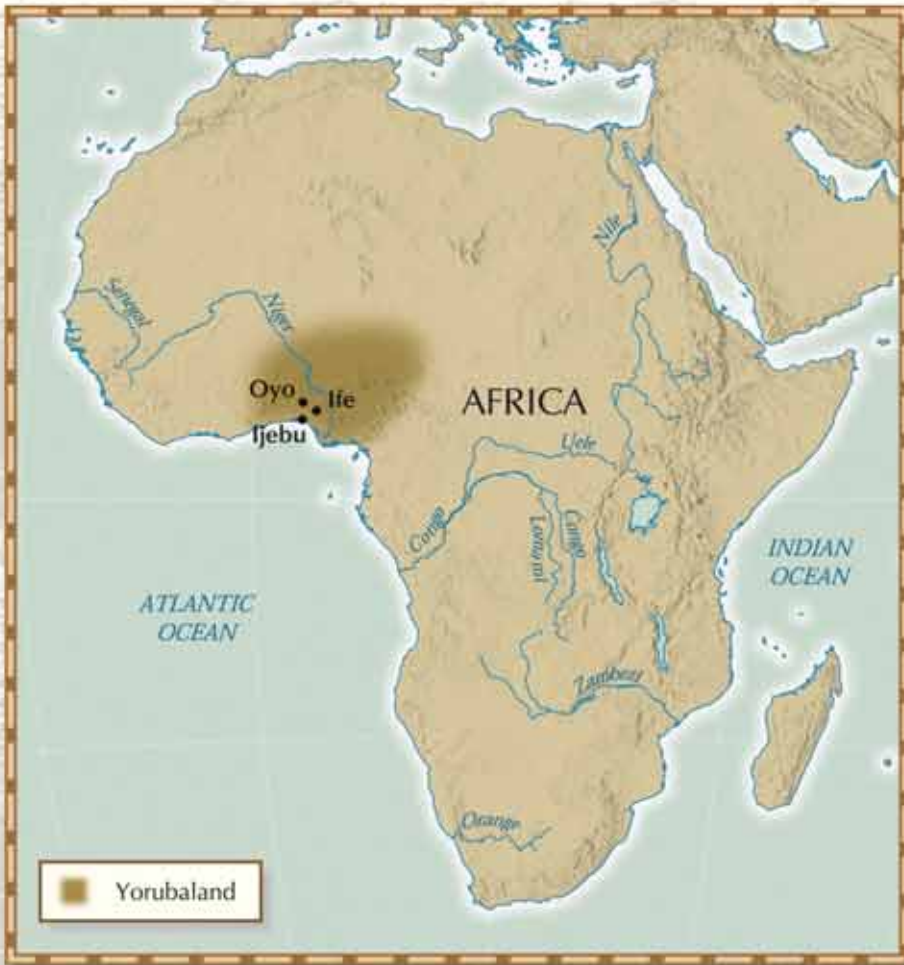
pantheism. The belief that the divine reality exists in everything.

polytheism. The belief in many gods.

revelation. The transmission of the divine will or knowledge to human beings, typically through myths or some form of religious experience.

ritual. Formal worship practice, often based on the reenactment of a myth.

transcendence. The overcoming of the normal limitations imposed by the human condition, whether temporarily or abidingly.



MAPS: © 2003, SAINT MARY'S PRESS





2 Primal Religious Traditions

The Nature of Primal Religions

Since prehistoric times small groups of people throughout the world have practiced their own unique forms of religion. Some of those religions continue to be practiced, especially among the native inhabitants of Australia, Africa, and the Americas. We refer to those religions as primal because they tended to come before the religious traditions we will study in the remaining chapters of this book.

Beginning our study with these first religions is a good idea for two reasons. One is that primal religions provide special insight into the mythic and ritual dimensions of religion. Primal peoples have tended to preserve a mythic orientation toward life. Their myths, and the rituals that reenact them, remain essential sources of knowledge and power for important aspects of their lives.

The other reason for studying primal religions first is that all religions stem, more or less directly, from primal beginnings. For example, the ancestor of Judaism, the religion of the ancient Israelites, was in its early stages a primal religion, exhibiting features similar to those discussed in this chapter. Other religions, such as Hinduism in India and Shinto in Japan, are also rooted in the primal traditions of early peoples.

Along with having originated first, primal religions generally have been the traditions of nonliterate people, which means they do not

depend on scriptures or written teachings, as do most other religions. What they lack in written texts, however, they often make up for in oral material—myths or stories that are passed down from generation to generation.

Primal religions tend to be the traditions of tribal peoples, organized in small groups that dwell in villages as opposed to large cities. There are exceptions, however, including the Yoruba of Africa and the Aztecs of Mesoamerica. In this and other ways, primal traditions are diverse. It is therefore crucial that we avoid making sweeping generalizations about them.

In the light of this vast diversity, this chapter does not attempt to describe all primal religions. Instead it focuses on four rather specific examples: the Aborigines of Australia, the Yoruba, the Plains Indians of North America, and the Aztecs. Once we have considered some particular features of each of these traditions, we will reflect on general themes that tend to be common to primal religions.

In the Apache Sunrise Dance, girls entering puberty are painted white with sacred clay and cornmeal. The rite symbolizes the passage into adulthood.



IMAGE: © CORBIS

Religion of the Australian Aborigines

The Aborigines, the native people of Australia, were largely unaffected by outsiders until the arrival of Europeans some two hundred years ago. The Aborigines maintained traditions extending many thousands of years into the past. In some areas, notably in the northern and central regions of Australia, those traditions remain largely intact today.

Australia is a continent of great diversity. Its geography ranges from lush forested mountains to harsh deserts, and those differences have produced a variety of social groups that speak about forty separate languages and have differing customs. Australia's primal religious life is diverse as well, but it possesses enough common elements that we can speak of one Aboriginal religion while acknowledging its varying manifestations.

The Dreaming: The Eternal Time of the Ancestors

The foundation of Aboriginal religion is the concept of the Dreaming. According to Aboriginal belief, the world was originally formless. Then at a certain point in the mythic past, supernatural beings called **Ancestors** emerged and roamed about the earth. The Ancestors gave shape to the landscape and created the various forms of life, including the first human beings. They organized humans into tribes, specified the territory each tribe was to occupy, and determined each tribe's language, social rules, and customs. When the Ancestors had finished and departed from the earth, they left behind symbols of their presence, in the form of natural landmarks, rock paintings, and so on.

This mythic period of the Ancestors is called **the Dreaming**. In a very real sense, this period lives on, for the Aborigines believe that the spiritual essence of the Ancestors



Ayers Rock is a sacred place for Australian Aborigines.

remains in the various symbols they left behind. The sites at which these symbols are found are thought to be charged with sacred power. Only certain individuals are allowed to visit them, and they must be approached in a special way. Rather than traveling the shortest routes to the sites, visitors follow the paths that were originally taken by the Ancestors in the Dreaming. Their ritual approach reenacts the mythic events of the Dreaming, and through it the Aborigines re-create their world as it existed in the beginning. This re-creation gives them access to the endless sources of sacred power of these sites. The Aborigines inhabit a mythic geography—a world in which every notable landmark, whether it be a rock outcropping, a watering hole, or a cave, is believed to have great religious significance. Aboriginal cosmology—or understanding of the nature of the universe—thus plays a constant role in Aboriginal religion.

The spiritual essence of the Ancestors is also believed to reside within each individual. An unborn child becomes animated by a particular Ancestor when the mother or another relative makes some form of contact with a sacred site. Usually this animation involves a ritual that draws the Ancestor's spiritual essence into the unborn child.

Aboriginal rock art evokes the Dreaming.



IMAGE © JOHN VAN HASSELT/CORBIS SYGMA

A
Empathy—seeing something from another’s perspective—helps us gain the insight we need to understand and appreciate the diversity of world religions. Striving to understand the Aboriginal concept of a mythic geography offers a good opportunity for practicing empathy.

Think of a favorite outdoor area, such as a place in the wilderness, a beach, a park, or your backyard. Imagine that every notable landmark has great religious significance and that your every move within the area is undertaken as if it were a religious ritual. Now describe the area and your experience of being there.

Through this connection each Aborigine is a living representation of an Ancestor. This relationship is symbolized by a **totem**—the natural form in which the Ancestor appeared in the Dreaming. The totem may be an animal, such as a kangaroo or snake, or a rock formation or other feature of the landscape. An individual will always be identified in certain ways with the Ancestor. The system of belief and ritual based on totems is called totemism. Totemism is a motif that is common to many primal traditions.

The Ancestors of the Dreaming also continually nourish the natural world. They are sources of life of all kinds. For a particular Ancestor’s nourishing power to flow forth into the world, the human beings associated with that Ancestor must perform proper rituals.

The supernatural, the human world, and the world of nature are thus considered to be delicately interrelated. Aboriginal religious life seeks to maintain harmonious relationships among these three aspects of reality. Such harmony is itself a form of spiritual perfection.^A

Animating the Power of the Dreaming: Aboriginal Religious Life

Aboriginal religion is the entire process of re-creating the mythic past of the Dreaming in order to tap into its sacred power. This process is accomplished primarily through ritual, the reenactment of myth. It also involves maintaining the structure of society as it was originally established by the Ancestors. This, in turn, requires the performance of certain rituals, such as those of initiation.

For Aborigines, ritual is essential if life is to have meaning. It is only through ritual that the sacred power of the Dreaming can be accessed and experienced. Furthermore, Aborigines believe that the rituals themselves were taught to the first humans by the Ancestors in the Dreaming.

Behind every ritual lies a myth that tells of certain actions of the Ancestors during the Dreaming. For example, myths that describe the creation of the kangaroo, a chief food source of the Aborigines, spell out precisely how and where the act of creation took



IMAGE: LEFT, © PENNY TWEEDIE/CORBIS; RIGHT, © PENNY TWEEDIE/CORBIS



Left: Aborigine men paint initiates' bodies in preparation for ceremonies that will bring the young people to awareness of their role in tribal life.
Right: An initiation dance.

place. Rituals that reenact these myths are performed at the corresponding sacred sites in order to replenish the local population of kangaroos.^B

**Taboo:
The Basis of Aboriginal Social Structure**

Aboriginal society is carefully structured. Certain people are forbidden to participate in certain rituals. The basis of this structure is the concept of **taboo**, which dictates that certain things and activities, owing to their sacred nature, are set aside for specific members of the group and are forbidden to others. Violation of this principle has on occasion been punishable by death.

The sites and rituals associated with certain Ancestors are for men only. Others, such as those connected with childbirth, are for women only. Restrictions are also based on maturity and on an individual's amount of religious training. Usually the older members of the tribe are in charge of important rituals.

Young people achieve religious maturity and training in part through the elaborate ini-

tiation rituals practiced throughout Aboriginal Australia.^C

**Initiation:
Symbolic Death, Spiritual Rebirth**

Even before birth each Aborigine possesses the spiritual essence of her or his totemic Ancestor. Initiation rituals awaken young people to this spiritual identity, and at the same time redefine their social identity within the tribe. The rituals bring about the symbolic death of childhood, which prepares the way for the spiritual rebirth that is a necessary step toward adulthood. Throughout the rituals, myths of the Dreaming are taught to the young people. Through the rituals and myths, young Aborigines learn the essential truths about their world and how they are to act within it.

Both boys and girls undergo initiation, though usually the rites are especially elaborate for boys. As an example, consider the male initiation rites practiced in the nineteenth century by the Dieri tribe of south-central Australia.

The initiation rituals of the Dieri took place around a boy's ninth birthday (though the age

B
Every society has rituals that reenact origins, just as the Aborigines do. Some contemporary rituals are religious in nature, whereas others involve patriotism and other aspects of society. List as many such rituals as you can, briefly explaining how each is a reenactment of an original event.

C
To what extent does your society apply restrictions similar to those of the Aboriginal concept of taboo?

The amulets on this Yoruba mask illustrate the impact of Islam in Africa. As primal traditions develop throughout history, they incorporate elements of other religions.

IMAGE: GELEDE MASK, MALE WITH SKULL CAP; EARLY 20TH CENTURY; AFRICAN, SOUTHWESTERN YORUBA, NIGERIAN. AMOSA AKAPO, IGBE QUARTER, IGBESA, SEATTLE ART MUSEUM (81.17.585), GIFT OF KATHERINE WHITE AND THE BOEING CO.



D What experiences have served as rituals of initiation for you, marking your passage from childhood to adulthood?

could vary) and lasted for months. In the first ritual, intended as a symbolic death, the initiate's two lower middle teeth were knocked out and buried in the ground.

Other rituals followed, including circumcision (removal of the foreskin of the penis), which for many Aboriginal tribes is the symbolic death par excellence. According to one myth, two Ancestors had shown the Dieri in the Dreaming how to circumcise with a stone knife.

The main initiation ritual was called the Wilyaru. The initiate stood with his eyes closed as men took turns cutting their forearms and letting their blood fall on him, until he became caked with dried blood. This blood served to connect the boy symbolically with his relatives. Next, the boy's neck and back were struck with wounds that were intended to leave scars, yet another symbol of death. At this point the boy was given a bull-roarer, a sacred instrument consisting of a piece

of wood attached to a long string made from human hair. The bull-roarer re-created the sound of the deities and, because of its great power, was taboo for women.

These initiation rituals were followed by a period of months during which the boy lived alone in the wilderness, until his wounds healed and the blood wore off his skin. When he returned to his tribe, he was greeted with much rejoicing and celebration. His rites of initiation completed, the boy had become a man.

It might be difficult for an outsider to understand the reasons for these various rituals. This difficulty illustrates the great power of myth. Aboriginal myth creates a reality that is unique to the Aborigines, a world of their own in which such initiation rituals not only make sense but are essential if life is to have meaning. The power of myth, and the performance of ritual to reenact myth, are basic features of all primal traditions.^D

An African Tradition: The Religion of the Yoruba

Africa, the second largest continent in terms of landmass, is home to some four hundred million people and several hundred religions, including the religion of the Yoruba. Though hardly representative of all African religions, the Yoruba tradition is similar enough to some others to serve as a good example. Yoruba society, today consisting of about ten million people, has endured for more than one thousand years. Its ancient religion has produced artwork that is famous and much admired.

The Yoruba and Their Universe

The Yoruba live in the western regions of central Africa, in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Yoruba designates not a unified nation, but rather a group with a common language and

culture. Throughout their history the Yoruba have favored living in cities. Some of those cities, such as Ife, Oyo, and Ijebu, have been quite large. The cities have tended to maintain independence from one another. Ife has always been the center of Yoruba religion, because it was there, the Yoruba believe, that the god Orisha-nla first began to create the world.

Yoruba cosmology depicts reality as being divided into two separate worlds: heaven and earth. Heaven is the invisible home of the gods and the ancestors. Earth is the world of normal experience, the visible home of human beings, who are descended from the gods. Earth is also populated by a deviant form of human beings, witches and sorcerers, who can cause disastrous harm if not controlled.

The purpose of the Yoruba religion is to maintain the balance between the human beings of earth and the gods and ancestors of heaven, while guarding against the evil deeds of sorcerers and witches.

Gods and Ancestors: The Inhabitants of Heaven

Primal traditions commonly hold a belief in both a supreme god and a host of less powerful deities. The supreme god of the Yoruba is Olorun, and the many deities the Yoruba worship are known as **orishas** (aw-ree-shahs'). The supreme god, lesser deities, and ancestors all inhabit heaven.

Olorun, the High God

The Yoruba believe that Olorun is the primary, original source of power in the universe. All other life forms ultimately owe their existence to him. But Olorun is distant and remote, and not involved in human affairs. He is therefore worshiped hardly at all, except in prayer. No shrines or rituals are assigned to him, and no sacrifices are made on his behalf. Instead, many other gods, the *orishas*, function as mediators between Olorun and human beings.

Orishas

The *orishas* are lesser deities, compared with the supreme Olorun, but are nonetheless truly significant. All are sources of sacred power and can help or harm human beings, depending on how well the rituals designed to appease them are carried out.

Hundreds of *orishas* exist. Some are worshiped by all Yoruba, others by only one family group. An especially significant *orisha* is Orisha-nla, whom most Yoruba believe created the earth. Ogun, the god of iron and of war, has a special status. Originally he was a human being, the first king of the city of Ife. After he died he became a god, and now he inhabits the border area between the ancestors and the rest of the *orishas*. The most complex *orisha* is Esu, who contains both good and evil properties. Precisely because of this, Esu mediates between heaven and earth. Worship of Esu is included in the worship of any other *orisha*, and Esu has a place in every shrine.



IMAGE: STAFF FOR ESU (OGO ELEGBA), NIGERIAN, YORUBA, EKITI, BAMGBOYE OF ODO-OWA, SEATTLE ART MUSEUM (81.17.598), GIFT OF KATHERINE WHITE AND THE BOEING CO.; PHOTO BY PAUL MACAPIA

Esu is a Yoruba *orisha* who embodies both good and evil and mediates between heaven and earth.

Esu's dual nature as both good and evil, and his corresponding role as mediator between heaven and earth, make him a **trickster figure**, a sort of mischievous supernatural being. Tricksters are significant in many primal traditions throughout the world.

The Ancestors of the Living

The heavenly ancestors are deceased humans who have acquired supernatural status. Like the *orishas*, the ancestors possess sacred power that can help or harm the living. Therefore they too are worshiped through rituals at special shrines.

There are two types of ancestors. Family ancestors gained their supernatural status by earning a good reputation and living to an old age, and are now worshiped only by their own families. Deified ancestors were important human figures known throughout Yoruba society, and are now worshiped by large numbers of people.^E

Connecting Heaven and Earth: Ritual Practitioners

Several types of ritual practitioners mediate between the gods and ancestors in heaven, and the human beings on earth. For whatever religious need a worshiper is attempting to fulfill, there is a specialist who can facilitate communication with the appropriate deity or ancestor.

For example: The head of a family is responsible for worshiping the family's ancestors and does so in the home at the family shrine. The king, or chief, of a city is in charge of the city's annual festivals and performs a host of other religious functions. The many priests oversee the various rituals carried out at the shrines of each *orisha*.

Among the priests who engage in specialized services are **diviners**. Those priests practice the art of **divination**, through which one's future can be learned. Becoming a diviner requires years of training, and the role is usually passed from parent to child. Divi-

nation is an extremely important aspect of Yoruba religion because knowledge of one's future is considered essential for determining how to proceed with one's life. The procedure involves an intricate system of hundreds of wisdom stories, which the diviner knows by memory. The diviner determines which of the stories are relevant for an individual, and from those stories interprets the individual's future.

Another ritual specialist mediates between the ancestors and the living. Wearing an elaborate ceremonial mask and costume, this specialist becomes a living representation of an ancestor by dancing at festivals. When an important person dies, the specialist imitates that person and conveys comforting messages from the deceased to the living.

The prevalence of these ritual practitioners clearly illustrates the importance of mediating, and thereby maintaining balance, between heaven and earth. Most primal religions share the understanding that the boundaries between the human and the supernatural realms are very thin and can easily be crossed over.

Religion of the North American Plains Indians

Interpreting the latest evidence, scholars believe that humans first came to North America some twenty thousand to thirty thousand years ago. They migrated from Asia, probably by crossing over the Bering Strait (situated between Russia and Alaska). They gradually spread out and eventually inhabited large regions of both North and South America.

Those first inhabitants of America, or Native Americans, formed many cultural groups, each with its own religion. For example, the peoples of the North American Plains comprised more than thirty tribes speaking seven distinct languages.

The Plains are vast, stretching from the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatch-

E

Deceased ancestors are worshiped in many religious traditions. Are they worshiped in any way in your society? Explain your answer.



Native Americans of the Northern Plains participate in a reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, in which the Lakota played a leading role. Such interest in history and other cultural aspects has become a common feature of the revitalization of Native American traditions.

ewan, and Manitoba southward to the Gulf of Mexico, bordered on the west by the Rocky Mountains and on the east by the Mississippi River. The culture we now associate with this area formed relatively recently, after the arrival of horses from Europe in the seventeenth century. Domestic horses enabled the Plains Indians to become great hunters of buffalo and other game. Numerous tribes migrated into the Plains region, exchanging ideas with one another. This exchange was aided by the use of a common sign language understood by all the tribes. The religion of the Plains is therefore somewhat representative of American Indian religion in general. Today this religion serves as the model of pan-Indian religion, a recent and popular movement uniting many tribes from across North America. As a result, Plains religion continues to be of vital interest to native peoples throughout North America.

The Plains peoples shared a number of religious features, including basic beliefs resembling those of the large and influential Lakota

tribe. All the tribes performed two basic rituals, the vision quest and the Sun Dance.

Basic Beliefs of the Lakota

The Lakota are also known as the Western Sioux, although *Sioux* originated as a pejorative label, from an enemy tribe's term for "snakes." These people inhabited eastern Montana and Wyoming, the western regions of the Dakotas, and parts of Nebraska. This is an especially important tribe for a number of reasons. The Lakota are remembered for having led a confederacy of tribes that defeated Custer and his troops in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. In 1890, as the wars between Indians and whites came to an end, more than two hundred Lakota were massacred at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Today about seventy thousand Lakota live on reservations in Manitoba, Montana, and North and South Dakota.

A Young Man's Vision Quest

John Fire / Lame Deer (1903 to 1976) was born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. In his lifetime he was a rancher, a rodeo cowboy, and a reservation police officer, but he is best known as a Lakota Sioux holy man. In this excerpt from his autobiography, Lame Deer describes his boyhood experience of a vision quest, or hanblechia (Lakota for "crying for a vision").

I was all alone on the hilltop. I sat there in the vision pit, a hole dug into the hill, my arms hugging my knees as I watched old man Chest, the medicine man who had brought me there, disappear far down in the valley. He was just a moving black dot among the pines, and soon he was gone altogether. (Page 11)

Night was coming on. I was still lightheaded and dizzy from my first sweat bath in which I had purified myself before going up the hill. I had never been in a sweat lodge before. I had sat in the little beehive-shaped hut made of bent willow branches and covered with blankets to keep the heat in. Old Chest and three other medicine men had been in the lodge with me. I had my back against the wall, edging as far away as I could from the red-hot stones glowing in the center. As Chest poured water over the rocks, hissing white steam enveloped me and filled my lungs. I thought the heat would kill me, burn the eyelids off my face! But right in the middle of all this swirling steam I heard Chest singing. So it couldn't be all that bad. I did not cry out "All my relatives!"—which would have made him open the flap of the sweat lodge to let in some cool air—and I was proud of this. I heard him praying for me: "Oh, holy rocks, we receive your white breath, the steam. It is the breath of life. Let this young boy inhale it. Make him strong."

The sweat bath had prepared me for my vision-seeking. Even now, an hour later, my skin still tingled. But it seemed to have made my brains empty. Maybe that was good, plenty of room for new insights. . . .

Sounds came to me through the darkness: the cries of the wind, the whisper of the trees, the voices of nature, animal sounds, the hooting of an owl. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming presence. Down there with me in my cramped hole was a big bird. The pit was only as wide as myself, and I was a skinny boy, but that huge bird was flying around me as if he had the whole sky to himself. I could hear his cries, sometimes near and sometimes far, far away. I felt feathers or a wing touching my back and head. This feeling was so overwhelming that it was just too much for me. I trembled and my bones turned to ice. . . .

Slowly I perceived that a voice was trying to tell me something. It was a bird cry, but I tell you, I began to understand some of it. . . .

I heard a human voice too, strange and high-pitched, a voice which could not come from an ordinary, living being. All at once I was way up there with the birds. The hill with the vision pit was way above everything. I could look down even on the stars, and the moon was close to my left side. It seemed as though the earth and the stars were moving below me. A voice said, "You are sacrificing yourself here to be a medicine man. In time you will be one. You will teach other medicine men. We are the fowl people, the winged ones, the eagles and the owls. We are a nation and you shall be our brother. You will never kill or harm any one of us. You are going to understand us whenever you come to seek a vision here on this hill. You will learn about herbs and roots, and you will heal people. You will ask them for nothing in return. A man's life is short. Make yours a worthy one."

I felt that these voices were good, and slowly my fear left me. I had lost all sense of time. I did not know whether it was day or night. I was asleep, yet wide awake. Then I saw a shape before me. It rose from the darkness and the swirling fog, which penetrated my earth hole. I saw that this was my great-grandfather, Tahca Ushte, Lame Deer, old man chief of the Minneconjou. I could see the blood dripping from my great-grandfather's chest where a white soldier had shot him. I understood that my great-grandfather wished me to take his name. This made me glad beyond words.

We Sioux believe that there is something within us that controls us, something like a second person almost. We call it *nagi*, what other people might call soul, spirit or essence. One can't see it, feel it or taste it, but that time on the hill—and only that once—I knew it was there inside of me. Then I felt the power surge through me like a flood. I cannot describe it, but it filled all of me. Now I knew for sure that I would become a *wicasa wakan*, a medicine man. Again I wept, this time with happiness.

I didn't know how long I had been up there on that hill—one minute or a lifetime. I felt a hand on my shoulder gently shaking me. It was old man Chest, who had come for me. He told me that I had been in the vision pit four days and four nights and that it was time to come down. He would give me something to eat and water to drink and then I was to tell him everything that had happened to me during my *hanblechia*. He would interpret my visions for me. He told me that the vision pit had changed me in a way that I would not be able to understand at that time. He told me also that I was no longer a boy, that I was a man now. I was Lame Deer.

(Lame Deer and Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, pages 14–16)

The Lakota name for the supreme reality is **Wakan Tanka** (wah'khan tankh'ah), sometimes translated as Great Spirit or the Great Mysterious, but literally meaning “most sacred.” Wakan Tanka actually refers to sixteen separate deities. The number sixteen is derived from the number four (multiplied by itself), which is the most sacred number in Plains religion. It refers to the four compass directions (north, south, east, and west), which are especially relevant to peoples living in the wide, open regions of the Plains.

The creation of the world and the arrival of the first human beings are explained in detailed myths that celebrate the activities of the various supernatural beings involved. One of those beings is Inktomi (whose name means “spider”), the Lakota trickster figure. As the mediator between the supernatural and human worlds, Inktomi taught the first humans their ways and customs. Inktomi also serves another important function. Numerous stories tell about Inktomi’s mistakes and errors of judgment, and offer an important moral lesson for children: Do not behave as Inktomi did!

Basic to most religions are beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, or human destiny. The Lakota believe that four souls depart from a person at death, one of which journeys along the “spirit path” of the Milky Way. The soul meets an old woman, who judges it and either allows it to continue to the other world of the ancestors, or sends it back to earth as a ghost. Meanwhile parts of the other souls enter unborn children and are reborn in new bodies.^F

The Vision Quest

The **vision quest** is common to many primal traditions throughout the world. It is a primary means for an individual to gain access to spiritual power that will ensure greater success in activities such as hunting, warfare, and curing the ill. Both men and women ex-

perience this quest, though men do so more frequently.

The vision quest is carried out under the supervision of a medicine man or woman, a spiritual leader who issues specific instructions beforehand and interprets the content of the vision afterward. Before setting out on the quest, the participant undergoes a ritual of purification in the sweat lodge.

The sweat lodge is used on numerous occasions, and is a common element among Plains Indians and Native American traditions in general. It is a dark and airtight hut made of saplings and covered with animal skins. The structure of the lodge is intended to represent the universe. Heated stones are placed in the center, and the medicine man or woman sprinkles water over them. The resulting hot steam causes the participant to sweat profusely, leading to both physical and spiritual purification.

Once purified in this fashion, the vision quester goes off alone to a place far from the camp, usually to a hilltop. There he or she endures the elements for a set number of days, without food or water. Depending on the instructions from the medicine man or woman, the quester might perform certain rituals, carefully structured around a central spot.

A vision comes to the quester eventually, usually near the end of the stay. It arrives in



IMAGE © BETTMANN/CORBIS

F Imagine yourself living in the open wilderness of the North American Plains. Why, do you suppose, did the Lakota understand their supreme reality as being closely related to the four compass directions?

For many Native American tribes, spiritual and physical purification in a sweat lodge is part of the preparation for setting out on a vision quest.

the form of an animal or some other object or force of nature. A message is often communicated along with the vision. When the individual returns to camp, the medicine man or woman interprets the vision and the message. The lessons derived from the vision quest influence the rest of the person's life.

On some occasions the participant acquires a guardian spirit, which can be in the form of an animal, an inanimate object, or a ghost. The guardian spirit continues to protect and instruct the person, especially at times of great need.

The vision quest expresses two dimensions of religion: the quest itself is a religious ritual, and the moment of receiving the vision or guardian spirit is a form of religious experience.

The Sun Dance

Whereas the vision quest focuses on the individual, the **Sun Dance**, another ritual common to all tribes of the Plains, is undertaken for the benefit of all. It occurs at the beginning of summer and is, in part, a celebration of the new year. In the past it also functioned as a preparation for the great annual buffalo hunt.

A sacred leader presides over the Sun Dance. This leader is usually a medicine man, though the Blackfeet, who inhabit Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana, choose a woman of out-

standing moral character. Leading the Sun Dance is both a great honor and a grave responsibility.

For all tribes the major task in preparing for the Sun Dance is the construction of the lodge in which the ceremony is held. A cottonwood tree is carefully selected, felled, and ritually carried to a chosen spot, where it is set upright. This tree becomes what scholars call the **axis mundi**, the axis or center of the universe—itsself an important and common theme for primal traditions. As the connecting link between the earth and the heavens, the tree also represents the supreme being. The lodge is constructed of twenty-eight poles, representing the twenty-eight days of the lunar month, placed in a circle around the tree. The finished lodge is representative of the universe with its four compass directions.

The performance of the Sun Dance features long periods of dancing while facing in the direction of the sun, which is venerated for its life-giving powers. Music and drumbeats accompany the dancing. Some of the dancers skewer the flesh of their chests and attach themselves to the tree with leather thongs. They then pull back from the tree as they continue dancing, until eventually their flesh tears. Because they believe their bodies are the only things they truly own, the dancers regard bodily mutilation as the only suitable sacrifice to offer to the supreme being.

This practice of bodily mutilation once compelled the U.S. government to outlaw the Sun Dance. It is now again legal and is commonly practiced in its traditional form among tribes of the North American Plains.⁶

A Mesoamerican Religion: The Aztecs and Their Legacy

In some ways the Aztec tradition defies the common description of primal religious tradition. Instead of a small group of people, the

G
The Indians of the Northern Plains traditionally lived off the land, depending on hunting and fishing to feed themselves. What elements of the vision quest and Sun Dance rituals are related to that lifestyle?

This nineteenth-century painting on buckskin depicts the performance of a Sun Dance.



IMAGE © STAPLETON COLLECTION/CORBIS

Aztecs were a highly developed civilization with a population of about fifteen million. Many Aztecs were urban, living in the city of **Tenochtitlan** (te-nohch-teet'lahn), which is now Mexico City, or in one of the four hundred towns that spread across Mesoamerica, from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. But like other primal traditions, Aztec religion emphasized the interrelationship between myth and ritual, as its practice of human sacrifice makes vividly clear. Aztec religion was also primal in the sense that it predated Catholicism, which came to Mesoamerica with the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. The Aztec influence can still be seen today in some modern Mexican religious practices.

The Aztecs and Mesoamerican Culture

Mesoamerica included most of present-day Mexico and extended southward to present-day Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Native Americans appear to have arrived there about twenty thousand years ago, although scholars lack firm evidence. From about four thousand years ago until about five hundred years ago (around the time Columbus arrived in the New World), the area was home to a sophisticated and diverse Mesoamerican culture, which included civilizations such as the Olmec (1500 to 200 BC), the Maya (AD 200 to 900), the Toltec (AD 900 to 1100), and the Aztec (AD 1325 to 1521).

The Toltec Tradition:

The Foundation of Aztec Religion

The Aztecs were relative latecomers to Mesoamerica, having migrated into the region from the northwest. By the time of their arrival, great cultural achievements had already come to pass. Those achievements offered the foundations on which the Aztecs built their own great civilization. The strongest influence came from the Toltecs. The Aztecs believed that the Toltec god **Quetzalcoatl** (kwet-suhl-kuh-wah'til) (Feathered Serpent) had presid-

ed over a golden age of cultural brilliance. The god's earthly devotee Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Our Young Prince the Feathered Serpent) ruled as priest-king. He provided the Aztecs with the perfect role model for their own authority figures.

The Aztecs looked back to this golden age of the Toltecs as a mythic pattern for the ideal civilization. The Toltec tradition especially influenced religion. Aztec children were taught to recite, "Truly with him it began, truly from him it flowed out, from Quetzalcoatl—all art and knowledge" (quoted in Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, page 44). Aztec cosmology attributed the creation and ordering of the world to Quetzalcoatl.^H

Teotihuacan: Place of Origins

It seems that even long before the rise of the Toltecs, Quetzalcoatl was worshiped in the great city of Teotihuacan (tay-oh-tee-wuh-kon') (AD 100 to 700), whose population once exceeded two hundred thousand. Today known mainly for its monumental Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon, Teotihuacan is the most visited archaeological site in the Americas. Aztec myth identified Teotihuacan, located just thirty miles northeast of the Aztecs' own capital city, Tenochtitlan, as the origin of the entire cosmos, in terms of both space and time. The myth goes as follows:

It is told that when yet [all] was in darkness, when yet no sun had shone and no dawn had broken—it is said—the gods gathered themselves . . . there at Teotihuacan. They spoke . . . :

“. . . Who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?" (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 7, part 8, page 4)

Cosmology: Time and Space

The Aztecs' cosmology was thoroughly interrelated with their pessimistic view of time, their perspective on the human condition, and their ritual of human sacrifice.

H

The Aztecs looked back to the Toltec tradition as a kind of golden age, providing them with a mythic pattern for the ideal civilization. In what ways do you and your society look to past traditions for cultural ideals?

Age of the Fifth Sun

As indicated by the creation myth that was cited previously, the Aztecs believed that the sun was created at Teotihuacan. In fact the present sun, they thought, was the fifth sun. Four previous suns and their ages had already been destroyed, and a similar fate was anticipated for this one. The only way of delaying the end of the age was to nourish the sun continually through human sacrifices.

This remarkable pessimism was enhanced by the belief that the fifth sun was the last that would ever shine. Each of the five suns had occupied its own cosmic location: the center, the west, the north, the south, and, in the case of the fifth sun, the east. The Aztecs understood the universe to be built around this structure of the center plus four cardinal directions. Aztec cosmology thus featured a close correspondence between time and space.¹

Four Directions and the *Axis Mundi*

The Aztecs understood the spatial world as having four quadrants extending outward from the center of the universe (the *axis mundi*), which connected the earthly realm to the many-layered heavenly realm above and the many-layered underworld below. The ancient

city of Teotihuacan had been arranged that way, apparently with a cave as the original *axis mundi*. Following on this pattern, the Aztecs designed Tenochtitlan to be the center of their world. At the point where the four directions met stood the Great Temple, known by the Aztecs as Serpent Mountain.

It is not surprising that the Aztecs' great temple should be called a mountain—the mountain is commonly a type of *axis mundi* for primal traditions around the globe. It is also not surprising that the temple should bear the name *Serpent*: recall that the Toltec god was called Feathered Serpent. However, worship at Serpent Mountain was devoted especially to a god of rain and fertility and to a god of war and sacrifice.

The Human Role in Sustaining the Cosmos

The Aztecs understood the human condition as being vitally linked to cosmology. Two divine forces, one concentrated in the head, the other in the heart, were believed to nurture the human being with basic needs. Because of the potency of these divine forces, each human being was regarded as a sort of *axis mundi*, connecting the earthly realm to the divine. The human body, especially the head and the heart, was also regarded as potent nourishment for the sun and the cosmos.

The Ritual of Human Sacrifice

So, it was said, when he arrived . . . he ascended by himself, of his free will, to the place where he was to die. . . .

And when he had mounted all the steps, when he had reached the summit, then the priests fell upon him; they threw him on his back upon the sacrificial stone. Then [one] cut open his breast, seized his heart, and raised it as an offering to the sun.

For in this manner were all [these] captives offered up. But his body they did not roll

I
The Aztec cosmology is marked by a deep pessimism regarding the future. How does your society view the future? What can human beings offer to “nourish” the present so as to ensure a sound future?

At the pyramid-shaped Great Temple, in the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, worship was dedicated to a god of rain and fertility and to a god of war and sacrifice.





The Aztecs understood the universe to have five parts: a center and four directions. This painting portrays the founding of the city of Teotihuacan.



IMAGE TOP: © GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/CORBIS
THE FIRST PAGE OF CODEX MENDOZA/FOUNDING OF TENOCHTITLAN. BOTTOM: © SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY

This illustration from an Aztec manuscript shows how the Aztecs offered up the hearts and heads of their warriors and captives in order to gain the favor of the gods and to delay the end of the Age of the Fifth Sun.

down; rather, they lowered it. Four men carried it.

And his severed head they strung on the skull-rack. (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 2, part 3, page 68)

This account illustrates some of the ways human sacrifice fit into the Aztecs' overall cosmology and understanding of the human condition. The heart, with its abundance of divine force, was offered as nourishment to the sun. The head, similarly, was offered to the sky. The warrior's willingness to ascend the temple's stairs suggests his acceptance of his role in sustaining the fragile cosmos. According to Aztec belief, moreover, this role would allow him to enter the highest heaven upon death.

Sacrifices like this one were carried out at least once every twenty days. Usually the victims were captive warriors, as in the account cited here; in fact the need for sacrificial victims motivated much of Aztec warfare. Sometimes the victims were slaves, including, rarely, women and children.^J

The Mastery of Language

Aztec religion was not fixated on human sacrifice. The rich culture of the Aztecs provided many means of fulfilling religious needs. For example, a great deal of religious power was believed to be conveyed through the mastery of language.

The Aztecs spoke Nahuatl (nay'wah-tuhl), a naturally expressive language capable of high achievements in poetry and other forms of speech. Specialists called "knowers of things" could communicate with the gods and make offerings through language, thus providing an alternative to sacrifice. The Aztecs also favored wit, commonly employing riddles in their ordinary speaking. Knowing the answers to riddles meant that one came from a good family. Here are two examples:

What is it that is a small blue gourd bowl filled with popcorn? One can see from our little riddle that it is the heavens. (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 6, part 7, page 237)

What is that which we enter in three places [and] leave by only one? It is our shirt. (Page 239)^K

From Aztec Empire to Catholic Mexico

The fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 to Hernán Cortés and his Spanish army was due in part to the religion of the Aztecs. The Aztec king Moctezuma II (commonly, though incorrectly, known as Montezuma) is said to have believed that the Spanish leader was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the long-lost priest-king of the Toltecs. Our Young Prince the Feathered Serpent had disappeared from earth long ago, but was expected to return, possibly in 1519. By an amazing coincidence, Cortés—wearing a feathered helmet—arrived in Mesoamerica that year. Moctezuma welcomed Cortés as the returning Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, providing him with gifts.

The end of the Aztec empire in no way marked the end of Aztec culture. Tenochtitlan has survived as the huge metropolis Mexico City, and Aztec culture has survived in religious forms.

The popular veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe began, according to legend, in 1531 on the outskirts of the fallen city of Tenochtitlan when a dark-skinned apparition of the Virgin Mary appeared to an Aztec convert to Catholicism named Juan Diego. The hill on which she appeared was considered the sacred place of the Aztec mother goddess Tonantzin, who had been worshiped for centuries. Some Mexican Indians today continue to refer to the Virgin Mary as Tonantzin.

The popular Día de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, also shows the survival of Aztec religious culture. This celebration, held at the end of October and beginning of November, joins the living and the dead through festive and spiritually meaningful rituals. The Aztecs set aside time each year to perform similar rituals devoted to the same basic purpose.

J

Considering the Aztec ritual of human sacrifice offers a challenging opportunity to see things from another's perspective. Explain how human sacrifice is part of the Aztecs' ordered and sophisticated religious worldview, given their cosmology and understanding of the human condition.

K

In your experience how has the mastery of language helped to convey religious power? How does the significance of speech in the Aztec tradition compare with the significance of speech in another religious tradition with which you are familiar?

Common Themes, Diverse Traditions

Though primal religions exhibit great diversity, many of them also share specific elements, including totemism, taboo, the trickster figure, the vision quest, and the *axis mundi*.

The four examples of primal religions presented in this chapter also share certain general themes. For these religions the boundaries between the supernatural and the human worlds are thin and easily crossed. Among the Australian Aborigines, for example, the sacred power of an Ancestor of the Dreaming is believed to enter an individual at the time of conception. The Yoruba commonly turn to divination to acquire knowledge of their destinies from the *orishas*. In both traditions communication between the ancestors and the living is thought to take place regularly.

A related theme is the all-encompassing nature of religion. In primal societies the secular and the sacred are not separate. Rather, the universe is full of religious significance, and humans constantly draw on its sacred and life-giving powers. This is vividly illustrated by the lack of specific terms for religion in Native



In Mexico today Christian families decorate the graves of their ancestors on the Day of the Dead. The Aztecs practiced similar rituals.

The Seven Dimensions of Religion: Primal Religious Traditions

Dimension	Examples
Experiential	receiving a vision or guardian spirit during a vision quest
Mythic	Aboriginal Ancestors and the Dreaming, trickster figures (such as Esu and Inktomi), Teotihuacan as the place of cosmic origins
Doctrinal	totemism, Yoruba theology of Olorun and the <i>orishas</i> , Lakota belief in four souls of the dead person, Aztec belief that the Age of the Fifth Sun would soon end
Ethical	moral lessons learned from the errors of Inktomi (the Lakota trickster figure)
Ritual	Aboriginal rites of initiation, the Sun Dance, Aztec human sacrifice
Social	taboo as the basis of social structure
Material	totems, bull-roarers, Yoruba masks, the sweat lodge, the Sun Dance lodge, the Great Temple (Serpent Mountain) of Tenochtitlan

American languages; religion pervades life, so there is no need to set it apart.

Another common theme is change. Too often, students of religion have regarded primal traditions as static monoliths. In fact primal religions have constantly been changing. For example, the religions of the Plains peoples altered markedly when horses arrived from Europe in the seventeenth century. Although Aztec religion is largely a thing of the past, its legacy continues to affect Latin American religious life. Australian Aborigines are well equipped to accommodate modern changes: once a new tradition has been accepted, they agree that the Ancestors established it long ago, in the period of the Dreaming, and the innovation becomes part of their eternal reality.

One powerful consequence of this ongoing change is the remarkable adaptability of primal peoples. Though it is commonly asserted that these cultures will inevitably disappear from the face of the earth, the primal religious traditions are not necessarily doomed. On the contrary, native peoples seem to be increasing their level of participation in their traditional ways. These traditions now bear the imprint of modernity, but their ancient foundations live on.¹

Chapter Review

1. Why are some forms of religion called primal? Describe some of the characteristics of primal religions.
2. What elements of the natural and human world did the Ancestors create or establish in the period of the Dreaming?
3. What survives in the symbols left behind by the Ancestors?
4. Explain the terms *totem* and *taboo*.
5. Why is ritual essential if Aboriginal life is to have meaning?
6. How did Aboriginal rituals originate?
7. What purposes are served by Aboriginal initiation rituals?
8. Identify two acts of Dieri initiation rituals that symbolize death.

9. In what part of Africa do the Yoruba live?
10. Why has the city of Ife always been the center of Yoruba religion?
11. Briefly describe the Yoruba understanding of the cosmos.
12. Who is Olorun, and what is his role in Yoruba religion?
13. What are the *orishas*? Explain their significance in the religious life of the Yoruba.
14. Name and briefly describe at least two of the *orishas*.
15. What is a trickster figure?
16. Describe the two types of Yoruba ancestors.
17. Describe the role of Yoruba ritual practitioners.
18. What is divination, and why do the Yoruba regard it as essential?
19. According to the interpretation of the latest evidence, when and how do scholars think human beings first came to North America?
20. Why is the religion of the Plains Indians of vital interest among native peoples throughout North America?
21. What is Wakan Tanka?
22. Who is Inktomi?
23. Briefly describe Lakota beliefs regarding death and the afterlife.
24. What do individuals try to gain access to by going on a vision quest?
25. Briefly describe the structure and function of the sweat lodge.
26. Describe a typical vision experienced by a person who undertakes a vision quest.
27. Among the Blackfeet tribe, who presides over the Sun Dance?
28. What is the *axis mundi* in general? What is the *axis mundi* in the Sun Dance?
29. Why do some participants in the Sun Dance skewer their chests and dance until their flesh tears?
30. In what two ways does the Aztec tradition defy the description of a primal religious tradition? In what ways is the Aztec tradition like other primal religious traditions?

L In general, primal religions understand the boundaries between the human and the supernatural realms to be thin and easily crossed. Drawing from the religious traditions of the Aborigines, the Yoruba, the Indians of the Northern Plains, and the Aztecs, identify as many examples as you can that illustrate this understanding.

31. What geographical area did Mesoamerica include?
32. According to Aztec cosmology, what god created and ordered the world? What ancient city is the origin of the cosmos?
33. Who was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl? What was his significance for the Aztecs?
34. What did the Aztecs call their present age? What did they anticipate its fate to be?
35. How did the Aztecs understand the spatial world?
36. Why did the Aztecs regard each human being as a sort of *axis mundi*?
37. What were the special religious capabilities of the Aztec knowers of things?
38. What historical coincidence contributed to the fall of Tenochtitlan to the Spaniards?
39. How does the popular Day of the Dead show the survival of Aztec religious culture?
40. What three themes are shared by the primal religions studied in this chapter?

Glossary

Ancestors. For the Australian Aboriginal religion, Ancestors are supernatural beings (or deities) who emerged and roamed the earth during the time of the Dreaming, giving shape to the landscape and creating various forms of life. When the word *ancestors* is lowercased, it refers to the deceased, who can assist the living while requiring religious devotion (as among the Yoruba, for example).

axis mundi (Latin: “axis of the universe”). Common to many religions, an entity such as a mountain, tree, or pole that is believed to connect the heavens and the earth, and is sometimes regarded as the center of the world; for example, the cottonwood tree of the Plains Indians’ Sun Dance.

divination. The use of various techniques, such as throwing bones or shells and then interpreting the pattern in which they fall, for gaining knowledge about an individual’s future or about the cause of a personal problem; important among many religions worldwide, including that of the Yoruba.

diviners. Ritual practitioners who specialize in the art of divination; very important among the Yoruba.

Dreaming, the. The mythic time of Australian Aboriginal religion when the Ancestors inhabited the earth.

orishas (aw-ree-shahs’; Yoruba: “head source”). The hundreds of various Yoruba deities who are the main objects of ritual attention, including Orisha-nla, the creator god; Ogun, the god of iron and of war; and Esu, the trickster figure.

Quetzalcoatl (kwet-suhl-kuh-wah ’til; Nahuatl: Feathered Serpent). Mesoamerican creator god worshiped at Teotihuacan and by the Toltecs; believed by the Aztecs to have presided over a golden age. Quetzalcoatl’s earthly representative was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Nahuatl: Our Young Prince the Feathered Serpent), a legendary Toltec priest-king.

Sun Dance. Ritual of the Lakota and other tribes of the North American Plains that celebrates the new year and prepares the tribe for the annual buffalo hunt; performed in the late spring or early summer in a specially constructed lodge.

taboo (sometimes spelled tabu). A system of social ordering that dictates that specific objects and activities, owing to their sacred nature, are set aside for specific groups and are strictly forbidden to others; common to many primal peoples, including the Australian Aborigines.

Tenochtitlan (te-nohch-teet ’lahn). Capital city of the Aztec empire, believed to be the center of the world. Home of the Great Temple, or Serpent Mountain. Site of present-day Mexico City.

totem. A natural entity, such as an animal or a feature of the landscape, that symbolizes an individual or group and that has special significance for the

religious life of that individual or group; a common motif among Australian Aborigines and other primal peoples.

trickster figure. A type of supernatural being who tends to disrupt the normal course of life, found among many primal peoples; for example, Esu among the Yoruba and Inktoni among the Lakota.

vision quest. A means of seeking spiritual power through an encounter with a guardian spirit or other medium, usually in the form of an animal or other natural entity, following a period of fasting and other forms of self-denial; common to many primal peoples, including the Lakota and other tribes of the North American Plains.

Wakan Tanka (wah ’khan tankh ’ah; Lakota: “most sacred”). Lakota name for the supreme reality, often referring collectively to sixteen separate deities.





3 Hinduism

There is only one God, but endless are his aspects and endless are his names. Call him by any name and worship him in any aspect that pleases you, you are sure to see him. (Shri Ramakrishna, quoted in Prabhavananda with Manchester, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, page 353)

Many Rivers to One Ocean

The esteemed holy man Shri Ramakrishna (1836 to 1886) speaks for most of his fellow Hindus when he emphasizes the harmony and tolerance that are characteristic of his religion. A harmony of many different beliefs and practices, all aiming

for the common goal of salvation, like many rivers converging into one ocean, Hinduism also tends to be highly tolerant of other religions. True to the ideals of Hinduism, Shri Ramakrishna lived what he taught. From early boyhood he mastered a variety of Hindu paths of worship, later he became a Muslim and then a Christian, and all the while, from his own perspective, he evolved into a better Hindu.

Throughout the ages, harmony amid diversity, and tolerance toward other faiths have characterized Hinduism. The nearly four-thousand-year-old **Rig Veda** (rig vay' duh), Hinduism's oldest sacred text, declares: "God is one but men call him by many names" (1.64.46). The great twentieth-century Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, echoes the ancient wisdom of the Rig Veda: "Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it

becomes many as it passes through the human medium" (*The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 1, pages 542–543). Like Ramakrishna, Gandhi revered Christianity; he even placed the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew alongside Hinduism's Bhagavad-Gita as his favorite religious texts.

In this chapter we will consider the main aspects of the vast diversity of beliefs and practices that together form Hinduism. We will chart many rivers, but it is important not to forget that all flow eventually into one ocean.

Human Destiny: From Worldly Realms to the Divine Beyond

Learning about Hinduism depends first on understanding a perspective of reality—the universe, human beings, and the divine—that is fundamentally different from common Western perspectives. Because Hinduism emphasizes above all else the concerns of human beings, we will chart the Hindu perspective on reality by first considering human destiny. It is best to begin this story at its conclusion, for the final destiny of salvation through liberation returns the individual to the original source. Spiritual perfection amounts to a return to the beginning.

Liberation: Returning to the Sacred Source

Salvation through liberation from the constraints of the human condition is the ultimate goal of all Hindus, the ocean into which all the rivers of Hinduism eventually flow. For most it is a distant goal, not to be attained in this lifetime. Hindus believe in reincarnation (rebirth in new life-forms) and thus anticipate a long series of lifetimes, so they can afford

Mahatma Gandhi, the great Hindu political leader, is revered for his ideas on social justice. His practice of non-violent disobedience helped to free India from British rule, establishing it as an independent nation.

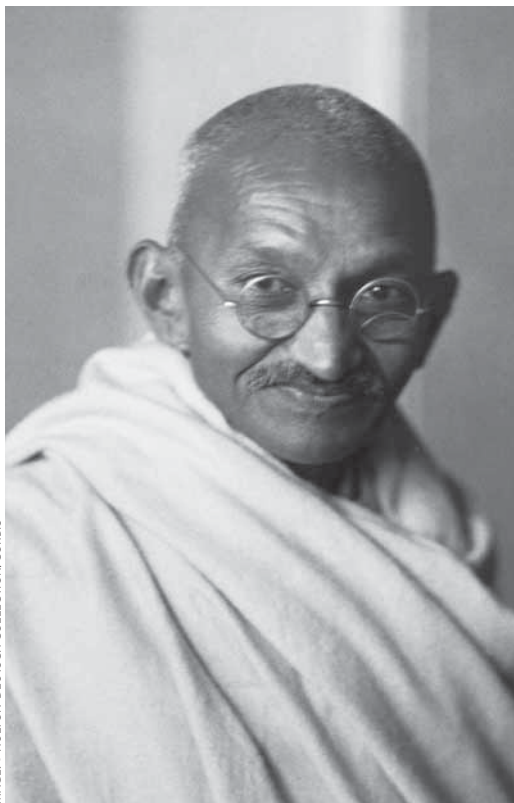


IMAGE: © HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS

to be patient regarding the goal of liberation. Hinduism is not in a hurry.

The Hindu term for “liberation” is **moksha** (mohk’shuh), a Sanskrit word that also means “release.” *Moksha* is a release from this ordinary, finite, limited realm of existence into the infinite ocean of the divine. It is an experience characterized by infinite being, infinite awareness, and infinite bliss. The details of this experience defy description, for it is completely beyond the experiences of this world.

Never again to be reincarnated, the Hindu who has attained *moksha* is united forever with the divine, having returned to the sacred source.

The Divine: One Ultimate Reality, Many “Masks”

Hinduism perceives the nature of the divine very differently than do the Western monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Rather than believing in one personal God, who created all things and exists independently of them, most Hindus believe that all reality—God, the universe, human beings, and all else—is essentially one thing. At the same time, Hindus worship many gods and goddesses, appropriately thought of as the various masks of God.

Monism: All Is Brahman

Most (though not all) Hindus believe in **monism** (only-one-ism), the doctrine that all reality is ultimately one. This basic feature of the doctrinal dimension of Hinduism differs markedly from the predominant monotheism (only-one-God-ism) of the Western religions, in which God is held to be both the creator of the world, and above and independent of it.

An analogy can help make sense of the difficult concept of monism. Rivers, ponds, lakes, and oceans appear to be quite distinctive, yet they share a common essence: they all are made up of water. Monists believe that similarly all forms of reality—gods and goddesses, plants and animals, the material universe, and

humans—share a common essence. Hindus call this essence **Brahman** (brah’muhn).

Infinite and eternal, Brahman is the ground of existence and the source of the universe. It is discoverable only through the most profound contemplation, and its true nature is not revealed on the surface of things. Brahman is impersonal, without characteristics that can be seen, heard, or even intelligibly thought about. The **Upanishads** (oo-pah’ni-shuhdz), the ancient philosophical texts that form the basis of most Hindu doctrines, teach that Brahman can be described only as *neti, neti*: “not this, not that.” Whatever the senses can perceive, whatever the mind can ponder, these are not Brahman, for Brahman is beyond the reach of human perception and thought. Just as atomic particles are invisible and yet are the basic building blocks of matter, so does Brahman reside beneath all surfaces, forming the essence of all things. Unlike atomic particles, however, Brahman is not material at all, but rather pure spirit.

Ultimate reality, called Brahman when referring to the essence of all things, can be described in another way as well. The Upanishads teach that ultimate reality can be understood through inward contemplation of the self. The ultimate reality within is named **Atman** (aht’muhn), the eternal Self.

The fundamental discovery of the Upanishads is that Brahman, ultimate reality understood through contemplation of the universe, and Atman, ultimate reality understood through contemplation of the inner self, are in fact one and the same. Brahman is Atman; all reality is one.

One famous passage in the Upanishads consists of a dialogue between a father and a son. Svetaketu asks his father:

“Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.”

“Be it so. Put this salt in water, and come to me tomorrow morning.”

Svetaketu did as he was bidden. The next morning his father asked him to bring the salt

Among Hinduism's many gods are (clockwise from top left) Krishna, depicted in a typical dancing pose; Agni, god of fire; Shiva, god of destruction, shown in this eleventh-century bronze ringed by a circle of flames and dancing on the back of a demon; and Ganesha, elephant god.



IMAGE: TOP LEFT, © BURSTEIN COLLECTION/CORBIS; TOP RIGHT, ISTOCKPHOTO; BOTTOM LEFT, TOM COMPAGNONI/WAX VISUAL STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY; BOTTOM RIGHT, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON/ART RESOURCE, NY

which he had put in the water. But he could not, for it had dissolved. Then said Uddalaka:

“Sip the water, and tell me how it tastes.”

“It is salty, sir.”

“In the same way,” continued Uddalaka, “though you do not see Brahman in this body, he is indeed here. That which is the subtle essence—in that have all things their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU.”

(Chandogya Upanishad 6.12.3—6.13.3)

“That art thou” (*tat tvam asi* in Sanskrit) is frequently cited in Hindu literature. Brahman is Atman. This is monism. All reality—the universe, oneself, and everyone else—shares one essence. And that one is Brahman. Or that one is Atman. In the light of the understanding that all is essentially one, the terms Brahman and Atman are interchangeable.^A

Polytheism: 330 Million Gods and Goddesses

The divine is thought ultimately to be one essence. And yet Hindus subscribe to polytheism, believing in many gods and goddesses (traditionally 330 million!). We can best understand this apparent contradiction by returning to our water analogy. We have referred to water as the common essence of rivers, ponds, lakes, and oceans. We have also noted that oceans are unique in that they are the final destination or ultimate receptacle of all of the earth’s water. Though we speak of different oceans that fill separate areas of the earth’s surface, there is in reality only one body of water. One person could be surfing in the Pacific while thousands of miles away her cousin is sailing on the Atlantic, each apparently enjoying a different ocean. But if you look at a map or a globe, you will see that the oceans of the world are not divided by any continuous landmasses; ultimately they form one body of water. In terms of our analogy, this one universal ocean can therefore



IMAGE: SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY

The Hindu god Vishnu and his consort, Lakshmi, ride on the bird Garuda.

be thought of as the ultimate ground of the common essence of reality.

Hinduism generally regards its 330 million deities as extensions of one ultimate reality, many names for one ocean, many “masks” for one God. Because the divine reality of Brahman or Atman is beyond the reach of the senses and of thought, humans need accessible points of contact with the divine. Ultimate reality must be revealed if it is to affect the individual. Hinduism’s many deities provide these points of contact, each with its own personal characteristics. Hindus can freely worship whichever gods and goddesses they like. Given the vast number of deities, at least one will surely provide an effective point of contact with the divine.

Many Worlds, Many Lifetimes: Hindu Cosmology

All religious traditions set forth a cosmology—an explanation regarding the nature of the universe. Hindu cosmology, relative to the great Western religions and to modern

A Imagine you are Svetaketu’s father. Create another analogy that might answer the boy’s question about the Self.

science, is noticeably distinctive in many of its aspects.

With the Hindu tradition, before examining *what* the universe is, it is appropriate to consider *why* the universe is. If everything is ultimately and originally one thing, all unified in the divine Brahman, why does there appear to be anything else? What happened in the first place that caused the human need to seek salvation? Such questions are of obvious interest, and yet they have no easy answers. Hinduism tends to regard such issues as great mysteries. Just as Brahman itself is ultimately a mystery, beyond the reach of logical explanation, so too does its creative energy flow forth mysteriously. This universe—this ordinary, finite, limited realm of existence—somehow has come to be. Humans call it home, at least for now. The important thing for Hindus is to deal with the universe as it is, to seek salvation through liberation from the world's bonds.

B

Many religions and philosophers, including Plato, have believed in reincarnation, considering it to provide a logical view of human destiny. How might reincarnation explain who we are, what we know, what we look like, and how we act?

Cycles of Creation

The West has generally stressed the linear progression of time, from a distant beginning (such as the six days of Creation recounted in the Book of Genesis, or the big bang theory of modern astrophysics) to an eventual end of creation as we know it. Hinduism, in contrast, charts time and creation in ongoing cycles.

The cyclical cosmology of Hinduism declares that the universe undergoes long periods of creation and destruction, a rhythmic pattern that repeats itself endlessly. The end of the present period is drawing near—although millions of years remain. As the end of the cycle approaches, the destructive forces already at work will gradually gain the upper hand, eventually bringing all of creation to a deep stillness and long pause. Then the entire universe will be re-created: the galaxies will be remade; souls will arise again and come to inhabit the various life-forms; Hinduism will evolve all over again.

Reincarnation

Within the cyclical pattern of the universe, each individual is also created and re-created repeatedly, until finally attaining release from this realm through *moksha*. In its barest outline, this is the Hindu perspective on the human condition. According to the doctrine of **samsara** (sahm-sah'ruh), or "wheel of rebirth," the individual is reincarnated from one life-form to another. Accounts vary as to precisely what is reincarnated. At the very least, it is the atman, the individual "self" or "soul," the divine spark within that is destined to eventually be reunited with its source. Most aspects of the personality are generally not thought to be transmitted into the next life-form. For instance, individuals usually cannot remember past lives.

Reincarnation occurs on a vast number of levels of existence, including the various life-forms (human, animal, according to some texts even plant) of this earth and other similar worlds, gods and goddesses in the many Hindu heavens, and demons in its many hells. Traditional accounts also specify a realm of semidivine "titans" just below the heavens, and a realm of "ghosts" just above the hells. Like all realms of *samsara*, even those of the gods do not last forever—they are not Brahman. An individual might enjoy heavenly pleasures for ten thousand years, but then the wheel of rebirth is destined to continue, and the individual's atman will continue being reincarnated until *moksha* is achieved.

Reincarnation puts an interesting twist on the problem of mortality. On one hand, to die without attaining liberation must be considered a defeat, because the atman is then destined to remain on the wheel of rebirth. On the other hand, the prospect of reincarnation denies death at least some of its sting. Death is not so final for Hindus—in fact it is likely to be experienced again!

In the **Bhagavad-Gita** (buh'guh-vuhd gee'tah), Hinduism's most popular sacred text,

the god Krishna teaches the great warrior Arjuna about many important religious issues, including reincarnation. As Krishna explains to Arjuna, the eternal atman (self) puts on new bodies like we put on new clothes:

Never have I not existed,
nor you, nor these kings;
and never in the future
shall we cease to exist.

Just as the embodied self
enters childhood, youth, and old age,
so does it enter another body;
this does not confound a steadfast man.

.

As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new
and different ones,
so the embodied self
discards
its worn-out bodies
to take on other new ones.

(Bhagavad-Gita 2:12–13,22)^B

Law and Order: Divine Principles in the World

Two principles, *karma* and *dharma*, connect the divine with this world. These principles form the crucial link between the realm of *samsara* and the divine source. By providing a basis for a moral life in this world, *karma* and *dharma* permeate the earthly life with spiritual significance.

Karma

Karma functions hand in hand with *samsara*, in that it determines the nature of each reincarnation. *Karma* literally means “action” or “deeds.” This principle, best understood as the moral law of cause and effect, states that every action produces an outcome that is justified by the action’s moral worthiness. *Karma* thus determines all the particular circumstances and situations of one’s life. *Karma* functions independently of any deity or of a procedure of divine judgment. Individuals are automatically held to be morally responsible for their actions; as the old saying goes, “As you sow, so shall you reap.”



This Hindu monument in Rishikesh, India, presents Krishna, the chariot driver, and Arjuna, in a scene from the Mahabharata.

C In the right-hand column of a sheet of paper, write the main actions you have taken during the last twenty-four hours. In the left-hand column, write what caused you to take each action. Then answer these questions:
Is it possible for an action to lack a cause?
Why or why not?

Karma permeates the realm of *samsara*, such that an individual's *karmic* record stays with the self from reincarnation to reincarnation. *Karma* thus determines the life-form into which the atman is born, whether it be a deity or other supernatural being, a human, or an animal. Of the various life-forms, only humans have the will to affect the status of their *karma*. Therefore being human is both a privilege and a demanding responsibility.

At least in theory, *karma* secures a high degree of justice. Unlike followers of Western religions, Hindus have an easy answer to the question, Why do bad things happen to good people? Because they have committed evil deeds in their past lives and therefore deserve to be punished! The criminal can never escape justice, and the saint will never be denied a just reward. Because of this foolproof feature, the law of *karma* has been called the most logical system of divine justice the world has ever known.

Dharma

The law of *karma* holds people responsible for their actions. Applying that law requires some standard for determining the rightness or wrongness of actions. That standard is **dharmā** (dahr'muh), or ethical duty based on the divine order of reality.

The significance of *dharmā* can hardly be overstated. The term *dharmā* is Hinduism's closest equivalent to the West's term *religion*. More than just a specific list of rights and wrongs, *dharmā* is the complete rule of life. For every activity, there is a way of acting that conforms to *dharmā*. Hindus look to four sources when seeking guidance about *dharmā* in particular situations. These sources, in order from highest to lowest level of authority, are (1) divine revelation, as expressed in the sacred scriptures; (2) sacred tradition, as passed on from generation to generation; (3) the practices and example of those who are considered the wisest members of society; and (4) conscience.

Whenever Hindus strive to fulfill desires, *dharmā* limits their pursuits. *Dharma* also shifts the focus from satisfying private cravings to caring for others. In its ultimate effect of nourishing unconditional concern for the world, *dharmā* has much in common with the primary Christian ethical principle of unconditional love and with the Buddhist counterpart of infinite compassion. *Dharma* is thus a major feature of the ethical dimension of Hinduism.^C

Hindu Society: Mapping the Individual's Identity

Despite their sometimes dizzying complexity, the many aspects of Hinduism are for the most part in harmony. Basic principles are interconnected. *Karma*, the moral law of cause and effect, is based in *dharmā*, ethical duty. *Dharma*, in turn, is connected to social order. A person's particular *dharmā* is determined by gender, caste, and stage of life. Within this social order, Hindus are free to choose from among four legitimate goals. Together these circumstances map an individual's identity.

The *dharmā* of women, for example, has traditionally emphasized obedience toward men—first the father, then the husband, and finally the sons. The duties of caste and stage of life, which figure prominently in constituting the *dharmā* of men, are less relevant for women. However women's primary role of providing for the welfare of the family has always been a basic aspect of Hindu society. By traditionally performing this role with energy and perseverance, women have tended to earn a reputation for having more integrity of character than men, who are sometimes regarded as less dependable and more prone to frivolity. On the other hand, women's domestic responsibilities have limited their educational and career opportunities compared with those of men.



IMAGE: TOM COMPAGNON/IMAX VISUAL STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

Hinduism's caste system divides society into four major classes. Ricksha drivers are generally members of the *shudra*, or laborer, class.

Doing One's Job: The Caste System

Hinduism's **caste system** incorporates a traditional division of society into four distinct classes—**brahmin** (brah'min), consisting of priests; **kshatriya** (kshuht'ree-yuh), including warriors and administrators; **vaishya** (vish'yuh), made up of producers, such as farmers, merchants, and artisans; and **shudra** (shoo'druh), composed of servants and laborers. The original term used for this division by class, *varna*, means "color," which is apparently related to the differences in skin tone between the darker original inhabitants of India and the fairer Aryans who migrated from the north and penetrated most of India during the centuries of Hinduism's origins (beginning about 2000 BC). The Aryans considered it important to prevent the two racial groups from intermingling, so they distinguished their own classes—the *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, and *vaishya*—from that of the native peoples, the *shudra*.

The original four classes of the caste system were divided and subdivided until over three thousand distinct categories emerged. These categories correspond primarily to different occupations, especially for men. For women the primary significance of caste pertains to whom they can marry; traditional *dharma* provides specific rules regarding marriage with respect to caste. An additional category consists of the "outcastes," those who are considered to be outside of society altogether. This group includes the Untouchables, who only recently have begun to enjoy some legal rights, thanks to the work of Mahatma Gandhi. He renamed the outcastes Harijan, "God's children."

In general the caste system is rigidly based on heredity. One is simply born to a lifelong caste identity, as determined by *karma*, which directs the soul into whatever situation it deserves. The Upanishads explain:

D Hindu society is separated by caste identity. Is Western society separated in any ways that are similar to the caste system? Explain your answer.

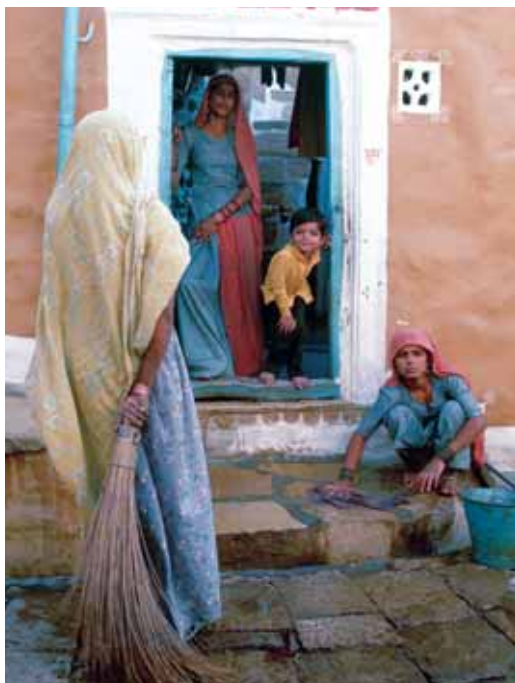
Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here—the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a [*brahmin*], or the womb of a [*kshatriya*], or the womb of a [*vaishya*]. But those who are of stinking conduct here—the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an [outcaste]. (Chandogya Upanishad 5.10.7)

In this way *karma* can be seen to justify the caste system itself. People do not just happen to be born outcastes; they deserve their lowly status because of their “stinking conduct” in previous lives. Likewise *brahmins* deserve their privileged position because of their meritorious *karma* in previous lives: they have lived in conformity to their *dharma*, and consequently are now closer to salvation.

Karma determines caste identity, and caste, in turn, determines the specific *dharma* governing a person’s actions. For example, the ethical duties of a *brahmin* differ from those of a *kshatriya*. The Bhagavad-Gita presents a striking illustration of how caste identity determines *dharma*. Arjuna, a great warrior (thus of the *kshatriya* class), is poised to enter a crucial battle. As he considers the gruesome tasks that lie before him, including the killing of kinsmen and old friends, he hesitates, wondering if he should avoid battle. The god Krishna, disguised as Arjuna’s charioteer, reminds Arjuna of his *dharma*:

Look to your own duty;
do not tremble before it;
nothing is better for a warrior
than a battle of sacred duty.

The doors of heaven open
for warriors who rejoice



Top: These women, considered Untouchables, perform lowly tasks such as sweeping and mopping streets. Gandhi called them Harijans, or “God’s children.” Bottom: This farmer selling his vegetables at market is part of the vaishya class.



IMAGE: TOP, © LINDSAY HEBBERD/CORBIS; BOTTOM, © JEREMY HORNER/CORBIS

to have a battle like this
thrust on them by chance.

If you fail to wage this war
of sacred duty,
you will abandon your own duty
and fame only to gain evil.

(Bhagavad-Gita 2:31–33)^D

Acting One's Age: Four Stages of Life

Hindu society distinguishes four stages of life, each with its own set of specific duties. The stages have traditionally been especially relevant for males who belong to the *vaishya*, *kshatriya*, and particularly *brahmin* classes.

Upon undergoing an initiation ritual at about the time of puberty, a Hindu boy enters the first stage, that of the student. Characterized by intensive study of the Vedas (vay'duhz) and other sacred literature, this stage lasts until marriage.

Hindu marriages are traditionally arranged by the parents, and the bride and groom commonly do not know each other until the time of the wedding. Though customs such as these are changing, especially in urban areas, many Hindus adhere to the traditional way. A contemporary young woman named Vimla, whose marriage was arranged, reasons: "We don't choose the family we're born into, we

adjust to it. So why should we risk choosing our marriage? It's too important to be left up to individual choice" (quoted in Mitter, *Dharma's Daughters*, page 18).^E

In the second stage, that of the householder, the worldly tasks of pursuing a career and raising a family are central. Women are involved in this stage along with their husbands.

The birth of the first grandchild marks the beginning of the third stage, the forest dweller stage. A man may choose to ask his wife to accompany him through this stage, which allows him to retreat from worldly bonds (sometimes literally by dwelling in the forest) in order to engage fully in a spiritual quest.

The fourth stage is that of the **sannyasin** (sun-yah'sin), or wandering **ascetic**. This stage is for forest dwellers who are ready to return to society, but remain detached from the normal attractions and distractions of social life. Engaged with the world but not attached to it, the *sannyasin* is, as described in the Bhagavad-Gita, "one who neither hates nor desires" (5:3). Women who have accompanied their husbands into the forest might naturally advance to the fourth stage as well. If they do so, the husband and wife live detached from each other, having transcended the ordinary ways of this world, including those of marriage.^F

E

Who do you think should choose a person's marriage partner? How does your perspective on this issue compare with Vimla's? What aspects of Hinduism might help account for any differences in perspective?

F

Describe the four Hindu stages of life, comparing each stage to a similar stage in Western society.



A Hindu marriage ceremony marks the start of the householder stage of life.

Seeking One's Desire: Four Goals of Life

Liberation from *samsara*, in the Hindu view, is the summit of spiritual perfection. *Moksha* is the ultimate goal of life. But what if we enjoy this world, welcome the challenges of this life, and relish its fruits? What if we are so content in this world that we appreciate reincarnation as yet another opportunity to seek the many pleasures of existence?

Sensual Pleasure

Hinduism embraces such pleasure seeking, even as it teaches the ultimate goal of liberation. Pleasure, or **kama** (kah'muh), is

Material success, or *artha*, is a legitimate goal in Hindu life and may be signified by jewelry and gold woven into a woman's sari.



IMAGE: STEVE VIDLER/SUPERSTOCK

a legitimate aim of life. No religion denies that humans desire pleasure. Religions differ drastically, however, in their judgments as to the goodness or rightness of fulfilling that desire. Hinduism tends to surpass most religions in its outright celebration of the pursuit of pleasure. *Kama*, which refers mainly to the pleasures of sensual love, is to be embraced by whosoever desires it, provided that the lovers remain within the limits of *dharmā*. So legitimate is the pursuit of *kama* that some of Hinduism's sacred literature is devoted to the enhancement of sensual love.

Material Success

Despite its complete legitimacy, the appetite for *kama* is believed to have a limit. Eventually the fulfillment found in love will no longer satisfy completely. A yearning arises for something else. For most people this yearning is for **artha**, material success and the social power and prestige that accompany it. Just as North American secular society tends to embrace the pursuit of money, Hinduism celebrates the goal of *artha*. But also like the pursuit of money, *artha* eventually proves

The Laws of Manu on *Dharma*

Some of the classical texts of Hinduism devote a great deal of attention to spelling out the details of dharma, setting forth specific rules of conduct. The Laws of Manu, composed by about AD 200, is the most famous of these texts. Its contents continue to dictate the ways of tradition-minded Hindus to this day. Here are two examples:

On the Proper Place of the Hindu Woman

Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control.

Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.

Reprehensible is the father who gives not (his daughter in marriage) at the proper time; reprehensible is the husband who approaches not (his wife in due season), and reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after her husband has died.

(9:2–4)

On the Student Stage of Life

Let [the student] not pronounce the mere name of his teacher (without adding an honorific title) behind his back even, and let him not mimic his gait, speech, and deportment.

By censoring (his teacher), though justly, he will become (in his next birth) an ass, by falsely defaming him, a dog; he who lives on his teacher's substance, will become a worm, and he who is envious (of his merit), a (larger) insect.

(2:199,201)

unfulfilling. In due time people experience a yearning to strive for something beyond pursuits that provide for only personal and material needs.

Harmony with *Dharma*

This yearning leads to the third goal of life, which is called *dharma*. *Dharma* as a life goal maintains its meaning as the general principle of ethical duty. But it is no longer merely a duty, begrudgingly performed. It is now that which is most desired. The deep joy of living in harmony with *dharma* is known firsthand. No one needs to tell the Hindu who pursues this goal that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The blessings of *dharma* give fuel to its fire. Yet even perfect harmony with *dharma* is a limited joy, destined eventually to lead to even deeper yearnings. After all, the world for which the ethical person has concern—even if the concern is unconditional—is still the world of this realm, afflicted with the unending pains of *samsara*.

The Bliss of *Moksha*

All Hindus are destined to seek the fourth goal of life: the infinite being, awareness, and bliss of *moksha*, the great ocean into which all rivers eventually flow. And the paths to *moksha* that are available to Hindus are as numerous and diverse as the rivers of India.^G

Three Paths to Liberation

Hinduism offers three great paths to *moksha*. People have different talents and strengths, and each of the three paths draws primarily on one of the following human tendencies: to be active, to gain knowledge, and to experience emotional attachment. The paths are not mutually exclusive; in practice Hindus usually follow more than one. All three are revered as effective means of moving closer to the ultimate goal of liberation.

For the Active: *Karma Marga*, “The Path of Works”

Most people—those engaged in the day-to-day tasks of earning a living and raising a family, those for whom physical activities come naturally—prefer to seek liberation through ***karma marga***, “the path of works” (also referred to as *karma yoga*). Simple to understand and to practice, this path has everything to do with living in accordance with *dharma*.

Recall that *dharma* in its most general meaning is ethical duty, and includes observance of many traditional aspects of Hinduism: household rituals, public ceremonies, and social requirements, such as conforming to dietary laws and marriage restrictions. *Dharma* also involves an ongoing concern for the world, as exemplified in the most influential modern advocate of *karma marga*, Mahatma Gandhi. For Gandhi, religion itself is none other than concern for the world expressed through social service:

I am being led to my religion through Truth and Non-violence, i.e., love in the broadest sense. I often describe my religion as religion of Truth. Of late, instead of saying God is Truth I have been saying Truth is God, in order more fully to define my religion. . . .

The bearing of this religion on social life is, or has to be, seen in one’s daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and



IMAGE: © HOWARD DAVIES/CORBIS

G Reflect on a major goal you have had and have achieved. Was the satisfaction of accomplishing the goal permanent? Did it cause you to desire to achieve new goals? From the experience, what did you learn about desire?

This nurse dedicates her expertise to alleviating the suffering of poor people in urban Delhi. She is following *karma marga*, “the path of works.”

identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service; there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it. (*The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 1, page 461)

In all its aspects, *karma marga* is marked by an attitude of unselfishness. When traveling this path, one must avoid selfishly claiming credit for having accomplished an action. This is challenging, for humans are inclined to be selfish. As Krishna remarks in the Bhagavad-Gita, “Deluded by individuality, / the self thinks, ‘I am the actor’” (3:27). If every accomplishment requires a pat on the back, the bondage of individuality is strengthened, and the self is further removed from the universal ocean of Atman, its true source and essence. The path of works succeeds when one does the opposite, performing the right action without needing to claim the credit.

In a similar way, selfish attachment to the results of action must be avoided. Krishna instructs Arjuna:

Be intent on action,
not on the fruits of action;
avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction!

(Bhagavad-Gita 2:47)

Do the right thing only because it is right. Be a good student, not because being a good student will earn you a good grade, but because being a good student is right in itself. Mahatma Gandhi did great deeds, but he did not act in order to be rewarded by the praise of others or even by a sense of self-satisfaction. He simply did what he perceived to be the right thing.^H

For the Philosophical: *Jnana Marga*, “The Path of Knowledge”

The shortest but steepest ascent to liberation follows **jnana marga** (nyah’nah mar’guh),

“the path of knowledge” (also known as *jnana yoga*). This path is intended for those with talent for philosophical reflection. It requires the follower to devote a great deal of time to learning and meditation. These demands render *jnana marga* most practical for members of the *brahmin* class.

Whereas the path of works emphasizes doing the right thing over the wrong thing, *jnana marga* emphasizes attaining knowledge over ignorance—knowledge of the true nature of reality. This is an enormous challenge because *jnana* is knowledge of a very special sort, amounting to extraordinary insight that is far beyond merely knowing about the subject matter. To attain this kind of knowledge is to live it, to be that which is known, to experience the true nature of reality. *Jnana marga* is thus primarily part of the experiential dimension of Hinduism. The knowing itself is the experience sought; it does not culminate in knowledge *about* this or that doctrine or other aspect of Hinduism. With this experience, reached through profound contemplation of the innermost self, comes a full awareness of truth, a certitude that has the power to transform the knower, thus leading to liberation.

Three Schools of Philosophy

Different teachings within *jnana marga* offer various specifics regarding the true nature of reality. The most important are those of three schools of Hindu philosophy: Vedanta, Sankhya, and Yoga. Despite their differences, the three approaches are in harmony regarding the same basic task: the attainment of knowledge over the ignorance that binds the self to *samsara*.

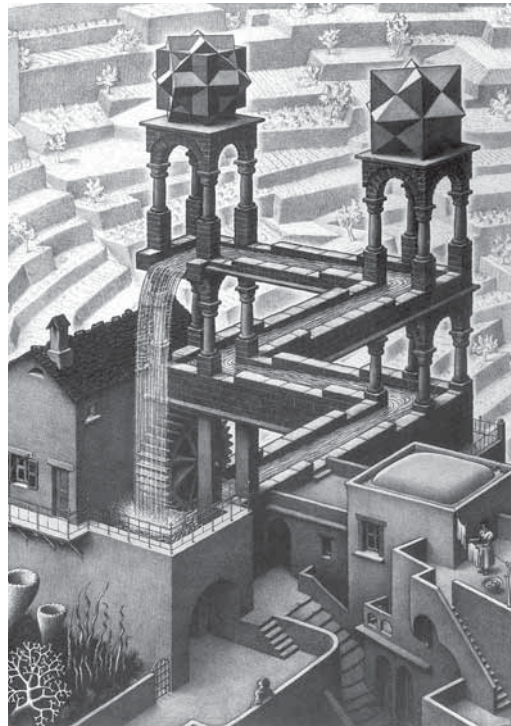
Vedanta. The school **Vedanta** (vay-dahn’ tuh) is most faithful to the predominant monism of Hinduism. Even within Vedanta, though, the characteristic diversity of the religion is apparent. The most prominent form of Vedanta is that espoused by the great medieval philosopher Shankara (788 to 820). Most

H
“Do the right thing only because it is right.” Must right actions be rewarded for people to want to do them, or should they be their own reward?

Hindus who traverse the path of knowledge embrace this philosophy.

Shankara's understanding of reality amounts to the basic monism predominant in Hinduism: All reality is essentially one—Brahman, the indescribable, impersonal ultimate. The world and all finite beings within it are the stuff of **maya** (mah'yah), cosmic illusion. In a state of ignorance, people are tricked into thinking of their individual selves as being ultimately real, just as the world of a dream seems real to the dreamer.

This persistent sense of individuality prevents one from experiencing the truth. Just as one might think a droplet of ocean spray exists separately from the ocean, so do individuals imagine they exist independently of Brahman. But in an instant the droplet is absorbed back into the ocean, indistinguishable from its infinite source. So too is the individual eventually absorbed back into Brahman, its infinite source. For despite the illusion of separateness, in truth all are one. The atman, the



© 2008 The M.C. Escher Company—Holland. All rights reserved. www.mcescher.com.

M. C. Escher's lithograph *Waterfall* demonstrates the Hindu concept of *maya*, or cosmic illusion. For the person viewing Escher's work, as for the individual trapped in *maya*, the world is not as it seems.

self deep within, is really the eternal Atman, the infinite Self. And Atman is Brahman.

Shankara on *Maya*

This tale is told of the great Vedanta philosopher Shankara and one of his pupils, a powerful king, who decided to test his teacher regarding the nature of maya (cosmic illusion brought about by the divine creator):

The following day, therefore, when the philosopher was coming along one of the stately approaches to the palace, to deliver his next lecture to the king, a large and dangerous elephant, maddened by heat, was let loose at him. [Shankara] turned and fled the moment he perceived his danger, and when the animal nearly reached his heels, disappeared from view. When he was found, he was at the top of a lofty palm tree, which he had ascended with a dexterity more usual among sailors than intellectuals. The elephant was caught, fettered, and conducted back to the stables,

and the great [Shankara], perspiration breaking from every pore, came before his pupil.

Politely, the king apologized to the master of cryptic wisdom for the unfortunate, nearly disastrous incident; then, with a smile scarcely concealed and half pretending great seriousness, he inquired why the venerable teacher had resorted to physical flight, since he must have been aware that the elephant was of a purely illusory, phenomenal character.

The sage replied, "Indeed, in highest truth, the elephant is non-real. Nevertheless, you and I are as non-real as that elephant. Only your ignorance, clouding the truth with this spectacle of non-real phenomenality, made you see phenomenal me go up a non-real tree."

(Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, page 20)

When one experiences this truth, one has followed the path of knowledge to its end: liberation of the self from *samsara* into the ocean of Brahman. But as the Upanishads warn, it is an arduous path, demanding that a unique kind of knowledge be applied to a difficult lesson:

Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic. Taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth. (Katha Upanishad 1.2.8)

Sankhya. Contrary to Hinduism's predominant monism, **Sankhya** (sahng'kyuh) asserts that reality is composed of two distinct categories: matter, and an infinite number of eternal selves. Somehow, for reasons beyond explanation, selves get entwined with matter, thereby becoming bound to the world of *samsara*. Such is the origin and the predicament of

human beings. The follower of Sankhya strives to free the eternal Self from the bondage of the personality. The basic teachings of the Sankhya school are important for the religions Jainism and Buddhism, and underlie the Hindu approach of Yoga.

Yoga. The term *yoga* has different meanings in Hinduism. In the general sense, it refers to any sort of spiritual practice—as it does in the terms for the paths to salvation, where it is substituted for *marga*, as in *jnana yoga*. In a more limited usage, it refers to a philosophical school that emphasizes physical and psychological practices.

Yoga carefully acknowledges the connection between the self and the other parts of our human makeup—the body and its sensations, the mind and its thinking, and the subconscious. The objective of the yogi, or practitioner of Yoga, is to free the eternal self from bondage by stripping away the many levels of personhood in which that self is wrapped. Note how Sankhya's teaching of the division of reality into eternal selves and eternal matter underlies Yoga. Like Sankhya, Yoga regards sensations, the mind, even the subconscious as aspects of matter.

Various versions of Yoga are based on this understanding of the human condition. The most famous sets forth eight steps:

1. Preparing morally by abstaining from five acts: harming living things, lying, stealing, acting unchastely, and being greedy
2. Preparing morally by observing five virtues: cleanliness, calmness, self-control, studiousness, and prayerfulness
3. Sitting in a posture that promotes comfort while discouraging drowsiness (Eighty-four postures are described; the most popular is the lotus position, with feet crossed and resting on the thighs, hands crossed in the lap, eyes focused on the tip of the nose.)
4. Breathing properly so that the entire body is brought into a simple rhythmic pattern

The objective of the practitioner of Yoga is to free the eternal self from bondage.



IMAGE © DAVID SAMUEL ROBBINS/CORBIS

5. “Closing the doors of perception”: withdrawing the senses from any contact with objects
6. Concentrating on one thing so the mind empties itself of all other thoughts
7. Meditating, an ever deepening state of concentration moving toward the final step
8. Going into **samadhi** (suh-mah’dee), a trancelike state in which self-consciousness is lost, and the mind is absorbed into the ultimate reality

In *samadhi* the knower becomes that which is known; the path of knowledge has been traversed to its goal. Although in practice the yogi normally comes back out of the trance, the transforming power of *samadhi* leads to final liberation. Here we have a good example of a type of spiritual perfection involving the transcendence of the human condition, eventually leading to salvation. As is typical of the climactic phenomena of the experiential dimension of any religion, *samadhi* cannot adequately be explained by way of language.

Like the final liberating experience of *moksha*, *samadhi* must be experienced to be fully understood.¹

For the Emotional: *Bhakti Marga*, “The Path of Devotion”

Based in loving reverence for one’s chosen god or goddess, **bhakti marga** (buhk’tee mar’guh), “the path of devotion” (also referred to as *bhakti yoga*), is most suitable for those to whom emotional attachment comes naturally. In contrast to the inward journey of *jnana marga*, this path directs spiritual energy outward, in worship of the deity. This is beneficial because the gods and goddesses favor their devotees, and answer their prayers. Most important, *bhakti marga* moves its adherents closer to liberation. Worship requires a focusing of attention on the divine, and away from the adherent’s selfish concerns. Through worship, the path of devotion helps to reduce the individuality that binds the self to *samsara*.

I What might be some differences between the knowledge sought by a Hindu on *jnana marga* and the knowledge sought by a student working on a college degree?

A Hindu woman follows the path of devotion by visiting a temple, where she places water on a statue of the god Nandi.



IMAGE © LINDSAY HEBBERD/CORBIS

Gods and Goddesses

Stories about Hinduism's many deities form the heart of the mythic dimension of Hinduism. Some of the deities have been a part of the tradition from the beginning, whereas others are newly acknowledged.

The vast variety of gods and goddesses points to an important fact about *bhakti marga*: a typical Hindu is devoted to more than one deity, depending on the specific needs of the day. Still it is common to choose a personal deity as the object of special devotion. Some of Hinduism's most popular deities are Vishnu, Shiva, Kali, and the *avatars* Krishna and Rama.

Among the 330 million gods and goddesses is an important triad: Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer. Brahma, though still highly thought of, is rarely worshiped anymore. Today, as for centuries, Vishnu and Shiva are worshiped by millions. As his role as the Preserver suggests, Vishnu, with four arms and various symbols of power and goodness, is regarded by his devotees as their supreme protector and ex-

ample of moral perfection. It is notable that Shiva, a god known for destruction, should be so popular. In fact this fits logically within the Hindu cyclical cosmology, for the destruction brought about by Shiva makes way for new creation.

The cycle of destruction and creation is similarly a primary theme of the popular goddess Kali, a wife of Shiva's. Black and wearing a necklace of skulls, she is a bloodthirsty, violent destroyer of her enemies. Toward her devotees, though, she shows steadfast care and affection, providing for their needs. The great Ramakrishna was one of her millions of devotees.

Avatars

An **avatar** is an incarnation, or living embodiment, of a deity, commonly of Vishnu, who is sent to earth to accomplish a divine purpose. The relationship of the *avatar* with the deity from which he comes is illuminated in the Bhagavad-Gita. Here Krishna, an *avatar* of Vishnu, actually speaks as Vishnu when he addresses Arjuna:

Though myself unborn, undying,
the lord of creatures, I fashion nature,
which is mine, and I come into being
through my own magic.

Whenever sacred duty decays
and chaos prevails,
then, I create
myself, Arjuna.

To protect men of virtue
and destroy men who do evil,
to set the standard of sacred duty,
I appear in age after age.

(4:6–8)

Krishna has a prominent role in the epic poem *Mahabharata* (mah-hah-bah'rah-tah), of which the Bhagavad-Gita is but a small section, and also is popular in another role—that of a somewhat mischievous and always amorous male cowherd, often accompanied

Depictions of Krishna with his favorite consort, Radha, symbolize perfect love.



IMAGE: RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY

by adoring bands of female cowherds. Hindu art beautifully depicts scenes that symbolize the loving adoration of souls (the female cowherds) for God (Krishna). Krishna is also frequently depicted with his favorite consort, Radha. The intensity of their feelings is clearly expressed, and they function as a symbol of perfect love.

Rama is another popular *avatar*. He is the hero of the *Ramayana*, an epic poem from ancient times that continues to have enormous influence among Hindus. Like Krishna, Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu. Through the centuries he has come to be so highly regarded that many Hindus revere him as the supreme deity.

The Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita contains ideas that are relevant to many aspects of Hinduism. Still it is most closely associated with *bhakti marga*. The content of the Bhagavad-Gita acknowledges the fruitfulness of the path of works and the path of knowledge, but tends to favor the path of devotion. This oft-quoted passage, in which Krishna again addresses Arjuna, especially reveals the universal appeal of that path to salvation:

Whatever you do—what you take,
what you offer, what you give,
what penances you perform—
do as an offering to me, Arjuna!

You will be freed from the bonds of action,
from the fruit of fortune and misfortune;
armed with the discipline of renunciation,
your self liberated, you will join me.

I am impartial to all creatures,
and no one is hateful or dear to me;
but men devoted to me are in me,
and I am within them.

(9:27–29)

Aspects of Daily Devotion

If we were to ask a follower of *bhakti marga* to describe Hinduism, we would most likely

learn first of the various acts of worship practiced from day to day. Along with a host of individual practices, such as prayer and visits to temples and shrines, Hindu worship includes numerous household and community rituals, pilgrimages to holy places, and veneration of the ever present and much adored sacred cows. Together such acts of worship constitute to a great extent the ritual dimension of Hinduism, and the objects that are the focus of these acts enrich the material dimension.

Household and village rituals. Hindu households are home to millions of “masks” of deities. Typically they maintain shrines that honor chosen deities and contain some form of image or symbol for those deities. Domestic worship includes the tending of a sacred fire, ritual bathing, and daily devotional rites before these shrines. Though the use of material representations of deities, such as clay figurines, may appear to be a form of idolatry, or idol worship, it is not. Hindus worship not the image itself but rather the god or goddess that the image represents.

On regular occasions the village joins together in worship. Often this occurs at the local temple, where ceremonies are conducted by a priest. Villages also celebrate annual festivals in honor of certain gods; sometimes these can last for days. For example, a festival in honor of Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and patroness of education and the arts (and hence a popular goddess at schools), can involve days of celebration before a life-size image that has been specially crafted for the festival. On the final day, the image is given a funeral and disposed of—among the cheers of smiling devotees! The cycle of creation and destruction applies to the worship of the deities as well.

Holy places. Pilgrimages to holy sites, some long and arduous, are another common form of devotion. Sometimes the destination is a temple or other site of a great festival. It can also be a natural entity, such as a river.

The Quest for Truth

Shubhabrata Dutta, known as Shuvo to his friends, is a young Hindu man now living in the United States. He offers the following thoughts on the role of Hinduism in his life:

As far as I can remember, the first time I really thought about Hinduism was in sixth grade, through some sayings of Shri Ramakrishna. Before that, although I attended all the religious festivals (there are lots of them!), I never really questioned or understood my faith. The saying of Ramakrishna that left a deep impression on me was: “If you put zeroes after a one, it makes a great number, but if you erase the one, the zeroes by themselves are not of any worth. Likewise, if we remove God from the creation, the creation, by itself, does not make any sense.”

I was struck by the depth and the intelligence of the analogy. I thought that only a great scholar could have come up with this kind of simple but deep uttering. So I asked my father, himself a devotee of Shri Ramakrishna, about the scholarly career of Shri Ramakrishna, and found out to my surprise that Ramakrishna could not even sign his name properly. That was a real shock! But much later I came to realize that the unscholarly way of Shri Ramakrishna may very well answer the questions philosophers have been asking for the last three thousand years. In light of Ramakrishna’s life, I understood Hinduism with all its complications; I realized that it is not that complex after all if we can just “live the life.” And above all, being a “true” Hindu is no different than being a “true” Muslim or a “true” Christian. Religions are not God but many “ways” to God. One who quarrels about the ways but forgets about the destination is nothing but a fool.

Being a Hindu is very simple, actually, at least from my point of view. Being a Hindu is no more than

being an *honest* human being. There are no universally held dogmas (except perhaps the prohibition against eating beef), no unanimous theological or philosophical doctrines, and no single ethical practice. From both inside and outside, Hinduism looks like a total mess, an enormous forest of ideas and practices of very dissimilar (and sometimes totally opposite) nature. What then can I believe? What path will I choose? What is the right way? A Hindu will say: “Through self-examination you will find the answers. All you need is a burning desire to know the truth, and the rest will follow automatically.” I believe in this, and to my great joy, the greatest spiritual personalities of India also believed in it and showed it in their lives.

As a Hindu I grew up with certain concepts that may seem funny to other people. One of them was that all the deities are associated with particular things. So I pick up a penny from the street and touch it to my forehead because money represents the goddess Lakshmi, or I scrupulously avoid touching any paper with my feet because I fear that Saraswati, the goddess of learning, might get angry with me. Such practices are necessary sometimes and unnecessary at other times. Why? Because, as Swami Vivekananda said, “A man does not proceed from falsehood to truth, but he moves from lower truth to higher truth.” As a Hindu I believe that a certain ritual or a particular belief is necessary until I reach a point where it no longer helps me toward my *moksha*, my liberation. In the famous words of Shri Ramakrishna: “First you pluck out the thorn of ignorance using the thorn of knowledge. But then you throw both of them away.” What remains then? Indescribable bliss.

Most rivers are regarded as sacred. The most famous river—and the one deemed most sacred—is the Ganges. Thought to fall from its heavenly source of Vishnu’s feet onto Shiva’s head and out from his hair, the water of the Ganges is sacred enough to purify all sins. Pilgrims seek its banks to partake in ritual baths, and the ashes of the dead are swallowed by its life-giving water.

Cow veneration. Mahatma Gandhi referred to the protection of cows as the “central fact of Hinduism” and “one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution” (*Young India*, page 804). For him, and for millions of his fellow Hindus, the cow represents life. It provides for Hindus in a multitude of ways and yet suffers along with them. Therefore Hindus venerate cows, worshiping them like deities, and on regular occasions decorating them with garlands and anointing their heads with oil. In the past, the killing of a cow was sometimes a capital offense.

Gandhi describes the encompassing significance of cow veneration:

The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realise his identity with all that lives. . . . The cow is a poem of pity. One reads pity in the gentle animal. She is the mother to millions of Indian mankind. Protection of the cow means protection of the whole dumb creation of God. (Page 804)¹

Hinduism in the Modern World

All traditional religions are challenged by the modern world. Scientific and secular views can erode the authority of perspectives based in ancient myths. Other religious traditions can become more familiar, offering new alternatives. And new movements, some in response to those very threats, can arise within a tradition, threatening the old ways.

The modern world seems to pose an especially acute challenge for Hinduism. India, home to most of the world’s Hindus, is the world’s largest democracy, and sets itself apart from religion, as a secular state. It is also rapidly becoming an economic powerhouse. For its many citizens who tend to equate Hinduism with India, and whose patterns of existence are provided by the ancient principles of *dharma*, the interplay of traditional religions with the secular state and its dynamic economy is frequently unsettled and contentious.

Some familiarity with the figures and issues of modern Hinduism can help us make sense of the contemporary situation.

Those Whom Hindus Revere: Religious Leaders

Along with the pervasive caste system and all that it implies, the social dimension of Hinduism features many significant religious figures, holy people in various roles who tend to provide continual spiritual nourishment for a tradition in the grip of change. *Brahmins* tend to ancient rituals; gurus, or enlightened teachers, teach the truths of the Upanishads to the young; *sannyasins* bear the serenity of spiritual transcendence even as they walk among their fellow villagers. All nourish Hinduism, connecting it with its illustrious past and directing it toward its future.

Mahatma Gandhi

Remembered primarily for his work as a social and political reformer, Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869 to 1948), reverently called Mahatma, meaning “great souled,” is also revered by many for his role as a religious reformer. His steadfast efforts to stand up to oppression through nonviolence and civil disobedience forever changed the nature of India, and of Hinduism. And yet his assassination by a Hindu extremist in 1948, just months after the accomplishment of his long-term goal to

J Discuss the differences between your own experience of worship and the worship of a Hindu on *bhakti marga*, “the path of devotion.”