

Primary Source Readings in
World Religions

Jeffrey Brodd

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Contents

Introduction	9
Chapter 1: The Catholic Church and World Religions . .	12
<i>Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)</i> , by Pope Paul VI. . .	14
“Meeting with Representatives of Other Religions: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI”	20
Chapter 2: Primal Religious Traditions	28
Australian Aborigines: Excerpt from <i>Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines: “The Birth of the Butterflies”</i> . .	30
The Yoruba: Excerpt from <i>The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria: Creation Myth</i>	34
The Lakota: Excerpt from <i>Lakota Woman: “On the Ghost Dance,”</i> by Mary Crow Dog	36
Chapter 3: Hinduism	41
Excerpts from <i>The Bhagavad-Gita: The Second and Third Teachings</i>	43
Stories of Vedanta Sages: Excerpt from <i>Philosophies of India: Teachings on Maya</i> , by Heinrich Zimmer.	55
Writings of Mohandas K. Gandhi: Excerpt from <i>All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as Told in His Own Words</i> , compiled and edited by Krishna Kripalani	58
Chapter 4: Buddhism	62
Excerpts from <i>The Dhammapada</i>	64
Zen Buddhism: Excerpt from <i>A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy: “The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch”</i> . . .	76
Tibetan Buddhism: Excerpt from <i>Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama</i> , by Tenzin Gyatso	81

Chapter 5: Sikhism	85
Excerpt from <i>Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism:</i>	
Events in the Life of Guru Nanak	87
Excerpt from <i>Sikhism: The Japji</i> , the Sikh Morning Prayer.	95
Excerpt from <i>The Self Spirit</i> , by Wadhawa Singh	98
Chapter 6: Confucianism	102
Excerpts from <i>The Analects</i> , by Confucius	104
Excerpt from <i>A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy:</i>	
“The Great Learning”	111
Excerpt from <i>Confucius: The Secular as Sacred</i> ,	
by Herbert Fingarette	113
Chapter 7: Taoism	120
Excerpts from <i>The Way of Lao Tzu (Tao Te Ching)</i> ,	
translated by Wing-Tsit Chan	122
Excerpts from <i>Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings</i> , translated	
by Burton Watson	132
Excerpt from <i>The Taoist Body</i> , by Kristofer Schipper	136
Chapter 8: Shinto.	141
Excerpts from <i>Sources of Japanese Tradition:</i>	
Shinto Creation Myth.	143
Excerpt from <i>Motoori Norinaga Zerish: “The True Tradition of</i>	
<i>the Sun Goddess,”</i> by Motoori Norinaga	147
“ <i>The Meaning of Kami,</i> ” by Motoori Morinaga	153
Chapter 9: Judaism.	156
Exodus, Chapters 19–20	158
Excerpt from <i>Pirke Aboth: Sayings of the Fathers</i> , edited with	
translations and commentaries by Isaac Unterman	163
Excerpt from <i>The Family Markowitz</i> , by Allegra Goodman	173

Chapter 10: Christianity	178
Matthew, Chapters 5–7	180
Excerpt from <i>Confessions</i> , by Saint Augustine	190
Excerpt from <i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments</i> , by Søren Kierkegaard.	194
 Chapter 11: Islam.	 199
Excerpt from <i>The Qur'an: Sura 22: The Pilgrimage</i>	201
Excerpts from <i>The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghāzālī</i> , by W. Montgomery Watt	209
Excerpt from “ <i>The Tagouris: One Family’s Story</i> ,” by Phyllis McIntosh.	213
 Chapter 12: A World of Perspectives	 218
Jainism: Excerpt from the <i>Ācārāṅga Sutra</i> , 1.7, 6, on <i>sallekhana</i> (self-starvation)	220
Baha’i: Excerpt from the <i>Kitab-i-Aqdas</i>	221
Mormonism: Excerpt from “Joseph Smith—History: Extracts from <i>The History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet</i> ”	223
Jehovah’s Witnesses: Excerpt from <i>Awake!</i> : “Where Is This World Headed?”	227
Secular Humanism: Excerpt from <i>The Gay Science</i> : “Parable of the Madman,” by Friedrich Nietzsche	229
Scientology: Excerpt from <i>Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health</i> , by L. Ron Hubbard.	231
The Old Religion of the Goddess: Excerpt from <i>Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics</i> , by Starhawk	233
 Appendix	 237
 Acknowledgments	 245

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Introduction

To learn about the world's religions is to learn about the world. Religion exerts a profound and pervasive influence on the thoughts and actions of individuals and of entire societies. To learn about the world's religions, however, is a difficult challenge. There are a great many religions, and each is made up of a diversity of elements.

To better study religions, scholar Ninian Smart proposes that we approach this diversity by categorizing them into seven dimensions: mythical, doctrinal, experiential, ethical, ritual, social, and material. A variety of methods can be used to study religions—field trips to places of worship, interviews of participants, historical analyses of sacred art or music, and so forth. Learning about the world's religions by means of *Primary Source Readings in World Religions* calls upon the most obvious method of all: to read texts. Reading the right variety of material can go a surprisingly long way toward covering all seven dimensions of religion.

The writings in this book have been selected to represent the seven dimensions. In this book doctrine is featured from the outset, with presentation of Catholic teachings on the study of world religions. You will also encounter creation myths from Africa and Japan, and an Australian Aborigine myth that accounts for the origin of butterflies—while also

explaining what happens after death. The highly personal accounts of Saint Augustine and of the great Muslim scholar al-Ghāzālī offer insights into the experiences of conversion and mysticism. There is no clearer example of the ethical dimension than the Ten Commandments, included here in their original biblical form. The text even represents the dimensions we would least likely associate with the written word—the ritual, social, and material dimensions. Readers will “observe” the Lakota Ghost Dance, and they will join a Jewish family as it participates in the rituals of the Passover meal. All three primary Confucian sources reflect the social emphasis of almost everything in the tradition. The material dimension—typically the featured category for field trips and slide shows—is prevalent in the texts too, as the reader visits sacred cities and sites such as the sacred city of Ile Ife in the Yoruba myth and the Kumbum monastery as described by the Dalai Lama.

Another criterion for selecting the writings in this book was to introduce you to highly significant elements of a given religion. Though most chapters feature at least one example of a sacred text, the various other writings run the gamut, from ancient mythological accounts to influential works of philosophers to contemporary literary fiction to personal insights on what it is to live the religious life. In other words the writings represent a wide variety of genres—but they are all relevant for understanding the world’s religions. Reading an account of wearing the *hijab*, a type of head covering, as she commutes to work in New York City, for example, is of no less value than is reading from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts to Philosophical Fragments*,

the most important book of Søren Kierkegaard, possibly the most influential figure in Protestant Christian thought since Martin Luther.

Chapter 1 of this book offers insight into the Catholic perspective on the study of world religions. The book's twelfth and final chapter, "A World of Perspectives," presents a sampling of ideas and practices of religious traditions that happen not to be included elsewhere. Chapters 2–11 feature traditions commonly covered in courses on world religions. After exploring primal religious traditions in chapter 2, the book proceeds, based loosely on geographical and historical sequencing. Chapters 3–5 address Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, all having originated in South Asia (that is, India and neighboring regions). Chapters 6–8 cover the East Asian traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto. Chapters 9–11 feature religions that originated in western Asia: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

For all our intentions to present you with appropriately relevant and diverse reading material, we readily admit that eleven chapters with just three primary sources each (and only two in chapter 1) cannot fully represent the rich tapestry of traditions around the globe. But the book offers sound building blocks for expanding your knowledge of the world's religions—and therefore of our world.

Chapter 1

The Catholic Church and World Religions

With more than one billion members worldwide, the Roman Catholic Church plays an enormous role in shaping global events and nurturing the relationships among peoples and nations. In relation to other world religions, the Catholic Church actively promotes understanding, both on the part of its members and among the various religions themselves.

Official Church doctrine encourages Roman Catholics to learn about the beliefs and practices of the world's religious traditions. This has been especially true in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, commonly called Vatican Council II, which occurred from 1962 to 1965. Pope John XXIII convened this worldwide council of Catholic bishops.

One of the Vatican Council II documents addressing the Catholic Church and world religions is the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, also known as *Nostra Aetate*. Pope Paul VI, whose papacy began in June 1963, proclaimed it on October 28, 1965. *Nostra Aetate* emphasizes the common features of the world's religious traditions and specially mentions Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. It describes Islam and Judaism extensively and in terms that make clear the Catholic perspective of close religious kinship to Muslims (here “Mos-

lems”) and Jews. Naturally, the proclamation maintains that Christ, in the words of John 14:6, is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (NRSV). But *Nostra Aetate* also emphasizes that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy” in the various world religions. The proclamation fosters the pursuit of greater understanding of the religions of others.

The second reading in this chapter is an address by Pope Benedict XVI from a “Meeting with Representatives of Other Religions.” The address was delivered at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., on April 17, 2008. The Pope chose a highly appropriate setting for this address. The Cultural Center, according to its mission statement and as noted in the address, seeks to promote the “human search for meaning and purpose in life” in this multicultural world. Washington, D.C., as the nation’s capital and as a symbol of the nation’s foundational tenets, created the ideal backdrop for the Pope’s pleas for religious freedom. Note also Pope Benedict XVI’s support for two other pursuits: faith-based education and interreligious dialogue.

The address by Pope Benedict XVI can perhaps best be summarized as a celebration of pluralism and, like the Vatican Council II proclamation *Nostra Aetate*, as a call for greater understanding through appreciation of our common human concerns and quests. Both documents stress that one way we can gain this appreciation is through dialogue with one another.

Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)

by Pope Paul VI

1. In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely the relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?

2. From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through **ascetical practices** or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones

ascetical practices

self-denial of physical pleasures and worldly attachments for the sake of spiritual growth

No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned.

The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this sacred synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to “maintain good fellowship among the nations” (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men, so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.

“Meeting with Representatives of Other Religions: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI”

My dear friends,

I am pleased to have this occasion to meet with you today. I thank **Bishop Sklba** for his words of welcome, and I cordially greet all those in attendance representing various religions in the United States of America. Several of you kindly accepted the invitation to compose the reflections contained in today’s program. For your thoughtful words on how each of your traditions bears witness to peace, I am particularly grateful. Thank you all.

This country has a long history of cooperation between different religions in many spheres of public life. Interreligious prayer services during the national feast of Thanksgiving, joint initiatives in charitable activities, a shared voice on important public issues: these are some ways in which members of different religions come together to enhance mutual understanding and promote the

common good. I encourage all religious groups in America to persevere in their collaboration and thus enrich public life with the spiritual values that motivate your action in the world.

The place where we are now gathered was founded specifically for promoting this type of collaboration. Indeed, the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center seeks to offer a Christian voice to the “human search for meaning and purpose in life” in a world of “varied religious, ethnic and cultural communities” (*Mission Statement*). This institution reminds us of this nation’s conviction that all people should be free to pursue happiness in a way consonant with their nature as creatures endowed with reason and free will.

Americans have always valued the ability to worship freely and in accordance with their conscience. **Alexis de Tocqueville**, the French historian and observer of American affairs, was fascinated with this aspect of the nation. He

Bishop Sklba

(Richard J. Sklba) Milwaukee Auxiliary Bishop and chairman of the U.S. bishop’s Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs; introduced Pope Benedict XVI to the interreligious leaders attending the Cultural Center on April 17, 2008

For Reflection

1. *Nostra Aetate* identifies several “unsolved riddles of the human condition.” What are they? In what ways and to what extent does society today treat such riddles as relevant?
2. Through *Nostra Aetate* the Catholic Church in 1965 condemned “any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.” Based on your experiences and observations, to what extent does today’s society agree with these teachings?
3. According to Pope Benedict XVI, what questions does interreligious dialogue help answer? How are religious freedom and faith-based education related to interreligious dialogue?
4. In your own words, explain the perspective of the Catholic Church on the study of world religions. Quote specific references from both readings in chapter 1 to support your explanation.

Appendix

General Interest

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