

# Understanding Catholic Christianity



saint mary's press

Nihil Obstat: Rev. Peter Cho, STL, PhD  
Censor Librorum  
August 8, 2022

Imprimatur: Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, CSsR  
Archbishop of Newark  
August 9, 2022

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.

Contributing Authors:

Barbara Allaire  
Steven Ellair  
Brian Singer-Towns  
Thomas Zanzig

This course was developed and designed by the expert teams at Saint Mary's Press.

Cover image: © agsandrew / Shutterstock.com

Copyright © 2023 by Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1320, [www.smp.org](http://www.smp.org). All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

1171

ISBN 978-1-64121-180-2

# CONTENTS

## 1

### **Being Human: Hungering for Meaning, Goodness, and Connection . . . . . 5**

Spiritual Hungers . . . . .	6
A Time of Unique Growth . . . . .	16
The Shared Wisdom of the World's Religions . . . . .	28

## 2

### **Revelation and Faith: Knowing and Responding to God . . . . . 36**

Revelation: How We Come to Know God . . . . .	37
The Nature of God . . . . .	44
The Human Response to God: Faith . . . . .	50
An Overview of the Worldview, Beliefs, and Practices of Catholics . . . . .	58

## 3

### **Judaism: Christianity's Religious Roots . . . . . 64**

The Jewish Connection . . . . .	65
The Beginnings of a People . . . . .	70
From Slavery to Freedom . . . . .	74
Living in the Promised Land . . . . .	81
Crushing Defeat and Painful Exile . . . . .	86
After the Exile . . . . .	90

## 4

### **Jesus: Son of the Living God . . . . . 97**

Who <i>Is</i> This Man? . . . . .	98
Jesus' Life and Mission Begin . . . . .	107
The Public Ministry of Jesus . . . . .	114

## 5

### **Jesus' Death and Resurrection: Experiencing New Life . . . . . 127**

The Last Supper: Jesus' Extraordinary Meal . . . . .	128
Accepting Death on a Cross . . . . .	134
The Resurrection of Jesus . . . . .	141
What Does the Resurrection Mean? . . . . .	149

## 6

### **The Church: Gathering in the Spirit of Jesus . . . . 156**

The Spirit Is Poured Out . . . . .	157
What Is the Church? . . . . .	165
The Spirit in the Church through History . . . . .	173

**7**

<b>The Scriptures: Hearing the Inspired Word of God</b> .....	<b>185</b>
The Power of God’s Word .....	186
What Is in the Scriptures? .....	191
Understanding God’s Truth in the Scriptures .....	205

**8**

<b>Tradition: Handing on Living Faith</b> .....	<b>215</b>
Unity in Diversity .....	216
Tradition: The One Faith Handed on as a Living Reality .....	220
What All Christians Believe .....	229
Special Gifts of the Catholic Tradition .....	235

**9**

<b>The Sacraments: Celebrating the Grace of God</b> .....	<b>243</b>
A Sacramental Faith .....	244
The Sacraments: Celebrations of the Paschal Mystery .....	249
The Sacraments of Initiation .....	251
The Sacraments of Healing .....	261
The Sacraments in Service of Communion .....	267
The Liturgical Year .....	273

**10**

<b>Spirituality and Prayer: Growing in Life with God</b> .....	<b>280</b>
Spirituality: Toward a Full Life with God .....	281
Prayer: Nourishing a Relationship with God .....	291
Prayer and Community .....	306

**11**

<b>Christian Morality: Living in the Spirit of Jesus</b> .....	<b>311</b>
A Life of Love: The <i>Why</i> of Christian Morality .....	312
The Law of Love: The <i>What</i> of Christian Morality .....	318
Freedom and Grace: The <i>How</i> of Christian Morality .....	328
Virtue and Character: The <i>Who</i> of Christian Morality .....	335
Our Final Destiny .....	339

<b>Glossary</b> .....	<b>345</b>
-----------------------	------------

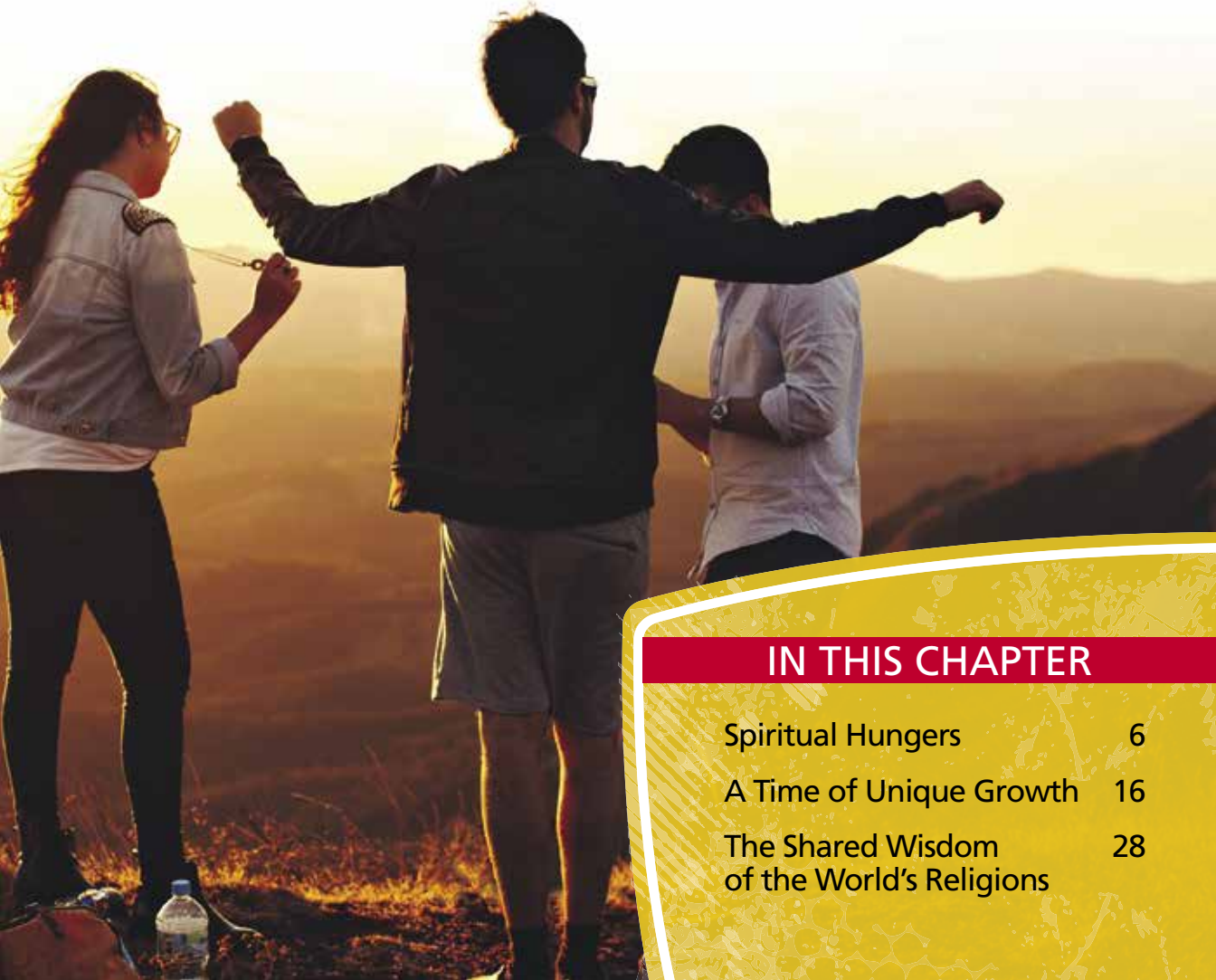
<b>Index</b> .....	<b>353</b>
--------------------	------------

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>366</b>
------------------------------	------------

chapter

1

# Being Human: Hungering for Meaning, Goodness and Connection



## IN THIS CHAPTER

Spiritual Hungers	6
A Time of Unique Growth	16
The Shared Wisdom of the World's Religions	28

# Spiritual Hungers

Imagine participating in a study about **religion**. After you have answered all the questions about your values and practices, you are asked to identify your religious affiliation using a checklist something like this:

- agnostic (I don't know whether there is a god.)
- atheist (I do not believe a god or any gods exist.)
- Buddhist
- Christian (Catholic)
- Christian (Orthodox)
- Christian (Protestant)
- Hindu
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Native or Indigenous religion
- nothing in particular
- other

Which box would you check? Would you answer quickly, or would you have to think about it? Would your answer be the same or different from others in your family? A recent study by Springtide Research Institute® shows that 61 percent of young people (ages 13 to 25) in the United

States identify with a religion, leaving 39 percent who indicate they do not belong to a particular religion. This same study shows that almost 75 percent of young people say they are religious, suggesting that many who do not identify with a particular religion still find something valuable about religion.

Regardless of which religious affiliation box you would select on a checklist, this course is for you. It has been designed with awareness of, and respect for, young people regardless of religious tradition. It is not the intent of this course to convince students who are not Catholic to become Catholic; rather, the course provides an opportunity to learn about the faith of your school and also your own faith if you are Catholic. But no matter what your current beliefs are, learning more about the Catholic approach to faith and life can be a rich experience.

Before considering the specific beliefs and practices of the Catholic faith, also called **Catholicism**, this

**religion** An organized system of beliefs, rituals, and ways of living that gives expression to a particular people's faith in a god or gods.

**Catholicism** The beliefs, rituals, and practices as lived out by those who identify with the Catholic religion.

course explores religion more broadly. It considers common hungers that people experience and explores this question: What does religion provide that makes it valuable in people's lives? This sets the context for the course's exploration of Catholic Christianity.

People belong to a religion generally because it feeds the hungers of the human heart and mind. Just as we have physical hungers that require nurturing our body, we have hungers related to the parts of ourselves that aren't material or physical. We refer to those as **spiritual** hungers. We'll turn now to exploring three of those hungers: the hunger for meaning, the hunger for goodness, and the hunger for connection.

## Hunger for Meaning

Davin met his friends Monica and Charlie for lunch at the neighborhood deli. Halfway through their sandwiches, Charlie asked: "So how is everyone doing? Like how are you really doing?"

Davin took a deep breath before replying. "Well, if I'm really honest, I've been feeling down lately.



**W**hat does it mean to say that someone is religious or belongs to a particular religion?

**spiritual** Relating to the nonphysical, or nonmaterial, aspects of human life and experience.

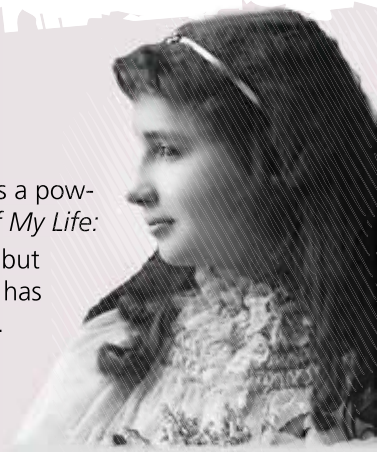
Image in public domain

## Helen Keller on the Best Things in Life

Helen Keller, who lost her eyesight and hearing in early childhood, shares a powerful reflection on spiritual experience in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*:

I used to wish that I could see pictures with my hands as I do statues, but now I do not often think about it because my dear (heavenly) Father has filled my mind with beautiful pictures, even of things I cannot see. . . . How happy your little Helen was when her teacher explained to her that the best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen nor even touched, but just felt in the heart. Every day I find out something which makes me glad.

One could imagine that Helen could easily have become angry, isolated, or cynical. Instead, her spiritual hungers were nurtured by people who loved her, and Helen's resulting love, joy, and gratitude inspired everyone around her.







It feels like all I've been getting is bad news. First, I bombed the math test a couple of weeks ago. Then we got the news that my uncle Desmond has cancer. Then there was that school shooting down south and the terrible floods up north. It's sometimes hard for me to even want to get out of bed these days."

"Oh no, Davin!" Monica exclaimed. "Will your uncle be okay? Isn't he the uncle you always go hunting with?"

"Yes, that's him," Davin responded. "I don't know yet how bad it is. They're not saying much. He's going in for more tests, and there's probably going to be chemo or radiation. I didn't really want to talk about all this negative stuff, but I needed to tell someone. Since you are my two best

friends, I hope it's okay that I shared it with you."

"Of course, it is," Charlie said.

"And you're not the only one feeling down. Life can seem overwhelming sometimes, but I have faith that God is there to help us through things like this. Just let us know how we can help you."

"I don't know about God," Monica chimed in. "I can't see why a loving God would let all this bad stuff happen. But I believe the universe wants the best for us, whether there is a God or not. Don't lose hope!"

Davin smiled at his friends. "Thanks, guys. It's really hard to be positive right now. I'm not sure what I believe in, but your support means a lot. Thank you."



We all want our lives to make sense, to have meaning. This is one of the deepest desires of the human heart. Most people find this meaning by believing in something bigger than themselves. Monica and Charlie both believe in something that helps them see the meaning in their lives and the lives of others. Charlie expresses his faith in God, a supreme being that he believes loves and cares for every person. Monica has faith in the goodness of the universe, believing that if we work on being our best selves, good things will result. Davin is still figuring out what he believes in, but he hungers for something that will give him strength and hope in dealing with the challenges of life.

Hungering for life to have meaning is a common human experience. When we feel that our life doesn't have meaning, we can easily despair or feel sad. We all want to know that what we do matters. We also want to know that the things we experience—both good and bad—have a purpose. Even if that purpose isn't clear, it is possible to have faith that it will become clear over time.

### Meaning Leads to Faith

The hunger for meaning leads to the idea of faith. Faith means putting your trust in something or someone. Having confidence in this thing or person gives meaning and purpose to a person's life. Understood like this, faith doesn't even require belief in a supreme being. It can mean believing in nature, the human race, your country, or even yourself. The point is that our hunger for meaning points to the belief in something bigger than ourselves.



**D**o you believe in something bigger than yourself? If so, what role does this belief play in your life? Does it give meaning to your life?



## Hunger for Goodness

A few weeks later, Davin, Monica, and Charlie were working on a history assignment together. They had just read *The Hiding Place*, by Corrie ten Boom. This book tells the story of the ten Boom family hiding Jews from the Nazis during World War II (1939–1945) and the consequences of this. Although the book is filled with horrors and injustices, it is also hopeful in showing the depth of human courage and determination.

“This book seems almost unreal,” said Monica. “I think most people would just give up when faced with those situations.”

“Except they had their faith in God,” replied Charlie. “It gave them hope that goodness and love are greater than evil and hate. That’s the point of faith. It gives us hope that good will win out, if not in this life then in the next.”

“But you don’t have to be a Christian to believe in the importance of goodness,” said Monica. “I’ve seen people from many different religions and even people with no religion making sacrifices to bring goodness into the world.”

“And does believing that goodness will win out mean having to believe in an afterlife? Can’t we believe goodness will triumph over hatred and evil in the here and now?” asked Davin.

“I mean the ten Boom sisters saw moments of kindness and goodness even in the concentration camp. I’ve been trying to look for the moments of kindness and goodness around me every day. It’s like if I look for them, I see them; if I don’t look for them, I don’t see them.”

“That’s interesting,” Monica replied. “It’s almost like you’re saying that experiencing the goodness in the world requires a certain way of seeing the world. It’s something that’s there, but you don’t experience it if you aren’t looking for it.”



A home in the Netherlands showing a place where Jews were hidden during World War II.

We have reasons to wonder whether goodness is really triumphing over evil. Just consider the ongoing news about violence, economic hardships, and injustices. Then there are the racial injustices, marked especially by the hate crimes committed because of race. Concern for global climate change continues to rise as the country experiences more and more weather-related disasters. We've lived through a pandemic during which schools were shut down and many people lost their lives. To make things worse, people in the United States and other parts of the world are sharply split on many of these issues, dividing families and communities.

Any one of these negative experiences can affect someone's life. This is true because human beings have a deep desire for goodness, an expectation that the world is good, and a general belief that people will treat one another with kindness. When something happens that challenges these understandings, it can cause people to feel a sense of hopelessness for the future. Recent years have seen rises in depression, especially among young people, because of struggles with feelings of sadness and hopelessness. A world filled with hate and injustice goes against the desire for goodness that seems built into us.

The hunger for goodness often leads to one of two responses when people face challenging and hurtful experiences. Some people fall into hopelessness and despair. They mainly see pain and grief without much hope that things will get better. Other people face the same situation and say to themselves: "We can get through this. Things can and will get better with time and effort." These people see beyond their current painful situation with the hope that goodness will overcome their pain.

## Goodness Is Connected to Hope

Hopelessness and despair are both valid responses to negative, painful experiences. Both come from



**D**raw a vertical line down the center of a sheet of paper to create two columns. In the left column, write signs of goodness you see in the world. In the right column, write signs of evil you see in the world. Which column is longer, and why?

the same place: the spiritual hunger for goodness. If we didn't have this hunger, experiencing something bad or hurtful wouldn't really bother us (outside of any physical pain). But because it does bother us, we can say that the hunger for goodness points to a reality that is spiritual because it goes beyond the physical or material world.

The hunger for goodness is connected to hope. Hope is the expectation and desire that things can and will be better than they are now. A hopeful person who has failed at something that really matters keeps trying with the belief that they can do better. A hopeful person who is struggling with money believes that their financial situation will improve

in the future. A hopeful person seeing the injustice of racism believes that people's hearts can change and that respect for people's dignity will improve. This isn't just wishful thinking.

## Hunger for Connection

Davin, Monica, and Charlie were talking after binge-watching their favorite show at Davin's house during their semester break.

"That is so corny," Charlie proclaimed. "As if those two characters could become friends after all the abuse they dumped on each other."

"I think it's great," replied Monica. "A lot of people who start out on the wrong foot end up liking each

© Billion Photos / Shutterstock.com

## Hope and Your Health

Research shows that people with hope are healthier, physically and emotionally. A *Psychology Today* article states: "Many studies have shown a wide range of physical health benefits of increased hope, including a higher-functioning immune system, better prognosis in chronic illness, and decreased sensations of pain." Not surprisingly, researchers have also shown that people with higher levels of hope have lower levels of anxiety and depression. Researchers have also identified practices that help people cultivate hope, including these:

- spending less time consuming news, which tends to focus on and repeat negative stories
- spending less time on social media, especially if your feed is filled with gossip and negative perspectives
- before going to bed, recalling one positive experience that shows the presence of goodness in the world





other. Remember the characters Clare and Chad and how they disliked each other when they first met? Turns out, they were guilty of the very things they didn't like in each other at first. Once they recognized that, they ended up becoming best friends."

"I once heard that the opposite of love isn't hate," said Davin. "The opposite of love is apathy, just not caring about the other person at all. I think our natural desire is to want connection with other people. But sometimes we avoid connecting with other people because we've been hurt in some way and don't want to be vulnerable again."

"I don't know about all that," replied Charlie. "All I know is that I love the two of you."

"We love you too!" said Monica and Davin as they all laughed together.

Every human person hungers for connection. Consider how people thrive and are happy when they are part of a caring and accepting community. Or how people suffer physically and emotionally when surrounded by mean and uncaring people. Or worse, how awful it is to feel alone and completely unconnected to other people. Many studies support the critical importance of being connected to loving and caring people. For example, one study found that being alone too much—often called social isolation—increases the risk of premature death regardless of the cause.

The hunger for connection is not limited to relationships with other people. Think of the role that pets play for many people. Have you ever heard someone with a cat or dog say, "I don't know how I would get along without them"? Human beings also hunger for a connection with nature. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people flocked to outdoor activities in record numbers. When their connection with friends and family was limited, people realized how healing and nurturing it is to be connected to nature.

Many people experience another kind of hunger for connection. It is the connection to a power greater than themselves. Throughout human existence, people have recognized that their connection to a higher power is what gives life meaning and hope. Some even go so far as to say that without this connection, their spiritual hungers are never truly satisfied.

## Connection and Love Go Hand in Hand

The hunger for connection is related to love. Loving and being loved are the ways we express our connection with others. Being able to share love with others is an essential part of being human. Think about times you have felt really loved by a family member or friend. Would it be accurate to say that these were times when you also felt the closest to them, the most connected to them? Love and connection go hand in hand.



**D**raw three interlocking circles. Label one “Meaning,” one “Goodness,” and one “Connection.” In the “Meaning” circle, write down things that give meaning to your life. In the “Goodness” circle, write down good things you experience and hope for. In the “Connection” circle, write down things and people you feel connected to. Is there something that all three circles have in common?

**spirituality** Ways of tending to the part of the self that is not physical. It is expressed through actions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that characterize a person’s life.

## Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Let’s conduct a thought experiment. Assume that the spiritual hungers for meaning, goodness, and connection are part of every person’s experience. What do these hungers point to? People will have different answers to this question. Some will say that these hungers are the result of biological evolution—that these hungers are hardwired into our brain for our survival. This answer has some truth to it. The hunger for meaning motivates us to grow and invent, the hunger for goodness motivates us to help one another, and the hunger for connection motivates us to form supportive groups and communities.

Another perspective builds on this survival answer. This perspective says that our ways of satisfying our spiritual hungers do more than help us survive. They help us thrive and grow into our full potential as human beings. People who embrace this perspective believe that human beings exist for more than just survival. We have been created to imagine new and better futures, to create beautiful works of art, to explore and understand the world, to celebrate life with dance and song, to be sources of love and goodness to friends and strangers alike. The hungers for meaning, goodness, and connection call us to use our imagination, intelligence, and creativity in ways that lead to a truly happy and fulfilled life.

The ways we feed our spiritual hungers are part of our **spirituality**. Every person has a spirituality, whether they call it that or not. This is because everyone experiences hungers that go beyond physical needs. A person’s spirituality is expressed through actions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that characterize their life.

Responding to our spiritual hungers involves choices. On the one hand, we can choose to nurture our spiritual hungers in healthy ways. A person might do this through connecting with other people, praying, serving others, or intentionally being open



to new experiences. This leads to a life that is joyful and thriving. On the other hand, we can starve our spiritual hungers, or worse, feed them in unhealthy ways. This could happen if a person withdraws from others, is resentful and unforgiving, or does not take time to reflect and center themselves. This leads to a life that is joyless, selfish, and often self-destructive. Young adulthood is a time of life when people face these spiritual choices in a more conscious way.

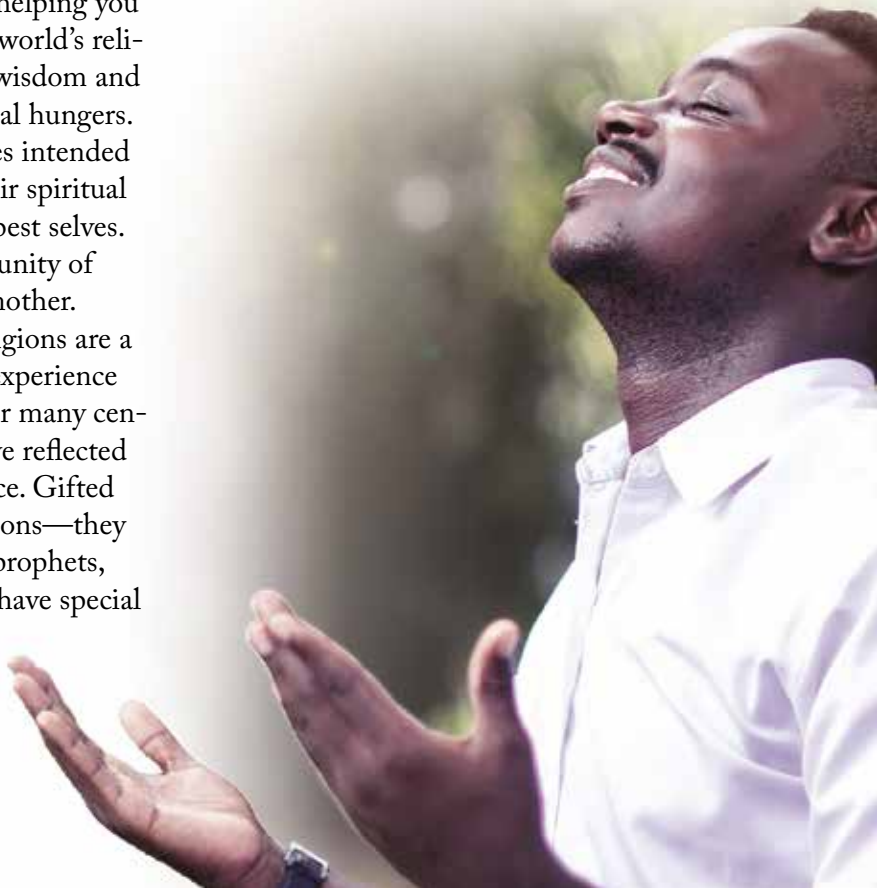
As you read this book, try to see in it an invitation to reflect on any hungers you experience related to the spiritual, or nonphysical, aspects of yourself and to consider the role religion can or might play in helping you satisfy those hungers. The world's religions have long provided wisdom and support for feeding spiritual hungers. First, they provide practices intended to help people grow in their spiritual lives and to become their best selves. They also provide a community of people that support one another.

Second, the world's religions are a source of knowledge and experience about spiritual truths. Over many centuries, religious people have reflected on their spiritual experience. Gifted people within these traditions—they might be called buddhas, prophets, saints, rabbis, and so on—have special

insights. These teachers pass on their wisdom to new generations through writings and oral traditions so that we might benefit from them.

You do not have to belong to a religion to live a spiritual life. Many people throughout human history and from around the world, however, have found that a religion's beliefs, practices, and community have helped them develop fulfilling spiritual lives.

Let's consider the changes that are occurring in the lives of teens and the spiritual opportunities that these changes bring as we continue to think about what religion provides that makes it valuable in people's lives.





## For Review

1. Why is the hunger for meaning important in the lives of human beings?
2. Describe two possible responses to challenging and hurtful experiences.
3. Describe three different kinds of connection that most people find important in their lives.
4. Define *spirituality*.

# A Time of Unique Growth

---

Most people don't spend a lot of time thinking about where they are in their life's journey. This is just as true of teens as it is of adults. The demands of school, family life, and extracurricular activities can keep high school students busy. If you are the typical student using this book, you are in the period of adolescence. These are crucial years of human development when a person moves from being a child to being an adult. It is a period of rapid change and physical, mental, and emotional growth. Let's look at some of the growth that occurs during adolescence and how it impacts a person's capabilities and decisions, especially regarding their spirituality.

## Growing Body, Mind, and Heart

During adolescence, human beings undergo amazing growth in their physical, mental, and emotional capabilities. The growth in young people's bodies, minds, and emotions is more rapid and extensive during adolescence than at any other time of life, except perhaps during infancy. All this growth leads to new capabilities, new possibilities, and new decisions. You are probably familiar with these changes, but let's review some highlights.

## Changing Body

Adolescence is marked by the start of puberty, which typically occurs between the ages of eight and fourteen. These are some of the physical changes that occur during puberty:

- The body grows faster than at any other time of life except between birth and age two. During puberty, young people will grow on average about two inches taller each year over several years.
- The body grows more muscle, becoming stronger, and develops greater physical stamina. Physical reaction times also improve. These changes lead to greater athletic ability, for example.
- The body becomes capable of starting new life.

Keep in mind that the timing and amount of these changes varies widely between individuals. Growth spurts will also be uneven, sometimes happening quickly and other times more slowly. There is no “normal” except what is normal for each person.

## Changing Mind

Although the human brain reaches 90 percent of its adult size during childhood, it continues to go through dramatic changes, sometimes called brain remodeling, during adolescence. These changes in the brain lead to changes in the way you and your peers may think and make decisions. Here are some of the mental changes that occur during adolescence:

- Unused connections in the brain are discarded, while other connections grow. The part of the brain where more connections are pruned away are in the back of the brain, the part that is more primitive and reactionary. Until this pruning process is complete, adolescents tend to be more impulsive, sometimes acting without thinking through the consequences.



**W**hat changes in your body, mind, and emotions have you experienced over the last two years?



**C**onsider the view that social media can be harmful to young people’s self-esteem. Experts note that when teens compare themselves to the influencers they follow on social media, they often feel inadequate or even deprived. On a scale of one (no influence) to five (high influence), rate the impact you think social media has on your feelings of self-worth.





**T**hink about a big decision you recently had to make. Were you tempted to rush to a decision, or was it easy to take your time thinking about all the possible outcomes?



- The part of the brain that is growing more connections is the front of the brain. This is the decision-making part of the brain, which is responsible for impulse control, problem-solving, and long-term planning. This process takes time and happens later in adolescence. As it continues, adolescents may think through consequences more thoroughly and spend more time thinking about and planning their future.
- The brain's chemistry is changing as new hormones and chemicals are produced, flooding the brain with new sensations. Higher levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine bring new feelings of physical pleasure and satisfaction. Higher levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin help regulate and smooth out moods and behaviors. The experience of alternating quickly between emotional highs and lows is a sign that these hormonal levels have not yet balanced out.

## Changing Heart

The rapid physical and mental changes that occur in your body and brain during the teen years are the foundation for changes in emotions, or the life of the heart. This is unavoidable, so you, your family, and your friends should accept these changes as natural and normal. These are some of the common emotional changes you may experience:

- Due to changing brain chemistry, feelings intensify. You might find that things that previously made you a little sad or a little happy can make you very sad or very happy. This can be confusing or even frightening.

- The same changing brain chemistry can lead to big and sometimes sudden mood swings. You might start out the day feeling positive and happy, and by lunchtime be feeling angry, sad, or hopeless—maybe all three!
- Biological changes can lead to sexual attraction, which can lead to dating and close friendships. The attraction can be to someone of the opposite sex or of the same sex, which does not necessarily have any bearing on eventual sexual identity.
- Because of biological changes, you may compare yourself to others. If this happens, it could affect your self-esteem.
- As the front part of the brain continues to develop, you may find yourself thinking more and more about the future. This might lead to feelings of excitement and adventure in anticipation of new experiences. Or it could lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety,

or sadness if you do not see a path to a future you want to experience.

If you or your peers are not ready for these emotional changes or do not have caring people to help you through them, there can be negative impacts. For example, changing hormones might make you raise your voice over something that isn't that bad. Or you might have tears in your eyes when hearing something a little sad. These things could cause people to be upset with you or maybe make fun of you, even though your reactions are perfectly normal given the physical and emotional changes you are experiencing.

We could add many more changes to these lists, but these points can help you appreciate the significance and the far-reaching consequences of the changes you and your peers are going through. Of particular concern in this course is the significance these changes have for your ability to think and act spiritually.





## Growing Spiritually

Davin, Monica, and Charlie were sitting together in the school lounge during their free period. “How are you guys doing on your religion essay?” Monica asked. “You know, the one where you have to describe your personal spirituality. I don’t even know where to start. I mean, I don’t pray, and I don’t go to church, so what is there to write about?”

“I’m almost done,” Charlie responded.

“Yeah, teacher’s pet!” Monica laughed. “I mean, your family goes to church and probably prays together and all that stuff. Easy for you to write about.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Charlie said. “But the essay is supposed to be about my personal spirituality, not just what my family does. It’s got me thinking about what God means to me and how I relate to God.”

“It really helped me when Mrs. Rhodes said that spirituality is about all of our life,” Davin chimed in. “So, I’ve been writing about my decision to join the football team even when my dad had doubts about it. And about what music means to me—how it calms me and helps me relax. I’m even writing about the time I went to see a counselor about my sadness last year.”

“Hmm . . .” mused Monica. “Maybe I’m making this harder than it has to be.”



**D**ivide a sheet of paper into three columns. Label the first “Beliefs,” the second “Values,” and the third “Actions.” Write down the beliefs, values, and actions that best describe your personal spirituality in the appropriate columns.

Every person has a spirituality, that is, a way of tending to the part of the self beyond the physical—the part of the self that hungers for meaning, goodness, and connection. As a young person’s body, mind, and heart grow during adolescence, their awareness of their spiritual hungers also grows. As teens are more aware of these hungers, the possibilities for their spiritual life also grow.



Children normally mimic what they see, and they often trust the adults in their lives. So as a child, a person's spirituality may be determined primarily by their family and their religious community (if they belong to one). It is common during adolescence to begin to explore spiritual questions more deeply, as Charlie, Monica, and Davin are starting to do. And teens who identify with a particular religion may find themselves wanting to explore for themselves beliefs they have grown up with.

Even if a person doesn't actively participate in a religion, it doesn't mean they don't have a spiritual life. In the conversation between the

three friends, Monica initially seems to be assuming that because she isn't religious, she doesn't have a spiritual life. This isn't true. A person does not have to belong to a religion to grow spiritually.

To better understand how young people's spiritual lives grow, consider each of the following five scenarios, keeping these questions in mind as you read through each one:

- Can you see how a change in body, mind, or heart led to the new situation?
- Can you identify the spiritual hungers connected to the situation?

## Questions about Religion

As our spirituality develops, we might find ourselves having a lot of questions. Some of those questions will revolve around religion. It is natural to have such questions, especially as a young person. Discussions about religious questions are a good way to understand and grow your spiritual life. But sometimes authority figures discourage religious questions. From the Springtide Research Institute study mentioned earlier, here is one young adult's experience:

I questioned my religion when I was pretty young, but a lot of my questions were kind of shut down by family members too. So, I couldn't really ask them. But as an adult, probably a few years ago, I started asking questions again.

If you have religious questions, seek out a trusted, caring adult to discuss them with!





## A Driving Dilemma

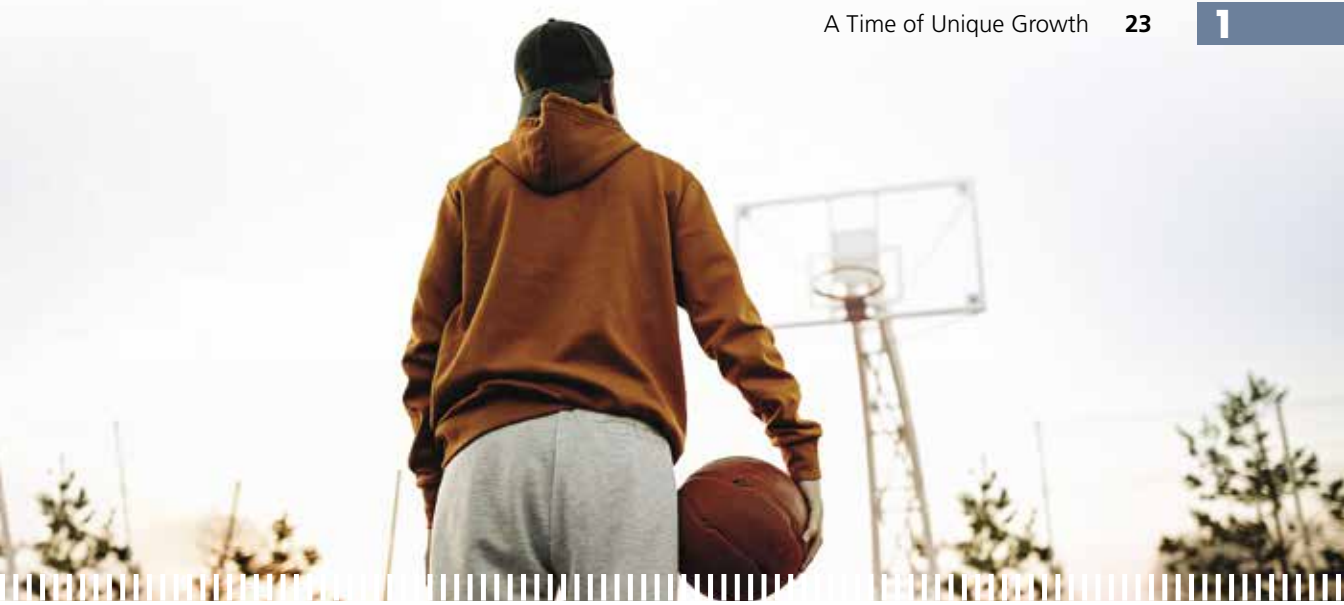
**Delores's situation.** Delores is old enough to begin taking driver's education classes. Her father is pressuring her to sign up, but she isn't sure she wants to right now. For one thing, it would cut into her time volunteering at the animal shelter. But more importantly, she believes that to battle climate change, people need to drive less, not more. She's checked out the city's bus routes and bike paths, and she's made a plan for using the bus and her bike to get wherever she needs to go. But she hasn't told her father yet because she knows he will not be happy with this decision.

**Reflection on Delores's experience.** Delores's growing body and mind have made her ready to drive a car responsibly. And her spiritual hunger for goodness causes her to want to make this decision in a way that makes the world a better place. Her spiritual hunger for connection makes her want to please her father, but it also pushes her to do what's best for the whole planet, which is now causing a conflict.

## To Play or Not to Play?

**Hakeem's situation.** Hakeem has really grown in the past year. He's 6 inches taller! He has started questioning if he should join the basketball team this year. On the one hand, it could be a lot of fun and his height could give him a real advantage. But he was on the team two years ago and hated it. He felt awkward and clumsy and sat on the bench most of the time. What if the same thing happens this year?

**Reflection on Hakeem's experience.** Hakeem's dramatic physical growth has led to this situation. And it is a spiritual issue because his spiritual hungers have been engaged. His hungers for meaning and connection could be satisfied if he tries out and becomes a successful player. But what



if Hakeem doesn't do well? Then those hungers could be frustrated. Hakeem is facing one of the great truths of the spiritual life—that growing spiritually often requires taking a risk.

### Torn between Two Parents

**Ayesha's situation.** It's been over three years since Ayesha's parents divorced. She mostly lives with her mom and spends an occasional weekend with her dad. At first, it was great living with her mom, but lately they've gotten into more and more arguments. Her mom is very traditional in her faith and makes Ayesha wear conservative clothing whenever she goes out. Because of this, Ayesha is feeling more and more like an outsider at school and even with her friends. Her father is not as conservative and lets her wear what she wants. He's told her that she can live with

him whenever she is ready. She's wondering if moving in with him might be the best thing for her right now.

**Reflection on Ayesha's experience.** Ayesha's developing mind and heart are causing her to think about her life in new ways. She's realizing she could have a choice in how she dresses. The increased hormones in her brain are causing her to feel stronger emotions, leading to conflict with her mother. Her hunger for connection is strong right now, and it seems like some of her mother's religious beliefs are keeping her from making new friends.

### Friends or *Friends*?

**Bruce's situation.** Bruce has a problem. He and Cara have been neighbors and friends since grade school. They eat over at each other's houses, they do homework together,



they are in a band together, and they spend time playing games and watching movies together. Lately, Cara's been spending time with Sanjay, and Bruce is feeling some things he's never felt before. Is it jealousy? He's never thought of Cara that way before. But last night when they were watching a movie, she fell asleep with her head on his shoulder. And that felt confusing to him.

**Reflection on Bruce's experience.** Bruce's growing body and heart might be causing his love for Cara to move from just friendship to romantic love. The spiritual hunger for connection really kicks into overdrive when sexual attraction is added to the mix. Bruce's hunger for meaning and goodness makes him want to respond to this attraction in the best possible way.

## Switching Churches

**Angel's situation.** Angel has been a Pentecostal Christian all her life. She believes in God and considers Jesus her friend. Her church is small, and everyone knows one another, but they have very few youth activities. One of Angel's Catholic friends invited her to a youth activity at the local Catholic parish, and Angel had a great time. She's gone to several other Catholic events with her friend, including a national conference. Everything is so different, and Angel finds that she really likes the Catholic rituals and Eucharistic adoration times. She's thinking about joining the Catholic Church but is afraid people at her church will react negatively.

**Reflection on Angel's experience.** Angel's growing mind and heart have expanded her understanding and appreciation of different religious traditions. Her hungers for meaning and connection are causing her to explore the possibilities for spiritual growth that a different religion might bring into her life. Her hunger for goodness, though, makes her unwilling to cause pain to the people in the church she grew up in. This is a challenging spiritual situation.



**H**ave you faced an experience like any of these five examples? What new choices have your growing body, mind, and heart brought into your life?

These scenarios may help you appreciate the time of life you are in right now. Your growing body, mind, and heart are making you capable of understanding the role that tending to the spiritual aspects of yourself plays in your life and the lives of others. And because many people find that religious communities—with their organized systems of beliefs and practices—enhance their spirituality, this is the ideal time to study and think more deeply about how religion can be valuable in people’s lives.

## Being Spiritual and Being Religious

After their teacher handed back their papers about their personal spiritualities, Davin, Monica, and Charlie gathered in the hallway. “What do you think about the question Mrs. Rhodes posed to us?” asked Monica. “Are you spiritual or religious or both?”

“I’m definitely both,” responded Charlie. “I believe in God and my church. My church family means a lot to me, and they give me a lot of support. My religion’s teachings guide my life.”

“I’m still figuring it out,” said Davin. “I guess I would call myself religious, but I don’t go to services very often, and I have a lot of questions about what my religion teaches. But I can see how important it is to my parents and other people in my family.”

“I’m definitely spiritual but not religious,” Monica declared. “I think it’s important to love others, take care of the earth, and speak for justice. I just don’t think I need to be part of a religion to do that.”

“I think it’s great that even though we have different answers to the question, we can still be friends,” said Charlie. “My grandparents told me that when they were growing up, people used to look at people from other religions as enemies. I’m glad it isn’t that way anymore.”

“Well, hopefully it isn’t that way anymore,” replied Davin. “Sometimes I’m not so sure.”



**W**hat are the five most important things in your life right now? How would you have answered this question five years ago?



**T**hink of someone who has different religious beliefs than you. Do their different religious beliefs make them different from you? How?





**A**fter reading the explanations of *spiritual* and *religious*, what questions do you have? How would you explain to a friend how being spiritual and being religious are closely connected but not exactly the same?

Charlie, Monica, and Davin’s conversation is typical of the way many teens think about spirituality and religion. In this chapter so far, we have been using the words *spiritual* and *religious* almost interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing. And even though these two concepts are closely related in many people’s minds, they are not exactly the same. Let’s consider how being spiritual and being religious are connected and how they are different.

To be spiritual means that a person recognizes that human life is more than just meeting physical needs, such as the need for food, water, and air. It means recognizing that there are spiritual hungers, such as those discussed in this chapter, and appreciating how experiences such as faith, truth, beauty, justice, and love satisfy these hungers. Being spiritual means recognizing that practices such as prayer, meditation, reflection, and service are also ways to feed those hungers and making these experiences and practices part of one’s life. Ultimately, it means sensing that there is something larger than oneself, whether one believes in a supreme being or god.

For most people, to be religious means to identify with an established religion. This means being connected to a community with an organized system of beliefs, rituals, and practices, and a leadership structure that supports these things. A primary characteristic of a religion is the belief that a higher power is at work in the universe. The names for this higher power vary from religion to religion.

Belonging to a religion and following its beliefs and practices are ways many people respond to their spiritual hungers. The world’s religions provide opportunities to experience truth, beauty, justice, and love. They provide ways for their members to practice reflection, prayer, meditation, and service. For most people who belong to a particular religion, their spiritual life and their religious life are pretty much the same thing.



As you are on your way to becoming an adult, you have an opportunity to decide which spiritual experiences and practices have value for you, and what role religion will play in your spiritual life. Your developing body, mind, and heart will open you up to a deeper and more fulfilling spiritual life. Along the way, you will probably have more questions about religious beliefs and practices. Your thoughts on what religion provides that makes it valuable in people's lives will grow and change. Before turning to look at the Catholic faith in chapter 2, let's consider the religious truths held in common by most of the world's religions.

## Talking about Religion and Spirituality

Conversations about religion and spirituality can help us grow into our best selves if done respectfully. Here are some guidelines for having respectful conversations:

- Honor and respect the other person's religious choices, whether the person belongs to your religion, another religion, or no religion at all. Do not try to convert the person to your beliefs.
- Be genuinely curious about the other person's religious beliefs and practices. Do not attack or belittle their beliefs and practices.
- Be willing to share what you believe and why you believe it, but not in a way that comes across as the only way to believe.
- Be honest about your own religious questions and struggles. Everyone has them!



### For Review

1. Give an example of how an adolescent's body is changing.
2. Give an example of how an adolescent's mind is changing.
3. Give an example of how an adolescent's heart or emotions are changing.
4. Give an example of how an adolescent's changing body, mind, and heart can lead to new situations and decisions connected to spiritual hungers.
5. What does it mean to be spiritual?
6. What does it mean to be religious?

# The Shared Wisdom of the World's Religions

---

What are the religious questions young people ask? By *religious questions*, we mean big questions about why we are here, what keeps us alive, and where are we headed. Consider this list of questions.

- How did the universe come to exist?
- Is there a god or supreme power responsible for creation?
- Is the universe basically a machine set in motion by God? Or is it something more?
- Does my life have a purpose?
- Does God care for me?
- When I die, is that the end for me?

How many of these questions have you wondered about? Have you ever talked about them with friends or family members? If you are a member of a religious faith, how does your religion answer these questions?

Since the first humans appeared on our planet, they have thought about questions like these. Over time, different religious traditions developed and provided answers to these questions. The traditions often started out small, associated with a particular tribe or nation. Many died out, but

some grew and expanded across the globe. The largest worldwide religions that exist today are Christianity (which includes Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants), Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Judaism. Many other smaller, but still important, religious traditions exist as well. The beliefs and practices of these global religions feed the spiritual hungers of human beings.

People of different religious backgrounds sometimes disagree bitterly, and some of these disagreements have led to violence and war. This may suggest that huge and irreconcilable differences exist among the world's different religions, but this isn't entirely true. When people from different religions talk to one another with open minds and hearts, they find they have as more in common than not. In the last several centuries, religion scholars and religious leaders have recognized that the world's major religions hold many of the same core beliefs. Let's consider some of these core beliefs as one more way to explore what religion provides that makes it valuable in people's lives.

## There Is a Divine Creator

Being in nature is a spiritual experience for many people. Walking amid trees, floating on a lake, or looking up at the night sky can bring a profound sense of peace. Even more, it brings a sense of wonder at the beauty, majesty, and diversity of the natural world. And it raises the question, How did all this come to be?

A core belief of the world's religions is that the universe we know came to be as the result of **divine** creation. That is, the universe came into existence through the creative power of a supreme or divine being or beings. The name most used for the supreme being(s) in predominantly Christian countries such as the United States is **God**. Some of the world's religions believe in only one god. This is called **monotheism**. These religions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Bahá'í faith, some forms of Hinduism, and several others. Many religions believe in multiple gods. This is called **polytheism**. These religions include Taoism, some forms of Hinduism, and the ancient Greek and Roman religions. Buddhism does not teach a belief in a divine creator, and for this reason many consider Buddhism a spiritual tradition or philosophy rather than a religion.

This brings us to another point. In addition to believing that the universe was brought into being by God, the world's major religions hold that creation is an expression of divine love, a love that brings all that exists to life. Another way of saying this is that God is in some way part of everything that exists, connecting all creation in divine love. As part of creation, human beings are also connected to one another, and to all of creation, by divine love.



**P**ope Francis has said on several occasions, "Faith and violence are incompatible." Many other religious leaders agree with him. If this is true, why are so many acts of violence committed in temples, synagogues, and churches or carried out in the name of religion around the world today?



**I**magine that someone said to you, "There's absolutely no reason to believe there is a God." How might you respond to this person? Can you give some reasons showing that belief in a divine creator is reasonable?

**divine** Related to or coming from God.

**God** A name for the supreme being, creator of all that is.

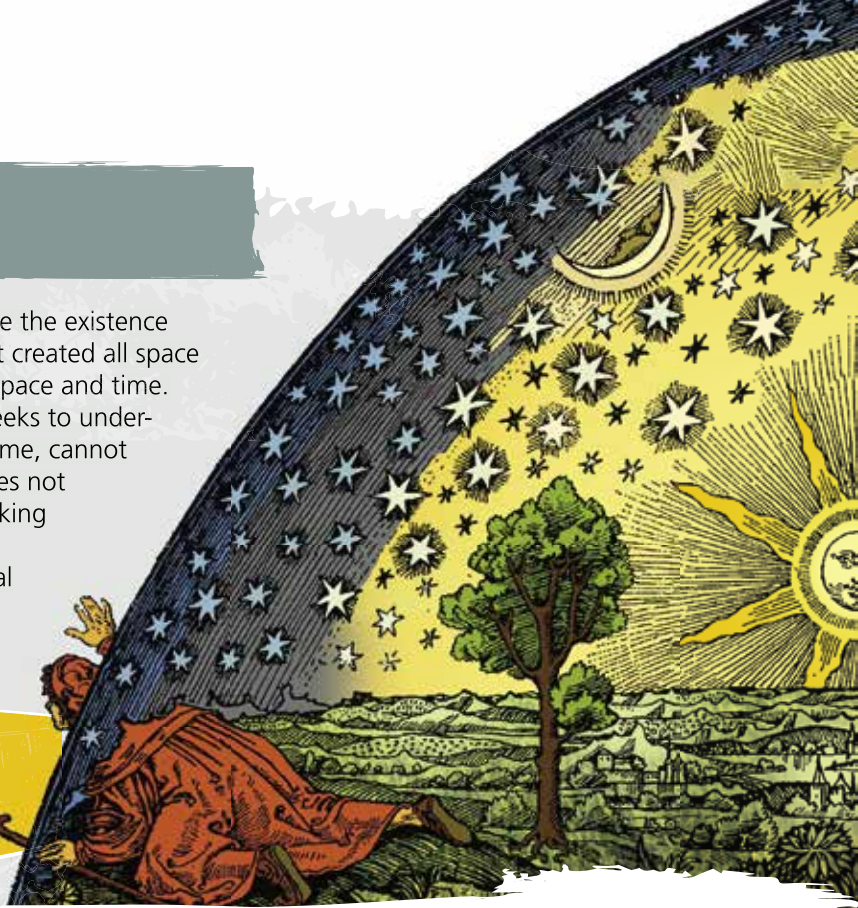
**monotheism** The belief that there is only one God.

**polytheism** The belief that there are many gods.

## Can Science Prove That God Exists?

Science cannot prove or disprove the existence of God. The supreme being that created all space and time must exist outside of space and time. So science, the discipline that seeks to understand and measure space and time, cannot measure God. However, this does not prevent human beings from making arguments for the existence of God. It does require using logical arguments, rather than scientific reasoning, when discussing the existence of God.

A person crawling under the edge of the sky represents the human quest to know what exists beyond space and time.



**W**here and how do you experience love in your life? What are the things that block you from experiencing even greater love? Are these blocks from inside of you or from things outside of you?

## Human Beings Are Made for Love

Another belief shared by the world's major religions is that human beings are meant for love. We are created to be in relationship with the divine creator, with God. If you think of God as a power source with outlets to plug into, human beings were created to plug into those outlets. This is a crude image, but you get the idea. And not only do human beings have the ability to "plug into" God, more importantly, God desires to be in relationship with us. Human beings are unique (not more special than the rest of creation, just unique) in that we can freely choose to receive the love of God and share it with the rest of creation.



The world's major religions hold that when we are connected to God, ultimately our lives will be **blessed**; that is, at a deep level we will be happy and be at peace. The flow of divine love will run through us as it is meant to. On the other hand, when our connection with God is blocked, our lives will be unsettled and even unhappy. What blocks this connection? Things like greed, anger, anxiety, injustice, and ignorance can all hamper our ability to be connected to God.

This does not mean that a deep connection with God means never having problems, difficult relationships, grief, or other hardships in life. It can mean just the opposite. It can mean that God knows our pain and the world's pain and does not ignore it. Thus, a person deeply connected to God also experiences pain, grief, and hardship without trying to hide from it. However, having a strong relationship with God can keep a person from falling into complete sadness and despair, knowing that in the end God's love will triumph.

The world's great religions also teach a variety of spiritual practices that are meant to help human beings stay connected to God. Prayer, meditation, religious rituals, forgiveness, serving others, and studying sacred texts, like Islam's Qur'an and Christianity's Bible, are some of the practices shared

## Arguments for the Existence of God

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), one of the greatest thinkers of the Middle Ages, developed these five well-known logical arguments for the existence of God:

1. Life is in motion. For life to be in motion, there must have been a "first mover" to get everything going. That mover is God.
2. An egg can't just cause itself to be an egg. There must be a cause outside the egg (in other words, a rooster and a hen!) that causes it to be an egg. Likewise, there must be a first cause outside all creation that caused creation to come into existence, and that first cause is God.
3. For the possibility of everything else to exist, there had to be something in existence first. This something is God.
4. There is something we call truest and best against which we measure everything else that is true and good. This something isn't just an abstract concept but is God.
5. The order in nature isn't just a happy accident. An intelligent being exists to direct all things to their natural end, and this being is God.

**blessed** To receive a favor or gift bestowed by God, bringing happiness.

by many religions. By making these practices part of one's life, people can stay connected with God, the source of love and blessing.

## Human Life Has Purpose

Have you ever been asked what you want to be when you grow up or what you want to study in college? You will no doubt be asked these questions more often in your next few years of high school. These questions can feel annoying to young people who are still trying to figure out what they want to do with their lives.

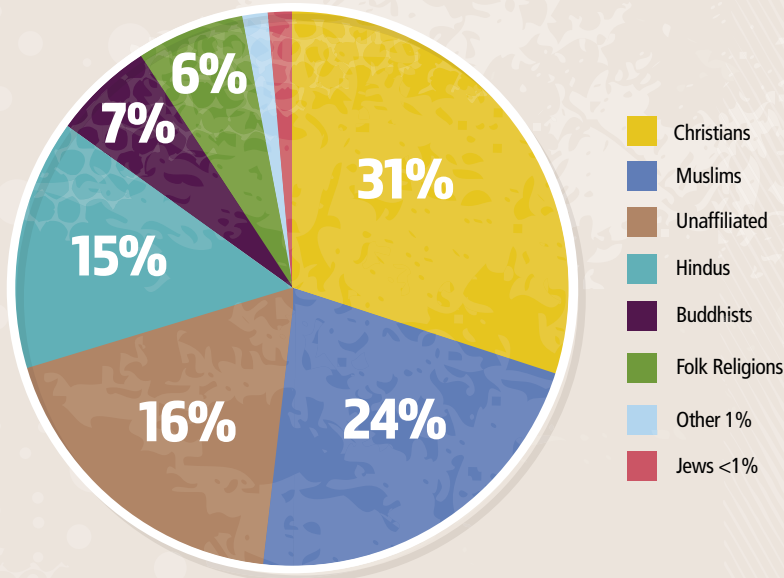
Here's some good news. The world's great religions make a distinction between the work that you *do* and the kind of person you *are*. Your career and the work you do can take many different paths with few wrong choices. You can be a politician, a health care worker, a plumber or an electrician. You might be a minister, an artist, or a sports enthusiast. These are all possible jobs you might do. But they are not who you are. Who you are is more significant than what you do.

It might be better if people would ask what kind of person you want to be. When asked that, most teens give





## Religious Affiliation Worldwide



Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding. "Christians" includes Catholics. "Folk Religions" includes Indigenous religions. "Other" includes Taoism and Confucianism.

these answers: "I want to be a good friend. I want to help other people. I want to be someone others can count on. I want to be a person who is happy and content." These are all great life goals, and working on them determines the kind of person you will become.

The world's great religions teach that who we are and who we are becoming matters. Human life has a purpose and a goal. Our purpose is to cooperate with God's desire to be a source of beauty, joy, peace, and love. Because God has given human beings free will, we can bring harm to creation—including other humans. But because of our free will, we can also be—we *should* be—sources of healing. We can help creation become what God wishes it to be.



**H**ow would you answer the question, "What kind of person do you want to be?"



**M**any of the world's great religions believe in some kind of heaven or paradise after death. Some people think of heaven as a reward for doing all the right things, and others think of it as a continuation of a life already lived in union with God's love. What are your thoughts on life after death?

The religions also share a belief that the goal of human life is to be in union with God, to experience the fullness of God's love for us. Some religions teach that we can reach this goal in this life, at least partially. Some religions teach that we reach this goal through reincarnation, living repeated lives in which we keep growing toward spiritual perfection. Some religions believe that we ultimately reach this goal after death, when we see God face-to-face. No matter the specific belief, the world's great religions agree that the goal of human life is to give and receive the love of God, to the greatest degree that we can.



## For Review

1. What is the difference between monotheism and polytheism?
2. How are creation and divine love connected?
3. Give an example of a logical argument for the existence of God.
4. What happens when human beings are connected to God?
5. According to the world's major religions, what is the purpose and goal of human life?

# reflect

## Religion, A Love Affair

Suppose someone wants to become a world-class soccer player. Do they only go out on soccer fields by themselves and practice endless hours, teaching themselves how to play? That's not the way the best soccer players achieve their goal. The best soccer players join a good team and find a coach who knows how to bring the best out of them. They study the moves of the world's best players. They value the wisdom and experience of the great soccer players who have gone before them. And they keep practicing, practicing, practicing.

The same is true for our spiritual lives. If we want to become the best version of ourselves, if we want to live

lives filled with the most meaning, goodness, and love, it's best not to try to do it all on our own. As you move from childhood to adulthood, you have the opportunity to decide what the best version of yourself will be and how you will become that person. The great religions of the world are filled with wisdom to guide and support you in becoming that person.

The rest of this course takes a deep dive into how one specific faith—the Catholic faith—helps people live lives of meaning, goodness, and connection. The exploration begins in chapter 2, with discussion of the Catholic understanding of how we come to know God.

