

## Worldviews: Religions and Their Relatives

*World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery, Fourth Edition*, considers—appropriately enough—“religions.” But exactly what is it about those many traditions that make them religions? As we outlined in chapter 1 of the student book (and also deal with at length in the online article “The Comparative Study of Religions”), each tradition provides its own answers to a common set of questions. And all traditions are composed of the same dimensions. It is therefore reasonable to group the traditions together in a single category.

On close analysis, however, we can see that this category has fuzzy boundaries. Other traditions and systems usually not regarded as religions provide answers to the same set of questions, and are composed of similar dimensions. To avoid the ambiguities resulting from this fuzziness, let us employ a label more inclusive than *religion* for our category. A popular choice is *worldview*.

Ninian Smart is a leading scholar in the field of world religions. He has been instrumental in establishing widespread use of both the dimensional approach and the term *worldview*. He understands worldviews to include both religions and “secular ideologies” like nationalism, Marxism, and humanism. His reasoning for including such ideologies is twofold:

In undertaking a voyage into the world’s religions we should not define religion too narrowly. It is important for us to recognize secular ideologies as part of the story of human worldviews. It is artificial to divide them too sharply from religions, partly because they sometimes function in society like religions, and partly because the distinction between religious and secular beliefs and practices is a modern Western one and does not represent the way in which other cultures categorize human values. (*The World’s Religions*, p. 9)

In this article, we will explore two examples of prevalent modern worldviews: nationalism and humanism. Along with closely resembling the traditional religions, these worldviews compete with them to varying degrees. But they can also function hand in hand with the traditional religions. Nationalism, for example, has at times served as a potent vehicle for religions, and vice versa. And humanism clearly illustrates the ambiguous distinction between religions and secular ideologies mentioned by Smart. Most religious traditions would agree wholeheartedly with humanism’s great emphasis on ethics, among other qualities.

See *Primary Source Readings in World Religions* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2009) for the selection titled “Parable of a Madman,” as well as the accompanying leader’s guide for suggestions about how to use this reading in your study of secular humanism.

## Nationalism: Living and Dying for *La Patrie*

Nationalism is a bond shared by a group of people who are attached to a particular land and to such things as language, history, and culture. It is characterized by a sense of devotion to the nation on the part of the citizenry, to the extent of providing them a cause for which to live and to die.

Today we tend to take nationalism for granted; a nation’s self-identity and its citizens’ relationship with that identity are simply facts of life. But nationalism is actually a recent phenomenon. Based philosophically on the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) concerning the organic nature of



a people, nationalism took concrete political form during the French Revolution in 1789. Having suddenly cast aside the ruling system of monarchy, the leaders of the revolution embraced the idea of each citizen's living and dying for *la patrie*, "the fatherland."

As a worldview, nationalism has much in common with religions. In the United States, for example, various nationalistic features are now commonly considered part of a civil religion (a concept developed by sociologists Phillip Hammond and Robert Bellah). Influenced by Christianity and Judaism, this civil religion is a tradition all its own, with unique religious aspects. Its myths include stories of the founding of the country. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. are among its saints. Holy days include the Fourth of July and Memorial Day, and civil religion's many rituals are especially apparent on these occasions. With these and many other religious aspects, civil religion has the power to unify the populace.

## Nationalism's Answers to Religious Questions

As a worldview, nationalism provides answers to the various religious questions considered in the student book and in the online article "The Comparative Study of Religions." This section outlines some of nationalism's answers to those questions.

There are many forms of nationalism—in fact, as many forms as there are nations. (In this respect, nationalism as a category is not exactly correlative with an individual religion like Buddhism or Islam.) We will focus somewhat on the civil religion of the United States. To a large extent, however, the examples given here have counterparts in most other varieties of nationalism.

### What Is the Human Condition?

Generally speaking, nationalism does not set out to explain what it is to be a human being—it does not offer philosophical descriptions of the self or the soul. But to some extent, nationalism defines the meaning of the individual's existence in terms of the national cause. Self-identity is shaped by such things as war efforts and nationwide attempts to preserve energy. Great achievements of the nation tend to enhance self-esteem.

### What Is Spiritual Perfection?

For nationalism, spiritual perfection is achieving a degree of patriotism such that one is ready to sacrifice individual interests for the sake of the national cause. Sometimes this means the "ultimate sacrifice" of dying for one's country; the national cause transcends one's individual interest in self-preservation. National cemeteries are filled with the graves of martyrs—soldier-heroes who have given their lives for the nation.

The quest for spiritual perfection typically does not require sacrificing one's life. The essential thing is a commitment to the nation beyond the concerns of self. This quest may best be summed up in the famous words of President John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

### What Is Our Destiny?

Nationalism does not promise the individual an afterlife in the typically religious sense. But to die for one's country is to gain a sort of symbolic immortality. Thousands of Americans pay respects every day



at the Tomb of the Unknowns. Many Americans also feel compelled to honor or memorialize the innocent people killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Those martyrs may not be known by their individual identities, but they will be remembered for their ultimate sacrifice.

Sometimes the perception of a collective destiny of the nation is significant. The Manifest Destiny of the United States is a concept based on the belief that God has ordained that the nation thrive as a rightful home for freedom and justice. Such a perception further strengthens commitment to the national cause, thus encouraging sacrifice to the nation. The individual's destiny comes to be identified with the nation's.

## What Is the Nature of the World?

Each nation has its own environmental policy. Should the environment be protected at all costs, even if slow economic expansion results? Or is it appropriate to exploit the nation's natural resources for the sake of economic well-being? These are fundamental questions. The ways that nations answer them reveal to some extent national perspectives on the nature of the world.

Whatever the environmental policy, nationalism tends to foster the belief that a nation's own land is somehow special. In some cases—Japan, for example—the land is regarded as sacred. Environmentalism itself generally has patriotic overtones. In the United States, many are committed to protecting “America the Beautiful” for future generations of Americans. Environmentalism is an important part of the national cause.

## What Is Ultimate Reality, and How Is It Revealed?

As we have seen, nationalism does not attempt to explain philosophically the nature of the self. Nor does it set forth doctrines explicitly intended to describe ultimate reality. It would be a stretch to ascribe to nationalism such terms as *theistic* or *monistic*.

Still, in some ways nationalism seems to involve itself with conceptions of ultimate reality. Some examples serve as interesting analogies to the perspectives of traditional religions. The Marxism-Leninism practiced by the Soviet Union and other nations throughout most of the twentieth century seems to have had its gods, namely, Marx and Lenin. In the People's Republic of China, the same can be said of Chairman Mao. These men are revered as creators of new nations, as founts of sacred wisdom, and as saints whose significance lives on long after their death. Mao's Red Book is an established sacred text of China. For decades Lenin's embalmed body lay in Red Square to be worshipped by throngs of passersby.

It could be argued that a national cause for which one is expected to die is itself the ultimate reality. As we see in the online article “The Comparative Study of Religions,” even with respect to the traditional religions, the category of ultimate reality admits a wide variety of concepts.

## The Seven Dimensions of Nationalism

Now we take a slightly different tack and consider how nationalism compares with the religions with respect to the seven dimensions.



## The Experiential Dimension

Nationalism evokes a wide range of emotions. People feel pride in the history and achievements of the nation. Scenic beauty and symbolic monuments inspire love. When troubles beset the nation, citizens feel pained and sometimes ashamed. On the other hand, victory in war or in sporting events causes spirits to soar in joyous celebration. When Brazil won soccer's World Cup in 1994, some people believed that the great positive effect on the emotions of the populace would improve the nation's economic productivity. With the success of the United States in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, President George Bush's approval ratings soared to record heights, and many Americans took great pride in the nation's achievement. Not much later, however, the nation's mood and priorities changed, and the year after the war, Bush was defeated in the presidential election.

## The Mythic Dimension

Myths—sacred stories answering questions of origins and serving as sources of sacred truth—are common and important aspects of nationalism. They help to bond people of a nation together by conveying a shared history of origins and of collective achievements. In the United States, history textbooks tell of the country's founders and their noble and daring deeds. Sometimes the factual nature of those accounts is questioned. Nevertheless, the stories of the founders present values that are fundamental to the nation.

Other nations have their own myths, many of which are set in the distant past. Germans, for example, possess a reservoir of ancient Teutonic myths, some of which were put to music by Richard Wagner in his mid-nineteenth-century operatic cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*. In the early nineteenth century, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected German fairy tales, such as "Snow White" and "Little Red Riding Hood," to record the spirit of the people.

All such myths unify a nation's populace and strengthen ties to land, history, language, and culture.

## The Doctrinal Dimension

Each nation has chosen one or more ideologies, such as democracy or communism or capitalism, on which it bases its government and way of life.

Specific beliefs and teachings are spelled out in important doctrinal statements. The United States has the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights (to name but a few). Like Christianity's Nicene Creed or Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, these teachings are foundational to the very nature of the nation.

## The Ethical Dimension

In their laws, nations answer the basic ethical question, What is right and what is wrong? National legal codes often provide specific ethical instruction that goes well beyond that of traditional religions.

Nations also tend to hold general ethical values, such as patriotism. For example, even if it is not against the law to burn the nation's flag, it is usually considered unethical to do so. Taxes are to be paid, and military and other service is to be given when appropriate. Depending on the nation, specific ethical values are deeply cherished. In the United States and other Western countries, those values include freedom and justice.



## The Ritual Dimension

The ongoing celebration of the nation is punctuated with numerous rituals. Saluting and caring for the flag, singing the national anthem, traveling to national shrines—all are performed in the manner of religious rituals. Nations also have their holy days (or holidays). In the United States, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Veterans Day, and Thanksgiving are especially sacred. Certain events involving the president or other officials are marked by formal ceremony and protocol. Even voting, considered the responsibility of a patriotic citizen, is in some ways a ritual.

## The Social Dimension

Nations are communities based on a shared history and culture. Citizens feel themselves to be part of the larger group.

In various ways, nations establish and maintain communal organizations. For instance, governments are hierarchical, the public sector is distinguished from the private, and citizenship status is usually not granted to everyone.

## The Material Dimension

With the material dimension, as with most of the other dimensions, examples are almost too abundant to count. The many material aspects—sacred entities, art, and architecture—of nationalism include national parks, the flag, historic buildings, monuments, national cemeteries, patriotic paintings and sculptures, and the national anthem and other musical compositions.

## Humanism: Spirituality without the Supernatural

The worldview of humanism understands the good of humanity on earth to be the highest purpose of life. Human beings, then, along with the natural world they inhabit, are understood to be the ultimate reality. There is no belief in a god or an afterlife. Instead life is believed to be significant and entirely worth living in the here and now, as judged by human standards of goodness. Humanists are committed to the ongoing improvement of the human situation, especially in the realm of ethics. Reason and the scientific method are the primary tools for ascertaining ethical truth and for making the world a better place.

Humanism dates back to Athens in the fifth century BC, and the dictum of the philosopher Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things.” The humanist tradition flowered in the European Renaissance and in the Enlightenment. Today it enjoys a rather large following, as evinced by organizations like the American Humanist Association, and journals such as the *Humanist* and *Religious Humanism*.

Humanism is primarily a Western tradition, and in fact has drawn much from the ethical teachings of Judaism and Christianity. But it is a very broad phenomenon, with various roots and a wide array of forms (Confucianism, for example, is considered by some to be a form of humanism).

To narrow our scope to a more manageable one, we will draw on one of these forms—humanistic psychology—as our primary example. Two of its main figures are Erich Fromm and Abraham Maslow. These men of Jewish heritage had both become thoroughgoing humanists who denied the need for believing in God, an afterlife, or anything else commonly regarded as the supernatural. However, they



believed strongly in the human need for spiritual fulfillment. Fromm advocated a “humanistic religion,” which aimed at overcoming the ego, loving others, and living life to its fullest capacity, in order to realize our highest potential. Maslow also advocated religion in its healthy sense, which he believed was centered in the “peak-experience,” an intense and illuminating event common to mystics and prophets, and to human beings generally.

## Humanism’s Answers to Religious Questions

Humanism uses reason and scientific method in its quest for truth. It rejects religious revelation and the claims to authority made by religious traditions. Still, this does not eliminate religion from the realm of humanist inquiry or interest. Indeed, as Maslow points out, religious questions are entirely appropriate for scientific inquiry:

What the more sophisticated scientist is now in the process of learning is that though he must disagree with most of the answers to the religious questions which have been given by organized religion, it is increasingly clear that the religious questions themselves—and religious quests, the religious yearnings, the religious needs themselves—are perfectly respectable scientifically, that they are rooted deep in human nature, that they can be studied, described, examined in a scientific way, and that the churches were trying to answer perfectly sound human questions. Though the answers were not acceptable, the questions themselves were and are perfectly acceptable, and perfectly legitimate.  
*(Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences, p. 18)*

Let us see how Maslow, Fromm, and humanism in general answer the basic religious—and basically human—questions that we have been examining in this guide and in the student book.

## What Is the Human Condition?

Humanists generally embrace the theory of evolution (and reject creationism) and therefore understand humans as being part of the greater whole that is the natural world. This in no way devalues humanity. In fact, according to Maslow, evolution has provided human beings with a higher nature that is part of their biological makeup. This higher, transcendent nature, says Maslow, is our human essence. We have the potential to realize, or actualize, this higher nature. This, according to Maslow, is the task that confronts us in our human condition: to make actual that which is for most of us merely potential.

Fromm similarly believes that the true task of human life is to realize our highest potential. True to his existentialist leanings, Fromm describes our human condition as characterized by inescapable dichotomies. We have both an animal nature and a rational, imaginative mind, and thus we are trapped between fundamental limitations and abundant possibilities. To deal with this predicament, Fromm believes, we need a frame of orientation and an object of devotion. That is to say, we need religion, and more precisely, humanistic religion. This is the pathway to salvation.

## What Is Spiritual Perfection?

Like Fromm and Maslow, humanists in general believe that spiritual perfection lies in realizing our human potential, and thereby in living life to its fullest. They do not anticipate an afterlife. Spiritual perfection, for them, is to be achieved in the here and now, in this world.



As we have seen, for Fromm, spiritual perfection was achieved through humanistic religion (*humanistic religion* is one of his terms for the humanist worldview). Humanistic religion is based in humankind and its strengths, such as rationality and artistic creativity. People face a choice between this path and the path of “authoritarian religion,” an unhealthy surrender to an imagined power that transcends humankind, such as the god or gods of traditional forms of theism. Casting this choice in other terminology, Fromm writes of the “being” mode of existence versus the “having” mode. The being mode is characterized by wisdom, love and care for others, and a profound respect for nature. The having mode is marked by possessiveness—of material things, of status, of knowledge, and of other people. Spiritual perfection, for Fromm, is being human in the deepest and fullest sense, which is an experience suffused with love and contentment.

For Maslow, self-actualization is the fulfillment of our human potential. That is to say, self-actualization is spiritual perfection, given Maslow’s humanism. The peak-experience is also a form of spiritual perfection, and is to some extent correlated with the process of self-actualization. But even people who have not attained self-actualization sometimes have the peak-experience, “so great and high an experience that it justifies not only itself but even living itself” (Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, p. 62).

We will explore the peak-experience in more detail later as we consider the experiential dimension of humanism. For now we can note that this event applies here because it involves transcendence of the ordinary limitations of our human condition. Fromm’s humanistic religion, otherwise described as the being mode of existence, is also characterized by transcendence. It infuses life with contentment and joy, and thus overcomes the sorrows that typify our inescapable predicament of being human.

## What Is Our Destiny?

Humanists do not believe in an afterlife. For them, whatever destiny is in store for the individual can be derived only from the ongoing effects of the individual’s actions while here on earth. A good reputation and a positive legacy for future generations are the extent of an individual’s destiny. But an individual’s destiny is intertwined with the destiny of the world and humanity at large. And in this respect humanism is indeed concerned with our destiny. Humanism is in constant pursuit of a better society, and is therefore intent on overcoming such present problems as overpopulation, environmental damage, and the threat of nuclear or chemical warfare. A world free of such problems would approximate a sort of humanistic heaven.

## What Is the Nature of the World?

To the extent that humanity is of ultimate concern for humanists, so too is our home, planet Earth. Humanism therefore tends to be highly environmentally minded. Concern for the future of humanity naturally implies that the ecosystem be cared for.

Fromm elaborates most interestingly on humanism’s environmentalist perspective through an analysis of the Sabbath. This special day, Fromm writes, symbolizes the perfect relationship both between humans and between humans and the world. Work is avoided on the Sabbath in order not to violate our original peace with nature. Fromm’s great interest in Taoism and Zen Buddhism also bespoke his environmentalist concerns.



## What Is Ultimate Reality, and How Is It Revealed?

For humanism, there is no ultimate reality beyond humanity and the natural world we inhabit. There is no god who has created us. There is no Brahman that underlies reality, nor is there an Atman at the root of our existence. Atomic structure could be the “essence” of reality. The human “soul” consists of the personality, along with our hidden potential—our higher nature, as Maslow would say. This higher nature is revealed through self-actualization and during the moments of the peak-experience.

In a similar manner, Fromm describes achieving our human potential as self-realization. To realize the self is to become fully human. Interestingly, Fromm acknowledges a theistic form of humanistic religion, for which God is a symbol of our human potential, or of the higher self that we should all strive to realize. In this respect, God is the symbolic manifestation of ultimate reality.

## The Seven Dimensions of Humanism

We now consider the extent to which humanism draws from the seven dimensions of religious traditions. As we might expect, some of these dimensions, such as the mythic and ritual dimensions, are not so relevant for humanism. Others, like the experiential, are surprisingly so.

### The Experiential Dimension

When we picture the typical humanist maneuvering through life by means of rational decisions and scientific investigations, we may not envision moments of heightened experiential intensity. But, according to Maslow, the peak-experience (which Maslow sometimes refers to as a core-religious experience) is common to almost everyone—including scientifically minded humanists. During the peak-experience, writes Maslow, one’s perception becomes “relatively ego-transcending, self-forgetful, egoless, unselfish” (*Religion, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, p. 62). It is no coincidence that this sounds similar to the religious experiences of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other traditions. For Maslow they are all basically the same experience. Far from regarding them as the possessions of only the traditional religions, Maslow advocates that peak-experiences be encouraged and thus made more accessible to all.

Fromm also advocates an experiential dimension of humanism. The being mode of existence amounts to a special type of experience, similar to the faith experience as described by some religious writers. It is characterized by contentment and joy.

### The Mythic Dimension

Owing to its scientific orientation, humanism tends to place less importance on myths than do some religions. Still, some humanists value myths as symbolic representations of basic truths. For example, in his book *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*, Fromm offers a most intriguing analysis. The Hebrew Bible, Fromm writes, is “a revolutionary book; its theme is the liberation of man from the incestuous ties to blood and soil, from the submission to idols, from slavery, from powerful masters, to freedom for the individual, for the nation, and for all of mankind” (pp. 9–10). The sacred stories of the Bible are pervaded with humanist values.





## The Doctrinal Dimension

Though humanism rejects religious revelation and traditional authority as sources of truth, it nevertheless embraces a complex set of beliefs. These beliefs are derived primarily from rational thinking and scientific investigation. They are therefore malleable, as dictated by further thinking and new scientific discovery. Certain deep-seated beliefs seem to be constants, however. Liberalism and democracy, for example, are basic to humanism. Freedom of inquiry, a fundamental tenet of humanism, depends on them.

## The Ethical Dimension

Ethics is an area of central concern for humanism. Indeed the worldview is sometimes referred to as ethical humanism. Humanists generally agree on some basic values: treating others with justice and tolerance, advancing political freedom, increasing human rights, eliminating hunger, and opposing violence and racism.

Fromm specifically advocates a global perspective that emphasizes the oneness of humanity. His book *The Art of Loving* (Harper Colophon, 1956) focuses on the basic ethical teachings of love, truth, and justice.

## The Ritual Dimension

Fromm and others have considered rituals, like myths, to have a symbolic significance. But for the most part, humanism gets along without formal worship practices. In fact, Maslow regards as secondary to the spiritually central peak-experience all such “paraphernalia of organized religion—buildings and specialized personnel, rituals, dogmas, ceremonials, and the like” (*Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, p. 28).

## The Social Dimension

The ideal of a harmonious society, including all human beings regardless of nation, race, or culture, is highly valued by most humanists. It is fundamental to Fromm’s humanistic religion.

Focusing on another form of community, Maslow believed that peak-experiencers tend to group together in close friendships, bonding as a result of their spiritual kinship.

## The Material Dimension

One of the things humanists most celebrate is the human capacity for artistic creation. Therefore humanists regard virtually every work of art and architecture as a token of human potential and thus worthy of reverence. Given their environmental concerns and kinship with nature, they also characteristically appreciate scenic wonders and the harmonious workings of the natural world.



## Competing with the Traditional Religions

The ability to categorize together the traditional religions and such modern worldviews as nationalism and humanism has a far-reaching practical implication: at least to some extent, all of these perspectives compete for adherents.

This competition can become severe. Some nationalist regimes, such as Hitler's National Socialism, explicitly clash with religion. The political and economic doctrines of Marxist-Leninist nations and Maoist China did so as well. On a less drastic note, many nations maintain a legal separation of church and state, which has significant consequences. In the United States, for example, formal prayer sessions are generally prohibited in public schools, while the Pledge of Allegiance is routinely recited in them (though various groups debate the constitutionality of the pledge's phrase "one nation under God").

Humanism, by its very nature, is nontheistic (and often atheistic). Maslow opposes the typical trappings of religious traditions as hindering universal accessibility to the peak-experience. Even Fromm, who had a deep appreciation for some religious symbolism and for religions that focus on nature, such as Taoism and Zen, was harshly critical of much that is commonplace in traditional religion. His humanistic religion, moreover, like Maslow's project of achieving self-actualization, is a functional alternative to traditional religion. It purports that one need not be a member of a church or synagogue—or a Zen monastery, for that matter—to realize one's highest potential. Indeed it deems reliance on religious revelation or traditional authority detrimental to the task.

Perhaps the clash between these modern worldviews and the established religions is most insurmountable precisely on the points where they are most in agreement. Humanism advocates spiritual growth, the fulfillment of human beings' potential to be loving, creative individuals. Nationalism advocates devotion to a higher cause, even to the extent of being willing to die for it. Religions tend to advocate the same things. Responding to the same fundamental questions, constituted of the same dimensions, advocating similar tasks—it is little wonder that nationalism and humanism compete with the traditional religions.

The prevalence of secular ideologies among the other worldviews illustrates the deep-seated human need for seeking spiritual contentment. Traditional religions may be rejected, but their functions are carried out in other forms. God-fearing or atheistic, traditionalist or New Age, the needs and tendencies of the spirit perhaps do not differ so very much among human beings.

(The excerpt on page 1 is from *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, by Ninian Smart [Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1989], page 9. Copyright© 1989 by Ninian Smart.

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