

World Religions

A Voyage of Discovery

Jeffrey Brodd



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1

CHAPTER

STUDYING THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS



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

The morning I arrived in Trivandrum, the capital of the south Indian state of Kerala, I met my friend Vinita, a Hindu, who promised to accompany me on a visit to the Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple, a place that is generally off limits to nonbelievers. Though my family is from Kerala, we are Christians. And that morning, one of their fold was proposing to enter a Hindu temple.

(From “Going on Faith”)

A Yiddish play with the title “Toyt fun a Salesman” opened at the Parkway Theater in Brooklyn early in 1951. As most of the audience recognized from the name alone, the show was a translation of Arthur Miller’s drama “Death of a Salesman.” It seemed a mere footnote to the premiere production, which had completed its triumphal run on Broadway several months earlier, having won the Pulitzer Prize.

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



© Wolfgang Bechtler / Corbis

Is Willy Loman Jewish? Did Miller create him devoid of ethnic or religious markings to better serve as an American Everyman broken on the wheel of capitalism? Or did he subtly intend for part of Willy's tragedy to be his estrangement from the Jewish and Judaic heritage that might have provided some ballast as his working life, and with it his very identity, falls to ruin?

(From "Since the Opening Curtain, a Question: Is Willy Loman Jewish?")

The Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, has filled the pews at St. Patrick's Cathedral. He has spoken before Pope Benedict XVI and the College of Cardinals in Rome. As archbishop of Milwaukee, he once put on a Green Bay Packers "cheesehead" during an outdoor Mass.

But in recent weeks, the cardinal and his office prepared for an entirely different kind of address: his first Twitter message.

“Hey everybody. It’s Timothy Cardinal Tebow,” @CardinalDolan. “I mean Dolan.”

(From “Now, @Cardinal Dolan”)

Perhaps the uglier side of politics is always close to the surface.

President Obama and his Republican rival, Mitt Romney, have said for months that the 2012 election will be about the economy. But on Thursday, it became—at least for a brief moment—about the always touchy issues of race and religion.

A report in *The New York Times* on Thursday exposed a secret plan by Republican strategists and financiers to rekindle questions about the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., Mr. Obama’s one-time pastor, and his angry black-power sermons.

Mr. Romney repudiated the plan to use Mr. Wright’s words as a racially tinged cudgel against Mr. Obama.

(From “Race and Religion Rear Their Heads”)

A GLOBAL VILLAGE

The preceding quotations are drawn from four different articles in the same newspaper on the same day—the *New York Times*, May 18, 2012: compelling evidence that the world’s religions are part of people’s everyday world. We cannot call ourselves informed citizens without having at least a basic knowledge of them.



ACTIVITY

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

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

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

Recognizing the need to understand the world’s religions is one thing; achieving such an understanding is another. This book aims to help. In certain ways, the study of world religions is especially challenging, as the following section explains. But it also offers a great opportunity for discovering the many ways of being human.

THE NATURE OF A RELIGIOUS TRADITION

Religion begins with mystery. Being human inevitably prompts deep questions about our existence: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? For that matter, what is “here”? That is, what is the nature of this world? What is the nature of the supreme or ultimate reality? Beset with such questions, we find

ourselves confronting mystery on all sides. By responding to the questions, religion provides a way of living and dying meaningfully amid the mystery.

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

Religious Questions

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



ACTIVITY

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

Not everyone chooses to answer these basic religious questions by following a religious tradition. Some people, even though they regard themselves as spiritual, are not

members of a specific religion. But others find that a religion helps them to grapple with religious questions. Religions offer responses that have been tested by time, in some cases by thousands of years. They are also fortified by the richness of tradition and by the shared experience of community.

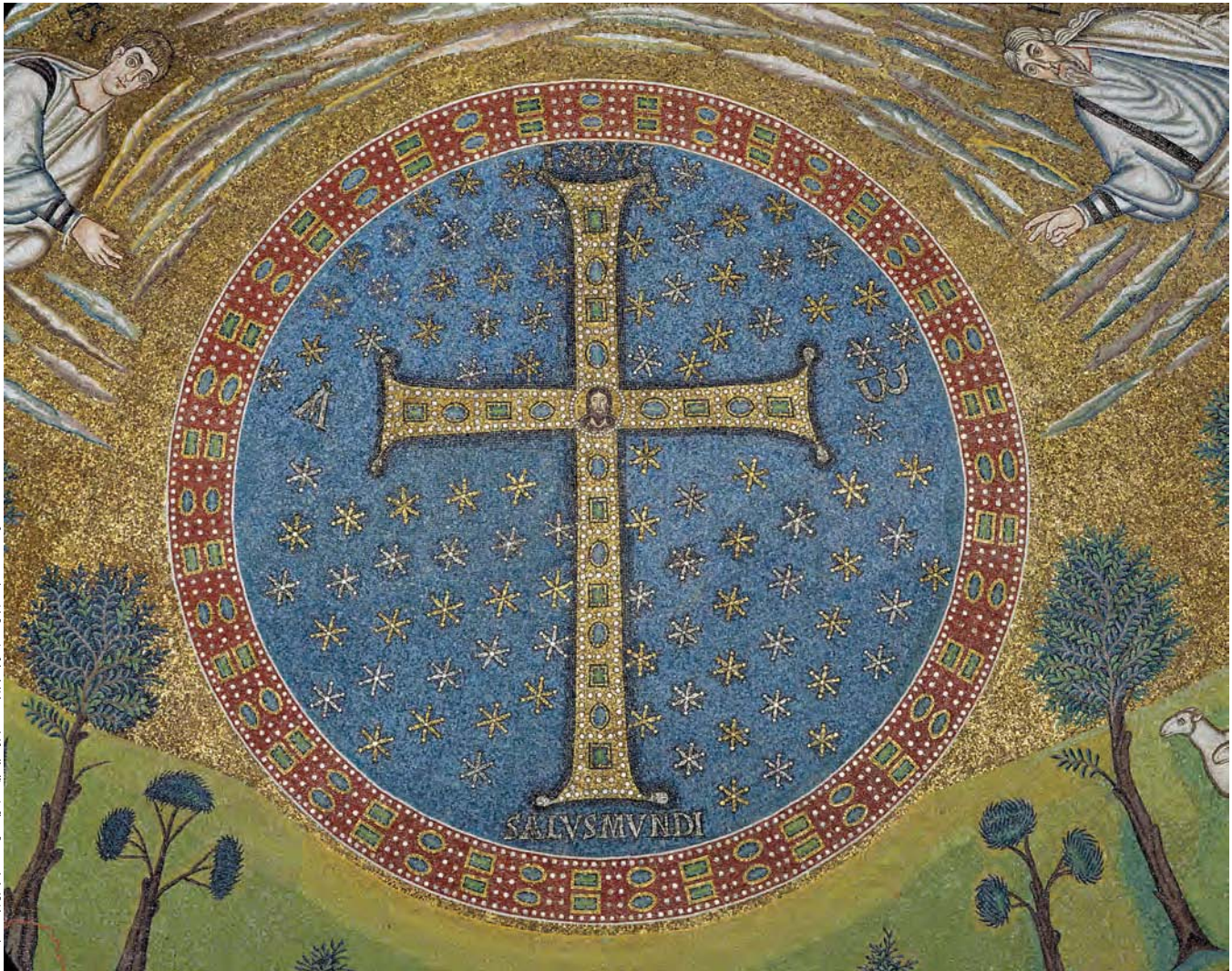
Regardless of how we choose to respond to them, religious questions are inevitable. Studying these questions can help us to better understand the nature of each religious tradition. Let us consider the primary ones.

What Is the Human Condition?

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

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

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



Conservatoriato mosaici, Spina di Romagna, Italy, 6th century / Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy / Bridgeman Images



ACTIVITY

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

What Is Spiritual Fulfillment?

Almost every religion describes what is needed to fulfill our spiritual potential most perfectly.

Some religions teach a form of spiritual fulfillment that can be attained in this life. Others teach that complete fulfillment must await an afterlife. In either case, fulfillment is a difficult thing to attain; in fact, some religions teach that it is impossible to attain on our own, without divine assistance. Therefore religions tend to acknowledge the goodness of being as spiritually mature and near to fulfillment as possible. Spiritual transformation, not necessarily leading to complete fulfillment, is a vital objective of most religions.

Later in this study of religions, you will encounter specific examples that explore various approaches to spiritual maturity and spiritual fulfillment. For now briefly consider

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

transcendence

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

cosmology

The understanding of the nature of the universe.

three questions about the way a religion addresses spiritual fulfillment and transformation: What is ethical—that is, how are we to act while living in the world? How do we transcend the human condition? And how do we attain salvation?

What is ethical? Religions typically prescribe an ethical life as a basic requirement for the journey toward spiritual fulfillment. Indeed, teachings regarding right and wrong constitute a significant part of most religious traditions.

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

How do we attain salvation? Most religions teach that spiritual fulfillment is closely related to some form of salvation from the ultimate limitation imposed by the human condition: death. Religions that emphasize forms of transcendence typically hold that

there is a direct connection between the transcendence attained in this life and final salvation. Some forms of Buddhism teach that the attainment of enlightenment in this life leads to *nirvana*, the final liberation. *Liberation* for religions such as Buddhism is the equivalent of *salvation*; both terms imply an overcoming of the limitations of the human condition. Religions such as Christianity and Islam, which teach that salvation depends on the divine, tend to maintain that final spiritual fulfillment awaits in the afterlife, sometimes after the individual's salvation has already been assured. According to this view, spiritual maturation continues even in a heavenly afterlife.

What Is Our Destiny?

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

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

The question of destiny is more complex for religions that teach that human beings live more than one lifetime—religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In this case, the immediate destiny after this life is generally not the ultimate, final destiny, but just another step toward the final destiny. Nevertheless, the need to seek spiritual

transformation (if not complete fulfillment) in this life remains vital, because the degree of one's transformation tends to determine the nature of one's future life.

What Is the Nature of the World?

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

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

regarding the natural world, while others tend to be suspicious of science.



ACTIVITY

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

What Is Ultimate Reality, and How Is It Revealed?

Finally, there is the religious question of ultimate reality (or for Western traditions especially, God). Theistic religions hold a belief in God or in multiple gods. These religions

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



© SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY

monotheism

The belief in only one god.

polytheism

The belief in many gods.

pantheism

The belief that the divine reality exists in everything.

nontheistic

Describes a belief system that holds that there is no divine being.

transtheistic

Describes a religion that allows for belief in divine or semidivine beings without the belief in an essentially relevant god.

revelation

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

faith

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

mysticism

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

teach a certain theology, or doctrine, regarding the divine. The theologies of the world include a range of basic perspectives: **monotheism** (belief in only one God), **polytheism** (belief in many gods), and **pantheism** (belief that the divine reality exists in everything), to name but a few.

Some religions do not hold a belief in a god who is essentially relevant for us, although they sometimes do hold a belief in various divine or semidivine beings. Sometimes such religions are termed **nontheistic**, which literally means that there is no belief in a divine being. The term **transtheistic** is helpful, for it allows room for belief in divine or semidivine beings without insisting on a god who is essentially relevant. Some of these religions teach that all reality is essentially one thing, and that human beings are part of the ultimate reality.

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

Seven Dimensions of Religion

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

here, prescribing a ritual there, and so forth. All religions use the same seven elements to create their own unique tapestry, often emphasizing one dimension more, another dimension less. Zen Buddhism, for example, has a strong experiential dimension but says relatively little about doctrines.

Experiential

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

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

The world's major religions acknowledge numerous types of religious experience, some of them astounding. Generally speaking, in theistic religions God is experienced as a holy presence who is other (that is, as a being distinct from the individual). This experience of God is often characterized by two separate emotions: awe-inspiring fear and fascination. A well-known example of this type of experience is the Revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai, through the burning bush. Moses was fearful of God, yet drawn in fascination toward the divine presence.

In nontheistic or transtheistic religions, religious experience usually takes the form of **mysticism**. In one basic type of mysticism,

found in Hinduism and other transtheistic religions, the individual becomes one with the ultimate reality through inward contemplation. Another form of religious experience, known as the vision quest, is found in many indigenous religious traditions, including religions of Native American people.



ACTIVITY

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

Mythic

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

We Westerners tend to base our perspectives on history and science, acquiring knowledge through empirical observation and rational thinking. Myths are both nonhistorical and nonrational. But they do not necessarily conflict with history and science, nor are they necessarily false or irrational. Myths are sources of sacred truth and are therefore powerful, for they give meaning to life.

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

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



ACTIVITY

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

Doctrinal

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

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

myth

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

ethics

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

ritual

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

empathy

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

other religious experiences that serve as the foundations of religions.

Ethical

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

Ritual

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

Social

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

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

Material

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



ACTIVITY

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

SOME CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF STUDYING THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

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

the matter of choosing a religion simply come down to personal preference?

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

Two Approaches

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

Second, the study of religions should be approached with **empathy**, which is the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective. A traditional saying cautions that we should never judge a person until we have walked a mile in that person's shoes. Empathy requires the use of the imagination, and it can be quite challenging. It is rewarding too, providing a needed tool for

gaining insight into the ways of others. The study of religions would not advance far if it lacked such insight.



ACTIVITY

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

Objectives

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

CHAPTER REVIEW

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

2

CHAPTER

INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS



© Paul Deley / National Geographic Society / Getty

Since prehistoric times, indigenous or native groups of people throughout the world have practiced their own unique forms of religion. Some of those religions continue to be practiced.

Indigenous religious traditions are generally the traditions that originated with non-literate people. Therefore, these traditions do not depend on scriptures or written teachings, as do most other religions. What they lack in written texts, however, they often make up for in oral material—myths or stories that are passed down from generation to generation.

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

In light of this vast diversity, this chapter does not attempt to describe all indigenous religious traditions. Instead, it focuses on four rather specific examples: the Aborigines of Australia, the Yoruba, the Plains Indians

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



Ancestors

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

of North America, and the Aztecs. Once we have considered some particular features of each of these religions, we will reflect on general themes that tend to be common to indigenous religious traditions.

RELIGION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

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

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

The Dreaming: The Eternal Time of the Ancestors

The foundation of Aboriginal religion is the concept of the Dreaming. According to Aboriginal belief, the world was



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Ayers Rock is a sacred place for Australian Aborigines.

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

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

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

Dreaming, the

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



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Aboriginal rock art evokes the Dreaming.

totem

A natural entity, such as an animal or a feature of the landscape, that symbolizes an individual or group and that has special significance for the religious life of that individual or group; a common motif among Australian Aborigines and other indigenous peoples.

is believed to have great religious significance. Aboriginal cosmology—or understanding of the nature of the universe—thus plays a constant role in Aboriginal religion.

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

Through this connection each Aborigine is a living representation of an Ancestor. This relationship is symbolized by a **totem**—the natural form in which the Ancestor appeared in the Dreaming. The totem may be an animal, such as a kangaroo or snake, or a rock formation or other feature of the landscape. An individual will always be identified in certain ways with the Ancestor. The system

of belief and ritual based on totems is called totemism. Totemism is a motif that is common to many primal traditions.

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

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



ACTIVITY

Empathy—seeing something from another’s perspective—helps us to gain the insight we need to understand and appreciate the diversity of world religions. Striving to understand the Aboriginal concept of a mythic geography offers a good opportunity for practicing empathy. Think of a favorite outdoor area, such as a place in the wilderness, a beach, a park, or your backyard. Imagine that every notable landmark has great religious significance and that your every move within the area is undertaken as if it were a religious ritual. Now describe the area and your experience of being there.

Animating the Power of the Dreaming: Aboriginal Religious Life

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

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

Behind every ritual lies a myth that tells of certain actions of the Ancestors during the Dreaming. For example, myths that describe the creation of the kangaroo,



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Left: Aboriginal men paint initiates’ bodies in preparation for ceremonies that will bring the young people to awareness of their role in tribal life.

Right: An initiation dance.

taboo (sometimes spelled tabu)

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

a chief food source of the Aborigines, spell out precisely how and where the act of creation took place. Rituals that reenact these myths are performed at the corresponding sacred sites in order to replenish the local population of kangaroos.



ACTIVITY

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

Taboo: The Basis of Aboriginal Social Structure

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

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

Young people achieve religious maturity and training in part through the elaborate initiation rituals practiced throughout Aboriginal Australia.



ACTIVITY

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

Initiation: Symbolic Death, Spiritual Rebirth

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

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

The initiation rituals of the Dieri took place around a boy's ninth birthday (though the age could vary) and lasted for months. In the first ritual, intended as a symbolic death, the initiate's two lower middle teeth were knocked out and buried in the ground.

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

The main initiation ritual was called the Wilyaru. The initiate stood with his eyes closed as men took turns cutting their forearms and letting their blood fall on him, until he became caked with dried blood. This blood served to connect the boy symbolically with his relatives. Next, the boy's neck and back were struck with wounds that were intended to leave scars, yet another symbol of death. At this point, the boy was given a bull-roarer, a sacred instrument consisting of a piece of wood attached to a long string made from human hair. The bull-roarer re-created the sound of the deities and, because of its great power, was taboo for women.

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

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



ACTIVITY

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

AN AFRICAN TRADITION: THE RELIGION OF THE YORUBA

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

The Yoruba and Their Universe

The Yoruba live in the western regions of central Africa, in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Yoruba designates not a unified nation but rather a group with a common language and culture. Throughout their history, the Yoruba have favored living in cities. Some of those cities, such as Ife, Oyo, and Ijebu, have been quite large. The cities have tended to maintain independence from one another. Ife has always been



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Top: The amulets on this Yoruba mask suggest Islamic influence in Africa. As primal traditions develop throughout history, they incorporate elements of other religions.

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

orishas (aw-ree-shahs’; Yoruba: “head source”)

The hundreds of various Yoruba deities who are the main objects of ritual attention, including Orisha-nla, the creator god; Ogun, the god of iron and of war; and Esu, the trickster figure.

trickster figure

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

diviners

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

divination

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

the center of Yoruba religion, because it was there, the Yoruba believe, that the god Orisha-nla first began to create the world.

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

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

Gods and Ancestors: The Inhabitants of Heaven

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

Olorun, the High God

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

Orishas

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

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

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

The Ancestors of the Living

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

There are two types of ancestors. Family ancestors gained their supernatural status by earning a good reputation and living to an old age and are now worshipped only by their own families. Deified ancestors were

important human figures known throughout Yoruba society and are now worshipped by large numbers of people.



ACTIVITY

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

Connecting Heaven and Earth: Ritual Practitioners

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

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

Among the priests who engage in specialized services are **diviners**. Those priests practice the art of **divination**, through which one's future can be learned. Becoming a diviner requires years of training, and the role is usually passed from parent to child. Divination is an extremely important aspect of Yoruba religion because knowledge of one's future is considered essential for determining how to proceed with one's life. The procedure involves an intricate system of hundreds of wisdom stories, which the diviner knows by memory. The diviner determines which of the stories are relevant for an individual, and from those stories interprets the individual's future.

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

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

RELIGION OF THE NORTH AMERICAN PLAINS INDIANS

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

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

The Plains are vast, stretching from the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba southward to the Gulf of Mexico, bordered on the west by the Rocky Mountains and on the east by the Mississippi River. The culture we now associate with this area formed relatively recently, after the arrival of horses from Europe in the seventeenth century. Domestic horses enabled



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

the Plains Indians to become great hunters of bison and other game. Numerous tribes migrated into the Plains region, exchanging ideas with one another. This exchange was aided by the use of a common sign language understood by all the tribes. The religion of the Plains is therefore somewhat representative of American Indian religion in general. Today this religion serves as the model of pan-Indian religion, a recent and popular movement uniting many tribes from across North America. As a result, Plains religion continues to be of vital interest to native peoples throughout North America.

The Plains peoples shared a number of religious features, including basic beliefs resembling those of the large and influential Lakota tribe. All the tribes performed two basic rituals: the vision quest and the Sun Dance.

Basic Beliefs of the Lakota

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

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

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

Basic to most religions are beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, or human destiny.

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



ACTIVITY

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

The Vision Quest

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

Wakan Tanka
(wah 'khan
tankh 'ah; Lakota:
“most sacred”)

Lakota name for the supreme reality, often referring collectively to sixteen separate deities.

vision quest

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



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

A YOUNG MAN'S VISION QUEST

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

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

(Lame Deer and Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, page 11)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Pages 14–16)

GLOSSARY

A

Adi Granth (ah'dee gruhnth; Punjabi: "first book") Sikhism's most important sacred text and, since it was installed as Guru in 1708, Sikhism's earthly authority; also called Shri Guru Granth Sahib. (page 113)

ahimsa (ah-him'suh; Sanskrit: "non-violence," "not desiring to harm") Both the avoidance of violence toward other life-forms and an active sense of compassion toward them; a basic principle of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. (page 97)

Ahura Mazda (ah'hoo-reh maz'dah) The Wise Lord, the one true God worshipped by Zarathustra and later by Zoroastrians. (page 189)

ajiva (uh-jee'vuh) The nonliving components of the Jain universe: space, time, motion, rest, and all forms of matter. (page 101)

al-fana (ahl-fuhn'ah; Arabic: "extinction") The extinction of one's sense of separate existence before achieving union with Allah; the aim of Sufi mystics. (page 276)

Analects The collected sayings of Confucius, one of the Four Books of Confucianism. (page 130)

anatta (uh-nat'uh; Pali: "no-self") One of the Three Marks of Existence; the Buddhist doctrine denying a permanent self. (page 81)

Ancestors For the Australian Aboriginal religion, Ancestors are supernatural beings (or deities) who emerged and roamed the earth during the time of the Dreaming, giving shape to the landscape and creating various forms of life. When the word *ancestors* is lowercased, it refers to the deceased, who can assist the living while requiring religious devotion (as among the Yoruba, for example). (page 23)

anicca (uh-nee'chuh; Pali: "impermanence") One of the Three Marks of Existence; the Buddhist doctrine that all existent things are constantly changing. (page 81)

anthropomorphic Of human form, characteristic of the deities of ancient Greek and later Roman religion. (page 196)

anti-Semitism Hostility toward Jews and Judaism; ranges from attitudes of disfavor to active persecution. (page 222)

apocalypticism (from Greek *apokalypsis*: "revelation") A common Jewish religious perspective of Jesus' time, which held that the world had come under the control of evil forces, and was heading toward the climactic End Time, at which point God would intervene to usher in a reign of perfect justice and goodness. Early Christianity was generally in keeping with apocalypticism. (page 236)

apostle (from Greek *apostolos*: "messenger") An early follower of Jesus' recognized as one with authority to preach the Gospel; the Apostles included the twelve original disciples (with Matthias replacing Judas after the latter's death; see Acts of the Apostles 1:15–26) and Paul. (page 245)

Apostles' Creed A short statement of Christian belief that sets forth the foundations of the central doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity; traditionally thought to have been composed by the Apostles. (page 241)

arhat (ahr'huht) One who has become enlightened; the ideal type for Theravada Buddhism. (page 88)

artha Material success and social prestige, one of the four goals of life. (page 55)

ascetic One who renounces physical pleasures and worldly attachments for the sake of spiritual advancement; common in Hinduism and many other religious traditions, most notably Jainism. (page 55)

Atman (aht'mahn) The eternal Self, which the Upanishads identify with Brahman; often lowercased to refer to the eternal self or soul of an individual that is reincarnated from one body to the next and is ultimately identified with Atman. (page 45)

avatar An incarnation, or living embodiment, of a deity, usually of Vishnu, who is sent to earth to accomplish a divine purpose; Krishna and Rama are the most popular *avatars*. (page 63)

Avesta (a-ves'tuh) The sacred text of Zoroastrianism, which includes the very old hymns known as the Gathas, along with more recent material. (page 189)

axis mundi (Latin: "axis of the universe") Common to many religions, an entity such as a mountain, tree, or pole that is believed to connect the heavens and the earth and is sometimes regarded as the center of the world; for example, the cottonwood tree of the Plains Indians' Sun Dance. (page 34)

B

Baha'i (bah-hah'ee) A religion emphasizing the unity of all religions and peoples, teaching that all founders of the world's religions have been God's divine messengers, or prophets. Founded in 1863 by Mirza Husayn ali Nuri (1817 to 1892), known to his followers as Baha Allah. (page 285)

bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah (bahr meets-vah', baht meets-vah'; Hebrew: "son of the commandment," "daughter of the commandment") The ritual celebration marking the coming of age of a Jewish child, at which time the person takes on the religious responsibilities of an adult. (page 230)

Bhagavad-Gita (buh'guh-vuhd gee'tah; Sanskrit: "Song of the Blessed Lord") A short section of the epic poem *Mahabharata* in which the god Krishna teaches the great warrior Arjuna about *bhakti marga* and other ways to God; Hinduism's most popular sacred text. (page 49)

bhakti marga (buhk'tee mar'guh; also *bhakti yoga*; Sanskrit: "the path of devotion") The most popular of the three Hindu paths to salvation, emphasizing loving devotion to one's chosen god or goddess. (page 62)

big bang theory An account holding that the universe was created through an explosion 13.7 billion years ago (although some scientists differ on the number of years) resulting in the rapid expansion of matter, energy, time, and space. (page 303)

bishops Officials within the early Church who were regarded as successors to the Apostles. Bishops were responsible for overseeing the Church and administering the Eucharist. (page 247)

bodhisattvas (boh-dee-saht'vahs) Future Buddhas. As the ideal types for Mahayana Buddhism, beings who have experienced enlightenment but, motivated by compassion, stop short of entering *nirvana* so as to help others achieve it. (page 92)

Book of Mencius The collected teachings of Mencius, one of the Four Books of Confucianism. (page 131)

Brahman (brah'muhn) The eternal essence of reality and the source of

the universe, beyond the reach of human perception and thought. (page 45)

brahmin (brah'min) The highest of the four classes of the caste system, traditionally made up of priests. (page 51)

Buddha (boo'duh; Sanskrit and Pali: "awakened one") Siddhartha Gautama and all others who have by their own insight attained perfect enlightenment. (page 71)

bushido (boo-shee-doh; Japanese: "way of the warrior") A code of conduct for the samurai that is based on Shinto nationalism, Confucian ethics, and Zen Buddhist self-discipline. (page 181)

C

caliphs (Arabic: "successors") The military and political leaders of the Muslim community who succeeded Muhammad after his death. (page 271)

canon (from Greek *kanon*: "rule" or "standard") An authoritative set of sacred writings, such as Christianity's New Testament. (page 248)

caste system Traditional division of Hindu society into various categories; there are four main *varnas*, or classes: *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, and *shudra*; each class contains numerous subgroups, resulting in more than three thousand categories. (page 51)