

## The Comparative Study of Religions

*World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery, Fourth Edition*, considers one religion at a time, chapter by chapter. An alternative approach is to select central themes of inquiry and to investigate how the religions engage with each theme. This approach is known as comparative religion. Chapter 1 in the student book isolates appropriate themes for comparative study: the religious questions that the traditions answer. The seven dimensions of religion presented in the student book are conducive to a different type of comparative study, and a brief analysis of the ethical dimension is included at the end of this essay. However, our main purpose here is to consider the religious questions. In addition to investigating each religious question in turn, we can conclude by asking (and attempting to answer) another question: Do the religions ultimately agree or disagree?

### Why Compare Religions?

At its beginning, the student book notes the dictum of Friedrich Max Müller, one of the nineteenth-century founders of comparative religion: to know just one religion is to know none. This statement may seem a bit extreme—certainly there is much that can be known merely by learning about one religion. But Müller is making an important epistemological point. Given the generally subjective nature of religion, the question of *how* we know a religion—especially our own—is of concern. We might “know” perfectly well what faith is, or what God is, or what a particular ritual means, and that knowledge might be satisfactory for our own understanding of religion. But what meaning does such knowledge have for anyone else? Could it ever amount to *shared* knowledge? Could it hold up to an objective standard of truth?

For many people, subjective knowledge regarding religion is adequate—it fulfills their personal religious needs. But for Müller, and for many others who endeavor to be not only religious individuals but also students of religion, subjective knowledge is not adequate. We need to share our knowledge. We need to strive toward objectivity (even if total objectivity with regard to religion—or to any other subject matter—is not possible). Otherwise our claims of truth regarding religion are not valid for anyone but us.

The comparative approach offers a potent means of gaining a more objective perspective on religions. Knowing many religions, not just one, allows us to map out the terrain and thereby to situate each religion relative to the others.

Of course the desire to gain academic understanding is not the only reason people study the world’s religions. Personal understanding is also important, and the comparative approach has much to offer on that level too. Our own religion can become more intelligible and meaningful when we reflect on it in the light of other religions. For some people, the religious quest extends across the boundaries of traditions, where alternative features are explored, some to be adopted and others to be left behind.

### Methods and Challenges of Comparing Religions

When we attempt to understand other cultures, we necessarily do so from the perspective of our own culture. This poses the risks of bias and of misunderstanding due to barriers of language and other



cultural differences. Comparing religions is therefore a difficult task, and it demands attention to certain methodological issues.

Chapter 1 in the student book notes the importance of empathy in the study of world religions. Empathy is especially important when comparing religions across cultures, and not just for the sake of respecting other people. Empathy is essential for maintaining academic integrity. Only through seeing the phenomena of a religion from the perspective of those within that religion are we able to understand it with any degree of accuracy.

Obviously religions do not stand still; they continue to grow and change through history. Thus to describe a tradition comprehensively, it is necessary to proceed historically to some extent. This need further complicates the task of comparative studies, because it means we are comparing moving pictures rather than still photographs.

One common tendency—sometimes taking the form of a religious perspective—is to see all religions as ultimately saying the same thing. This possibility is the focus in the concluding section of this article. For now it is important methodologically that we not lose sight of the distinctive aspects of each religion. This is only fair to the traditions, and mandatory if our study is to be useful.

Other difficulties have sometimes plagued the comparative study of religions: the sloppy use (and overuse) of certain terms, such as *mysticism*; the varying dependability of accounts from inside participants; and bias, both positive and negative, in the accounts of outside observers. There is also the basic theoretical challenge of comparing across cultures: how can that be done when almost every means of comparison is culture specific?

Comparative religion is an imperfect science. But the same can be said of almost any human endeavor to understand human phenomena. (As we have noted, perfect objectivity in such matters seems impossible.) Still, the comparative study of religions is vital, and it becomes increasingly so as our global community becomes ever more tightly knit. As for its difficulties, we can add intellectual challenge as another compelling reason for undertaking the comparative task.

## The Catholic Approach to the Study of Other Religions

Especially since the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has sought to foster an atmosphere of mutual understanding and cooperation among people of different religions through open, respectful dialogue. In his *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate, 1965)*, Pope Paul VI clearly states that while acknowledging the differences between various faith traditions, the Catholic Church recognizes and affirms what is true and holy in other religions, treating them with reverence and respect.

At the same time, however, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *On the Mission of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Missio, 1990)*, voices the Church's caution to avoid "a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'" (36). While promoting an atmosphere of respect and collaboration between various religions, the Church must also remain true to its own belief and conviction that salvation comes through Jesus Christ and in the Church as the continued presence of Jesus in the world. Though seeking common ground between belief systems, authentic discourse must also acknowledge the very real differences that exist between religions. Denying this diversity fails to respect the uniqueness of another's beliefs as well as the uniqueness of our own, rendering such dialogue meaningless.



Even when there is substantial disagreement over beliefs, the Catholic Church upholds a respect for the sincerity, goodwill, and dignity of believers within other faiths. Furthermore, by virtue of the dignity possessed by all, the Catholic Church condemns any and all discrimination against members of other faith traditions as being incompatible with the Gospel (see *Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, 5). Unfortunately, the language employed in Church documents can often come off in an exclusivist or harsh tone, obscuring the spirit of respect and cooperation the documents contain.

Essential to all of this is that although the Church maintains the unique role of Christ and the Catholic Church in the economy of salvation, the Church also promotes respectful dialogue with other faith traditions. It is hoped that through open communication and collaboration, people of differing faiths might come together to work toward the spiritual and material common good of all the world's people (see *Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, 2). Twenty-five years after *Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue expressed the conviction that such open communication can also be a catalyst allowing one to grow in one's own faith:

While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through dialogue they may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified. (*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 49)

Rather than being viewed with an air of suspicion or an attitude of fear, interreligious dialogue should be embraced as an opportunity to not only grow in our understanding of others but also develop a deeper self-awareness and an appreciation of our own faith tradition. It is by studying other religions that we hope to eliminate those misunderstandings and biases that form obstacles to authentic dialogue and acceptance.

Though much progress has been made in recent decades to foster open dialogue and understanding among various faith traditions, it is essential that the leaders and believers within the world's various faith traditions remain steadfast in their dedication to a spirit of collaboration and authentic communication. In the April 2005 "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Delegates of Other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of Other Religious Traditions," the newly elected Pope Benedict XVI applauds the strides made by Pope John Paul II toward interreligious dialogue and expresses his own commitment to promoting a spirit of ecumenism and cooperation.

## Comparing Religious Answers

Chapter 1 in the student book offers an overview of the questions commonly asked of the religions. Here we compare various answers.

### What Is the Human Condition?

Religions are perhaps most famous for describing God. But they also tell us a great deal about what it is to be *human*. Because answers regarding the human condition are generally closer to home, so to speak, than typical theological descriptions of God, this is a good place to begin our comparative study.



## What Is a Human Being?

Western culture has long tended to regard a human being as being made up of both body and soul. To a great extent, Plato is responsible for shaping this perspective. According to Platonic dualism, reality consists of the material realm, which includes physical bodies, and the realm of Ideas, or Forms, which are entirely intellectual constructs knowable by the mind (or soul). The realm of Ideas is eternal and divine, whereas the realm of matter is temporary and not of lasting worth. With Platonic dualism as a guiding influence, most of Western culture came to conceive of the soul as eternal, created in each individual by God. The body, while also part of God's creation, is regarded as separate from the soul and doomed to die, even as the soul continues to exist.

How very normal, even obvious, has this conception of the human being been to most Westerners! Only recently has this dualism come under serious scrutiny, in part because of advances in neurophysiology, which tend to argue that the material brain is the primary seat of the mind (or soul). But in the light of our survey of world religions, we see that this Western conception is not so normal or obvious after all. Let us recall some Eastern perspectives.

First, let us look at the Confucian conception of self. Far from emphasizing the uniqueness or importance of the individual, Confucianism regards the self as part of a network of human relationships. Self-identity is based on a person's place within this network. There is no "soul" in the Western sense—that is, there is no immaterial essence individually fashioned by God. (For that matter, no "God" exists.)

Second, let us recall the predominant South Asian perspective: that the individual is but one part of a greater, even universal, reality. This is most apparent in the dominant form of Hinduism (including the school of Vedanta), which holds a monistic understanding of reality. The individual *atman* is part of the eternal Atman (or Brahman), a drop of water from the infinite ocean, destined to return to its source. This monistic perspective on the human being is very different from Western dualism.

We can cite other distinctive perspectives on the makeup of the human being: the Buddhist concept of no-self (*anatta*), the Jain pluralism of eternal souls (*jivas*) and matter (*ajiva*), the shared divine ancestry of Shinto, and so on. Let us continue to explore this issue by considering the closely related question of the basic disposition of human nature.

## Are We Good or Are We Evil?

Some religions assert that human beings are by nature entirely and inevitably good. This became a basic teaching of Confucianism owing to the influence of Mencius, who taught that humans are naturally good, and that we commit evil actions only in violation of our true nature. Shinto emphasizes the basic goodness of human nature with its myth of divine ancestry. Born with a divine essence, people cannot actually be sinful. The Shinto focus on purification assures that the light of this divine essence will continue to shine.

The major Western religions also espouse the notion of a divine essence, without attributing it to a descent from gods or goddesses. (In the ancient West, however, this was a well-known motif; Homeric heroes, for example, have divine ancestors.) As God-given and eternal, the soul is commonly regarded as something of a divine essence. But does this imply that human nature is essentially good? The details vary from religion to religion (and from faction to faction within each religion), and to some extent the answers depend on semantics (for example, what is meant by *essentially?*). But in general, Western religions understand human nature to be good in a qualified sense. For Christianity, humanity's original goodness is qualified owing to the "fall" from innocence, all of which is symbolized by Adam and Eve and the Original Sin against God. Islam holds a different perspective on the qualified



goodness of human nature, asserting that people are subject to *forgetfulness* regarding their original goodness. Muslims have their own interpretation of Adam and Eve to symbolize this perspective. This propensity to forget leads to sin; it is overcome through the practice of Islam.

In South Asian religion, this question of the basic goodness of human nature is quite complex due to the general tendency to distinguish the realm of ultimate reality from the this-worldly realm of *samsara*. Simply put, the distinction between good and evil has relevance only in *samsara*. It would hardly make sense, then, to assert that the *atman* is “good,” when ultimately the *atman* is part of the realm that lies beyond any such qualification. Buddhism accentuates the point, asserting with its doctrine of *anatta* that “human nature” itself is but an illusion, and that in truth we have no individual essence. And yet ethics plays a central role in both Hinduism and Buddhism.

## What Is Spiritual Perfection?

The human quest for spiritual perfection lies at the heart of all religious traditions. It is even plausible to assert that religions exist *because* of our need for spiritual perfection. The existence of religion, after all, does not depend on the existence of God or of Heaven or Hell. Religion is a human phenomenon, born of such human needs as conceptualizing ultimate reality or finding meaning in the face of death—in other words, seeking answers to life’s most profound questions. At the center of those needs is our need for attaining spiritual perfection.

For most religions, spiritual perfection extends beyond this lifetime. We will consider this phenomenon shortly, under the category of destiny. But typically some form of spiritual perfection is attainable in this lifetime. We can categorize this type of spiritual perfection as transcendence. In fact, transcendence is commonly regarded as the distinguishing mark of religion. First and foremost, a religion serves to connect individuals to that which they perceive as being beyond the normal or mundane sphere of things. For the Western monotheistic religions, God is understood to be the ultimate manifestation of the transcendence. For some other religions, however, the transcendent is not necessarily understood as being above or outside of the individual or the world. As we will now explore, Buddhism and other Asian traditions offer clear examples of such forms of transcendence.

## Experiences of Religious Transcendence

Some of the primary challenges of our human condition are classically expressed in the Buddha’s experience of the Four Passing Sights: we get ill, we grow old, and we die. To meet these challenges adequately, the Buddha sought enlightenment. And in that state of perfect wisdom, he led a long life of joy and tranquility, even as he grew old, and even as he died of illness.

Buddhist enlightenment is a clear-cut example of transcendence—of spiritual perfection in this life. So is its Jain counterpart, *kevala*. So is Hindu *samadhi*, the eighth and final stage of Yoga, in which the mind of the yogi is absorbed into the ultimate reality. South Asian religions also tend to emphasize such absorption into, or union with, ultimate reality, which generally is said to happen in this life. In East Asia, too, a similar form of transcendence is prevalent. For Taoism, it is being one with Tao, the manner of living perfected by the sage and characterized by simplicity and naturalness. For Zen, it is *satori*, the experience of enlightenment that sets one free from the bondage of ego.

Asian religions characteristically emphasize experiences of transcendence. Not coincidentally, they also tend to be oriented more toward mystical experiences in which ultimate reality is encountered within oneself or within nature.



What about the Western monotheistic religions? For one thing, they also sometimes manifest a mystical approach. Sufism, for example, is Islamic mysticism. It teaches a form of transcendence known as *al-fana*, the “extinction” of the person’s sense of ego, triggering union with God. (A similar sort of union is experienced in Sikhism, which, like Sufism, combines monotheism with mysticism.) Certain forms of Judaism, the Kabbalah and Hasidism, teach a mystical approach to God, leading to similar types of experience. Mysticism has also been important to Christianity. Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross were famous Christian mystics. But spiritual perfection for the living is not confined to the mystical strands of monotheistic religions. In Christianity, for example, the power of sin and death—basic challenges of the human condition—are overcome through faith in Christ. Christians are free to live in joy and peace, and to look forward to resurrection and the afterlife.

Transcendence of this last type, though perhaps not as dramatic or as experientially intense as *samadhi*, *satori*, or *al-fana*, is clearly a form of spiritual perfection attainable in this life. All religions, by virtue of providing answers to life’s most problematic questions, offer some degree of transcendence. One of the most pressing of these questions involves a person’s destiny after this life, and here the teachings on spiritual perfection take on new features.

## What Is Our Destiny?

For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the question of destiny is relatively straightforward. Death is followed by an afterlife, which will consist either of salvation or of condemnation. Time in the West is generally regarded as being linear, and human existence proceeds accordingly. People have one life to live, one death to die, one afterlife.

Generally speaking, then, Western religions teach of an afterlife, which is the final destiny of all. Even Homer believed this much, although his concept of the realm of Hades left little room for optimism in the face of death. The afterlife was the subject of much greater attention in Zoroastrianism, which established early on the distinction between Heaven and Hell, and introduced the concept of a judgment of the soul. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim perspectives on destiny illustrate further development of these ideas. Islam, with the Qur’an’s vivid descriptions of both Paradise and Hell, and its great emphasis on the Day of Judgment, is especially concerned with the afterlife.

When we consider the cyclical time scheme prevalent in the East, the question of destiny gets much more complicated. Hindus and Buddhists believe that there are many lives to live, many deaths to die, many afterlives—and then, finally, an ultimate destiny. In Hinduism this is *moksha*, “liberation” from the realm of *samsara*. The Buddhist counterpart, *nirvana*, is quite similar. In both cases, the ultimate destiny is a realm qualitatively removed from this realm of *samsara*, such that it is impossible to describe adequately. Does a person continue to “live” in *moksha*? Does *nirvana* even entail “existence” as we know it in this life? The traditions themselves admit that such questions cannot be answered. One thing, however, is made clear: individual existence vanishes upon entering *moksha* or *nirvana*. This is a crucial distinction from Western notions of destiny.

The question of destiny gets more complicated still. We can cite an example from American Indian religion. The Lakota believe in four souls. One of them is judged after death, either to be allowed to journey to the otherworld of the ancestors, or to be condemned to exist as a ghost on earth. Meanwhile the other three souls are reincarnated. East meets West—and in a religious system that likely predates any meaningful distinction between these two geographical categories!

Finally, it is notable that some religions simply do not concern themselves with what happens after death. Confucius, when one of his followers asked him about death, responded: “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” (Analects 11.12). For Taoism, death is simply a return to the primal unity of Tao, the counterbalance to life in this grand harmony of nature. (This is true



of philosophical Taoism, the main subject of the student book's chapter; religious, or popular, Taoism includes elaborate teachings on the afterlife, along with directives for attaining physical immortality in this life.) Zen, its focus fully on the present, neither affirms nor denies an afterlife. It holds that to distinguish between life and death would be to construct a false duality, when in truth there is only the simple unity of the here and now.

## What Is the Nature of the World?

Thus far we have considered issues about human beings: the human condition, the quest for spiritual perfection, and human destiny. Another major question that we ask of the religions involves the world. What is its origin? Is the world real, ultimately, or is it illusory? Is it sacred and alive, or is it material and inert? And is the world a help or a hindrance to our religious quest? These are all questions of cosmology: the understanding of the nature of the cosmos (the word *cosmos* is Greek for "world" or "universe").

## The Origin and Significance of the World

The Genesis account of Creation underlies the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim perspective on both the origin and the significance of the world. In just two chapters, Genesis sets forth an array of fundamental teachings: the world is created by God; it exists independently of God; there is only one inhabited Earth, populated by God's creations; the world is cherished by God as being "very good."

This last teaching has especially strong ramifications with respect to religion. For although the world is material (rather than living), it is sanctioned by God's blessing. Islam emphasizes this point by referring to the world as the cosmic Qur'an, a revelation of God's will.

The concept of a divinely created world that is good without qualification has a clear parallel in Shinto. Japan is believed to have been created by a primordial pair of *kami*, Izanagi and Izanami. Japan is inhabited by a great many other *kami*, such that the natural world is imbued with their sacred presence. In this respect, the world of Shinto tends to be a living, sacred world, in contrast with the material world of Western monotheism.

A different cosmology is prevalent in South Asian religions, which understand the world as being of the realm of *samsara*, the wheel of rebirth. These traditions believe that the universe undergoes endlessly recurring cycles of creation and destruction. Within this cyclical time scheme, many worlds exist, with heavens, hells, earths, and other inhabited spheres. This realm of *samsara* is characterized by what the Hindus call *maya*, or cosmic illusion. That is to say, the realm of *samsara* is not ultimately real. Buddhism expresses the same general perspective with its second mark of existence, *anicca* (impermanence). According to this principle, all things are continually changing; there is no underlying reality, no permanent essence. Jainism sets forth some interesting (though slight) modifications to the general South Asian cosmology. It refers to the universe as the *loka*, an immeasurably vast, yet finite, space depicted as having the shape of a giant man. The *loka* is eternal, never having been created and never to cease existing. And yet the realms of existence within the *loka* are in a constant cyclical process of creation and improvement, and decay and destruction. The Jains carefully chart the stages of these cycles.

What is the origin of this "unreal" world of South Asian religions? That is a difficult question. Jainism simply asserts that the *loka* has existed forever. The Buddha dismissed this sort of question as not tending toward edification—he believed that people need to overcome the immediate problem of their own suffering, not to decipher the mysteries of the universe. Hinduism tends to regard the universe



as a great mystery, somehow the result of the creative energies of Brahman, the ultimate reality, which is itself a mystery. Farther east, the Taoists, though not dismissing the universe as somehow unreal, similarly consider its existence a mystery. The Tao, entirely unfathomable, is the “mother” of the universe.

We can see how straightforward, detailed, and revealing the first two chapters of Genesis are, compared with Eastern cosmology in general. The basic distinctive patterns carry through to views regarding humanity’s place in the world.

## Our Place in the World

South Asia offers a rather stunning perspective on our place in this world: it is not our rightful place. We need to leave it, to be released from the bondage of *samsara*. But in the meantime, we are here and need to make the most of it. Hinduism explicitly teaches an attitude of patience with respect to living in *samsara*. It assumes that for most people, *moksha* will not occur for many lifetimes. Hinduism sets forth *kama*, *artha*, and *dharma* as legitimate goals of life, appropriate for everyone who is not genuinely ready for the rigors of the goal of *moksha*. But Hinduism and the other South Asian religions do not embrace this world as something sacred, nor do they celebrate humanity’s place in it. They see the world as a temporary vessel, transitory and impermanent, destined to eventually be destroyed.

For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God has not only created this world—a unique and very good world—but has also given us “dominion” over the plants and animals. This principle of having dominion, commonly known as stewardship, continues to shape the basic Western perspective on our place in the world, whether that perspective is still recognized as religious or not. It is our responsibility to care for the world, and, in turn, the world is here to provide for us. We are its superiors, spiritually speaking.

East Asian religions offer yet another perspective. They revere the world as a spiritual entity, permeated with the divine. For Shinto, the world is inhabited by innumerable *kami*, and human beings dwell humbly among them. For Taoism, nature itself is primary, the unfathomed reservoir of Tao. The best we can do is to live in perfect harmony with the way of nature; we can never be its superiors. It is instructive to compare this hands-off perspective of Taoist naturalism with Western environmentalism. Having tampered with nature, the West typically strives to fix things through technology, in keeping with the principle of stewardship. The *Tao Te Ching* at times seems to have anticipated a modern Western readership:

Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?  
I do not believe it can be done.

(Chapter 29)

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

Perhaps the most famous of all questions to be asked of the religions is, What is God? Of course, to study world religions comprehensively, we need to be more inclusive than this, and so we ask, What is the divine, or the ultimate reality? A second question, arguably just as relevant, asks how this ultimate reality is revealed to human beings.

## Various Conceptions of the Divine

We can begin by charting the categories of theism, which is the general belief in the existence of a god or gods.





Polytheism, the belief in multiple gods, is exemplified in the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. The gods are anthropomorphic—depicted as male and female, as subject to typically human emotions, as falling in love and marrying. They are known to involve themselves with human beings, sometimes having children with them (such is the ancestry of Achilles and some of the other Homeric heroes). These anthropomorphic gods are not all-powerful, although most polytheistic pantheons have a clear leader, such as the Greek Zeus or the Roman Jupiter. Among ancient religions, polytheism tended to be the norm. Today polytheism is most evident in Hinduism, which is emphatically polytheistic (with its 330 million gods). Because most Hindus are at the same time monistic, this form of polytheism is rather distinct from that of the ancient West. (It is notable that Neoplatonism, a later development combining Greek philosophy and religion, bears striking resemblances in this respect to Hinduism.)

Given this prevalence of polytheism in the ancient world, it is not surprising that the monotheistic religions have tended to place great emphasis on their conception of divinity, thus distinguishing themselves from their polytheistic neighbors. When Zarathustra asserted that Ahura Mazda was the one and only God, he was departing radically from the norm (which resembled the polytheism of Hinduism). The central theological statement of Judaism is the Shema: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut. 6:4, Tanakh). Islam’s Shahada, which sets forth the oneness of Allah (the God), is similarly central. In general, the God of monotheism is believed to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. This God is also usually thought of as personal but aloof—as wholly other, completely distinct from human beings. Some religions such as Sikhism, however, believe God to be immanent, or indwelling. A similar form of immanent monotheism is prevalent among the mystical strands of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

A third category of theism is pantheism, which conceives of the divine as being present throughout creation, and includes a broad spectrum of beliefs. Examples are Shinto, with its ubiquitous *kami*, and the early Roman religion, for which the *numina* were supernatural powers inhabiting the gods, humans and their possessions, and a wide variety of natural entities. Primal religions are commonly pantheistic. For example, the ultimate reality of the Lakota, Wakan Tanka, comprises sixteen separate deities, related to the four compass directions. Such an intimate connection with nature is typical of pantheism.

Some religions conceive of ultimate reality as other than a god or gods. Their belief system is called nontheism (which is not necessarily atheism—the outright denial of belief in a god or gods). Hindu monism is clearly nontheistic. It makes no sense to describe Brahman as a monotheist would describe God, because by definition Brahman is indescribable. Besides, monism understands all reality to be ultimately one. Theism, by contrast, conceives of the divine as being somehow distinct from humans and creation. Buddhism denies even the monistic claim that reality is one, insisting instead that there is no real essence of things or of human beings—no Brahman or Atman. Sometimes *nirvana* is identified as the divine or the ultimate reality of Buddhism. Even so, Buddhism remains nontheistic. For like Brahman, *nirvana* is indescribable. Furthermore, *nirvana* cannot be distinguished from the individual who experiences it—*nirvana* is the experience, and in this experience individuality ceases to be.

The religions Taoism and Confucianism also hold nontheistic conceptions of divinity. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, Tao is the ultimate source of reality, an unseen force that is both the origin and the order of the universe. Like Brahman, Tao is ultimately beyond human understanding. But unlike Hindu monism, Taoism does not assert that all reality essentially is Tao. This is nontheism of a different sort, one that is more difficult to categorize.

Tao is also of basic significance for Confucianism, although here the meaning is confined to the moral order of the universe, the Way that people ought to follow. Confucius also referred to Heaven, a concept similar, and perhaps even identical, to Tao. It is the universal moral force. Because Confucius seems not to have conceived of Tao or Heaven as having any metaphysical import, his conception of



ultimate reality is not altogether clear. It can be said that the grand harmony of moral relationships, which includes Heaven, is at the very least the foundation of Confucian life.

## Forms of Revelation

Ultimate reality is revealed in a wide variety of ways, although in general those ways are patterned after the two basic categories we have been considering: theism and nontheism.

Revelation in theistic religions includes the dramatic events in which human beings find themselves in the presence of the deity. Examples abound: Guru Nanak being escorted from his morning bath to the court of God; Zarathustra being brought as a disembodied soul to Ahura Mazda; Moses standing before the burning bush; Jeremiah receiving a call to be a prophet; Paul experiencing conversion on a road to Damascus; Muhammad ascending from Jerusalem to heaven, into the presence of Allah.

These are well-known examples, some of them marking the beginnings of new religions. But more mundane versions of the same sort occur rather commonly. German theologian Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), classified this type of religious experience in terms that have become famous. Otto describes an encounter with the divine, which he calls the Holy, as a numinous (from the Latin *numen*) experience. It is characterized by inspiring *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, “a feeling of mystery, both fearful (to be trembled at) and fascinating.” The Holy thus repels even as it attracts.

Encountering God in such a numinous experience is perhaps the most notable form of revelation in theism. But several other forms are also of great importance: prophetic revelation, a central motif in Israelite religion and in Western monotheism generally, especially Islam; oracles, common in ancient Greece and Rome; and providence, the concept that God is directly involved in guiding and caring for creation, always a focus of Judaism. Divine revelation is also believed to be contained in myth, or sacred stories, some of which have been written down over time in the form of scriptures.

Ultimate reality is also revealed when God takes human form, and in a manner quite distinct from the anthropomorphism characteristic of, for example, Greek polytheism. God in human form becomes a paradigm for people to revere and to follow. Of course, the Incarnation of God is the heart of Christianity. Other religions also revere the divine in human form. Hinduism has its *avatars*, the most popular of whom are Krishna and Rama; they are worshipped by millions. Whereas Christianity believes that Jesus Christ is unique, Hinduism reveres a great many incarnations of the divine. In fact, the number is steadily growing. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, is now regarded by some as an *avatar*.

These various forms of revelation are also experienced in another manner through the sacred narratives that relate the events and divine figures to ordinary worshippers. The means of transmitting sacred narratives has varied through the ages and across cultures, from oral storytelling to scriptures, to popular literature, and, recently, to the array of electronic forms of communication. Whatever the means of transmission, sacred narratives have the power to inspire and transform individuals through their accounts of revered figures and events.

For nontheistic religions, the ultimate reality is revealed (if *revealed* is even the appropriate word) experientially, specifically, in mystical experience. This contrasts sharply with the numinous experience of the Holy as described by Otto. Rather than being a fearful encounter with the “wholly other” (as Otto refers to the Holy), the mystical experience is generally characterized as being tranquil. It is also typically an experience of oneness, devoid of any distinction between self and the rest of reality. In Hindu *moksha*, the individual *atman* is dispersed in the infinite ocean of Atman, the eternal essence. In Buddhist *nirvana*, self-awareness disappears; all that remains is the experience.



Are all mystical experiences ultimately the same? This is the subject of much debate. To a great extent, their ineffable nature prevents us from knowing. People who have had mystical experiences inevitably lack the words to describe them fully. In any event, certain basic distinctions seem to exist among such experiences, depending on the religion. For example, mystical experiences within monotheistic religions do tend to involve encountering God, who remains distinct from the individual. Sufis, for instance, however much their experience of *al-fana* is one of union with ultimate reality, still understand Allah in monotheistic terms.

Comparative mysticism, a major component of the comparative study of religions, illustrates the usefulness but also the difficulties of this field. The intensely subjective nature of the mystical experience to some extent belies meaningful analysis. Still, the most effective means of knowing about these experiences is to compare them.

## Conclusion: Do All Religions Say the Same Thing?

This introduction to comparative religion merely touches the surface. It is hoped that it at least illustrates the intriguing and compelling potential of comparative religion, while also bringing to light its complexity and some of its challenges. We can perhaps emphasize all these points by concluding with a final question: Do the religions ultimately agree or disagree?

Many people assert that religions, while differing on the surface owing to unique cultural and historical settings, essentially say the same thing. This perennial philosophy, as it is sometimes called, would say, for example, that we share the same basic human condition and that there is really only one ultimate reality. But can we then conclude that all religions ultimately agree?

One useful approach to this basic question is to consider the analogy of ascending a mountain. The mountain represents the challenges that each person faces given the human condition. Do we all share the same human condition? It does not matter (for the sake of the analogy, at least); the mountain has different sides, each with a potentially different set of challenges. The summit represents ultimate reality, and the ascent toward the summit is the quest for spiritual perfection. Are we all heading for the same summit? We cannot know, because we have not all finished our ascent. The summit (or summits) is in fact veiled in clouds. Its true nature cannot be known fully from here below. About all we can do is depend on the reports of others who we believe have reached the top. As for the religions, they are represented by the various means by which we make the ascent: choosing a path, donning the proper gear, honing the required skills, and putting forth the necessary effort. These means are fashioned in large part by those who have made the ascent before us.

Do these means—the religions—deliver us to the same summit? The mountain analogy does not reveal that. It maps out the mystery but leaves the mystery unanswered. Here we have an analogy for comparative religion itself. Though not able—nor intended—to answer once and for all the deepest questions about religions, it maps out the terrain. In doing so, it helps to foster understanding not only of the religions but also of the people who adhere to them.



## Comparative Religion and the Ethical Dimension: An Example

What follows is an example showing how a comparative study of the ethical dimension of the religions in the student book might look. It is hoped that this brief examination will provide a framework from which the students can begin their conversation about the world's religions.

Religions have much to offer regarding ethics: how we are to act while living in this world. Along with providing detailed guidelines for behavior, ethical teachings also tend to be closely linked with the issue of spiritual perfection and the related issue of salvation. The destiny of the Buddhist, for example, is tied to *karma*, the moral law of cause and effect. *Karma* brings about rebirth and determines the basic dispositions of the new person. Enlightenment and *nirvana* can be attained only when *karma* is overcome and the chain reaction of worldly desires and deeds is extinguished.

A religion's ethical teachings are also closely linked with its basic perspective on human nature—whether we are good or evil. Most religions consider us good, or at least redeemable. For these religions, ethical ideals and paradigms of ethical perfection are potent means of inspiring good behavior.

### Ideals and Models of Ethical Perfection

Jesus Christ taught that we should love even our enemies. His actions, reaching out to society's outcasts and caring for the sick and downtrodden, teach this ideal perhaps even more powerfully than his words. The Buddhist ideal of compassion is practically an identical teaching. Stories abound of the compassion of the Buddha, both in his life as Gautama and in previous lives. The *bodhisattvas*, those who have vowed not to enter *nirvana* until "the last blade of grass" becomes enlightened, provide additional paradigms of the perfect practice of compassion. Jainism teaches *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as its ethical ideal. Mahavira and the other *tirthankaras* are models of nonviolent living. So too are the Jain ascetics, who wander the roads and paths of India as living paradigms for the laity to admire and aspire to.

Ethical perfection in Hinduism is regarded as one of four legitimate goals of life. *Dharma* involves the observance of traditional Hindu laws and customs, along with an ongoing concern for the world. *Dharma* has been exemplified most recently by Mahatma Gandhi, for whom religion and social service were inextricably linked. Are Hindus who pursue the other goals of life somehow released from ethical responsibility? Not at all. In its more general meaning, *dharma* is "ethical duty," and it applies to all Hindus. In Hinduism, as in Buddhism, *karma* is an integral aspect of the quest for salvation, and *karma* is based in *dharma*. When ethical perfection is embraced as the primary goal of life, however, *dharma* is no longer regarded as a mere duty. It becomes an opportunity and is carried out with joy.

Ethics is the central aspect of Confucianism, the means by which social harmony is maintained. Little wonder then that it elaborates on the ideal of ethical perfection by setting forth multiple teachings. *Jen*, the supreme virtue of benevolence, is similar to Christian love and Buddhist compassion. A primary component of *jen* is *shu*, reciprocity, which corresponds to the Golden Rule. It is notable that Confucius did not go so far as to advocate loving one's enemy (which was the teaching of another ancient Chinese philosopher, Mo Tzu). Virtue, Confucius said, should be repaid with virtue, but hatred with uprightness (see Analects 14.36). Confucius also emphasized the power of moral example. The *chun-tzu*, the "mature person" or "gentleman," is the paradigm of ethical perfection, embodying the ideals of *jen* and *shu*. The *chun-tzu* leads through manifesting *te*, virtue as shown through the power of moral example.



The religions we have considered so far seem to be quite similar with respect to ideals and models of ethical perfection. Even Hindu *dharma*, though grounded more thoroughly in customs specific to one culture, aspires ultimately toward a universal perspective of love and concern similar to Confucian *jen*, Buddhist compassion, and Christian love. (One of Gandhi's favorite spiritual texts was the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus teaches love of one's enemy.) Are there any exceptions to this general agreement on ethical perfection?

Taoism, though not necessarily rejecting the ideal of ethical perfection, certainly approaches it in a unique way. In its insistence on the relativity of values, Taoism rejects the notion of absolute goodness. Good and evil exist, says the *Tao Te Ching*, only insofar as we recognize them as opposites. Ethical perfection for Taoism is a matter not of doing "good," but rather of living in accord with nature. The supreme virtue of Taoism is *wu-wei*, "nonaction"—hardly an injunction to go forth and do good deeds. Does it therefore follow that the Taoist sage, when judged by the standards of other religions, would come across as being less than ethical? Not necessarily. After all, living in accord with nature—in harmony with Tao—might indeed inspire the same degree of ethical perfection as loving perfectly, or practicing infinite compassion. This issue gets us to the heart of comparing religions and seems to extend beyond the limits of human understanding.

## Rules of Ethical Behavior

Along with ideals and models of ethical perfection, religions usually provide rules of ethical behavior. Taoism again tends to be an exception—the way of nature is too spontaneous for rules and the social contrivances used to enforce them.

Typically a tension exists between ethical ideals and the ethical rules that apply to the specific circumstances of life. Christianity teaches people to love their neighbor as themselves. But how exactly are they to apply this ideal? To a great extent, love is an attitude or disposition rather than an applied rule of behavior. Islam, while revering Christ and his teachings, argues that humans require more specific guidelines in order to act according to the will of God. Islam sees the Qur'an and the Sunna as providing the applied ethical rules that the New Testament lacks. The Shari'a, or divine law, is an all-encompassing collection of rules that sets forth in detail how a Muslim is to live.

Underlying both Christianity and Islam are the ethical teachings of Judaism. Most famous among its rules for behavior are the Ten Commandments, with such injunctions as honoring one's parents, and not killing, stealing, or committing adultery. Rules like these are condoned by most religions; they tend to be universal in scope. We can name other sets of similar ethical teachings: the five forbidden acts of Hindu Yoga; the Five Precepts of Buddhism; the Five Lesser Vows of Jainism (the laity's version of the more rigorous Five Great Vows, which apply only for ascetics).

Are all important ethical teachings universal? Great philosophers like Immanuel Kant have argued that they ought to be, based on our common human faculty of reason. But a comparative study of religions illustrates that they are not. The ethical teachings of Hinduism, for example, are grounded in *dharma*, a deeply traditional set of norms thought to have been delivered by ancient sages (the *rishis*). *Dharma* instructs women to maintain obedience to men. It divides Hindu society into castes and carefully governs the relationships between their members. Obviously such ethical teachings are not universal. Examples of such culturally specific norms could surely be found in every tradition. Confucianism, for instance, sets forth the Five Constant Relationships, fortifying the superior position of elders and of men, and emphasizing the virtue of being "filial." Confucius based his teachings regarding *li*—proper behavior as sacred ritual—on his own understanding of ancient Chinese customs. Confucius's teachings about *li* are intentionally specific to that culture; they are not universal.



And that is how a comparison of the ethical dimension works. Though it may take the students some time to begin to think in terms of comparative analysis, by the end of the course, they should be able to easily discuss similarities and differences among the religions covered in the student book.

(The quotation by Pope John Paul II on page 2 is from the encyclical *On the Mission of the Redeemer [Redemptoris Missio]*, number 36, found at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html).

The excerpt by the Pontifical Council on page 3 is from *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, number 49, at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

The excerpt on page 8 is from *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu, translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English [New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1989], chapter 29. Copyright © 1972 by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English.)

