CHAPTER 1

Introduction to World Religions
# Assignment Checklist

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**Introduction**

The study of world religions is fascinating. The term *world religion* was first used in the nineteenth century to refer to a religion whose many followers extend beyond national borders. Today, as nations and cultures collide in an ever-shrinking world, it has become even more important to understand world religions.

Religion can be thought of in terms of worship, morality, and the common aspects of faith shared by a group of people. Religion is also the beliefs and actions connecting people to supernatural beings and forces. In this course, we will define *religion* as the part of human experience and practice that has to do with the sacred, a god or gods, a higher power, or the ultimate values of life.

The study of world religions offers an opportunity to explore the tapestry of human beliefs and cultures. We will look at religions, both familiar and unfamiliar, to learn about their exchange with other religions and cultures in the world and about their development. Your understanding of world religions will begin with developing some basic knowledge that will prepare you for the academic study of religion.

**Objectives**

After you complete this chapter, you will be able to

- Define key terms associated with religion
- Describe the primary concepts associated with the study of religion
- Identify the significance of the sacred within religious experience
- Describe the primary aspects of people’s involvement with religion
- Identify some of the charismatic figures associated with religious traditions and beliefs
- Explain the uses of sacred texts and forms of worship that are foundational to religions
- Explain the roles of religion and society in the formalization of belief systems, ethics, and rituals
- Describe the observable growth processes of world religions
- Compare and contrast indigenous religions and world religions
Key Terms

**Bible**: collection of writings for the Christian faith comprised of the Old and New Testaments

**Charismatic figures**: people who inspire belief, trust, and emotion and who often give leadership to movements

**Community of believers**: group or congregation of people sharing the common aspects of religion and belief

**Conservative believers**: people who are less receptive to adaptation and change in their religious belief

**Convert**: to adopt a new religion or religious system

**Deity**: being, entity, or god thought to be divine

**Divine**: having the characteristics of a god, such as omnipotence and omniscience

**Doctrines**: formal statements that are accepted as truth and that become the teachings of a religion or religious group

**Eastern religions**: religions originating in Asia, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto

**Eschatology**: study of last things, such as the end of the world or the end of a religious epoch

**Ethics**: set of values defining right from wrong

**Exclusive religions**: religions which are less open or entirely closed to ideas from other philosophies or religions

**Fundamentalism**: movement within a religion that maintains a strong resistance to change and an adherence to a primary set of principles or beliefs

**Heaven**: spiritual realm of eternal reward in many religions

**Holy**: quality of reverence; divine, sacred, consecrated, or godly

**Inclusive religions**: religions which are receptive to adaptation of beliefs, doctrines, or deities of other philosophies or religions

**Indigenous**: born of, or native to, a land or region

**Indigenous religion**: religion originating in a particular geographical area or region

**Liberal believers**: people who are more receptive to adaptation and change in their religious belief

**Liturical worship**: worship that follows a prescribed set of rites and rituals, according to traditions
**Magic**: use of words or gestures to control supernatural forces for intervention with the sacred, the holy, or spirits

**Missionary**: person who is sent to attempt to convert others to a religion, doctrine, or way of life

**Morality**: goodness or rightness based on cultural, social, and religious traditions and standards

**Mysticism**: direct experience with the divine, holy, or god, outside the structure and organization of religion

**Omnipotence**: state of having unlimited power

**Omniscience**: state of having unlimited knowledge

**Pagan**: often used to mean heathen, irreligious, or non-Christian in connection with ancient religions

**Profane**: non-religious part of the human experience

**Prophet**: one who speaks for and/or is a messenger of a god

**Proselytize**: to attempt to convert people to a religion, sect, way of believing, or system of belief

**Religion**: part of the human experience that has to do with a god or gods, a higher power, or the ultimate values of life

**Religious ecstasy**: extreme joy or elevated senses attained through religious experience

**Religious icon**: work of art or other depiction which represents aspects of the sacred

**Religious myth**: story about the sacred, providing foundational patterns of living for the believers

**Religious symbol**: words, objects, acts, or events which evoke awareness and experience of the sacred or divine

**Ritual**: symbolic acts, verbal expressions, or ceremonies in religious practice

**Sacred**: believed or declared to be connected to the divine or holy

**Sacred places**: any geographical location that serves as an anchor or reference point for belief

**Sage**: person venerated for wisdom, judgment, and experience

**Salvation**: deliverance from suffering, evil, death, or eternal punishment; redemption from sin and the consequences of sin

**Shaman**: person in an indigenous religion who normally has gone through initiation and training to function as a spiritual specialist

**Soul**: spiritual, immortal part of humans separable from the body at death

**Superstition**: belief or act resulting from the fear of the unknown, a false sense of causation and ignorance

**Syncretism**: fusing of different philosophies or religions
Taboo: primarily social prohibition or ban against forbidden behaviors, language, or even thoughts

Theology: rational and systematic study of god, gods, or religion and the influence of the sacred

Traditions: rites, beliefs, and values handed down from one generation to the next

Transcendental: spiritual state that goes beyond the physical world of reality and cannot be attained through reason

Western religions: religions originating in the Middle East and other areas outside of Asia, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and New Religions

World religion: term first used in the nineteenth century to refer to a religion whose many followers extend beyond national borders

Worship: religious homage or reverence to a deity, saint, or sacred object

**Overview**

In this chapter, we will be introduced to the terms and concepts of religion as we begin the study of world religions. We will prepare by looking at what defines religion. We will also review what is not considered a religion. We will learn how religion and people have persisted over the course of the ages. We will conclude this chapter by looking at what is a world religion. The study of all religion requires preparation. We will build a foundation for study by learning terms and gaining a general knowledge of the beliefs and writings associated with the academic study of religion. This foundation will assist us in understanding the impact that religion has on culture and, in turn, the impact of culture on religion.

**What Is Religion?**

The word religion is used on a daily basis, but what is it? In everyday life, the common use of words creates definitions. The many meanings of religion are in part based on social customs that develop during continual use over time. This makes religion difficult to define because many descriptions are related to how it is viewed or studied.

Within each definition of religion, we find a reflection of how the concept is embraced. Think about this. How would someone define the word if that person has rejected religion as a viable option in her/his life? Would it be a positive definition?

Differences in definition also arise from focus and use. Each academic field has its own perspective. For example, philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and history each focus on different aspects of the world. They create definitions which support the means and purposes of their academic inquiry.

Thus, we need to establish a standard definition of religion for use in this course. Perhaps you recall that the chapter introduction stated that religion is the part of human experience and
practice that has to do with the sacred, a god or gods, a higher power, or the ultimate values of life. There are many more key terms to learn, and they will all be presented this way, bold and in italics, in this text. You will be responsible for learning all of them. In this way, students of world religions will be on common ground during discussions and when completing written assignments.

This is a first step in becoming a student of world religions. Soon your study will lead to more questions, for example, “Why are there so many religions?” and “What are the differences among them?” In order to answer these questions, we begin looking at some similarities found in all great religions. Let’s start by building a foundation of the concepts and ideas related to religion in general.

**Religion Is the Sacred**

Religions share an idea of the sacred. Something *sacred* is believed or declared to be connected to the divine or holy. Moreover, it is thought of as something other than human. Mircea Eliade, a scholar of religious history, built upon earlier scholarship to say that people divide their experiences into two separate parts: sacred and profane (Eliade 25). The *profane* is the non-religious part of the human experience. The term deity is often used in relation to the sacred. A *deity* is a being, entity, or god that is thought to be divine.

*Divine* means having the characteristics of a god, such as omnipotence or omniscience. *Omnipotence* is the state of having unlimited power. The root *omni* actually means all, so omnipotence actually means all-powerful. *Omniscience* is the state of having unlimited knowledge. Both of these characteristics are used to describe the divine. We apply these characteristics to the divine because of our expectations. The sacred is expected to be more than human.

Religion allows us to use terms like sacred and divine as reference points. These concepts separate humans from god and help us understand the human place and purpose in the world. The sacred fulfills our need for structure and orientation beyond the concrete, real, and visible world.

The profane does not fulfill this need.

In order for the profane to connect with the divine, religions share sacred places. *Sacred places* are any geographical location that serves as an anchor or reference point for belief. They can be springs, grottos, structures, or even trees. Acceptance of a place as sacred makes it special for the believers.

For example, every year crowds of Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca to visit the Kaaba. The Kaaba is a shrine, located in modern Saudi Arabia. Why is it a shrine? The Kaaba is considered a sacred place because the founder and the believers believe that it is. Often, the connection of sacred places to religion is so normal that the universal acceptance is overlooked.

However, a place does not have to be sacred to be used for a sacred event. Any building, such as a house or shared community building, can be used for worship services. This does not make it sacred or holy. *Holy* is a quality of reverence; it refers to something that is divine, sacred, consecrated, or godly. Most sacred places maintain a sense of holiness.

![Fig.1.1 Mosque in Central Asia](image)
The beliefs about what is divine or holy are often transmitted through sacred stories. Sacred stories are the oral and written narratives that convey and define those things that connect religions to their ultimate reality. The stories may be about the founding of the religion, the founder of the religion, or sacred concepts. These stories provide a connection between the subject and the sacred. They may begin as a vision or a dream, or they may employ other forms of conveyance. Epics or long narrative poems may be used. Scholars use the term myth for some of these stories. A religious myth is a story about the sacred, providing foundational patterns of living for the believers. It is not a term used to mean either true or untrue.

There are different types of religious myths, such as creation myths or salvation myths. Salvation in religion is deliverance from suffering, evil, death, or eternal punishment. It can also mean redemption from sin and the consequences of sin. Each type of myth serves as an explanation of a relationship to the sacred, the divine. The concept of heaven is related to salvation. In many religions, heaven is a spiritual realm of eternal reward. In Christianity and Islam, the reward in heaven is eternal bliss. Therefore, it is the aim of living a righteous life. In most religions that have doctrines regarding salvation and heaven, there is also a belief in the soul. The soul is the spiritual and immortal part of humans that separates from the body at death. It is the soul, which “lives” in heaven. There are variations to this belief. For example, in upcoming chapters we will read that in some Eastern religions, the soul is eternal but the aim is not heaven.

Besides sacred stories, individual religions share sacred writings. Sacred writings are the texts which are understood to be from divine sources or about divine sources. They also connect religions to the core of their beliefs about the sacred. Adherents of a religion can interpret many aspects of life through sacred writings.

Each world religion has a set of writings vital to its core beliefs, ways of believing, and primary belief systems. An example of sacred writings is the Bible. For the Christian faith, the Bible is a collection of writings comprised of the Old and New Testaments, beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation. There are multiple versions of the Bible, which vary primarily upon the translation. Scriptures such as the Torah or Koran also provide a foundation for law, morality, ritual, and even business. Morality is goodness or rightness based on cultural, social, and religious traditions and standards.

It should be noted that religions incorporate the readings of sacred texts within their worship. Worship is religious homage or reverence to a deity, saint, or sacred object. Worship can be practiced in private or performed publicly by a community. Some religions use a more structured format known as liturgical worship. Liturgical worship follows a prescribed set of rites and rituals, according to traditions. Christian religions that use liturgical worship include the Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopalian churches. Other religions may use less structured formats. Examples of these religions are Buddhism and Shinto. All of these religions may recite passages from scripture or sacred texts as a part of the worship service, rite, or ritual.

Religion and magic have always been closely connected. Magic is the use of words or gestures to control supernatural forces for intervention with the sacred, the holy, or spirits. It is common to think of magic as part of the ancient or primitive foundations among many religions of the world. Magic is usually used in connection with pagan religious traditions. Pagan commonly refers to aspects of religion that are heathen, irreligious, or non-Christian.

However, magic can be connected with all religions in some way. Any act used to control the divine, the holy, or the supreme absolute could be considered magic. An example of magic thus defined would be burying a religious statue or special object near a house so that the house will sell. Another example would be the use of special words or actions meant to induce a desired outcome.
However, special words are also often used in prayers; the difference between using special words as magic and using special words as prayers is perhaps in the mind of the worshipper. A prayer is a request for intercession by a god, gods, or spirits while magic is an attempt to induce an outcome by acts or words. Although the uses of magic and prayer seem similar, the difference is in the intent—whether to request or induce an outcome.

**Religion Is the People**

**Belief Systems**

*Doctrines* are formal statements that are accepted as truths and that become the teachings of a religion or religious group. Doctrines define each individual religion. Doctrines are often symbolic, representing ideas and concepts other than what the doctrines state. Included in a religion’s doctrines may be concepts explaining what is moral, the human place in the universe, or ideas of eschatology. *Eschatology* is the study of last events, such as the end of the world or the end of a religious epoch. Therefore, doctrines establish the necessary beliefs and attitudes that a religion has formed in its self-identity and self-definition. This is how religions set the perimeters of acceptable belief. Doctrines are often derived from, or connected to, a religion’s myths.

Myths often contain elements of truths and/or teachings that relate to doctrine. Santa Claus is an example of the relationship between doctrine and myth. The modern Santa Claus myth teaches the Christian doctrine of joyful giving. Myth and doctrine are both means to instill and maintain cultural and religious values.

We arrange our lives around pivotal values. The concept of pivotal value is taken from Robert C. Monk’s text, *Exploring Religious Meaning*. In it, he speaks of a person’s reliance on a pivotal value to organize one’s life (Monk 364-368). Have you ever pondered the meaning of life? Do you desire fulfillment? Religion can be a means to focus devotion and commitment around pivotal values which you may find meaningful and rewarding.

*Ethics* are a set of values defining right from wrong. Religious ethics often share the same goal as cultural or social ethics. The common goal of ethics is to support a moral standard defining right action, conduct, and attitudes. Ethics set an ideal such as an ethical code of practice. In everyday life, the word “morals” is more commonly expressed. Morals are the established rules of behavior. Ethics would thus be the justification for morals. For religions, there is an additional purpose for ethics.

Religious ethics need rules of conduct that connect personal behaviors with the ultimate doctrines of the religion. Max Weber said this:

> [T]he systematization of religious obligations in the direction of an ethic based on inner religious faith produces a situation that is fundamentally different in essence. Such systematization breaks through the stereotypization of individual norms in order to bring about a meaningful total relationship of the pattern of life to the goal of religious salvation. (209)

Furthermore, religious ethics can be understood as a duty which comes from god for the good of humans. For example, if god forbids murder, then it must not be done because god has this ultimate authority. This contrasts to the understanding that something is forbidden because the consequences are bad.
Also, ethics and morals play a part in religious social interaction. A community of believers is a group or congregation of people sharing the common aspects of religion and belief. Are you a member of a church? Take a moment to think about what being a member means to you. Do you think of the church members as your extended family? Do they help you make value decisions in your life? Gathering as a community, believers demonstrate what they consider sacred, holy, and the truth. They come together to worship the divine. As a unified body, each member provides a source of priority and integration into the culture. Communities of believers share more than beliefs and doctrines; they share rituals and systems of worship.

In comparison to strictly religious ethics, a taboo is a primarily social prohibition or ban against forbidden behaviors, language, or even thoughts. Furthermore, it can be seen as a prejudice, as in the case of not associating with a group or clan. Taboos may or may not be codified or written. However, they are an important form of ethical code. As such, taboos provide a source of common practice as well as an understanding of a group’s rules and way of acting. Taboos may have a religious connection; however, they are more social in origin and application.

**Rituals**

Rituals are acts, verbal expressions, or ceremonies in religious practice. A woman makes the sign of the cross in church. A man bows his head and says a blessing over a meal in his house. Rituals such as these connect a person to the sacred. They can be simple or complex, a word or a gesture, seen or unseen. Through participation, rituals link believers to their religion. Each active engagement reminds the believer of being a part of a larger community. Rituals give symbolic meaning and create spiritual relationships between the religion and its adherents. Rituals also include significant elements of worship such as communion in the Christian religion.

Religious traditions are the rituals, beliefs, and values handed down from one generation to the next. More often than not, they are unwritten, oral transmissions of ideas which support belief systems. In this way, traditions are part of the identity for a religion and the surrounding culture. Traditions can be formalized or not formalized. Sending Christmas cards depicting the baby Jesus to family and friends is an example of a religious tradition. Religious traditions often are so connected with culture that it is difficult to see them as distinctly religious in nature. Religious traditions are a means of interpreting and expressing religious experience.

Religious traditions are often adapted from older, longer-standing traditions. A very good example of a long-standing religious tradition is the festival called Carnival, which is celebrated in many places throughout the world. The word Carnival is the combination of two Latin words: carne (meat) and vale (farewell); therefore, the word means farewell to meat. Carnival occurs before the Christian season of Lent, during which believers fast and abstain from meat. The festival traces its origins to the Roman Empire and the day the Romans set aside for the god Saturn. The Romans encouraged festivals, and the connections between festival dates and the Roman gods were transmitted to the Christian church.

The ancients understood the seasons and had astronomically determined how to predict key moments in the year. Two such moments were the fall equinox and the spring equinox. These days represent the major seasonal divides. It was said the ancient German goddess Ostara mated with the solar god on the spring equinox. She would have a child on December 21, the winter solstice. This would mark the midwinter festival, Yule. The Christians adopted December 25 for one of their major celebrations, Christmas. The original idea still is present in terms like the Yule log. We will discuss the alignment of the spring equinox and Easter in chapter 9.
The seasons of the year were associated with the seasons of life. Spring was birth and winter death. In between was life. It is easy to see this relationship. Spring brings new life which grows in the summer and is harvested in the fall, but in winter, life lays buried and cold like death. Another ancient idea adapted in modern use is the concept of Mother Earth. It is easy to relate this terminology with goddess worship (Weber 13).

Perhaps no other night in the United States means more merriment for children than Halloween. This day of "trick or treat" coincides with the Christian day called All Hallows Eve. It originated in the ancient Celtic celebration of the night when the Celts, who were Druids, believed the separation between the living and dead was minimal. Moreover, they believed that the spirits or ghosts of the dead wandered about the Earth on this day, October 31. The Celts built bonfires and dressed in masks of animal heads and costumes of skins. The Celts believed that the spirits could foreshadow events in the lives of the living. Think about the modern American traditions, and it is easy to see how the current traditions have emerged from older ones. The underlying ideas have been transferred to the new traditions and to new cultures.

**Religious Experience**

Religious experience is the commonality of ritual, myth, and symbol. Religious experience includes the events, actions, or engagement felt by people in religious activities. It can be experienced through the mystical, magic, and moral. The experience can be of an artistic nature, rapturous, or without outward emotion. Religious experience can be achieved in a group or as an individual. It may be described as an awakening. In chapter 4 you will learn how Siddhartha Gautama experienced enlightenment. Through this experience, he encountered a transcendental reality. A **transcendental** state is a spiritual state that goes beyond the physical world of reality and cannot be attained through reason.

Individual religious experience can be the result of worship or contemplation. It can be gradual or immediate. However, it is felt and can bring on a conversion, new understanding, or deeper commitment of beliefs. Moreover, religious experience is not limited by education, intelligence, gender, or age. Religious experience is known to all religions and often is the source of transformation of the individual.

**Religious ecstasy** is extreme joy or elevated senses attained through religious experience. Often, it is expressed as almost unbearable joy and can be accompanied by a trance, stigmatism, or some other physical or psychological condition. Religious ecstasy is more often than not the experience of just an individual. Experiencing ecstasy may be expressed as achieving a form of unity or oneness with the divine. It may also be accompanied by visions or having a truth revealed to the person. An example of religious ecstasy would be the experience of modern Pentecostal Christians who experience an overpowering by god, which they call being slain in the spirit. Those who have experienced it report a feeling of unity with god or an overwhelming joy.

Another widely known example of religious ecstasy is that of the “whirling dervishes.” Many travelers to places like Istanbul, Turkey, witness the spinning dance of these men wearing wide bottom skirts and brimless tall caps. Their dance is a form of active meditation during which the dancer spins with arms held high.

Whirling dervishes are followers of a mystical derivation of Islam known for its austerity and poverty. Listening to the music and spinning is a means for abandonment of personal desires by focused action on the love of god. The physical experience conveys an understanding of engagement in pursuit of the unseen world attained through religious ecstasy.
Mysticism is direct experience with the divine, holy, or god, outside the structure and organization of religion. There is an immediacy and direct or intuitive knowing of the divine. This knowledge of the divine is not irrational. In other words, reason and mysticism are not mutually exclusive. However, the mystical experience is not meant to be a cognitive, reasoned approach. It is a special state of consciousness outside the structure and rites of religions.

Mysticism can be expressed through visions. Mystical experiences can be attempts to reach oneness with god or the divine. They can be associated with a state of ecstasy, although they are not usually highly emotional. Mystical experiences are more often described in terms of awareness, a sense or feeling of unity with the divine or ultimate reality. Mystics and mysticism are found in all of the world religions. Mystical experiences serve as examples of obtaining a spiritual reality. Notable mystics include Buddha (560-480 BCE) in Buddhism, Meister Eckhart (1260-13270) in medieval Christianity, and Rabi’a al Adauya (b. 801) in Islam. Rabi’a al Adauya was a woman considered a saint who sought to love god completely.

Material Expressions

All religions use symbols to impart religious truths. Religious symbols are words, objects, acts, or events which evokes awareness and experience of the sacred or divine. Symbols remind the believer of a deeper truth. Feelings are directed toward the sacred through a conscious understanding of the deeper meaning connected with the symbol. A Hindu woman washes in the Ganges River. An Eastern Orthodox Christian kisses an icon. A cross is hung in a church or private residence. Each of these objects or acts is a religious symbol. To that Hindu woman, the Ganges River can purify. To the Orthodox Christian, the icons represent holiness. A cross reminds Christians of salvation.

Symbols are therefore a means of connecting a person to her/his beliefs. Moreover, they are a means of remembrance. The act of remembering can be on the part of an individual or a group such as a religion or culture. In addition, the memory can be of an actual event in a person's life. For example, when seeing a cross, a Christian may remember her/his religious conversion or another experience emotionally connected to the faith.

The religious meaning of symbols is usually taught. Symbols then take on meaning that is part of the religious experience of the group. This is not an actual remembrance but can be considered an imposed remembrance. A Christian who makes the sign of the cross on herself/himself in remembrance of her/his baptism was taught the connection between the two acts. Both actual and imposed remembrances connect a person to the past through symbolic images, acts, and words.

In religion, colors also carry meaning; white represents purity, and red represents blood. Once a symbol is learned, then it is transportable and compoundable. If a white cross is put in a field of red on a stained glass window or on a tapestry, it has a different symbolic meaning than if that same white cross is in a field of purple. Why? Remember, red represents blood, but purple represents royalty. Therefore, we see that in art, shapes and colors can be symbols understood on conscious and subconscious levels.

Another example of a symbol is a lamb. The lamb depicted in religious works of art is most often white. The lamb also has a symbolic connection to sacrifice. Lambs were sacrificed on the altar for sins in ancient Judaic worship rites. Do you see the connection? To many Christians, Jesus is understood to be the Lamb of God. Symbols are learned, but once learned; they can be used out of context and still understood.
Material expression can be seen in religious images. Images of the sacred are as old as the images that humans painted on stones or cave walls. Images are used in religions to draw the mind to the holy through the person or object portrayed. In the Christian world, icons are important to the Eastern Orthodox Church. A religious icon is a work of art or other depiction which represents aspects of a religion. It might be a two-dimensional painting or a statue used in religious devotion. On the bottom of each page in this text are icons representing each of the world religions in this course. Other types of icons are often personages related to the sacred stories of a religion. The believers do not pray to the icon, but rather use it to focus on the truth that is represented. It creates a connection to the holy.

Architecture can be used as a material expression in religion. Religious buildings are often more than a physical structure. Picture a Christian church. It is a building, but the addition of a spire to that building will draw your eyes toward heaven.

Many of the features used in the design of religious buildings are used to remind people of the teachings, doctrines, and beliefs of the religion. Religious images and symbols are artistically displayed within the building. An overall theme is supported through architecture and design to inspire and create a religious mood.

**Religious Figureheads**

In this section about people in religion, we have studied beliefs, rituals, and material expressions, but what about the people? Every religion has a founder or leader. However, there is no uniformity in how believers in the various world religions view these important persons. In following chapters we will discuss the founders of each religion in detail. For now, we will look at the broad categories of divine people, charismatic leaders, prophets and sages.

Prophets and Sages

In many religions, you will hear or read the words of a prophet. A prophet is the messenger of god. Prophets speak for god. They may call for justice, denounce evil, or describe future events. The prophet, male or female, historically has held an important position not only in religion but also in the culture and society in which the religion functions. Sometimes, the prophet is a leader, such as Mohammed. The religion that he founded, Islam, refers to him as “The Prophet.” Islam reveres him in his role as a messenger from Allah rather than as a leader of the people. There were many religious prophets in history. For Judaism and Christianity, an important prophet was Moses.

A sage is a person venerated for wisdom, judgment, and experience. The sage normally does not hold an official position in the religious structure. The sage is accepted as significant because of his/her experience and/or connection to the sacred. A sage is a wise person who gives guidance. Wisdom is valued, respected, or even revered in all cultures. It is an important stabilizing element of daily cultural and religious life.

Fig. 1.2 Christian church
Charismatic Figures

The history of the world is filled with charismatic figures that inspire belief, trust, and emotion. These charismatic people often give leadership to movements. A charismatic person may not necessarily be a good organizer or competent leader, yet people will flock to him/her. Why? The charismatic personality is someone whom people want to follow. She/he radiates appeal.

The charismatic personality can propel a movement, giving it cohesion through mere presence. Pope John Paul II was a charismatic figure. As the spiritual head of the Roman Catholic Church, John Paul II was seen as a man of the people. He radiated appeal and was admired and loved by people everywhere.

Perhaps Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church is not as well known as John Paul II, but he is quite a charismatic leader. The Unification Church that he founded in 1954 has grown in part because of his charisma.

When the titles Christ and Buddha are used, two charismatic figures come to mind, Jesus of Nazareth and Siddhartha Gautama. Both Christ and Buddha demonstrated those qualities which are exemplary for the religious charismatic leader. Followers of the religions each founded also believe Christ and Buddha are divine people.

Divine People

Religion is about people and their connection to the sacred. To keep the connection to the sacred or even to maintain and provide continuation of the religion, a certain type of person is needed. We will classify this type as divine people. Divine people serve functionally and symbolically. Examples of the roles they fill are those of shaman, priest, minister, prophet, or sage. Each holds a position of respect, is valued by the believers, and is held exemplarily in status. Divine people connect to the holy and guide and defend the faith.

An example of a divine person is the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism. Millions of people worldwide think of him as divine. Sometimes, the person may not be a religious leader to be considered divine. Such is the case of Mahatmas Gandhi. Many people in India consider Gandhi divine because of his devout following of Hindu beliefs and practices while he struggled for independence for India. You will read about Gandhi in the chapter on Hinduism.

What Is Not Religion

The material presented so far has been a lot to digest. We have defined religion and considered the concepts of the sacred and the profane, including sacred places, stories, and texts. We have also looked at the role people fulfill in religion through belief, ritual and worship. Keeping all these characteristics in mind, let’s summarize by looking at what is not religion.

Many sports fans seem to worship their sport. Does that mean we can classify American football as a religion? After all, thousands of people come together at a designated place (a stadium) to watch a ritual (the game) and often leave with stories of fantastic plays. Even the playbook is held in high regard as if it were a sacred writing.

Does this make the sport a religion? No, not really. All activities approached with religious zeal are not religious in nature.

Football isn’t intended to connect the sports fan with the holy or an ultimate value. The rituals, rules, and codes are not understood to be a spiritual guide. The playbook does not provide insights on the way to live out our daily lives. The stories will soon be forgotten, and the game provides
entertainment but not a spiritual experience. Finally, it is not accepted by society as a religion or even a religious activity. Therefore, we see that though people may act in ways that resemble religion and though activities may have things in common with religions, such as rituals, there are religious-like activities that are not religions.

What Is World Religion?

A world religion is just what the phrase suggests. It is a religion known throughout most of the world, with membership that crosses national borders. The major world religions are divided into Eastern and Western religions, based on the location where each religion began. Eastern and Western religions have also been called Oriental and Occidental.

Eastern religions are those originating in Asia, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto. They can be further divided into Indian and East Asian religions. The Indian religions are Hinduism and Buddhism. The East Asian religions are Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto. Again, these sub-groups are based upon region of origin.

Western religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are those originating in the Middle East and other areas outside of Asia. The New Religions discussed in chapter 12 are also grouped with the Western religions. The three major Western religions are also referred to as Abrahamic religions. The story of Abraham is told in the book of Genesis. This Hebrew scripture is accepted as sacred writing by the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham has a key progenitor role in these religions.

One characteristic of world religions is that each has a large membership. An identifying name for followers is also a characteristic. For example, Christians are followers of Jesus Christ, and Buddhists are followers of Buddha. Another characteristic of world religions is that each has sacred texts (accepted collections of writing used to develop tenets of belief), a moral code, and spiritual guidance. Transportability is another important characteristic of the major world religions. For a religion to grow, it must be able to expand. Last, each of the major world religions has a documented history for at least part of its existence.

Although these are some of the universal characteristics of a world religion, each major religion has an identity that is unique. This is no accident. Religions develop theology based on their beliefs. Theology is the rational and systematic study of god, gods, or religion and the influence of the sacred. It is also the study of the nature of religious truth. A religion’s theology is part of its identity.

Each of the major world religions takes its unique identity seriously. The identity begins with the birth of the religion. It grows and redefines itself in contrast to the religions around it. This stage can be thought of as reaction redefinition.

Growth Processes of World Religions

Reaction and Redefinition

New religions have emerged throughout human history. The growth of a new religion demonstrates that people can find pivotal or ultimate value through means other than the religions that are already established. This demonstration sets the new religion at odds with the major or dominant religions of the time. There is a reaction to the differences, which helps redefine the new religion.
Each new religion redefines itself against the existing older established religions. The redefinition includes establishing its own message of belief through oral and written traditions, establishing its own moral code emphasizing points of difference with established religions, and establishing its own means of interaction or exchange with other cultures and religions. New religions usually have, at the core of the reaction and redefinition process, a charismatic leader who symbolically provides authority to the process.

Buddhism is an example of a religion that went through reaction and redefinition. In chapter 4 we will see how Buddha used older doctrines of Hinduism but interpreted them in a new way. He set Buddhism apart by having no god or gods. Buddha was such a dynamic person that he became a symbol for those elements of his religion that were different.

Social Adaptation

As a new religion becomes more established, it needs to present its doctrines in many situations and conditions to survive and expand, and this requires adaptation. During the social adaptation stage, exchange with other cultures and religions is guided by the selection of those elements of the cultures which are closely linked or useful for the new religion.

A religion in the social adaptation process selects traditions, myths, and people to re-interpret its new ideals and teachings. An example of this adaptation is a new religion’s use of stories of an established religion, presenting the stories as a basis for the new religion. Consider the way Christianity adapted Jewish writings to support the Christian reinterpretation of those writings. In chapter 9, we will see how Christianity applied the adaptation process to Jewish beliefs, stories, and holy days to develop its own identity.

Resistance to Change

Maturing religions have spent time and energy defining an identity. Once established, a religion has the tendency to use constraint and reward to enforce its values. Because there are similarities between society in general and established religions, there is identification with the religion expressed as culture, for example, culturally Christian or culturally Buddhist.

At this stage of integration between religion and culture, individuals must make an active choice to change religions. Newcomers are persuaded that they are choosing the right way or at least the accepted way. People leaving a religion are thought of as losing their way or forsaking the truth.

The religion in this stage has history and social structure to support its existence and growth. It is therefore resistant to change. In fact, established religions expect other religions to adapt to them. The religion has lasted and grown. Therefore, the sacred must be with them.

Members of a mature religion are secure in the “rightness” of their religion. Their beliefs have become part of their culture and way of life. Therefore, they believe that their way is best. This is not an absolute principle. Religions may be categorized based upon how strongly members hold to the concept that they are right. These categories are inclusive and exclusive religions.

Inclusive religions are receptive to adaptation of beliefs, doctrines, or deities of other religions. An inclusive religion may be thought of as a blending of religious ways, which is a form of syncretism. Syncretism is the fusing of different philosophies or religions. In chapter 3, we will read how Hinduism is inclusive in that it accepts new gods and beliefs. However, we will also learn that Hinduism holds fast to its core beliefs and doctrines. This acceptance but reluctance to fuse makes it inclusive but not syncretistic. The key difference between inclusive and syncretistic religions is that syncretistic religions merge thoroughly.
The other large category is the exclusive religions. **Exclusive religions** are less open or entirely closed to acceptance of ideas from other philosophies or religions. These religions may believe that they are following the directive of god or are selected to save the world. They maintain that their way is the only right way. It must be stressed that every religion has some difference from other religions. Each religion must be exclusive to some degree in order to maintain an identity.

Within each religion, there is a tendency for some members to be more open to the ideas beyond the core beliefs of the religion. Moreover, there are those who resist change. These two groups form ends of an imaginary line. People often refer to the more open and accepting members as liberal. **Liberal believers** are more open to adaptation and change. The other end of the line is referred to as conservative. **Conservative believers** are people who are less open to adaptation and change.

Members of religions who are very conservative are often called fundamentalists. Grouped together, these members are referred to as part of a movement. **Fundamentalism** is a movement within a religion that maintains a strong resistance to change and an adherence to a set of key principles or beliefs. Fundamentalists believe that they hold to an unchanging truth, and this truth is the only correct way. This adherence often creates a tension between them and others in the religion. Fundamentalism is also an important factor in the interactions between a religion and the culture(s) it exists within.

**Directed Expansion**

The directed expansion of growth is expected in mature religions. Self-identity is already fully established in this stage of a religion’s development. Mature religions are much more secure. They plan their expansion of members in directions that are consistent with their identity. Religions select the people that they officially send as representatives to proclaim their message based on an awareness of this identity. The people selected are often trained to promote this identity.

As the established religion expands, it transmits and spreads culture. Directed expansion provides a world religion with increased scope of influence. A religion’s sphere of influence is important. Influence helps safeguard the faith and protect against change through the exchange of cultures and religions.

**What IS NOT A World Religion**

Most people have heard of the major religions of the world, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Not as many people are familiar with the indigenous religions. The word **indigenous** means born of, or native to, a land or region. Native peoples such as the Australian Aborigines and Native Americans are indigenous. These people are an ethnic group, society, or community who were often the first human inhabitants of a geographic area.

Sometimes people do not realize that an indigenous culture had beliefs, rituals, and ways to worship long before the initial contact by any external culture. **Indigenous religions** are connected to a particular geographical area or region. These religions are separate from other religions and unique to themselves. Therefore, they cannot be considered world religions.

**Studying Indigenous Religions**

What place do indigenous religions have in a text on world religions? Since they are not a major world religion, why bother? Well, scholars have realized that much can be learned from indigenous religions. Developing the proper attitudes toward and the means for good academic study of the indigenous religions has taken time for several reasons. The main reason is that oral tradition posed a major difficulty to research methods. Without written sacred texts, early scholars
could only observe and interview the adherents of the indigenous religions. This proved difficult and time-consuming. Sacred stories were passed down from generation to generation by oral tradition. Therefore, it was necessary to study the whole culture in order to learn the meanings of the religious stories.

It is normal to compare religions from our own experience and context. However, studying indigenous religions requires understanding the religion within its own context. Yet, many indigenous religions offer points of similarity which can help with our study of world religions.

**Representative Indigenous Religion**

Although each indigenous religion is unique to its own culture, history, and experience, we can examine selected details of one religion's beliefs and practices in order to establish a context for understanding others. Let's look at the African religion of the Yoruba people for this purpose.

African traditional religions provide a good representation of indigenous religions. Africa has more than one thousand indigenous religions, each with its own culture (Mbiti 1). However, there are general themes that recur. These four themes are representative of most of native religions.

The first recurring theme is many spirits. An authority on African religion wrote that the Yoruba tribe has seventeen hundred spirits. Each has its own function and purpose (Mbiti 99). There is one primary spirit, which reflects a pattern similar to many indigenous religions: a stratified importance of the deities.

A second recurring theme found in the Yoruba tribe is the creation myths. In the Yoruba myth, the “Owner of the Sky” gave his agent a snail shell filled with earth, a pigeon, and a hen. The hen helped by scattering earth until the world was formed. The original earth was the Yoruba’s sacred city. The agent created humans from clay, and the high god breathed life into them.

The third recurring theme is the use of religious specialists. The Yoruba believe the head of the family is responsible for the spiritual care of the family. However, for the tribe there is a position called oba, or chief. This person is responsible for spiritual care of ritual. In addition, there are priests who are connected to the shrines. These are shamans. In an indigenous religion, the *shaman* is a religious person who normally has gone through initiation and training to function as a spiritual specialist.

A fourth characteristic found in the Yoruba indigenous religion is ritual. Ritual practices are important. Sacrifice is highly regarded. Sacrifice may be in the form of a prayer or an animal. Rituals revolve around the life cycle, beginning before birth. A mother will visit a priest to insure a good birth. This visit may or may not include herbal medicine, but a sacrifice is always conducted. Another ritual is the circumcision of young males. Rituals continue into adulthood. Marriage in indigenous religions is a negotiation with rituals and mediation. Divination is common to determine the possible outcome of the joining of the couple. Death rituals include sacrifice to conclude the life cycle. Properly conducted sacrifices are needed to guarantee the person's afterlife will be good.

**Common Beliefs of Indigenous Religions**

While each indigenous religion is unique, all share traditional views. Like most world religions, indigenous religions believe in a supreme deity or divine creator. Indigenous religions often believe that the spirit realm has powers which are not seen but are present in everyday life. Some spiritual powers are thought to be formless, mysterious, and sacred.
Other spirits are thought to have forms, but most are still intangible. The forms may be associated with sacred sites, objects, ancestors, or other people. It is important for most indigenous religions to maintain a good relationship with the spirit world or realm. The spirit is evident not only in humans but also in other forms of life. For example, a prayer or other words may be spoken over the souls of animals killed for food.

Core beliefs and values are passed down through oral traditions. Their beliefs are often kept secret from outsiders. Within the community, elders are respected and valued. The old ways are valued. Harmony or balance is an example of this. For the indigenous peoples, balance exists; it is neither formed nor created by humans. Forsaking the spiritual way causes disharmony and imbalance. This deviation can occur in pursuit of material gain or wealth for self or family at the expense of the group. The group is necessary for harmony. Belonging to the group and respect are important components of the indigenous way. Depending on the culture, a person may need to perform an act, visit a shaman, or engage in ritual to return to balance.

The shaman is an important part of indigenous religions. This person serves as a spirit guide, helps with healing, foretells the future, and contacts gods or spirits of the departed. A shaman also performs or serves as a guide in the rituals related to life stages. S/he holds a privileged place between the people and the spirit realm.

Totems may also be an important part of indigenous religions. A totem is an entity that is supposed to watch over or assist a person or group of people. Totem poles are often associated with Native American beliefs and practices. However, they have been employed in societies throughout much of the world, including Africa, Asia, Australia, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the Arctic polar region.

Rituals and rites are often performed both by groups and individuals. Group rites of passages are naming a child, transition into puberty, marriage, and death. The rituals may be connected to magic as when a shaman drives out an evil spirit. However, “there are many departures from magic, as when sacrifices are interpreted as tribute” (Weber 27). An example of tribute would be the offering of the first catch by an individual fisherman or the first fruits by a grower. This ritual does not require that the rest of the catch nor the harvest be taken from the person offering. In addition to thanksgiving for the crop or catch, this offering may be a self-imposed punishment. The idea of sin is not connected to the act of offering (Weber 27).

Many indigenous religions use the circle as a symbol to signify that all in the universe, all life, is interrelated and interdependent. The circle has a universal appeal to many scholars because of its symbolic inferences in the greater field of religion. However, it is one symbol, and there are numerous others.
Cultural Impact and Exchange

Current issues related to the native and indigenous religions are focused on the loss of these religions in whole or part throughout the world. The religions of a dominant culture frequently see the indigenous people as a source of new members. The indigenous religions feel pressure from the dominant culture to convert, often to the extent of oppression. To convert means to adopt a new religion or religious system. Attempts to convert individuals and groups of people are the work of missionaries. A missionary is a person who is sent to attempt to convert others to a religion, doctrine, or way of life. The word missionary is derived from the Latin word missionem 'the act of sending.'

In the West, it is normal to think of Christianity as a missionary religion. We will see how other religions, such as Buddhism, are missionary as well. Missionaries of all religions are engaged in proselytizing. Proselytizing is the act of attempting to convert people to a religion, sect, way of believing, or system of belief.

The validity and continuation of native and indigenous religions has been challenged by the proselytizing of both well-meaning groups of people and those with special or personal interests. The overall impact points to loss of cultural identity and self-identify through the process of converting members of indigenous religions to other faiths.

An example of a dominant culture's impact may be demonstrated through the language used to describe the other culture's beliefs. Modern scholarship is exploring the impacts of elitism and colonization on indigenous religions. Timothy Fitzgerald's book The Ideology of Religious Studies addresses this new understanding. He supports the growing trend to connect language with the intent used to describe religion. Fitzgerald describes means by which colonial powers intervened in non-European societies to open markets and expand their spheres of influence. The dominant powers represented themselves as liberators of the people from “undemocratic local elites and superstition” (Fitzgerald 29-30).

In this context, superstition is understood to be a belief or act resulting from ignorance, the fear of the unknown, and a false sense of causation. The use of this word is thought by modern scholarship to elevate the person using it by saying that the observed acts or beliefs are less than those of the observer. The labeling of something as superstition comes down to cultural perspective and intent. The more powerful culture uses language that demonstrates the relationship with the cultures under its control or influence. In this way, language can establish and maintain dominance of one group over another.

It needs to be added that religion and culture are not the only spheres in which language can establish and maintain dominances. It occurs in philosophy, science, education, business, politics, and in fact most aspects of human exchange. Caution must be exercised regarding the words used to describe beliefs and practices throughout the study of religions in exchange. Language used and accepted as proper at one point in time may not be accepted as such later because the study of religion is not static but ever changing and growing.
**Summary**

This chapter provides an introduction to the study of the major world religions, each of them being an important aspect of human experience. An essential factor is that all religions have a concept of “sacred.” The role of belief is primarily a connection between humanity and this ultimate value. It is expressed in sacred places, stories and texts. We also explored the ways people exhibit their beliefs through rituals, religious experiences, and material expressions.

You should know that the world religions are divided into eastern and western halves based upon their place of origin. We studied four major stages in the growth process of each world religion: reaction and redefinition, social adaptation, resistance to change, and directed expansion. This is the beginning of our study about the continual interaction of religion and culture. The exchange which occurs between religions and cultures is a major theme of this course which we will revisit in the study of each major world religion.

Soon we will begin the adventure of traveling back in time to visit the locations where the world religions began. We will trace the history of each religion forward to the present day and discuss their impacts on the modern world. To prepare for this journey it is important to understand the scholarship of religious studies, and that is the subject of our next chapter.

**Works Cited**


