

WORLD MARK
ENCYCLOPEDIA
of Religious
Practices

SECOND EDITION

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of Religious
Practices

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Volume 1
RELIGIONS AND DENOMINATIONS

Thomas Riggs, Editor



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**Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices,
2nd Edition**

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Contents

VOLUME 1: RELIGIONS AND DENOMINATIONS

Editor’s Note.....	ix
Introduction.....	xi
Advisory Board.....	xix
Contributors.....	xxi
Chronology.....	xxxiii
Holy Days.....	xli
Practices and Beliefs.....	xlv
Quotations on Beliefs.....	li
Populations.....	lxiii
Glossary.....	lxv
African Indigenous Religions.....	1
Bahá’í Faith.....	29
Buddhism.....	55
Mahayana Buddhism.....	85
Theravada Buddhism.....	97
Tibetan Buddhism.....	110
Christianity.....	119
Anglicanism (Episcopalianism).....	169
Baptist Tradition.....	180
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.....	191
Coptic Christianity.....	202
Eastern Catholicism.....	213
Eastern Orthodoxy.....	223
Evangelicalism.....	238
Jehovah’s Witnesses.....	248
Lutheranism.....	256
Methodism.....	267
Pentecostalism.....	278
Protestantism.....	287
Reformed Christianity.....	300
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).....	311

Roman Catholicism.....	321
Seventh-day Adventists.....	335
Unitarian Universalism.....	344
United Church of Christ.....	355
Confucianism.....	365
Hinduism.....	395
Shaivism.....	427
Vaishnavism.....	440
Islam.....	453
Shiism.....	492
Sunnism.....	504
Jainism.....	517
Judaism.....	543
Conservative Judaism.....	577
Orthodox Judaism.....	588
Reform Judaism.....	598
Shinto.....	607
Sikhism.....	631
Taoism.....	655
Zoroastrianism.....	683

VOLUME 2: COUNTRIES, AFGHANISTAN TO GHANA

Afghanistan.....	1
Albania.....	13
Algeria.....	22
Andorra.....	33
Angola.....	39
Antigua and Barbuda.....	49
Argentina.....	57
Armenia.....	65
Australia.....	78
Austria.....	89

CONTENTS

Azerbaijan.....	98	Egypt.....	485
Bahamas.....	107	El Salvador.....	496
Bahrain.....	116	Equatorial Guinea.....	507
Bangladesh.....	123	Eritrea.....	514
Barbados.....	133	Estonia.....	525
Belarus.....	139	Ethiopia.....	533
Belgium.....	147	Fiji.....	544
Belize.....	160	Finland.....	555
Benin.....	169	France.....	562
Bhutan.....	179	Gabon.....	574
Bolivia.....	187	Gambia.....	581
Bosnia and Herzegovina.....	196	Georgia.....	588
Botswana.....	209	Germany.....	597
Brazil.....	217	Ghana.....	611
Brunei.....	227		
Bulgaria.....	234	VOLUME 3: COUNTRIES, GREECE TO PHILIPPINES	
Burkina Faso.....	243	Greece.....	1
Burundi.....	253	Grenada.....	13
Cambodia.....	261	Guatemala.....	19
Cameroon.....	269	Guinea.....	32
Canada.....	282	Guinea-Bissau.....	40
Cape Verde.....	296	Guyana.....	50
Central African Republic.....	301	Haiti.....	59
Chad.....	310	Honduras.....	68
Chile.....	320	Hungary.....	75
China.....	328	Iceland.....	84
Colombia.....	349	India.....	91
Comoros.....	357	Indonesia.....	109
Costa Rica.....	364	Iran.....	121
Côte d’Ivoire.....	371	Iraq.....	132
Croatia.....	387	Ireland.....	142
Cuba.....	395	Israel.....	153
Cyprus.....	404	Italy.....	166
Czech Republic.....	414	Jamaica.....	176
Democratic Republic of the Congo.....	427	Japan.....	183
Denmark.....	438	Jordan.....	195
Djibouti.....	445	Kazakhstan.....	204
Dominica.....	452	Kenya.....	220
Dominican Republic.....	459	Kiribati.....	228
East Timor.....	471	Kuwait.....	237
Ecuador.....	478		

CONTENTS

Kyrgyzstan	247	Palau	624
Laos	257	Panama	629
Latvia	267	Papua New Guinea	637
Lebanon	275	Paraguay	648
Lesotho	286	Peru	656
Liberia	295	Philippines	668
Libya	305		
Liechtenstein	313	VOLUME 4: COUNTRIES, POLAND TO ZIMBABWE	
Lithuania	319	Poland	1
Luxembourg	327	Portugal	9
Macedonia	333	Qatar	17
Madagascar	344	Republic of the Congo	23
Malawi	360	Romania	33
Malaysia	369	Russia	43
Maldives	378	Rwanda	55
Mali	387	Saint Kitts and Nevis	66
Malta	398	Saint Lucia	77
Marshall Islands	404	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	84
Mauritania	413	Samoa	92
Mauritius	419	San Marino	103
Mexico	431	São Tomé and Príncipe	108
Micronesia	441	Saudi Arabia	115
Moldova	449	Senegal	124
Monaco	458	Serbia	132
Mongolia	464	Seychelles	141
Montenegro	473	Sierra Leone	148
Morocco	482	Singapore	160
Mozambique	496	Slovakia	168
Myanmar	505	Slovenia	177
Namibia	514	Solomon Islands	184
Nauru	521	Somalia	193
Nepal	528	South Africa	201
Netherlands	537	South Korea	211
New Zealand	546	South Sudan	225
Nicaragua	554	Spain	233
Niger	560	Sri Lanka	243
Nigeria	569	Sudan	255
North Korea	582	Suriname	263
Norway	592	Swaziland	273
Oman	601	Sweden	286
Pakistan	610		

CONTENTS

Switzerland	295	United Kingdom	458
Syria	309	United States	470
Taiwan	317	Uruguay	491
Tajikistan	326	Uzbekistan	497
Tanzania	332	Vanuatu	505
Thailand	343	Vatican City	516
Togo	356	Venezuela	523
Tonga	367	Vietnam	531
Trinidad and Tobago	374	Yemen	546
Tunisia	388	Zambia	556
Turkey	396	Zimbabwe	567
Turkmenistan	406		
Tuvalu	418		
Uganda	425	Bibliography	577
Ukraine	439	Index	583
United Arab Emirates	451		

Editor's Note

The *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, now in its second edition, is a resource for information about religions and their practices throughout the world. Originally published in 2006, it outlines the contemporary religious practices of 13 major religions and 28 religious subgroups, as well as the distinctive way these religions and subgroups are practiced in 195 countries—from the very largest, such as China, India, Brazil, and Russia, to the smallest, such as Tuvalu, Andorra, and Antigua and Barbuda. Even in the Internet age, such information is often not available, especially from a credible source.

The *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, planned with 10 distinguished advisers, was written by more than 200 scholars and other subject specialists. The encyclopedia is part of a broader Worldmark series, which includes the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* and the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*.

Organization

The second edition of the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices* has four volumes. Volume I includes essays on the history, beliefs, and contemporary practices of 13 major faith groups—African indigenous religions, the Bahá'í faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism—and 28 of their subgroups, such as Anglicanism, Reform Judaism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Vaishnavism. These essay topics, selected by our advisory board, represent not only the world's largest religious groups but also smaller faiths that have had significant historical, cultural, or theological impact. Because of space limitations, we could not include essays on all groups worthy of discussion. Each essay in volume I is organized with the same subject headings—for example, “Moral Code of Conduct” and “Sacred Symbols”—allowing easy comparison of a topic from one religion or subgroup to another. At the beginning of each essay in volume I is a population map displaying the group's distribution throughout the world. Major religion entries also include a chronology of key events, as well as a glossary.

By discussing broadly various religions and subgroups, volume I provides the background or context for more fully understanding the information in volumes 2, 3, and 4. These subsequent volumes together contain 195 essays, each focusing on the contemporary religious practices of a particular country. Organizing the topic of religious practices by country assumes that geographical and, in particular, political boundaries—because in varying degrees they mark off areas of unique history, culture, and influence—encourage distinctive ways in which a religion is practiced, despite shared beliefs held by all members of a religion.

The essays in volumes 2, 3, and 4 follow a standard format: statistical information, an overview of the country, one or more sections on major religions, a discussion of other religions, and a bibliography. The statistical information includes the country's total population and a breakdown by percentage of the major religious groups. The “Country Overview” section contains an “Introduction” (providing a geographical, political, and historical summary of the country needed to understand religious activities in the area) and a subsection on “Religious Tolerance,” discussing such topics as freedom of worship, religious discrimination, ecumenical movements, and the relationship between church and state.

Every country essay then proceeds with a major religion section on a religion whose followers make up 25 percent or more of the country's population. In some countries just one religion, such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, has at least this percentage of followers, but in other countries two or three religions each have more than 25 percent, resulting in two or three major religion sections in an essay. Exceptions to the rule were made for a small number of countries, most notably China, where Buddhism (at 7.4 percent of the population), Chinese popular religion (2.9 percent), and Christianity (2.3 percent) were given their own sections. China's population, however, is immense, and Buddhism's 7.4 percent, for example, represents almost 100 million people, more than the entire population of most countries. In some essays the major religion section is on a religious subgroup—for example, when a subgroup, such as Roman Catholicism, dominates the country or when the country, such as Sweden, has had a historically important state church.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Each major religion section is broken down into 18 subsections, which describe the religion's distinctive qualities in that country. "Date of origin," for example, refers to the year not when the religion was founded but when it was introduced into the country. "Major Theologians and Authors" discusses significant religious writers from the country. "Mode of Dress" details any religious clothing or styles distinctive to the country. Because each major religion section is divided into the same 18 subject headings, religious practices can be easily compared from one country to another.

1. Date of Origin
2. Number of Followers
3. History
4. Early and Modern Leaders
5. Major Theologians and Authors
6. Houses of Worship and Holy Places
7. What Is Sacred
8. Holidays and Festivals
9. Mode of Dress
10. Dietary Practices
11. Rituals
12. Rites of Passage
13. Membership
14. Social Justice
15. Social Life
16. Political Impact
17. Controversial Issues
18. Cultural Impact

Each country essay ends with a summary of other religions—those that make up less than 25 percent of the population—and a bibliography, which recommends books, articles, and Web sites for further reading.

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed time, effort, and ideas to the second edition of the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*. At Cengage Gale, Debra Kirby, content production manager, and Kathleen Edgar, senior project content editor, planned the early stages of the revision. Kathleen Edgar also managed the in-house production of the encyclopedia, and her editorial gifts and attention to detail were essential in the successful completion of the project.

I am grateful to Greta Gard, senior project editor, who managed—along with Joseph Campana, Theodore McDermott, Erin Brown, and Hannah Soukup—the long process of revising the essays with the scholars. Mary Beth Curran, senior editor, aided by Anne Healey and Lee Esbenshade, oversaw the editing process, ensuring that the text, even when containing challenging or esoteric information, could be understood by readers with no background in the subject. Other editors on the project included Jill Oldham, Donna Polydoros, Natalie Ruppert, William Wagner, and Judith West. Mariko Fujinaka, managing editor, and Jacob Schmitt, assistant editor, provided organizational support and oversaw the workflow.

Finally, I would like to thank the advisers and contributors. Without their knowledge and contributions, this encyclopedia could not have been produced.

Thomas Riggs

Comments and Suggestions

Cengage Learning welcomes your comments on the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices, 2nd Edition* and suggestions for future editions of this work. Please write to Editors, *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, Cengage Learning, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535; call toll free: 1-800-877-4253; fax: 1-877-363-4253; or send e-mail via www.gale.com.

Introduction

Although religion has been universal throughout human culture, its variations are so extensive that scholars do not always agree on a definition. More than 50 characteristics have been identified in various religions, from belief in gods or God to sophisticated ideas about a philosophical worldview, making it difficult to create a single statement defining what a religion is. Many languages do not have a specific word for religion. Acts of piety are simply natural or ordinary, so that there is no need to identify it as a distinctive experience.

Some scholars regard religion as a particular kind of human experience, a special way of living together, or a set of answers to certain vexing questions, such as why there is something rather than nothing or whether there is a larger purpose for evil. Some view “religion” as so perverse that they refuse to use the term, preferring the more innocuous “spirituality.” Religion is sometimes understood to be connected to what a particular group chooses as sacred, whether that be an object (totem), a being (God), a text (scripture), or a fundamental law of nature. Many adherents hold that religion is beyond comprehension by the human mind, with the study of it reserved for only specially gifted people, a view that makes religion an esoteric, or secret, activity. Critics have argued that espousing something so obtuse is nonsense.

The academic discourse of religion has undergone a dramatic transformation since the mid-20th century, when intellectuals commonly forecast that religion was in its death throes. Today that view is unimaginable. Religion remains a central element throughout the world, though there have been important changes in religious practices and our understanding of them. In the past, for example, when Melanesians cooked and ate a wild boar, it was thought to be a religious rite. Today when an urban Melanesian kills and eats a wild boar unaccompanied by traditional ceremony and ideology, the religious character of the act is less clear. Would a pious attitude be sufficient for the act to be called religious?

Modern life is sometimes viewed as less religious than societies long ago. For some Muslims the best community existed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632), and the Islamic community today is somehow “less Muslim” than it was then. Some ancient concepts have lost their

religious power. The god Osiris was once widely worshipped in Egypt, but today he has few, if any, followers. A common concern in many religions is whether a rule dating from ancient times is still applicable today or whether “timeless” revelations can be modified in the light of new discoveries.

Despite such changes in religious life, it is still essential to understand the phenomenon, for it touches almost every facet of life, from themes in popular culture to perceptions of well-being and motivations for global terrorism. It is also important to understand the history of religions and their spread across the world. Christianity, for example, began as an obscure movement in a tiny place outside Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago. It then spread to the Roman Empire, where it was adopted as the state religion in 380. This accelerated its growth, and it extended throughout Europe, eventually following European movement into the New World. Christianity has now spread to virtually every part of the earth. By the late 20th century, reform movements, such as that of the Korean evangelist Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012), had emerged in countries outside Christianity’s traditional homes, challenging conventional Christian ideas and practices. Meanwhile, Christians in emerging countries were urging Western nations to push back at secular influences and become “religious” once again.

The *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices* focuses on contemporary expressive acts of piety, rituals, and rites, public practices that are not hidden away for a diligent few. This encyclopedia also accepts that there are international communities of “belief,” along with numerous branches within them, providing the contours of the world of religion today. It acknowledges the very “political” expression of certain changes in religious tradition. Islam has expressed notions of jihad, or holy war, that have challenged traditional ideas and confronted traditional social orders around the globe. Buddhism, a great repository of religious tolerance, has spawned a vigorously militant wing—for example, in Myanmar, where Buddhist monks incited violence against Muslims in 2012 and 2013. The authors of the encyclopedia have tried to depict how political boundaries and interests have influenced religions within a country’s border, creating distinctive religious identities and practices.

INTRODUCTION

Volume I contains articles on the following 13 major religious groups: African indigenous religions, the Bahá'í faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. In addition, there are separate articles on major branches within these groups—for example, in Buddhism, on the Mahayana, Theravada, and Tibetan traditions. For those not schooled in multiple religious traditions, these entries provide an introduction to a world that is different, vibrant, and compelling. It also provides a glimpse into the world of future generations, in which people of different faiths will increasingly share communities, work together, and marry.

As with any encyclopedia, the organization of the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices* has its limitations. Each essay in volume I focuses on a single religion or subgroup, not on how ideas and practices from different religions interact with one another or on why similar ideas exist across religious boundaries. There is far more variety within each religion and subgroup than discussed in the entries of volume I. Still, volume I is important in showing that the subject is not limitless—there are recognizable contours to each religion. It is possible to sketch the main dimensions of religious practice according to the traditions with which believers identify. It is in volumes 2, 3, and 4 that the encyclopedia emphasizes religious diversity around the world, even within a single religion, as it covers each country's distinctive religious history, ideas, and practices.

Common Elements in Religious Practice

It is often said that religion insists on a certain kind of reality, something that is larger than the individual or the immediate community. Such a reality is usually defined as a force or person of greater “power,” something beyond human creation. What results from human interaction with this power may be called “religious.” This encyclopedia attempts to document how people act in relation to this power—that is, their religious practices.

Prayer, for example, is a common religious practice. Normally it is possible to tell the difference between believers at prayer and believers acting in an “ordinary” way. Prayer brings believers into communication with the transforming agent, or higher power that is the basis of their religion and their world. There are, however, considerable variations in how people pray—depending on the tradition, different ways of moving, stances adopted, demeanors assumed, and words uttered, all of which appear to indicate a direct relationship between the believer and the greater power.

Each religion has systems defining how the religion is experienced (as, for example, in prayer), giving a structure to its activities or providing an intellectual basis for the

believer's understanding of reality. These systems might be called “philosophy,” “theology,” “beliefs,” “values,” or “doctrines.” In some, religions systems are spelled out in an elaborate manner, as, for example, in the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity, in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are seen as three persons in the nature of God. In some religions, however, there is less emphasis on theory because this is regarded as specialist knowledge, and little reference is made to basic beliefs unless queries or disagreements arise. An example can be seen among Japanese shamans who perform healing rituals but who seldom talk about the spirit world they are encountering.

Many religious practices arose from ancient rituals related to major life passages—for example, rites for girls and boys when they reach puberty. Some practices, such as those surrounding birth, marriage, and death, are as old as humankind. For many believers there is something reassuring about religion's connection with the stages and cycles of life, and people may actively participate in such rites even when they are not sure about the meaning of what they are doing.

Rituals and Rites of Passage

Throughout life, rituals are used to experience basic meaning. There are formal words used when greeting someone of an official rank. There may be gifts for important people on special occasions. A person might shake someone's hand when it is offered in public. It is possible to ignore these practices or to decline to participate, but it is awkward or indicates a different cultural practice. There may be repercussions. As such, rituals take on critical importance in society.

Rituals are an important way of expressing true religious feeling, and believers use rituals to interact with the source of life. The indigenous people of the Plains tradition in North America smoke a pipe as a means of sending their prayers to the Spirit World, and Tibetan Buddhists chant in meditation to encounter the “Thunderbolt” reality that lies beyond ordinary perception. In conveying their concerns to their sacred entities, believers do not see themselves as using rituals to manipulate a greater power. Rather, they believe that such acts are a way of communicating with the object of their religious devotion and to convey their concerns to the power controlling their destiny.

For those who hold that communication with the gods or God is the purpose of religion, worship is a basic ritual, and in most religions worship is demanded of the faithful. Even in Buddhism, where the basis of religion is not worship, loving adoration of the Buddha is ordinarily a crucial part of the believer's rituals. In addition, most religions have developed rites of passage that mark important moments in the life of a person from birth to death and beyond. These rites move a person through various levels of privilege and responsibility. In some religions the performance of rites is

considered so critical that they can be carried out only by specially endowed people, usually called priests, who operate as mediators between divine power and the individual believer.

The practices of any religion are directly affected by its conception of the spiritual world. When theism (belief in one God) is a central tenant, the resulting religious practices in one way or another invoke the deity. Further, how people conceive the gods or God directly shapes practices. Christians speak of God's love as revealed through Jesus Christ and hold that God offers spiritual fulfillment and personal redemption through the doctrines reflected in the Trinity. As a result, Christians have developed rituals that embrace this belief, such as baptism. Jews, on the other hand, stress the worship of "the God of our Fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," emphasizing the importance of a spiritual lineage with God. For Jews this lineage is demonstrated through the reading of the laws of God as set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures. By contrast, Hinduism has embraced many names for the diversity of spiritual reality, and Hindus observe a great number of rituals to express this exuberance of deities. On the other hand, religions that do not involve belief in gods, including those of certain indigenous peoples, have quite different rituals. In the past Inuit shamans and medicine people maintained a vigorous encounter with spirits of the "other" world. They performed rituals honoring and submitting to these spirits, although they did not "worship" them in the sense commonly understood in Western religious rituals.

Celebrations and Observances

Religions thrive on celebrations. Festive occasions bring people together and foster a sense of belonging, reflecting the deep-seated need within humans to move beyond the everyday. People celebrate birthdays, toast each other on a wedding anniversary, and laud victories on battlefields with ceremonies of remembrance and introspection. Likewise, religions pause throughout the year to celebrate those events that make them unique, the result being a world calendar replete with religious holidays and festivities. From the wandering Hindu sannyasi (mendicant), whose presence is regarded as beneficial, to the reaction of an infant upon first seeing Santa Claus, celebrations bond people to their religious roots and unite families around common cultural themes.

Many religions also celebrate their founding. Such celebrations look to a defining time in the past and rejoice at its continuing influence. Birthdays of founders are elaborate affairs, such as celebrations of Muhammad's birthday by Egyptians. For believers celebrations bring a sense of liberation and freedom. Sometimes such observances, along with their accompanying feasts and festivals, are criticized for the waywardness they encourage or for their expense on the public

purse. Critics, for example, often single out Christmas decorations and gift giving as reflections of such extravagance.

Scripture

Authoritative religious teachings are those sources of inspiration that embody a tradition's wisdom. They take on a hallowed character that puts them beyond normal human creativity. For believers such teachings are not exhausted through reading, for they embrace a whole gamut of religiosity. They can become a source of theology, meditation, or even healing, as well as provoking division and militancy. The teachings also reveal the standards by which the believer is to live. In most religions there is a written document, or scripture, that conveys this material. The oldest is thought to be the Rig Veda, which includes materials that may date to around 4000 BCE, before the beginning of writing. Scripture is sometimes held to be timeless, as, for example, with the Koran—the words were delivered by the Prophet Muhammad but the message is believed to date to the very establishment of humans upon the earth.

Because writing is relatively recent in human history, religion has not always relied on a written text. Even some literate peoples have never assigned true authority to written forms, preferring instead the immediacy of the oral version. Devout Muslims, for example, pointing to the oral origins of the Koran, regard the oral version of "pure Arabic" as the only authoritative version. Others, like the Quakers, hoping to ward off dogma and worrying that a text might become frozen into literalism, have refused to accept anything but a flexible interpretation. Further, in certain religious contexts, such as ritual activity, there remains a preference for oral versions among some groups—for example, Buddhists—even though they have written texts. In place of a written canon some religions have sacred stories that are passed on orally from one authoritative speaker to another. The stories may take on the character of scripture, with people referring to them as the basis for their actions. In such traditions, authorities have the freedom of recasting the stories according to the audience and the spiritual need of the moment. Some theorists have preferred the term 'speech-acts' to define the significance of scripture, since the meaning of scripture is influenced by how it is used, or spoken, within the religious environment.

One of the most important uses of scripture is to provide the language of religious rites, with believers using its passages as a means of communicating with the object of their faith. During a ritual the text becomes a vehicle of communication at another, perhaps deeper, spiritual level than when it is simply used to affirm a specific doctrine. At this level scripture fosters a state of spiritual being and unites those focused upon it. As a result, it is difficult to disassociate scripture from the ritual life and personal piety of the group. The use of a scriptural text in scholarship outside the religious tradition is sometimes said to distort

INTRODUCTION

its original purpose, provoking criticism from believers that unsympathetic outsiders are trying to interpret what are essentially sacred sources in ways unbecoming to the revelation.

Not all scriptures are conceived of as written by a celestial authority. The Analects of Confucius, for example, are regarded as inspired writings that give details on a properly ordered life, but they are held up not as the word of a god but rather as spiritually superior insights from a master with keen insight. In addition, many practitioners of New Age beliefs argue that true religion is syncretic or eclectic—that is, people may pick and choose which scriptures or parts thereof are most meaningful and then make up their own authoritative text. Such individualism in the contemporary world, however, seems to violate the traditional sense of a sacred text as the focus of group loyalty.

Theology

In many religions it is particularly important to describe the intellectual basis of the faith. Throughout history great minds have wrestled with the problems of explaining the reality behind their religion; their efforts have produced an interpretation of God and related terminology that is called “theology.” As with activities like prayer or sacrifice, theologies of various religions show considerable diversity, and despite the attempt to use words and phrases that can be understood by ordinary people, the subject is sometimes difficult to comprehend. Further, in some religions, certain ideas are not discussed in a systematic way, even though they involve important concerns in the tradition, such as death and life after death.

Theology has been of particular importance in Western religions, especially Christianity. In the Christian tradition, theology is a highly organized profession, with the various churches exercising vigorous control over the ideas perpetrated in their names. At least in Western culture, theology has a long history separate from both philosophy and science, and it often involves intellectual activity at a sophisticated level. Most Western studies have viewed non-Western religions through this model. As a result, much has escaped the analysis of specialists simply because non-Western religions, including so-called “primitive” traditions, are formulated in ways unrelated to Western theology.

Theology attempts to explain the principal ideas of a religion in a way that both adherents and interested observers can understand. It also develops ways to address puzzles that are created by its own system of thought. For example, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which as monotheistic religions embrace the doctrine of God as all powerful and all good, the existence of evil in the world is a problem. For the ordinary believer some of these complications may be beyond solution, the result of limits in human understanding. For

others the activity of theology demonstrates an inherent problem of religion—it cannot escape the contradictions in its own logic—although there are conundrums in all human knowledge systems, including science.

Ethics

Every world religion serves as the foundation for a system of ethics, or laws and standards of moral behavior. It defines when someone is violating community norms, as well as what is to be tolerated and what is to be condemned. Is a mild explicative to be tolerated, while a theft of bread to be punished? For some religions, adherence to moral standards is regarded as the very basis of the believer’s relationship with God, as, for example, in Judaism. For others, ethics promotes well-being, a healthy society, and social responsibility. In the Confucian tradition devotees believe that a successful person is one who is neighborly and giving and who subjects all personal acts to the rule of moral conduct. Acting out that value in life is deemed religious. Confucius summed up the standard for human relationships in the Analects as “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you,” which is strikingly similar to the biblical adage “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” (Matthew 7:12). Islam asserts that God has established the true way and that living according to the Sharia, or Islamic law, is the most important responsibility of the true believer. Whosoever follows the law is a true Muslim.

Most religions are concerned that their moral values be expressed concretely in people’s lives. There is an almost universal interest among religions in helping the poor and in providing education for children. Religions affirm that there are certain principles that should be enshrined in society, since the values they represent are the foundation of a beneficial community life. It is for this reason that religions advocate such qualities as honesty and truthfulness and oppose greed and materialism. Likewise, religions promote concern for the uniqueness and sanctity of human life.

However, it is questionable how intimately connected religion is to ethical behavior. Some people may never undertake a religious rite and never express concern for religious piety but may still behave in an ethical manner. Established religious institutions have also been involved in questionable practices. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the Catholic Church was accused of hiding cases of sexual abuse of children by priests in order to protect its image, thus willfully ignoring its own ethical standards. Governments have also been accused of working with religious organizations in ways contrary to the ethical norms of the communities they represent. For example, beginning in 1874 and continuing through much of the 20th century, the Canadian government, in an effort to assimilate indigenous people into the country’s dominant culture, removed thousands of indigenous children from their homes, sending them to Christian-run schools,

where some children suffered physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Modern science has often been seen as objective and free of “beliefs,” a type of knowledge unfettered by religious convictions, but complex influences from the culture, including religion, have shaped its development. The freedom to pursue research regardless of the consequences, for example, reflects an aggressive individualism that could not have developed without belief in the individual’s responsibility for knowledge, a view derived from ancient religious convictions. Scientists are themselves human, of course, and respond to various religious sensibilities. Issues like human cloning are debated by scientists, who must sometimes arbitrate between their religious values and what is scientifically possible. Further, questions have been raised about the legitimacy of any science that operates without social and cultural oversight—that is, outside a solidly based ethics.

It has been argued that, since different religions promote different standards of moral behavior, ethics should not be grounded in religious belief. Women the world over have articulated the failures of traditional religions in guaranteeing their equality. Some people have pointed to the international scourge of HIV/AIDS or to the war on terrorism, begun after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, as examples of international ethical issues in which religion has been a problem. Still others point to the stunning advances in social media and the unrestrained spying by the U.S. government’s National Security Agency (NSA) as evidence that religions are far too limited to handle the ethical challenges of the modern technological world. How will religions be able to provide ethical guidance in a world where humans increasingly interact with machines that behave like people and that can learn and develop independently of them?

Other people claim that some problems in the contemporary world are the result of the failures of religious ethics. They point, for example, to the growth of Muslim factions that pursue jihads as an example of how traditional religion can no longer operate as a restraint on violence and antisocial behavior. Such violent acts in the name of religion bear little relationship to traditional ethical norms, implying that the contemporary world has outstripped its ancestral behavioral patterns bequeathed by religion and has moved into a post-religious world. Although such acts may be explained or justified using the religion’s ideology, they do not reflect the norms espoused by the majority of believers. Still others scoff at such generalizations, stating that Christianity went through a much longer period of war and violence before it was able to reduce its violent tendencies and suggesting that religion is not immune to using violence for its own ends.

Such critics usually advocate a system of secular ethics. Religious believers, however, argue that in a secular system people are not schooled in, nor do they internalize, the age-old patterns that have undergirded human civilization

throughout the ages. Believers maintain, for example, that secular ethics do not explain the importance of respect and dutifulness, values that religions have traditionally promoted as the foundation for relationships between people and societies. They view greed in Wall Street and other financial institutions around the world as evidence that the secular ethics of the corporate world is fundamentally flawed, creating such problems as the growing gap worldwide between the incredibly rich “super caste” and the ordinary worker. Advocates for traditional religious ethics argue that there has been an abandonment of the egalitarianism at the heart of religious ethics. Believers, however, have been equally critical of ethical systems formed in secular Marxist societies.

Despite changes in the contemporary world, religious groups maintain that their perspective is essential for civilization and that religious tradition is the only alternative to intellectual and moral chaos. Using the tools of promotion and advertising, religions have entered into competition with other forces as they challenge individuals and societies to live according to traditional ethics. Seen from this perspective, religion has taken on a business hue, with various traditions competing for followers in the marketplace of contemporary ethical life.

Observance and Explanation of Death

Most religions deal with death by providing rituals of condolence, as well as assurances that life continues after death, although in a different way and on another level. Some religions profess to hold keys to eternal life, while others claim to provide the means by which a person can face the next phase of life after death. Even religions that do not maintain a belief in life after death provide a sense of closure and acceptance at the end of life. In contemporary life, religions have needed to address new issues concerning death, including the practice of physicians who help desperately ill and suffering patients to die, in effect ushering people into the eternity of their choice.

Most cultures accept the idea that death falls within the scope of religion. Many indigenous faiths anticipate living on in an ancestral world, sometimes characterized by festivities that provide endless moments of delight before some part of a person once again takes on bodily form in this world. Hindus believe in a form of transmigration: After the death of the body, the person enters an otherworldly transitory state before ultimately returning to the world in another form. Buddhists hope to achieve nirvana, a state of bliss not attached to the material world. Western religions, on the other hand, are based on a strong sense of linear time, and although they hold that death is the end of earthly life, they believe that at least a spiritual element lives on. Such religions hold that following death, there are

INTRODUCTION

various events, including judgment, purification, and, ultimately for believers, a glorious life in a paradise, or heaven. All of these notions have an impact on religious practices, for religions prescribe how the individual is to be conveyed into the domain of death.

Geographic Variations in Religious Practice

In the contemporary world there is great diversity within religious groups, and religious practices often vary by country or region. Consider meditation, for example. As practiced across India in early Hinduism, meditation seems to have been associated with mendicants—those who left their families and homes, took vows, and became wandering holy men. When the practice was adopted by Buddhism, which spread from India to China, it seems initially to have been restricted to monks. In Zen Buddhism, which took root in Japan, meditation eventually took on much broader forms, weakening its connection to monastic life and making its benefits available to the lay population.

Volumes 2, 3, and 4 of this encyclopedia, containing essays on the contemporary religious practices of individual countries, reveal that religions have frequently been influenced by and vary according to political and geographical boundaries. For example, people do not celebrate Christmas in the same way in Sweden, Uganda, and China. This can be a contentious issue, however, as political boundaries sometimes reflect the history of colonialism, not the “natural” configuration of an ethnic or religious group. It is also true that religion seldom is restrained by national borders, as is seen by the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Nonetheless, whatever its limitations, the view that political boundaries play a critical role in shaping religious life is commonly accepted among scholars.

Trends in Contemporary Religion

An important trend in the contemporary world is the growth of local religious groups made up of small but highly engaged memberships. These groups, whose practices are especially diverse, claim to redefine traditional views, and they sometimes challenge tradition over the “proper” way to practice religion. The number of such groups is staggering, with perhaps thousands having sprung up throughout the world since the beginning of the 20th century.

Contemporary religion is also characterized by its close relationship with politics. Religion has not retreated from politics, even in the face of the widespread embrace of secularism by governments. Nearly every major government in the world faces pressure from groups that form political movements clothed in religious mantles and that raise ethical

questions over public policy. Further, the rise of radical religious groups like al-Qaeda or the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka has sometimes made religion a prime force in political events. Religious conflict remains present even in countries that might be conceived as firmly advanced in secularism. In France a law banning the hijab (a veil worn by Muslim women) in public places, which took effect in April 2011, was met with a storm of protest. Moreover, many governments in Muslim countries have quietly abandoned their secular stance.

In Europe during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation, whole countries became Protestant or Roman Catholic at the conversion of a ruler and stroke of a pen. Today it tends to be the other way around, with the religious values of the people having a direct impact on the government. Whereas newspapers once were restrained in their reporting of religious issues, such matters have become front-page news, and powerful religious organizations, such as the Roman Catholic Church, are no longer free from scrutiny by the public press.

Another feature of contemporary religion is the changing role of women. Women are more important than ever before in religious organizations, with responsibilities ranging from volunteer to executive positions. While some organizations have been slow to revise their official policies on the role of women, women themselves often have developed their own ways of circumventing the system. Their influence in religion has also changed many people’s views about the relationship between the sexes, despite the view of women in traditional theology.

Along with this challenge from women, religious groups have faced greater demands from the laity. Many laypeople have come to insist that their understanding of tradition is just as valid as that of the professional religionist, influencing such areas as ritual activity, doctrine, and organization. Although traditional religious organizations have come to adopt the Internet and social media to serve their existing structures and approaches, laypeople also use such technology to promote alternative religious views and to develop new ways of interacting, further alienating them from the traditional centers of authority.

The practice of religion without the trappings of wealth and privilege, what is called “antiformalism,” is another contemporary idea of global significance. A noticeable feature is the rejection of elaborate settings for worship. In Christianity, for example, architecture has historically played a major role—with basilicas, monasteries, and other religious and educational edifices being central to the life of the church—but the trend in Christianity is away from embodying tradition in ornate, expensive buildings, which can be seen as part of a broader challenge to established traditional religious understanding and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Fundamentalism was a complex phenomenon that arose in American Christianity in the early 20th century, and variations of this movement have spread to most major religions and countries around the world. Fundamentalism involves a militant return to first principles, even as its very existence requires the presence of modernity, with which it clashes. It is not a return to traditional views, for most fundamentalists see such views as hopelessly entwined with political and secular issues. Instead, for fundamentalists religion is primary. Resisting the concept of compromise, fundamentalism affirms a direct and literal interpretation of what is seen as essential in religion. Although it is claimed that the roots of fundamentalism connect it to ancient religious founders, there is no mistaking the modern tone and strident individualism of the movement, regardless of the religion in which it occurs.

Finally, the Internet and social media have been forums of vigorous attempts by religions to adapt to a rapidly changing technological world. Although initially this technology was conceived as secular and lacking in humanity, religions, as well as their followers, have used it as a means of extending their influence. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow for new ways of religious expression and interaction, creating new virtual spaces of spirituality. Social media has played an important role in various reform movements around the world, including the Arab Spring, political uprisings in 2010 and 2011 in Muslim countries in North Africa and the Middle East. By embracing new media, religions have revealed their potential for further progressiveness and creativity in the contemporary world.

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