



# STUDIES OF RELIGION

**PRELIMINARY**

Nicholas G Coleman



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Science Press

## Acknowledgements

Nicholas Coleman has a First Class Honours degree in religious studies from La Trobe University and a PhD in philosophy of religion from the University of Cambridge. He is a specialist teacher and consultant in the field of religion and values education, and is Head of Religious Education at Wesley College, Melbourne.

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Science Press  
Unit 7, 23-31 Bowden Street  
Alexandria NSW 2015 Australia  
Tel: +61 2 9020 1840 Fax: +61 2 9020 1842  
sales@sciencepress.com.au  
www.sciencepress.com.au

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# Introduction

The topics covered in this textbook and the organisation of material follow the 2005 syllabus for the NSW Studies of Religion I and II Preliminary Course.

Certain non-English technical terms are regularly used, such as Dukkha (discontent in Buddhism), puja (worship in Hinduism), Shari'ah (Law in Islam), mitzvot (blessing in Judaism) and kami (spirit beings in Shinto). These are initially accompanied by an English equivalent in brackets.

All important concepts and technical terms are explained in the glossary. References and further resources are provided in the bibliography and websites page for readers who wish to follow up research interests.

This textbook naturally regards its subject matter as serious and interesting, and views with optimism the ambition of religion to find meaning within and beyond ordinary life. Due to the different characters and emphases of the religious traditions described, there is no single way of presenting them all absolutely equally; yet, every effort has been made to present them all with equal respect and sympathy.

## 1

# Nature of Religion and Beliefs

## Student outcomes

Through this chapter you come to an understanding of:

- religion as a worldview
- religious worldviews
- characteristics of religion
- studying religion
- contribution of religion



## Religion as a worldview

Generally speaking, religion is a ready-made worldview or system of formal beliefs and structured practices that guides and directs its followers to an initial or enhanced feeling for the sacred or divine. The faith of all religions is that a higher spiritual reality gives existence and meaning to ordinary human life. It acknowledges a supernatural dimension to life that is beyond the natural, measurable world. The beliefs and practices of religious institutions aim to bring their adherents into a closer relationship with that origin and goal of existence, variously known as God, Truth or the ultimate reality. Like recipes in cooking, religions give directions for how to combine the ingredients of life into an outcome that is good and happy and forever. The names of the major world religions are well known: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. Each of these faiths has a distinctive character, and each has a chapter dedicated to it in this text.

The original English term ‘religion’ comes from the Latin word, *religare*, which means ‘to tie back to’. Implied in the word itself is the idea that our true nature has come adrift from its original ground and needs a way to reconnect to its deep source. By restoring our connection (or right relation) to the creative origin of existence, we recover the true meaning of present life and find final fulfilment in the life to come.

That basic narrative of separation and reunion is enshrined at the heart of all the world’s historical faiths. The Indian tradition of Buddhism, for example, codifies this grand religious narrative in the doctrine of ‘the Four Noble Truths’. Indigenous faiths, for their part, arise from a view of nature as unfallen and so teach their followers how to remain in touch with their original spiritual ground.

Religion is found in all ages and all cultures. Its ideals and values have inspired countless individuals and given motivation and direction to every human society. Religious beliefs and practices affirm a **transcendent** world—a reality or level of being deeper than ordinary human experience; a world **immanent** within us, yet too simple for words and closer to us than our own jugular vein.



That invisible dimension of depth experience is encountered and expressed by different religions in different ways. The resulting traditions of religion reveal as much about human beings as they do about the spiritual reality found within and beyond human experience.

With the exception of Hinduism, all the major religions (and most of the minor ones) began with the actual life experience of a particular individual – Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Siddhartha. Somehow, for some reason, these people experienced something indescribably real and good and true; they called it God, or Truth, or the ultimate reality. Thereafter they felt compelled to communicate their experience to others, and to formulate a way of life and thought that would bring others to their own experience of the same reality or truth. The teachings of these great figures were institutionalised, developed and adapted to suit the needs and capabilities of subsequent generations of followers. The results are the formal traditions of religion as we have them today. On that basis, one definition of **religion** is: ‘a form of belief and practice that comes from and leads to human experience of God or the ultimate reality.’

Religion is about the search for spiritual meaning within and beyond ordinary life. Since time immemorial, knowingly or otherwise, human beings the world over have followed the advice of the Hebrew prophet Amos (5:6), ‘Seek God and live’. The goal of the religious quest is to find answers to the questions of existence that profoundly affected people at some stage in their lives. These questions range from the personal (such as: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? What is my purpose?) to the general (such as: Where did the universe come from? What does life mean? Why do evil and suffering exist?).

Religion can be powerful in how it affects people, yet responses are not always religious. For most people, religion brings comfort, encourages efforts to correct perceived injustices, and gives positive meaning to life. For some people, their own response to religious feelings can stir anger, evoke intolerance and produce violence – although such negative reactions conflict with the law of love that is at the heart of all true religious faiths. Religion can affect many aspects of people’s lives, even if they are non-believers. Thus, many of the structures and values of Australian society have their historical origins in Christian beliefs.

Religions are described as individual traditions, yet they are not always completely unified organisations in areas such as doctrine and ritual. Within each tradition there can be considerable diversity of belief

and practice. Nor are religions unvarying; they can undergo development through interaction with the changing social conditions of the culture in which they are embedded. There may be vigorous debate between different parts of the country but within the same religious tradition. In the Anglican Church in Australia, for example, some parishes allow the ordination of women priests, while some (such as the Sydney diocese) do not allow women to be ordained as priests.

## The Axial Era

One of the most remarkable coincidences in the history of ideas is that most of the world’s great religions found their fundamental and enduring forms at about the same time. In the short span of a few centuries (approximately 800 to 400 BCE) a new calibre of religious consciousness became established in the traditions in China, India and the Middle East. All over the world, almost simultaneously, without any region knowing of the activity in other regions, religious traditions everywhere secured a new depth and clarity of insight into the biggest questions of life, the universe and everything. With this advance of consciousness, most of the great religions crystallised into the basic forms they continue to maintain today.

In China, Lao Tzu and Confucius began the traditions of Taoism and Confucianism and all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being. In India, the Upanishads were written by the great Hindu sages of the forests; Siddhartha Gautama found his own way to enlightenment and began the religion of Buddhism, and Mahavira the Conqueror founded the faith known as Jainism. In Iran, Zarathustra began teaching an ethical monotheism which viewed the world as a cosmic struggle between the Supreme Good God, Ahura Mazda, and the Evil Spirit, Angra Mainya. (This was more than 2500 years before a similar story was told about the battle between Light and Darkness in the ‘Star Wars’ series.)

Further west, in Palestine, Judaism became defined as a prophetic monotheism, through such great figures as Elijah, first-Isaiah, Jeremiah and second-Isaiah. In Greece, Homer wrote his great epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey; Western philosophy was born with the teachings of Thales, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato; and the tragedians, Sophocles and Aristophanes, wrote plays that remain topical and are still performed today.

All over the world, wherever people were writing, suddenly they began to make sense of human life and





death in the light of a higher and more enduring reality. In that period around 500 BCE, human consciousness passed over a threshold and reached into the realm of universality in every sense. Karl Jaspers, who coined the phrase 'Axial Period' to refer to this extraordinary time, says (*The Origin and Goal of History*; p. 2):

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations, (and in the face of those limits) he strives for liberation and redemption.

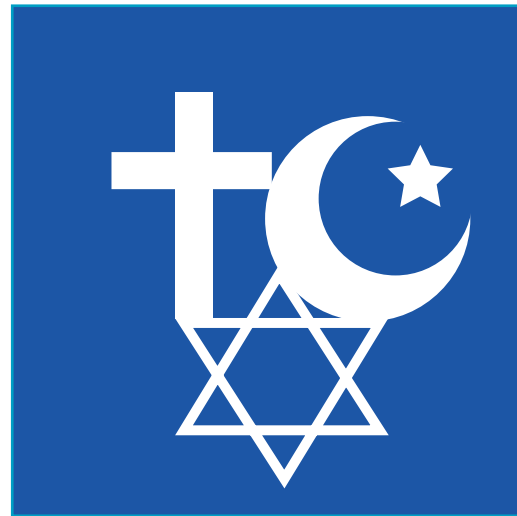
The Axial Era was of great importance for the worlds of religion. Religious beliefs and practices seek to solve the deepest problems of life by answering questions of meaning. These questions are the raw material with which religion works. Questions of meaning generally arise in relation to the self or ego; other selves and the universe; the ultimate reality, often felt and even dreaded long before it is recognised; and the most worthwhile values. In the Axial Era, human thought secured a transcendent perspective beyond the surface phenomena and accidents of life. That perspective revealed perennial answers to the questions of basic meaning; and the answers found then, so long ago, have never lost their relevance.



The River Nile, Cairo Egypt's population is about 90 per cent Muslim and 6 per cent Christian

## Religious worldviews

The living systems of belief and practice that constitute the world's religions differ from one another in various important ways. Nonetheless, all religions share certain



Religious symbols The Christian Crucifix, the Islamic Star and Crescent and the Judaic Star of David

basic features that make them 'religions' in the first place. In addition, some traditions have historically devolved from others and so display definite family resemblances.

## Semitic faiths - transcendent religious worldviews

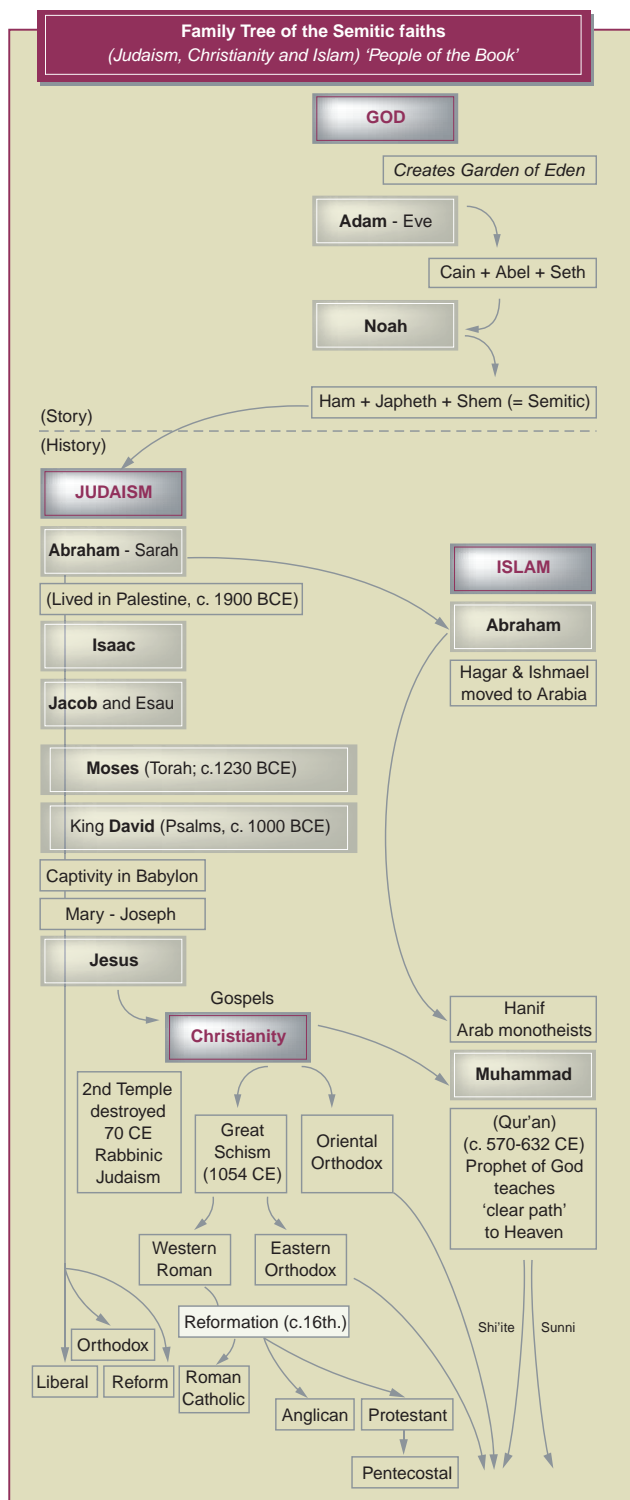
The great monotheistic faiths of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, may be grouped together as the Semitic family of religions. The term 'Semite' refers to the offspring of Shem, the son of Noah. With his direct descendant Abraham, who lived around 1900 BCE, the history of Semitic religion begins. These faiths are examples of transcendent religious worldviews.

The Semitic faiths all worship the God of Abraham as the one and only God of the universe. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Abraham is the founding father and his God is the one true God. Their family roots give these three traditions certain concepts in common.

### Monotheism

The Semitic traditions are unconditionally monotheistic and insist that no other god exists. The single divine Being is personal, with a mind and will of his own. God acts in human history and enters into a special relationship with human beings, yet he transcends the limits of space, time and gender. God is eternal, all-knowing, ever-present and all-good. God is moral, and expects that human beings will also live moral lives. Thus the three Semitic traditions are forms of ethical monotheism.





Family tree of Semitic faiths

## Cosmology

The Hebrew Book of Genesis is accepted as a sacred text by the Semitic religions. As a result, the story of the creation of the universe in the beginning of the Book of Genesis provides the foundation for cosmology in the three traditions. The natural world is seen as a physical creation and a reality separate from God, although dependent on God for its continued existence. Creation is regarded as good and real, not evil or illusory (as some Gnostic traditions and Eastern religions claim).

## Revelation

In unique historical events God reveals his Will and Law to humanity. Revelation is given (interpreted and applied) in writings in the form of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Bible and the Islamic Qur'an (Koran). God's revelation requires human obedience if one is to avoid punishment and find true spiritual life.

## Salvation

Semitic religions believe in life after death, and that divine judgement will result in eternal reward or punishment depending on God's mercy and justice. Also, the moral quality of the individual person's thoughts and actions in life contribute to the state of life after death.

## Common emphases

The Semitic faiths also share distinctive emphases. They regard human beings as capable of transcending the physical limits of the natural world and so rank humanity as superior to nature. They believe that individuals have personal responsibility for their actions in life and are therefore morally accountable to God for their thoughts and deeds.

The Semitic traditions view the created world as a morally good order of existence in which the justice of God calls for justice in human society. Finally, these three faiths all see the movement of history not as an endless cycle but rather as a linear progression from original creation towards final redemption.







**Taj Mahal and the River Ganges** A monument to eternal love that has inspired many, no matter what their religious beliefs. Built by Shah Jehan in the 17th century. Hindu people are cremated on the banks of the Ganges to ritually release their soul for rebirth and their ashes are spread into the river.

## Indian religions – immanent religious worldviews

Hinduism and Buddhism emphasise the discovery of spiritual truth from within the human spirit. The two world religions to emerge from India, Hinduism and Buddhism are historically related in so far as Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, began life as a Hindu. Hence, in certain respects, the Buddhist worldview echoes that of Hinduism.

### Knowledge and deliverance

In both Hinduism and Buddhism, the major emphasis is on spiritual salvation through wisdom or esoteric knowledge. Spiritual wisdom is more than just theoretical information about things in the world. It is deep familiarity with the ultimate truth of life, which includes and transcends the world itself. Wisdom is direct personal experience of the eternal spiritual reality that resides within and extends beyond the ordinary empirical nature of things and lives and minds. The Eastern religions happily admit that there is more to life than meets the eye, and wisdom reveals the deeper reality beneath the surface phenomena and accidents of life.

### The experience of wisdom

Wisdom reveals the ultimate reality of life, the universe and everything. It does so in a living experience of that reality. The scale and intensity of wisdom make it tremendously exhilarating and rather frightening at the same time. That is one reason why people often avoid wisdom if they can, because it can be too difficult and scary for them to face if they are not ready for the experience. The whole point of many religious rituals and practices is to prepare one's spiritual identity, or inner sense of self, so that one is strong enough to seek wisdom and flexible enough to take it on board when it appears.

Wisdom is not like ordinary knowledge. We might say that people with ordinary knowledge have 'read the book and seen the movie', while people with wisdom have 'been there and done it themselves'. Ordinary knowledge acquaints us with objects in the world; wisdom joins us to the living reality of the world. Knowledge can leave us unchanged, but wisdom is immediate and personal experience that alters us to the core of our existence.

Ordinary knowledge separates us from what we know, and in that sense is 'objective'. Wisdom joins us with what is known to us, so that 'we' and 'what we know' are one and the same. The experience of wisdom unites us with what we know, so that we are what is known to us.

### Deliverance and the world

According to the Eastern religions (and such Western traditions as Gnosticism and mysticism), the unifying power of wisdom leads to deliverance. When wisdom reveals eternal reality, then whoever has that wisdom



**Inner eye/I** When the inner eye/I opens, cosmic consciousness looks out into the world through your ordinary point of view



becomes united with that reality and so they become eternal themselves. In the moment of experience of wisdom, we are changed and elevated to become one with the ultimate reality that transcends the temporariness and other misfortunes of human existence. Thereby, wisdom is deliverance from suffering and death in the physical world. Reincarnation allows the spirit to gain that additional wisdom to take it to a higher spiritual plane. The Semitic traditions regard life as linear, moving from birth in a spiritual journey to the afterlife. Indian religions, though, see life more as a cycle or spiral, progressing through birth, life and death to rebirth. Ideally, one grows in wisdom through each lifetime until reaching the ultimate spiritual goal of Enlightenment.

The Eastern attitude of transcending the world to gain deliverance from the suffering of life is often mistaken by Western thinkers to be a denial of life and a condemnation of the world. Albert Schweitzer, a famous humanitarian and Christian theologian from early in the twentieth century, set the lead by characterising the Eastern ideal as ‘world-and-life negating’. But Western commentators who are quick to follow Schweitzer fail to see that the Eastern religious ambition rests on the assumption that ignorance can be replaced by wisdom.

If human experience of meaninglessness and suffering is due to incorrect knowledge of life and the world, then what Eastern religions reject is not the reality of life and the value of the world but, rather, the error of false knowledge that begets the misfortune of unnecessary suffering.

## Characteristics of religion

It is common to regard religions as having a number of outward forms. These visible features can be classified into four main observable aspects: beliefs, sacred texts and writing, ethics, rituals and ceremonies. In practice, the boundaries of these aspects overlap and blend into one another, and may also include social structure, myths and stories, religious experience and symbols.

## Beliefs and believers

Beliefs are ideas that are considered true and express the self-understanding of the tradition. Earliest attempts to put beliefs into words used sacred stories and myths to convey deep insights. At a more developed level we find doctrines and creeds expressing beliefs in a clear form. Many sophisticated traditions offer the formal study of religious beliefs called theology. All organised religions have a system of beliefs which offers a comprehensive picture of reality – the first step in knowing how best to live.



Outer aspects of religious tradition

In accepting the worldview offered by a religion, believers make sense of life in terms of the ideas and values of that religion.

## Sacred texts and writings

The notion of ‘text’ has a wide meaning that takes in more than just written material. In addition to ancient handwritten manuscripts and modern printed books, texts are taken to include oral traditions and artistic representations. Thus, for example, the traditional stories, paintings and ground-sculptures of Australian Aboriginals may be regarded as texts.

Not all religious texts are ‘sacred’ in the sense of containing revelation or having a direct relation with the transcendent. In addition to scriptures, most religions hold in high regard various other writings that are the works of commentary or explanation.



## Ethics

Ethics are ideas about worthy human conduct. Religious traditions spell out the consequences of beliefs by offering guidance in how one should live. Many have codes which set standards and give directions for behaviour. For instance, the Torah, or Law, is the central guide to life for Orthodox Jews; while the Dreaming is a Law equally central to Aboriginal spirituality.

## Rituals and ceremonies

These are established ceremonies and customary acts that involve special, deliberate and repeatable patterns of behaviour. Rituals often provide opportunities for members of a tradition to enact their beliefs and commemorate important past events by bringing them into the present.

Religious rituals affirm the values, meanings and purposes that are shared within a tradition. Rituals can include such activities as worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental and healing rites, and festivals. Religious festivals can be solemn occasions to recall sad events or glad celebrations to honour joyous happenings.

Rituals concentrate one's mind on the meaning and implications of the events that surround them. For example, the simple ritual of saying grace before meals is a thanksgiving that reminds us that the life of an animal or vegetable has been sacrificed for our food. Through the repetitive formality of ritual actions, practitioners are able to feel the spiritual presence within the ordinary world.

## Myths and stories

The dimension of myth includes the stories and historical narratives of a tradition as well as its symbolic and instructive myths. 'Stories' and 'myths' may be loosely distinguished from one another on the grounds that the former more or less respect the conventions of time and space, while the latter have a timeless and universal quality about them.

Thus, there are stories about historical incarnations (e.g. Krishna, Christ), while there are myths about Cosmic Creation (e.g. Genesis, Timaeus, the Rainbow Serpent). The distinction is not hard and fast, because there are often religious stories such as infancy narratives which have mythic qualities that not all would take literally (e.g. the star of Bethlehem).



The Australian bush Australia has many sites suitable for quiet contemplation or meditation

## Symbols

These may include material objects and artistic creations, for example temples, icons and pulpits. Symbols have the power to represent realities beyond themselves. They focus beliefs, communicate meanings, promote community identity and enliven faith experience.

## Religious experience

The dimension of experience, including associated emotional reactions to the world and to ritual, is often of central importance in religious history and contemporary practice. Indeed, religious traditions have their earliest and deepest foundation in personal experience or revelation of some power or transcendent spiritual reality greater than human.

## Social structures

Religious traditions are manifested and perpetuated within society through institutions and specific leadership groups. These communicate established beliefs and traditional practices from one generation to the next.

The social structures of religious traditions often take the form of separate institutions within society (e.g. 'the Church'). In tribal cultures they commonly occur as distinctive features of the society (e.g. a priestly caste). In traditional Australian Aboriginal spirituality such traditions are incorporated in everyday life and the dissemination of knowledge is through tribal elders.





# Studying religion(s)

The aspects or characteristics of religion make study of the complex world of religion more manageable. But rightly understood, each aspect opens a window into the inner world of religion, its living heart. And just like the love that remembers your birthday with a small gift, it is the invisible inner reality that counts most.

The outer aspects of religions only make religious sense when they are understood in relation to their inner meanings. To study the world's religious traditions in their living integrity, certain attitudes and skills are more appropriate and useful than others.

An attitude of respect for religion and an openness to new ideas are necessary when studying religion. If we are totally closed to the possibility of religion then we will be unable to recognise the inner meanings which give sense to religion. It would be like trying to get to know somebody personally by studying them as if they were a nebula or insect; living things, like people and religious traditions, are not inclined to disclose themselves when they are investigated like lifeless objects. They reveal their inner life and depth to those who approach with open hearts and open minds.

Good research and study maintains an attitude of impartial commitment. An impartial study avoids prejudging the beliefs and practices of religions. No one religion is assumed to be 'the only true religion'. All the worlds of religion are respected equally, without any being diminished by exclusive commitment to any other. When a tradition claims to have the only way to fulfilment and deliverance, the influence of its claim can certainly be considered within the context of the tradition itself. Yet to avoid fundamentalism, the supremacy claims of one tradition are not extended to compromise the possibility and worth of other traditions.

To make sense rather than non-sense out of religions, we must avoid examining them through the filter of our own beliefs and practices. By suspending our disbelief and sympathising with the values and goals of religious traditions and their participants, we can identify with the living experience of being inside a world of religion. In this way it becomes possible to gain insight into what religious actions mean to those who perform them.

## The inner life of religion

Simple observation often provides the first and easiest point of entry into a particular religious world. Through our five senses we can learn much about the surface aspects and outward appearances of religion. We can observe what colour robes a Taoist priest wears during an exorcism, and what ritual actions a Christian priest performs during a Communion service, or what sacred prayers a Tibetan Buddhist priest chants during daily meditation.

Yet there is more to religion than just what meets the eye. The surface phenomena of religion (such as ritual gestures, burning candles and ringing bells) do not contain their inner meaning and deep purpose. We can readily see, for example, that a Jewish groom breaks a drinking glass underfoot at the end of the marriage ceremony. But no matter how hard we stare we will not understand that breaking the glass commemorates the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE.

The living experience of being inside a world of religion is what gives meaning to outward actions that otherwise might seem interesting but unintelligible. Hidden inside religious traditions are its wellsprings of meaning from which all-else flows. The surface phenomena are like the flesh, limbs and organs of a person; they can be exhaustively picked apart and described without any reference to the life and soul that integrate, animate and ennoble the person as a whole and complete individual.

These heartfelt realities are invisible and hard to describe yet they constitute the best part of religion for those who put their faith to good use.

## The secret to understanding 'religion'

The origin of religion in all cultures is connected with whatever it is that makes us distinctively human: the quality we have that makes us aware of our own being and how our kind of awareness is different from that of minerals, plants or other animals – the sense we have of being unfinished and able to move into new possibilities. The traditional word for this inner dimension of our being is 'spirit'. Our spirit is that which is creative in us, which yearns to break boundaries, which soars above the ordinary.



The spirit is also what connects us to mystery, which for many involves a power greater than themselves. Religions take their adherents into this invisible world of spiritual reality. Personal allegiance to this world is the experience called faith, and because the experience deepens with time, it is common to speak of a 'journey of faith' or 'the spiritual life'. Religious actions are designed to remember and celebrate the presence of the spiritual life that underlies and empowers the material world.

The problem is, of course, that in our society a 'commonsense' view of the world may not acknowledge the reality of a spiritual world at all. We cannot perceive things of the spirit with our physical eyes alone. As the Fox says to the Little Prince (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, 1982, p. 68):

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

Until recently the theories of modern science seemed to cast doubt on the existence of unseen entities. Yet scientific scepticism has begun to diminish now that astrophysicists report that 90 per cent of the 'matter' in the universe is invisible in the sense that it does not register on scientific instruments. We may perhaps understand religious traditions as having developed from dialogue with the unseen spiritual reality of the universe from earliest times.



The gift of love

The heart of religion is beyond the limitations of conventional reason. It is a felt experience of invisible and infinite reality, which leads us to extend and transcend ordinary consciousness by discovering and coming to know what was unrecognised previously. Plotinus, a great teacher from Alexandria in Egypt, advised that to find the deep things of spirit we must close our eyes and invoke a new manner of seeing, 'a wakefulness that is the birthright of us all, though only few put it to use'.

Finding the spiritual heart of religion begins with faith that there is something to understand beyond surface appearances. All religions affirm the existence of a higher reality than ordinary human experience, and they all teach that life gains meaning and fulfilment in relation to that higher reality. As one of the Hindu Upanishads puts it: 'Faith is the bird that feels the light, and sings while the dawn is dark'.

## The dynamic of religion

William James (1842-1910), an American psychologist and philosopher, describes the vital process at the heart of religion as a twofold movement: an uneasiness, and its solution. James says (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1979, p. 484):

The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers.

Identifying a similar process in the nature of religion, yet using phrases that are more obviously positive the Russian thinker and writer Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) says (p. 295):

True religion is a relation, accordant with reason and knowledge, which man establishes with the infinite life surrounding him; and it is such as binds his life to the infinity, and guides his conduct.

These scholars both regard religion as a combination of how we feel about our relationship with the universe and what we do to establish, maintain and improve the quality of that living feeling.





## The discovery of purpose

What most religions claim to offer their supporters is a way of restoring them to a right relationship with the world or the higher powers that underpin their lives. With that restoration human life gains meaning in the present imperfect world. In the light of higher reality, people discover a reason for life and a purpose for death; they can make overall sense of things. With a religious perspective people can see that their lives really do matter: life has a genuine purpose and a final goal beyond the limitations of the present human condition.

The Greek temple at Delphi was famous for its inscription, translated as, 'Know yourself'. Only the wisdom of self-knowledge reveals who you really are. Religion's answer is to situate life in a larger context, typically some all-embracing spiritual reality that explains the origin and goal of life and mind and makes clear how people should live. All religions offer a way of life – with special practices for keeping on track, such as meditation, ethics and rituals.

## The integral study of religion

We still need some way of identifying what is religiously significant within any particular tradition. Thus, for example, a walking holiday and a religious pilgrimage might not differ from one another in any significant outer detail. Yet the respective people involved will have totally different intentions and consequent experiences. What the travellers think they are doing is what decides the nature of their journey.

The characteristic that makes a tradition 'religious' is its concern with deliverance on a cosmic scale. Or, to present the same concern with a positive face, what makes a tradition religious is that it offers a way of bringing human existence to the fullness of life. The vital process of religion assumes that there is something better than ordinary existence; there is a way out of (or through) life's disappointments and hardships to something better. Religion offers a way to get from an initial condition to a much improved one.

Each of the major religions has a message about the human condition; each points to something that it views as fundamentally wrong and unsatisfactory about our ordinary existence; each offers a diagnosis of the cause of that unsatisfactoriness and points to a possible remedy.

(Burke, p. 2)

This inner dynamic is what gives purpose to the surface phenomena of religion and makes those phenomena religious in the first place.

In those terms, a definition of religion would be: a way of life and thought directed towards ultimate fullness and typically expressed through a living system of aspects such as beliefs, ethics, sacred texts and writings, and rituals and ceremonies.

Only when we have a grasp of the inner dynamic operating below the surface of religious phenomena can we make sense of them and explain them in terms that a believer of that tradition could accept as insightful and fair. Then we will be equipped to conduct a genuinely religious study of religions in their integrity and unique riches, as opposed to making a sociological, historical, psychological, political or other analysis of religion.

## Within and beyond

At the heart of religion is the journey of life in search of meaning and fulfilment within and beyond the present world. The formal beliefs, rituals and structures of religion provide a way of life and thought that brings the adherent to wholeness as an individual and within a community. Through the practice of religion and progress on the journey of life, one's experience broadens, one's understanding deepens, and one grows to realise that life within and life beyond are really one and the same.

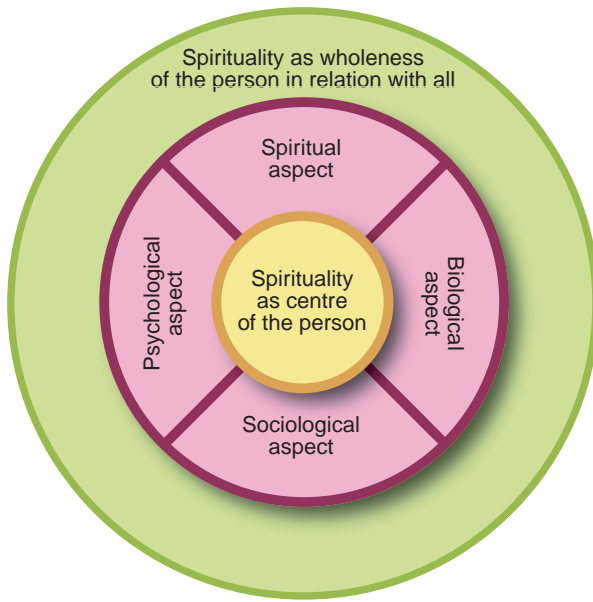
In *Alcheringa*, a poem which speaks of 'creative journeys' and the Dream as the spiritual vision of all things, the Aboriginal poet Rod Cameron writes:

Human life is lived in two dimensions.  
One outstretches to the long horizons  
While the other gives us fellowship with stars.  
One is secular and the other is sacred.

The secular and the sacred need each other.

We leave our footprints on the crimson earth  
and light our little campfires in the night  
but our human spirit cannot be contained.  
It leaps beyond the canopy of stars.





**A model of spirituality**

The diagram, 'A model of spirituality', is one way of depicting human nature and its potential for wholeness. The intermediate ring shows the four component parts of the ordinary person conventionally understood. Each of us is made up of a physical body, a social context, a psychological life of thought and emotion, and an invisible inner life of the spirit. The relative size of those four dimensions depends upon the individual. Some people, for example, are acutely aware of their bodies but largely unconscious of their inner spiritual life; some are so conscious of their social constraints that they are hardly aware of their psychological freedoms.

The proportions of the intermediate components may vary. Yet, the centre ring shows the true spiritual identity of each person as a unique individual, while the outer ring shows the wholeness of each person in relation to others and the world. The practice of religion, or spirituality, is the response from within to the call from beyond. The immanent spirit within seeks connection with the transcendent spirit beyond. That connection is made through one's intentional practice of spirituality or adherence to formal religion. The more one commits to practice, the larger one's Spiritual aspect becomes. The more freely spirit flows within, throughout and beyond, the greater is one's achievement of wholeness, fulfilment and grace.

## Contribution of religion

The motives and goals of religion have been shaping human culture and directing human history since time immemorial. Religion has sustained people in times of adversity; it has strengthened them in times of fear; it has offered the path of a meaningful life in this present world, and provided the hope of a better life in the next world.

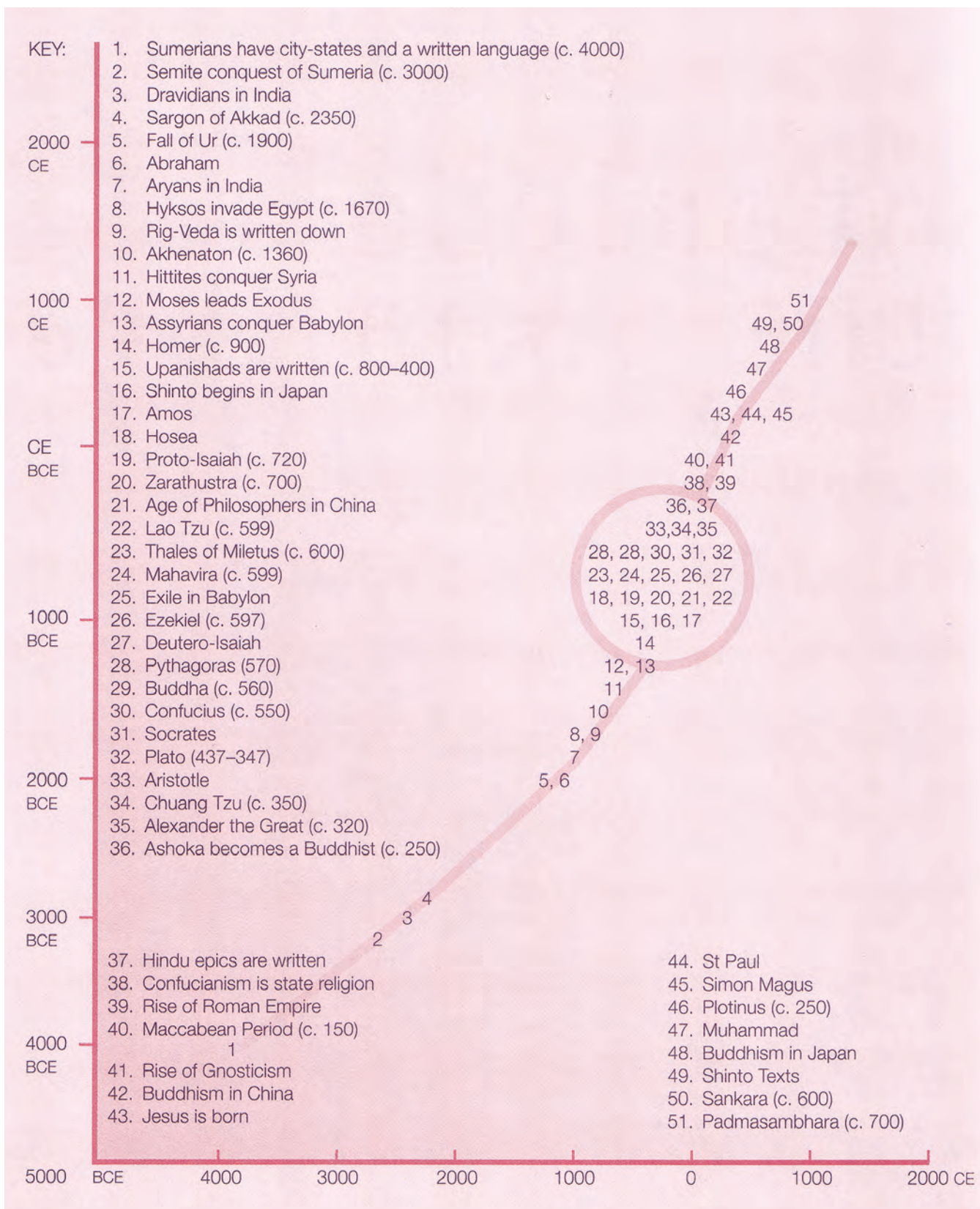
## Contribution of religion to society and culture

Historically, religion has inspired more human creativity and noble endeavour than any other cause. Through tracing the influence of any religion on its host society, we inevitably come into contact with many aspects of that society's intellectual and cultural life. While all theology and much philosophy is the most obvious product of religious thinking, a great deal of art, literature and architecture serves a clearly devotional purpose. Even modern Western science started out (in the seventeenth century) with the religious aim of praising God more fully through better understanding his creation: 'thinking God's thoughts after Him'.

In some cultures the religious leaders are also the political leaders. In Australia, for instance, ministers of the Church of England (now the Anglican Church) had a supervisory and disciplinary role in the early colony. Today religious leaders in Australia are, not infrequently, told to stay out of political commentary by some politicians.

Religious faith comes from and leads to the highest human ideals such as heroic sacrifice and loyalty. Much of our history and culture results from the desires of people to celebrate or defend their faith, and to bring its ideals into reality. Studying religion gives an insight into one of the most profound forces at work in the hearts and lives and minds of human beings the world over. Unfortunately a wide variety of abuses have taken place in the name of religion. Studying religion may provide us with an understanding that promotes peace and prevents situations developing because of fear of the unknown in other people's cultures.





Axial Era Chart of major religious and cultural events, from Europe to China, with Axial Era circled

