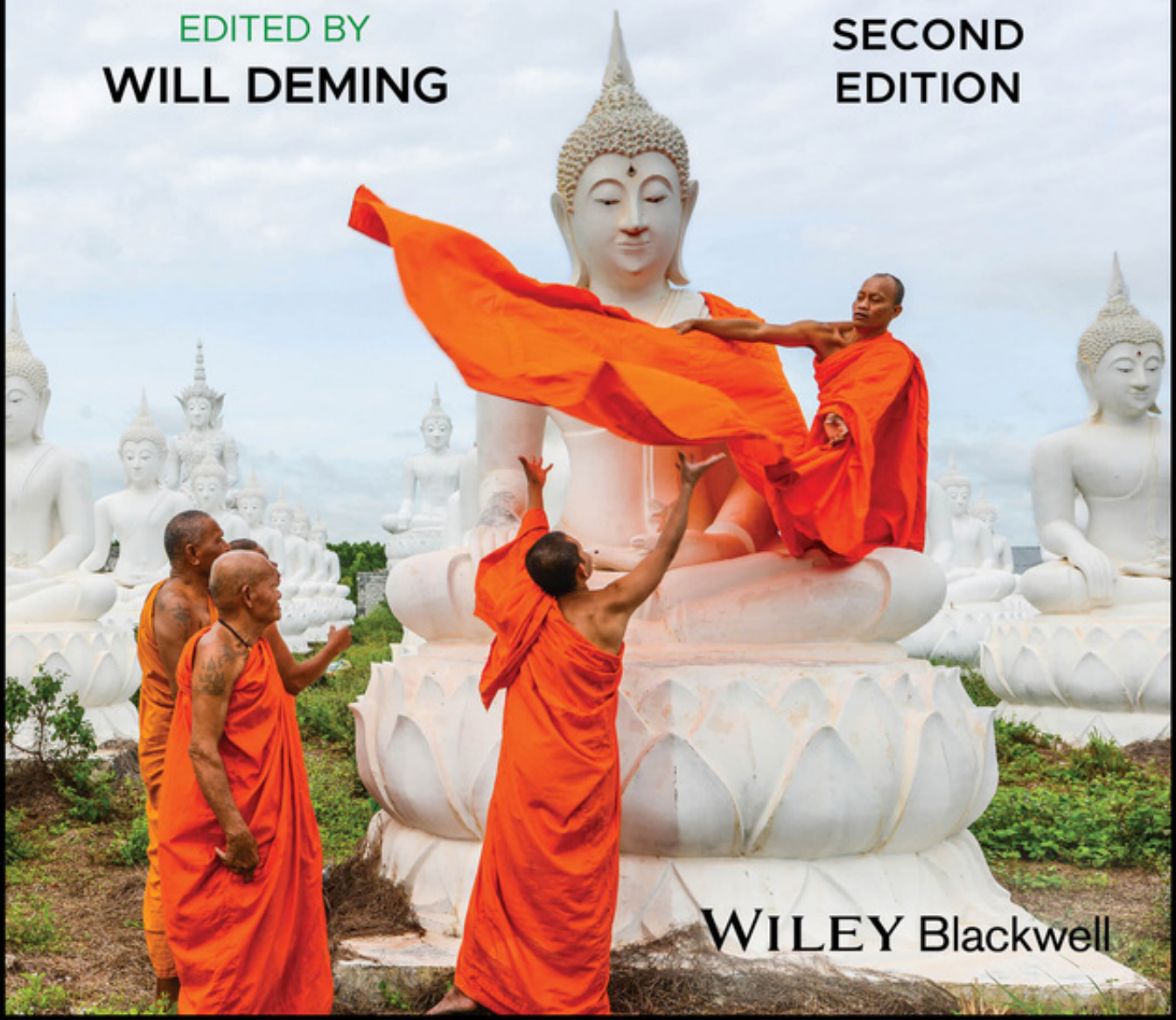
UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

AN INTRODUCTION

EDITED BY
WILL DEMING

SECOND EDITION



WILEY Blackwell

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This edition first published 2025

Registered Office(s)
John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, New Era House, 8 Oldlands Way, Bognor Regis, West Sussex, PO22 8NQ, UK

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Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some content that appears in standard print versions of this book may not be available in other formats.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Applied for:

Paperback: 9781119887478

Cover image: © Goldquest/Getty Images
Cover design: Wiley

Set in 10/13.5 pt Minion Pro by Straive, India

CONTENTS

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

For this second edition of *Understanding the Religions of the World*, all the chapters from the first edition have been edited to remove mistakes, improve clarity, and treat important events that have taken place since 2015, when the first edition appeared. The one exception is the chapter on Japanese religion, which has been completely rewritten and renamed Japan's Lived Religion. This was necessitated by a growing consensus on the fundamental importance of the Meiji regime for the interpretation of Shinto. It also afforded an opportunity to expand the history section of this chapter and broaden and update the discussion of contemporary beliefs and practices.

Beyond this, three major additions have been made to the original text. First, a discussion of African-based religions in the American diaspora has been added to the chapter on African religions, providing an analysis of Candomblé, Umbanda, Vodou, and Santería. Second, a new chapter on the indigenous religions of the Americas has been added. This is a true innovation for texts of this kind, for not only does it cover North, Central, and South America, but it also moves away from an anecdotal approach of treating one or two widely practiced rituals by providing a comprehensive analysis of these religions—to the extent that this is possible in an introductory textbook. This chapter brings to light previously neglected religious traditions and completes the original design of the first edition, which at the time of its publication proved to be too ambitious. Third, a chapter on the study of religions has been added, with the goal of giving students a glimpse into this relatively new and heterogeneous discipline. It begins with the creation of the modern research university and ends with a consideration of the Cognitive Science of Religion, treating major figures, from Marx to Eliade along the way. It is concise and accessible to students in a manner that other treatments are not.

I would like to thank my wife, Lauren Wellford Deming, for her help with proofreading the drafts of this text, and my son, JD Deming, for his advice on clarity and style.

PREFACE FOR TEACHERS

Dear Colleague,

This text offers a new approach to the study of religions. Its goal is to help students understand how religions *work*—what makes them appealing, why they "make sense" to their adherents, and how we can study them as symbolic systems that orient people to things they regard as supremely important in their lives. As *systems*, each religion operates according to its own logic. This is simply another way of saying that religious people do not act at random. Yet a religion's particular logic can mystify outsiders, which is why members of one religion often find it difficult to empathize with members of another, and why students can experience unfamiliar religions as bizarre or confusing.

This book attempts to demystify religions for our students by first identifying each religion's own internal logic, and then explaining how this logic guides adherents into encounters and experiences with transcendent ideas, beings, relationships, and realities. This approach enables students to see why members of a given religion prefer *their* particular rituals, images, and beliefs over a multitude of alternatives, and why religions have developed so differently from one another. It also helps students understand why religious adherents invest so much of themselves and their resources into a religion.

What to Expect: The Specifics

Each chapter is written by or in partnership with an area specialist, and reviewed by other area specialists. This guarantees the latest scholarship and provides students a taste of the distinctive approaches that these specialists use in their respective fields. The study of Islam, for example, has developed quite differently than the study of Indigenous American religions.

The presentation of the material in Chapters 1–10 is guided by an understanding of each religion's particular logic. This is true not only for the sections on contemporary beliefs and practices, but also for the sections on history. The advantage for the historical sections is that each religion's past is organized with an emphasis on how it has changed over time as a dynamic system of meaning. The sections on contemporary beliefs and practices, in turn, move beyond the usual descriptive or thematic approaches by involving the reader in analysis. These sections are much longer than those of a typical textbook, in most cases comprising well over half the chapter.

Chapter Structure

Each chapter, with the exception of Chapters 11 and 12, has four principal sections: Overview, History, Contemporary Beliefs and Practices, and Conclusion.

- The *Overview* provides a brief description of how large the religion is, where it is practiced, something of its distinctive nature, and its major divisions or denominations.
- The *History* section summarizes past practices, doctrines, and organizational structures of a religion and gives an account of important developments and changes. The length of this section varies from chapter to chapter and sometimes includes an account of the western "discovery" of a religion. The chapter on the Religions of Oceania, for example, has a relatively short historical section and discusses the importance of European first contacts.
- *Contemporary Beliefs and Practices* is the heart of each chapter. This section begins with a thesis statement outlining a religion's basic premises and logical structures, and then explains what adherents do and why they do it in light of these premises and structures.
- The *Conclusion* provides a short summary with final insights.

Each chapter ends with questions for review and discussion, a list of key terms, and a short bibliography. The latter is divided into three parts: a good first book, further reading, and reference and research.

The Order of the Chapters

The first four chapters follow the rationale that Hinduism, which shares much of the worldview of Buddhism, prepares students for Buddhism; Buddhism, as a component of both Chinese and Japanese religions, prepares students for these two religions; and Chinese religion, both by its syncretistic nature and its early influence on Japan, prepares students for that religion.

Traditional and indigenous religions are often placed at the beginning of a text, giving the impression that they are more elemental (primitive) than other religions, or at the end, implying, perhaps, that they are not as important. To avoid this, African religions, the religions of Oceania, and indigenous religions in the Americas follow Japanese religion. The order of the last three religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, follows the standard rationale that the religious worldview of Christianity presupposes that of Judaism, and the religious worldview of Islam presupposes that of both Judaism and Christianity. It also has the advantage of putting religions near the end that are already familiar to many students, but which they must now reassess in light of having studied other religions. The chapter entitled Change in Religion

and New Religions follows these because it presupposes some knowledge of the religions discussed in the earlier chapters. Finally, the chapter on the study of religions is placed last, in the hope that the earlier chapters will have peaked the interest of some students to the point that they want to know more about the discipline.

Figures and End Matter

The photographs, diagrams, illustrations, and maps that accompany the text have been carefully chosen to further the discussion of the text, not simply to add ornamentation. At the end of the book, a combined glossary of key terms from all the chapters is assembled, as well as a comprehensive index.

A Personal Note

After teaching "world religions" to incoming first-year students for more than a decade, I began to formulate an analytical approach to the material, replacing the largely descriptive-chronological one I had been using. The result, three years later, was *Rethinking Religion* (2005), in which I outlined a model for making sense of religions. It was on the basis of that publication that I was asked to consider editing a textbook on religions, the first edition of which appeared in 2015. With this new edition, I am again pleased and excited to offer my colleagues what I consider to be a solid introductory text as well as a genuine pedagogical contribution to the study of religions in undergraduate courses.

Will Deming

CHAPTER FEATURES

Each chapter that presents a religious tradition (Chapters 1–10) is divided into four main sections: introduction, history, contemporary beliefs and practices, and conclusion. This is followed by questions for review and discussion, a glossary of key terms, and reading suggestions. In addition, these chapters contain feature boxes that highlight aspects of each religious tradition under discussion. There are five types of boxes:

A Closer Look offers an extra level of detail for topics mentioned in the text.

Rituals, Rites, Practices draws attention to distinctive activities performed by religious adherents.

Sacred Traditions and Scripture provides the reader with examples of the narratives, legal codes, and other compositions—both written and oral—that are authoritative for a religion.

Talking about Religion focuses on how adherents and scholars choose to express themselves when describing or explaining a religion.

Did You Know . . . makes connections between a religion and things that readers commonly know but had not associated with that religion.

Introduction

Understanding religions takes time.

Understanding the Religions of the World: An Introduction, Second Edition.
Edited by Will Deming.

The Importance of Religion

Eighty-five percent of the world's population is religious—roughly 6.9 billion people. This means that religion shapes and justifies much of what goes on in the world. To understand religion is to understand people. To understand religion is to understand today's world.

When people go to war, when they make peace, when they buy and sell, when they start families, and when they honor their dead, they do so in ways influenced by religion. Here are some examples that have important political or economic implications: Almost one-fourth of the world's population (1.9 billion people) does not eat pork or drink alcohol for religious reasons. Another 1.4 billion people do not eat beef. Many countries have a national religion, display religious symbols or colors on their flags, or require their citizens to pay a religion tax. In the United States, sessions of Congress begin with prayer; the outcome of national elections is influenced by religious organizations; tens of thousands of churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples are exempted from paying taxes; and in the grocery store, many foods carry a religious mark or symbol (Figure I.1).

Figure I.1 Many foods at the grocery store bear a mark of religious certification. The "circle U" on this jar designates the approval of a Jewish organization called the Orthodox Union. The "D" signifies that the product contains dairy, and hence should not be eaten with meat. Source: Will Deming.

Knowledge of Religion

Despite religion's considerable presence and influence in the world (Figure I.2), most people know little about it. Maybe this is not so surprising. Most people know little about their own language. Religion, like language, is something people use but rarely think about—it is simply a given of their world. But even when people do ponder

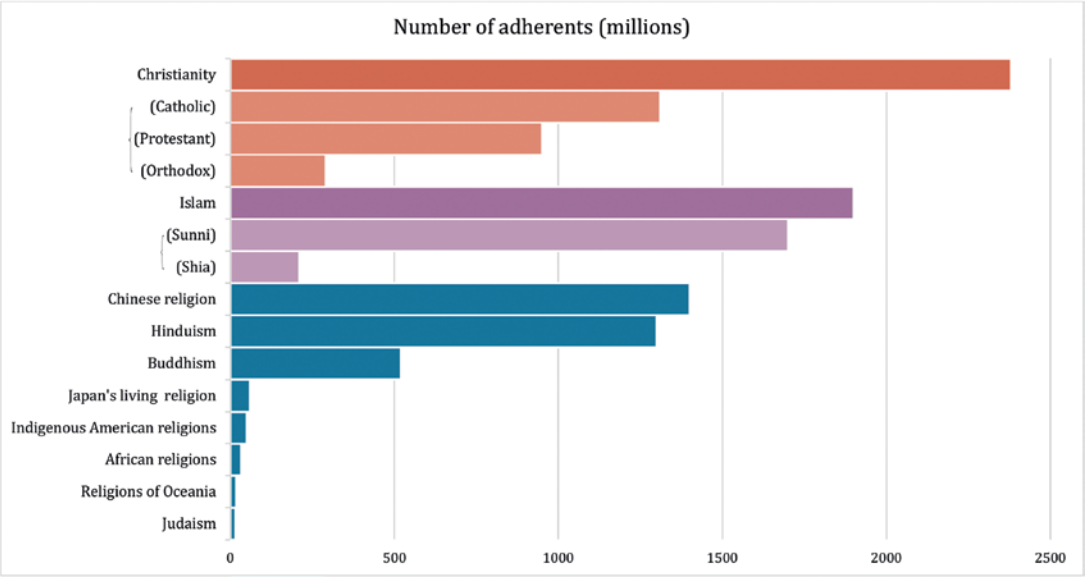

Figure I.2 Religion is a human activity practiced by about 85 percent of the world's population.

religion, it is usually their own religion that comes to mind. Most Roman Catholics, for example, know little about Islam or Hinduism. Most, in fact, know little about other forms of Christianity. And the same is true for Baptists and Methodists, and for different types of Muslims and Buddhists.

In the United States, several legal and social norms actually discourage people from learning about any religion beyond their own. The American principle of separation of church and state has limited the extent to which religion is studied in public schools, while the secular nature of American society promotes the idea that religion is a private matter, unsuited for public discussion. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was even popular to single out religion as one of two topics that people should avoid in polite conversation—the other being politics.

Beyond this, the absence of a national religion in the United States encourages religious diversity. Today, more religions are practiced in the United States than in any other country. But with so many smaller religious circles carrying on internal conversations of their own, a larger forum for the public discussion of religion has been slow to materialize. Historically, Christians and Jews have had little interaction with one another; Roman Catholics and Protestants have also kept to themselves; and the various Protestant denominations have more often than not established their identities by highlighting their differences. The unifying factors that now promote the public discussion of religion are fairly recent to the American scene. Ecumenical movements, the notions that most Americans practice an "Abrahamic religion" or share a common "Judeo-Christian" value system, and the adoption of the phrase "In God We Trust" as the national motto go back no further than the previous century.

Finally, the importance given to science in the United States often marginalizes religious perspectives on social and economic issues. In legislatures and boardrooms across the country, it is now a matter of course to demand that someone "do the science" before addressing an issue. By contrast, it is rarely appropriate to ask that someone consider the religious or spiritual dimensions of an issue—that is, "do the theology."

A Closer Look

Approaching Religion

Not everyone interested in religion practices religion—some people are insiders and some are outsiders. *Religious adherents* and *theologians* are insiders. Those in the first group practice a religion; those in the second both practice a religion and seek to understand, explain, and articulate how that religion works. *Students of religion*, by contrast, engage in the academic study of both religion and religions from the outside, often by comparing several religions. They can practice a religion in their private lives as well, but they are rarely theologians.

Understanding Religions

The purpose of this book is to provide an objective approach to learning about and analyzing religions. It is one thing to know facts about a religion—its history, its size, its geographical distribution, and its principal beliefs and practices. It is quite another thing to understand a religion: to appreciate why a particular religion is so appealing to some people; why it makes sense to its adherents; and how it works as a system for defining and achieving human aspirations. This sort of understanding gives us insight into how religious people view the human condition and what motivates them to live as they do.

Defining Religion and Religions

There are many ways to define religion. Typical definitions include things like:

- a system of beliefs and moral behavior,
- faith in God, and
- the worship of supernatural beings.

While these definitions may be helpful in discussing certain religions or certain aspects of religions, they are not broad enough to cover all the religions we will study

in this book. As a consequence, we must take a more inclusive approach, defining **religion** as *orientation to what is supreme or ultimate in one's life*.

A definition such as this is necessary because of the tremendous variation we find among the religions of the world. The word "orientation," for example, is flexible enough to account for the innumerable ways in which people practice their religions (pilgrimage, sacrifice, dancing, acts of kindness, storytelling, devotion, etc.). Likewise, the use of "what" in the phrase "what is supreme or ultimate" is necessary because the focal point of some religions, such as *brahman* in Hinduism or nirvana in Buddhism, is neither a thing nor a being. Indeed, according to some Buddhist teachings, nirvana may, in fact, neither exist nor not exist. For this reason, each of these is best designated as a "what." Finally, the phrase "supreme or ultimate" is needed because, while "ultimate" accurately describes the Muslim God and nirvana, it would distort African and Oceanian views of the divine world in a way that "supreme" does not. The difference is a subtle but indispensable distinction between what is most important and what is more important than anything else could ever be.

Given this definition of religion, we may define **religions** (the plural) as discrete systems or traditions of orientation to what is supreme or ultimate—for example, Buddhism and Islam (Figure I.2).

The goal of orienting oneself to what is supreme or ultimate is to make one's life more real, more true, and more meaningful, and in every religion this requires the use of **symbols**. While everyday English uses the word symbol to mean something that "represents" or "stands for" something else, it is important to think of *religious* symbols as tools. This is because religious symbols do not just represent something, they *do* something. They enable religious people to achieve their fullest potential in life by linking them to what is supreme or ultimate. Lighting a candle and placing it in front of the statue of a god does not simply represent wisdom or divine light. Rather, it nurtures a relationship with a divine being who is accessible through the symbols ("tools") of the candle and the statue. Likewise, prayer does not "stand" for anything. It is orientation to deities by speaking to them.

This raises an important question: what qualifies a candle, a statue, or a prayer as a religious symbol? As we will discover, many things serve as symbols: words, objects, images, sounds, motions, rituals, foods, animals, clothing, buildings, mountains, rivers, and much, much more. Even so, not just anything can be a symbol for a particular religion. Because each religion has its own understanding of what is supreme or ultimate, each will also have its own set of appropriate words, objects, images, etc. If what is supreme or ultimate comes through enlightenment, as in Buddhism, then meditation will be an appropriate tool for orientation. But if it comes through establishing balance and harmony in an ever-changing cosmos, as in Chinese religion, then acupuncture or eating bitter foods might be required.

This wide variation in symbols between different religions underscores a final important insight: each religion is a distinct, internally logical system. In this respect, religions may be compared to languages. Just as a word from one language may be meaningless or inappropriate in another language, most religious symbols are meaningless or inappropriate outside the context of their own religion. Praying in the

direction of Mecca, as Muslims do, has no significance for Hindus and Buddhists. Removing one's shoes before entering a place of worship, as is practiced in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, is normally quite inappropriate in Jewish and Christian worship. Even symbols that outwardly resemble one another are often appropriate in different religions for very different reasons. The Hindu practice of bathing in the Ganges River and Christian baptism are both methods of spiritual purification that use water. In Hinduism, however, bathing in the Ganges "makes sense" because the Ganges is a manifestation of the Great Goddess. For Christians, however, baptism is an effective tool because it connects them to God through the death of Jesus Christ. Likewise, while most Hindus do not eat beef and most Muslims do not eat pork, Hindus renounce beef because they consider the cow too god-like to harm, let alone eat, whereas Muslims forgo pork because they regard the pig as ritually and hygienically unfit for human consumption.

In the final analysis, what qualifies something as a symbol is its capacity to "work" in accordance with a religion's **internal logic**. Given a religion's understanding of what is supreme or ultimate, things that promise orientation to it have the potential to be effective symbols. When symbols lose this capacity, moreover, they become obsolete. This is why, for example, Roman Catholics no longer abstain from meat on Friday as a way to please God. Because of decisions made at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), abstaining from meat on Friday lost its effectiveness: it no longer "works" as a tool to draw close to God.

CONCLUSION

By defining religion and religious symbols, we have taken the first step in understanding the religions of the world. In the following chapters, we will examine 10 religions, each of which has its own view of what is supreme or ultimate, operates according to its own internal logic, and uses its own repertoire of symbols. Using this knowledge, we will consider each religion's beginning, its development over time, and its manifestation in today's world. In two final chapters we will explore the ways in which religions change over time, how new religions come into being, and how the study of religions became an academic discipline. For our efforts, we will gain valuable insight into how the people with whom we share the earth view themselves and others from a religious perspective.

For review

1. What is the role of symbols in a religion?
2. How is a religion's internal logic related to what it envisions as supreme or ultimate?
3. What is the difference between religion and *a* religion?
4. According to our definitions, do you consider yourself a religious adherent, a theologian, or a student of religion—or some combination of these?

For discussion

1. Can entire religions die out? Give some examples and explain why this happens.
2. Why, in an age of secularism and science, do people still find religion attractive?

Key Terms

internal logic	A system of meaning unique to a particular religion that determines how one orients oneself and others to what is supreme or ultimate.
religion	The human activity of orientation to what is supreme or ultimate.
religions	Symbolic systems by which people orient themselves to a particular vision of what is supreme or ultimate.
the supreme or ultimate	The focal point of religion and religions; that which is the most important, real, and true in someone's life.
symbol	The means by which people orient themselves to what is supreme or ultimate; depending on the religion, a symbol can be practically anything.

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CHAPTER 1

Hinduism

The divine is in everyone

A *murti* (idol) of the Hindu god Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of the Great Goddess Devi. Source: Will Deming.

DID YOU KNOW …

The popular term avatar comes from Hinduism, where it has been used for hundreds of years to describe the 10 incarnations of the god Vishnu. In Hinduism an *avatar* is a form by which this god crosses over from his reality into ours.

Understanding the Religions of the World: An Introduction, Second Edition.
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OVERVIEW

Hinduism is the predominant religion of India, the world's most populous nation. More than 80 percent of its population (around 1.4 billion people) identify themselves as Hindu. The next largest religion in India is Islam, at about 14 percent of the population, followed by Christianity and Sikhism, at about 2.3 and 1.7 percent, respectively. More than 50 million Hindus also live in countries surrounding India—Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar—and significant populations can be found in Bali, Malaysia, the United States, Mauritius, Guyana, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (Figure 1.1).

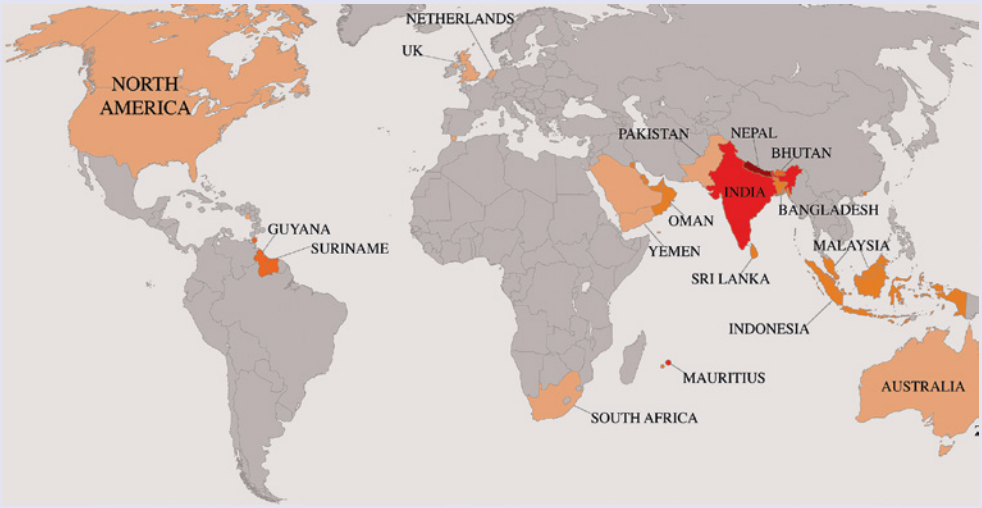

Figure 1.1 A map indicating the Hindu population of different countries as a percentage of each country's total population. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Hindus have no single scripture that codifies their core beliefs, nor do they have a governing body that establishes a standard for religious practices. Instead, Hindus recognize a wide diversity within their religion. In India alone one finds innumerable regional differences, and outside the country this diversity is sometimes even greater. Indonesians, for example, practice forms of Hinduism that incorporate elements from Islam and local folk traditions.

Thus, it should come as no surprise to learn that the name Hinduism, which manages to gather this diversity neatly—perhaps too neatly—under a single designation, was not created by Hindus themselves. Rather, the ancient Persians used "Hindu" to designate their neighbors to the east, who lived along the banks of the Indus River. But even the

Persians did not intend to identify the religion of these people, just their geographical location. Only when India came under British colonial rule in the eighteenth century did Hinduism gain currency as an umbrella term for the religion. The British, who thought of religions as theological systems, and who governed India by taking into account the religious affiliation of their subjects, needed terms to distinguish Indians of this religion from Indians who were Sikhs, or Muslims, or something else. By contrast, Hindus had traditionally referred to their religious activities as ***dharma*** (duty), and distinguished themselves from others in various ways, such as calling themselves **Aryans** (noble people), or followers of **Brahmins** (Hindu priests), or devotees of a particular god in the Hindu pantheon. Today, many Hindus accept and use the names Hindu and Hinduism to speak of themselves and their religion, despite its unusual diversity.

To envision such a multiform religion, Julius Lipner has likened Hinduism to the famous banyan tree near Kolkata (Calcutta), in West Bengal. The banyan (Figure 1.2), India's national tree, sends out a profusion of aerial roots, which become new trunks, covering large areas and assimilating everything in their path. The Kolkata banyan covers approximately four acres. It has no central trunk or core segment, but is nonetheless a single tree. In a similar way, we can understand Hinduism as a single entity, but one whose diversity almost defies description. (Julius Lipner, "On Hinduism and Hinduisms: The Way of the Banyan," in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

Figure 1.2 Like the banyan tree, Hinduism has no center or main trunk.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

History

Timeline

2300–2000 BCE	The Indus Valley civilization is at its height.
2000–1500 BCE	The Indus Valley civilization is in decline.
1700–1500 BCE	Aryans migrate into the Indus Valley; the *Rig-Veda* is composed.
1200–900 BCE	The *Collections* are brought to completion.
900 BCE	Aryan peoples spread eastward to the Ganges River.
800–600 BCE	The *Brahmanas* are composed.
500–400 BCE	The first *Upanishads* are composed; Buddhism begins.
5th–4th century BCE	The caste system begins to take shape.
3rd century BCE	Ashoka becomes king of the Mauryan dynasty.
300 BCE–300 CE	The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are composed; the practice of *puja* begins.
1st century CE	The *Bhagavad Gita* is composed.
2nd century CE	The first evidence of Hindu temples.
3rd–4th century CE	Devotional practices (*bhakti*) become popular in south India among Tamils.
ca. 350 CE	The first *Puranas* are composed.
7th century CE	Devotional practices (*bhakti*) are used widely in Hinduism.
ca. 1000 CE	Muslims enter the Punjab.
1206–1526 CE	The Delhi Sultanate.
mid-13th century	Buddhism disappears from most of India.
15th century	Sikhism is founded.
1526–18th century	The Mughal Dynasty.
1600	The East India Company establishes offices in Kolkata.
1757	The beginning of British colonial domination.

(*continued*)

18th and 19th centuries	The Hindu Renaissance.
1869–1948	Mohandas Gandhi.
1872–1950	Aurobindo Ghosh.
1947	End of British rule; millions of Hindus and Muslims are uprooted and resettled during India's Partition, which creates the nation of Pakistan.
1950	The Indian Constitution guarantees certain civil liberties regardless of caste or religion.
1980s	The resurgence of Hindu Nationalism.

The Indus Valley

Hinduism began in the middle of the second millennium BCE in the Indus Valley, a fertile region fed by five tributaries of the Indus River. Today this area is known as the Punjab (five rivers) and is divided between the nations of India and Pakistan. From approximately 2300 to 2000 BCE, a complex, urban civilization flourished in the Indus Valley. It had two major cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, a host of other towns and settlements, and a remarkably uniform culture spread out over 400 square miles.

Both the religion and the name of this civilization remain a mystery, since no one has been able to decipher what is left of its writing system—if, in fact, the curious shapes found there are a writing system. On the basis of archaeology, some scholars postulate connections between the religion of the Indus Valley civilization and later Hinduism. For example, there remain about 2000 soapstone seals from the Indus Valley civilization which were used to identify property, and some of these depict images of what might be incense burners or altars. One of the most celebrated images depicts a figure seated with his legs crossed in a yogic position, surrounded by various wild animals. It has been suggested that this is an early form of the Hindu god Shiva, who is master of yogic renunciation and sometimes carries the name Lord of the Animals. It has also been proposed that Hinduism's veneration of the Goddess may have roots in the worship of goddesses in the Indus Valley civilization.

Newcomers to the Indus Valley

Whether or not this earlier civilization influenced Hinduism, most of what constituted the first period of Hinduism came from a nomadic herding people who called themselves Aryans (noble ones). Scholars from the previous century believed that the Aryans had crossed over the Himalayas from central Asia and conquered or

overwhelmed the Indus Valley's inhabitants. But archeological research has since cast doubt on this theory, leading most scholars to consider flooding, disease, or crop failure as the cause of the Indus Valley civilization's demise. The original homeland of the Aryans is now also debated, some scholars suggesting a location in what is now modern Turkey, or even another part of India.

A Closer Look

The Swastika

While westerners generally associate the swastika with the atrocities of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime, this association is uniquely western and only goes back to the early twentieth century. As a religious symbol in India, the swastika is at least as old as the second millennium BCE, and has been used in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism for many centuries (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3 This juxtaposition of swastikas and six-pointed stars on adjacent window screens might strike a westerner as jarring, as the former are usually associated with Nazi anti-Semitism and the latter with Judaism. In Hinduism, however, these symbols are often used together in the worship of the gods Ganesha and Skanda, sons of Devi and Shiva, respectively. Source: Reproduced by permission of H. Richard Rutherford, C.S.C.

The word swastika derives from an ancient Sanskrit term for well-being. It later became associated with the pleasures of life and with spiritual truth. In Hinduism it often denotes the blessings that come from Ganesha, the god of good beginnings. In Buddhism it is an element in images of the Wheel of Law; and in Jainism it represents the endless process of birth and rebirth (*samsara*), in a diagram that depicts the tenets of that religion.