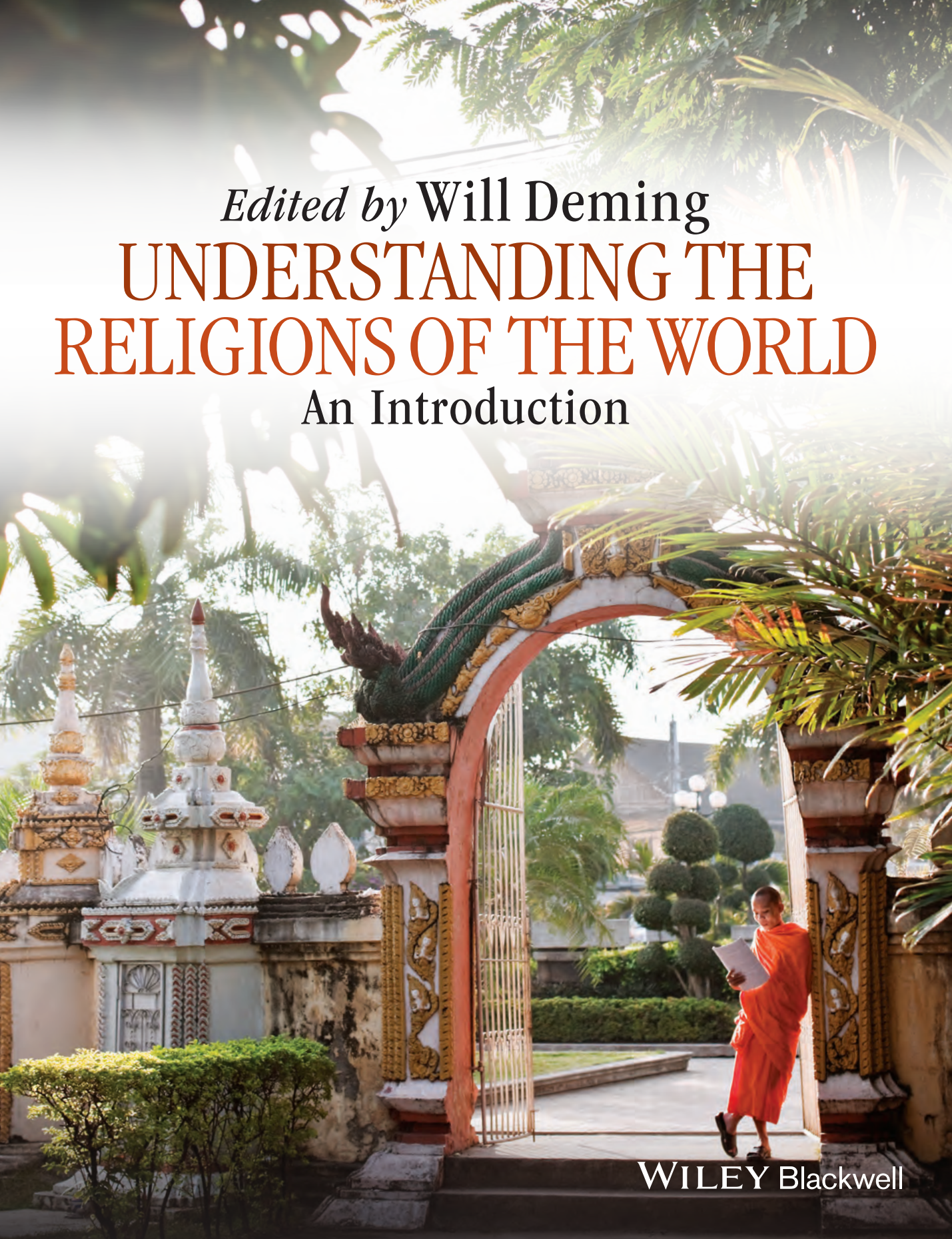




Edited by Will Deming

UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

An Introduction

WILEY Blackwell

Praise for Understanding the Religions of the World: An Introduction

“Religion is an important topic in today’s world. To know the basics of the world’s religions is to gain access to some of the greatest thinkers of all time about some of the most significant matters to all people everywhere. To learn the history of the great faith traditions is to become acquainted with the history of the human race and to see where it has come from. And by becoming familiar with the beliefs of these faith traditions, one can become a citizen of the world and see where we, as a race, might someday be. But where can one find an adequate guide to this important subject? The answer is now clear. In this book!”

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Jacob K. Olupona, Harvard University

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RELIGIONS
OF THE WORLD

An Introduction

Edited by
WILL DEMING

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2015
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<i>Registered Office</i>	John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK
<i>Editorial Offices</i>	350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Understanding the religions of the world : an introduction / edited by Will Deming.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-76756-6 (cloth) – ISBN 978-1-118-76757-3 (pbk.) 1. Religion.

I. Deming, Will, 1956- editor.

BL48.U48 2015

200–dc23

2015004065

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: A young monk studies at Wat Si Muang, Vientiane, Laos. Photo © Matthew Wakem/Axiom

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

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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 of ultimate importance. As *systems*, religions operate each 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 strange or confusing.

This book attempts to demystify religions for our students by first identifying each religion’s particular logic, and then explaining how this logic guides adherents into experiences and encounters with ultimate ideas, beings, relationships, and realities. This approach enables students to see why members of a given religion prefer *these* particular rituals and images 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 an area specialist. This guarantees the latest scholarship and provides students with a taste of the distinctive approaches that these specialists use in their respective fields. The study of Judaism, for example, has developed quite differently than the study of African religions. In addition, each of these specialists comes highly recommended by his or her peers; all have engaged in field research; and all have had experience teaching undergraduates.

Their presentation of material in each chapter is guided by an understanding of each religion’s own logic. This is true both for the section on a religion’s history, and for the section on its contemporary beliefs and practices. The advantage for the historical section is that a religion’s past is organized not only with regard to political and social developments, but also with an emphasis on to how it has changed over time as a *system of meaning*. In this way, the historical section underscores the *history of the religion* as much as the religion *in history*.

For the section on contemporary beliefs and practices, starting with a religion's distinctive logic enables the authors to organize their material in a more *organic* fashion. Each religion now “makes sense” in light of its own logic. Because this also frees the authors from a predominantly chronological or thematic structure, they have expanded their discussions of contemporary beliefs and practices far beyond the usual treatments. For most chapters this section comprises more than half the chapter.

Chapter Structure

Each chapter, with the exception of Change in Religion and New Religions, has four 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 gives a summary of the *religious* developments of a tradition. Its focus is on the past practices, doctrines, and organization of a religion, not political or cultural developments as such. The length of this section varies from religion to religion and sometimes includes an account of the western “discovery” and initial study of a religion. The Religions of Oceania chapter, 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 broad thesis that outlines 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.
- *Conclusion*: a short summary with final insights.

Order of Chapters

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

Traditional and indigenous religions are often placed at the beginning or end of a text, giving the impression that they are more elemental (primitive) than other religions, or not as important. To avoid this, African Religions and the Religions of Oceania follow Japanese Religion. This not only puts them in the middle of the text, but also provides something of a transition inasmuch as Japanese Religion shares some elements with indigenous traditions and, like them, has a largely undocumented history. 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 on Change in Religion and New Religions comes at the very end because it presupposes some knowledge of the religions discussed in the earlier chapters.

End Matter and Art

At the end of each chapter there are questions for review and discussion, a list of key terms, and a bibliography divided into three parts: “a good first book,” “further reading,” and “reference and research.” At the end of the book there is a combined glossary of key terms for all the religions, as well as a comprehensive index.

The photographs, diagrams, illustrations, and maps that accompany the text have been chosen to further the discussion of the text, not simply to add ornamentation. Additional materials, along with video footage, are available to teachers via the internet.

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 new 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. Now, after twenty-one years of teaching, and after eight years of editing, I am 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

A NOTE ABOUT THE CHAPTER FEATURES

You will see that each chapter is divided into four main sections: introduction, history, contemporary beliefs and practices, and conclusion. In addition, all the chapters contain a range of feature boxes, each highlighting some area of particular interest or concern to the religion under discussion. They add interesting, additional information to enrich the text. Here is a brief description of the role of each type of box:

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

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

Sacred Traditions and Scripture provide 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 focus on how adherents and scholars choose to express themselves when describing or explaining a religion.

Lastly, **Did you know...** boxes are designed to make connections between certain aspects of a religion, and things that readers commonly know about but had not associated with that religion.

ABOUT THE WEBSITE

This book is accompanied by a companion website for instructors and students:



www.wiley.com/go/deming

The website provides a range of resources, including:

- multiple choice questions and answers
- quizzes and answers
- images and maps
- glossary
- a list of useful websites
- additional materials on religious traditions

Introduction



Religions supply people with entire worlds of meaning. Understanding them takes time. Source: Will Deming.

The Importance of Religion

Eighty-five percent of the world's population is religious. 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 gain insight into our world.

When people go to war, when they make peace, when they buy and sell, when they start families, when they honor their dead, they do so in ways influenced by religion. Here are some prime examples, all of which have important political or economic implications: More than one fourth of the world's population does not eat pork or drink alcohol for religious reasons. Another one billion people do not eat beef. Many countries have a national religion, 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 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.

The Study of Religion

Despite religion's considerable presence and influence in the world, most people do not study religion or reflect on it objectively. Maybe this is not so surprising. Most people do not reflect objectively on human culture or language either. Religion, like culture and language, is something people use, but rarely examine. It is one of the givens of their world. But even when people do ponder religion, it is usually only 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 examining 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 culture 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 Founding Fathers’ refusal to establish a national religion encouraged religious diversity in America. 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 organizations, the belief that all Americans share a common “Judeo-Christian” value system, and the adoption of “In God We Trust” as the national motto go back no further than the previous century.

Finally, the importance given to science in American culture often marginalizes religious perspectives on common 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 in these contexts to ask someone to consider the religious or spiritual dimensions of an issue—that is, “do the theology.” If someone does, he or she risks being labeled a fanatic.

A Closer Look

Approaching Religion

Not everyone interested in religion is a believer or practices religion—some 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 and seek to understand, explain, and articulate how their religion works. *Students of religion*, by contrast, are scholars engaged in the academic study of religion and religions from the outside, often by comparing several religions. But they can be insiders as well.

Understanding Religions

The purpose of this book is to provide students with an objective way to study and analyze religions. It is one thing to *know certain 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 life’s goals. This sort of understanding gives us insight into how religious people view the human condition and what motivates them to act 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
- the worship of supernatural beings.

While these definitions are helpful in certain situations, they are not broad enough to cover all of the religions we will study in this book. In the following chapters, religion will be understood as orientation to those things which are of *ultimate* value in a person’s life. As we will see, this includes orientation to ultimate ideas, beings, relationships, and realities. In addition, we will define **religions** (as opposed to the singular, religion) as particular systems or traditions of orientation. Examples of religions are Christianity and Islam.

As each chapter makes clear, every religion has its own vision of **ultimate reality**—something that is more real and true and meaningful than anything else. This can be a god or gods, as in Christianity and Hinduism; it can be enlightenment, as in Buddhism; or it can be participation in a network of otherworldly relationships, as in African religions. The goal of orienting oneself to this ultimate reality is to share in its reality, thereby making one’s own life more real, more true, and more meaningful.

In every religion, this orientation requires the use of **symbols**. In everyday English usage, a symbol is understood as something that “represents” or “stands for” something else. But since the job of a *religious* symbol is to orient someone to what is ultimately real—to connect a person with another, more true reality—it is best to think of religious symbols as “tools.” In this way, religious symbols do not just signify something, they *do* something. They enable religious people to achieve their fullest potential in life by linking them to what is ultimate. Lighting a candle and placing it in front of the statue of a god does not simply “represent” wisdom or divine light. Rather, this action nurtures a relationship with a divine being who is accessible through the *symbols* of the candle and

the statue. Likewise, prayer does not “stand for” anything. It is orientation to deities by means of appropriate words.

This raises an important question: what makes a candle, a statue, or certain words “appropriate”? In other words, what qualifies something to be a religious symbol? As we will discover in the following chapters, many things serve as symbols: words, sounds, objects, images, 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 ultimate reality, each will have its own set of appropriate words, sounds, objects, etc., for orienting people to it. If one’s ultimate reality includes a hungry god, a rice offering might be an appropriate symbol. If god is a loving being, then imitating god by sharing her divine love with others might be the appropriate means of orientation, while rice offerings would be wholly *inappropriate*.

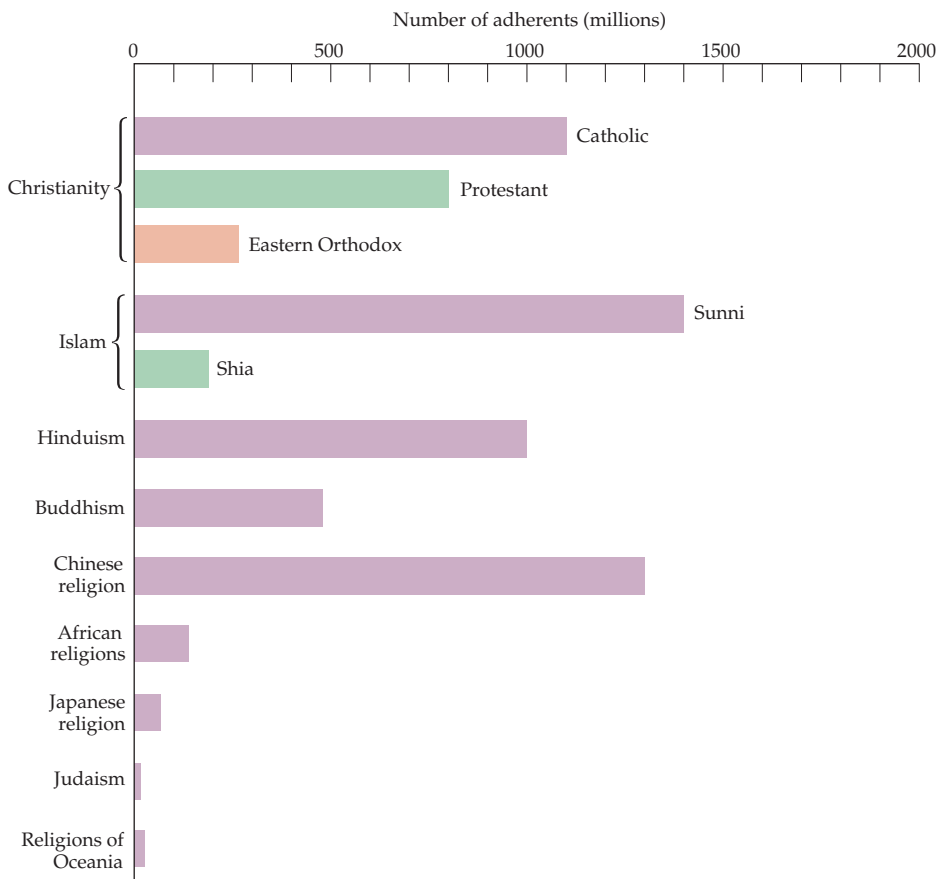


Figure I.2 Religion is a human activity practiced by 85 percent of the world’s population.

From these examples we can see that each religion has its own logic. Like languages, religions are distinct, internally logical systems. Just as a word from one language might be meaningless or inappropriate if used in another, most religious symbols are meaningless or inappropriate outside the context of their particular religion. Praying in the direction of Mecca, as Muslims do, has no meaning 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 can be appropriate in different religions for 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 saving power of Christ's death. Likewise, Hindus do not eat beef and Muslims do not eat pork. But Hindus reject beef because they consider the cow too god-like to harm, let alone eat, while Muslims regard the pig as ritually and hygienically unfit for human consumption.

What qualifies something as a symbol is its capacity to "make sense" in a religion, according to that religion's **internal logic**. Given a person's understanding of ultimate reality, things that promise to orient him or her to it have the potential to be effective symbols. But symbols can also become obsolete if they lose this capacity. This is why most Roman Catholics no longer abstain from meat on Friday as a way to please God. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), it has simply fallen out of use as a religious symbol: it no longer "works" as a way to draw close to God.

CONCLUSION

As we will use the terms in this textbook, “religion” is orientation to ultimate reality through symbols, while “religions” and “religious traditions” are individual systems of orientation constructed around particular visions of ultimate reality. In the following chapters we will look at nine different religions, each of which operates according to its own logic, using its own set of symbols. In the final chapter we will examine how religions change over time, and how new religions come into being. In the process we will learn a great deal about how the different peoples of the world view life, and consequently what motivates them to live and act as they do.

For review

1. What is the role of symbols in a religion?
2. How is a religion’s internal logic formed by its vision of ultimate reality?
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 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 guides the thoughts and actions of its adherents.
religion	The human activity of orientation to ultimate reality.
religions	Symbolic systems by which people orient themselves to a particular vision of ultimate reality.
symbol	The means by which people orient themselves to ultimate reality; depending on the religion, a symbol can be practically anything.
ultimate reality	The focal point of religion and religions.

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CHAPTER 1

Hinduism



God is in everyone. A *murti* (idol) of the Hindu god Ganesha, elephant-headed son of the great god Shiva and remover of obstacles. 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 ten incarnations of the great god Vishnu. In Hinduism an *avatar* is a form by which this god can cross over from his reality into ours.

OVERVIEW

Hinduism is the predominant religion of India, the world's second most populous country. More than 80 percent of its population, or about 1 billion people, identify themselves as Hindu. The next largest religion in India is Islam, at about 13 percent of the population, followed by Christianity and Sikhism, at about 2.3 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively. More than 30 million Hindus also live in the countries surrounding India, such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan; and large populations can be found in Indonesia, Malaysia, the United States, Mauritius, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

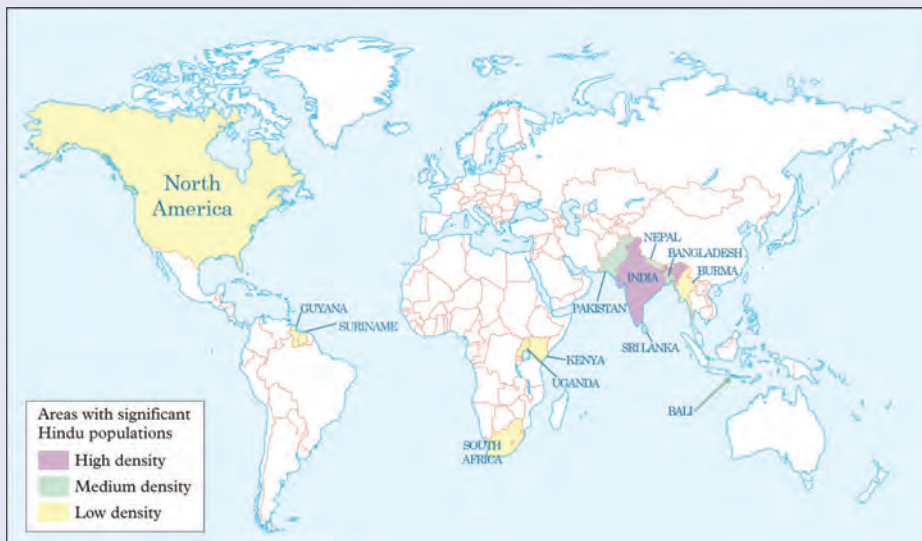


Figure 1.1 A map showing the relative Hindu populations in different countries around the world.

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 an enormous 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 Islamic and folk traditions.

It should come as no surprise, then, 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 was 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. In contrast, Hindus had traditionally referred to their religious activities simply as *dharmā* (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 also accept and use the names “Hindu” and “Hinduism” to speak of themselves and their religion, despite its unusual diversity.

In an attempt to envision such a multiform religion, Julius Lipner has likened Hinduism to the famous banyan tree near Kolkata (Calcutta), in West Bengal. The banyan, India’s national tree, can become quite old. It prospers by sending out a profusion of aerial roots which become new trunks that cover large areas and assimilate everything in



Figure 1.2 Like India’s banyan tree, Hinduism can appear to have no center or main trunk. Source: Photo by Murky.

their path. The Kolkata banyan, which is estimated to be over two centuries old, 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,” ch 1, pp. 9–34 in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

History

Timeline	
2300 to 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 <i>Rig-Veda</i> is composed.
1200-900 BCE	The <i>Collections</i> are brought to completion.
900 BCE	Aryan peoples spread eastward to the Ganges river.
800-600 BCE	The <i>Brahmanas</i> are composed.
500-400 BCE	The first <i>Upanishads</i> are composed; Buddhism begins.
5th–4th century	The caste system begins to take shape.
300 BCE–300 CE	The <i>Mahabharata</i> and the <i>Ramayana</i> are composed; the practice of <i>puja</i> begins.
3rd century BCE	Ashoka becomes king of the Mauryan dynasty.
1st century CE	The <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> is composed.
2nd century CE	The first evidence of Hindu temples.
3rd–4th century CE	Devotional practices (<i>bhakti</i>) become popular in south India among Tamils.
350 CE	The first <i>Puranas</i> are composed.
7th century CE	Devotional practices (<i>bhakti</i>) are used widely in Hinduism.
1000 CE	Muslims enter the Punjab.
1206-1526 CE	The Delhi Sultanate.
1526 CE–18th century	The Mughal Dynasty.
mid-13th century	Buddhism disappears from most of India.
15th century CE	Sikhism founded.
1600 CE	The East India Company establishes offices in Kolkata.
1757 CE	The beginning of British colonial domination.
18th and 19th centuries	The Hindu Renaissance.

(continued)

1869-1948 CE	Mohandas Gandhi.
1872-1950 CE	Aurobindo Ghosh.
1947 CE	End of British rule; millions of Hindus and Muslims are uprooted and resettled during India's Partition, which created the nation of Pakistan.
1950	The Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste.
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 remarkable uniformity of culture in terms of such things as brick sizes and planned cities laid out in grid patterns. In all, the Indus Valley civilization spread out over 400 square miles.

Both the religion and the name of this civilization remain something of a mystery, since no one has been able to decipher what is left of its writing system—if, in fact, it is a writing system. On the basis of its material remains some scholars have postulated connections between the religion of the Indus Valley civilization and the later Hinduism. For example, there remain about 2,000 soapstone seals from the Indus Valley civilization which were used to identify property, and some seem to depict images of what might be incense burners or altars. One of the most celebrated of these seals depicts a figure seated with his legs crossed in a yogic position, surrounded by various wild animals. This, it has been suggested, 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 in these ways, most of what constituted the first period of Hinduism came from a nomadic herding people who called themselves Aryans (noble ones). Many scholars in the previous century believed that the Aryans had crossed over the Himalayas from central Asia and

overwhelmed or conquered the Indus Valley's inhabitants. But archeological research has since cast doubt on this theory, leading most scholars to consider possibilities other than invasion as the cause of the Indus Valley civilization's demise, such as flooding, disease, or crop failure. 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, many centuries.

The word *swastika* derives from an ancient Sanskrit term for well-being. It later became associated with the pleasures of this life, with spiritual truth, and with endless birth and rebirth in this world. In Hinduism it often denotes the blessings that come from Ganesha, the god of good beginnings. In Buddhism it is sometimes 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 explains the tenets of that religion.



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