



*Mourning Angel* (2020), by Lynn Randolph, 58" × 46"

## 1

## If Horses Had Hands

### Comparative Practices in Global History

*The Scriptures contain many things which never came to pass, interwoven with the history, and he must be dull indeed who does not of his own accord observe that much which the Scriptures represent as having happened never actually occurred.*

Church Father Origen (third century CE)

*God is neither Hindu nor Muslim.*

Guru Nanak

This chapter will develop the fundamental insight that human communities have been “comparing religions” as far as we can see back and around the world. We will examine in particular how many religious systems are themselves implicit practices of comparison—at once suspicious and trusting—and how they code these insights in various philosophical, mythological, and theological ways. They might use “God” or “the gods,” the “Self” outside the socialized ego, the many-sidedness of perspective, or the metaphor of different “ways” to compare one another, but they all compare. *Religions compare religions.*

## Recognizing the Comparative Faculty in the Past

Modern forms of comparing religions have a history. Many, in fact. Rooted in forms of thought that were originally Christian and Jewish, these practices (they themselves are plural) gradually separated from those religious traditions over the last two hundred years

until they became their own largely independent acts. Their definitive births occurred in the Protestant, mostly German universities of Europe in the beginning of the nineteenth century, with a few particularly brave professors who were reading the Bible carefully and noticing all sorts of contradictions and repeated stories, rather like Origen above in our opening epigraph.

Birth is one thing, however, and development or maturation is quite another. Many of the field’s most generative and radical thinkers have been secular (non-religious) Jewish intellectuals living in Christian societies. As we shall repeatedly see, the “outsider” usually sees things more clearly (hence also my own constant invocation of “outsider” experiences). In the last decades, a number of major theorists have emerged from around the globe, often with rich multicultural backgrounds and diverse educations. If one used to read mostly European names for much of the twentieth century (Durkheim, Eliade, Feuerbach, Freud, Marx, Otto, and Weber, for example), one reads more and more Asian, African, and Middle Eastern names today (Appiah, Asad, Kakar, Obeyesekere, and Said, for example).

In terms of pure numbers, institutional homes, and publishing houses, however, the centers of the field today remain primarily in the US and Europe. There is a reason for this. Whether of Christian or Jewish origin, whether practiced in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, or Australia, the study of religion as a broad-based institution established and carried in centers of higher learning in literally thousands of classrooms every day is a historical product

and reflection of modern Western civilization, of its secular values, and of its broad, if always contested vision of a liberal or free society.

That most basic intellectual freedom and certainly that unflinching analysis of religion—especially via the comparative categories of class, gender, and race—are under assault today by authoritarian ideologues and their supporters. Such a study cannot be assumed. It did not exist two centuries ago, and it may not exist in the next century. Its theories must be practiced. Its ideas must be argued, defended, and institutionalized. Curricula and comparative classrooms matter. So do *you*.

## The Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds

Which is not to say that comparative practices around “religion” are unique to the modern world. They are not. Indeed such forms of thought go back as far as we can see in the written historical record, and indeed well *before* that record in what we generally call the **prehistoric period**, so named for the ways that this unimaginably long hominid and human history, consisting of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of years, is “before” (pre-) written history and so is inaccessible to our ordinary methods of interpretation, which are mostly dominated by the analysis and interpretation of written texts.

Still, new discoveries are always being made, and the dates are always shifting. I certainly can pretend no clear picture here. As best this layperson can tell, the genomic and physical anthropological evidence point to the emergence of modern humans sometime between 150,000 and 200,000 years ago, with all human beings on the planet today tracing their roots back to Africa somewhere around 100,000 years ago (there were other hominim or archaic human populations, like the Denisovans, named after a cave in Russia and probably cousins of the Neanderthals, who likely evolved in Eurasia well before this date). After that, it very much looks like there were endless expansions, migrations, and mixings of populations out of Africa and into ancient Europe (where these early modern human populations absorbed and eventually eliminated Neanderthal peoples), into what is now the Near East, and eventually into the vast stretches of Eurasia, Oceania, and, finally, the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

We will return to this prehistoric world and some of its first clearly religious creations in the Near East—what one French archaeologist has called a “Revolution of Symbols” and “the birth of the gods and the origins of agriculture.”<sup>2</sup> For now, I want rather to begin with the **ancient world** of the Near East and Mediterranean region, which is generally understood to come well after the first practice of settlement agriculture, about 8000 BCE, and soon after the invention of written language, about 3500 BCE in Mesopotamia. The same period is generally understood to extend a few centuries into the Common Era (CE).

Fundamental to any remotely adequate understanding of this ancient world is some grasp of the **altered states of consciousness** (ASC) that were privileged as unique sources of knowledge and wisdom. As counterintuitive as it might sound, the sense-based logic or “reason” of the modern human is *not* the only way to know and organize the world.

Anthropologists and historians define altered states of consciousness as states of body-mind that are not ordinary or normal, that is, that are different or alter (“other”) than the normal social ego and the physical body, *however* that person and body are understood in the biomedical knowledges of the place and time. In short, in these states there are *other* selves and *other* bodies at work that possess capacities that the selves and bodies with which people ordinarily speak and walk around in common do not possess. Such altered selves might see or dream the future, travel to the world of the dead, understand a cave as a portal to another world, see a snake or a bird as an opening to other levels of the cosmos, meet a god or spirit, leave the physical form altogether, or rise up after physical death.

Be very careful, then, when you say things to yourself like, “I won’t believe it until I see it.” Or, “I won’t believe it until science proves it is real.” That is just privileging the senses and human reason again. It is also confusing the dimensions of the world that science can measure with the world itself. To speak philosophically, that is circular and self-confirming. And deeply dubious.

To speak more traditionally, altered states of consciousness, which give individuals access to other dimensions of the world, are experiences of **ecstasy** (Greek *ek-stasis*, literally “to stand outside [oneself]”).

These almost certainly helped inspire the beliefs, art, ritual activity, and indeed eventually the texts, teachings, and mythologies of the religions. To access these in the ancient world, we must rely on a kind of double method, involving both the translation and interpretation of written texts (particularly Greek ones in the Mediterranean world), but also the study of art objects and architectural remains through a whole spectrum of new methods, including archaeology, physical and genetic anthropology, and archaeochemistry (the chemical analysis of things like drinking vessels, burial sites, or works of art). In other words, none of this denies science. Quite the opposite—it embraces science as one of many methods of knowing.

Of course, today's ASCs—the endless near-death and out-of-body experiences, precognitive dreams, contact with dead loved ones, psychedelic states, and paranormal experiences—provide a third or vertical dimension to the historical picture and yet another base or foundation of comparison, as we shall see in these pages. That is, if such things are possible today (and they are, they happen), they likely happened then as well. But even these modern experiences, we must acknowledge, grant us only approximate access and limited historical understanding. We must also recognize that they can well lead us astray in understanding what was going on in another historical epoch. Which is all to say, we must be both bold and careful here.

Diana Stein, Sarah Kielt Costello, and Karen Polinger Foster get the matter just right when they define such ecstatic states—which in fact range widely from dream, soul-flight, and possession states involving the dead, and the presence of demons and ghosts, through psychedelic or psychoactive experiences with various plants, to trance states involving music, drumming, and dance and even mystical experiences of ultimate unity—as “out of the realm of the ordinary.”<sup>3</sup> That is what they were (and still are today).

A strong corollary or implication follows. Any attempt to make altered states of consciousness ordinary, to reduce them to our own social or material categories must in the end fail the comparative project. We cannot reduce them from something these historical peoples knew and were to something we can understand and are. That may feel comfortable and feed our own sense of self-worth and present identity formations, but it is almost certainly wrong.

This is another way of saying that the historical past cannot be fully understood or “explained” by our own present secular (or scientific) assumptions. This refusal to shove altered states of consciousness into our boxes is why I want to capture such religious states with the simple comparative phrase—the super. The super is that which exceeds or goes beyond any and all ordinary states of the human being. The rest is open-ended.

The point is worth emphasizing: These altered states are *precisely* what makes religion religious and without which *there is no religion*—the out of the ordinary, the extraordinary, the outside, the eccentric, the strange, the super. Put more bluntly, religion involves the human experience and subsequent claims of the transcendence of the world as we ordinarily know it, of space and time, and, often enough, of a particular metamorphosis into all kinds of other relations or nonhuman states of being. And such ecstatic superhumans do not intend such claims metaphorically. They intend them as real, as how the world actually works, how it *is*. How we might interpret such fantastic claims in our own modern present and its own forms of knowing will take up the rest of these pages, and here we certainly will not conclude. We will begin.

The takeaway here is simple but difficult enough. Do not confuse *your* way of being human in this world with everyone else's for all time. It simply is not so.

## The Comparative Practices of Ancient Empire

The comparative practices of the ancient world only became more important as these same settled human societies expanded and conquered other human societies in what were basically ancient forms of colonialism and empire. Colonizers and imperial rulers often wished to understand the beliefs and practices of those peoples over whom they ruled, if not out of intellectual or spiritual generosity, then out of administrative and political expediency. And human beings were often sensitive to the challenges that other forms of human life and belief presented to their own. People everywhere thought, wondered, and re-imagined themselves in the mirrors of foreign cultures.

Martin Riesbrodt describes this ancient human ability to recognize religious activity and the religions this way:

In all ages people have distinguished interaction with superhuman powers from other forms of action. In different times and cultures, religious actors and institutions have seen each other as similar, no matter whether this perception was expressed in competition and polemics or in cooperation, assimilation, and identification. In addition, all rulers of religious pluralistic empires—the Achaemenids, the Sassanians, the Romans, the T'ang, Ming, or Qing dynasties, the Japanese emperors, the Fatimids, or the Mughal dynasty—have pursued a politics of religion.<sup>4</sup>

In short, human beings—be they in ancient Persia, Rome, China, Japan, the Middle East, or South Asia—have been “comparing religions” for a very long time. They have had to do so. Which is not to say that all of these comparative practices worked in the same way or, much less, came to the same conclusions. They did not.

## From the Mysteries to the Mystical

We will be looking at a broad spectrum of comparative practices and conclusions as we proceed. One such comparative style—which bears a particularly close relationship to the comparative practices of some of the modern intellectuals who created the discipline of “comparative religion”—can be found among individuals whom we have come to call mystics. Since this topic bears a close relationship to the altered states of consciousness that I wish to foreground, and because I will be returning repeatedly to this resonance between comparativism and mysticism, it seems appropriate to begin with it here.

The language of the mystical stretches back to the ancient Greek mysteries, a set of special rituals that were believed to bestow immortality on those who partook of them. Their details were successfully shrouded from history as a result of the imposition of strict vows of silence, although there is some suggestive evidence now—textual and historical, but also

archaeochemical (basically, carefully scraping ancient drinking vessels and lab-testing the chemical compounds of the results)—that these ancient Greek Mysteries may have involved the consumption of mind-altering drink and plants. As Brian Muraresku has summarized this particular argument in his book title, such psychedelic consumption was likely the “key of immortality” and is a part of “the secret history of the religion with no name.”<sup>5</sup>

We do not know if this psychedelic secret was so, but we do know that the Greek initiate was known as a *mustēs*—literally someone who keeps silent or “shut” (this is the origin of the modern word “mystic”). Hence also the adjective *mustikos*—“secret,” and later on “mystical.” Whatever their actual content and nature, such Mysteries appear to have been practiced for a very long time, indeed, *for almost two thousand years*, from about 1500 BCE to the exact date of 392 CE, when the Mysteries were officially shut down by the Christian emperor Theodosius.

Muraresku is eloquent about the long-lasting influence, eventual suppression of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the question this still raises for Christians:

Though we are liable to forget, Western civilization was not founded as a Christian enterprise. The Ancient Greece that invented democracy, and birthed all the arts and sciences we now take for granted, never heard of Jesus. Before Jerusalem, before Rome, before Mecca, there was Eleusis. ... Eleusis was our first, undisputed spiritual capital. ... In the battle for the sacred legacy of the West, Eleusis was a spectacular casualty. Its demise at the hands of the newly Christianized Roman Empire in the fourth century AD marked the beginning of an identity crisis that persists to this day. Are we Greek or are we Christian?<sup>6</sup>

And, again, on the religious importance of Eleusis:

Why did the pilgrims flock to its temple for two thousand years in search of life beyond the grave? Why was the age-old ritual performed under the cover of darkness? Why was the magic potion hidden away? And why did the Christians shut it all down? ... If you come to

Eleusis, you will never die. A bold claim, for sure. Hard to believe nowadays. But, for some reason, our ancestors believed it. In fact they couldn't imagine a world without the exceptional landmark. The Mysteries were said to hold "the entire human race together."<sup>7</sup>

In our own terms, the Mysteries and the experience of immortality they bestowed—again, however they bestowed it—were how these ancient peoples "compared religions."

None of this implies, of course, that every altered state of consciousness in the history of religions was chemically catalyzed (although all such states, like the one you are in right now, would have had elaborate chemical correlates). There are endless ways to alter (or reveal) the deeper reaches of a human being, from ritual, entranced reading, physical and moral discipline, chant, prayer, meditation, and art, to trauma, sexual arousal, violence, and near-death. And *all* of these can be found in the historical record in abundance.

Like most words that scholars use to study religion, both the noun (mysticism) and its adjectival form (mystical) are modern transformations of ancient uses. The modern meanings arose in Europe (particularly in France) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as different types of extraordinary experiences were being severed from established religious institutions and their interpretations (as I will explain in due time, intellectuals have long noted that religious experience is *not* the same thing as religion). Put in contemporary terms, the word *mysticism* was about the separation of spiritual experience from religious institutions. The words often functioned as a kind of slur (as they often do today as well). It was generally a bad thing to be called "mystical." But by the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, "mysticism" was being recovered and affirmed as something uniquely valuable or special about the history of religions. The meanings were reversing.

The eventual result was that, by the mid twentieth century, such expressions were part of a comparative language that scholars used to refer back to the historical sources and relate them. In this latter sense, **the mystical** can be defined as a strong, comparative pattern that refers to all those human

experiences that express some "hidden" or "secret" communion, even complete identity, between human nature and the really real, however these two are conceived. Precisely because of this, mystical traditions generally emphasize sameness and downplay difference. Indeed, the most radical forms of mystical thought deny difference altogether, insisting that cultural, religious, and ethnic differences are surface matters and that deep down we all share, we all *are*, the same reality.

The twentieth century saw a broad debate between those who emphasized the sameness of mystical states and those who emphasized the cultural and historical differences or contexts of such experiences. Today, many scholars affirm both poles. As such, they are gifted comparativists.<sup>8</sup>

## The Axial Age

This transcending of local differences—to hold "the entire human race together"—in the name of some shared or deeper altered state of immortality has a history, too. Most of the doctrines that surround these types of claims can be traced no further back than the middle of the first millennium BCE. Following the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers, this general period of global history is sometimes called the **Axial Age**, since civilizations around the world, seemingly without clear contact, turned in new directions during these centuries, as if around a shared global-spiritual axis.

The Axial Age may have emerged from the rise of urbanization, social stratification, and the disillusionments of city life. It may also have arisen from the specialization and leisure of new priestly and scribal elites, or from altered states of mind of individual forest sages and trance prophets. Or, perhaps most likely of all, it may have emerged from all of these factors working together. Whatever the causes, something appears to have "clicked" around the globe.

Karen Armstrong summarizes Jasper's thesis in her usual, clear way:

From about 900 to 200 BCE, in four distinct regions, the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity came into

being: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece. This was the period of the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads, Mencius, and Euripides. During this period of intense creativity, spiritual and philosophical geniuses pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience.<sup>9</sup>

What was this new experience? Put one way, we might say that the Axial Age turned particular individuals “in” to produce new forms of self-consciousness that were not simply social but could now reflect back on society in a critical and distant fashion. For the first time (that we can historically see, anyway), human beings began to “step outside” themselves in significant numbers. They no longer completely equated their experiences of consciousness with their cultures or ethnicities. As a result, some individuals could now extend their view of the human being beyond their local tribe, city, or even empire. They could begin to imagine universally, even if, yes, these imaginings were also always local. They could think of sameness as well as of difference. They could hold “the entire human race together” in their minds. In short, they were discovering comparativism.

### Early Theories: Projection, Diffusion, and Euhemerism

Comparativist thinking, of course, is not always based on altered states or revelatory experiences. Indeed, more often it is based on keen observation, careful classification, and rational analysis. The results here are very different. Difference now tends to subsume sameness. One of the earliest, and certainly one of the most striking examples of this kind of rational comparison occurs in the ancient Greek writer Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570–475 BCE). Xenophanes left us the following lines on what we today call **anthropomorphism**, that is, the universal tendency of human beings to imagine their deities in human (*anthropos*) form (*morphē*), and more

especially in the forms of their own ethnicities and physical features:

If oxen, or lions, or horses had hands like men,  
they too,  
If they could fashion pictures, or statues they  
could hew,  
They would shape in their own image each face  
and form divine—  
Horses’ gods like horses, like kine the gods of  
kine. “Snub-nosed are the Immortals, and  
black,” the Ethiops say;  
But “No,” the Thracians answer, “red-haired,  
with eyes of grey.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps a little later, the Greek fifth-century historian Herodotus took the comparative practice one step further when he argued that much of Greek culture and religious practice (including his own) was indebted to the earlier practices and beliefs of the Egyptians. He also “compared” (really identified) the Greek gods with their Egyptian counterparts in a way that supported what we would today call a **diffusion theory**—that is, the idea that a religious complex in one place came from another place and that religious ideas and practices in general tend to “spread out” through migration, trade, war, empire, and other human activities that involve travel.<sup>11</sup> Later Roman authors would similarly “compare” or identify their own Roman deities with the earlier Greek ones, hence the Greek Zeus became the Roman Jupiter, the Greek Hermes became the Roman Mercury, and so on.

There were other ways of explaining why there were so many gods. One of these would become connected to the figure of Euhemerus (c. 330–260 BCE). Euhemerus advanced the theory that the gods had originally been human beings who were worshipped in their own lives for their accomplishments and later, after their deaths, were divinized as local gods. This was a very solid thesis in a Mediterranean world where Egyptian pharaohs had been worshipped as gods on earth for millennia (see Figure 1.1), the Macedonian King Alexander the Great (356–223 BCE) had *just* been divinized, and living Roman emperors would soon be worshipped as gods by their subjects.



**Figure 1.1** Giant stone statue portraying the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II (c. thirteenth century BCE) as Osiris (the god of the afterlife). Abu Simbel temple, Egypt. Anton Sorokin /Alamy Stock Photo.

This idea of gods as exaggerated human beings is still very much with us in numerous forms and is called, after its apparent creator, **Euhemerism**. More superhumans.

## Polytheism as Cross-Cultural Understanding

It was in this way that **polytheism**—the belief in many deities but also, perhaps more radically, in different realities—functioned as an implicit form of comparative practice. How? In the polytheistic imagination it is not only the case that the gods or worlds of one culture can be translated into those of another. There is also an underlying assumption that it is perfectly natural, and hence acceptable, that different peoples will worship different deities and so live in different realities.

Polytheism thus effectively relativizes religious practice and assumes that no practice or belief of this nature should be imposed on another people or community. It is not, of course, the case that polytheistic cultures have not engaged in cross-cultural violence of various sorts, including invasion and empire. They most certainly have. But these have generally not been motivated by or articulated through explicit religious reasons (such as conversion or salvation).

The scholar of ancient Egypt Jan Assmann traces this polytheistic logic all the way back to Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE, from which it would have spread throughout the ancient Near East in the second millennium BCE. In doing so, he suggests that the polytheistic comparative practice was based on three separate notions or principles: (1) *name* (the local name of the deity in Egyptian, Greek, Latin, and so on); (2) *shape* (what the deity looked like or how it was

imagined); and (3) *function* (what natural or cosmic process the deity was believed to control or look over). Whereas the names and shapes differed dramatically from context to context, the functions were relatively stable. It was in this way that ancient polytheistic practices could effectively balance difference (1 and 2) and sameness (3). Here is how Assmann puts the matter:

The polytheistic religions overcame the primitive ethnocentrism of tribal religions by distinguishing several deities by name, shape, and function. The names are, of course, different in different cultures, because the languages are different. The shapes of the gods and the forms of worship may also differ significantly. But the functions are strikingly similar. ... The different peoples worshipped different gods, but nobody contested the reality of foreign gods and the legitimacy of foreign forms of worship.<sup>12</sup>

Assmann can thus speak of polytheism as a kind of “intercultural translatability.” What he means by this is that the logic of polytheism allowed peoples to understand and even appreciate the deities and rituals of other peoples by “translating” them into their own languages and customs. Today we might frame this as a kind of cross-cultural understanding. In any case, the gods *could* be compared, because they served very similar functions. This was their sameness.

There are other, more radical models of polytheism, including ones that posit many worlds or many bodies and senses with different capacities to perceive many worlds. Polytheism can even become the claim that nature itself is culturally conditioned (and so works differently across different languages and social constructions). We will get to this most radical of plural possibilities, or impossibilities, in future chapters.

## The Nonlocal Self

Before we leave the ancient polytheistic world, we might also mention the Egyptian-born Greek philosopher Plotinus (c. 205–270 CE). After studying for 11 years with a mysterious teacher in Alexandria, Egypt, Plotinus became convinced that he needed to learn

more about Persian and Indian philosophy.<sup>13</sup> This may have been because he saw profound similarities between his own early experiences of a transcendent and immortal “Mind” (*nous*) as the knower of “the One” (*to hen*) beyond all multiplicity and the Indian doctrines of the immortal “Self” (*atman*) as the knower of the cosmic ground of all being (*brahman*). They certainly look alike.<sup>14</sup>

Plotinus was hardly the first to locate wisdom in the East. Intellectuals of his culture had long and commonly done the same. This ancient comparativist conviction has been called **Platonic orientalism**, on account of (1) its reverence for the philosophy of Plato as a kind of divine revelation; and (2) its location of earlier expressions of this divine revelation in “the orient” or “the East.” As we shall have numerous occasions to see, this ancient location of a special wisdom in the East has been an extremely consistent conviction throughout Western history.

The scholar who coined the expression, John Walbridge, did so in order to name the “science of lights” of a twelfth-century Muslim mystic named Suhrawardi (1155–1191), who venerated the sages of Egypt, Persia, India, and China and emphasized direct experience and a photic “illumination” (that is, the experience of an actual if nonordinary light, *phōs*) over abstract thinking, rational speculation, and literal belief. The true philosopher, Suhrawardi declared, teaches out of these experiences of divine radiance through evocative symbols, which are actual refractions and reflections of the mystical light.<sup>15</sup>

Whether it was because of his experiences of Mind or out of this comparativist conviction in the wisdom of the East (or both), Plotinus hitched a ride with the Roman army on its way to march on the Persians and the Indians. The army was beat back and Plotinus never got to study with the Persians or the Indians. Still, the apparent desire of the philosopher to understand more deeply his own experiences in the mirror of not one, but two foreign cultures is a remarkable early example of the comparativist spirit.

The case of Plotinus points toward a most interesting pattern within the general history of religions that is seldom mentioned, probably because it violates how religion is supposed to work. Human beings, it turns out, sometimes have life-changing experiences that

cannot be fit into their own local categories and social contexts (which is how this is supposed to work), but that fit well within the categories of a “foreign” culture. For the sake of more examples to come, let us call this comparativist pattern the **nonlocal self**. The self is “nonlocal” here in the simple sense that its deepest experiences can find few or no resources in the culture in which it was born. Here comparison ceases to be an abstract exercise and becomes a quest for the truth of one’s own deepest self, which is reflected and refracted most accurately elsewhere.

Hence Plotinus on his way to Persia and India.

## Cosmotheism and Evolutionary Monotheism

Figures like Plotinus should alert us to the fact that ancient peoples often asked (and answered) very serious questions about why there were so many religions and how they were related to one another. Polytheisms, moreover, often developed extremely sophisticated forms of monotheism as well. Jan Assmann calls this phenomenon **evolutionary monotheism**, since these forms of monotheism often “evolved” or developed out of earlier polytheisms. He also calls them forms of **cosmotheism**.<sup>16</sup>

The last term, which was originally coined from the Greek in 1782, refers to any model of the divine that understands the physical universe (*kosmos*) to be an actual manifestation of a god or God (*theos*) and—just as importantly—commonly understands the local or multiple deities as a kind of interface between the physical universe and this hidden animating force. This is a kind of poly-mono-theism, if you will. The key, though, is this: the world is not separate from the ultimate god or God. The physical universe *is* a god or God.

As in other theological visions, there is a spectrum here. Modern thinkers have latched onto particular bandwidths and provided yet more names. In some forms of cosmotheism, God is the universe and the universe is God, and nothing is left over. These forms are referred to as **pantheism**, literally “everything-[is]-God-ism.” In other forms the cosmic God is the universe, but this God also overflows or transcends the universe. The cosmos, as it is commonly put, is “God’s

body.” Scholars sometimes refer to these models as forms of **panentheism**, literally “all-in-God-ism.”

Such models have hardly gone away. To take a single provocative example, when contemporary cosmologists note that the patterns of the distribution of galaxies in the universe look remarkably like the distribution of neurons in the human brain and sometimes wonder, out loud, whether the universe might actually *be* a gigantic brain, they are playing with both pantheism and panentheism. After all, the relationship of mind and brain can be conceived in both models—the mind is the brain, full stop (God is the cosmos, or pantheism); or the brain is in the mind (the cosmos is in God, or panentheism).

Assmann uses the myths and metaphors of cosmotheism to explain how ancient peoples often understood their own religious images and symbols as *both* revealing *and* concealing the truth of divinity. Just as the god both is the world and is not (just) the world, so too images and symbols reveal this cosmic divinity even as they fail to encompass or fully explain it. The gods are an interface or medium, not the final truth. Every revealing is thus, by necessity, also a concealing.<sup>17</sup>

## Theory as “Vision Trip”

The implicit linking of philosophy and travel in the story of Plotinus bears witness to the roots of the Greek term *theōria* (“spectacle,” “contemplation”), from which we get our own modern “theory.” Figures like Plato used the term to mean something like “cosmic vision” or the direct knowing of divine truths, beyond mere opinion: in short, it had the exact opposite value of what many people mean today when they quip, “it’s just a theory.”

It was not just a theory in ancient Greece. The word *theōria* originally referred to the practice of state pilgrimage, in which a person called a *theōros* (“seer”) would travel to another city to witness religious spectacles or to consult an oracle (more paranormal stuff). The seer could do this officially, on behalf of his own city, or personally, for his own private needs. In the former case, which probably became a model for the philosophers, the key was the entire process of (1) leaving home; (2) witnessing divine things on a

journey abroad; and then (3) returning to one's own city in order to report on the witnessed spectacle.

The return was not just a return, however, for the seer was inevitably transformed by the spectacular journey. As Andrea Wilson Nightingale explains, "he thus 'returns' as a sort of stranger to his own kind, bringing radical alterity [otherness or strangeness] into the city ... he possesses a divine perspective that is foreign to the ordinary man."<sup>18</sup> To put it in our own terms now (and this is most important), *the concept of "theory" originated in the triple process of departure from one's own culture, comparative envisioning of other people's religious spectacles abroad, and return home—often to a certain confusion, isolation, or even rejection—to report on what was seen.*

Thomas Tweed has summarized the matter in a three-word sound bite, very much worth memorizing at the beginning of our own journey together: "Theory is travel."<sup>12</sup> This makes more than a little sense, since a person generally does not question (that is, theorize) his or her own society and beliefs until he or she physically leaves that culture and encounters a very different one. Only then can a person realize, often with something of a shock, that there are many ways to be a human being and that none of them is obviously or necessarily superior to the others. Travel has become a kind of embodied comparative practice.

For us, the lesson is clear enough: if you want to become a real thinker and a real comparativist, you must leave home in every sense of that term. Come back, for sure. But you really must leave first.

So go.

## The Comparative Practices of the Early Jewish Traditions

During the Axial Age, the polytheism of the ancient Near East was definitively interrupted and eventually cancelled in many places by the rise of **monotheism**: the belief in one deity, almost always imagined as male, that is, as a god. The rise of monotheism is generally connected with the ancient religion of the Israelites.

Ancient Israelite religion is the source tradition out of which the later monotheisms of Judaism and Christianity emerged. It was this ancient Israelite culture that broke with the mythical imagination of the

ancient world, which tended to think in terms of cycles, and began to imagine its god as acting in material history and in linear time. God became the Lord of history, and history itself came to be experienced as an expression of the will and intentions of the divine.

It was the ancient Israelites, again, who claimed a particular covenant or "contractual agreement" with the single God through the central figure of Abraham (who plays a similar foundational role in all three major monotheistic or "Abrahamic" religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and thus articulated a theology of election—in other words, the religious notion that a particular people (in this case, the Israelites) is called by God to give witness, to "the nations," to the existence of the one God and to his ethical intentions for all of humanity, eventually conceived of, in the Jewish imagination, as a single community under a single God. And it was ancient Israelite culture that developed, through its ecstatic and visionary prophets, a tradition of moral critique and social justice and later, through its scholar-teachers or rabbis, extremely sophisticated techniques for interpreting its own scriptural texts. It was this learned rabbinic culture that eventually created what we now think of as Judaism.

## God(s)

With the biblical religion of the ancient Israelites, however, we plunge into a whole series of historical complexities. To begin with, the word *monotheism* was not invented until the eighteenth century. It is found nowhere in the Jewish or Christian scriptures (a **scripture** is any text or set of texts that is considered revealed or sacred by a community). It appears nowhere in the Jewish scripture, the Torah (this is a Hebrew word derived from the same root as the verb "to instruct" or "to give advice"). Nor is it found anywhere in the Bible (from the Greek *biblion*, "book"—namely the books, *biblia*, that make up the Christian scriptures, which include the Torah).

When we use a term like *monotheism*, then, we are speaking of *our* modern worldviews as much as, and probably more than, any ancient worldview. If I may, most of us are monotheists either in the religious sense (there is only one God) or in the scientific sense (there is only one nature). Few of us can imagine a radical

polytheism, that is, the possibility that there are many gods or many natures, many worlds.

Consider this. Even if this one god is capitalized in English as “God,” it is important to understand that there is no capitalization practice in Hebrew, the language of the Torah. To make matters more complicated still, one of the oldest Hebrew terms for “God” is *elohim*, which is in fact plural and means “the gods.” (See, for example, Genesis 1.26: “Then God [*elohim*] said, “Let us make humans in our image, in our likeness.”) That is right: One of the most ancient words for “god” in the Bible actually means “the gods.” The single English capital letter “G,” then, carries a whole set of religious assumptions, all of which revolve around the idea that “God” is different from “the gods” or “(a) god.”

In short, it is important that you understand that that single English capitalized letter is itself a comparative practice and is imbued with all sorts of assumptions. It is designed to emphasize difference, to set apart and distinguish the capitalized “God” from all those lower-case “gods.” That is why I so hesitate to write “God” or “god” or “gods,” or, perhaps most shocking of all, “Gods.”

## The Monotheistic Distinction

Assmann has called this insistence on absolute difference, on God against the gods, the **monotheistic distinction**—“distinction” here as in “what sets apart” or “makes different.” If cosmotheism was an evolutionary monotheism that affirmed all the gods as ultimately One, the monotheistic distinction was a **revolutionary monotheism** that broke with the earlier systems and insisted that all other or “foreign” gods must be rejected.

Such a revolutionary monotheism did not begin with Moses or, for that matter, with the Torah. Historically speaking, this kind of monotheism is clearly attested for the first time in connection with the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten, also known as Pharaoh Amenophis IV, who dramatically enforced a monotheistic religion around the sun god Aten in the fourteenth century BCE, well before there was any Torah or Judaism. Akhenaten’s was a most radical break with all that came before in Egyptian religion, which was robustly polytheistic. Indeed, Akhenaten’s new religion was so different and so incongruous that after his death this religion was canceled, his name

was removed from the lists of kings, and artistic representations of him were defaced.

Centuries later, another revolutionary monotheism would resurface in the same part of the world and would become connected to another Egyptian name: Moses. It was this remembered Moses who played the central role in what would become the Jewish story of being liberated from polytheistic Egypt—which came to represent, in this same monotheistic imagination, everything that was wrong, everything that was to be rejected as “pagan” or “idolatrous.” This absolute distinction between the one God of Israel and the polytheistic corruptions of Egypt is what Assmann means by the monotheistic distinction. The ancient Israelites had been chosen or “elected” to become “witness” of the one true God. Jews were to be set apart from all of the other surrounding peoples and cultures, which they came to call “gentiles”—that is, peoples and nations who are not part of the Israelite community.

And what did the Egyptians think of such a story? How did it feel to have one’s culture and deepest beliefs framed as forms of darkness, of something from which to escape, as an object of divine anger and plague? In simple human terms, consider Exodus 11:1–12:36 and the Jewish story of the last plague, that is, the death, really divine murder of the first-born Egyptian males (down to even the calves) and the manner in which the angel of death is said to have passed over the Israelite homes, over whose doorways had been smeared with lamb’s blood, according to the instruction of Moses (hence “Passover”). We are not told in the Jewish scriptures, of course, how the Egyptian mothers and fathers related the sudden deaths of their little boys to such a foreign god. What kind of story is this? And *for whom?*<sup>19</sup>

This is hardly a minor or innocent story. This same distinction between “our God” and “their gods” would have an immeasurable impact on the future of religion—not just in the ancient Near East but around the world up to this very day. It is as central to the histories of Christianity and Islam as it is to the histories of Judaism, even though, as we shall soon see, Christianity and Islam took this distinction further with their explicit policies of conquest, conversion, and colonialism. It would also have a major impact on the comparative imagination. No longer could other people’s deities be translated into the conceptions of one’s own monotheistic community. It was no longer a

matter of your sun god and my sun god doing the same solar work under different names and cultural shapes. Now it was all a matter of “true religion” and “false religion.” Compromise was out. A new form of human difference had appeared.

Indeed, Assmann has argued that the whole concept of “religion” is itself a construction of monotheism, since, before monotheism, no one would have spoken or thought like that. No one would have thought of “true” and “false” religions. He puts it this way:

The distinction I am concerned with ... is the distinction between true and false religion that underlies more specific distinctions such as Jews and Gentiles, Christians and pagans, Muslims and unbelievers. Once the distinction is drawn, there is no end of reentries or subdistinctions. We start with Christians and pagans and end up with Catholics and Protestants, Calvinists and Lutherans, Socinians and Latitudinarians, and a thousand more similar denominations and sub-denominations. Cultural or intellectual distinctions such as these construct a universe that is not only full of meaning, identity, and orientation, but also full of conflict, intolerance, and violence.<sup>20</sup>

Monotheism, then, is not just another religion. It is a “counter-religion,” as it is poised against every other religion. Indeed, “It rejects and repudiates everything that went before.” And so, “Whereas polytheism ... rendered different cultures mutually transparent and compatible, the new counter-religion blocked intercultural translatability. False gods cannot be translated.”<sup>21</sup> They can only be denied. Or destroyed.

Because of this, the subsequent Jewish, Christian, and Muslim attitudes toward other religions were more or less intolerant. A powerful new logic and language had appeared on the scene.

## The Gods and Early Israelite Intolerance

The Hebrew texts of the Torah do not deny the existence of other gods. Quite the contrary, they assume their existence. The Hebrew prophets certainly saw

the local gods and goddesses as dangerous competitors. One of the common biblical ways to express Israel’s relationship to its god and to his competitors was through the language of sexuality. In the words of some of the prophets (particularly Hosea and Isaiah), the community of Israel was understood to be the “wife” or “bride” of God. Hence any commerce with these other deities was labeled “adultery.” One prophet, Hosea, was even married to a prostitute and used this relationship to act out or prophesy about Israel’s unfaithful “whoring” with other nations and deities.

This sense of difference went far beyond the metaphorical language of sexual jealousy and adultery, however. Israel was encouraged to destroy the people, the children, even the livestock that made up the surrounding Canaanite cultures. Here are some sample passages from the Torah:

Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction. (Exodus 22:20)

... you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces. (Exodus 23:24)

... you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places. You shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. (Numbers 33:52–53)

“Intolerant” seems much too tame a word to describe this biblical god, at least as we have him described and represented in passages like these.

## Qualifications in the Jewish Traditions

But we have to be very careful here, and for at least four reasons:

- 1) *We must be both humble about what we know about the ancient world and suspicious of what the ancient texts tell us.* To take only one example, there simply is no archaeological or anthropological evidence

that any kind of “exodus” from Egypt or later military invasion of Palestine ever occurred along the lines called for and described in such passages (scriptural texts cannot be read as accurate historical reports). What did happen must remain in the realm of speculation.

One possible scenario is that the “Israelites” were originally semi-nomads who settled in the highlands by the thirteenth century BCE and came into conflict with the political authorities of the lowlands, that is, the Egyptians and Canaanites. As the centuries ticked by and the political authority of the Egyptians and Canaanites waned, these different highland tribes consolidated, took on their own political and religious identity (which, like all identities, they invented), and adopted a variety of practices and identity markers, like circumcision and the avoidance of pork, probably because their main enemies, the Philistines, did not circumcise and ate copious amounts of pork.<sup>22</sup>

Whether this or some other scenario is accurate, one consensus remains strong: the Hebrew stories were originally designed to fuse a political and a religious identity. They were not a collection of accurate histories of “what really happened.” The latter sense of history is very modern, no more than a few hundred years old.

- 2) *No religious tradition can be identified solely with its scriptural texts.* Religions are much more than their texts, however sacred or important these are held to be. Rituals, cultural customs, social institutions, artistic representations, and countless invisible acts of piety and prayer are just as important, if not more so. Moreover, scriptural traditions are often filled with things that are, quite simply, impossible to follow for any but the most devout and extreme. If the truth be told, the religious life of the vast majority of people is as much about politely ignoring particular scriptural texts as it is about acting on them. We will return to this idea in Chapter 3, when we get to the separation of religious experience and religion. We will return to it again in Chapter 10, when we will see that the modern virtue of “tolerance” is largely about *not* acting according to one’s religious tradition.
- 3) *Most religions have developed sophisticated ways of reading scriptural texts that qualify, or even deny,*

*their own most troubling passages.* Much of Jewish history is a history of minority communities engaging in sophisticated innovation and critical compromise through legal and rabbinic scholarship and, much later, through modern Jewish philosophy, which in turn has had a major impact on the study of religion to this day (see Figure 1.2).<sup>23</sup> The ancient rabbis often accomplished this innovation through the distinction between an oral and a written Torah. This distinction was based on the idea that the Hebrew text of the Torah (the “written Torah”) needed to be constantly interpreted by living scholars and that these interpretations constituted a second “oral Torah,” perhaps not of equal authority, but nevertheless of great importance and practical implications.

This idea was in turn based on the principle that the Torah does not mean just one thing but is rather infinitely meaningful, and hence always capable of revealing more of the divine truth. Since no single interpretation can exhaust the Torah’s revelation, it naturally follows that the Torah can and should be interpreted anew, in each generation and for each community. This sensibility was expressed powerfully by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, an eighteenth-century writer who went so far as to claim that “all the roots of the souls of Israel are in the Torah, so that they are six-hundred-thousand interpretations of the Torah, which are apportioned to the six-hundred-thousand souls of Israel.”<sup>24</sup> In short, there are as many appropriate interpretations of the Jewish scriptures as there are Jews.

- 4) *There are other Torah passages that present a different sort of deity, one not entirely obsessed with preserving the ritual purity of Israel vis-à-vis its surrounding cultures.* In these, we find prophets witnessing against the social and economic injustices of poverty and political oppression and proclaiming a kind of universal salvation through the chosen nation of Israel and its promised restoration. The prophetic traditions of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah are most remarkable examples of such visions of social and economic justice poised against the rich and powerful. The book of Isaiah is probably the clearest example of a developing religious universalism in the Torah.



**Figure 1.2** Rabbi learns Torah in Cave Synagogue, Jerusalem. Rostislav Glinsky / Alamy Stock Photo.

In short, there was not then, and is not now, one Judaism. There are many Judaisms.

Still, the texts of the Torah as such never reach what we would consider tolerance in the very modern sense of that term—that is, an equal respect for other traditions. We cannot be anachronistic here. Religious tolerance and an accurate comparativism are *our* concerns and values, not those of the Torah. Bottom line? The ancient Jewish record is, at best, profoundly ambiguous on questions of cross-cultural understanding and fair comparison, at least as we understand these today in our globalizing world. In truth, in these early Hebrew texts there was little of either.

### The Comparative Practices of the Early Christian Traditions

In the first few centuries of the Common Era, the early Christian communities, which in the beginning were Jewish communities, came to believe in what they

would call a “new covenant” with God, which was now believed to surpass and complete the “old covenant” of the Torah. Hence the eventual Christian expressions New Testament and Old Testament (a word, in turn, based on the Latin word used to render the earlier Hebrew category of “covenant”).

This new contract revolved around the belief that a Jewish rabbi named Jesus (Hebrew Yeshua, or Joshua) was the “anointed” one (*messiah* in Hebrew, *Christos* in Greek)—that is, the one chosen to reestablish the reign of God or, as Jesus himself appears to have expressed it, “the kingdom of heaven.” This same Jewish rabbi was eventually executed by the Roman authorities as a rabble-rouser and criminal—he was sent to the electric chair of the time: a gory public crucifixion.

Biblical scholars have debated endlessly how Jesus understood his own relationship with God. They are hardly alone. We know that early Christians fought for centuries over the same question. Some early Christians considered Jesus to be a great man,

a prophet perhaps, but nothing more. Others regarded him as a pure god whose humanity and sufferings were an illusion or appearance. Others still took him for an eternal savior figure who had descended from the heavens into the material world to enlighten and awaken the divine spark in individuals and so rescue them from the clutches of a corrupt, even demonic social and religious order. Finally, others—and these are the people who eventually won these early cultural wars—considered him to be literally the son of God, namely a son born of a virgin, who had suffered and died on a cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the world and was resurrected by God on the third day.

In short, Christianity developed the most astonishing claim that God had taken on human nature—had been “enfleshed”—in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, in this winning view, was both fully human *and* fully divine. As the much later Nicene Creed put the matter (in Greek philosophical terms), he was of the “same substance” (*homoousios*) as God himself. Jesus was God. And he was a human being. He was superhuman.

Be careful, though. Beware of using who won to judge who lost.

## On “Old” and “New” as Comparative Terms

As they fought over who Jesus was, the early followers of Jesus, who referred to their movement as “the Way,” were also faced with how to articulate their relationship with the parent religion—an emerging Judaism. Over the course of a century or so, they would accomplish this with the help of the already mentioned expressions Old Testament and New Testament. These are examples of what scholars call **polemics** or **apologetics**: religious categories that are designed to criticize, subordinate, or argue against another religious worldview (hence they are “polemical”), even as they establish the superior truths of one’s own religious worldview over those of others (hence they are “apologetic”). The argument was made over centuries that the Greek Christian texts of the “New Testament” complete or fulfill the Hebrew Jewish texts or “Old Testament.” The claim embedded in them is that Christianity has inherited the mantle of Israel and is now the true spiritual Israel, as it were.

Historical accuracy and religious polemics and apologetics, however, are two very different matters. Accordingly, many biblical scholars no longer use the phrase (or title) Old Testament except when they are explicitly treating Christian materials or readings, and then they do it always with a clear explanation of how this phrase has been used to privilege Christianity over Judaism. Jewish readers and scholars, after all, would never use the phrase “Old Testament” to refer to the Jewish understanding of the Torah. That is an obvious (and quite polemical) Christian expression, not a Jewish self-understanding.

## Canon Formation and Christian Theology

The development of the Christian New Testament and the Christian renaming of the Jewish Torah as the Old Testament are also examples of what scholars call **canon formation**. The word *canon* comes from a Greek term that originally referred to a measuring plumb line used by ancient carpenters to assure a straight line. It was later adopted by Christian theologians and bishops to name the set of texts that were held to be revealed, sacred, and authoritatively “straight,” in contrast to the “crooked” ones that were held to have human authorship and hence to fall outside the realm of true revelation. Related here are the nouns **orthodoxy** (literally “straight teaching”) and **heterodoxy** (literally “other/different teaching,” but here something like “wrong teaching”).

The important thing to keep in mind is that a canon is *relative to a particular religious tradition*. What is “canonical” for one religious tradition is often only partially true or, worse yet, destructive or just plain silly for another. Often, however, one canon does not simply dismiss or demean a previous parent canon—it *includes* it, if always at a lower level, within its own canon. So the Christian canon absorbed and changed the meaning of the Jewish canon in the second century CE, when it developed its notions of the “Old” and “New” Testaments. Then the Islamic tradition absorbed and changed the meaning of both “the Torah” and “the Gospels” in the seventh and eighth centuries, when it argued that Islam includes and corrects these earlier revelations in the perfect and final

revelation that is the Quran. Muslims were now God's most elect. Same basic comparative move. Different religion.

Christian comparative practices were pioneered by a group of Greek and Latin intellectuals who came to be called "the Church Fathers." These were highly educated male church leaders, monks, scholars, and bishops writing from the second to the fifth century who developed the diverse stories and teachings of the New Testament into a coherent system or theology. A **theology** is a rational explanation (*logos*) of God (*theos*). The term is generally used to describe the attempt of human reason to explain and systematize divine revelation for a particular faith community.

A great deal has been written about how the study of religion is not theology, or vice versa. As always, there are nuances and qualifications to make, but the basic distinction is fair enough. Theology speaks from the perspective of a particular faith tradition or religion. The professional study of religion strives to privilege no single faith tradition or religion but to develop models and theories that can be applied anywhere at any time (obviously, this is the goal, if never quite the accomplishment). These are two *very* different intellectual-spiritual orientations, even if they are also historically linked in some profound and important ways, as we shall see soon enough.

Some type of theology was, of course, always practiced *implicitly* in the mythologies, ritual hymns, processions, and prayers of different cultures, all of which implied or assumed particular understandings of the deities that they worshiped. But it was probably not until (roughly) the Greeks, Romans, and Christians of the ancient Mediterranean world that systematic theology proper developed. We might, then, distinguish between **implicit theology**, which every religious system has practiced, and **explicit theology**, which only some have developed. We might also distinguish, for our own purposes, between implicit and explicit comparative practices.

It was through the writings of the Church Fathers that Christianity came to adopt a whole set of new doctrines or "teachings," such as the trinity (the **doctrine** or religious teaching that God is three persons in one substance), the incarnation (the doctrine that God took flesh and became human in Jesus of Nazareth), original sin (the doctrine that all human

beings are born with an ancestral moral fault inherited from humanity's first parents, Adam and Eve), and *theōsis* or "deification" (the doctrine, much more developed in the eastern Greek and Russian Orthodox traditions, that God became man so that man might become God). *None* of these terms (trinity, incarnation, original sin, or deification) appears anywhere in the biblical texts. They were the results of theological labor. Many of their orthodox meanings were finally crystallized in the famous Nicene Creed, which was not composed and finalized until 325 CE at the Council of Nicaea, almost three hundred years after the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. That is how long it took to create what would come to be known as "Christianity." Creed and canon aside, there were always, in fact, many Christianities.<sup>25</sup> There still are.

## The Gods and Early Christian Intolerance

With respect to other religions, early orthodox Christianity did something that early Judaism never could: it carried out the intolerant aspects of biblical monotheism. It could do this because, in the first decades of the fourth century, some of the Christian communities aligned themselves with the power and reach of the Roman Empire. In the centuries that followed, the Christian church would align itself with the developing European monarchies, and eventually with nation-states as well. Due to this political-religious fusion with major political powers, the Christian church could now carry out the kinds of religious intolerance and political persecution that the Israelite legal writers and prophets had envisioned and written about but could seldom, if ever, carry through. Islam, as we shall see, followed the example of Christianity here, not that of Judaism.

Assmann has put it this way: Whereas the monotheistic distinction of Judaism was directed "inward" and resulted in a separation from the Other (as in other cultures and nations), the monotheistic distinction of Christianity and that of Islam were directed "outward" and resulted in religious, political, and military projects aiming to convert or vanquish the religious other.<sup>26</sup> Judaism separated itself from other cultures

and religions: its method was *segregation*. Christianity and Islam attempted to change other cultures and religions into images of themselves: their methods were *conversion* and *conquest*.

The latter strategies can be seen in the various comparative practices of some of the early Christian communities, including those enshrined in language that some still use today, particularly through the notions of pagans, demons, and heretics.

One of the most general and long-lasting comparative practices that the early Christians developed involved the use of a single word: **pagan**. The word originally referred to inhabitants of the countryside (*pagoi*). Since Christianity was largely an urban phenomenon—that is, since it had the most success in cities, where it took deep root through administrative structures modeled after those of the Roman Empire (hence *Roman Catholicism*)—it was in the countryside that its reach was weakest. It was there that the traditional polytheistic practices of Roman religion survived longest. For the Church Fathers, then, the “pagans” were quite literally the “country folk,” the uneducated and uncivilized: in contemporary polemical terms, the “hicks” who had not yet embraced the true religion and divine light of Christianity.

The same category was later expanded to refer to any non-Christian religion. “Pagan” thus came to function in ways not dissimilar to the Jewish “gentile.” If *gentile* meant “anyone who is not Jewish,” pagan came to mean “anyone who is not Christian.” Ancient Christian writers, to be clear, would not describe Jewish people as pagans, since they were perfectly aware that the Christian revelation emerged from the Jewish revelation. Ancient Jewish writers, however, would and did refer to Christians as gentiles, since the revelation of the Torah was in no way indebted to the Christian “New Testament,” which they did not recognize as a revelation at all.

The Church Fathers also wrote and spoke of other people’s gods in (very) negative terms. These were the foreign *daimones*, that is, “demons.” These were to be battled against and exorcised by the faithful as if they were diseases or mental illnesses—which, in turn, had also been understood to be symptoms of demonic possession. Demons were everywhere.

The later history of demons, the devil, and Satan is an especially complex one. What generally happened

was that the Christian fear and hatred of the religious other was demonized and became “Satan.”<sup>27</sup> Early Christianity did what other religions had done or would do: it turned the gods of the religious competitor into demons. This fear of the religious other was in turn fused in the popular imagination with the bestial horns and hooves of Greek and Roman folklore and mythology. The Greek fertility and nature god Pan (Greek for “all”) was often the visual source here.

The meanings of Pan were complex and rich in the Greek context, both positive (as in a kind of natural pantheism) and negative (the word “panic” is one result). So were the Greek histories of the *daimon*, a most mysterious real presence (translated into Latin as the *genius*) that could be a source of inspiration and knowledge, as it clearly was, for example, in Plato’s stories of Socrates and his guiding *daimon*. All of this became entirely negative in the Christian imagination, with the result that the popular image of Satan as a horned and hooved evil demon relies on the Christian transformation (or deformation) of “pagan” and the “daimon.” Unfortunately, this kind of fear and hatred of the religious other would have a very long history in religious forms of comparison and can still be heard (and no doubt experienced as such) today in numerous contexts.

Perhaps the most dangerous of all, though, were those religious others “inside the family,” that is, the countless Christians whose faith and practice did not meet the standards of those in power and authority. These erring members of the Christian community—those other Christianities—became the **heretics**: individuals who, instead of submitting to the authority of the bishops, willingly chose to believe something else. The term *heresy* comes from the Greek *hairesis*, which means “choice,” “opinion,” and also “sect” or “school of thought”; we could say—quite anachronistically but not at all inaccurately—that *hairesis* is, more or less, what we mean today by “religious freedom.”

Like demon talk, heresy talk was suffused with what we might call today “immunological” associations. If, after all, the “disease” or “poison” of a particular heresy was allowed to spread, it would eventually “infect” the entire “body” of the church. It had to be stopped. It had to be stamped out. Augustine was especially influential here. He would develop a justification for

the use of state violence against heretical Christians as just such a response.

Arguments of this kind would turn out to be immensely influential in later Christian history. Thousands of individuals would be burned at the stake, imprisoned, or otherwise harassed and tortured in the later histories of Christianity for their freely chosen beliefs or “heresies.” And this is before we even get to something like the crusades—those politically organized campaigns and pitched battles, usually around Jerusalem, in the tenth through the twelfth centuries, during which thousands of Christians and Muslims lost their lives, partly for being “heretics” and “infidels” to one another, that is, for having the “wrong” set of beliefs. Things other than right belief were at stake too, of course—like wealth, treasure, power, and land; but it was belief and religious identity that marked the battle lines and the bodies that fell.

## Christians in the Eyes of Others

Roman intellectuals, of course, had their own comparative take on early Christians. Not that they understood them. They were particularly baffled by the Christians’ refusal to give proper reverence and worship to the gods, which, in their mind, was an important part of being a good and decent Roman citizen. It appeared to them that the Christians were in fact “atheists.” They were atheists because they denied the existence of the gods and refused to participate in the state religion of Rome, which involved worshipping the emperor. It was this last element that resulted in the persecution of Christians by some of the Roman emperors.

The Romans also considered the Christians to be stupid, hateful, and anti-social. These early Christians, after all, denied the existence of the Roman gods. In modern terms, they practiced a form of religious intolerance. But the Christians *also* separated religious truth and morality from any previous loyalty to a community or people. They sought to form another people, another “race” (*genos*) that was not bound to any previous ethnicity, community, or culture. Most people today who think of “religion” are thinking in these same transcultural or transnational terms. For better and for worst, the revolution was effective.<sup>28</sup>

## Qualifications in the Christian Traditions

As with ancient Israelite religion and early Judaism, we must be careful here about overly simplifying the ancient Christianities. We might briefly mention four points:

- 1) *Inclusive New Testament passages.* As with the universal God of Isaiah, the New Testament is studded with passages expressing a certain conditional, implicit, or limited universalism. Probably the most famous passage appears in Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). It is also worth pointing out here that at least one Church Father, a most remarkable scholar named Origen (185–254 CE), probably preached a form of universal salvation, that is, the doctrine that eventually all men and women would be saved. This teaching was later declared heretical—too much sameness. But it was there in early Christian thought, and it has persisted into the present: there is no eternal damnation, and all will be saved by a God who is good.<sup>29</sup>
- 2) *The mystical element of the New Testament.* It is also worth pointing out that various strands of Jewish mystical practice played a major role in the early development and definition of Christianity, and in fact they are very much part of the New Testament. Paul’s description of being taken up “to the third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12.2), for example, is almost certainly an expression of this Jewish mystical element, as was his famous blinding conversion on the road to Damascus via a conscious lightform that he experienced as the resurrected Messiah of his own Jewish faith (Acts 9:3–19; 22:6–21; 26:12–18).
- 3) *Ancient diversity.* Along similar lines, it must also be remembered that both the early Judaisms and Christianities were mind-bogglingly diverse. Historically speaking, there simply is no such thing as the first, or the original, Judaism or Christianity. Once again, there were only Judaisms and Christianities. And many of them were open to all sorts of currents of religious thought and practice, from Greek, Roman, and Egyptian astrology and

magical practice to the nuanced teachings and ritual practices of various “pagan” philosophies.

The influence of those intellectuals who, one way or another, considered themselves Plato’s followers during these first few centuries of the Common Era was also immense. Indeed many have argued that it is **Neoplatonism** that provided the philosophical base for much of the later histories of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystical theology. This same influence became coded in an anxious question, originally asked by the Church Father Tertullian: “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” That is, what can the religion of the one God learn from the pagan philosophers? A great deal, as it turned out.

- 4) “Knowing” comparisons. Then there were the **Gnostics**—the “knowers.” These were Christian communities whose emphasis on personal mystical knowing (*gnosis*) did not sit well with the views of the authorities. They wrote their own gospels and scriptural texts (which were condemned, mocked, and eventually suppressed). By such *gnosis* or “knowledge,” these Christians did not mean any kind of knowing *about* something else. They did not mean data. They meant a kind of intimate acquaintance, even mystical identity. Elaine Pagels, in her 1979 classic *The Gnostic Gospels*, defined *gnosis* this way:

The Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflexive knowledge (“He knows mathematics”) and knowing through observation or experience (“He knows me”), which is *gnosis*. As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as “insight,” for *gnosis* involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny ... to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of *gnosis*. ... Orthodox Jews and Christians insist that a chasm separates humanity from its creator: God is wholly other. But some of the gnostics who wrote these gospels contradict this: self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.<sup>30</sup>

As one would expect, these gnostic Christians (and they *were* Christians), with their strong emphasis on

the mystical element of religion, often practiced particularly radical forms of comparison. One of the most striking examples is the caustic phrase “not as Moses said.” It occurs in the second-century scriptural text *The Secret Book of John*, where it is used as an angry critique of ancient biblical literalism and its divinization, according to the Gnostics, of the violent and cruel creator-god who repeatedly appears in the Hebrew scriptures. In short, for the gnostic Christians, the God featured in the Hebrew Bible was not the real God but a fake or lower God. The true hidden or transcendent God, they concluded, could not possibly behave so badly. It simply cannot be “as Moses said.”

One of the most remarkable examples of such gnostic comparisons is *The Revelation of the Magi*, an early Christian text about a traveling orb of light that is said to have appeared to the *magoi*—magicians or astrologers—in the Gospel of Matthew (see Figure 1.3). These astrologer-magicians are often safely but deceptively described in English translations as “wise men.” In this text at least, the astrologers are in fact members of an ancient religious order in a far eastern land called “Shir” (probably China), where the luminous entity appears to them in a cave, concentrates its form into a “small and humble” humanoid, and leads them to travel to Bethlehem, where in another cave the light-form is “born” as Mary and Joseph’s son, now as an infant but still glowing radiantly. Note, again, the theme of wisdom coming from the East.

New Testament scholar Brent Landau concludes his study of this text with what he considers the most remarkable aspect of the revelation, namely that, “instead of seeing non-Christian religions as products of human vanity or demonic inspiration, as most ancient Christians did, the *Revelation of the Magi* sees potentially all revelation as coming from Christ himself.” Indeed the star-child never actually identifies himself as Christ to the traveling magicians and makes startling statements like this one: “I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light whose light has shone ... in the entire world and in every land by unspeakable mysteries.”<sup>31</sup>

We should not, of course, make too much of this single text, but it does show quite dramatically that liberal acts of comparison, and even a certain universalism, were not only possible but practiced within some forms of early Christianity. They, too, are very much a part and parcel of the Christian tradition to this very day.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 1.3** *Adoration of the Magi* (1423), by Gentile da Fabriano. Galleria dei Uffizi, Florence, Italy. GiorgioMorara / Adobe Stock.

## The Comparative Practices of the Early Islamic Traditions

Islam, a monotheistic religion that emerged in the seventh century, is the only “world religion” to have named itself. All others were named by outsiders. In the case of Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, and Judaism, for example, the original adjectival appellations (Buddhist, Christian, and so on) and eventually the abstract names ending in -ism (in modern languages like English) were given by outsiders. One might expect, then, that the Islamic traditions

would have a particularly keen and particularly ancient practice of thinking abstractly and comparatively about “religion.”

And one would be correct.

## The Arabic Category of *din* or “Religion”

Much of this ancient comparative practice revolves around the central Arabic term *din*. The term *din* was in use well before the rise of Islam. It was evident, for

example, both in the Persian and Semitic cultures of the Mesopotamian world and beyond. In its middle Persian form *den*, it was used extensively in a variety of ways, including one that can well be translated as "religion." For example, we find the phrases *weh-den*, "the good religion," and *mazdesn den*, "the religion of Mazda worship," in Zoroastrian texts. For Manicheans, too, *den* denoted true or right "religion," that is, the Manichaean community.<sup>33</sup>

A bit of background is in order here. Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism are among the most ancient "world religions" that flourished throughout the ancient world. Both are commonly understood to be Iranian religions, meaning that both developed in conversation with or in the context of ancient Persian civilization. The most central tenant of both religions was a worldview in which the moral forces of good and evil, of truth and falsehood were seen to be both real and locked in an eternal struggle. We call this an **ethical dualism**. Sometimes the force of evil was understood to be a function of human choices or inspirations. At other times, it appears to have been understood as having an independent existence, or existences, of its own. These were not quite traditional monotheisms, then, since they sometimes recognized the independent existence of a separate and quite real counterforce in the world.

Having said that, it must also be observed that the traditional monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have never quite been traditional monotheisms, either, as they too have recognized such forces and have never been able really to explain the presence of evil. If there is only one all-powerful God, what is that "other god," traditionally called Satan or the Devil, doing there? If God is good and so powerful, why is there evil in the world? Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism had a clear answer: because there *is* evil in the world.

Traditionally, the figure of Zoroaster is credited with the founding of Zoroastrianism, which focuses on the worship of the good God of all light and truth, Ahura Mazda, the "Wise Lord" who created the universe. The founder's name is based on an ancient Greek version of it: *Zoroastres*. He has also been called "Zarathustra," mostly in European contexts, and "Zarathushtra." Hence many believers today call themselves "Zarathushtis," that is, followers of Zarathushtra, or, alternatively, they describe themselves

as "Mazdaean" or "Mazdayasni," the latter ancient expression meaning "Mazda-worshipping."<sup>34</sup>

Scholars have not been able to pin down even an approximately reliable date for Zoroaster. Arguments have been advanced that place him anywhere from the thirteenth to the sixth century BCE, the majority of scholars favoring dates around 1000 BCE.<sup>35</sup> We know virtually nothing about him or what he preached outside of what we have in a body of sacred literature written by Zoroastrian priests a full two thousand years later, that is, around 1000 CE. This was after the fall of the Sassanian Empire (third to seventh century CE) to the Arab invaders who introduced Islam to the same region.

Unlike Zoroastrianism, which rose to political prominence as the national religion of Persia during the Sassanian Empire, Manichaeism became a persecuted minority religion early in its history. Its founding figure, a prophet named Mani, lived in the third century CE and hailed from Persia. His religion shared some fundamental elements with Zoroastrianism, including its dualism, which he took further still. Although Manichaeism was suppressed in the central lands of ancient Iran under Zoroastrianism, it flourished in Central Asia, Africa, and Europe before finally going extinct.

The important point for us is not the origins or content of these two ancient religions, but the fact that, in both Zoroastrian and Manichaean use, the term *den* referred to a privileged and unique set of beliefs and practices, which were held to constitute the true religion. What we have here, in short, is another version of Assmann's "monotheistic distinction." Hence no plural form of the noun *den* is used. In the same uncompromising spirit, Kartir, the official Zoroastrian high priest of the Persian emperor in the third century CE, proudly boasts of his accomplishments in this royal inscription:

And in kingdom after kingdom and place after place ... great dignity came to the religion of Mazda worship ... and Yahudis (Jews), Sramans (Buddhists), Brahmins (Hindus), Christians ... and Zandiks (Manichaeans) in the empire were smitten. Idols were destroyed and the dens of the demons were obliterated and turned into thrones and seats for the gods.<sup>36</sup>

If you thought our earlier discussion of God/gods was complex, consider this: The Latin word for “god” (*deus*), the Zoroastrian word for “demon” (*dev*) here, and the Indian Sanskrit word for “god” (*deva*) are all derived from the same root of a verb “to shine.” As the Zoroastrian and Sanskrit uses make very clear, one culture’s gods are often another’s demons. We have seen this same process above with the early Christian demonization of the Greek fertility god Pan into the popular figure of Satan and the deformation of the Greek *daimon* into the Christian demon. This process was hardly a Christian invention, then. It is a common human reaction to the religious other, particularly the earlier religious competitor. It, too, reflects a comparative practice—from our modern academic perspective, a bad one.

Four centuries later, the Quran (the sacred scripture of Islam) will adopt the same language, using *din* as a term more or less interchangeable with Islam: “The *din* before God is Islam” (3:19). Once again, no plural forms are used, although there would develop different forms of Islam. Early in Islamic history, for example, a sectarian movement developed that would later be known as Shi’ism. Shi’a Muslims believed that Muhammad’s religious authority (with the exception of his role as a law-giver) was transmitted to divinely chosen members in his lineage. The majority of Muslims, later known as Sunnis, defined their theology in contrast to that perspective, arguing that after Muhammad, religious authority belonged to the whole community rather than a special person. Just as scholars speak of Judaism and Christianity, we might well speak of Islamic traditions, then.

To complicate the picture somewhat, the Quran also makes a gesture toward universalism by depicting the multiplicity of beliefs evident in the world as part of the divine plan. Even here, though, there appears to be a real limit to just how “other” or “different” the religious Other can be:

Indeed, the faithful [Muslims] and those who are Jews or Christians or Sabaeans—those [among them] who believed in God and the Last Day and performed righteous deeds—will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve. (Quran 2:62)

This relative religious tolerance, paired with the rapid rise of Islam into a regional and then a global colonial power, made it easier for Muslims to move toward a more inclusive understanding of *din*. Although Islam retained its position as “the most complete” religion, many other systems of belief were now understood and categorized as genuine religions. Such a situation, we might note, stands in contrast to the medieval Christian usage of the term *religio*, which was not treated as a generic category for different systems of belief and practice until the early sixteenth century, when the era of exploration was taking off, literally and metaphorically, and European colonialism was just around the corner.<sup>37</sup>

In any case, it is sometimes suggested or implied that the modern conception of “religion” and the practice of comparing religions are both modern colonial inventions, that they did not exist until the modern period. As even this brief history of Islam shows, this simply is not so. As the sociologist Martin Riesebrodt observed above with respect to ancient empires, rulers and peoples around the world have been noting the presence and power of “religion” and asking comparative questions about the “religions” for millennia, not centuries, and not just in Europe or the European colonies.

## People of Religion and People of Opinion

Muslim comparative practices were shaped by the Quran, which was itself partly a product of the cultural dynamics of the same Near Eastern world that gave birth to Judaism and Christianity. One could well argue that the same region also gave birth to the very idea of the “holy book” as a central and indispensable element of an authentic religion. Such a trend culminates in the Quran, a text that, for the first time in the general history of religions, self-consciously refers to itself as “the Book” (*al-kitab*) and introduces the comparative category of the “people of the Book” (*ahl al-kitab*) to refer to the Abrahamic lineage of religions, that is, to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—a bold move of classification and comparison, to be sure.

Hence, in matters of belief, the Muslim scholar of religion Abu al-Fath Muhammad al-Shahrastani (1086–1153) divides people into two groups: (1) those who rely on revelation rather than opinion and possess a revealed book (he calls them “people of religion,” a category that includes Muslims, Christians, and Jews, as well as Zoroastrians and Manicheans); and (2) followers of Indian thought and of the Greek philosophies, Sabaeans, pagans, and others, who depend on their own opinions and reason rather than on revelation or a sacred book (he calls these “people of opinion”).

It is easy to recognize the limitations of such division when it comes to a fair comparative practice in the modern world. We might just as well translate “people of religion” and “people of opinion” as “people like us” and “people not like us.” But the important fact remains that Muslim scholars were indeed classifying and “comparing religions” in the medieval period. Such practices, moreover, were not merely abstract scholarly entertainments. Rather, some Muslim authorities treated (and in some ways still treat) their subjects on the basis of opinions generated by these practices and passed into Islamic law. For example, people of religion enjoy certain rights because they fall into the legal and Quranic category of “people of the Book” (*ahl al-kitab*), whereas the second group, “people of opinion,” otherwise categorized as “idolators” or “infidels” (*kuffar*), face (at least in theory) the stark choice of either converting to Islam or being persecuted under Muslim rule. Note again how “opinion” is framed negatively in the ancient monotheistic imagination, be it Christian or Muslim.

## The Gods and Early Islamic Intolerance

It must be admitted that early Islam, like early Judaism and Christianity, was not generally tolerant of other religions.

*Jihad* One obvious example of such intolerance is the Quranic concept of jihad, that is, the “struggle” to be waged against the infidel or nonbeliever, which, of course, only makes sense if the basic binary believer/unbeliever is in place. The injunction for “struggle” was later spiritualized, and jihad was often understood

as an interior battle—a battle that one waged within one’s own soul against temptation and unbelief—but the historical fact remains: jihad was originally a military and physically violent practice.

It should not surprise us, then, that the Quran is peppered with passages very similar to those of the Jewish Torah on not tolerating the unbelievers or pagans, indeed on killing them:

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. (Quran 7:5)

O ye who believe! fight the unbelievers who gird you about, and let them find firmness in you: and know that Allah is with those who fear Him. (Quran 7:123)

*The Destruction of the Idols* Similar forms of intolerance of other gods were expressed in the attitude of the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran toward the indigenous polytheistic religions of Arabia. The pre-Islamic sacred cubical of the Kaba in Mecca, for example, was the most important religious site and a major pilgrimage destination before the dawn of Islam. It hosted hundreds of sacred images of various local tribal deities. One of Muhammad’s most iconic acts in his triumphant return to Mecca after twenty years of exile was his destruction of these “idols,” held inside and around the Kaba (see Figure 1.4).

We are reminded of the same monotheistic impulse in ancient Israelite religion, with its texts on God’s commandment to physically destroy Canaanite images and shrines. Later, in the course of the early rapid expansion of Islam, pagan tribes all over the Arabian Peninsula were given the choice of either converting to the new religion or having their property confiscated, their wives and children enslaved, and their men killed.

*The Poll Tax* Also important here is the common Islamic practice of demanding a special “poll tax” from adherents of recognized religions, that is, Christianity,



**Figure 1.4** The Masjid al-Haram or “Sacred Mosque” surrounding the Kaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Ahmad Faizal Yahya / Alamy Stock Photo.

Judaism, and Zoroastrianism (the “people of the Book” again), in return for peace and protection:

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, among the People of the Book, until they pay the *Jizya* (poll tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (Quran 7.29)

## Qualifications in the Islamic Traditions

As with the ancient Torah texts and the early Christian forms of intolerance, we need to exercise real caution here. Again, in a spirit of fairness and balance, let us mention four points to qualify our observations immediately above:

1) *Inclusive Quranic passages and contextual interpretive principles.* First, it is important to note that

Muslim scholars have often insisted on broad limitations to Quranic interpretation, particularly when it comes to the application of the more extreme injunctions. They have had to reconcile the militant tone of the verses expressing intolerance with that of many other verses in which toleration, compromise, and peace are the message. Consider this verse, which immediately follows the first jihad passage quoted above:

And if any one of the pagans seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the words of God. Then deliver him to his place of safety. That is because they are a people who do not know. (9.6)

Moreover, very much like modern biblical scholars, who consistently demonstrate how biblical passages must be read in their original historical contexts before they can be properly applied to any contemporary situation, early Muslim scholars

argued that each Quranic verse needs to be understood and interpreted in association with the specific historical circumstance in response to which it was originally revealed to the Prophet. Such circumstantial contexts were gathered by Muslim scholars in separate books that eventually came to be known as a genre, under the description of *Asbab al-Nuzul* (“Occasions of Revelation”).

- 2) *Empire and diversity*. Another major force that worked to qualify Islamic intolerance toward other religions was the Islamic Empire. Islamic colonialism would push Muslim intellectuals into new territory, both intellectual and literal. As Muslim elites encountered the unbelievable religious diversity of the Muslim-ruled lands, from Spain and West Africa to Central China and Malaysia, they often found it difficult, if not actually impossible, to adhere to this simple polemical or legal distinction between the people of the Book and the people of opinion.

Consider, for example, what happened to Islam after Muslims conquered much of north India and ruled it for half a millennium as a colonial power. The polytheistic outlook of much Hindu religiosity is anathema to Muslim belief. Moreover, the Hindu beliefs in multiple deities and in reincarnation fly in the face of the two basic principles of Muslim faith: monotheism (signaled by the first Muslim “pillar of faith,” namely the declaration that “there is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger”); and the belief in the last judgment and in a single afterlife. There was, it seems, no way to categorize Hindus as people of the Book. Hindus and Muslims clearly believed incompatible things.

And yet, practical concerns regarding the situation on the ground often prevailed over these religious concerns. Hence, there is evidence that, shortly after the conquest of India, some Muslim authorities came to recognize Hindus as a “people of the Book” and so subject to both Muslim protection and to the attached poll tax.<sup>38</sup> Hindus, after all, have their own sacred Book: the Veda.

- 3) *The Sabaeen umbrella*. Another comparative strategy that protected minorities from open persecution was recourse to *Sabaeanism*, a category that, as we noted above, was introduced by the Quran itself. The ambiguity of this category, perhaps consciously left so by the Prophet, made it the perfect shelter for several nonmonotheistic minority groups. Examples

include the Mandaeans (the only surviving group of Gnostics currently living in southeast Iraq and in southwest Iran) and various star-worshipping religions in the ancient town of Harran. In the light of the positive context in which Quran speaks about the Sabaeans, it was not difficult for Muslim rulers and their jurists to grant these communities protection as a people of the Book.

Edward Browne’s entertaining, yet generally accurate, re-creation of how this actually happened to the pagans of Harran deserves to be quoted at length:

When the Caliph al-Ma’mun passed through the district of Harran on his last campaign against the Byzantines, he remarked amongst the people who came out to meet him and wish him God-speed certain persons of strange and unfamiliar appearance, wearing their hair extremely long, and clad in tightly-fitting coats (*qabā*). Al-Ma’mun, astonished at their appearance, inquired who and what they were, to which they replied, “Harranians.” Being further questioned, they said that they were neither Christians, Jews, nor Magians; while to the Caliph’s inquiry “whether they had a Holy Book or a Prophet,” they returned “a confused reply.” Convinced at last that they were heathens (“Zindiqs and worshippers of idols”), the Caliph ordered them, under pain of death, either to embrace Islam, or to adopt “one of the religions which God Almighty has mentioned in His Book,” giving them respite for their decision till his return from the war. Terrified by these threats, the Harranians cut their long hair and discarded their peculiar garments, while many became Christians or Muhammadans; but a small remnant would not forsake their own religion, and were greatly perplexed and troubled until a Muhammadan jurist offered, for a consideration, to show them a way out of their difficulty. So they brought him much fine gold from their treasuries, and he counseled them to call themselves Sabaeans when al-Ma’mun returned to question them, since the Sabaeans were mentioned in the Quran, yet, since little was known of them, the change of name would involve no change of beliefs or customs.<sup>39</sup>

4) *The mystical element in Islam.* Perhaps the inclusive and tolerant spirit of Islam is nowhere more evident than in Sufism. A Sufi is a Muslim mystic, that is, a religious aspirant or saint who witnesses some profound union with God or the unity of God through such acts as meditation, retreats, and the ritual chanting of the names of God sometimes accompanied by music, poetry, and dance. Not all Sufis have been tolerant of non-Muslim religions, but many have been (this is one of the reasons modern-day Muslim fundamentalists generally despise Sufi communities and shrines). Sufis have often functioned as Islam's premier "border creatives," that is, as effective translators and synthesizers of Islamic and non-Islamic religious forms.

The great Persian poet Shams-al-din Muhammad Hafez (1320–1398) was such a Muslim mystic. His *divan*, a collection of lyric poems, sits beside the Quran in many Muslim homes. It contains lines like these ones:

Love is a church where all religions meet;  
 Islam, or Christ, or Tavern, it is one;  
 Thy face of every system is the sun—  
 O Sun that shines in the Beloved's street.  
 Where Love is there's no need of convent bell,  
 And holy living needs no holy frocks;  
 Time ticks not to your monastery clocks;  
 Where goodness is there God must be as well.<sup>4027</sup>

Once again, it is the mystics of a religion who are often the most radical comparative thinkers.

### "World Religions" Textbooks of the Islamic World

It is also well worth mentioning that, during the classical period of Islamic civilization (roughly, from the late ninth century to the fifteenth century), a number of Muslim scholars succeeded in introducing what are probably the earliest texts on "world religions" known in the West.

The eleventh-century theologian Abu al-Ma'ali, for example, wrote the first Persian text that we would today recognize as just such a study. He decided that the term *din* was not a proper category when it came to

discussing different systems of belief and practice. He chose instead to use the more neutral word *madhhab*, that is, "way" or "path." This might seem a minor lexical change, but it was in fact a significant departure from the earlier comparative practice, which slotted communities into one of just two categories: people of the Book and people of opinion. There could now be, after all, many ways or paths—not just two types of religion, true and false.

Similarly, Shahrastani published his masterpiece *Religions and Sects* at roughly the same time. This work not only provided its readers with a balanced view of different sects within Islam, but addressed Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Christian, and Jewish beliefs and practices in a remarkably open spirit. Even more importantly, this text was widely read. Indeed, the work became so popular among Muslims that Persian and Turkish translations were commissioned in the medieval period. These were subsequently used throughout the Islamic world, from India to Asia Minor.

It bears repeating and emphasizing: comparing religions is neither simply modern nor restricted to European Christians and contemporary secular intellectuals.

### The Comparative Practices of the Hindu Traditions

The "world religions" are sometimes divided into those of "the West" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and those of "the East" (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism). However reasonable and helpful such a classification may be, there are multiple problems with it, including the simple fact that "Western" religions are found throughout Asian cultures, and "Eastern" religions are found throughout Euro-American cultures. Moreover, "Eastern" religions like Sikhism are clearly indebted to "Western" religions like Islam and are also now found throughout Western cultures. With centuries, really millennia, of immigration, trade, and now instant global communication, comparative expressions like "the West" and "the East" are understood to be increasingly dubious, if not actually useless.

Still, there is some truth to the traditional observation that the Asian religions generally work through worldviews, beliefs, and philosophies that are fundamentally different from those found in the Western monotheisms. Not surprisingly, their comparative practices have differed in fundamental ways as well. The Asian attitudes toward other religions have generally been seen as more tolerant. Such a view has good reasons too, even if it is no longer entirely convincing (since these Asian religions have sometimes behaved very badly with respect to other religions, taking on what are essentially monotheistic and nationalistic attitudes of intolerance, bigotry, and violence).

The cultures and religions of India, for example, where diversity of every sort has long been the practiced and lived norm, have an especially rich history of comparative practices. Not surprisingly, the same subcontinent has also produced a number of major world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and numerous Indian forms of Islam and Christianity.

## Cosmotheism in the Vedas and Upanishads

With respect to ancient Hinduism, explicitly comparative insights already appear in the ancient Sanskrit texts of India's earliest scriptures, traditionally known as the Vedas or, in the singular, the Veda. "The Lord is one, though his names are many," sings the *Rig Veda* (c. 1500–1000 BCE). Already we can see a clear and classic balancing of sameness ("The Lord is one") and difference ("though his names are many"). We can also see an ancient polytheism evolving, as Assmann would say, into a robust cosmotheism, with its usually attending comparative practices and eventual conclusion that the gods are all One.

Similar cosmic convictions and implicit comparative practices can be found throughout the rich histories of Hinduism, but perhaps they are nowhere more clear than in the teachings of the Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886). In Ramakrishna we find explicit and multiple declarations such as "She herself has become everything," or "He himself has become everything"—that is, God/dess *is* the physical universe, and more.<sup>41</sup> And the saint was not being

metaphorical here. In one of his visions, the saint saw that the Goddess Kali *was* the walls and floor of the sacred temple, even the cat that wandered through the temple grounds: everything was vibrating with and as her "energy" or "power" (*shakti*). At other times, the saint shifted his religious register and likened all deities, persons, and things to freezing and melting icebergs or temporary waves on the surface of a single Ocean of Conscious Light. This was the famous *brahman* of the Advaita ("non-dual") Vedanta tradition. Ramakrishna also taught that all religions lead to the same goal. Indeed, he even turned this teaching into a practiced "comparative mysticism" by serially adopting the rituals and teachings of different religious "paths," which he experienced as all leading to the same blissful *brahman*. Note the liberal language of "paths" or "ways" again.

Ramakrishna's cosmotheism and comparative practices were advanced in a British colonial context in which they worked as a powerful response to Christian missionary claims that Hinduism was simple polytheism or, worse yet, "idolatry." In short, Ramakrishna's inclusive comparativism was a critical response to colonial comparative practices and worked to undermine the latter's exclusive religious logic. Once again, as with the Muslim Sufis, some of the early gnostic Christians and universalists, and the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries, the mystical experience of oneness and comparing religions or holding "the entire human race together" went together naturally and plausibly.

Such Hindu comparative practices can hardly be explained by British colonialism, then. They are much bigger than that. Such teachings are in fact ancient in India and can be traced at least as far back as the Upanishads ("Secret Teachings"), which were developed around the middle of the first millennium BCE, right in the middle of Jaspers's Axial Age. Also part of the Vedic tradition, these writings are often considered the "end" or "culmination" (*-anta*) of the Vedic revelation (*Veda*)—hence the aforementioned expression, "Vedanta."

These foundational texts have been variously interpreted in Indian history, and so it would be a serious mistake to identify any one of these interpretations as the correct one; but one constant theme has been the distinction between the surface ego or social self (*ahamkara*, literally the "I-maker") and the deeper

human spirit or cosmic Self (*atman*). This distinction is an important one, as it became the basis of a Hindu comparative practice of great power and persuasion.

In this model, religious difference and multiplicity are explained as a function of the social self, which, of course, is socialized in radically different ways, whereas the deeper dynamics of religious sameness are explained as a function of the shared and universal cosmic Self, which is understood to be immortal and unchanging, or at least quite other than the temporary social self. Hence, Ramakrishna's teachings about the surface waves of selves on the deeper Ocean of Light; or ancient secret teachings like this one: "May the gods abandon him who thinks the gods dwell anywhere other than in the Self."<sup>42</sup> The gods are real, but they are not as real as the Self, of which they are temporary projections or local manifestations. *This*, too, is a kind of "comparing religions."

Such comparative practices, of course, were not just functions of secret texts. Nor were they the sole product of elite intellectuals or recognized saints. They were also commonly and publicly exercised, in ritual and in stone, in lived religion. Many of the Hindu temples, for example, display in striking form a most remarkable comparative practice: numerous gods and goddesses share the same sacred space, as each is understood to be a part of a larger cosmic vision or sacred whole (see Figure 1.5). A comparative practice like this, of course, is an implicit one, that is, the sculptors and temple builders were not setting out consciously to "compare religions." They nevertheless did.

## The Caste System and Early Hindu Intolerance

As with the three monotheistic religions, such liberal and inclusive practices have by no means been the whole story of Hinduism. There also have been some fundamental Indian social structures that emphasize difference, social hierarchy, discrimination, and what we would today recognize as religiously based intolerance.

*The Foreigner* Consider the traditional abhorrence of the *mleccha* (the barbaric "foreigner"), the classical prohibition against "crossing the black waters" (that is, of leaving the subcontinent of South Asia), and,



**Figure 1.5** Hindu temple in Gopuram, India. Tim Gainey / Alamy Stock Photo.

behind all of this, the caste system that renders entire communities permanently marginalized by declaring them "polluting." For much of Indian history (the situation radically changed in the modern period), to leave Bharat or what is today called India was equivalent to losing one's caste—for what could "caste" mean in a foreign culture that did not recognize it?—which was in turn tantamount to a kind of social and personal destruction. Here travel was openly recognized for what it in fact often is: the dissolution of one's cultural certainties and social self.

*The Crushed* Related here is the very difficult subject of Hinduism's historical treatment of millions of people whom it came to call "untouchables," so named because orthodox Hindus will not literally touch them lest they become polluted or rendered

ritually impure. Untouchable people, of course, have a very different perspective on this daily social fact of life in India. From their own perspective, they are not “untouchable” at all. They are “Dalits.” They are “the Crushed.”

*Hierarchical Inclusions* The truth is that ancient or classical Hinduism was not so much “tolerant” in the modern sense of that word, as it was “hierarchical” in the ancient or medieval sense. That is, before the modern period, Hinduism has generally handled religious and social difference not by accepting the religious or social other as a free citizen within an open liberal society of equals (*no* culture attempted this until the modern period), but by including the religious other within its own caste mentality, always at a lower or subordinate level. One could certainly argue today that this kind of hierarchical inclusion is preferable to the biblical and Quranic strategies of actively suppressing or converting the religious other into oneself, but one can hardly argue that this strategy meets all the modern moral standards of religious pluralism and religious freedom. It does not.

## Hindu Mystical Currents

It was, once again, the poets and mystics who mounted the most radical challenges to these sorts of hierarchical subordinations of other individuals and whole communities. One of the most remarkable of these poets and mystics was the fifteenth-century poet-weaver Kabir. Kabir attempted to move his listeners out of the religious ideas that made both normative Hindu social discrimination and Muslim religious discrimination possible. More particularly, he taught of a God beyond all Hindu, Muslim, ritual, and caste differences, and he did so within an implicit, accessible, effective, and beautiful comparative practice: he *sang*.

Here, for example, is Kabir going after the pundits or learned scholars of conservative Hinduism, their claimed authority to interpret the sacred scriptures (the Vedas and Puranas), and their violent animal sacrifices. Kabir insists that the true God (whom he called “Ram,” a common Hindu name for God) cannot be

known through words, scriptures, and sacrificial killings. He can only be known through love:

Pundit, how can you be so dumb?  
You’re going to drown, along with all your kin,  
unless you start speaking of Ram.

Vedas, Puranas—why read them?  
It’s like loading an ass with sandalwood!  
Unless you catch on and learn how Ram’s name  
goes, how will you reach the end of the road?

You slaughter living beings and call it religion:  
Hey brother, what would irreligion be?  
“Great Saint”—that’s how you love to greet  
each other:  
Who[m] then would you call a murderer?

And here is the same poet going after the Muslims, their circumcisions, their gender discriminations, and their reliance on another holy book:

Hey, Qazi [an Islamic judge],  
What’s that book you’re preaching from?  
And reading, reading—how many days?  
Still you haven’t mastered one word.  
Drunk with power, you want to grab me;  
Then comes the circumcision.

Brother, what can I say?—  
If God had wanted to make me a Muslim,  
why didn’t he make the incision?  
You cut away the foreskin, and then you have  
a Muslim;

so what about your women?  
What are they?  
Women, so they say, are only half-formed men;  
I guess they must stay Hindus to the end.  
Hindus, Muslims—where did they come from?  
Who got them started down this road?  
Search inside, search your heart and look:  
Who made the heavens come to be?  
Fool,

Throw away that book, and sing of Ram.  
What you’re doing has nothing to do  
with him.<sup>43</sup>

It would be difficult to find more dramatic criticisms of religious identity *anywhere* in the modern study of religion. What scholar has spoken like this? What academic has sung? And certainly no form of scholarship

can approach the popularity and cultural influence of a people's poet like Kabir. He "compared religions" to transcend religion. And the people loved him for it.

## The Comparative Practices of the Jain Traditions

Hinduism was, by no means, the only religion to have developed in ancient or medieval India. Indeed, South Asia has been a veritable volcano of religious creation and development, endless spiritual teachers and new religious movements that constitute new lands, as it were. One of these is what we today call Jainism (generally pronounced "Jane-ism").<sup>44</sup>

Jainism is especially interesting for the comparativist, since it takes basic religious principles that can certainly be found elsewhere in the world but then takes them to their most logical ends, particularly around the existence and transcendence of the soul (*jiva*) and the moral virtues of nonviolence (*ahimsa*). It is as if we can see in Jainism's past and present what is only implied or future in other belief systems. It is as if Jainism is a kind of microscope that allows us to see below the surface of things.

## The Conquering of the Material World

Jainism is a dualistic religion. It affirms the complete transcendence of the soul—understood in ways that go far beyond any "person" or "individual" as normally understood—from any and all forms of material involvement, a material world that it considers very real and as opposed in some basic ways to the well-being and independence of the soul. Hence many of its religious practices—from meditation and monasticism to vegetarian dietary rules and the choice of profession—involve lessening or even the stopping of what the Indian traditions commonly call *karma* or "action," which the Jain tradition sees as a kind of subtle material covering of the pure soul.

It should be stressed that the tradition understands *all* living things to possess or *be* such a soul, even insects and invisible beings in the water (what we would now call microorganisms). There is a particular non-anthropocentrism at work here, that is, a most

dramatic insistence that the human being is not the center of things, is not the only significant agent of moral value in the environment. Hence the modern reading of Jainism as possessing a deep ecological wisdom. Hence the extent to which nonviolence is defined among Jains, particularly with respect to food or consuming other living beings. Hence also the general Jain prohibition against the practice of agriculture (the plow kills).

The spiritual goal, then, becomes the complete removal of these karmic impurities covering the pristine soul. This is accomplished by not acting, particularly by avoiding all violent activity, which is considered especially polluting. This includes basic functions like eating (hence the strong vegetarianism of the tradition) and, in its most radical forms, not wearing any clothes (hence the nudity of the male monks in one branch of the Jain tradition). Once the soul is entirely purified of subtle material *karma* or binding action, it can release itself from the body and float up to the top of the universe, where it exists in its perfect spherical form for all eternity. It is now an omniscient immortal Jina, a soul that has "conquered" (*jina*) the material world. Followers of such a soul's transcendent teachings are called Jaina, literally, those who are "of the Jina," of the One Who Has Conquered.

There are an infinite number of souls, but in some fundamental sense they are all identical in the sense that they are all composed of the same pure all-knowing awareness (an identity that poses a most severe challenge to any Western notion of permanent personality or lasting individuality). Technically, liberated souls cannot and should not be worshipped, since they are indifferent to this world and will not hear any such prayers—another radical challenge to Western notions, this time of deity. But they are certainly venerated, remembered, and celebrated in the Jain traditions as models to emulate and strive toward over many life cycles. Much like their Hindu and Buddhist counterparts, Jains affirm the reality and importance of reincarnation.

The Jain tradition is technically atheistic (it is simply not true that religion and the existence of God require one another), since it recognizes no creator god or God, and the laws of karma and reincarnation are entirely impersonal—that is, there is no judge to save or damn. But this Jain atheism is complex, since

the tradition also involves various forms of robust worship and devotional prayer for practical needs and worldly purposes, or simply for celebration and fun. There is a profound sense in India that different rules and practices are in place for different kinds of people—there is no “one size fits all” assumption. I doubt that the observer would conclude from any significant encounter with Jain ritual, practice, or community that Jains are atheists in any but the most technical philosophical sense.

### The Teachings of Manyness, Perspective, and Maybe

What is of special interest to us is the Jain position of *anekantavada*, which can be literally translated as the “doctrine (*vada*) of many ends (*anekanta*),” but which can be further glossed as the position that there are many views of reality, and that each is worth considering as a legitimate and understandable perspective *from within that perspective*. Jeffery Long calls this the doctrine of non-absolutism and links it to two other Jain philosophical convictions: *nayavada*, or the “doctrine of perspectives,” and *syadvada*, or the “‘maybe’ doctrine,” that is, the position that every position should be put in the conditional tense, which is to say: not as a certainty, but as a “perhaps.”<sup>45</sup>

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of these three teachings. These fundamental values suffuse and define Jain religious culture and morality. Indeed, Melanie Barbato has argued, particularly with respect to Jain approaches to religious plurality, that Jain identity is all about dialogue, in that it opens Jains up to the views of others even as it also stabilizes the core of Jain identity (as dialogue itself). This is why she translates *anekantavada* as the “teaching of plurality” and locates it squarely at the heart of Jain identity, practice, and social life.<sup>46</sup>

Together, these three teachings on Manyness, Perspective, and Maybe are what we might call—a bit anachronistically—the Jain position on comparing religions. Within such a model, each religious belief system potentially has its place and legitimacy within its own system, but no such position should be taken as absolute or fully the case for everyone. Long is also clear that such an approach does not suppress differences in

order to affirm unity. It affirms and engages *both* differences *and* unity.<sup>47</sup>

## The Blind Men and the Elephant

Long tells the famous pan-Asian story of the Blind Men and the Elephant (see Figure 1.6), which can function well as a parable on the limits and value of comparison to this day:

Several blind men are brought before a king and asked to describe an elephant. ... One, who grasps the elephant’s trunk, claims that an elephant is like a snake. Another, grasping a leg, claims it is like a tree. Yet another grasps the tail and says it is like a rope; and another, feeling the elephant’s side, claims it is like a wall. The blind men then proceed to argue amongst themselves about the true nature of the elephant. The moral of the story is that all the blind men are partially correct—for an elephant does, indeed, possess all the qualities that the blind men attribute to it. Each is also partially incorrect, inasmuch as he denies the claims of the others.

Long then explains, with the same story, why the Jain doctrines do not constitute a **relativism**, that is, the position that there is no truth, or that any perspective is as good as any other, that, in effect, it does not matter what one thinks:

Only someone who can see the whole elephant—like a Jina—is in a position to say, unequivocally, what its true nature is. The rest of us, with respect to the true nature of reality, are like the blind men. We can only say with certainty what we can apprehend from our limited perspectives—and be open to the insights of others.<sup>48</sup>

There really is an elephant there. The story can thus be heard to remind us of the fact that there is simply no question that Jains think “in terms of eternal and unchanging truths,” that is, of “a unity that is handed down age after age by the community of Jain



**Figure 1.6** *Blind Men and the Elephant*, Meiji period (1868–1912), 19th century, Japan, Ivory, H. 1 5/8 in. (4.1 cm); W. 1 3/4 in. (4.4 cm). Penta Springs Limited / Alamy Stock Photo.

ascetics.”<sup>49</sup> Such truths are not at all relative. Nor are they perspectival. In the Jain understanding, they are fully true.

We might locate, then, a certain tension in Jain comparativism between the truths of one’s own tradition and those of others. As we see in some other religious thinkers, the other claim or belief might well be true on some level or in some way, but one’s own tradition is truer in a deeper or more ultimate sense. This is often the nature of a religious claim. In a word, such a claim is **normative**. It is universal and true for all, regardless of whether others recognize this or not. The men are blind, but the Jina is not, and there really is an elephant in the room.

### Nonviolence, Ecology, Dialogue, and Mind Beyond Brain

Finally, Long has made the point that the basic truth-positions of Jainism—especially around nonviolence, nonattachment, and the profoundly ecological notions that an insect’s life, might be as precious as a human

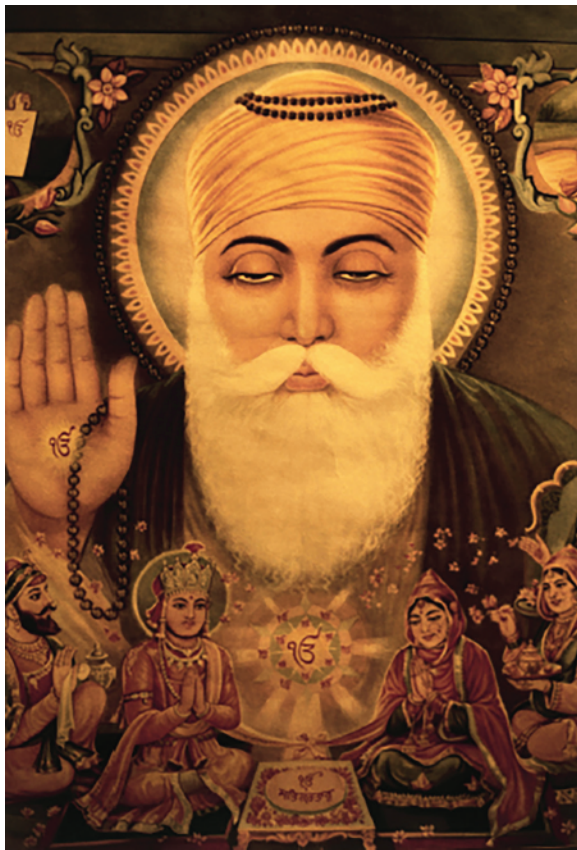
life (since both possess an identically composed soul)—are not only opposed to the basic values of Western society and Christian spiritualities. They are actually the exact opposite or *reversals* of these values, which are too often narcissistic or me-centered. The same might be said of Barbató’s sense of Jain identity as dialogue and conversation.

Jain teachings have attracted me personally over the years for another reason. They attract because they strike at the very heart of the materialism of Western science and its assumption or belief (and it really is just that), that consciousness is the same thing as brain. “No, it is not,” says the Jain tradition. “To be fully known as such, the soul has to be separated from matter, not identified with it. The soul is distinct from and finally transcendent to what we think of as the individual body and the physical world. Accordingly, such an eternal all-knowing consciousness cannot be equated with the person or embodied ego. Indeed, that conflation is *the* problem or mistake that must be corrected.” I do not know if that position is finally and fully correct (I am one of the blind men, and I take the teachings of Many,

Perspective, and Maybe extremely seriously), but I think it is very important to hear and to ponder. It would certainly call into question virtually all of our academic assumptions about human identity, society, and embodiment. I deeply admire Jainism, even if I am not a Jain.

## The Comparative Practices of the Sikh Traditions

In what we might think of as the late medieval or early modern period of India, a man who came to be known as Guru Nanak (1469–1539)—literally “Teacher Nanak”—came on the scene and established a community among Hindus, Muslims, and Jains (Figure 1.7). Guru Nanak or Baba Nanak (“Father



**Figure 1.7** *Guru Nanak*, by Amarjit Singh. Amarjit Singh / Mary Evans Picture Library.

Nanak”) proclaimed a god who united all human beings, in a bold new monotheistic vision that insisted on the equality of all and on the welfare and protection of the poor and the downtrodden. And so was eventually born a new religion, which we have come to call Sikhism (so named after the word “Sikh,” probably originally “bearer of divine wisdom or teachings [*sikhia*],” but eventually “disciple”).

## The Dissolution of Religious Identity

Nanak was born into an upper-caste, land-owning Hindu family in a region that was largely Muslim at this point in space and time. Islam had been practiced in the area for almost eight centuries, that is, from the early eighth century CE on. Somewhere around the year 1500, Nanak had a powerful religious vision, which he described as one of “being taken to the divine court.” This vision appears to have involved both a revelation into the true nature of God and a profound personal sense of being called to a divine mission. In one version of this initiatory vision, the Sikh tradition has it that, after receiving his revelation while bathing in a river, Nanak could not be found for three days. When he finally reappeared, he could not speak until he ecstatically uttered lines like these: “There is neither Hindu nor Muslim, so whose path shall I follow?” and “God is neither Hindu nor Muslim.” Another implicit act of comparison, and of the most dramatic sort.

## Revelation as Comparison

The stunning revelation that began with a denial of religious identity became—through centuries of conversion, community building, ritual practice, and anxious defense on the part of the Sikh community before repeated military oppositions—its own strongly marked religious identity, which now represents itself with a symbol consisting of swords. This is an especially complex history, whose details and debates we have neither the space nor the competence to describe here. Only one subject will concern us now: Sikh comparative practices.

As in most premodern religions, the comparative practices of early Sikhism were largely implicit rather than explicit. Guru Nanak's reported declaration that "there is neither Hindu nor Muslim" was precisely such an implicit comparative practice, in this case one that privileged the universal sameness of the human spirit over the superficial differences of religious and social identity.

But it is also clear that Nanak was in effect "comparing" the new religious revelation he had received to the established religious communities of his own place and time. With respect to his own Hindu society, he acknowledged the reality of reincarnation or rebirth, for example, but he strongly opposed both Hindu polytheism and the religiously based caste system. With respect to Islamic society, he followed Muslim theology on many points, particularly the unity and primacy of God as Lord and Creator, but he was deeply critical of the excesses and corruptions of Islamic political practices. With respect to the Jain communities in his midst, he unequivocally denied the atheism of Jain teachings.

Such "comparisons," of course, were not advanced for the sake of any academic or intellectual project, nor did they develop from any purely rational processes or logical arguments. They were rather direct outcomes or implications of the divine revelation that he believed he had received at the divine court. Revelation *was* comparison.

## The Comparative Practices of China: Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist Traditions

China, like India, is famously plural and diverse. And famously ethnocentric. Indeed the most common indigenous name for China is not "China" (that word appears to have come from the Indian Sanskrit word *cina*, pronounced "cheena"). What the ancient and medieval people of China actually called their culture and land was "the Middle Kingdom." In short, they thought of themselves as living in the center of the world. In their view, every other culture, and thus every other people, lived on the margins.

Even within this so-called Middle Kingdom, however, Chinese culture has generally been dramatically pluralistic, defined in large measure by the weaving together of three separate streams of social and religious thought: those deriving from the teachings of the Chinese scholar-sage and political theorist Confucius, of the Chinese nature mystic Lao-Tzi, and of the north Indian teacher and religious founder Gautama Buddha. Confucius and Lao-Tzi were indigenous to ancient China.<sup>50</sup> Buddhism was an import from South Asia. Buddhism arose around the fifth century BCE in northern India and probably did not reach China until somewhere around the turn of the Common Era, through traveling monks and texts; but these were effectively assimilated and absorbed into Chinese culture in the ensuing centuries by many means, including through extensive translation activities, until they became as "Chinese" as the political philosophy and familial pieties of Confucius or the Way of Lao-Tzi.

## The Three Ways

What is relevant about all of this for our present purposes is the fact that early medieval Chinese scholars engaged in ways of writing and talking about these different traditions that were not so different from the ways early modern European scholars wrote comparatively about "religions," or even—eventually—about "world religions."<sup>51</sup> The Chinese, of course, did not use the Latin-based term "religion." Rather they commonly spoke and wrote about "ways" or "practices" (much like Abu al-Ma'ali in his eleventh-century Persian textbook on world religions, or Ramakrishna countering British Christian colonialists in the nineteenth).

The most common category was Dao, which means simply "way" or "path." This was yet another riff on the universal motif of travel, journey, and path. Thus, while the later European scholars would make up various -isms to name the religions—like Taoism (or Daoism), Buddhism, and Confucianism—the medieval Chinese comparativists spoke of *wuwei dadao* or "the Great Way of Intentionless Action," *fodao* or "the Way of Buddha," and *qingyue dadao* or "the Great

Way of the Pure Contract.”<sup>52</sup>This is sometimes called the “Three Teachings” (*Sanjiao*) tradition. It was especially prominent in the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

Unsurprisingly, different scholars writing on the various “ways” often sought to establish the superiority of a particular “way” over the others. For instance, one scholar used the category of Dao to argue that the Ways of the Buddha and Confucius ultimately share a common source, the true Way of Laozi: “Now the three Ways are but different branches extending from the same root. ... These three Ways are equally methods of the Most High Lord Lao, though they differ in their teachings and transformative effects. All three find their source in the true Way.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, in our own terms now, Daoism becomes the sameness that the surface differences of Confucianism and Buddhism ultimately point toward. This was a fairly easy argument to make, given the language being employed. The “Dao” of Daoism, after all, means the Way, so it would have been quite natural to think of different religions as different “ways,” *and* to privilege the Way (that is, the Dao) over the other ways.

Chinese scholars had a fundamental comparative insight, namely, that often it was quite impossible to understand the true shape and nuances of a particular religious tradition without comparing it to another. That is to say, sometimes the “inside” of a religion can only be fathomed by looking at it from the “outside.”

So, for example, one Ming scholar, Yuan Zongdao (1560–1600), went so far as to write that “we can understand Confucianism for the first time only after we have studied Chan [Buddhism].”<sup>54</sup> This is a most remarkable observation and could easily be put in the mouths of any number of contemporary comparativists. Chinese intellectuals, not unlike their Indian counterparts, were “comparing religions” on their own terms and in their own, well, *ways*.

## Colonialism and Comparison on the Horizon

Such comparisons in the mirror of the other would only quicken in China with the appearance of European missionary activity, which was effectively initiated by the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). European missionaries and colonialists would now bring new forms of European religion, knowledge, and technology to China, which in turn challenged traditional forms of knowledge and catalyzed a whole series of new ways of thinking among the Chinese—including, eventually, new comparative practices. Similar cross-cultural encounters would be catalyzed in India and Hinduism as well, primarily in the nineteenth century around the global center of Calcutta and the colonial and missionary activity of the British Empire, as we shall see in greater detail in our next chapter.

### The Tough Questions

- 1) If you are religious and believe in some sort of deity, does the god you worship look like you? If your tradition forbids making images of the deity, do you nevertheless tend to think of this god in human terms? If so, why? Would it be emotionally possible for you to worship or care about a deity who was *completely* nonhuman, who looked, say, like an insect or a crab? How about a bacterium?
- 2) Are the ancient Christian concept of “heresy” and the Islamic category of “people of opinion” really so different from what we today recognize and *value* as religious freedom? What has changed? Are ancient notions of religious orthodoxy and modern notions of human rights compatible?
- 3) The way we talk matters, and it matters a great deal. How would our societies differ if we abandoned the language of “religions” and adopted the language of “paths” or “ways”?

## Notes

- 1 David Reich, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (New York: Vintage, 2018), 5–15.
- 2 Jacques Cauvin, *The Birth of the Gods and Origins of Ancient Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 3 Diana Stein, Sarah Kielt Costello and Karen Polinger Foster, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Ecstatic Experience in the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 2022), 1.
- 4 Martin Riesbrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xii.
- 5 Brian Muraresku, *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name* (New York: St. Martin's, 2020).
- 6 Muraresku, *The Immortality Key*, 25.
- 7 Muraresku, *The Immortality Key*, 26.
- 8 See, for example, the recent balanced approach of Richard H. Jones, *A History of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2024).
- 9 Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York: Anchor, 2007), xvi.
- 10 Quoted in in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 3.
- 11 Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 4.
- 12 Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3.
- 13 Porphyry, *The Life of Plotinus*, 3.7–21.
- 14 Frits Staal, *Advaita and Neoplatonism* (Madras, India: University of Madras, 1961).
- 15 John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
- 16 Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 70–75.
- 17 Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, 70–72.
- 18 Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.
- 19 Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- 20 Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 1.
- 21 Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 3.
- 22 Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (London: Equinox, 2006).
- 23 Robert Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).
- 24 Quoted in Jonathan Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 41. This book, by the way, is a fine example of how and why altered states of consciousness (ASC) can and should be used to compare religious texts, in this case trance states and modern Jewish mystical literature.
- 25 For an eye-opening journey into this early Christian plurality with the latest scholarship, see April D. DeConick, *Comparing Christianities: An Introduction to Early Christianity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2023).
- 26 Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 19, 117.
- 27 Elaine Pagels, *The Origins of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* (New York: Vintage, 1996).
- 28 See Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016). We will see below that this project to create a new “race” had complex and paradoxical consequences, including racist ones.
- 29 David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, & Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 30 Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979), xix–xx.
- 31 Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 90–91.
- 32 David Bentley Hart, *You Are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2022). Hart sees the similarities between

- gnostic forms of Christian thought and nondual mystical strands of Hindu philosophy. Accordingly, the book begins with a famous Sanskrit quote (in Sanskrit) on the identity of the Self and the universe.
- 33** Mary Boyce, *A Word-List of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian* (Tehran and Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, Acta Iranica 9a, 1977), 38.
- 34** Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2011).
- 35** William W. Malandra, “Zoroastrianism I: Historical Review,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, July 20, 2005, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrianism-ihistorical-review> (accessed August 1, 2013).
- 36** D. N. MacKenzie, “Kerdir’s Inscriptions.” In *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam: Naqsh-e Rostam 6, The Triumph of Shapur I*, edited by G. Hermann, D. N. Mackenzie, and R. Howell (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, Iranische Denkmäler 13, 1989), 35–78.
- 37** Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious.” In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–270.
- 38** J. Burton-Page, “Hindū.” In *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed., Brill Online, 2012). Reference, Harvard University, July 6, 2012, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hindu-SIM\\_2884](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hindu-SIM_2884) (accessed August 1, 2013). Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*. (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1972), 139.
- 39** Edward Granville Browne, *A Literary History of Persia: From the Earliest Times until Firdawsi*, vol. 1 (London: T. F. Unwin, 1902), 302–303.
- 40** Epigraph to Eric Maroney, *Religious Syncretism* (London: SCM Press, 2006).
- 41** Bengali (the language the saint spoke) does not distinguish gender in its pronouns, nor does Hinduism identify divinity with a single gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter forms are all commonly found. Hence the shifting genders here.
- 42** *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.4.6.
- 43** John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51–52.
- 44** Technically and historically, the Sanskrit “Jain” or “Jainism” would be pronounced in a way that rhymes with “mine.” This is still the case in South India and in the original sources. But in northern India, and certainly in the West now, where hundreds of thousands of Jains have migrated and settled, the word is generally pronounced like the English “Jane.”
- 45** Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), xvi, 117. Long is a philosopher of religion and takes many Jain ideas as true and crucial for the future of humanity.
- 46** Melanie Barbato, *Jain Approaches to Plurality Identity as Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2018).
- 47** Barbato, *Jain Approaches*, xxiii.
- 48** Barbato, *Jain Approaches*, 118.
- 49** Barbato, *Jain Approaches*, xii.
- 50** There is considerable debate as to whether or not Lao-Tzi was a historical figure or a legendary one. The debate is similar to those debates regarding the historical existence of biblical figures like Abraham and Moses.
- 51** I am relying here on Robert Ford Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China).” *History of Religions* 42: 4 (May 2003): 287–319.
- 52** Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions,” 303.
- 53** Quoted in Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions,” 304.
- 54** Quoted in in Richard J. Smith, *Fathoming the Cosmos and Ordering the World: The Yijing (I-Ching, or Classic of Changes) and Its Evolution in China* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 165–166.