INTRODUCTION

Religious Studies: Overview and Terminology

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

FIGURE 1.1 A statue of Ganesha, one of the most popular gods in India. He is worshipped as the Remover of Obstacles, and also as the Lord of Success. As a god of knowledge and wisdom, he is a patron of the arts and sciences. Suyash Dwivedi, CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Religion Toolkit: Understanding Religion in the World Today, Second Edition.
John Morreall and Tamara Sonn.
© 2024 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Published 2024 by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
Companion website: www.wiley.com/go/morreall

If there were no God, it would have been necessary to invent him.

– VOLTAIRE, 18TH-CENTURY FRENCH PHILOSOPHER

1

Religious Studies: Prepare to Be Surprised

Religion is found around the world and may well be as old as the human race. Some of the earliest evidence of human life found by archeologists seems to involve religious **ritual**. And throughout history, people have developed a mind-boggling multiplicity of beliefs and practices that many scholars recognize as religious. Today, there are thousands of distinct traditions identified as religions (exact numbers are impossible to determine given the range of ways "religion" is defined), and many of these are divided into smaller groups called denominations and sects. According to the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary annual statistical report, Christianity alone includes over 47,000 denominations. The diversity within some traditions is so extensive that some scholars do not even use terms like "Judaism" or "Christianity." Instead, they speak of "Judaisms" and "Christianities."

The sheer number of religious groups is only one of the surprises awaiting students of Religious Studies. Many are also surprised to discover how different *learning about* religion is from *learning* a religion. The goals and methods of the academic study of religion are quite distinct from those found in the *devotional* or *normative* study of religion. These are terms that describe the approach most people follow when they are taught their own religion. The scholarly approach

to learning about religion is so different, in fact, that it is usually called Religious Studies, to distinguish it from the devotional or normative study of religion.

In learning a religion, people are trained to follow it. When children are given lessons in religion, these lessons are about their own religion (or denomination or

What is a Cult?

The common terminology dealing with the divisions and subdivisions within religions, based on categories used by 19th-century Christian thinkers, was described by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge in *A Theory of Religion* (1987).

According to their distinctions, a *church* is a religious group that exists in harmony with its social environment, and is sufficiently institutionalized to be passed on from one generation to the next. The term "church" is technically appropriate only for Christianity; people of other religions have different terms for their communities and houses of worship. But "church" is used generically here, so that even Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism count as churches in this vocabulary.

A *denomination* is a subset of a church – also existing in harmony within its church and among other denominations, and institutionalized enough to be passed on through the generations. Again, scholars use the term "denomination" for subsets within all religions so that, for example, Reform Judaism is a denomination of Judaism, and Shi'ism is a denomination of Islam.

A *sect* is a subset of a church that does not exist in harmony within its environment or church, although it may eventually come to be accepted and develop institutions to survive generational changes, thus achieving the status of a denomination. An example is The Society of St. Pius X, started in 1970 by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in opposition to recent reforms within the Roman Catholic Church. Archbishop Lefebvre was excommunicated from the Catholic Church when he took upon himself the right to consecrate bishops – a right reserved for the pope. That was in 1988. But in 2009, the Church revoked the excommunication and started a process to integrate members of the Society of St. Pius X back into the Church.

A *cult* is a religious movement that develops outside an established church structure and often exists in tension with socially accepted religious institutions. Scientology is considered by some authorities to be a cult, since it originated outside an established church structure. However, followers of Scientology have organized themselves sufficiently to survive and prosper since their beginning in 1953, and they refer to themselves as members of the Church of Scientology.

While many scholars use these terms as defined above, some reject them as imposing concepts from modern Christianity inappropriately, as we will see in Chapter 8.

sect or cult or tradition). This approach is a kind of initiation. Students are taught what their community considers true, so that they will be able to distinguish between that and what is considered false. And they are taught what their tradition considers right and wrong, so that they may do the one and avoid the other. They may learn some of the history of their group, but typically spend more time learning stories, rituals, and prayers. If, in the process of being trained, they learn about other religions, it is often so that they will understand why their own tradition is right, and how it is distinguished from the teachings and practices of other traditions.

In Religious Studies, on the other hand, we are not trying to determine what is true or false or right or wrong about any religion's teachings or practices. The goal is to understand religious traditions, not be trained in them. In doing this, we examine many traditions that are identified as religions without judging any of them. We do study what certain traditions teach is right and wrong, and true and false, and why they teach what they do. But whether we agree with those teachings or not is not part of Religious Studies. When we study the teachings of a single tradition, we may well learn how they changed over time but again without attempting to judge the truth or rightness of either the old or the new teachings. In other words, in Religious Studies, we learn about diversity, both among and within religious traditions, but the goals and methods are like those of scientists rather than those of preachers.

A second goal of Religious Studies is to understand what religion is in the first place. And this holds still more surprises about the field. When you take a course in accounting, you know that you will be studying how to manipulate numbers for specific purposes. When you sign up for Chemistry 101, you know you will be introduced to the tiny particles that make up the world we see around us. But when you sign up to study a religion other than your own, you may find yourself studying things that you were not aware could be considered religious.

If you think of your own religion as consisting of beliefs, rituals, and values, you might expect to study the beliefs, rituals, and values of the other religion. So it often comes as a surprise to students in Religious Studies courses that they may be studying history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and even economics. In Religious Studies, we study these things, and more, because many traditions do not confine themselves to beliefs, rituals, and neatly identified values. Some traditions consider themselves simply a way of life, so that everything in life is subject to religious teaching. Put another way, you may have learned that religion is about what is holy or sacred, as distinguished from what is worldly or secular, and therefore expect to find that distinction in other traditions. But many traditions consider all of life as the domain of religion, so they do not use the distinction between sacred and secular.

Because the study of religion gets into so many areas, it is necessarily multidisciplinary. Experts in Religious Studies may have their primary training in any of the fields mentioned above, or others such as art history and classics. And this wide-ranging approach to the subject matter of Religious Studies is also why there is so much debate within the field regarding what "religion" is.

The 19th-century German scholar who introduced the term Religious Studies (***Religionswissenschaft***), Max Müller (see Chapter 2), is often credited with saying, "He who knows one, knows none." His idea is that people who know only their own religion cannot understand the nature of religion itself, just as people who know only one language are not qualified to explain the nature of language itself. Asking someone who knows only one religion what religion is would be like asking a fish what water is. "Compared to what?" would be a reasonable answer. Not until we have at least two examples of something can we try to describe the category to which the two specimens belong.

As we shall see, trying to figure out just what religion is began as soon as scholars started trying to identify religions other than their own. Should practices associated with healing in traditional societies be considered religious? In modern industrialized societies, we generally leave healing to science, not religion. Should practices designed to influence the thoughts or feelings of someone far away be categorized as religion, or should they be called magic or superstition? Should stories about events that modern science says could not have happened be included in religion, or should they be dismissed as holdovers from a prescientific era? Is it even possible to distinguish religious stories from myths, or religion from superstition or magic?

This quest, to understand what religion is, is made even harder by the fact that many languages have no word that means the same thing as "religion" in English. Scholars are not even sure where the term "religion" came from. We know that its root is Latin, but what did it mean in early Latin? The 1st-century **BCE** philosopher Cicero traces the term to *legere*, to read, so that "religion" would mean to reread (*re-legere*), but the 4th- to 5th-century **CE** Christian thinker Augustine traces the term to *ligare*, meaning "to connect or bind" (the same root as the English word "ligament"), so that "religion" would mean "to bind again" or "to reconnect." Many modern theologians favor this etymology, seeing religion as something that binds a community together. However, *A Latin Dictionary* by Lewis and Short traces our modern meaning, "reverence for God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things, [or] piety," only to the 13th-century CE. So what word might earlier Christians have used for what modern Christians think of as religion?

To complicate things further, the term in the **sacred** texts of Judaism and Islam that is often translated as "religion" means something quite different from any of the Latin roots for "religion." This term is *din*. (It might also come as a surprise that in both Hebrew and Arabic, the languages of Judaic and Islamic **scriptures**, the term is the same. Hebrew and Arabic are closely related Semitic languages, and Judaism and Islam are very similar traditions.) *Din* can mean "judgment," as in "Day of *din*" or "Court of *din*." It can also mean "way of life." What is more, the same term is used in modern Persian, but that usage is traced to Zoroastrian (the ancient religion of Persia) texts, where it means "eternal law" or "duty." Similarly, the term from Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh texts that sometimes is translated as "religion" is *dharma*. But dharma does not mean what "religion" means in English. Dharma means "cosmic truth" or "order" or, more generally, actions in accord with cosmic order and, therefore, duty. It also refers to Jain and Sikh teachings regarding proper behavior, and the teachings of the Buddha.

Scholars may not agree on exactly what "religion" means, but they generally agree that the term is too narrow to refer to all the phenomena that are examined in Religious Studies. As a result, many scholars use the term **tradition** rather than "religion." This may be not only surprising, but confusing. By "tradition," Religious Studies scholars do not mean simply something that people do because it has always

been done that way. We use the term "tradition" to refer to the amalgam of a group's beliefs, rules, and customs insofar as they are associated with that group's ultimate concerns, values, and ideas about the meaning of life. For similar reasons, we try to avoid referring to people's traditions as "*-isms*," giving the impression that there is a fixed list of beliefs and practices followed by all members of a community. Instead, as much as possible, we refer to the people the way they identify themselves. So, for example, we refer to Jews (rather than Judaism), Sikhs (rather than Sikhism), Tengrists (rather than Tengrism), and so on.

At the same time, we attempt to avoid modern European categories of "Western" and "Eastern" to characterize religious traditions. The idea of "the West" as a cultural complex that includes Europe and America and is distinct from "the East" is unsupported by history. The dominant religions of "the West" had their origins in the Near/Middle East, for example. And the advanced math and the "Arabic" numerals that make it possible, along with many other scientific and technological advances, also developed in Asia. The West-East distinction became popular only with the trauma of World War I and the publication of German historian Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918–1922). The idea of "Middle" or "Near" East as distinct from "Far East" came from British and US government bureaucracies just over a century ago. So rather than referring to "Middle Eastern religions," we refer to the *monotheistic* (believing in one god) and prophetic (based on teachings revealed through prophets) religious traditions (Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i). And instead of talking about "Eastern religions," we refer to those with origins in South Asia (Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh) as *Dharmic*, reflecting their shared used of that term.

Because of its interest in understanding what "religion" is in general, Religious Studies includes both historic and comparative elements. Religious Studies scholars examine traditions not just as they are now but as they have developed over time. This aspect of Religious Studies is known as **History of Religions**. The comparative elements of Religious Studies may involve looking at a single religious tradition in various historic periods, tracing any changes that developed. It may also involve studying a number of religious traditions within a single historical period. In addition, it may involve comparing and contrasting the ways several religious traditions deal with a certain topic, such as salvation or war. This approach to Religious Studies is called **Comparative Religions**.

The historical and comparative approaches to the study of religious traditions lead to a number of other surprises for the new student. People who are used to religions that revolve around a single God may be surprised to find that some traditions involve many gods and some do not even require belief in a god. In Hinduism, for example, there are countless **deities** (gods) – 330,000,000 is the traditional number given. Some people worship one of them, such as Shiva or Vishnu, some worship several, and others turn to specific deities for assistance, depending upon the need at hand. The deities of some traditions may have a number of personas. The Indian god Vishnu, for example, can be worshipped as Vishnu, or as Rama, Krishna, the Buddha, or any of several other personalities. These diverse **avatars** are considered manifestations of the one god. Moreover, people who are used to conceiving of God in spiritual or nonmaterial terms may be surprised to find gods that are quite physical. A popular god in India is Ganesha (Figure 1.1), who has the head of an elephant, with one broken tusk, and is variously depicted with 2–16 arms.

In Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Baha'i monotheisms, a central idea is that the one God has revealed certain truths to human beings, often through

messengers called **prophets**. People who believe in divine revelation typically believe that the information transmitted in this way – or at least the most important parts of it – could not have been obtained in any other way. They also consider the written records ("scripture") of that revelation to be extremely special – "sacred" or **holy** – and, in various ways, absolutely true (**inerrant**, without error). However, many traditions have texts that they consider sacred, even though these texts come from human sources. The Hindu **Upanishads** and Buddhist **Tripitaka** are examples. Moreover, other traditions, those of some Native Americans, for instance, have no sacred texts; they transmit their wisdom in oral form from one generation to the next.

On a related theme, people who are used to **orthodoxy** – the idea that there is a single set of truths – will be surprised to find that in some traditions, it is considered perfectly normal for some people to believe in one God, while others believe in several gods, and still others believe in no god at all. Another way to put that is that, while some traditions are **exclusivist** – believing there is only one true religion, others are pluralist – believing that different people have different traditions and that each of them is legitimate. Religious **pluralism** can even extend to a single person. **Monotheists** tend to think of each person as belonging to one religion or to none, but in Japan, for instance, most people follow both Buddhism and Shinto – an ancient set of Japanese traditions. When Japanese people want to get married, they may go to a Shinto priest; to arrange a funeral, they may go to a Buddhist priest. The same temple may house both of them. In China and Taiwan, people participate in Buddhist rituals, Taoist rituals, and rituals dedicated to local gods, and they also visit temples dedicated to Confucius.

As Religious Studies explores the history of various traditions, more surprises come to light. For example, we often find that a belief or practice we thought was unique within our own tradition is actually shared by a number of traditions. Christian students, for example, are often surprised to find that Muslims revere Jesus as a great prophet, and honor his mother Mary with an entire chapter of the **Qur'an** (Islamic scripture) named for her. Islam also shares with Judaism and Christianity the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the history of prophets from the time of Abraham forward.

It is potentially even more stunning, especially for those from religions with divinely revealed scriptures, that a number of their beliefs are found in texts that predate those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Scholars trace the story of Noah and the Flood that appears in the Book of Genesis of the Hebrew Bible (Christian **Old Testament**) and Qur'an, for example, to the Gilgamesh Epic of ancient **Mesopotamia**. In that story, the gods flood the earth, one man is told to build a huge boat, and he brings many kinds of animals on board.

Religious Studies also includes careful (or "critical") study of scripture that often reveals how people's understanding of their own texts has changed. For example, students are often surprised to find that the Hebrew Bible speaks of a time when there was more than one god, the gods mated with humans, and the babies they had were giants:

> When mankind began to increase and to spread all over the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of the gods saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; so they took for themselves such women as they chose …. In those

Who Was Easter?

FIGURE 1.2 *Ostara, Goddess of the Dawn* by Johannes Gehrts, 1884. Eduard Ade / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the word "Easter" – the name of the most sacred day in the Christian calendar, the day commemorating Jesus' resurrection from death – is derived from "Eostre," the name of an ancient goddess of spring. According to *Compton's Encyclopedia*, "Our name Easter comes from Eostre, an ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess, originally of the dawn. In pagan times an annual spring festival was held in her honor." So Eostre was a pre-Christian goddess venerated at the vernal equinox (beginning of spring). The Easter Bunny and the colored eggs at Easter also come from pre-Christian rituals to promote fertility. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us, "The egg as a symbol of fertility and of renewal of life goes back to the ancient Egyptians and Persians, who had also the custom of coloring and eating eggs during their spring festival."

days, when the sons of the gods mated with the daughters of men and got children by them, the Nephilim [Giants] were on earth. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. (Genesis 6:1–4)

Not only does religious people's understanding of what happened in history change, but their understanding of morality does too. To take a contemporary example, millions of Jews and Christians now work and shop on the **Sabbath** without giving it a second thought, but the Hebrew Bible condemns work and commerce on the Sabbath. Exodus 31:15 says that "[w]hoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death." In fact, many Jews and Christians took the Sabbath seriously until just a few decades ago, and refrained from working, or buying or selling things on that day. Some still do.

Another issue that shows how a tradition can change over time is the morality of war. A 1988 book by John Driver is aptly titled *How Christians Made Peace with War*. He explains how, for the first three centuries, Christians followed Jesus' injunction "Do not resist the evildoer. But if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other as well …. Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:39–44). In the Roman Empire, Christians were well known for their pacifism, and they did not accept soldiers into their group. But then in the fourth century, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, and soon Christian leaders were talking about "just wars." The 4th- to 5th-century Christian thinker Augustine developed a rationale for wars in order to justify attacking the Donatists, a group of fellow Christians who disagreed with him on some theological issues, and since then, some Christian scholars have elaborated justifications for war under certain conditions, while others reject justifications for war. In 2020, Pope Francis issued an encyclical stating that for the Catholic Church, "We can no longer think of war as a solution … [I]t is very difficult nowadays to invoke rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a 'just war'. Never again war!" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 258).

Actually, the whole history of religious traditions includes a lot of killing. Five hundred years ago, the rituals of the Aztecs included the sacrifice of thousands of people, mainly prisoners of war, followed by the eating of the corpses. If these rituals seem brutal, consider the treatment of religious heretics and suspected witches in Christian Europe at the same time: burning at the stake. As these examples show, Religious Studies is about far more than right and wrong, true and false – which are the main concerns when people learn about their own religions. Religious Studies also looks at what people actually do. It is about religion as it is lived, including "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." In 1978, for example, a religious group of over 900 people from the United States who had established themselves in Jonestown, Guyana, committed mass suicide at the insistence of their founder, Jim Jones. In an article that has become widely known, Religious Studies scholar Jonathan Z. Smith (d. 2017) criticized those who felt that Mr. Jones was too far out of the norm to require serious scholarly attention. Some even refused to discuss the event, Smith claimed derisively, "because it revealed what had been concealed from public, academic discussion for a century – that religion has rarely been a positive, liberal force. Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity" (Smith 1982, 104). American theologian William T. Cavanaugh and British scholar of religion Karen Armstrong take issue with such sweeping claims about religion and violence. Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009) and Armstrong's *Fields of Blood* (2014) argue that those claims ignore the fact that until the modern era,

Is Slavery Wrong?

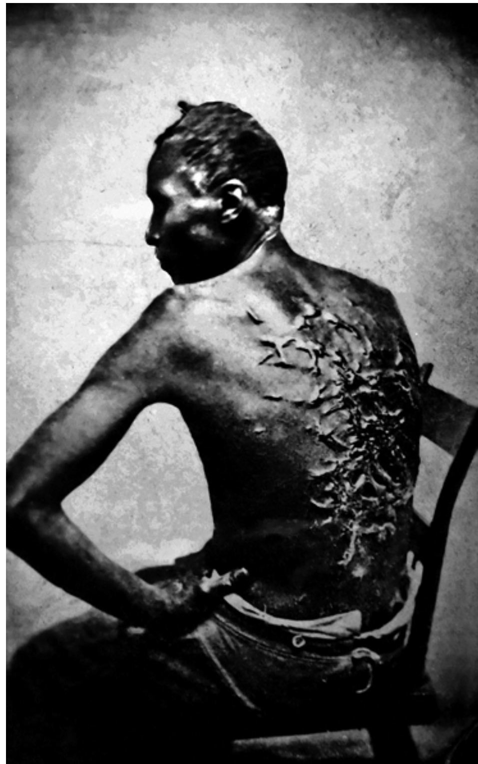

FIGURE 1.3 Gordon, known as "Whipped Peter," almost died after being brutally whipped by his overseer. Mathew Benjamin Brady / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.

All major traditions, including Christianity, now condemn slavery and consider it immoral, but before 1770 none did. John Newton (1725–1807), the Anglican priest who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace," had earlier been the captain of a ship that transported newly enslaved Africans to slave markets in the Americas. He thought that the job of slave ship captain was spiritually enriching because of the long periods at sea. There was, he wrote, no profession that provided "greater advantages to an awakened mind, for promoting the life of God in the soul." (Figure 1.3 shows one enslaved man in the US.) In the Bible, God not only permits slavery but regulates it. Right after God gives Moses the Ten Commandments in Exodus 21, he says, "When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go free [after seven years] as male slaves do." In the Christian New Testament, too, Paul says, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ" (Ephesians 6:5).

religion and politics were indistinguishable. Premodern wars were politically driven even if at times religiously legitimated. Yet it remains the case that religion and violence have been interconnected throughout history.

Some students taking their first course in Religious Studies may find this objective approach disturbing at first. They may feel that it is too relativistic because it treats every tradition as equally valid. Just as a zoology course might compare lions, tigers, and leopards, say, without asking "Which is best?" a major university offers a course called "God/s: a Cross-Cultural Gallery" that compares Yahweh, the God of the Bible, with dozens of other gods, without ranking them. Similarly, the British Library has an online gallery of sacred texts in which the Bible appears alongside dozens of other scriptures. Religious Studies does not preclude the belief that there is really only one true religion. Religious Studies only precludes *teaching* that any given religious tradition is the correct or incorrect one. These are personal convictions that may be described in the classroom, but not advocated in the classroom.

In sum, studying religions is like studying other subjects in that we have to be willing to look at surprising facts. We also have to be ready to imagine what the world looks like to people who think quite differently from the way we do. The 19th-century English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that appreciating some literature required a "willing suspension of disbelief." One could say that understanding other people's religions requires a temporary suspension of belief – our own beliefs. This certainly does not mean that scholars of religion must abandon their own beliefs. It only means that we must not make them the standards by which to judge others' beliefs and practices. As one of the greatest scholars of religion in the 20th century, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, said,

> We have not understood any action or any saying in another century or another culture until we have realized that we ourselves, had we been in that situation, might well have done or said exactly that. Not that we would have done it; that would mean denying human freedom. We must simply appreciate, must feel and make our readers feel, that of the various possibilities open to us at that point, this particular thought or move or comment would have seemed attractive to us, and perceive the reasons why that would be so. (Smith, unpublished paper)

But note that Smith does not use the word "religion" here. He speaks of people's actions and words; that is what we are really trying to understand in the study of religions. Unlike the study of other subjects, in the study of religion, we are not sure exactly what the topic is. We are still trying to understand what religion is – a question that permeates this book. What we do know is that people's religious traditions serve a number of functions, both personal and social. The next section provides an overview of those functions.

Overview of Religion

Humans are the only religious animals. Some scholars think that is because we are the only ones who are self-aware; we not only live our lives but we can think and make choices about how we live our lives. And choices demand reasons. British scholar of religion Karen Armstrong calls us "meaning-seeking creatures … [U]nlike other animals,

[we] fall very easily into despair if we fail to make sense of our lives …. We find it astonishing that we are here at all and want to know why" (*Fields of Blood*, "Introduction"). Religions help us explain not only why we exist but who we are. They also help provide a sense of order and predictability in the face of apparent chaos. Perhaps most challenging of all for humans is the existence of suffering and death. Throughout history, religions have provided explanations for these apparent evils.

Identity

In the modern era, we often think of religion as essentially personal but religion is also fundamentally social. We generally do not invent our own religions; we inherit them. We are inducted into them by our communities. Part of what we learn in that process is who we are – as individuals and as members of communities – and how we came to exist in the first place. An important way we learn these things is through stories called "**creation myths**." The term "myth" here does not have the ordinary implication of not being true; scholars use "myth" to refer to explanatory stories that both give meaning to and help order or regulate our lives. In an often-quoted saying of 4th-century Roman historian Sallust about a particular myth, "Now these things never happened but are always true." Although some people consider creation stories historically and scientifically credible (and in Chapter 10, we will survey scriptural literalism today), their literal truth is less important to most people than their identification of the group under discussion. That group can range from a single tribe to all humans and the entire cosmos.

The following ancient story tells of the creation of the Ngarabana people of southern Australia:

> In the beginning the earth was a bare plain. All was dark. There was no life, no death. The sun, the moon, and the stars slept beneath the earth. All the eternal ancestors slept there, too, until at last they woke themselves out of their own eternity and broke through to the surface.
>
> When the eternal ancestors arose, in the Dreamtime, they wandered the earth, sometimes in animal form – as kangaroos, or emus, or lizards – sometimes in human shape, sometimes part animal and human, sometimes as part human and plant.
>
> Two such beings, self-created out of nothing, were the Ungambikula. Wandering the world, they found half-made human beings. They were made of animals and plants, but were shapeless bundles, lying higgledy-piggledy, near where water holes and salt lakes could be created. The people were all doubled over into balls, vague and unfinished, without limbs or features.
>
> With their great stone knives, the Ungambikula carved heads, bodies, legs, and arms out of the bundles. They made the faces, and the hands and feet. At last the human beings were finished.
>
> Thus every man and woman was transformed from nature and owes allegiance to the totem [symbol] of the animal or the plant that made the bundle they were created from – such as the plum tree, the grass seed, the large and small lizards, the parakeet, or the rat.

> This work done, the ancestors went back to sleep. Some of them returned to underground homes, others became rocks and trees. (http://www.crystalinks.com/australiacreation.html)

In this story, there is no single creator, nor does the story account for the creation of the earth. But it does describe the creation of the people whose story it is. They were created by their ancestors, providing a solid basis for strong group identity and social solidarity.

The same pattern is evident in this story accounting for the origins of the Iroquois tribes in North America in lands that already existed:

> Long, long ago, one of the Spirits of the Sky World came down and looked at the earth. As he traveled over it, he found it beautiful, and so he created people to live on it. Before returning to the sky, he gave them names, called the people all together, and spoke his parting words:
>
> "To the Mohawks, I give corn," he said. "To the patient Oneidas, I give the nuts and the fruit of many trees. To the industrious Senecas, I give beans. To the friendly Cayugas, I give the roots of plants to be eaten. To the wise and eloquent Onondagas, I give grapes and squashes to eat and tobacco to smoke at the camp fires."
>
> Many other things he told the new people. Then he wrapped himself in a bright cloud and went like a swift arrow to the Sun. There his return caused his Brother Sky Spirits to rejoice. (http://www.shannonthunderbird.com/creation_stories.htm)

Unlike the monotheistic traditions that support a linear view of history (having a beginning and end), some traditions teach cycles of generation and destruction of the universe. But stories explaining social identities and order are critical in these traditions as well. The sacred **Rig Veda** of the tradition that came to be called Hinduism explains the creation of a society comprised of four hierarchically ordered groups of people. The explanation is found in one of the many stories told about Purusha, "Cosmic Man." Purusha was split apart. The elite priestly Brahmins were created from his mouth; the royal warrior Kshatriyas were created from Purusha's mighty arms; the hard-working merchants and traders – the Vaishyas – came from his thighs; and the peasant Shudras came from the soles of his feet. These four **varnas** form the foundation for social structure in Indian tradition.

The monotheistic traditions share a story that accounts for the creation of the entire cosmos by a single, all-powerful God. Its most familiar form is in the *Book of Genesis*, the first book of the Hebrew Bible. "Genesis" in Greek means "origin," and this book explains the origin of the world and of human beings:

> In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1–5)

The Hymn to Purusha

One of the most influential parts of the Rig Veda is the Hymn to Purusha, the Cosmic Man. It recounts how the universe itself came out of a sacrifice in which the Cosmic Man was offered by the gods. This hymn is still sung today, 3,000 years after it was composed.

The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers …

It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever will be …

Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this. All creatures are a quarter of him; three quarters are what is immortal in heaven …

When the gods spread the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation …

From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the melted fat was collected, and he made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages …

Horses were born from it, and those other animals that have two rows of teeth; cows were born from it, and from it goats and sheep were born.

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born … and from his vital breath the Wind was born.

From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and from his ears the four directions. Thus they set the worlds in order.

(Rig Veda 10.90)

Over the next four days, God created the sky, plants, the sun and moon, and fish and birds.

> And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the

birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1:24–28)

In the monotheistic traditions based on this creation story, group identity revolves around the acceptance of figures who speak for the one God. "One who speaks for" is the meaning of the term "prophet," which is derived from Greek. Prophets are humans who bring the messages of God, and each of the monotheisms has prophets specifically associated with them. Moses, for example, is believed to have brought the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible; the later books were brought by a series of other prophets. Christians accept the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, but they relegate them to the past; the New Testament conveys the law for those who accept Jesus, who came to be seen as divine himself. Muslims accept the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and Jesus as a prophet, but for them, Muhammad is the final prophet. We will see other examples in Part II.

Group identity can also be a function of following a legal system based on the teachings of the prophets embraced by the group. Thus, for Jews, a member of the community is recognized as an adult, responsible for their own actions and therefore expected to follow the law, in a ritual that marks them as bar (or bat, for girls, in Reform Judaism) mitzvah, literally "son" (or "daughter") "of the command." In Islam, there is no formal ceremony for recognizing "coming of age"; by tradition, puberty is the point at which members of the community are expected to perform obligatory prayers and fasting, and are considered responsible for following the law. In Islamic law, which enshrines religious freedom, particularly for monotheists, Muslims are those who follow Islamic law, Jews are those who follow Judaic law, and Christians are those who follow Christian law. As the Qur'an puts it, "To you your *din* and to me mine" (Qur'an 109:6).

As we shall see in Part II, however, unlike Jews and Muslims, Christians' self-identity is based on belief rather than law. Christian denominations differ based primarily on their "creeds," their official beliefs. Many Christian denominations recognize a responsible believer in a ceremony known as confirmation, which is not associated with following the law so much as it is with committing oneself to steadfast belief in a set of doctrines.

In the contemporary world, religious identity has taken on important political implications with the rise of religious nationalism. This will be the topic of Chapter 11.

The Importance of Order

Order Out of Chaos

Many traditions explain the beginning of the world as "bringing order out of chaos." In the ancient **Babylonian** tradition of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq), the text **Enuma Elish** describes the feats of the great god **Marduk**, who killed his grandmother **Tiamat** and made the world out of her body. Tiamat is described as the great, raging sea; scholars see her as the personification of primeval, terrifying chaos. So, the

great god created an orderly world out of chaos. Tiamat/chaos is evil, and order is seen as a very good thing.

Interestingly, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) uses a similar term for the out-of-control raging primordial waters. At the beginning of the first book, Genesis, we are told that "the earth was without form … and darkness was upon the face of the deep" before "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." Then, God created light and separated it from darkness, and separated the waters of the sky from those of the sea. He then gathered the waters into one place, "let[ting] the dry land appear." The Hebrew term for those raging, abysmal waters is *tehum*, a cognate of the Akkadian (the language of the Enuma Elish) *tiamat*. So again, God brought order out of chaos, "and God saw that it was good."

In Zoroastrian scriptures, the Avestas, the term for what is true and right and good, is **asha**. Asha also means "order" or "proper functioning." Its opposite, **druj**, means "lie" and "chaos" or "disorder." At the end of time, disorder will be ended and life will return to its original, beautiful, and good order.

The correlation between chaos and evil is evident in popular culture today. In the 1990s video game *Sonic the Hedgehog*, one of the evil characters is called Chaos. In a slight linguistic variation, the American metal band System of a Down raged against "Disorder" in their 2001 album *Toxicity*. The Dutch techno musician Danny Masseling (a.k.a. Angerfist) titled one of his 2007 hits "Chaos and Evil." Metalcore band Atilla titled their 2016 album "Chaos." Social disorder and apparent chaos continue to arouse acute anxieties as they thwart our quest to make sense of our lives. We will see in Part III that those anxieties can be channeled politically when they reach critical mass.

Order and Predictability: Eschatology and Divination

The need for order is closely related to the desire for predictability in our lives. Religions address the desire for order and predictability in several ways. Some include predictions of the future in their formal teachings, often making them central to the tradition's worldview. The Zoroastrian and the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example, envision a time when the world as we know it will end, everyone's deeds will be judged, and all people will rewarded or punished accordingly. This "end time" is called the ***eschaton***, which means the last thing in Greek, so beliefs about the end of the world are called eschatology and its defining characteristics are described in detail in scripture.

In the Book of Daniel of the Hebrew Bible, for example, we are told of the coming of four great beasts, the last one of which will be really terrible. It has 10 horns and crushes the entire earth and then eats it. But believers do not have to worry; as we saw above, Daniel tells us, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt" (12:2).

Christian scriptures refer to the Book of Daniel and reiterate that the "end times" will be marked by "abomination of desolation" and the coming of "great tribulation such as has not been seen since the beginning of the world" (Mt. 24:15–22; Mark 13:14–20). The Gospel of Luke provides more detailed indicators or "signs" so that readers will be able to prepare themselves and (literally) head for the hills: "There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring" (21:2–33). Evil chaos will return, but the righteous can take comfort; they will be rescued.

FIGURE 1.4 Victor Vasnetsov, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death), 1887. Hood. Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0.

The last book of the Christian Bible provides even more detailed descriptions of the "end times." Often called the Book of Revelation, the book was originally known as *The Apocalypse of John* ("apocalypse" means "revelation"), and as a result, the dramatic events accompanying the end of the world as described in Revelation are often referred to simply as the **apocalypse**. Here, we are told of the "book with seven seals." With the opening of the first four seals, four riders appear, one each on a white, red, black, and "pale" horse – the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" (Figure 1.4). Opening the fifth seal reveals a vision of those who were slain for their loyalty to the "word of God." The sixth seal releases a great earthquake, "and the sun became black as hair sackcloth, and the whole moon became as blood, and the stars of heaven fell upon the earth … and the heaven was removed as a scroll rolled up, and every mountain and island were removed out of their places." This is described as "the great day of wrath" (Revelation 6).

The Qur'an's descriptions of the end times are similarly striking:

> The sun will be darkened, when the stars will be thrown down, when the mountains will be set in motion, when the pregnant camels will be abandoned, when the savage beasts are herded together, when the seas boil over, when the souls are sorted into classes, when a baby girl buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed, when the record of deeds are spread open, when the sky is stripped away, when Hell is made to blaze, when Paradise brought near, then every soul will know what it has brought about. (81:1–14)

Clearly, there will be no mistaking the coming of the end of the world. We shall be able to get ready.

Many fundamentalists – people who believe scripture is the authoritative source of not only moral guidance but also history and science – interpret the descriptions of the end times literally. But scholars generally see in apocalyptic literature

Apocalyptic Visions Today

For decades, the idea that God will soon end the world has been popular among Evangelical Christians in the United States. This can be seen in the sales figures of 80 million for the *Left Behind* series of books published by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins between 1995 and 2007. Several of the 16 books reached No. 1 on the bestseller lists for the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*. In the stories about the "End Times," the good Christians in the "Tribulation Force" are battling the "Global Community" and its leader, the Antichrist. Six of these books have been made into action thriller movies and four strategy computer games.

The online magazine published by the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS) from 2014 to 2016 was titled *Dabiq*. It was named for a town in northern Syria that is mentioned in Islamic apocalyptic literature as the site where a final battle between Muslims and infidels will herald the beginning of the apocalypse. When IS was routed from Dabiq, it started a new online magazine, titled *Rumiyah* (published 2014–2017), in reference to its envisioned defeat of "Rome," symbolic of the Christian West in general, again in the process of hastening the end times.

reflections of the anxieties of the times in which it was produced. Many scholars think that the apocalyptic passages in the books of Daniel and Isaiah were written while the Jews were being persecuted by the Greeks, and that the Book of Revelation was written after Jerusalem was attacked by the Romans, the temple destroyed, and Jews evicted (70 CE). The popularity of apocalyptic teachings in our own time reveals that, like the people in the age of Daniel, we are experiencing a heightened sense of insecurity and angst.

In traditions with a cyclical view of history, there is less focus on "end times," although both Hindu and Buddhist scriptures contain descriptions whereby the end of specific cycles will be recognizable. And in the nearer term, these traditions reflect people's concern for knowing what the future holds in the practice of astrology.

Astrology, the art of predicting events based on the positions of stars, planets, and moons, is an integral part of most Asian traditions, in fact. Its focus is on the individual, based on the belief that one's destiny can be discerned by the positions of celestial orbs at the time of one's birth. Astrology can also be used to predict important events in a community's life, especially catastrophic events such as natural disasters and wars. However, it can also deal with more mundane things such as political and financial developments. Thus, people consult astrologers to determine when to begin an important undertaking. They want to find out when the celestial bodies will be aligned in such a way as to indicate success of something undertaken under their alignment.

The term for such a time is "auspicious." It comes from a Latin term meaning someone who can determine the future based on patterns observed in the flight of birds. This was one ancient approach to **divination** – the effort to read the future – that was common in both ancient Rome and Greece. Another popular form of ancient divination was to inspect patterns in the internal organs of sacrificed animals. These ancient methods of reading the future were generally superseded by later developments in European cultures, but astrology remains popular. In India today, it is still common even for members of traditions that do not recognize astrology to consult an astrologer before planning an important event such as a wedding.

In the traditions of the **Yoruba** people of western Africa, and traditions developed by Yorubas who came to the Americas as slaves, such as Santeria and Vodou, divination is a responsibility of religious authorities (generically known as priests and priestesses). It may be used for solving a current problem or obtaining advice on future undertakings. Known as Ifa, Yoruba divination is practiced only by those who have reached the highest level of learning and are able to "receive" Orunmila, the god of wisdom and knowledge or destiny. It may be accomplished through a variety of instruments, including reading the patterns in a group of cowry shells or palm nuts or a special divining chain. The petitioner (the person who has brought a problem to the priest or priestess) is then given advice that often includes offering a sacrifice to the god whose efforts would be most helpful with the issue at hand.

Social Order

Religious traditions also commonly deal with another kind of order, one that stems from the fact that human beings are intensely social. Some have observed that we are reluctantly so. The 4th- to 3rd-century BCE Chinese philosopher Hsun Tzu (Xun Tzu) wrote a chapter titled "Human Dispositions Are Detestable." In it, he argued that people are naturally selfish and so we must be controlled by society or else sink into chaos. English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (d. 1679) agreed. He wrote in his book *Leviathan* that, due to inherent selfishness, human beings would be fighting constantly, living lives that were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," if it were not for the control imposed by government. Whether we are naturally beastly and so must be controlled or, as Hsun Tzu's near contemporary Mencius (Meng Tzu) argued, naturally good but easily perverted by society, there is general agreement that human beings are social and that societies need order.

We need communities in order to survive. More than any other animals, human beings must rely on others to meet their needs. We are born virtually helpless and require years of nurturing before we can meet even our most basic needs on our own. And from our earliest moments, we learn to interact with and depend upon others. Ideally, we learn to cooperate. The more cooperatively a social group interacts, the better are its chances of survival. Religions play fundamental roles in fostering effective, orderly social interaction.

Ethics/Morality and Law

In the process of telling us who we are and why we exist, foundational myths often lay out fundamental norms or rules to regulate the community's life. In India, for example, the **Laws of Manu**, dating from between the 2nd-century BCE and the 2nd-century CE, explain in detail how to protect the purity of the upper three social groups, *varnas* (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas), from pollution by the impure Shudras

(and women). The upper three varnas are known as *aryan*, or "noble"; they are *dvija*, or "twice born," meaning they have behaved well in previous lives and therefore have been reborn into their higher social stations. The Shudra are not twice born. They must recognize that their only hope for rebirth in a higher varna is in serving the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. Thus, if a Shudra insults a "twice born," then he must have his tongue cut out, according to the Laws of Manu. If he even mentions their names insultingly, then he must either have a red-hot iron nail put into his mouth or go live in the forest. (In Chapter 5, we will see that in this tradition, women are assumed to be even lower than the Shudras. In order to achieve a higher birth next time, they must subject themselves at all times to men.)

In the monotheistic traditions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with their vision of resurrection to an eternal reward or punishment, the rules typically deal with assuring the orderly working of the society. They do this by regulating the aspects of life most critical to group survival: successful procreation, maturing into adulthood and carrying out adult responsibilities, and death. Moreover, they are often developed by the community into more complex regulations, accompanied by methods of enforcement. The group must be protected from those who violate the regulations and so threaten the social order and perhaps even the survival of the group.

Many religions, for example, have stringent regulations for assuring that anyone born of the group will be properly incorporated into the group. This process begins with making sure that sex – viewed strictly in terms of its function in procreation – happens only between a woman and a man who has pledged to take care of her and any offspring. In some cases, sex is only supposed to take place when a woman is capable of getting pregnant. Judaic and Islamic laws prohibit sex during a woman's menstrual period, explaining that it is impure or uncomfortable.

Many traditions also require that people contribute to the support of institutions, especially those that train teachers so that the tradition can be passed on to the next generation. It is also common for religious traditions to require that parents ensure that their children are educated and trained within the tradition. In fact, many religions prohibit marriage with someone outside the tradition. Those traditions that allow "inter-marriage" generally require that, if any children are born, they must be brought up within the religion.

Laws prohibiting theft, personal injury, and murder have obvious connections to social order. Islamic law provides an interesting example. Like all legal systems, Islamic law prohibits theft and murder. But there are certain kinds of crimes that are considered particularly egregious, so much so that capital punishment is mandated if they are committed. The category of such grievous offenses is *hiraba*. It is described as physical harm or murder committed against unknown victims as happens in robbery. Murder committed as a result of a personal grievance is an entirely different category from hiraba, and the family of the deceased may agree to allow the murderer to pay compensation rather than be subjected to capital punishment. Classical Islamic law explains that the reason for the severe penalty for hiraba is that this crime, because it is committed against random victims, makes everyone else afraid that they could be next. Hiraba "sows terror" in the community. Making everyone feel unsafe, hiraba crimes violate the security that is supposed to characterize Islamic society. They create chaos. Hiraba is therefore the Islamic term for terrorism, considered a heinous crime in Islamic law.

Not all traditions have written codes of law, since many remain oral, but we would be hard pressed to find a tradition without fundamental concepts of what constitutes right and wrong, moral and immoral, ethical, and unethical behavior.

Authority and Power

Many religious traditions also designate authority figures to assist and, in some cases, lead the community in various ways. Again we find a great variety in the roles and qualifications for authority figures in the world's religions.

Among the most commonly recognized authority figures are people thought to influence the forces that control our lives but over which we have no direct control. Generically called **shamans** or **priests**, these authorities' tasks vary depending upon what forces their communities rely upon for survival. Ancient societies that depended upon successful hunting and protection from wild animals often valorized those who were believed to be capable of influencing the spirits that control animals.

We will see in Chapter 3 that some of the earliest evidence of human activity appears in caves dating from **Paleolithic** times (the Old Stone Age), before people learned to grow food crops. Like other animals, they were hunters. Their survival depended upon their ability to kill animals to eat and avoid being eaten by other animals. The evidence that we have of these people consists of pictures of both kinds of animal.

The oldest "cave drawing" is in the Chauvet Cave in southern France. Dating from around 30,000 years ago, the drawings depict a number of species, including both the kind that were hunted for meat (like horses and reindeer) and the kind that hunted the hunters (like lions and bears). Most of the pictures are realistic, but some of them show combinations of human and animal characteristics. Some scholars believe that the purpose of the pictures was to represent the spirits of the animals, so that a shaman could influence them to help the community to survive.

As we saw above, Yoruba priests represent a different approach to authority. They are believed to be capable of communicating with the gods who control the various aspects of our lives. They may even embody these gods. Santeria (also known as Lukumi), the Yoruba-based religion that developed in Cuba, recognizes a number of gods, each with important responsibilities. Besides the creator god Obatala and the royal ancestor god of the Yoruba, Shango, chief among the Santeria gods are Eleggua (also known as Eshu and by several other names in diverse Yoruba-based traditions), who protects travelers and escorts the dead to the afterlife; Ogun, who is in charge of hunting and war; Oshun, who presides over love, beauty, and wealth; Oya, who creates storms, earthquakes, and other harbingers of change or chaos; and Yemaya, who is mother ocean and protects children.

In traditions with written texts (scriptures), being able to read, interpret, preserve, and transmit the texts is a prerequisite for elite status. We see this pattern in Judaism's **rabbis** – meaning those who teach (the scriptures). Before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, when animal sacrifices were still offered to please God, the elites in charge of that were kohanim – priests, which is where we get the common Jewish name "Cohen." But sacrifices are no longer a feature of Jewish practice; study of the sacred texts is the most important undertaking and rabbis are the dominant elites. The same is true in Islam, where the "scholars" of the sacred texts – ulama and fuqaha – are the primary religious authorities.

FIGURE 1.5 Hammurabi with Shamas, the god of the sun and the god of justice. Mbzt / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 3.0.

In some traditions, those who are most closely associated with the gods take on not just moral authority but also the coercive power of leadership. They not only interpret and articulate what people should or should not do, but can make sure that people obey. An early example of this pattern is Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE), king of Babylon (in modern-day Iraq). Hammurabi handed down a set of 282 laws known as the Code of Hammurabi, including "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth." The basis of his authority? He said that the chief gods of the land called upon him, because he was a righteous prince, "to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land" (Figure 1.5). The pharaohs of ancient Egypt were authorized to rule because they were the sons of important gods. Later on, pharaohs were believed to actually be the all-important god Horus in human form.

Although we have these examples of rulers with combined religious authority and coercive power, it is more common throughout history to find religious authority and coercive power – that is, control of the government – in separate hands. Sometimes the two spheres of life are entirely distinct, as in traditions such as Baha'i that reject political involvement, but often religious authorities cooperate with governmental authorities, and even empower them, giving official religious approval. The crowning of the Holy Roman emperor by the **pope** is a case in point. In the year 800, on Christmas day, Pope Leo III crowned the invading Frankish (proto-French) King Charlemagne as the Imperator Augustus, or Revered Emperor.

Later in Europe, 16th-century French philosopher Jean Bodin articulated the idea of **divine right kingship**, according to which the king has power because God wills it. No earthly authority can challenge the king's power. However, religious authority and political power often come into conflict, as happened after the Christian Reformation and in modern Islamic history. Such conflicts raise more questions for religious communities.

In some cases, religious authority is hereditary, as in **Shi'i Islam** (see Chapter 4). It may be relatively informal, as in Judaism and Islam, where individuals may choose to undertake advanced study of the religious texts and then may or may not be recognized by their communities as authorities. In other cases, the route to positions of religious authority is highly formalized, as in Roman Catholicism, with its strict hierarchy of clergy ranging from priests through bishops and cardinals to the pope. In the medieval Church, the scholars who interpreted scripture and formulated Church doctrines and laws called themselves the *magisterium*, the teaching authority, of the Church. In 1870, Pope Pius IX went one step further by declaring himself infallible – unable to make a mistake – when he taught about matters of faith and morals.

Explaining Evil, Suffering, and Death

Theodicy

Religious Studies scholars agree that dealing with suffering – our own and that of others – is among the significant roles of religion. According to American theologian Forrest Church (d. 2009), "Religion is the human response to being alive and having to die."

The challenge of suffering and death is often associated with "the problem of evil." For religions based on belief in a God who is both all-powerful ("omnipotent") and all-good, the existence of evil can be particularly vexing. If God is all-good and all-powerful, then where does evil come from? Either God cannot stop evil and so is not all-powerful, or God could stop evil but does not, in which case God is not all-good. Neither alternative is attractive to most believers, so many religious thinkers have devised explanations for how God can be both all-powerful and all-good, and there can be evil at the same time. These explanations are called *theodicies*, and they can be quite sophisticated.

Theodicy is a term used by monotheists – people who believe in one God – to discuss the challenge of reconciling divine benevolence and justice. It is more specific than the problem of suffering. Suffering of various kinds can be explained without having to justify it as somehow part of a divine plan. Theodicies try to explain evil in terms of divine justice. The term is taken from the Greek words theos, meaning god, and dikaios, just. People sometimes commit evil deeds, and God has promised punishment for such acts. But if God is all-powerful and all-good, then why did God not just prevent the evil deed in the first place? A theodicy is an answer to a question like this.

Here are some common theodicies:

- *Punishment Theodicy*. Evil was not part of God's original creation, but came into being when the first humans disobeyed God. Human suffering is God's punishment for the Original Sin of Adam and Eve.

- *Warning Theodicy*. Natural disasters such as earthquakes are God's warning to people that they are not living the way he wants them to live.
- *Free Will Theodicy*. To make a universe without evil, God would have to make it impossible for human beings to do evil. But if God did that, there would be no free will. Humans would be like the lower animals, doing only what they were caused to do by outside forces and by their instincts. But God wanted humans to be a higher kind of creature than that. He wanted them to respond freely to him. So, God gave humans free will – the ability to do evil as well as good – and they often choose evil. However, a world in which humans sometimes freely choose evil is a better world than one in which no creature has free will. (This view is associated with the Christian thinker Augustine of Hippo; d. 430.)

Some thinkers try to explain suffering independently from sin. For example:

- *"Soul-Building" Theodicy*. God set up the universe so that we can learn from our experience and grow in goodness and strength of character. If we never faced setbacks, we would remain childishly shallow. The suffering and difficulties we face are opportunities to become more patient, courageous, and loving – to "build our souls." (This idea was suggested by the Christian thinker Irenaeus; d. 202.)
- *The Best Possible World Theodicy*. Any possible universe of any complexity would eventually have some evil in it. In any world where animals move around, for example, some of them are going to bump into others and hurt them, if only accidentally. God – being all-good – chose the possible world in which the happiness of creatures is maximized and their suffering is minimized. So, this is the best of all possible worlds. (This explanation is attributed to the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz; d. 1716.)
- *The Contrast Theodicy. Evil* and *good* are contrasting terms, like *pain* and *pleasure*. We learn each word as the opposite of the other one. If there were no suffering and other evil to experience, we would not be able to understand what pleasure and other kinds of good were.

The Punishment Theodicy is particularly common in the **Abrahamic religions** – those that trace their heritage to the patriarch Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is expressed most starkly in the Christian teaching called Original Sin. This is an interpretation of the story told in the first book of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) and in the Qur'an, explaining that when the first human beings disobeyed God's first command, God punished them. He expelled them from the Garden of Eden and changed human life from pleasant to painful. Evicted from paradise, humans since Adam have lived in a "vale of tears." According to this explanation, the pain of childbirth, the need to work hard, disease, and death at the end of the whole ordeal are God's way of punishing Adam and Eve for disobeying him, and all their descendants as well.

Another common way to explain suffering is to attribute it to an evil force external to God. A good example is found in Zoroastrianism. According to Zoroastrian teaching,

The "Punishment" Theodicy Today

One example of the theodicy that suffering is punishment for sin is the comments of Austrian Catholic priest Gerhard Maria Wagner that the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, which killed over 1,800 people, was divine retribution for New Orleans' sins. Another is the comment by American Evangelical Christian preacher Pat Robertson that the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, resulting in an estimated 200,000 deaths and massive property destruction, was God's punishment for the Haitians' sins. They had "made a pact with the devil" when they were trying to free themselves from French colonial control. They said, "'We will serve you if you will get us free from the French'. . . so the devil said, 'OK, it's a deal' and they kicked the French out. The Haitians revolted and got themselves free but ever since they have been cursed by one thing after the other." Similarly, in 2016, an earthquake in Italy that killed some 300 and left thousands homeless was described as "divine punishment" by theologian Fr. Giovanni Cavalcoli.

there is a single eternal and transcendent god, **Ahura Mazda**, who created the world and to whom all creation will return at the end of time. Ahura Mazda created a beautiful and orderly universe. As noted above, the principle of order or truth is known as *asha* and, as will be discussed further in Part II, human beings' duty is to think, speak, and act well in order to preserve order. If they think, speak, or act badly, the result is evil, which is an affront to all that is good and true. Evil is represented by **Angra Mainyu**, also known as Ahriman, an evil spirit independent of the great creator Ahura Mazda. All of history is characterized by the conflict between good and evil, but in the end, Ahura Mazda will triumph over all evil. However, Ahura Mazda did not create evil. Variously described as the destructive force of untruth and "nothing," Angra Mainyu is nevertheless considered the manifestation of all that is evil, and its source.

The problematic nature of suffering within the monotheistic worldview is probably nowhere better laid out than in the Book of Job from the **Hebrew Bible**. Job is described as a morally upright man of whom God was proud. In fact, God boasts to Satan (described here as an angel who reports to God, rather than as "the Devil") that "there is no one on earth like him: a man of perfect integrity, who fears God and avoids evil." Satan points out that it is easy for Job to be faithful to God, since Job is rich and successful and has a wonderful family. But if Job lost his wealth and his family, Satan says, "He would curse you to your face." Taking up this challenge, God lets Satan destroy Job's possessions and kill his children, to see how he will react. However, after Job has lost most of his family and his possessions, he continues to worship God. Then, creating a new bet, Satan points out that Job still has his health, whereupon God lets Satan cover Job with horrible sores all over his body. Job finally asks why a just God would allow a perfectly good man to suffer so. Three of Job's friends present the standard theodicy that suffering is a punishment for sin, and say that either Job or his children must have done something wrong. Job rejects this explanation and ultimately dismisses his friends sarcastically.

Then, Job takes his case directly to God, who responds, not with an explanation of why Job is suffering, but with a flurry of questions such as, "Where were you when I planned the earth? Tell me if you are so wise." Instead of answering Job's question about justice, God reminds Job that he is the sovereign creator. The overall impression left is that questions about "the problem of suffering" are not answerable. At the end of the book, God says to one of Job's friends, "I am very angry at you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has." Then, God instructs them to ask Job to pray on their behalf, and God forgives them because of Job's intercession. God then gives Job back double his lost possessions and gives him new children. Perhaps the point is that bad things just happen.

The inexplicability of suffering is also featured in the playful story of the old man and young boy who die and go before God for judgment at the same time. God assigns the old man a very high position in heaven and a very nice (it is heaven, after all) one for the boy. The boy asks why his position is not as exalted as the man's and God explains that the man lived such a long life that he had time to do a great deal of good. The boy then asks why he had not been allowed to live such a long life, and God says that because he knew that if they boy had lived longer he would not have spent his time doing good deeds. At that point, a great cry arises from voices in hell asking why they did not die sooner. Ultimately, suffering is indeed difficult to understand.

Traditions based on belief in a god who is not all-powerful have an easier time explaining evil. In this story from the Native American Comanche tribe, the Great Spirit who created the Comanche banished the evil demon, but it still is able to inflict suffering:

> One day the Great Spirit collected swirls of dust from the four directions in order to create the Comanche people. These people formed from the earth had the strength of mighty storms. Unfortunately, a shape-shifting demon was also created and began to torment the people. The Great Spirit cast the demon into a bottomless pit. To get revenge, the demon took refuge in the fangs and stingers of poisonous creatures and continues to harm people every chance it gets.

Traditions that are not based on a single god in control of the entire world have other ways of explaining suffering. In Chapter 5, we will see that both Hindu and Buddhist texts teach that suffering results from our own deluded attachment to material things. In fact, evil and suffering are not ultimately real; we perceive evil and suffering in the world only because we do not see things correctly. In this worldview, only minds and ideas are real; the material world has no objective reality. Our ordinary experience of a material world in which there is evil is illusory. To the person who sees the world correctly, there is no evil or suffering. So the answer to the question of suffering and apparent evil is to adopt a higher, truer perspective.

Explaining Death

Of all the problematic aspects of life, the most challenging is that it comes to an end. Whether as a result of natural disaster, war, technical errors or accidents, carelessness, personal vendettas, random massacres, or suicide, death raises profound questions. How can it be that, after all the struggles of life, it just ends? After all the efforts to face the challenges of life, to overcome adversity, to make the hard choices and do the right thing, can life just be over? Can one even imagine the end of one's own existence?

One of the strongest statements about the enigma of death is found in the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes. The supposed author of this book is "a king in Jerusalem" (some commentators say it was Solomon) who had everything he desired. Unlike Job, he was not afflicted with loss of family, illness, and pain. But still he complains that there is no apparent design to his life or to anyone else's, and that it all ends in a few decades. "Humans are creatures of chance and the beasts are creatures of chance, and one mischance awaits them all: death comes to both alike" (3:19). To die is to be destroyed. "The dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun" (9:5–6). And when people die, the text continues, someone else inherits all their hard-earned possessions. All one's efforts have come to nothing. So life is futile and meaningless. "No one can comprehend what is happening here under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it" (8:17).

Among the common ways that religions counter the apparent meaninglessness of death is by teaching that death is not really the end. As German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin put it in a 1936 essay, "The idea of eternity has ever had its strongest source in death." Many religions teach that death is not the permanent end of life, and that something happens to people after death that makes life worthwhile.

We can identify four basic explanations of how people might live after they die:

- as ghosts,
- as persons resurrected at the end of the world,
- as nonphysical souls, and
- as persons reincarnated in new bodies.

Ghosts

As we shall see in Chapter 3, the idea of ghosts is probably the oldest idea about life after death, and the most widespread. A ghost looks like the person who died and may talk like them, too. But ghosts are not solid like living persons and are not subject to the laws of physics. They may pass through doors and walls, for example, and may travel thousands of miles effortlessly in seconds. Belief in ghosts is popular around the world, even among people whose religions rule out such belief, such as Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and people who do not identify with specific religious traditions. According to a poll conducted in 2019 by Paris-based research firm IPSOS, 46% of Americans believe in ghosts – an increase of 16% from a similar poll in 2005, and 21% since 1990. In 2021, the *New York Times* reported an increase in reports of ghostly experiences during the COVID pandemic, citing sociologist Joseph O. Baker's observation that belief in the supernatural tends to increase when people "have experiences with death recently … That may bring up these sorts of issues of wondering about spirits of loved ones."

Unlike the other three concepts of life after death on our list, surviving death as a ghost is not something that people look forward to as making life worthwhile. In most cultures, ghosts are thought of as unhappy, lonely, even angry. As a result, they may cause trouble for living people, as by haunting a house, which explains why many people are afraid of ghosts.

Spiritualism

One modern religion based on belief in ghosts is Spiritualism. It originated in Hydesville, New York, near Rochester, in 1848 when Kate and Margaret Fox, ages 12 and 15, claimed that spirits of the dead were causing "rappings" and other noises in their home, which had a reputation for being haunted. Kate snapped her fingers and challenged the spirit to repeat the sound. The spirit did, she said. Kate and Margaret asked the spirit to rap out their ages, which it did. In the days that followed, they got lots of attention from neighbors, and they worked out a code for the spirit to signify Yes or No, and to signify letters to spell out words. They quickly became famous, and in 1850, they traveled to New York City to conduct public séances with spirits. Soon people around the United States and the United Kingdom were holding séances and claiming that they had contacted spirits, usually of their dead relatives. Peaking at 8 million followers, Spiritualism was particularly popular during the US Civil War. Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of the American President, was said to have held séances in the White House to contact her dead sons.

In 1888, Margaret Fox explained how the "rappings" had started 40 years before:

> When we went to bed at night, we used to tie an apple to a string and move the string up and down, causing the apple to bump on the floor, or we would drop the apple on the floor, making a strange noise every time it would rebound. Mother listened to this for a time. She would not understand it and did not suspect us as being capable of a trick because we were so young.

Resurrection

Unlike ghostly existence, resurrection at the end of the world is something that people do look forward to, particularly in the monotheisms – Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Zoroastrian texts, we are told that once evil is vanquished, a savior will renovate the world to a beautiful condition and the dead will be resurrected to live without a trace of evil. Resurrection is mentioned late in the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) and became important in the Christian New Testament and the Qur'an (Islamic scripture), as we shall see in Chapter 4.

In most of the Hebrew Bible, there is no mention of life after death. It is simply assumed that at death a person becomes a corpse in ***she'ol***, the hole in the ground in which a person is buried. The dead are not conscious, are not with God, and are not being rewarded or punished. As the Hebrew Bible puts it, they are "asleep in the dust." The writer of **Psalm** 6:5 asks God to spare his life, arguing, "No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?"

The idea that death destroys the person dominates early biblical texts, but then the writers of the books of Isaiah and Daniel had prophetic visions about the end of the

world in which some of the dead would be resurrected. Isaiah envisions a day when God will vindicate the people of Israel by bringing them back to life while leaving their enemies dead.

> The dead do not live; shades do not rise – because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them ….
>
> Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. Awake and sing for joy, you who lie in the dust! (Isaiah 26:14, 19)

The writer of Daniel is more cryptic:

> There shall be a time of anguish …. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:1–3)

Some scholars think that these late passages were written at a time when the Jews were being persecuted by Greeks, and they were being killed precisely for staying faithful to God. This raised the question of justice. They were remaining faithful to God because that was God's demand. Should they not be rewarded for their loyalty? If they are destroyed forever, then their fate is the same as those who disobey God. This leaves little incentive for obeying God. The writers of Isaiah and Daniel offer hope to such martyrs: the oppressors may triumph for now, but in the future, God will bring his faithful people back to life. Thus, belief in divine justice is maintained; it will simply happen in the future, not necessarily on earth. And life's suffering maintains meaning.

The idea of the resurrection of the dead and the serving of justice in an "afterlife" came to be accepted by many Jews, including Jesus. However, Jesus taught that everyone – bad and good – will be resurrected and judged and then rewarded or punished. In the Middle Ages, some cathedrals had carvings of dead people rising out of their graves to face the Last Judgment (Figure 1.6). This view of resurrection and final judgment is also found in some Zoroastrian texts, although without the emphasis on reuniting with a body. It was reiterated in the Qur'an and is accepted by Muslims.

Souls

The first Christians believed that the resurrection of the dead would happen at the end of the world. Before the resurrection, they thought those who have died are simply "asleep in the dust" – dead and buried. Missing from this worldview was the later Christian idea that people are made up of two parts – physical and nonphysical or spiritual. The Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an reflect a holistic view of the human person. A person (a "self") is one thing. At death, the physical body is destroyed and goes into the ground, but it can be brought back to life by the same Creator who made it in the first place.

The region in which early Christians and Muslims lived, however, had a number of influences – primarily Greek, Roman, and Persian. In the worldviews of those cultures, persons are composed of an immaterial soul or spirit that was embedded in a material body at birth. The material body perishes, but the soul – being

FIGURE 1.6 Dead people being resurrected, carving on the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Reims, France. GO69 / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0"

immaterial – is not subject to the wounds of the flesh. This **dualist** view of human beings was eventually adopted into the perspectives of Christians and Muslims. Thus, they came to think of a person as an immortal soul living in a mortal body.

Adopting the dualist perspective entails an interpretation of death that is different from that held by people who see the human being as an integrated whole. In the dualist view, instead of the entire person dying, only the body dies. The soul survives. As we shall see in Part II, some monotheistic traditions teach that the soul survives in the ground until the end of the world. According to others, particularly worthy souls go to heaven while particularly guilty souls go to hell; either way, they will eventually be reunited with their resurrected bodies. And some traditions allow for the soul to inhabit earthly regions.

The dualist perspective also implies a reorientation toward personal identity. The body ceases to be essential to an individual's identity. It will perish but the soul, bearing all the personal characteristics developed during the individual's lifetime, including merit for good deeds and guilt for misdeeds, lives on.

Despite the disconnect between the idea of the resurrection of the person and the idea that we survive death as immortal souls, the two beliefs serve a similar purpose. They both give purpose to life and make death more tolerable through the teaching that after death, good people will be rewarded and bad people will be punished.

Reincarnation

Many religious traditions in Africa, Asia, and Australia have taught that each of us has been reborn countless times and may be reborn many more times in the future. This belief was common in ancient Greece. (Even in early Christianity, there were

discussions of the idea. Some scholars see the idea of bodily resurrection as a kind of limited **reincarnation**.) Clearly, belief in reincarnation allows people to see the death of a loved one in a less tragic light than if this were the person's only life.

Today, in many traditions of India, death is treated not as a tragic end at all. Instead, it is a transition to a new life. In this perspective, physical life is part of a long learning process, the goal of which is to recognize that physical life is illusory at best – a punishment, at worst – and that people's true identities are as part of a much greater nonphysical whole. Until individuals reach this awareness, they are born again and again – that is, "put into a body again" or "reincarnated." In Buddhism, the goal is different. Instead of recognizing one's true identity, the epitome of awareness is recognizing that there is no such thing as a true individual identity. But either way, people generally must go through many lifetimes before being released from the cycle of rebirths.

Ritual and Prayer

Many aspects of religion, including identity, order, and concerns about suffering and death, are reinforced in another aspect common to religions: ritual. Rituals are actions, often symbolic, repeated systematically by individuals and groups for specific purposes. The purposes may be very practical, such as to heal someone, to bring success in a new endeavor, or to ward off evil. They may mark time or the passage of seasons; many traditions include rituals to celebrate the beginning of a new year, for example, or the coming of spring. Rituals may symbolize phenomena or events important in the community's traditions. Jews, for example, commemorate the escape from slavery in Egypt at Passover, Christians recall Jesus' last meal in the Eucharist, and Muslims reenact Hagar's search for water during the Hajj pilgrimage. Rituals may be performed in worship, such as Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain puja ceremonies, and Sikh scriptural recitations. They may be performed to initiate individuals into the community, as in naming ceremonies and baptism. They are often used to mark significant events in individuals' lives, such as becoming an adult, getting married, achieving a high status within the community like priesthood or kingship, and, not surprisingly, death.

Many rituals involve **prayer**. Prayer – calling upon a god or other cosmic force for assistance, to express gratitude or sorrow for offenses, or to acknowledge submission or awe – may be performed privately and informally. But when it is performed in ways specified by the tradition, it is considered ritual.

Most generally, rituals are performed for a combination of reasons and they can be the occasion for profound spiritual and emotional experiences.

The repetitive and systematic nature of rituals also serves to reinforce the group's beliefs about their identity, solidarity, and the nature of the world in which they live. Rituals enhance the sense of order and predictability, too. Very little about human life remains static; change is inevitable and everywhere evident not just in individuals but in communities. Our ways of making a living, our customs, even our languages change. But rituals are peculiarly resistant to change. This sameness, this predictability and regularity creates, in effect, little universes of order and gives a comforting rhythm to our lives.

Prayer for the Auto Industry

Many religious traditions have prayers for their everyday needs. In Christianity, the Lord's Prayer asks God for "our daily bread." When people's livelihoods are threatened, as in the economic downturn that began in 2008, many turn to prayer, private and public. In this service at the Greater Grace Temple in Detroit, Michigan, the "Motor City," Christians surround three SUVs in the sanctuary to pray that God will save the auto industry.

FIGURE 1.7 Prayer for the auto industry. © Carlos Barria/Reuters/Corbis.

Conclusion

Religions help us deal with life. As Albert Einstein said, "Our situation on this earth seems strange. Every one of us appears here involuntarily and uninvited for a short stay, without knowing the whys and the wherefore." Religions make life less puzzling by giving people a big picture of who they are, what the world around them is, and how they fit into it. They give people a *worldview*. (Scholars often use the German term for this word, *Weltanschauung*.) They allow us to see meaning in life and they help us order our communities, providing ethics and laws and institutions.

We could have organized our description of the various aspects of religion in any number of ways. Many people would begin an explanation of religion with something about belief in the supernatural. Others might focus on questions of ultimate truth and the symbolic nature of religious language and practice. Still others would emphasize individual experience, particularly perceptions of contact with the supernatural, commonly known as "religious experience."

Fortunately, there is no "orthodoxy" in Religious Studies. As we have noted, the field is multidisciplinary; its scholars come from many areas of expertise including history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. The views about what constitutes religion are many and varied. German-American theologian Paul Tillich (d. 1965) famously described faith as "the state of being ultimately concerned" (Tillich 1957, 1). However, "faith" is not the same thing as "religion." Faith – believing in something that one is unable to demonstrate logically or rationally – is among the phenomena studied by Religious Studies scholars. But there are many others. Philosopher Ninian Smart (d. 2001), who established the first department of Religious Studies in the United Kingdom (University of Lancaster, 1967), identified seven elements typical of religions: doctrine, myth, ethics, ritual, experiences, institutions, and material culture. As we shall see in Chapter 2, this taxonomy is a late development in over two centuries of scholarly efforts to characterize religion, and it is not universally accepted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the most surprising thing you learned in this chapter?
2. What are the things about you that provide your sense of identity – your ethnic heritage, religion, political affiliation, economic status, musical talent, athletic ability? If religion is one of them, how important is it to your identity compared with your other characteristics?
3. Can people who are not religious have good reasons to follow moral rules?
4. Do you believe in ghosts? If you belong to a religious group, does that groups teachings include anything about ghosts?
5. Have you ever checked your horoscope or done anything else with astrology? If you belong to a religious group, what is its attitude toward astrology?

REFERENCES

Armstrong, K. (2014). *Fields of Blood*. New York: Anchor Books.
Cavanaugh, W.T. (2009). *The Myth of Religious Violence*. New York: Oxford.
Smith, J.Z. (1982). *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Stark, R. and Bainbridge, W.S. (1987). *A Theory of Religion*. New York: Peter Lang.
Tillich, P. (1957). *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper & Row.

FURTHER READING

Appiah, K.A. (2018). *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*. New York, London: Liveright.
Dowley, T. (ed.) (2018). *Introduction to World Religions*, 3rde. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Dubuisson, D. (2003). *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*. Tr. William Sayers. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Livingston, J.C. (2008). *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 6the. London: Pearson.
Smith, W.C. (1991). *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.