



The Jaguar Temple, constructed in the 8th century, is one of the largest structures in the ancient Mayan city complex at Tikal, Guatemala. The pyramid-shaped temple stands more than 150 feet in height and is believed to be the burial site for the Mayan king Jasaw Chan K'awiil I. *Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw*

The Study of Religion

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Chapter Goals

- I. To help students understand the parameters of the academic discipline of Religious Studies.
- II. To encourage critical thought about the scope and purpose of religious systems.
- III. To identify core perspectives that scholars bring to the study of religion.
- IV. To begin introducing core vocabulary and ideas that are common within the discipline.

“My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind.”

Albert Einstein

Our Purpose

As one travels around the globe, the influence of religion may be seen in every community and on almost every corner. Often, the term “religion” is used narrowly, to reference a specific and recognizable set of practices or beliefs. Yet, religion takes many forms and may serve many roles within the lives of those who embrace or are even in proximity of these cultural systems. Religions may bind together communities, offer responses to common life crises, establish systems of communal order, and provide symbols that serve to represent core ideals and desires. Indeed, this represents only a small list of the possible roles played by religious systems within the lives of individuals and communities.

In addition to these common functions, religions also play an important role in prompting the cultivation of intentional interpretive perspectives. In other words, religions often provide mechanisms that allow and encourage us to see, understand and interpret events happening around us in particular ways. Throughout this text, significant attention will be given to the unique perspectives fostered by individual religious communities. Along the way, case studies will be included, to provide students an opportunity to consider the effect of key philosophical differences among specific religious systems. These case studies will be set apart from the larger text.

Through the various resources provided in this text, it is hoped that students will have a meaningful and positive encounter with the great religious cultures of our world, leading to deeper understanding.

One of the unique resources provided in this text is a series of perspectives sections that focus attention upon key issues within the field of religious studies. Through these sections, students are invited to consider these issues through varied religious and cultural lenses, in an effort to gain a greater appreciation for and understanding of the viewpoints cultivated within diverse communities. The authors of this text, one from North America with a primary research focus upon the religious systems of Islam and Christianity, and the other from China, with a research focus upon the religions of East Asia, contribute to these sections.

The authors draw from their own experience, both as researchers and citizens of the global community, to shed light on the varied issues addressed. As a way of introducing you, as the reader, to these resources, this text opens with a perspectives section focused upon one of the world’s oldest mythological works.



A stone column unearthed at Gobekli Tepe.
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Origins

Religion has been a part of the human adventure since the very origins of history. For tens of thousands of years, humankind has embraced religious practice in varying forms. New discoveries are pointing to the prospect that religious ideas date to a time that is even earlier than most scholars previously suspected.

One of the more recent discoveries has reminded scholars of just how ancient the origins of religious ideas may be. The excavation is at a site known as Gobekli Tepe, which is located on a hilltop in southeastern Turkey and is believed to be more than eleven thousand years old. That makes this site more than six thousand years older

Perspectives Case Study – The *Enuma Elish*

The *Enuma Elish* is one of the oldest religious texts ever recovered. The text derives its title from its opening words and presents a mythic account of creation that appears to have been widely known and shared within the context of the ancient Mesopotamian religious cult. The first discovered copy of the text was found among the ruins of the ancient library of the city of Nineveh, located in the modern nation of Iraq, in the middle part of the nineteenth century. That copy of the text is thought to date back to the period of around the seventh century B.C.E. Since the time of that discovery, other fragmentary copies of the text have been recovered, as well, leading many scholars to date the origins of the creation myth to as early as 1800 B.C.E.

The *Enuma Elish* has received significant attention due to certain commonalities it shares with the Genesis 1 creation myth, contained in the Hebrew Bible. These commonalities have led many scholars to argue that the more ancient *Enuma Elish* text may have inspired and influenced the authors of the Genesis 1 text. More orthodox interpreters, from both the Jewish and Christian faith communities, have resisted the argument that Genesis 1 was influenced by any prior human writing or record, but, instead,

believe that the Biblical narrative constitutes a wholly unique history communicated through divine revelation alone.

For present purposes, it is useful to examine a portion of this ancient text, while considering differing positions that may be taken regarding its relationship to the Hebrew Scripture. Accordingly, the *Enuma Elish* opens with these lines:

*When in the height heaven was not named,
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
And the primeval Apsu, who begat them,
And chaos, Tiamut, the mother of them both
Their waters were mingled together,
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
When of the gods none had been called into being,
And none bore a name, and no destinies were ordained;
Then were created the gods in the midst of heaven,
Lahmu and Lahamu were called into being. ...¹*

The View from the West

Why it matters if the *Enuma Elish* and Genesis are Related

From Mark Hanshaw

In the brief excerpt above, one can certainly detect what appear to be striking parallels, in terms of themes and structure, between this mythic text and the opening verses of Genesis. What do such parallels mean and why should they be of interest to us?

The question of whether these two ancient texts are related is important for many because of the implications our answer to this inquiry bears upon our collective notion of history. Do we believe Genesis 1 to be a historical document? If so, how does the discovery of an earlier myth that is aligned with the text, but differs in certain specific key details, affect this interpretation?

Western religions tend to be quite concerned with questions of history. Going back to the mythologies central to both the Jewish and Persian Zoroastrian faiths, both time and history may be seen as dimensions of the sacred. This is so precisely because time and history are the realms within which the divinely mandated destiny of creation flowers. Time, itself, is carrying us irrevocably toward the culmination of a divine plan.

The documents that both introduce us to this divine plan and give it credence are the scriptures that support such faiths. Any examination of such scriptures that points toward human origination, rather than divine, may be viewed by those who read the texts more literally as a challenge both to the historicity of the claims made in the texts and, more importantly, to the view that they communicate a purposeful, divine plan initiated by a purposeful god.

Continues



Relief of the Mesopotamian God Marduk. *Public Domain*

Does it Matter if Religious Mythologies Conflict?

From Lili Zhang

In the movie *Kung Fu Panda*, one of the most popular animated films in the U.S. and around the globe in recent years, the central character Po, a giant panda, is twice exposed to a curious message about truth. At one point in the film, Po discovers that the long-withheld secret ingredient to his Dad's famous "secret ingredient soup" is *nothing*. Later, as Po seeks to understand the secret to becoming a great warrior in his effort to defend his community, he gains access to the famous Dragon Scroll only to find that it is blank. This realization of nothingness or emptiness enormously empowers Po to defeat his formidable rival, Tai Lung.

In contrast to the strong emphasis of Western religions upon the authority of scripture, in *Kung Fu Panda*, it seems the value of words is called into question. We see a history of such skepticism regarding scriptural or revelatory literature in both

Zen Buddhism and Taoism, two religions that have profoundly influenced and shaped Eastern Asian cultures.

In one commonly told story, a Zen master belittles the scriptures as having no more value than wiping paper. He even called for the burning of scriptures. The Zen system has regarded itself as "a special transmission standing outside the scriptures," which is "not founded upon words and letters."

The opening chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* explicitly states the incompatibility of the ideal of Tao and mere words when it states, "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao." For Taoism, language is a human construction and, therefore, will always be a medium incapable of expressing transcendent truth.

The marginalization of words and scriptures in both the Zen and Taoist traditions is consistent with an understanding of the nature of ultimate reality as both "*kong*", meaning emptiness, and "*wu*", meaning nothingness. For some followers of both the Zen and Taoist traditions, the ultimate reality may be understood as essentially representing the highest spiritual mental state. The attainment of this spiritual state cannot depend on guiding words. Instead, the spiritual pathway in Zen is described as one that points inward, leading one to see his or her true nature. In Taoism, the spiritual pathway embraces a meditative approach that is sometimes called *wu wei*, or "effortless action."



The North entrance of the temple of Angkor Wat, Cambodia.. Dating to the 12th century, the temple is considered to be the largest religious monument in the world. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

than Britain's famous **Stonehenge**. It features massive carved pillars, standing close to twenty feet in height and weighing between seven and ten tons. Many of the pillars feature various carved images on their faces. Interestingly, based upon geomagnetic surveys, it has been determined that this site is likely one of more than a dozen related, but scattered, structures spread across a twenty-two acre landmass.

So, what is Gobekli Tepe, and why is it of interest to us as we begin this study? Klaus Schmidt, a German archaeologist, has offered some compelling evidence to suggest that this site in Turkey may represent the oldest human worship complex ever discovered. The site is so old that it pre-dates the assumed origins of every religion on the face of the earth, that is known and practiced today. If this site is what Schmidt believes it to be, and if we have unearthed only a small fragment of it, how might such a discovery help us to rethink the very nature of what we understand about religions?

When I read about discoveries, such as this one, I am often left asking very basic questions, like how such ancient people, utilizing primitive tools, were able to move and place such massive stones and why they went to such effort? As is true of Stonehenge, the pyramids in Egypt, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and other ancient structures, we may never have a full explanation. Still, such discoveries are useful to us as we seek to understand the ways in which perspec-

tives regarding life, death, and the human purpose developed within these ancient societies. Tracing the origins and evolution of the responses of ancient societies to such concerns may offer insight into our own

modern efforts to understand life's meaning. This common endeavor by humans, across time, links us to the very purpose of the study of religion.

Why might we engage in the study of religious beliefs and practices, whether ancient or modern? What can we expect to learn from such an investigation? In part, we may answer this by observing that religious systems have played an important role in the historical development of human cultures. Still, the study of religion is not merely a historical endeavor. Religious practice and belief effects the ways humans live, interact with one another and respond to the world. As the title of this volume suggests, religion is a part of the human experience across the globe, even for those who may not claim adherence to a faith tradition, because such systems influence the shape of cultures and communities and affect the way humans encounter their world. Yet, before we can engage in the study of religion, it seems important to ask a difficult, but often overlooked, preliminary question. That question is simply, how do we define religion?

What is Religion?

Many have attempted to define religion and some have been more successful than others. It is, perhaps, difficult to define this term precisely because of the varied ways humans have expressed themselves through religious systems. Across cultures and time, humans have chosen quite distinct tools and methods to express their religious aspirations. The word “religion” derives from the Latin term *religare*, which means “to bind,” and in a sense this is an apt description of religious practice. To commit oneself to a religious system is to willingly bind or conform one's actions or beliefs to fit a particular set of expectations or propositions. Still, is there an appropriate descriptive category that serves to capture the multitude of varied ways that humans do bind themselves religiously?

One of the more noteworthy attempts to define religion came in the 1890 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the matter of *Davis v. Beason*. The *Beason* case involved a claim by members of the Mormon community that their right to enter into polygamist marriages constituted an important and legitimate part of their religious practice. In its decision, the Court was placed into the position of having to determine the reasonable parameters of systems that could be labeled “religions.” Ultimately, the court offered its own succinct definition of religion, stating:

The term ‘religion’ has reference to one's views of his relations to his Creator, and to the obligations they impose of reverence for his being and character, and of obedience to his will.²

Is this a workable definition and, if not, what are its limitations?

Perhaps, the greatest limitation we might note regarding the *Beason* definition is that it generally views religion through the lens of a Christian theological framework. The idea that religion must incorporate an expectation of the existence of a personal deity, who relates to humans on individual terms, is not one that is embraced by all cultural systems that we might typically label as religions.

In Buddhist mythology, the Buddha, himself, is said to have dismissed such metaphysical questions as whether there is a creator god by arguing that such inquiries are not capable of being resolved and, accordingly, lead to distraction and possibly even division, rather than genuine enlightenment. Accordingly, some branches of Buddhism, today, are indifferent toward theistic claims. Such a position does not appear to



Actor portrays St. James along the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

be comprehended under the definition offered in the *Beason* decision. Thus, under the *Beason* definition, Buddhism and potentially many other systems that we might typically study and identify as religions would apparently be excluded. In effect, this definition appears to be so narrowly constructed that it excludes traditions that seem appropriate to be included in the category of religions.

Another exaggerated example of a description of religion that is too narrow to be workable comes from the satirical novel *Tom Jones*, in which the fictional character Mr. Thwackum observes, “By religion I mean Christianity, by Christianity I mean Protestantism, by Protestantism I mean the Church of England as established by law.” As with the *Beason* decision, we confront a definition of religion, here, that is overly narrow. Indeed, the definition here is so narrow that it excludes everything but a single, specific form of Christianity. These definitions, then, serve to expose a common potential pitfall. Attempts to define religion that are informed by a single faith may prove unworkably narrow. Thus, it may be useful to seek out a definition of religion that offers greater breadth in terms of the types of communities it comprehends. In our search for such a definition, we turn, again, to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In the U.S. Supreme Court case of **U.S. v. Seeger**, a matter decided in 1965, some seventy-five years following the *Beason* decision, the question of the nature of religion was again confronted. In *Seeger*, the court appeared almost frustrated, as it articulated the breadth of the differing religious systems that populate our landscape. In this regard, the Court observed:

Over 250 sects inhabit our land. Some believe in a purely personal God, some in a supernatural deity; others think of religion as a way of life envisioning as its ultimate goal the day when all men can live together in perfect understanding and peace. There are those who think of God as the depth of our being; others, such as the Buddhists, strive for a state of lasting rest through self-denial and inner purification; in Hindu philosophy, the Supreme Being is the transcendental reality which is truth, knowledge and bliss.

In the *Seeger* case, the claimant argued that he should be exempted from the military draft for the Vietnam War based upon his religious belief system. This claim was complicated by the fact that the claimant did not adhere to a known religion, but to a personal ethical system that opposed war. Ultimately, the court reasoned that the test of whether a particular belief system constitutes a religion hinges upon its inclusion of “a given

belief that is sincere and meaningful and occupies a place in the life of its possessor parallel to that filled by the orthodox belief in God.” The Court went on to assert that its definition provided an “objective” standard against which all cultural systems could be tested.³

Again, we are left asking whether the Court’s attempt to define religion appears adequate. Does the definition provided by the Court in *Seeger* alleviate the complications created by the Court in its earlier opinion in the *Beason* case? While it is true that the definition offered in the *Seeger* decision is much broader than the Court’s earlier attempt to define religion, one might argue that it is, in fact, too broad. If all that is required for a belief system to constitute a religion is that it incorporates an idea or practice that is “sincere and meaningful” and occupies a central place in the life of an individual, what would be excluded from this category?

If one’s personal priorities centered upon activism in the Communist Party, a social club or even the support of an athletic team, are these to be considered religions?

Based upon the definition provided by the Court in *Seeger*, a reasonable case might be made for any of these to be labeled religions. Indeed, under *Seeger*, it seems difficult to exclude virtually any personal priority from the list of things we might identify as religions, so long as they are highly significant for the individual and closely held.



A Hindu ascetic, in Vrindavin, India, the legendary birthplace of the god Krishna, seeks alms. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

The definition provided by the Court in *Seeger* bears a significant resemblance to another, offered by the twentieth-century Christian theologian Paul Tillich. In thinking about the nature of religion, Tillich opined that religion is the embrace of “that which is closest to one’s heart.” At first glance, this statement may sound compelling and reasonable. Yet, as a practical working definition of religion, it suffers from lack of clarity. Of course, Tillich’s goal was not to craft a comprehensive definition of religion. His statement was rhetorical. Still, it, like the *Seeger* definition, helps us to recognize the pitfalls associated with drawing a definition of religion that lacks clarity because it is overly broad. A single example can help us understand this definition’s limitations. Thus, even though one may have a love for his child that is greater than the concern he feels for anything else in life, it would seem curious to attempt to classify that love as a religion.

These examples of attempts to define religion are not particularly unusual. Generally, scholars of religion have struggled to identify an acceptable definition of religion. Most of these attempts have failed, usually because they have fallen into one of the pitfalls identified above. They have been so narrow that the boundaries drawn have excluded many traditions that most would agree should fall into the category of religious systems, or they have been so broad that they have effectively excluded nothing. So challenging has been this task of adequately defining religion that the 1990 edition of the *Cambridge Encyclopedia* offered this observation:

... no single definition will suffice to encompass the varied sets of traditions, practices, and ideas which constitute different religions.



Vendor stalls located just outside of a temple in central India.
Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

This apparent surrender may prompt us to ask whether an adequate working definition of religion as a subject can ever be produced.

One possible solution to this dilemma may involve the utilization of a new type of definition. A number of scholars, including James Hall of the University of Richmond, have proposed the use of a definitional scheme that begins with the identification of commonly occurring attributes of relevant systems. These common attributes may be termed “family traits.” Among the common characteristics or attributes that might be included in such a “family traits” definition could be the following:

- Belief in a supernatural intelligent being;
- A complex worldview interpreting the significance of human life;
- Expectation of an afterlife experience;
- An account of the nature and origin of evil;
- A moral code;
- Ritual practices;
- Revealed truths;
- A mythological tradition; and
- An institutionalized social community constructed around these and other priorities.

What makes this definition so promising is the fact that it is both flexible and substantive. The definitional scheme recognizes that all religions are not shaped the same. Accordingly, its listing of the traits that

are typical of religious systems is fairly comprehensive. It is the comprehensive structure of this definitional scheme that affords it substance.

At the same time, under this definitional scheme, the outlined traits are viewed as typical features, rather than firm requirements of a religion. Thus, the scheme recognizes that not all social systems that are likely candidates to be labeled religions will reflect the same traits, just as every member of a human family may not have precisely the same physical features. Instead, it seeks out systems that reflect a majority of these listed traits, while still recognizing that each religion need not reflect every single trait listed. In other words, the absence of any single trait would not prevent a social system from being classified as a religion, under this definitional scheme.

Why might this definition be more workable than others that came before it? This definition's advantage lies in its flexibility. Instead of simply offering a firm set of qualifying criteria to be met by all religions, it accommodates the many varied shapes and features that religious systems may take. At the same time, it provides sufficient certainty such that mere personal belief systems or priorities would likely not meet its demands.

In the end, it is fair to say, we are left with many questions as we seek to better understand the dimensions of the discipline of Religious Studies and those social institutions that are the focus of investigation within this field. Of course, by the very nature of this topic of study, questions are always more prevalent than answers. Still, we will attempt to offer some of both through the course of this study.

Our Place in the World

As we explore the varying global religions included in this text, we are particularly interested in the worldviews cultivated by these systems. In large part, these worldviews are reflections of the ways in which religious traditions seek to explain and respond to our world. Among the most perplexing questions confronted by our human species is the nature of our relationship to the surrounding world. Thus, we are interested in the ways religions respond to these questions.

Through this investigation, we will seek to gain at least a basic understanding of the varied ways in which individual religious systems have attempted to explain our place in the world and the meaning of human existence. While each religion is distinct in terms of the specific response it has cultivated, some broad commonalities may inform our survey. Through awareness of these potential commonalities, we may begin to see important links between religious systems, even in the midst of their diversity.



Monkey enjoys fruit in a New Delhi train station. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

The Nature of Our Being

For much of human history, individuals have pondered their relationship to the surrounding world. Are humans, as a species, simply a part of the larger, undifferentiated natural world or is there something that makes this race of beings distinct or special?

This question has many dimensions. Biologically, of course, humans share great commonality with the other species that inhabit our world. In recent years, the evidence of our commonality with other creatures has grown, as the **genomes of humans** and other animals have been mapped. Indeed, when compared with that of the chimpanzee, the human genome has 96 percent commonality, according to modern research.⁴

Still, despite these physical commonalities, it has long been argued that there is something unusual or special about humans that differentiates us from the rest of the natural order. We get a hint of this claim regarding the special nature of humankind from the earliest verses of the Judeo-Christian Bible, when, at the conclusion of the cosmic creation, God commands the newly formed humans to:

Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.⁵
(Genesis 1:28)

Upon reading this text, one may ask whether humans are a part of the natural order or separate from it. This question points us toward a larger philosophical concern that serves to color the worldviews cultivated by many religious traditions. Are we separate individuals, capable of carving our own destiny unhindered? Or are our fates deeply intertwined with those of other humans and the entire natural order?

Philosophically, this question focuses attention upon whether our world is primarily “dualistic” or “non-dual” in nature. From a practical vantage, the term duality refers to the observation that the varying aspects of the created order are differentiated and, as such, are capable of carving their own independent destinies. From a nondual perspective, all parts of the created order function interdependently and, as such, our fates are tied. From a non-dual perspective, the experience of living things is a product of a wide array of environmental influences, ranging from natural events to community pressures. In other words, from a strictly non-dual vantage, there is no true individual identity or destiny, but the lives and futures of all things are the product of cumulative environmental interaction.

While most religious systems offer perspectives that are neither strictly dual nor non-dual, virtually all systems of spiritual practice tend to promote worldviews that lean toward one of these philosophical poles. The ramifications of adopting either a more dual or non-dual philosophical approach are rather dramatic in terms of how they affect our own interpretations of events. Thus, in the Hindu school of thought known as *Advaita Vedanta*, the entire cosmos is seen as being akin to a single functioning organism, including the realm of divinity.

Under this philosophical approach, there is no differentiation between humanity and divinity. Every person is a reflection of the ultimate source of being, as is all of nature. This is so because all things are understood to be so deeply interconnected that all things constitute a single reality.

Advaita Vedanta offers a philosophical perspective that is strongly non-dual in nature. Indeed, the Sanskrit word *Advaita* essentially means “non-dual.” Under this philosophy, God is understood as being literally present in the personhood of each living being and the natural order.



Tibetan Buddhist mani stones, stacked outside of a Nepalese temple, represent prayers. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw



Mural of the resurrected Jesus above a doorway at St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, Italy. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

Case Study – Duality, Non-Duality, and the Self

In this chapter, significant emphasis is placed upon responses by various religions to the question of the nature of human existence. Who are we? And do we have some purpose beyond the mere perpetuation of the physical body? Almost every religious system has, in some way, attempted to address such concerns regarding personal meaning, though their responses are certainly not uniform. In this case study, we examine particular responses arising from two distinct religious systems. Here, we reflect upon both the Protestant strand of the Western Christian faith and the Eastern Taoist tradition. How have these distinct traditions addressed such questions and what can we learn from a comparative examination of them?

Perspectives:

The View from the West

The Christian Vision of an Independent and Fulfilled Self

From Mark Hanshaw

Philosophical duality sounds like a very complicated concept. Without a doubt, a strongly dualistic worldview can lead one to some curious observations regarding life and life's purpose. However, foundationally, this concept is not really complex at all. Duality presupposes a world marked by difference and differentiation. You and I are distinct and, therefore, we have unique sets of life experiences and destinies.

At one level, it seems difficult to dispute such an observation. As we follow the lives of individuals closely, we see day-to-day experiences that appear to be unique. Yet, as we step back, we see communities enduring collective hardship and whole nations confronting mass tragedies. Indeed, we may even reference the plight or fate of generations or entire races of people. On such levels, then, individual experience seems to blend into a much larger flow of human or global events.

From a religious perspective, a dualistic frame of reference may prompt heightened emphasis upon individual destiny. Thus, if we turn to Christianity, we will see that, in many strands of this faith, broad concern is given to notions of personal experience and individual salvation. Indeed, one of the great slogans of the commencement of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was “sola fides,” meaning “faith alone,” and referencing the individual action that was believed to establish a salvific relationship between God and each individual. As one of

the leading voices of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, John Calvin, said in his, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*:

Therefore, forasmuch as no man is excluded from calling upon God, the gate of salvation is set open unto all men; neither is there any other thing which keepeth us back from entering in, save only our own unbelief.⁶

Thus, Calvin, like his contemporaries and many within the modern Christian tradition, saw the salvific process as an individual journey. As independent agents, our individual actions are determinative relative to issues of personal destiny. Of course, God plays a role in this process, by gracefully responding to our belief and faith. Yet, even that response is personal, affecting only the singular faithful actor.

At the end of the day, it may be observed that the dualistic leanings of a faith system can have a strong influence on the understanding adherents have regarding their place and purpose in the world. So, what is the alternative?

The View from the East

A Non-dual Emphasis upon Collective Purpose

From Lili Zhang

Western tradition has tended to define the human as an atomic being, self-contained and differentiated from the surrounding world. Yet, this is not the only way to understand the relationship of humans to our environment. East Asian tradition has cultivated an understanding of humans as microcosmic beings. Thus, humans do not only exist within the world, but mirror and reflect it in its fullness.

This nondualistic view of the self that is prevalent in East Asian societies sees the relationship between humans and the world as being deeply interdependent. This interdependence permeates all aspects of life. One of the clearest illustrations of the application of this worldview can be found in the Taoist image of the human body.

Both Taoist philosophy and meditation focus attention upon the task of understanding the human body. According to Taoist philosophy, three sources of energy function together to provide and sustain bodily health. These sources are: *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*. Yet, these energy sources are not purely internal, but derive from outside the body and, eventually, re-enter the larger environment. When working together, these sources prompt an ideal flow of energy within the body. At the same time, imbalance between the three can produce ill effects upon the physical body and the psyche.

Jing refers to body fluids, including blood, saliva, and other secretions that are produced from the nutrition that we consume. *Qi* refers to the energy expelled from the act of breathing. *Shen* references a desired spirit of mental clarity. These three components constantly circulate inside and outside the body. According to the Taoist map of the body, the human form is divided into three fields: the lower cinnabar field, the middle cinnabar field and upper cinnabar field.

The lower field, below the navel, is metaphorically compared to the earth. As the earth provides the soil from which all plants sprout, the lower cinnabar provides the elements necessary for the elements we consume to be purified into *jing* to support the whole body. At the level of the heart is the second cinnabar, where the *qi* distilled from our breath is distributed to the whole body through the heart. The brain is the upper cinnabar field, where *shen* is cultivated. The upper cinnabar field is the dwelling place of *Taiyi*, the highest God of the Ultimate Oneness.

When pure and adequate *qi* ascend to the upper cinnabar, *shen*, the clarity of mind, is obtained. In the Taoist concept of the body, not only do energies within the body circulate through the body, connecting the different organs like a web, but this energy is also expelled into the universe, where it can produce both positive and negative influences.

This vision of the body working organically in concert with the natural order around it has a profound impact upon the way we see the world. Instead of seeing the self as the master of the universe, conquering and commanding the world to fulfill individual private needs, Taoists see the self and the universe as one. The goal, then is to find a balance between the self and the world. An important term in the Chinese vocabulary is *guanxi*, which means “relationship.” From the viewpoint of this system, all existence is relational. Further, true happiness is possible only in the presence of universal harmony.

Traditional Judaism, on the other hand, offers a much more dualistic image of the nature of being. In this religious system, as is reflected in the passage from Genesis, set out above, humankind is differentiated from nature by the attestation that people are to rule over nature, creating a hierarchy that exposes distinction in kind. In this system humanity and divinity, while perhaps in communication, are utterly separate in terms of their being and nature.

The practical implications of these philosophical positions are potentially broad. We explore these below, as we seek to understand the positions taken by various religions concerning the purpose of being.

Our Human Purpose

Essentially, all religious systems agree that human existence is at least potentially purposeful. In other words, these systems seek to convey a sense that our lives serve a purpose that transcends day-to-day concerns. At the same time, the various religions are not necessarily in agreement in terms of what they understand our purpose to be or the types of actions necessary to attain it.

In part, the divide over the fundamental purpose of human existence reflects some of the same issues that emerge from the above discussion concerning the distinction between dual and non-dual world-views. In regard to the nature of the human purpose, the central controversy focuses upon whether we obtain our purpose through collective means and by supporting the larger social community, or whether the attainment of purpose is an isolated and individual endeavor.

Again, virtually no religious system adopts one of these stances on absolute terms. Still, most every religious system moves toward one side of this continuum or the other, as it seeks to inform the



Boys pose for a photo outside a temple in Northern India. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

lives of adherents. One example of a religious system that embraces a more collectivist position on the nature of the human purpose is the Mahayana Buddhist community. Though Mahayana Buddhism is diverse, there is a general, broad embrace of the notion that the ideal course of life is one that reflects the traits of a being known as the *bodhisattva*.

According to Buddhist tradition, the *bodhisattva* is one who has obtained a heightened level of enlightenment through the cultivation of compassion. When realized, this state prompts a spirit of awakening akin to that which motivated the historical Buddha. In other words, any person has the capacity to become a *bodhisattva*, or an enlightenment being. Yet, as a part of this awakening, there also arises a deep awareness of the sufferings that afflict all beings, and an accompanying sense of great empathy. Based upon this spirit of compassion, then, the *bodhisattva* does not seek any sort of personal salvific experience, but, instead, is concerned chiefly with the fate of others.

Thus, the goal in this tradition becomes a collective salvation, rather than an individual one. In other words, this system understands the ultimate fulfillment of the human purpose as a communal experience.

Conversely, we may glimpse a much more individualist approach to the notion of salvation within many segments of the Christian community. In leading the Protestant Reformation in Europe, Martin Luther declared *sola fide* or by “faith alone” is the Christian life to be fulfilled. In other words, through one’s individual action of placing trust in the existence and responsive action of God does one attain his or her genuine purpose. Though one may receive support from a community as she travels this path, the road to salvation, in this tradition, is understood as a personal and individual venture. We are not saved as whole communities, but as individuals.

This dichotomy may also affect, to some extent, the way in which we understand our responsibility to the world around us. One embracing a more communal orientation is apt to feel some heightened responsibility toward his community. Meanwhile, a strongly individualist orientation may lead one to be more focused upon ideals of self-reliance and individual striving than upon communal support.



The Temple of Heaven in Beijing was the site of an important annual ritual conducted by the Emperor each year. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

Our Essential Task

An additional area of some difference between religious systems has to do with the priority given to specific forms of practice. From the standpoint of the religious practitioner, it may well be asked, what is our primary task or duty within the context of the faith system? While differences certainly exist, dividing one religion from another in terms of the specific methodologies that might be employed to bring one to a desired end, the broad distinction concerning the nature of our central task focuses on the importance of belief versus practice.

In ancient religious systems, great emphasis was often placed upon ritual practice. Indeed, based upon the information we have, there seems to have been little interest in the particular “beliefs” held by practitioners of many early religions. Instead, the focus was clearly on the undertaking

of specified ritual duties. Those embracing the religious system supported it through their actions. This emphasis placed upon ritual action by ancient societies was characterized by the late Cambridge University professor **W. Robertson Smith**, in a lecture delivered before his death, in which he observed:

Broadly speaking, [ancient] religion was made up of a series of acts and observances, the correct performance of which was necessary or desirable to secure the favor of the gods or to avert their anger; and in these observances every member of society had a share, marked out for him, either [by] virtue of his being born within a certain family and community, or [by] virtue of the station, within the family and community, that he had come to hold in the course of his life. A man did not choose his religion or frame it for himself; it came to him as part of the general scheme of social obligations and ordinances laid upon him, as a matter of course, by his position [in] the family and in the nation.

Of intolerance in the modern sense of the word ancient society knew nothing; it never persecuted a man into particular beliefs for the good of his own soul. Religion did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society, and in all that was necessary to this end every man had to take his part, or break with the domestic and political community to which he belonged.⁷

It is not merely ancient religions that have placed primacy upon practice. In the Chinese religious system of **Confucianism**, great emphasis is placed upon formal ritual. As we see in the statements attributed to **Confucius** and recorded in the *Analects*, a central text in this tradition, social rituals contribute significantly to the attainment of the ideal human state sought in this system. In addition, Zen Buddhism, is a religious system constructed upon the foundation of meditative practice, while essentially minimizing the value of cognitive processes. As the late Zen master and teacher **Daisetz Suzuki** observed, regarding the nature of this unique form of Buddhism:

[T]here are in Zen no sacred books or dogmatic tenets, nor are there any symbolic formulae through which an access might be gained into the signification of Zen. If I am asked, then, what Zen teaches, I would answer Zen teaches nothing.⁸

Other religious systems, including Catholicism and **Islam** place significant emphasis upon the embrace of specific propositions. Core beliefs may be transmitted through scripture, tradition, or creedal statements. So central is the task of embracing core dogmatic propositions in some traditions that religions, as a whole, have sometimes come to be referenced as “belief systems.” The best known of the Christian creedal statements, the Nicene Creed, begins by emphasizing the importance of cognitive action. It asserts, “[w]e believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of all things seen and unseen.” Though most religions are structured to incorporate both ritual actions and propositional components, for the purposes of the study of these systems, it is useful to consider which of these is given priority.



Buddhist monk in prayer. Shutterstock

The Nature of Time

One of the chief ingredients in many religious worldviews is the community's understanding of the nature of time. Here, again, we get two distinct understandings of the nature of time, which may affect how practitioners respond to episodes during their lives.

Interpretations of the **nature of time** serve quite an important role in the shaping of worldviews. Many religious systems have crafted understandings of the nature of time that appear to draw lessons from the natural environment. In such systems, time is seen as following a cyclical pattern. Within the scope of

such understanding, events repeat themselves in a cyclical fashion, just as the world follows a repetitive path through the varying seasons. In nature, death precedes the blossoming of new life. Similarly, humans, like other living creatures and the cosmos itself, are understood to be bound by a repetitive cycle of birth and death. When applied specifically to humans and other living creatures, this cycle is known as **reincarnation** or transmigration.

In some parts of the world, reincarnation is a highly controversial theory, and may even be broadly dismissed. Still, even in these regions, which may generally include the United States, stories stemming from individual experiences may prompt public curiosity in the topic of reincarnation.⁹

One such story that caught headlines was of a young boy who, beginning at the age of two or three, had repeated visions of himself as a downed World War II pilot, though he had had no real exposure to the history of the war. The boy was said to be able to recall even fine details of a past experience, such as the name of an aircraft carrier he served on and the location of his airplane's crash.

The persistence of such stories has led to the establishment of a center at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, headed by psychiatrist Jim Tucker, to study such phenomena. Such stories have prompted ongoing reflection regarding the viability of the doctrine of reincarnation.⁹

On the other side of this debate are those systems that tend to interpret time in a **linear fashion**, with a precise point of beginning and ending. While religious systems adopting such a view of time may often imagine some heavenly realm of re-birth, they do not typically embrace a notion of reincarnation, but see physical human existence as being defined exclusively by a singular lifespan.

Differing understandings regarding the nature of time also seem to frequently affect the broad structure of the religious systems employing them. For example, religious systems embracing a more linear understanding of the nature of time may also be more inclined to incorporate apocalyptic visions associated with an anticipated definitive point of

termination for the created order. Thus, in the Christian and Muslim traditions, powerful images of a final destructive conflict and an ultimate day of judgment of all people occupy an important place within the larger body of the systems' teachings. In a system adopting a more cyclical understanding of the nature of time, such scenes of judgment might have little value, as any ending, even one taking place on a cosmic scale, stands merely as a point along an unending continuum.

These are simply some of the ways in which religions may interpret the world on vastly different terms. As we will see, through the scope of our examination of various religious systems, the ways in which individuals see the world around them can have significant impact upon the responses they offer to passing events and the choices they make in life.

The Study of Religion

As has been observed, religions are complex social and philosophical systems. Thus, the study of religions is a complicated endeavor. In response to the challenging task of the exploration of religions, a host of different investigative methodologies have been developed over time by scholars. Each of these methodologies serves to focus attention upon differing aspects of individual religious systems.



This ritual Buddhist painting, known as a *thangka*, depicts the cycle of existence, leading to re-birth. *Public domain*

While the methodologies with which one may investigate religious systems vary, it is also true that the results of such examination may often lead to conflicting or incongruous results. Among the particular methodologies that may be adopted as one examines religious systems are:

Archaeological Study of Religion

The archaeological study of religion represents a field of study in which researchers consider the nature of religions and their evolution through the exploration of the remains of civilizations. Such remains may range from ancient structures to iconic imagery and recovered texts. Through the consideration of such evidence, archaeologists seek to reconstruct ancient ritual patterns, practices and belief systems. Moreover, through such investigative work, archeologists often shed light upon the ways in which religious systems have influenced and shaped one another over time.

Comparative Study of Religion

Through this field of study, scholars investigate varying religious systems side-by-side, seeking to better understand their commonalities and differences. The comparativist is particularly interested in common patterns that seem to emerge from the analysis of differing religions. Attention may be focused upon the theology, mythology, ritual practice or other aspects of religious systems. An example of a topic that might be considered by a scholar in this field would be an examination of the varying **global flood stories** that are a part of the mythological systems of many ancient religions.

Philosophy of Religion

This is a field of study in which the claims of religious systems related to the nature of being are investigated and weighed. At its heart, this field is most interested in metaphysical questions, including those related to the nature and meaning attributed to human life and claims concerning the existence of God. In addition, this field may focus attention upon questions rooted in the relationship between religious and scientific claims. Those working in this field seek to apply objective and logical analysis to this investigation.

Psychological Study of Religion

Those investigating religions through the lens of psychology may be interested in the motivations of those engaged in spiritual practice, as well as the potential therapeutic impact of such efforts. Perhaps, the individual most closely associated with the origins of this field of study is **Sigmund Freud**. In his volume, ***The Future of an Illusion***, Freud argued that humankind created religion for the purpose of dealing with individual and collective psychological insecurities regarding natural threats. As may be surmised, then, scholars within this field seek to understand and isolate specific psychological motivations that affect the nature of religious belief and practice.

Sociological Study of Religion

Researchers within this field are primarily concerned with the relationship between religions and the surrounding societies they serve, including questions related to the ways in which religion may affect the social environment. The field is generally traced back to the foundational work of the French scholar **Emile Durkheim** and his classic work, ***The Elementary Forms of Religious Life***, but continues to offer important insights into the ways in which religions may be understood. In particular, researchers in this area may investigate questions concerning such matters as the effect of religion upon social institutions, including hierarchies, political and family systems, and economics.



An artist's rendering of Noah's Ark, circa fifteenth century. Public Domain

Theological Study of Religion

Theology is the study of the divine and, accordingly, this field of study focuses attention upon the metaphysical claims made by religions. Scholars in this field seek to apply logic and systematic thought to their engagement with the concept of divinity. Because the term theology appears to presuppose the existence of a singular God, it has been argued that this field of study relates exclusively to the monotheistic traditions of Christianity and Judaism, though others interpret the term much more broadly.



This relief from a South Indian temple depicts Vishnu, one of the three major deities of Hinduism. Photo by Mark E. Hanshaw

Study of Mythology

Myths are the foundational narrative stories that serve to communicate core messages and ideas among members of a religious community, across time. These narratives may serve to explain the nature of our world or they may communicate an allegorical message. Thus, the stories of the life of the Buddha or of Jesus are narratives that serve to inform members of the Buddhist and Christian communities, for example. The study of mythology is the investigation of these narratives, and scholars in this field are interested in the origins and meaning of the specific mythologies that serve particular religious communities. Among the best-known scholars of mythology is the late **Joseph Campbell**, who sought to identify common themes that emerge from widely variant mythological systems.

These are some of the approaches by which religions may be investigated, though this list is by no means exhaustive. For our purposes, this list is useful in helping us to understand the breadth of these cultural systems. In so doing, we may better understand both the complexity and importance of the study of religious systems.

Finally, as we begin our quest to encounter and understand varying religions, we may ask how the study of religion relates to other fields of academic investigation concerned with our human civilization. We study cultures because, in so doing, we gain insight into the differing ways people have organized their lives and their social environment. It is useful for us to understand how differing groups of people live because their lifestyles dramatically affect their priorities, the manner in which they interact with other groups, and the ways in which they may respond to specific situations, as they arise.

We also study history, at least in part, because in examining past events, we may find insights that help us to predict the ways in which we, as humans, may respond to particular conditions as they arise in the future. Such study, then, may help us modify our behaviors in positive ways. Yet, the study of religion may be of equal value in this quest to understand and predict human responses and motivations.

While culture has to do with the lived experience of communities, religion has to do with individual and collective aspirations. It may be argued that, above all else, the study of religion is the consideration of the greatest ambitions and hopes of individuals and cultural groups. Though such hopes are not always realized, they often serve as strong emotional forces that inform the actions of individuals in the world.

Questions for Reflection and Research

1. Turn to a dictionary or encyclopedia. How does this resource define religion? Is the definition provided workable? Can you isolate any particular problems with the definition provided? How might you improve it?
2. In the more dualistic religious systems, the divine or God and humankind are seen as separate entities, while the traditions that offer a more non-dual frame of reference tend to understand humankind as merely a reflection or extension of the divine. When considering these two positions, how could each affect the ways in which we view human relationships? In what way might our adoption of one of these twin perspectives affect the way we might approach situations of conflict?
3. In the description of ancient religions cited above, from W. Robertson Smith, how does he describe the role of the individual within a religious tradition? How is this description consistent or inconsistent with your own notions regarding the nature of religion?
4. Link to and read the ABC News story, “Parents Think Boy is a Reincarnated Pilot,” cited above. How and to what extent might such a story affect the way in which you think about the concept of reincarnation? What, if any, questions do you feel the story leaves unanswered?
5. Of the varying methodologies for the study of religion outlined in this chapter, which, in your opinion, seems most promising or interesting and why? What specific questions would you be most interested in investigating within the field of religious studies?

Resources for Further Study

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Internet Resources

- Idinopulos, Thomas A., “What is Religion?” from Crosscurrents online magazine, available at: <http://www.crosscurrents.org/whatisreligion.html>.
- Sridhar-Chaama, “What is Religion?” (February 24, 2011) available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/religion/article1486330.ece> [A consideration of religion from a Hindu perspective].
- Leclerc, Paul, “What is Religion? Representative Historical Perspectives,” available at: http://faculty.ccric.edu/paleclerc/phil_rel/what_is_religion.shtml [Offers a broad assortment of attempts by varying scholars to define religion].

Endnotes

1. Leonard William King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation*, Bel Air, Cal.: FQ Classics, 2007, pp. 2-3.
2. The full text of the decision in the U.S. Supreme Court case of Davis vs. Beason is available for review online, at: <http://vftonline.org/TestOath/Beason.htm>.
3. The full text of the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court case of U.S. Vs. Seeger is available for review online at: <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=380&invol=163>.
4. See Stefan Lovgren, "Chimps, Humans 96 percent the Same, Genome Study Finds," *National Geographic* magazine (August 31, 2005), available at: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/08/0831_050831_chimp_genes.html.
5. Genesis 1:28 (NRSV).
6. Henry Beveridge, edit., Part I: Acts 2:14-21, Christopher Fetherstone, trans., Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, pp. 1847-50.
7. W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites the Fundamental Institutions*, London: Adam and Charles Black Publishers, 1901, pp. 28-29.
8. D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Grove Press: New York, 1964, p. 8; for more, see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/suzuki.html>.
9. A complete transcript of the 2005 ABC News story, "Parents Think Boy is Reincarnated Pilot," is available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/Technology/story?id=894217&page=1>; to read more about Tucker and his work at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, see Sean Lyons, "The Science of Reincarnation," available at: http://uvamagazine.org/articles/the_science_of_reincarnation.