

Chapter Overview

We begin our exploration of religion in general, and specifically Eastern Traditions, by discussing the importance of the famous Neolithic monument in England—Stonehenge. With this setting in mind, we begin to explore the common elements of religions: powerful gods, sacred places (often associated with “high places,” rivers, and waterfalls), life after death (with “grave goods,” the power of the departed, and ceremonies like the Japanese Obon), spirits interacting with humans in the world, and cosmological concepts (like the heavenly realm of the gods, the earthly realm of humans, and the underworld realm of *nagas* and reptilian monsters).

Religiousness is part of being human. It deals with our fear of death, our desire for a good after-life, and the uncertainty we feel toward nature and our experiences of various powers. Eventually religion itself engenders awe, fear, love, and hate. Religion claims to help us in this life and the next. Although broadly proclaiming aspects of the divine, religion also tells us a lot about our human condition. We can distinguish nine major waves of concepts and practices in our broad viewing of religions.

1. The first of these waves is shamanism, which is often connected with rituals involved in hunting and food supply and the dangers involved in these activities. It also involves dealing with unfriendly spirits.
2. The second wave involves connecting to the cosmos, which meant connecting human activity to the cycle of the seasons or the movements of the stars, often by establishing sacred spaces with symbolic monuments connecting earth and sky, or *axes mundi* (plural of *axis mundi*, meaning “world axis”).
3. The third wave is temple religion, a wave which included the Indo-Europeans and the beginnings of religious class structure.
4. The fourth wave is prophetic religion, which includes foreseeing the future and speaking for the deity.
5. The fifth wave concerns the Energy God, a broad, unified, non-personified power.
6. The sixth wave is purity and monasticism, which investigates asceticism, non-violence, purity of mind, and more.
7. The seventh wave is mystery religions, which involve the initiations into and the involvement with secret rites.
8. The eighth wave concerns god on Earth, an exploration into avatars and saviours.

9. Finally, the ninth wave is scriptural religion, which explores the manifestation of religion in the written word (its importance for some religious traditions and total authority of others branded as “fundamentalists.”)

This introductory chapter concludes by offering insight into the challenge of defining religion and how the diverse forms of religious expression can be approached through various functional definitions. It provides some important suggestions on why we study religion at all. It addresses the approaching the study of religion as both an “insider” and “outsider,” helping us appreciate our own traditions from both perspectives. This chapter also discusses the problems inherent in viewing religions as being eastern or western.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

- think about religions in general and the general patterns shared by religions around the world and throughout history;
- see that all human cultures have religious dimensions and that concern with religious ideas is part of what it means to be human;
- see the necessity of understanding religion both from an insider’s perspective and from an outsider’s perspective;
- learn to approach religious traditions in a scholarly fashion, maintaining a critical ethos regarding truth claims, and guarding against relativistic judgements; and
- begin to develop a familiarity with the specialized vocabulary of terminology pertinent to the study of religion.

Key Terms

All Saints Day A Christian festival honouring all the departed saints; held in the West on 1 November. (p. 6)

asceticism Spiritual practices centred on austerities and subjugating one’s desires. (p. 15)

avatar The “descent” or “coming down” of a god into human form. (p. 17)

axis mundi A location or structure thought to represent a symbolic connection between the human realm and the realm of the divine (often the sky). (p. 9)

Daodejing The Daoist *Classic of the Way and Power*, compiled roughly 2,500 years ago and traditionally attributed to Laozi. (p. 14)

Day of the Dead A Mexican festival honouring the dead. (p. 6)

the Indo-Europeans A linguistic and cultural group whose influence once extended from India to Europe. The major features of their culture include a stratified society, an elaborate pantheon (and a sacrificial system to accommodate these various deities), the practice of honouring a high warrior god (usually associated with storms/lightning), and a cultural focus on the practice and technologies of war and conquest. (p. 9)

Hallowe'en Now a popular secular holiday, held on 31 October; originally celebrated as the “Eve” of All Saints Day. (p. 6)

high places Sacred areas located on a hill- or mountain-tops; such places existed throughout the ancient Near East. (p. 8)

naga A mythical cobra living in the underworld, often associated with water and fertility in Indian religions. (p. 5)

Obon A Japanese festival honouring ancestors. (p. 6)

sacred Places, objects, or practices that are “set apart” from the mundane activities of daily life and thus granted special significance. (p. 5)

shaman A type of priest, widespread among hunter-gatherer societies, who communicates with the spirit world on behalf of their community. (p. 6)

Stonehenge One of several ancient rock structures thought to have been constructed for ritual purposes. (p. 4)

Upanishads Hindu religious texts thought to have been composed between 1500 and 600 BCE. (p. 15)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. What are a few concepts shared by virtually all human cultures?
2. What are the names of the three worlds and what are some of the characteristics of each one?
3. What is some of the evidence of a belief in an afterlife amongst ancient peoples and what festivals of the souls of the dead returning to earth are still celebrated?
4. What are some of the reasons humans are religious?
5. What are the nine waves of religion?
6. What are some of the features of shamanism?
7. What are some examples of how people were connected with the cosmos?
8. How were temple religion and its priesthood spread across the world?
9. Our text discusses the Energy God and explains that it is an inner force. What are two examples of this concept?
10. How are avatars saviour figures and how does this relate to sacrifice?

11. What three worlds have human beings imagined? What is believed to reside in each world?
12. What main function does a shaman provide for a religious community? What are three key roles that the shaman fulfills?
13. What is the four-level social system that results from the Vedic myth of Purusha?
14. What is an Energy God? How does this concept manifest in the Daoist and Hindu traditions as well as in pre-Socratic philosophy?
15. What is a fundamentalist religion?

Reflection Questions

1. Do you think the need for religion will decrease as scientific rational thinking increases?
2. How do spatial and temporal shifts affect religious traditions?
3. As technology, social media, and the Internet become further entrenched in our society, will the space religious communities occupy alter?
4. Traditionally, people adopt the religious community of their family. Given our globalized world, will this change with more people converting to other traditions?
5. Can you think of other patterns that may be common to different religious traditions?

Research Paper Topics

1. Nature played a substantial role in ancient religious traditions. The movement of the planets, phases of the moon, and different seasons are woven into the annual ritual events. How do today's religious traditions encompass elements of nature?
2. The belief in the role of ancestors and various spirits acting as guides to living members of the family is a common theme among religious traditions. How do believers of various traditions think ancestors and spirits aid them, what must they do in return, and in what ways do religious festivals, such as Obon or All Saints Day, provide a venue for interaction between the realms of the living and the dead?
3. Research the role of trance as a method for shamans to act as mediums in order to communicate with the spirit world.
4. Analyze the Hindu myth of Purusha and its underlying role in the Indian caste system.

5. Ritual sacrifices of various religious traditions involved the sacrifice of animals. Select two religious traditions and explain how such sacrifices were undertaken. What was the significance of the offering (or type of animal) and what outcome was to be achieved?
6. The Energy God differs greatly from an anthropomorphized Creator God. Explain each concept in detail and provide examples from two religious traditions for each concept of divinity. What are the possibilities and constraints offered by each concept?
7. Choosing a monastic life frequently involves a radically different lifestyle from that of a lay member. What were the religious and social conditions in ancient India during the sixth century BCE and how did these conditions influence the beginnings of a monastic tradition?
8. Research the goddess Isis and explain how her mystery cult may have influenced early Christianity.
9. Clifford Geertz and Émile Durkheim both consider religious experience to be grounded in social arrangements and community. What are the key ideas of each scholar's theory? What does each consider to be the function of religion in human lives?
10. Compare and contrast four Buddhist traditions: Japanese Soka Gakkai, Chinese Pure Land, Tibetan Vajrayana, and Thai Dhammayut sects. What similar elements do they contain? What accounts for their vast differences?

Additional Resources

Audio-Visual

Alpert, Daniel. (Director and Producer). 2001. *A History of God* [Documentary]. Available online <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/a-history-of-god/>

Films for the Humanities and Sciences www.films.com

National Film Board of Canada www.nfb.ca

Print

Bowie, Fiona. 2006 [2000]. *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Dawson, Lorne L. and Joel Thiessen. 2014. *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Perspective*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Hick, John. 2004 [1989]. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Meister, Chad. 2007. *The Philosophy of Religion Reader*. London: Routledge.

Internet

Shea, Rachel Hartigan. (2013, June 21). "Stonehenge Revealed: Why Stones Were a "Special Place": Lead Archaeologist at Stonehenge Discusses his Team's Discoveries in New Book." *National Geographic Daily News*
http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/archaeology/photos/stonehenge/#/stonehenge-dusk_24763_600x450.jpg

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. Virtually all human cultures share concepts like powerful gods, sacred places, life after death, the presence of spirits in the world that interact with humans, to mention only a few. (p. 4)
2. The three worlds are the sky, the earth, and the underworld. The sky is the home of the gods like the Sky Father. In the underworld live the spirits of serpents like the *nagas* and reptilian monsters. The earth is where humans live. (p. 5)
3. One possible proof would be placing the dead in their grave in the fetal position, indicating the potential of rebirth. Another are the grave goods often placed with the dead. The festivals of the souls of the dead returning to the earth that are still celebrated are Obon, Day of the Dead, All-Saints Day, and Hallowe'en. (pp. 5–6)
4. Humans are religious because they fear death, they hope for a good afterlife, they are concerned with the uncertainty surrounding natural events, they desire a sense of control over nature, and they are in awe of perceived experiences of good and evil powers. (p. 6)
5. The nine waves of religion are (1) shamanism, (2) connecting to the cosmos, (3) temple religion, (4) prophetic religion, (5) the energy god, (6) purity and monasticism, (7) mystery religion, (8) god on earth, and (9) scriptural religion. (pp. 6–22)
6. Shamanism has rituals showing concern about adherents' food supply, such as those surrounding hunting rituals. These may be to ensure success or to appease the spirits the people believed the animals possessed. There may also be rituals that are a way of dealing with dangerous situations and the spirits of natural phenomena. The priest in shamanism is called a shaman, witch doctor, or soul doctor and often has to go on vision quests. (pp. 6–8)
7. One important way of connecting with the cosmos was by discerning the best time for seasonal activities by tracking celestial objects. A second way was by means of burial in high places. If no elevated place was available, artificial ones like the pyramids and stupas were constructed, often with an accompanying *axis mundi*. A third way was linking animals with gods, for example Zeus and the bull or Durga and the tiger. (pp. 8-9)
8. The Indo-Europeans, who seem to have originated around the Black Sea, spread across Europe, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia. Everywhere they settled they established a social system with four divisions, which included the prestigious priests. They performed rituals, kept

calendars, and taught and advised kings. The priests were usually male but Rome also had priestesses. (pp. 9–11)

9. The sage Laozi wrote about the *Dao*, a mysterious energy that underlies all things. However, the real *Dao* cannot be adequately described in words. The Upanishads teach about *sat*, or “being,” “truth,” or “the real.” The highest reality is you, “that you are.” That ultimate reality, that great energy that underlies everything, that is you. (pp. 14–15)
10. First, the avatar saves the world from some evil power, like a demonic king or Satan. Second, he can save those who put their faith in him from hell and ensure them a place in his heaven. In this wave, the ritual of sacrifice is replaced with faith in the saviour god. (pp. 17–20)
11. Human beings have imagined three worlds: sky, earth, and underworld. The corresponding residents of each sphere are the deities, underworld figures such as *nagas* and reptilian monsters, and human beings. (p. 5)
12. Shamans are ritual specialists who act as intermediaries with the spirit world. They perform ceremonies to appease the animal spirits during a hunt, attempt to win over or rid the community a malevolent spirit, and communicate with the spirit world by entering a trance state. (pp. 7–8)
13. The ancient *Rig Veda* text tells the story of Purusha, whose sacrifice results in the creation of the four-class social structure in India. It is thought that out of his mouth came the Brahmin priests, while the warriors emerged from his arms. The middle class came into being through his thighs and the servants materialized from Purusha’s feet. (p. 10)
14. An Energy God is not a personalized God that responds to human petitions, issues commands, or interacts with human beings on a human level. An Energy God is the underlying principle of existence, the ground, the source, from which everything has its being. Daoist understandings do not contain a creator God, or divine being that answers prayers. Rather, they understand the *Dao* (the way) as the underlying principle to the whole of existence. Similarly, the Hindu concept of *sat* (truth) is the underlying reality, a faceless, impersonal divinity that is the hidden essence of all life. Finally, the four primal elements (earth, fire, air, and water) were considered the ground of being or ultimate reality for the pre-Socratic philosophers. They believed that everything in the universe stemmed from these elements. (pp. 13–15)
15. A fundamentalist understanding of a religious tradition refers to a scriptural religion in which total authority is placed in a religious text. Outsiders observing a religious tradition, rather than the tradition itself applied the term fundamentalist. Fundamentalist understandings, in which a religious text is taken to be *the* absolute, unchanging, and literal truth, are found in most religious traditions. (p. 22)