

50 ideas
you really need to know

religion



Peter Stanford

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Introduction

Everyone has an opinion about religion. It may be positive; it may be negative, but it is rarely neutral. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who announced confidently in the 1880s that God was dead, would be surprised to see, 120 years after he wrote its obituary, that religion is still a vibrant and widely debated presence on the world stage.

This book is an attempt to go back to basics and present a balanced picture of what religion is and isn't, from its origins, through its history and its highs and lows, to what it stands for in the modern world. Polemicists such as Richard Dawkins, whose 2007 book *The God Delusion* has done so much to feed and embolden anti-religious prejudice, argue that no one can ever present a wholly objective picture of religion. He may well be right, but it has been my constant endeavor throughout what follows to leave my own feelings and denominational attachment to one side so as to present as rounded a picture as possible.

If there is one point about religion that needs to be made over and above all others it is that its various manifestations around the globe have much more in common with each other than they have that divides them. I have started and ended this book by focusing on that shared ground. In between these opening and closing reflections are sections chronicling the range of religions around the world. Each faith is explored in a broadly similar fashion, by following its history and development, and setting out the essentials of what it teaches and how that translates into everyday life. I hope that what follows will be an intriguing voyage of discovery, whether you know nothing of religion or whether you have already explored some of the areas covered and put down roots in one (or even several) of them.

Greater knowledge of this major force that continues to shape our world may also provide the chance to move beyond the stereotypes that dog discussion about religion. My aim is not that you arrive at the end of this journey converted, but simply that you feel better equipped to participate in that ongoing debate.

Peter Stanfo

01 The God-shaped hole

It is the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal who is usually credited with coining the phrase “a God-shaped hole” to describe the spiritual vacuum inside every human being that yearns to be filled. The concept, however, goes back much further—to the very origins of life on this planet. For many people argue that the religious impulse, a deep-seated need to find a more profound meaning to existence, went hand in hand with the birth of humankind.

Sincere religious believers, of course, hold that it was God who came first, creating men and women to populate the Earth. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” starts John’s gospel in the New Testament, while the Upanishads, the sacred texts of Hinduism, claim that the Hiranyagarbha, or golden womb, contained the origins of the universe, and of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation.

Others, though, suggest that the process happened the other way round. There have been many theories about the origin of religion. What all of them accept is that human beings have always created gods. So when the first men and women found themselves confronted by the randomness of their fate—with sickness and suffering just as likely to afflict them as joy and good health—they searched for and discovered an explanation for these otherwise inexplicable turns of fortune by attributing them to the actions of a distant deity.

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

St. Augustine, 354–430

A more precise starting point for the idea of a man-made God is found 14,000 years ago in the Middle East, where historians and archaeologists have detected evidence that the forces of nature—the wind, the sun, the stars—as well as less tangible but nonetheless keenly felt entities or spirits believed to exist in the landscape, were personalized and worshipped as gods with human characteristics.

The origin of the idea of God

Many historians and theologians have sought to prove that the concept of God originated in the human mind. One of the most influential writers on the subject was the German anthropologist, ethnologist and Catholic priest, Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), whose twelve-volume *The Origin of the Idea of God* was first published in 1912. His theory of “primitive monotheism” held that at the dawn of humankind, man fashioned a benevolent creator god—often referred to as the “Sky god,” since he was thought to reside above the Earth in a region that came to be known as the heavens—to provide an explanation for the otherwise inexplicable things, both good and bad, that happened on Earth. This god was so remote from the dilemmas of human life that it seemed pointless to make images of him, or to worship him in rituals led by holy men and women. Alienated by this sensation of distance, people turned instead to more approachable deities, shaped in the image and likeness of humans. According to Schmidt, the cult of the Sky god persisted only among isolated peoples, such as some African and Latin American tribes, and

A subsequent stage in this process occurred in the centuries between 800 and 300 BCE, known to history as the Axial Age. During this period, the search for meaning in life turned on figures such as Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah, who all shared a view that there was a transcendent or spiritual dimension to existence, and who tried for the first time to formulate that idea. The primitive notion of a deity grew more distinct and refined.

These attempts to define divine overlordship eventually resulted in the various denominations and faiths that are part of the religious world today. While they all still share the common ground of addressing ethical behavior and the question of how individuals should relate to each other, they differ in how this should be done—in other words, what might loosely be termed doctrine. For instance, Christianity, Judaism and Islam are monotheistic religions. This means that they believe in a single all-powerful god. Hinduism and other Eastern faiths, by contrast, have a pantheon of gods.

“If I knew him, I would be him.”

Rabbi Joseph Albo, 1380–1445

Shadowy figures With the Axial Age came the writing down in holy books of the various religious traditions, an accompanying growth in theological study, and the establishment of codes of behavior governing membership of a particular faith. Yet to this day, in most faiths the exact nature of the deity remains shadowy. Sometimes, as in Taoism and Confucianism, this is deliberate, to place the emphasis on living an ethical life of faith rather than placing a premium on theological speculation. Yet often it is accepted that the deity is beyond conventional words. The *Penny Catechism* of the Catholic Church, a popular digest of that denomination’s essential rules and beliefs, and widely used until the 1960s, consisted of a series of questions and answers. To the inquiry “What is God?” it replied opaquely: “God is the Supreme Spirit, Who alone exists of Himself, and is infinite in all perfections.”

Any definition of the divine remains cloaked in abstractions and taboos. Jews are forbidden to pronounce the sacred name of God, and Muslims may not depict the divine in visual imagery. Yet the very mystery seems only to heighten the appeal of religion as a way of bringing order to an otherwise unpredictable world.

An ever-changing deity Human needs and desires have changed as the world evolves, and continue to change as the planet and its population face new challenges. Concepts of the divine also evolve and change, though most religions prefer not to acknowledge this, presenting themselves instead as unwavering both in the essentials of their faith, and in the rules that shape its practice within institutions.

Hard-wired for God?

Some scientists have recently produced research to show that the human brain is predisposed or hard-wired for belief in God. According to British academics at Bristol University, human beings are programmed to believe in God because it gives them a better chance of survival. A 2009 study by Bruce Hood, professor of developmental psychology, into the way children’s

brains develop suggests that during the process of evolution, those people with religious tendencies began to benefit from their beliefs—possibly by working in groups to ensure the future of their community. As a consequence, “supernatural beliefs” became hard-wired into our brains from birth, leaving us receptive to the claims of religious organizations. Professor Hood’s research shows that “children have a natural, intuitive way of reasoning that leads them to all kinds of supernatural beliefs about how the world works. As they grow up they overlay these beliefs with more rational approaches, but the tendency to illogical supernatural beliefs remains as religion.” These conclusions echo other findings—notably by a group at the Centre for the Science of the Mind at Oxford University, published in 2008—which have uncovered evidence linking religious feelings to particular parts of the brain. Devout Catholics shown a picture of the Virgin Mary experienced less pain when given an electric shock than non-believers because they underwent a greater degree of deadening activity in the right ventrolateral frontal cortex area of the brain.

So the idea of a deity remains remarkably flexible, and it is this flexibility, according to some people that has enabled the concept to survive for so long. This suggestion implies a degree of calculation by religious leaders—that they have tailored their presentation to satisfy the particular needs of specific periods. That God is ultimately unknowable, however, is spelled out explicitly by all the faiths, which teach that it is in the quest to know God, or the gods, that we seek and hopefully find value and meaning in life.

the condensed idea

Deities explain the inexplicable

timeline

2 million years ago First humans and birth of the cult of the Sky god

14,000 BCE Origins of monotheism

800–300 BCE Axial Age

02 Sacred texts

In the process of shaping the concept of a deity as the explanation for the otherwise inexplicable swings between joy and torment in individual lives, religions have distilled what was often originally an oral tradition into sacred texts that have come to represent a thread of continuity and timeless wisdom for believers through the ages.

In all written material there is a relationship between the reader and the word on the page, but for religious believers, their sacred texts take that relationship to new heights. Some will speak of their holy book falling open in front of them on a page that provides a clear answer to the precise dilemma they are currently confronting. Others use their daily reading of religious texts to provide them with guidance in their everyday lives. In all sorts of ways religious texts are invested with faith, and become a practical, spiritual and moral yardstick, the ultimate authority in judging behavior. Below, we discuss three of the best-known sacred works; others are dealt with later in the book.

The Bible The Bible, the holy book of Christians, is divided into two sections, the Old and the New Testaments. The former, which was written between approximately 1200 BCE and 200 BCE, begins with the creation of the world, and though it contains prophecies of a Messiah who is yet to come, it ends before the birth of Jesus. The latter, dating from 40 CE to 160 CE, covers the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus, and ends (in most versions) with a glimpse of the end of the world and the final judgment. It is estimated that six billion copies of the Bible have been sold in the last two hundred years alone.

Are the gospels true?

The four gospels (a word meaning “good news”) collected in the New Testament of the Bible are for Christians the key accounts of the life of Jesus. Yet none of them is a firsthand narrative. They are not, to take the word as it is typically understood today, gospel—that is, infallibly true in every respect. For a start, they were written decades after Jesus’s death, with the oldest existing manuscript versions dating from only the third century. Moreover, they all offer different—often strikingly so—accounts of the basic details of Jesus’s life.

Most Christians believe that the gospels are the result of a complex process of authorship that makes them much more than straightforward historical chronicles. They are part reportage, part the setting down in writing of existing oral traditions stretching back to when Jesus was alive, part preaching, part reference back to Old Testament prophecies, part commentary on political events at the time of writing, and part works of literature and imagination. The exact proportions of each element are hotly disputed.

Some Christians insist that the account of the creation of the world given in the Book of Genesis at the start of the Old Testament is literally true—that God created the Earth in six days and rested on the seventh. Others accept that this flies in the face of scientific knowledge. Throughout the Bible there are many conflicting details and statements, but most Christians prefer to believe that despite the

contradictions, the Bible possesses an essential truth. For some, especially in the Protestant tradition, it is the supreme arbiter in matters of religion.

“The Bible’s authority for Christians lies in the fact they have a special relationship with it that can never be altered, like the relationship of parent and child.”

Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church, University of Oxford, 2009

The Torah The term Torah can refer to the Hebrew Bible (which overlaps with the Old Testament but does not mirror it), along with the rabbinic teachings that evolved during the first six centuries CE. It is, however, more often used to describe the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, the “books of Moses.” Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai fifty days after their exodus from Egyptian slavery—though this can only be true of certain sections of the five books, sometimes referred to as the “Oral Torah.” They believe that the Torah shows how God wants them to live—as laid down in 613 commandments. Another factor that binds the five books together is that they are all about God’s concern for his “chosen” people of Israel.

The Torah scroll is regarded as the most sacred object in a Jewish synagogue. It is usually kept in an “ark,” or cupboard, and is revealed at the climax of the liturgy, when it is paraded solemnly among the congregation, who show their respect by brushing it with the tassels of their prayer shawls.

Buddha and scripture

The Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) fought throughout his life against the cult of personality, and tried to direct the attention of his disciples away from himself. His life was not important, he declared. What mattered was the truth he had discovered, which was rooted in the deepest structure of existence—*dharma*, or a fundamental law of life for gods, humans and animals alike. The Buddhist scriptures are therefore unlike other holy books in that they tell us very little about the Buddha himself, to the extent that some Western scholars in the nineteenth century doubted he had ever existed. These scriptures run to many volumes, in various Asian languages, and their authenticity is a matter of much scholarly debate. It is believed that they were not written down until the first century BCE, around 400 years after the Buddha lived.

The Qur’an Muslims believe that the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad bit by bit over a period of 23 years. It consists of the exact words of Allah and so, unlike holy books in other faiths, involves no human authorship. Muhammad’s own teachings are contained elsewhere, in the Hadith, which are a series of oral traditions relating to the Prophet’s words and deeds. The Qur’an was first set down in writing by Muhammad’s secretary and follower Zayd ibn Thabit soon after the Prophet’s death in 632. It contains 114 chapters and is not arranged in chronological order. Islam rejects pictorial illustrations, but the decorated writing—or calligraphy—in some ancient copies is amongst the great art treasures of the world.

There is a precise ritual attached to reading the Qur’an. Muslims must “prepare the heart” and wash their hands. Women usually cover their heads—as for prayer. There is a special sitting position—disciplined and alert—on the floor, with the Qur’an on a stand or *kursi* in front of the reader.

Though the words of the Qur’an are unchanging, different translations and interpretations place

varying emphases on them. In recent times, for example, some Muslims have attempted to justify violent atrocities by reference to jihad—or struggle—a concept they place in a military context, even though Muhammad is not portrayed by Islam as a man of violence.

The significance of all these holy books goes beyond any direct, or indirect, connection to the deity. They are seen as having the power both to encapsulate the hopes of humankind as no other text does, and to speak directly to those aspirations in a way that is unique, tangible and empowering.

“Let holy reading always be at hand.”

St. Jerome, c.410

the condensed idea

Religions venerate holy books

timeline

- c.700 BCE** First of 13 Hindu Upanishads written
- c.586 BCE** Jews’ exile from Jerusalem prompts the Torah
- c.100 BCE** Buddhist scriptures recorded
- c.CE 40** St. Paul writes earliest sections of the New Testament
- c.CE 635** Qur’an started after death of Muhammad

03 Good and evil

Once the notion of a Sky God had begun to evolve into a deity shaping the world and its destiny from the heavens, the question was asked: why would such a deity allow human beings to suffer? It is a dilemma that religions still struggle to answer to the satisfaction of many. One solution was for religion to shift the blame, so that whatever went wrong in the world, and in individual lives, was now the fault of an evil spirit rather than an omnipotent God.

This approach presented Earth as the apocalyptic battleground for a cosmic clash between good gods and malign deities, with humankind as cannon fodder. There is early evidence of a belief in an evil horned spirit, half man, half beast, in cave paintings found at the Caverne des Trois Frères at Ariège in France that date back 9,000 years. The pantheon of the ancient Egyptians from the fourth century BCE featured a series of two-faced deities, one profile benign, the other menacing, the most prominent of which combined Horus, the hawk-headed Sky god, and Seth, depicted as a snake or pig and representing evil. In Egyptian holy legend the two are locked in an eternal mortal combat.

The hostile spirit The high point of this belief in equal and opposite divine forces competing for world domination occurred in the twelfth century BCE in ancient Persia. The sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, the Gathas, tell the story of the power struggle between the good god Ahura Mazda, lord of wisdom and justice, and the hostile spirit Angra Mainyu, who had invaded the world and filled it with violence, falsehood, dust, dirt, disease, death and decay. Good was separated from evil, the pure from the impure. This concept of opposing divine principles is known as dualism, and has over time been flirted with by many religions.

Zoroastrianism

There are an estimated 479,000 Zoroastrians in the world today, many of them in India among the Parsi people. However, Zoroastrianism's greatest influence arguably lies in the role it played in the development of other religions, which borrowed and adapted the insights of its founder. Zoroaster, who is thought to have lived around 1200 BCE, was troubled by the suffering of his own people in what is now Iraq and Iran. In the Gathas, seventeen hymns attributed to him, he ponders on humanity's vulnerability and impotence. These he ascribes not just to a creator god, but also to his opposite and equal—"two primal spirits, twins destined to be in conflict" with each other. He is thought to have been the first to introduce such an apocalyptic vision to religion.

During the Jewish exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE, for example, the notion of Zoroastrian dualism became so familiar to the Jews that when they came to reflect on their defeat by the Babylonian forces, and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, some of them decided that such a failure was caused not by Yahweh, but rather by the intrusion of an evil spirit that had come between the Israelites and their God.

“Sine diabolo, nullus dominus.”

(“Without the Devil, no God.”) **Traditional saying**

The face of evil Dualism, in turn, was passed on to Christianity. There is one prominent strand in the New Testament that presents human existence in terms of a clash between Jesus and the Devil—notably during Jesus’s 40 days and 40 nights in the desert wilderness, when he is tempted by the Devil with all the riches of the world. Later in the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation, there is an account of the end of time, when the Devil and his supporters are finally defeated by God but are left to prey on suggestible human beings until the final day of judgment dawns, thereby polluting the Earth with sin and suffering.

Exorcism

Although the Devil has been downgraded from the role he was given by the medieval Catholic Church, the practice of exorcism still survives. The Vatican maintains a network of priest exorcists around the globe, and continues to believe that in rare cases, humans can suffer demonic possession. In March 1982, it was reported by the prefect of the papal household, Cardinal Jacques Martin, that Pope John Paul II had personally exorcised a young woman believed to be possessed by the Devil. The rites of exorcism used by the Catholic Church are based on Jesus’s actions in casting out demons in the gospels. The ritual remains largely unchanged from that set out in 1614, and incorporates prayers, the laying on of hands, making the sign of the cross and sprinkling with holy water. There are also minor rites of exorcism in the wording of the baptismal service, and when a priest blesses a new home.

Although Christianity is officially monotheist—believing in one God as the source of everything in the world—in practice it has for long periods tempered this theory with a limited dose of dualism. By contrast, both Judaism and Islam are more purist in their monotheism. Though there are minor Devil-like figures in the Qur’an, called Shaytan and Iblis, they are largely impotent. “I have no authority over you,” Shaytan says, “except that I called you and you obeyed. Do not therefore blame me, but blame yourselves.” Judaism, meanwhile, prefers to talk not of evil spirits but of an evil inclination—the *yetzer hara*—in each and every person.

“He is the weak place of popular religion, the vulnerable belly of the crocodile.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley on the Devil, 1821

It was Christianity that portrayed the Devil as the face of evil. Throughout the medieval period the Church taught that the Devil waited at every turn to woo the faithful away from God and the path of righteousness, and into sin and ultimately damnation in hell. Even the Protestant reformers embraced this view. Martin Luther was so convinced of the reality of the Devil that he believed his own bowel problems were caused by demonic possession.

In more recent times, mainstream Christianity has spoken with reluctance on the subject of evil. However, the figure of the Devil remains popular in more evangelical Christian churches, where weakness or illness is still sometimes believed to be the result of giving in to him. Exorcism ceremonies are held for possessed individuals. More generally, any form of disturbance is attributed to an external reality—that is, the Devil—rather than to internal psychological, sociological or

emotional factors in a person's life. The Devil may have been sidelined by the established Church, but the concept of opposing divine principles remains a powerful one among many believers.

the condensed idea

Good and evil are at war in us

timeline

- c.1200 BCE** Zoroaster's apocalyptic vision
- c.585 BCE** Jews in Babylon encounter Zoroastrianism
- c.CE 30** Jesus battles with Devil in gospels
- c.CE 1200** Christian inquisition seeks out devil-worshippers

04 Life and death

Religion aims not only to inspire moral and ethical standards in this world; it also holds up the promise of life after death. This might be in a celestial paradise such as the Christian heaven or the Muslim *djanna*, or as part of the cycle of death and reincarnation whereby the spirit is reborn in various manifestations, known in the Hindu Upanishads as *samsara*.

All religions incorporate an element of judgment in death, linking conduct on earth with reward or punishment afterward. This idea dates back to the ancient Egyptians and the civilization that thrived along the Nile and its delta from the fourth millennium BCE until the time of classical Greece and Rome. The Egyptians believed in life after death, as the mummies and artifacts in the death chamber of the pyramids make abundantly clear. In the domain of Osiris, lord of the dead, the *ka*—the intellect and spirit of each individual—would be placed on one side of a set of scales, and an ostrich feather on the other. Goodness was deemed light. If the scales tipped the wrong way, it meant consignment to an underworld of monsters. Verdicts were recorded by Osiris's son, Thoth; this is the origin of the lavishly illustrated Books of the Dead that have survived from ancient Egypt.

Judgment in death Despite the fact that they had been exiled in Egypt, the Israelites did not borrow this notion of judgment in death when they first established their own kingdom in the Holy Land around 1200 BCE. The Hebrew scriptures and the early books of the Old Testament speak of *sheol* as a subterranean resting place to which all were sent at death, regardless of merit on earth. Only a handful of exceptional individuals, such as the prophet Elijah, are described as going to heaven to join God. However, by around the eighth century BCE, the element of judgment at the end of life was introduced into Judaism, and was then passed to Christianity.

It has traditionally been taught by Christians that those who follow Jesus's teachings will go to heaven for eternity, while those who reject them will suffer torment in hell. Somewhere between the two is purgatory—a waiting room for heaven—first mentioned in theological discussions around 1170 and referred to explicitly by a pope in 1254. It is closely linked to 2 November, All Souls' Day in the Christian calendar, when believers pray that dead friends and relatives will be ushered from purgatory into the final joy of heaven.

A Hindu heaven

Though Hinduism generally avoids detailed portrayals of the afterlife, there is in the Kausitaki Upanishad a description of the landscape where those who have emerged from *samsara* enjoy union with the infinite spirit, Brahman. "He first arrives at the lake Ara. He crosses it with his mind, but those who go into it without complete knowledge drown in it. Then he arrives near the watchmen, Muhurta, but they flee from him. Then he arrives at the river Vijara, which he crosses with just his mind. There he shakes off his good and bad deeds, which fall upon his relatives—the good deeds upon the ones he likes and the bad deeds upon the ones he dislikes ... Freed from his good and bad deeds, this man, who has knowledge of Brahman, goes on to Brahman."

Final enlightenment The Upanishads, the key documents of Hinduism, written between 700 and 300 BCE, are quite specific in their descriptions of *samsara*. If you have stolen grain in one life, you will be a rat in the next. If you kill a priest, you will be reborn as a pig. Hindus believe that *moksha*—the liberation of the soul from the oppression of the body, which leads to final enlightenment—is a long process. At the end of it will be found not so much a place as a state of mind, described in the Upanishads as self-abandonment.

“A thing too stupendous for the tongue to tell of or the imagination to picture.”

As-Suyati, 1445–1505, on *djanna*

While reincarnation is sometimes regarded by Western Christians as an attractive possibility compared with the finality of death, for Hindus the cycle of *samsara* is not just an opportunity to grow spiritually, but also punishment, because it signifies that the believer has not yet achieved final enlightenment.

Garden paradise In many religious traditions, the exact nature of the afterlife remains unclear. Eastern religions say almost nothing about it, though Shinto and Taoism include elements of ancestor worship. Islam teaches that *djanna* is a garden paradise where, according to the Qur’an, a banquet of the finest foods is waiting, but further theological speculation about what is an otherwise abstract idea is dismissed as *zannah*, or self-indulgent whimsy. In the fifth century, St. Augustine, arguably the most influential writer and thinker in Christian history, insisted that heaven was simply ineffable—beyond words.

“The Way of Heaven has no favourites. It is always with the good man.”

Lao-Tzu, 6th century BCE

Despite this coalition of powerful voices warning against attempts to imagine the afterlife, it is a concept that has intrigued and inspired a long line of theologians, mystics, artists and writers. The fourteenth-century Italian poet Dante memorably mapped out *Paradiso* as part of his *Divine Comedy*, though even he shied away from describing the inner core of heaven. Dante’s depiction of hell—or *Inferno*—as a series of layers descending into the Earth is one shared with Jainism, the ancient Indian religion, which sees itself as operating within a universe with two levels of heaven above the Earth and two of hell below it.

Several Western artists depicting life after death have borrowed from Virgil, the first-century BCE Roman poet, the image of the Elysian Fields, entered symbolically through a gate. And medieval Christian mystics, many of them virginal nuns, favored the image of Christ waiting for the souls of the faithful departed to arrive in heaven as a bridegroom would wait for his bride.

Cockaigne

Medieval Western travelers to Islamic lands reported back that the Qur’an promised Muslim martyrs that they would be greeted in *djanna* by beautiful virgins. While the Qur’an itself is unclear on this—depending on which translation you prefer, the exact description can refer to anything from “companions” to “full-breasted maidens.” The Hadith, traditional sayings traced with varying degrees of credibility to Muhammad, includes (again in some versions) the promise: “The least [reward] for the people of Heaven is 80,000 servants and 72 wives, over

which stands a dome of pearls, aquamarine and ruby.” Such texts encouraged exaggerations in Western literature of the period about the eroticism of *djanna* that have persisted to this day. Thus the *Liber Scalae* or *Book of the Ladder* of 1264 described *djanna* as a place with ruby-encrusted walls where virgins lay waiting to pleasure newcomers in pavilions of emeralds and pearls, set amid fruit trees and tables laden with food and drink. Descriptions such as these are believed in their turn to have been the inspiration for the fantasy land of Cockaigne, an earthbound paradise of plenty, recorded in many medieval European texts and illustrations.

As we can see, therefore, in the many and varied attempts to imagine life after death, there are two distinct schools—one that envisages it as a cleaned-up version of Earth, and the other that, in line with Augustine, insists that in order to satisfy souls for eternity, it must be beyond our imagination and therefore can only be described in metaphor.

the condensed idea

Death is not the end

timeline

c.4000 BCE Ancient Egyptians weigh the souls of the dead

c.800 BCE Judaism introduces judgment into *sheol*, land of the dead

c.700–300 BCE Upanishads describe *samsara*

1321 BCE Dante’s *Paradiso*

05 The Golden Rule

At the moral core of all religions lies a simple shared imperative, often referred to as “the Golden Rule.” The exact wording of this rule differs from one religion to another, but the essential meaning is the same, and is best summed up in Western societies by the familiar command: “Never do to others what you wouldn’t want them to do to you.”

Confucians know this code of behavior as *shu*—consideration—in the sense that you show consideration for others because you can’t separate out your own pain, or hope, or satisfaction from that of other people. Buddhists talk of a lifelong approach to the issue, and their rule is summed up in a phrase of the Buddha’s from one of the Buddhist scriptures, *Samyutta Nikaya* (literally “kindred sayings”): “A person who loves the self should not harm the self of others.” In Christianity, in similar fashion, Jesus tells his followers in Matthew’s gospel, “So always treat others as you would like them to treat you. That is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets.” It might justifiably be added that this is the meaning of the New Testament too.

“Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.”

Confucius, 551–479 BCE

By contrast, Jews explain the rule in the form of a story. The celebrated scholar Rabbi Hillel (80 BCE–CE 30) is approached by a pagan who promises to convert to Judaism if Hillel can teach him Torah while standing on one leg. “What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man,” replies the rabbi, perched on one foot. “That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn it.”

The first formulator of the Golden Rule

Confucius, in the sixth century BCE, was arguably the first religious leader to articulate the Golden Rule. It sprang from his core belief that holiness was inseparable from altruism; that everything always came back to treating others with respect. “Our master’s way,” said one of his disciples, “is nothing but this: doing-your-best-for-others [known to Confucians as *zhong*] and consideration [*shu*].” Confucius developed many of his insights in conversation with the group of followers he gathered around him. In the *Analects*, the main source for accounts of his life and teaching, he is constantly debating with them. “Is there,” asks Zigong, one of the group, “any single saying that one can act upon each and every day?” Confucius replies: “Perhaps the saying about consideration.”

A shared ideal There are, of course, contrary forces within the religious traditions. The books of the Old Testament that are sacred to both Jews and Christians tell of Yahweh commanding the Israelites to drive out other inhabitants of the Promised Land by the sword, and even permitting the rape and murder of their womenfolk. But if it is possible to identify a single thread linking all religions, it is their mutual attachment to the Golden Rule.

Rabbi Hillel and the Golden Rule

The Christian Bible presents the Pharisees in an unfavorable light during the events surrounding Jesus's crucifixion, but history indicates that they were in fact the most progressive and inclusive force within Judaism in the first century CE, a time when the Jewish homeland was occupied by the Romans, who put down a rebellion with great brutality and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hillel was one of the leading Pharisee teachers. He held that God could be experienced everywhere and by everyone, not just by a privileged elite through elaborate rituals in the Temple. Charity, he believed, was the most important human endeavor, hence his championing of the Golden Rule. For him it was the spirit of Jewish law that mattered, not the letter. This was conveyed in another Talmudic story, in which two Jews are surveying the ruins of the Temple. "Woe is it that the place, where the sins of Israel find atonement, is laid to waste," says one. "Grieve not," replies the other, "we have an atonement equal to the Temple, the doing of loving deeds."

The power of the rule lies in the fact that it contains what is and always has been for human beings a profoundly countercultural and counterintuitive idea—namely, not to put ourselves and our own needs first. However instinctive that impulse may be, all religions teach that it is morally wrong-headed and potentially self-defeating.

“Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you.”

Muhammad, 632 CE

Religion might be reasonably defined as an attempt to find a way whereby individuals can interact peacefully, societies can operate in a just, inclusive and equitable way, and different societies and tribes can satisfy their own needs while co-existing with others on the same planet. The first principle of these various aims is the Golden Rule.

A radical challenge In many ways the Golden Rule represents a radical notion—that by putting others first, we are not, as is often suggested in Western secular society, showing weakness, but rather moral strength. There is also the suggestion, implicit or explicit, that by treating others well we are ultimately helping ourselves, for if we set standards in our own behavior, other people will match them in their dealings with us, and as a result everybody benefits.

The Golden Rule also touches on another feature of religion—that faith is about doing rather than simply believing. Showing empathy, concern and compassion, yielding rather than judging: these are the lessons that are emphasized in the sacred scriptures, yet often they become lost behind dogma, doctrine, rules and rituals.

the condensed idea

Do as you would be done by

timeline

c.530 BCE Confucius first states Golden Rule

c.480 BCE Buddha urges love of others not self

c.CE 30 Rabbi Hillel defines Golden Rule

c.CE 60 Golden Rule included in gospels

06 Rites and rituals

All religions have their own ceremonies and rites of passage. The purpose of these is to forge a link between humankind and the gods, to provide a forum for spiritual exploration, and to remind individual believers that they are part of something bigger than themselves, both in their own time and throughout history.

For many believers, the rites and rituals of their faith give shape to their lives. The sacraments of Christianity, for example, celebrate the landmarks of an individual's life from birth through adulthood and on to death. Muslims are required to pray five times a day—the call to prayer being part of *shahadah*, the first of the “Five Pillars” of Islamic practice. And the Buddha taught 2500 years ago that regular meditation was the pathway to enlightenment. It continues to this day to form the core of the life of a Buddhist.

The various religions, however, have differing approaches to their rites and rituals. Islam, for instance, teaches that any building can be converted into a mosque, and that none of the traditional features of the great mosques are compulsory. Hindus do gather in temples to worship, but there is no obligation on them ever to do so. Rites can just as well be carried out at home in front of a personal shrine.

Within Christianity, the house-church movement favors simple services, using everyday contemporary language, in believers' own homes. At the other end of the Christian scale, though, are the elaborate High Church celebrations, held in ancient and ornate buildings, presided over by ministers in dazzling vestments and carried out according to strict patterns and precedents that date back hundreds of years, sometimes even in the “dead” language of Latin.

The Sacraments in Christianity

Many branches of the Christian faith celebrate a series of sacraments that mark the significant events in an individual believer's life. Catholicism, for example, has a lifelong structure of seven sacraments: baptism (formally entering the Church), usually as an infant; reconciliation (once called confession) and holy communion (receiving the bread and wine as the body and blood of Jesus), both around the age of eight; confirmation (making an adult commitment to the faith), in the mid-teens; marriage, as an adult; ordination (becoming a priest), again as an adult; and finally the sacrament of the sick (once extreme unction), usually when death is close.

Higher symbolism Rites and rituals carry with them a heavy burden of symbolism, part of the attempt by religions to lift the eyes of believers from the everyday and earthbound to the spiritual plain. In medieval Christianity, even the spires and towers of cathedrals were held to be not simply an outward sign of prestige, or a beacon in the landscape for believers, but an almost literal reaching-up to the heavens. And in Taoism, the ancient religious and philosophical tradition that originated in China with Lao-Tzu in the sixth century BCE, purification and meditation rituals of chanting, playing instruments and dancing are often so complex and technical that they are left to the priests, with the congregation playing little part. Because of the significance that is attached to it, there is a danger that the ritual can be regarded as an end in itself. Time-honored words and phrases repeated among fellow

believers in a familiar setting often become as treasured as the actual theology or insights of religion. Guru Nanak, the founder in sixteenth-century India of Sikhism, warned specifically against thinking that God could only be approached through ritual. Spending time in prayer should be likened to spending time in the company of a friend, he said. Unlike members of some other religions, Sikhs therefore worship God in his abstract form, without using images or statues to help them. They do, however, gather for communal worship in *gurdwaras*, or temples.

The rites of Hajj in Islam

It is compulsory for every Muslim who can afford it, and who is well enough, to make the pilgrimage once in their lifetime to Mecca, the mother-town of Islam. This is known as the Hajj—literally “to set out with a definite purpose.” There are four parts to the ritual of the Hajj: (1) Ihram—to wear special clothing and to enter into a spiritual or holy state of mind; (2) Tawaf—to circle seven times, in an counterclockwise direction, the Ka’bah, the cube-shaped shrine in Mecca, and, if possible, to touch the black stone it contains (al-Hajar al-Aswad), which is said to have been sent down from heaven; (3) Wuquf—to go to the plain of Arafat, 24 kilometers east of Mecca, and pray before Allah on or near the Mount of Mercy; and (4) on returning from Arafat, to circle the Ka’bah again. Only then can a pilgrim claim the title *hajji* for men or *hajjah* for women.

All faiths emphasize the fact that ritual provides a link between the spiritual and material domains. In the Taoist ceremony of *chiao* (or *jiao*), which concentrates on cosmic renewal, each household in a village brings an offering for the local deities. A priest then dedicates the offerings in the names of the donor families, performs a ritual to restore order to the universe, and also asks the gods to bring peace and prosperity to the village.

“For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them.”

Matthew 18:20

Because of their symbolism, and the faith invested in them by believers, religious rituals have changed very little over the centuries. This is largely by design, since it allows contemporary believers in a rapidly changing world to experience the sense of walking in the footsteps of earlier generations who shared their faith. Christians, for example, when they recite the Lord’s Prayer, are using words written in the gospels 2,000 years ago, although today they usually do so in their own language.

“You can set up an altar to God in your mind by means of prayer.”

St. John Chrysostom, c.390

Despite the many differences between them, there are also overlaps and interchanges in the rites and rituals of the various faiths. This is sometimes a result of the fact that they have a common origin, but it can be more calculating. When Christianity began to replace paganism across great swathes of Europe in the first millennium CE, it consciously adapted elements of pagan rituals, by marking the feasts of Christ’s birth and death at the pagan winter solstice and spring equinox respectively.

Saying and meaning There is a teaching element to religious rites and rituals. Reading aloud from sacred books, a practice that dates from an age where the majority of the congregation were illiterate

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