INTRODUCTION

Facing Our Neighbors: Introducing Religions of the World

Lawrence E. Sullivan

Wondrous Signs

Religion deals with all the things that appear to us—whether those things are mundane, like water, fire, and birth, or mysterious, like life before this universe or life after our death; and religion wonders about the signs of those appearances.

Religion propels human inquiry into restless motion by posing questions basic to being human. When Bono, of the rock group U2, delivered the homily at the National Prayer Breakfast at the White House on February 2, 2006, he emphasized how religion provokes lifelong inquiry. “The reason for this gathering is that all of us here—Muslims, Jews, Christians—all are searching our souls for how to better serve our family, our community, our nation, our God. I know I am. Searching, I mean.”

The religious traditions in this volume illustrate the long search for answers to such fundamental questions as the following: What is the meaning of the signs that appear to us in the world? Such signs may be natural objects untouched by humans, like the sky, which is a
contemplating such religious questions at the Prayer Breakfast, Bono stands beside Moses on Mount Sinai, both of them wondering what real-world commitments flow from their religious experiences and convictions. In Bono’s creative supernatural being according to many religions, from ancient China and ancient Egypt to the contemporary Barasana people living in the Northwest Amazon basin in South America.

Or, signs that give rise to religious wonder may be cultural objects, the work of human hands, like the bread of the Christian Eucharist. Christians have wondered and debated: Is this only bread, or is it the sign of the real presence of the body, blood, and soul of Jesus Christ, a fully divine being?

Religion questions appearances and inquires about things and their signs: What is the true nature of the realities seen in these signs? Whether one wonders about the origins of the universe or the communication of the Ten Commandments, what claims do these things and their significance place on us, our thinking, and our moral life together? In

Fig. Intro. 2  The temple of Heaven, Beijing, China.

Fig. Intro. 3  The goddess, Nut, is represented with outstretched wings on this Egyptian coffin, circa 500–25 BCE.
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appearances, we are led to ask: What role does
religion play in shaping the distinctiveness of
our human species? After all, such wondering
is a uniquely human capacity that distinguishes
human beings from other things. Whether one
looks through the eyes of faith, or history, or
sciences like psychology, economics, anthropo-
pology, sociology, or natural history (including
evolutionary biology and ecology), the central
question is: How does religion instigate and sus-
tain the kind of thinking, feeling, and acting that
define human nature and that mark human culture
so deeply in every part of the world?

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universities just over a century ago—relatively
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this central religious question.

case, he wonders “about God, who He is or if
He exists,” and concludes, “If there is a God . . .
He is with the vulnerable and the poor . . . in
the cries heard under the rubble of war . . . in
scorched places.” In the same way, Moses also
felt that his lofty religious experiences obliged
him to lead his people toward liberation in very
concrete ways.

To ponder searing questions, religions
gather the appearances of significant realities
in this world. In the life of the Buddha, for
example, one finds signs like unusual birth, a
chance chariot ride, the suffering of old age and
hunger, a putrefying corpse, and a house afire.
The life of Moses presents other signs: burning
bush, slavery, Ten Commandments, trumpet
blast from a cloud, cries of the poor, ravages of
war, and forces of nature. Religious traditions
arrange these signs systematically—in myths,
rites, creeds, teachings, laws, prayers, sacred his-
tories, or moral codes—in order to experience
and reflect on them critically and in order to
respond to them deliberately through worship,
thought, and social action.

When we view religion as a source of
wonder about the things that appear in the
world and when we understand that it raises
basic questions about the significance of those
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Fig. Intro. 4  Eucharistic wafers used in Christian liturgies.

Fig. Intro. 5  Illustration depicting Moses on Mount Sinai.
Religious Wonder and Disciplined Learning

Readers of this volume will observe religion from different points of view: the curiosity of scholars, the open heart of seekers, the skepticism of cynics, the protectiveness of converts, the detachment of spectators, the spiritual regret of those who have lost faith, and the love of neighbors who still have theirs.

The study of religion helped give rise to new disciplines of study and ultimately proved worthy of inclusion in the academy. In the modern research academy, religion is central to the groundwork of founding figures in these new disciplines. A brief sample of groundbreaking studies of religion, all of which established new fields of research, makes the point:

- in psychology, Sigmund Freud (*Moses and Monotheism*, *The Future of an Illusion*, *Totem and Taboo*) and Carl Jung (*Psychology and Religion*);
- in sociology, Emile Durkheim (*Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*) and Max
introduction: facing our neighbors

when the followers of a North American religious leader named Jim Jones led his followers to commit murder—the victims included a visiting US Congressman—and mass suicide. A poisoning with sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995 by a religious group known as Aum Shinri Kyo was the most damaging terrorist attack in the modern history of Japan. And on September 11, 2001, terrorists acting in the name of Islam hijacked planes and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, and a field in western Pennsylvania, sending thousands to their deaths.2

Religion is by no means only associated with causes of violence. On the contrary, religion has proven to be a powerful inspiration to quell violence. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist leader who is a forty-second-generation monk in his Zen lineage, fearlessly led other Buddhists, in the midst of ferocious war-torn circumstances of the Vietnam War during the 1960s, to reconstruct destroyed villages, establish schools, and build medical centers. Exiled from Vietnam in 1973, Hanh moved to France. Through a change of mindfulness that he calls “Engaged Buddhism,” his principles and practices today lead individuals and communities out of a violence-generating mindset.3

More recently, Dharma Master Hsin Tao of Ling Jo Buddhist Monastery in Taiwan, an orphan forced to become a child soldier at age nine, was called to a religious awakening by Guan Yin—“She who hears the cries of the world”—the bodhisattva of compassion. After years of meditation in isolation, he created the Museum of World Religions in Taipei, which opened in 2005, to display the love that arises in the world’s religions. In Japan, an international group of religious leaders from various traditions, all committed to one another to overcome

Religion, Violence, Peace

Your inquiry about religion may begin with the dramatic experiences of violence connected with religious groups. The search for scientific knowledge of religion continues in today’s quest to probe the link between religion and violence. Violence associated with religion has drawn dramatic attention in recent years. Consider three examples. On November 18, 1978, 918 people died in “Jonestown” in Guyana when the followers of a North American religious leader named Jim Jones led his followers to commit murder—the victims included a visiting US Congressman—and mass suicide. A poisoning with sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995 by a religious group known as Aum Shinri Kyo was the most damaging terrorist attack in the modern history of Japan. And on September 11, 2001, terrorists acting in the name of Islam hijacked planes and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, and a field in western Pennsylvania, sending thousands to their deaths.2

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violence, awards the annual Niwano Peace Prize. In this they are similar to, and collaborate with, the World Conference for Religions of Peace (WCRP), a multi-religious coalition that has worked in armed conflicts to mitigate violence in Sri Lanka, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Indonesia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.

Christian leaders and groups also draw from their religious faith to work for peace and extinguish fires of violence, in society as well as in the heart. Such Christians take their cue from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9 King James 2000 Bible). When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. received the Nobel Prize for Peace, he delivered a lecture explaining that his philosophy of non-violent love and service is rooted in the First Epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. . . . If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:7, 12 KJV).

The Community of Saint Egidio, an international group of lay Catholics based in Rome,
Religion is a net healer of violent division through its disciplined cultivation of shared religious values, such as love and forgiveness. These opposed positions are argued in a variety of publications. Daniel Philpott contends that instead of making blanket generalizations about all religion as a whole, one should undertake nuanced, granular studies and comparisons of specific religious traditions, with particular histories, in focused places and times. Recently, Philpott interviewed leaders in northern Uganda who are healing their war-torn communities by extending forgiveness toward those who perpetrated unspeakable violence on them during attacks by the Lord’s Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony. For these Ugandans in the Gulu area, the power of forgiveness to heal and transform their future is rooted in their religious faith.

Religion, Sciences, and the University

During the years I directed the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, from 1990 to 2004, John Huchra from the Smithsonian Astronomic Observatory and the biologist Stephen Jay Gould helped break new ground for religion and science in programs titled “The Age and Fate of the Universe” and “Science and the Spiritual Quest,” for example. Leading neurobiologists also investigate how prayer and contemplation may reshape the brain, mind, and behavior. Religion has also become a generative focus for the budding science of ecology. Religion and spirituality have gained increasing attention at international gatherings on the environment such as the United Nations Environmental Program in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992,
Religion thus remains a fertile source and great test of the explanatory power of scientific ways of thinking in the university. Think for a moment of these “new” sciences as extensions of the long religious quest: new ways of wondering about the things that appear in the world and the meaning of the signs in which they appear. Using terms and ideas valued in our day—whether the multiple dimensions of quantum physics, the eons of evolutionary time, or functional MRIs of the brain—these disciplines deepen the long search that springs from the heart of religion itself, opening new ways to wonder about things, their appearances, and their meanings.

Since its origins, which straddle the end of the first millennium, the university has been involved with religious inquiry into all the things that appear to us, from the mundane to the mysterious. Whether one dates the university to the founding of Al-Azhar, an Islamic educational institution started in Egypt in 970, or to the first universities in Europe, such as Bologna in 1088, Paris in 1150, and Oxford before 1167, or to the cathedral schools in the early Middle Ages, religious inquiry has remained a constant fire in the belly for universities, in complicated and interesting ways.

The social and natural sciences, with critical views of religion at their roots, extend the wondering of religion into our current day. This suggestion may startle Daniel C. Dennett and Richard Dawkins, but why not view these sciences as intimately related to religious inquiry? Dennett, a cognitive scientist and philosopher, energetically forwards a rational disenchantment of religion in his *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and he argues for...
more scientific study of religion in the future. In him, religion and science are joined at the hip. Dawkins, the biologist and gifted science writer, after several popular works critical of religion, has written the best-selling *The God Delusion* to denounce belief in a personal god as a false belief. Dawkins treats belief in God as one treats any scientific hypothesis. At first glance, Dennett’s and Dawkins’s views seem to hurl themselves at religion from the outside, which is how they present themselves. On more thoughtful inspection, however, their strong views may sound a lot like criticisms long found within the heart of religions themselves. In their zeal, they are not alone. Though Dennett and Dawkins call for more scientific study of religion, scientists themselves zealously debate how a university should handle religion. The evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, for example, successfully led a faculty effort to ban the study of religion from the undergraduate requirements at Harvard, a school originally founded for religious purposes.7

In his *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion*, John Polkinghorne, an English theoretical physicist and an Anglican priest, sees affinity between religion and the sciences, contending that religion and science are close cousins, bound together as family members of the same truth-seeking lineage.8 Francis S. Collins, the physical chemist and medical geneticist who directed the Human Genome Project, declared in his book written after he succeeded in spelling out the human genome, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*,9 that the evolutionary creative process is a source of awe and wonder and that scientific breakthroughs on the frontiers of genomics have awakened and confirmed his religious awareness of an almighty God, not limited in space or time, who created the entire universe.

The historian of religion and science Ioan Couliano has made an interesting case concerning the interrelationship of religion, physics, magic, and mathematics in *Out of This World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*.10 Couliano argued that great leaps forward in both science and religion stem from remarkably similar ecstatic experiences. Ecstasy—“seeing the world from some n + 1 dimension”—dramatically shifts one’s perceptions of the world, whether the ecstatic person is a religious mystic or an innovative physicist or mathematician.

Some proponents of science criticize religion by asserting that it is, for instance, driven by the will to power and authority over others; or by a false consciousness of economic relationships; or by disguised feelings of guilt for atrocious deeds. Ironically, however, these criticisms thereby expand the audience of those who attend to and wonder about religious questions well beyond the restricted confines of practicing believers. Think of Dennett and Dawkins. Through scientific, studious approaches to religion, sociologists or textual scholars or neuro-biologists who are nonbelievers and secularists focus ardently on Buddhist meditation, Hindu chant, Christian art, and holy Scriptures. Does science allow us the freedom to hold religion close, as humans have always done, but while keeping it at a “safe remove,” the way a test tube lets a virologist handle a dangerous virus, or an asbestos glove allows a technician to hold a molten object without getting burned? Hold that thought. The new disciplines studying religion, from linguistics and depth psychology to neurobiology, have brought increased attention to religion. Perhaps this is one reason why Steven Pinker prefers not to include religion among required subjects of study at his university.
Studies of religion rearrange the signs and meanings already apparent in the world’s religious traditions for their own purposes in order to understand religion better. For their part, religious communities frequently remain open to scientific studies about them and make use of these scientific reassignments of meaning, often by including scholarly studies of their communities in their ongoing education about their own religious life. The anthropologist Linda Schele recounted to me that she offered instruction to Maya Indian religious leaders in Central America in reading the spoken language encoded in Maya glyphs, a skill lost over the centuries. Maya elders enfolded her scientific deciphering into the communities’ own religious self-knowledge.

The same reciprocal process is at work for Christians and Jews who use text-historical criticism to enlarge Christian and Jewish understanding of their own Scriptures. Such scientific studies, far from dismantling religion from the outside, have become a nearly mandatory part of the education of ministers and rabbis.

In addition to the myths, rituals, creeds, arts, and meditative practices treasured by believers in the traditions, scientific researchers are thus adding to the interpretive fabric of traditions by weaving their own recombinations of those same signs and meanings. They recombine the signs of sacrifice, initiation, body painting, ecstatic poetry, ritual dance, altar construction, and festival processions, for instance, into theories about the origins of religions, histories of certain rites, economic or psychological explanations of religious community, and sociological or neurobiological accounts of religious experience. In other words, both the practitioners and the scientists who study them are linking those religious signs to the underlying meanings revealed in the new scientific images being brought to light in their fields (e.g., eons-long scenarios of adaptation and survival in evolutionary biology, the “fight or flight” functions of the amygdala in neurobiology, the “fission or fusion” mechanisms of kinship and social organization in cultural anthropology, or the deictic structures of prophetic oracles brought to light in linguistics).

This is arguably the same process of religious wondering that has gone on for millennia.

Doubt, Disenchantment, and Critical Experience of Religion

As practitioners of both science and religion wonder about the same signs, some scholars risk underestimating the critical capacity of religion and claim mostly for themselves and their new sciences the critical function that is a defining hallmark of human existence everywhere, a critical capacity long vibrant within religion itself. Two quick examples dispel the notion that fundamental criticism and systemic doubt come at religion only from the outside.
and in the modern period. First, just before the Buddha's enlightenment, Mara, the lord of death, tempts him with exterminating doubt, evil, and death. Second, Mother Teresa of Calcutta journaled her lifelong anguish in her spiritual diary: “haunted by religious doubt,” “the terrible pain of loss . . . of God not being God, of God not really existing,” “such convicting emptiness.” The critical experiences of the Buddha and Mother Teresa, two paradigmatic religious figures, reveal how the religious life, intensely lived, calls the meaning of religious life itself into question.

Are sacred things just delusions, mere fabrications? Is religion itself manufactured? Such questions lie at the heart of religion, which is, after all, a reflexive mode of being: wondering deeply about the trustworthiness of our own capacity to wonder; and wondering about the reality of those realities that apparently lie beneath the outward signs reflected in the images of the religious imagination. That is why systematic doubt, equal at least in force and scope to the criticism and doubt coming from the sciences, abounds in religious traditions around the world, from the “dark nights of the soul” described by St. John of the Cross, as well as many other accomplished Christian saints, to the mind-shattering koans of Zen Buddhism. “Without thinking of good or evil, show me your original face before your mother and father were born.” This koan comes from the Wumenguan, a collection of forty-eight koans gathered by Wumen, a Chinese Zen monk of the thirteenth century, who comments that this koan can transform your whole body into an inquiry, a “Great Doubt,” as if you had swallowed a red-hot iron ball that you cannot vomit out.

Disillusionment is deliberately induced during religious initiations to provoke the critical experience of symbolic death so central to the process of maturation, often imagined to be like the death of a seed in agricultural societies, or the sacrificial death of an animal that nourishes the life of all in nomadic and hunting communities. From this critical deathlike experience, the initiate and the community are reborn to new states of life, growth, and understanding. The disenchantment, disillusionment, and doubt that occur in the heart of religion may in fact be the best context to evaluate recent critical methods and theories for the study of religion.

To repeat, the focus question is: How does religion instigate and sustain the kind of thinking, feeling, and acting that define human nature and that mark human culture so deeply in every part of the world? Each chapter in this volume
addresses that central question by using all the perspectives available to the modern study of religion: history, social sciences, objective description, art, and textual study, as well as views from within the belief system in question.

“Religion” and Making Introductions

It is important to point out that the word religion, as used in this introduction, especially in its opening sections, is a concept; it is a way of talking in order to learn. Specific cultures and communities may not use or have the word religion at all. They may instead speak of a “path,” “way,” “practice,” “faith,” “observance,” “creed,” “tradition,” or any one of many other non-English terms.

That people in a given place and time do not use the term religion and do not speak of “religion” in this conceptual way should not deter us from using such general terms of analysis in a proper way. On the contrary, using our imagination to distil general concepts from varieties of religious experience is a great gift. It is what humans do. As long as we remain cognizant that we are using conceptual language, we will avoid mistaking our own generalizations for particular cultural expressions. As in any disciplined inquiry to gain knowledge, the technical terms of religious studies allow us to transform understanding by moving back and forth between expressions initially unknown to us, on the one hand, and our own individual cultural experience, on the other.

The ready availability of intimate knowledge regarding the most deeply held cultural beliefs of our neighbors’ throughout the global community has become a distinguishing hallmark of our times. Entering most university libraries today, students have at their fingertips—through archaeology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and new schools of history arising from colonial and postcolonial studies—ideas and practices little known and little available to their great-grandparents. The fact that many of us do not yet initiate ourselves in
by the Muslim understandings of love, as cultivated in Sufi practice and the recitations of such mystical poets as Rumi and Hafiz, Yacoobi founded the Afghan Institute for Learning (AIL) in 1995. In the crucible of war and in the face of policies designed to restrict female education, Yacoobi organized at the grassroots level to bring education and health care to girls and women in rural as well as urban settings. Her fellow female teachers suffered to provide these services. During the Taliban regime, her organization supported eighty underground home schools for thousands of girls. Today, through forty-two program sites, AIL reaches 350,000 women and employs 400 Afghans, 70 percent of whom are women.\(^{18}\)

The First Binding:
Signs to Meaning

The word \textit{religion} derives from the Latin word \textit{religare}, “to bind together.” At least two kinds of special binding occur in religions. The first kind of binding fuses signs and their meaning: in religion, the meaning of religious matters is linked to realities other than their everyday appearances. This first kind of binding makes it clear that the signs of ordinary appearances, like fire, are in fact symbols bound to a fuller, more extraordinary meaning, rooted in an altogether different kind of being. For example, in Zoroastrianism, fire is the symbol of the seven Holy Immortals and is the purest and most noble sign of the mind of Ahura Mazda, who created them, and all things, before the beginning of time.

This first kind of binding also links religious items to one another in complex arrangements and associations. A small Hindu temple in Delhi or a Shinto shrine in a residential neighborhood of Tokyo, for instance, are holy
Religion relates these diverse but significant things by linking the signs of their appearances to their deeper shared meaning: the life and times of the god or goddess. Thus in this first kind of binding—binding a sign to its deeper meaning—religion also “binds together” diverse things into more integrated wholes by linking them all to their shared underlying meaning. Ultimately, religious awareness of the deeper meaning of the outward signs that appear in the world may reveal an interconnected and meaningful cosmos at its largest reach in space and time.

Religions wonder about their own power to bind: by linking things and signs together through their deeper meaning, is religion distorting reality or distilling it into a crystal-clear vision of truth? This question occurs at the heart of various religious traditions, as the reader will discover in the chapters within.

The Imaginal World, Religious Ambivalence, and Hidden Relationships

Since religion is clearly a powerful exercise of the creative imagination, religious traditions internally debate whether religion has sufficient faith in its own imagination to bend the world to its meanings and purposes. Or should religion instead rein in or even reject the fervid imagination through iconoclasm and self-denying disciplines that hold the imagination in check?

Religion wonders deeply about such questions. It includes both the impulse to affirm...
the fierce warrior Arjuna beholds the loving divinity Krishna in his cosmic form on the plains of a world-ending battle. The vision of Krishna, center of loving devotion, “devouring all the world on every side,” reduces the fierce warrior to terror, pleading for mercy.

Religious traditions have noted that even the syllables in a word can be recombined to reveal utterly new meanings, sometimes directly opposed to one another. The Yaka people of southwestern Congo think of the recombinant process of language as weaving. They heal infertile women by partly unraveling them and then reweaving them over a nine-month ritual period, rearranging the syllables in the names of their afflictions. Loka, for example,
The Second Binding: Appearance to Awareness

Through the ongoing contention between belief and doubt, meaning and question, affirmation and discipline, religious life attends to a second kind of binding: the binding of reality to a human awareness that is creative, reflective, and self-conscious. The truth is so obvious that it often escapes our attention: the human imagination is the only place in the universe where reality appears in a way that makes it the subject of interpretive reflection and knowledge.

Reflection and interpretation are labors of the imagination. The moon and other things that appear in the world do not fit in the human eyeball, as Aristotle pointed out long ago. Rather, we “see” the moon, as the poet Hafiz did also through signs and images that arise in the human imagination. Our imagination forms an image of the moon after signs of its light make an impression...
Religion cultivates critical awareness of this basic situation, an awareness that there exists a conspiracy between things and the human imagination, to their mutual benefit: an awareness that the meaning of things is revealed when, and only when, they appear in the imagination. Consequently, the imagination must be watched carefully, for it can hallow reality with religious meaning or desecrate it to the point of meaninglessness. Religion brings home the responsibility that humans bear for the religious imagination, within them but affecting the critical understanding of the world and all the things that appear there, including the human role in it.

By calling all things and the meaning of their signs into question, religion furnishes human beings with a critical experience of the
Mind as Mirror: Imagining a Universe, Viewpoint, and Place to Stand

Many religious traditions, from classical Greek piety and medieval Christian mysticism to various schools of Buddhist meditation, describe disciplined cultivation of human sense perception and special awareness as “polishing the mirror of the mind,” so that images of reality can appear more accurately and their meanings be apprehended more clearly. The ancient Greeks eyed the murky “mirror of Medusa.” Instead of displaying the outer world, the mirror reveals the invisible, cryptic one. The gods appear there, for example; the mirror dulls their splendor so humans can look on them without expiring. But mortals pass before it unseen. Warriors, however, prepare their minds for war by gazing at their own faces through the lowered visors of their helmets, catching glimpses in this mirror on the wall of the glory (bebe) within them, which will shine forth during the upcoming battle and reveal their immortal fate.

Over centuries, Christians also reflected on the mind as mirror of the world and questioned the trustworthiness of the imagination. Do the mind and imagination turn the world to fiction? Should we believe or should we doubt the picture that the mind presents? Saint Paul states, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” (1 Cor. 13:11 NIV). The Christian theme of the mirror-mind is developed further in Saint Augustine’s Confessions, in Saint Bonaventure’s Journey of the Mind to God, where he places the mind’s mirroring capacity on the bottom rung of Jacob’s meditative ladder, and in the Paradiso (Paradise) of Dante, which abounds with mirrors that signal his own transformation as his imaginative mind takes in more of reality during his passage from this world to other worlds.

These ancient Christian writers foreshadow the modern crisis of the subject. They worry that the self may be a broken mirror that poorly reflects reality, just as the scientists Dennett, Dawkins, and Pinker worry about the distortions of religious thinking. In the case of the early Christian writers, however, they worry not only about the distortions of religious thought but also about the imperfect human reflections that form the basis of all forms of knowledge. Each Christian writer mentioned above proposes solutions for corrective vision.
Today, mirror images of ourselves and of our world multiply exponentially through our technologies of image capture and distribution. “Real” events, from weddings to bungee jumps, appear to lack the full impact and significance we yearn for in popular culture unless they can also be photographed and seen in other settings to bear testimony to the event. The “soul” was once imagined in the form of a shadow or reflection in a pool or mirror. Today the technological capacity of our minds to mirror the world invites more questioning than ever, questions about signs and meanings that for so long have been at the heart of religious inquiry.

Today, camera phones and IMAX cameras mirror our every living moment and thought. YouTube, Facebook, and multiplex movie theaters place mirror images of every possible thing, both “real” and fictive, into every imaginable human space, from the rooms of our homes, to restaurants, planes, trains, and automobiles. Scientific imagery is being captured from every level of the universe, from electron microscopy of nickel molecules, to MRIs of the brain while listening to music, from sonar-and-temperature pictures of the deepest trenches of the oceans, to ultraviolet and infrared probes of the outermost rim of the universe billions of light years away. Images of every aspect of our world, from the macro- to the nano-scale, are being gathered for our reflection through the creative instruments, like the Hubble and Chandra telescopes, that extend the capacities of our own imagination.

What do we make of it all? With knowledge of the world so much at stake, it is no surprise that our powers of reflection and imagination are being called ever more into question. We must know: Through our imagery and imagination, are we truly reflecting the world we live in? Is the tiny seed of the self—an infinitesimal speck on the ocean of time and being—capable of all that? Is that believable? After all, the moon still does not fit in our eye. Or are we living increasingly in a wallpaper world, like the character Truman Burbank, portrayed by Jim Carrey in the movie *The Truman Show*, a digital-thin surface world papered only with virtual images of our own making? More deeply, how would we know the answer to this question? That is, where would we stand in the universe to see all this more clearly? Short of human beings removing themselves from their place in the world and seeing all reality from some wholly other, divine Archimedean point of view, one may fairly ask what is the experience from some “n + 1 dimension” of our universe, which would help us see how accurate our mirroring of things might be, an experience that some religions (and scientists) might describe as an ecstatic moment of clarity?

When humans irrepressibly wonder about things, appearances, and their meanings, we often seek to know whether there is such an outermost limit, an imaginable observation post that can serve as a check on our potential subjective distortions. Is there such a referent point exterior to ourselves, some ultimate meaning that is self-evident? Questions like these have been and remain fundamentally religious questions. Each of the traditions sketched in this volume has addressed questions of this sort, in the distinctive terms of their cultures, times, and developmental histories. Understanding their questions and answers takes some doing, but it is a worthwhile exercise.

The effort to understand those religions enlarges one’s admiration for the human capacity for inquiry and enriches what it means to be a human being in the world. Is the puny religious drama of humankind equal to the grandeur of the cosmic stage set by the Big Bang?
of the universe and the long evolution of life? This was the question that the famous physicist Richard Feynman put to the novelist Herman Wouk. Feynman thought the answer was clearly, “No!” Wouk, a playwright who knows a good drama when he sees one, pleads his case for the universe-altering power of Job’s religious questioning of God. Wouk counters Feynman by pointing out that only humans can or care to ask such a question, calling God and the universe to accounts and thereby bringing to light the critical purpose of the religious life. Where else in this vast universe is there a creature that raises such a question about the whole thing? The religious question is a turning point in the entire cosmic drama, because of its exponential difference from all other questions in the universe. Like a Big Bang of its own, the religious question stirs all other inquiries into motion and infuses a new kind of force into the universe, this time an imaginal and reflective power that affects all things, transforming them forever.

In the second binding, in other words, religion self-consciously links the images of reality to the “imagination,” a word that literally refers to the mirror condition of human reflection in which “images are born.” Religion, especially during processes of initiation, cultivates the awareness that it is in the religious imagination that the world appears in a meaningful way. This awareness imposes on human beings a sense of creative responsibility for the world and the people and things that appear in it. Such responsibility is instilled in the young Navajo woman, for example, during her Kinaalda, a four-day ceremony that transforms her from a child to a woman. Seated on a sacred sand painting at the center of the Hogan, the ceremonial hut that is a microcosm of the world, her body is refashioned, molded like corn pollen or clay in the image of Changing Woman, the primordial being for whom the ceremony was first performed during the time that the Holy People emerged from below the earth. Changing Woman and the Holy People formed the world as it is known today by placing things around them—mountains and landmarks—with the ritual intention and attention being cultivated in the young woman during the Kinaalda. She models her awareness and her responsibility for life in the world on that of Changing Woman.

The religious person is encouraged to remain mindful that humans are symbolic beings. We reflect realities beyond ourselves: in language, science, art, dream, and mathematics, but especially in religion. Words, theorems, visual art, numbers, the constants of physics, and religious ideas and practices point beyond us for their meaning, whether we are calling our mother’s name as toddlers, naming the Washington Monument or a lost object no longer visible, describing the speed of light in a logarithm, or reminding a friend about Buzz Lightyear. Only in human beings does the meaning of such things in the world arise in the form of signs, symbols, and images that reflect back on the world’s things in the forms of calculus, Japanese, love songs, and other forms of understanding.

The religious imagination is the outermost expression of this human capacity to point beyond ourselves, whether one accepts the idea with enthusiasm or not. Religion constantly generates fundamental choices about the nature of reality and the role humans play in it. For instance, only through the religious imagination of human beings does the entire world itself become hallowed, no matter what one makes of that benediction. Religion binds things to utterly different kinds of being than those appearing in its signs. Moses’ burning
bush (Exod. 3:1-21) becomes a sign of the all-powerful God whose name is unspeakable. Is this a delusion or a delight? Through religious wonder, the beings and worlds that appear as signs in the religious imagination are called into question and are thereby critically experienced and understood.

Realities of the First Order

Religions often point to events that happen “in the beginning,” such as creation, and therefore concern themselves with primordial realities in that chronological sense. Reference to “first things” indicates, however, that the religious meaning of signs is primordial in another sense as well: the signs point ultimately to realities that are the first of their kind, first in their quality of being: “those beings than which nothing more primary may be conceived.” Their meaning is ultimate. Primordiality seems deeply rooted in the human imagination as it relates to the world, for it appears not only in religion but also in science and other domains of knowledge. In many religions found in this volume, the ultimate meaning of signs is located in the beginnings of time, when the gods and superhuman heroes were fully present, visible, and active. Temples mark the space where these supernaturals once performed their prodigious acts, especially their momentous acts of transformation or disappearance, which also mark time with a dramatic break-point to which humans constantly return to evaluate their own existence in time. Those first beings created the world or reshaped it after destruction and then withdrew from full view, rendering what is primordial relatively invisible but highly meaningful. All subsequent things that appear in the world point back to those first things, which are now ironically less apparent, though their meaning is all the more basic. In other words, signs point to primordial realities for their ultimate meaning, something religions ceaselessly inquire about.

This was the sense Mircea Eliade, a leading historian of religions, intended when he used the term *archaic* the way he did, drawing on Greek philosophical notions of the *arche* as a “primary structure” of thought but also of ontology, a fundament in the order of being, as being appears in the imagination, and not merely a “first beginning” in chronological time. The primacy of things that are first of their kind in the order of being makes them the ultimate meaning for all the subsequent appearances and signs that represent them, whether in order of time or rank order of being. All other things that subsequently appear in the universe become their signatures, marks of their identity, and surrogates, pointing back toward them for their originative meaning.

Interestingly enough, here affinities between religion and science may help. Our contemporary sciences may help us understand this strategy of the imagination—the search for primordial conditions—since the sciences seem to continue the archaic tradition of extending new knowledge and of anchoring the ultimate meaning of ongoing manifestations and signs.
in the universe by pointing to their most primordial foundations, whether in the sense of chronological time or of first-order in quality of being. The application to evolutionary biology is obvious enough.

Searching for primordial realities is also one way of thinking of the important scientific projects being carried out by CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research), including the Large Hadron Super Collider, the largest and highest-energy particle accelerator ever built, some 570 feet beneath the mountains of the French-Swiss border near Geneva. Constructing it involved over 10,000 scientists and engineers from more than one hundred countries. Recently brought back online after a shutdown for safety checks after it opened in 2009, the CERN Hadron Collider represents the billions of dollars going toward exciting research that, if it succeeds, will back up the clock of our knowledge about the origins of the universe by some \(1 \times 10^{-42}\) nanoseconds of time. Those primordial moments and the primordial conditions of energy and bosons during them are thought to be the most revealing sources about the laws of nature and the fundamental questions about the physics of energy in our world.

A similar preoccupation with primordiality drives the NASA COBE (Cosmic Background Explorer) satellite project directed by the Nobel Prize–winning astrophysicist George Smoot at the University of California-Berkeley. Using the Explorer 66 satellite to record and measure cosmic microwave background radiation (CMB), Smoot and his team peer back into time, capturing pictures of the background radiation first set in motion by the Big Bang at the birth of the universe. Their work demonstrates that the universe burst forth from a single point of infinite density, radiating background energy that still fills the entire universe with microwaves.

Smoot and his team have been capturing images of that energy, like someone tracking down the light still traveling from a camera flash 14 billion years ago. He created a map, a picture of energy set in motion when the universe began, showing temperature fluctuations that are the seeds of present-day galaxies. With new technology, scientists stare toward the origins of time. Our hope is that the tain-like mystery of deepest, darkest space, like the opaque black backing of a mirror, will reflect back to us the primordial story.
of our universe and its preconditions. Not unlike the visored Greek warrior facing the Mirror of Medusa, a glimpse of nearly invisible primordial space-time may reveal something of ultimate significance about our ultimate fate as well.34

Given the much longer history of religion, in comparison to the recent history of new sciences, we may be allowed to wonder whether the strategic search for primordial realities, which seems so innate to the imagination and to human knowing, owes its origin, development, and continued existence to religious experience, religious wondering, and religious inquiry over the long history of our species.

**History, Experience, Culture**

Recent introductions to the study of religion tend to come in three flavors, placing a primary emphasis either on experience, history, or culture. This introduction combines all three approaches.

History offers a general framework to guide us; and the study of religion offers keys to understanding history. Take, for example, the history of the city, which so defines human life on the planet today. For ten thousand years, humanity has moved in ever greater numbers toward the city, even at the cost of trading the longstanding family home in the placid countryside or small village for a squalid dwelling in the poorest, most violent quarters of Bukavu, Delhi, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Jakarta, or Los Angeles. The cultural geographer Paul Wheatley demonstrated that the increasing urbanity of human life on our planet began with a religious attraction.

He has closely studied what he called urbanogenesis—the birth of cities35—and he concludes that, based on the archaeological and cultural evidence from the ten oldest cities in ten separate settings of the globe, the city itself—the very idea of the city as a mode of human existence—is religious in origin. That is, when one peels back the onion of archaeological time to look at their earliest footprints in space, these cities were not the outcome of new technologies, economies, or architectures. Religious sanctuaries did not follow the settlement of people in thick urban clusters. Rather, their essential forms, cast into the ground of these sites and fixed in stone, preceded any such dense settlements. At their root, cities prove to be ancient sacred centers of pilgrimage to which people traveled temporarily for religious reasons and then returned home. Like the ancient structures underlying Beijing in China, Benin in West Africa, Tenochtitlan in Mexico, and Mohenjo-daro in Pakistan, these early seeds of what became cities had what Wheatley demonstrated were cosmo-magical structures designed to attract, through religious practices, beneficent forces and to repel malignant ones. The primary function of cities was to align human life with the most significant forces, cosmic and sacred, by placing humans at the center of the world and all powers, including those that transcend it. Centering of this sort is as much an act of awareness, predicated on and cultivated by religious acts and disciplines, as an act of geographic siting.

The present volume examines the distinctive histories of the separate religious traditions featured in each chapter. The table of contents arranges the communities treated into an outline of traditions, each one of which has its distinct history. Each individual tradition receives its own treatment. This framework emphasizes the importance of what the great scholar of Islam Marshall Hodgson called “the primacy of the dated and the placed.”36 The volume uses history as a peg to fix our focus on what is believed and
practiced in specific spaces and times. Founders of the particular religions and their specific reformers, principal events, and writings are all set in their historical context. The development of ideas and communities is traced over time.

Nevertheless, experience must also be a key feature. That is because chronology alone is not a sufficient account of history, especially religious history. The British philosopher C. P. Snow once accused writers who confused history with chronology as merely placing “one damn thing after another.” History must also mean “evaluating the quality of our existence in time.” That is why it is necessary to somehow come to grips with the quality of religious experience, on an individual as well as communal scale. The vignettes in each chapter convey the quality of the religious experience in that tradition, as do the art, the occasional personal testimonies, and the descriptions, from time to time, of religious moments and events as experienced from within the life of practitioners.

It is also important for readers to bring their own experience to the process of understanding. The fact that we are dealing, at every step, with signs, symbolic orders, and the conditions of the human imagination frees us from settling for exclusively economic, social, or historical explanations of the religions of others. For one thing, religions cannot be exhaustively accounted for by descriptions of their geography, ecology, language, material conditions, or even historical events. It is true that every set of religious symbols, from myths to creeds and rituals, relates to the political, social, and economic life of the community from which it springs. But the historicity of religious experiences cannot absolve us from the responsibility of questioning more generally the nature and meaning of existing in time, if we want to fully understand the humanity manifest in particular historical situations.

Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist thinkers mentioned in this book, for example, do not limit
their claims to specific people in specific places and times. They reflect on the general human condition and on cosmic existence more broadly. To understand them, we too must reflect on human nature at its widest reach and deeply probe the nature of our own experience. In the course of thinking about the ninth-century Japanese Buddhist thinker Kukai and his vision of the ten worlds (or the religious ideas of the Navajo, the Barasana, the Inca, or the Yaka), we must come to grips with what we ourselves think about the world and the mind-body practices that affect our views. Where do our experiences of the world and Kukai’s intersect in ways that ground our understanding of his ideas and practices? The study of religion, then, like all exercises in the humanities, is an invitation not only to accumulate more historical data in a detached way but also to plumb more deeply one’s own views about important realities and evaluate one’s own experience of existence in time.

This is the central meaning of culture: to creatively engage the resources that we inherit in each generation. Those resources include language, art, specific material and economic conditions and the skills to work with them, as well as patterns of thought and value. At a certain point, usually associated with adolescence, cultural actors in every society and in each new generation assume their own responsibility for cultural production and reproduction. Communities generally set aside some time for reflecting about culture, an intense period but also one open for learning. Thus free from full economic responsibilities, the ascendant generation can make its transition into their mature cultural role, whether through initiation in traditional villages or through apprenticeship in trades or labor associations in cash economies, or through other technical and educational preparations, such as the college education suited to knowledge workers. During this time of transition, the upcoming generation is furnished with know-how and information about the world. But whether it is the Okiek women of Kenya or the young men of the Greek polis, the culture also contrives to stage for them a set of critical experiences as well as a mode of critical reflection on those experiences that can transform their awareness of themselves and their world.\(^{37}\) This transformation of awareness develops sensitivity to the uniquely symbolic nature of human life as well as to the range of expressions, meanings, responsibilities, and self-disciplining skills required to handle such awareness well. Within the pluralistic global community that young adults enter today, it makes sense that knowledge of the religions—recognition of the

Fig. Intro. 21 Statue of Kukai (774–835, CE), Japanese monk, founder of the Shingon (“True Word”) school of Buddhism.
profiles, motives, and meanings important to our religious neighbors in the global community—play a part in that changing awareness. I wish to extend my thanks to the authors who joined me and contributed chapters to this volume. We have taken pleasure in the thinking and the writing that went into the preparation of the text as well as in the teaching about religion that readied us for the task. We offer the volume to you, kind readers, with excitement and hope. We invite you, students and instructors alike, to meet the religious neighbors we introduce in it. We hope you will enjoy and benefit from your acquaintance with these longstanding and remarkable ways of life as much as we enjoy knowing about them in our own professional lives. And we hope as well that your deepening knowledge of these neighbors and their religions will make a positive difference in your lives and in the life of the world you share with one another.

◆ NOTES
are the “Dwight Harrington Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy” that Eagleton delivered at Yale University in 2008.


10. Ioan Coulianu, *Out of This World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991)


16. Theories, for example, by Russell McCutcheon, Donald Wiebe, Luther Martin, Armin Geertz, Michael Pye, Daniel Dubuisson, Thomas Lawson, and, standing somewhat apart from these, my admired teacher Jonathan Z. Smith.


20. Jewish mystical systems of recombination and wordplay, for example, have caught on and become better understood through such studies as Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). See also Moshe Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia* (Rome: Adelphi, 2001). In fact, practices of mystical wordplay and recombination are found the world over, as among the Kari’na tribe of Venezuela (Marc de Civrieux, *Religión y Magia Kari’na* [Caracas: Universidad Catolica ‘Andres Bello,’ Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1974]).

21. The word *critical* derives from the Greek word *kritein*, meaning “to choose, to decide.”


24. Dante ascends from the lowest to the highest otherworld throughout his Easter transition from death to eternal life. Mirrors are featured in canto 2 (the trinity of mirrors is introduced), canto 13 (God’s goodness is mirrored in the nine angelic orders), canto 21 (Beatrice instructs Dante how to turn his eyes into revelatory mirrors of inward vision and awareness), canto 29 (Beatrice praises God for creating so many mirrors of himself in the heavens), canto 30 (features the reflecting mirror of the great River of Light), canto 33 (Dante becomes enraptured in vision as he peers into the laser-like trinity of self-reflecting circles, a symbol of divine self-knowledge).


27. In *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), Rodolphe Gasché uses the image of a mirror to discuss the contemporary need for the critical disciplines to reflect on our world and our place in it, in a condition of ubiquitous imagery. “Tain” refers to the sheet of blackened tin on the backside of a mirror, which enables it to reflect images. The inherent formlessness and opacity of the tain, so evocative of mystery and limitless enigma, allows anything to be reflected in it. On that analogy, the capacity of our minds to act as mirrors presents special difficulties today. For the reasons that Gasché analyzes, our mind-mirrors require extra polishing today, through criticism, of the rough assumptions and obscure preconditions of our human capacity for reflection. (In the same vein, see Edward Peter Nolan, “Mirrors in Modern Theory and Cultural History,” the appendix in his *Now through a Glass Darkly*.)

September 16, 2007, who advocates not striving for an omniscient observer-point outside all systems but instead an “integrative science” that blends all possible points of view, a panoptic.


31. In The Language God Talks: On Science and Religion (Boston: Little, Brown, 2010), Wouk dramatically restages Job’s argument with God, placing it into the last lecture given by the fictive character Aaron Jastrow, a doomed inmate of the Auschwitz death camp. Through Jastrow’s words, Job, the quintessential man of long-suffering faith, exercises once again the quintessential right to wonder, a right that the religious person ironically earns through his faithfulness.


33. See Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religions (Omaha: Bison, 1996).


