

## Preface

### RELIGIONS IN OUR WORLD TODAY

Our world now has around 6.1 billion people on it. Of those almost 85 percent are thought to be religious in some way or other. Table 0.1 shows members of various world religions in terms of their demographic visibility on the planet. Here the religions are named more or less according to current designations in demographic listings. The world religions are listed in descending order of total adherents.

Some religions boast a great many adherents, while others have a modest membership. Yet despite the variation in numbers this book aims to represent (if

not include) all religious peoples around the globe. The world religions are surveyed roughly in geographical order around the globe beginning and ending in the “circum Pacific,” which includes land on the Asian and American sides of the Pacific Ocean. There is no perfect way to arrange world religions in a sequence. Yet there is a kind of geographical and even cultural logic in moving from Oceania “eastward” around the globe winding up finally in Japan. This Asian Pacific point of origin and return reinforces Japan’s ancestral connections to both mainland Asians and Malayo-Polynesians. It also traces the Africans of Latin America to their roots on the African continent, exposes the

Table 0.1 Religions in our world today\*

Religion	Daily increase	Total population	% world population	% yearly increase
Christian	69,000	2 billion	33	1.4
Muslim (Islamic)	68,000	1.2 billion	19.6	
Hindu	37,000	811 million	13.4	1.7
Chinese folk	10,700	384.8 million	6.4	1.0
Buddhist	10,600	360 million	5.9	1.1
Tribal ethnic	8,200	228.4 million	3.8	1.3
New Religions of Asia	2,800	102.4 million	1.7	1.0
Sikh	1,100	23.3 million	<1	1.9
Jewish (Judaic)	350	14.4 million	<1	0.9
Non-Christian spiritist	600	12.3 million	<1	2.0
Bahá'í	400	7.1 million	<1	2.3
Confucian	120	6.4 million	<1	?
Jain	100	4.2 million	<1	0.9
Shintō	−90	2.8 million	<1	−1.0
Daoist	70	2.7 million	<1	?
Zoroastrian (Mazdean)	160	2.7 million	<1	?

Note: \*Statistics are from the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, except for the Confucian, Daoist, and Zoroastrian total population figures, which are rounded from the *World Almanac* report. The figures are basically corroborated by the *World Almanac 2005* for populations, and [www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com) for percentages.

cultural link between the Zoroastrian and Vedic (early Hindu) traditions, follows the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Roads, and observes the outflow of Chinese culture into Korea and Japan.

## A WORD ABOUT PROBLEMATIC TERMS

In 1962 Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote, “I seriously suggest that terms such as Christianity, Buddhism, and the like must be dropped, as clearly untenable once challenged” (Smith 1963 (1991): 194). He argued that the world had Buddhists but not Buddhism, Christians but not Christianity, and so forth. Smith suggested that the word “religion” be dropped as well, claiming that monolithic terms such as “religion,” “Christianity,” “Hinduism” obscure the dynamic and personal quality of religious traditions.

“Hinduism” refers not to an entity; it is a name that the West has given to a prodigiously variegated series of facts. It is a notion in men’s minds – and a notion that cannot but be inadequate. To use this term at all is inescapably a gross oversimplification. There is an inherent contradiction between history and this order of idea.

(Smith 1963 (1991): 144)

One day W. C. Smith even wrote, “I am bold enough to speculate whether these terms will not in fact have disappeared from serious writing and careful speech within twenty-five years.” (Smith 1963 (1991): 195) Yet habits die hard, as does language.

Now over forty-five years after W. C. Smith called for an end to the word “religion” it shows little sign of expiring, and “-isms” are as convenient as ever. Due to problems with the “-isms” and monolithic terms that sanitize the messiness of culture, the terminology of this book minimizes their use. Thus “Judaic tradition” generally is used in place of “Judaism” and so forth. Here the word “tradition” should carry a *holistic sense* that conveys the fact that traditions are ongoing with multiple strands that intertwine with many aspects of people’s lives. A religious tradition may be thought of as a cultural heritage that is both: (1) kept alive through participation (what W.C. Smith calls “faith”), and (2)

continually challenged by ongoing cultural circumstances. At this point it is still not practical to dispense with the word “religion.” Thus stuck with the word, one is advised to think of particular religions as dynamic cultural complexes, not as static monolithic entities.

Nowadays, the trope “world religions” is often avoided due to its original connection with European colonialism. Consequently the status of a “world religion” was given only to traditions that somehow dominated the world stage. (See page 000.) To dispense with such embarrassing and annoying political baggage many people now use the expressions “the world’s religions” or “religions of the world.” These tropes (words or expressions used in a figurative, non-literal sense) seem to be more inclusive and politically correct. However the term “world religions” is retained in this book because it allows for a richer set of meanings than the two possessive expressions. The trope “world religions” *may incorporate* the possessive sense of “the world’s religions” or “religions of the world.” But the grammatically simple expression “world religions” allows for larger spectrum of meanings. For example, it may carry the sense that religions are *in* the world, not possessed by the world. “In” carries an active connotation: we are all *in* the world together; religions are *in* the world together. Moreover, the terms “the world’s religions” and “religions of the world” are problematic because they force all religions into a single world. And while religious cultures all develop on the same terrestrial globe each one also creates its own world (of meaning). Therefore the trope “world religions” captures the sense that religions are on our globe – *each with a world of meaning*.

## EDITORIAL FORMALITIES

### Dates

Dates are rendered according to contemporary Western conventions. The designations BCE and CE are used to mark the years of historical time. BCE means “Before the Common Era” and CE means “Common Era” – where “common” refers to what is common to Western culture. BCE replaces BC (Before Christ), while CE replaces AD. AD stands for *Anno*

*Domini*, which is Latin for “in the year of our Lord [Jesus Christ].” Although the actual dates rendered as BCE or CE are exactly those of the Gregorian Christian calendar, the newer abbreviations introduce a modicum of cultural even-handedness. It is important to realize a calendar can never be value free. Calendars always embody cultural interpretations of time, regardless of whether they “objectively” measure it by means of the sun, moon, or something else.

In the history of religions the dates of an overwhelming number of events cannot be pinpointed. Moreover, traditional dates provided within religions often contradict dates suggested by modern historians. To further complicate matters, scholars often disagree among themselves as to when something happened. Traditional dates may be historically accurate, but differ from Western dates because they start from their own points of reference. An example is the start of the Islamic calendar, which dates from Prophet Muḥammad’s migration (hijra) from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. The year 622 CE (Common Era) corresponds to the year 1 AH (*Anno Hegirae*, in the year of the Hijra) – but not for the whole time because the CE date is measured by the sun, while the AH date is measured by the moon’s shorter year! Sometimes dates are reported on the basis of both lunar and solar calendars, resulting in two sets of dates for a single event. It also happens that scholars provide a range of dates within which something is supposed to have occurred. A prolonged event might have actually taken several centuries. For example, dates for the Hindu Mahābhārata epic may be given as “ca. 400 BCE – ca. 400 CE.” This range indicates that the written rendering of the ancient oral tradition happened over many years. Here “ca.” stands for the Latin *circā* (from *circum* meaning “around”) and means that the date is approximate. A range of dates can also be given because the exact year of an event is unknown, but is accepted as having occurred within that specified range of time.

When a set of dates ascends in number it is understood that the time frame is the Common Era, so the designation CE is often omitted. For example, Augustine’s dates of 354–430 are CE, as opposed to Buddha’s dates of 566–486, which are BCE. If two sets of dates have been proposed for an event (such as Buddha’s life, also given as 448–368 BCE) both dates

may be provided here. If a person’s life spans two centuries, the earlier century is used to mark the date. Thus Augustine’s date might simply be rendered as “b. 300s CE” or “b. fourth c. CE.” When placed before dates, “b.” means born, “d.” means died, “fl.” means flourished, and “r.” means reigned. In cases where traditional dates are at odds with dates given by modern scholars, the designation “traditional” or “expert” is appended to the date.

### Treatment of terms

Transliterations generally follow the editorial choices of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, second edition, and *The Oxford Dictionary of Religions*. Diacritical marks are preserved even when a word has made it into *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Upon first use in a chapter, glossary terms are printed in boldface, and foreign terms are printed in italics. Definitions of boldfaced terms are provided at the end of each chapter, as well as in a comprehensive Glossary located at the end of the book. Proper names are capitalized; other terms occur in lower case unless capitalized in their original context or commonly in translation. When contemporaneous place names are used, modern locations are indicated in parentheses. Book titles are italicized, except for names of the major religious scriptures.

### CHAPTER ENHANCEMENTS

Each chapter that treats a world religion includes a timeline, and four boxes. Each timeline is divided into three columns, with players on the left, major events on the right, and dates in the middle. Boxes involve these subjects: (1) “A Spiritual Path” treats some form of religious discipline; (2) “Symbols” explores key symbols; (3) “Culture Contrast” compares items from two cultural contexts; and (4) “Interpretations” provides an example of how the tradition defines its own religious categories. The chapters end with features to enhance study: Key points, Study questions, Glossary and Key reading. Key reading contains a handful of titles that represent different types of books, normally including key scriptures or anthologies, historical surveys, anthropological studies of a living population, modern interpretations, and a dictionary

or encyclopedia. A comprehensive bibliography is provided at the back of the book. A companion website for this textbook to be found at [www.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415772709](http://www.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415772709) includes: (1) self-test questions; (2) discussion questions; (3) essay questions for each chapter and other materials as they become available.

The use of websites to complement this textbook is helpful. Yet students of religion must keep in mind that the authors of websites (as the authors of books, films, and so on) speak from a point of view (i.e., a bias). It is important to keep authors' assumptions and research methods in mind when evaluating informa-

tion presented in their work. A wide range of views is available on the World Wide Web. For example, searching through Google for material on contemporary Islam brings up links from diverse political perspectives. To wit, a link for "Salafiyya" (which defines Islamic fundamentalism) seems to be associated with the US military, while a link for "Islamic Cultural Revolution" is maintained by the SCCR (Secretariat of Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution). Normally, for a deep understanding of any given subject matter consideration of several points of view is recommended.