

# The Encyclopedia of Religion



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# Preface



Such an encyclopedia as this has long been overdue. In all areas of religious studies—in the historical religious traditions as well as in nonliterate (“primitive”) religious systems—the “information explosion” of recent decades has demanded a new presentation of available materials. Further, in the last half century, new methodological approaches and more adequate hermeneutics have enhanced our knowledge of the existential value, the social function, and the cultural creativity of religions throughout history. We understand better now the mind and the behavior of *homo religiosus* (“religious man”), and we know much more about the beginnings, the growth, and the crises of different religions of the world.

These impressive advances in information and understanding have helped to eradicate the clichés, highly popular in the nineteenth century, concerning the mental capacity of nonliterate peoples and the poverty and provincialism of non-Western cultures. To realize the radical change of perspective, it suffices to compare, for instance, the current interpretations of an Australian Aboriginal ritual, a traditional African mythology, an Inner Asian shamanistic séance, or such complex phenomena as yoga and alchemy with the evaluations *en vogue* a few generations ago. Perhaps for the first time in history we recognize today not only the unity of human races but also the spiritual values and cultural significance of their religious creations.

I shall not here attempt to survey all the decisive contributions of recent research to a more correct appreciation of the dialectics of the sacred and of so many ethnic and historical religious systems. A few examples will serve to underscore my point.

In some areas of religious studies, unexpected and astonishing consequences of recent archaeological or textual discoveries have become almost immediately apparent. Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, for instance, have revealed the grandiose proto-historical urban civilization of the Indus Valley, and discoveries

of the library of gnostic writings at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt and of a great number of Essene manuscripts at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, have given us documents of immeasurable value. Although publication and translation are not yet completed, much light has already been thrown on two problems that were extremely controversial until a generation ago.

A specific characteristic of the last several decades’ activities has been the amazing number of Asian religious texts that have been edited and, in many cases, translated for the first time into a European language. This editorial enterprise has been accompanied by the publication of a series of monographs spanning a range of scholarship difficult to imagine a few generations ago. The significance of such works is enormous, and the consequences of their publication are far-reaching.

The esoteric and occult traditions, misunderstood or neglected by former generations of scholars born and brought up in a positivistic milieu, constitute but one area of study on which recent research has cast new light. Here, much that was once obscure has been illuminated by, for instance, the classic monographs of Gershom Scholem on Qabbalah and on Jewish gnostic and mystical systems. Scholem’s erudition and insight have disclosed to us a coherent and profound world of meaning in texts that had earlier been generally dismissed as mere magic and superstition. Likewise, our understanding of Islamic mysticism has been radically improved by Louis Massignon’s works, while Henry Corbin and his disciples have revealed the neglected dimensions of Ismā’īlī esoteric tradition.

Also, in the past forty years we have witnessed a more correct and comprehensive appraisal of Chinese, Indian, and Western alchemies. Until recently, alchemy was regarded either as a proto-chemistry—that is, as an embryonic, naive, or prescientific discipline—or as a mass of superstitious rubbish that was culturally irrelevant. The investigations of Joseph Needham and Nathan Sivin have proved that Chinese alchemy has a holistic

structure, that it is a traditional science *sui generis*, not intelligible without its cosmologies and its ethical and, so to say, "existential" presuppositions and soteriological implications. And it is significant that in China alchemy was intimately related to secret Taoist practices, that in India it was a part of Tantric Yoga, and that, in the West, Greco-Egyptian and Renaissance alchemy was usually connected with gnosticism and Hermetism—all of which are secret, "occult" traditions.

A most surprising result of contemporary scholarship has been the discovery of the important role that alchemy and Hermetic esotericism have played in Western thought, not only in the Italian Renaissance but also in the triumph of Copernicus's new astronomy, in the heliocentric theory of the solar system. Frances A. Yates has brilliantly analyzed the deep implications of the passionate interest in Hermetism in this period. For almost two centuries, Egyptian magic, alchemy, and esotericism have obsessed innumerable theologians and philosophers, believers as well as skeptics and crypto-atheists. Yet, only recently has the importance of alchemy in Newton's thinking, for example, been revealed. Betty J. T. Dobbs has pointed out that Newton probed in his laboratory "the whole vast literature of the older alchemy as it has never been probed before or since." In fact, Newton sought in alchemy the structure of the small world to match his cosmological system.

Among many other examples of the progress realized in the last several decades, I may also recall the reevaluation of European popular traditions. Until the 1930s, the religious systems of Australian Aborigines and North American Indians were more seriously investigated, and were better understood, than were European folk traditions. On the one hand, researchers were interested mainly in folk literature; on the other hand, their interpretations of rituals and "popular mythologies" usually followed one of the fashionable theorists, such as Wilhelm Mannhardt or James G. Frazer. Furthermore, many scholars, in both eastern and western Europe, considered rural traditions as fragmentary and debased survivals from a superior layer of culture, from that, say, represented by the feudal aristocracy or that derived from church literature. In sum, taking into account the powerful influences of the church and of urban culture, one was inclined to doubt the authenticity or the archaism of rural religious traditions in Europe.

Recent and more rigorous studies have revealed a quite different situation. The Austrian ethnologist Leopold Schmidt, for example, has shown that certain mythico-ritual scenarios that were still current among peasants of central and southeastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century preserved mythologi-

cal fragments and rituals that had disappeared in ancient Greece before the time of Homer. Other scholars have concluded that Romanian and Balkan folklore preserves Homeric and pre-Homeric themes and motifs. According to the American linguist and anthropologist Paul Friedrich, "The attitudes of contemporary Greek peasants toward the Virgin Mary might bear in some way on our understanding of the Classical Demeter." And the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas has pointed out that the pre-Christian layer in Baltic folklore "is so ancient that it undoubtedly reaches back to prehistoric times—at least to the Iron Age or in the case of some elements even several millennia deeper." As to the archaism of Irish popular traditions, recent studies have demonstrated numerous analogies with ancient Indian ideas and customs.

Even more important, popular traditions around the globe reveal a specific originality in their reinterpretation of the Christian message. In many cultures, peasants practice what can be called a "cosmic Christianity," which, in a "total" history of Christendom, ought to have a place, for it represents a new type of religious creativity. Thus, parallel to the different Christianologies constructed both on Hebrew scriptures and on Greek metaphysics, one must also set the "popular theology" that assimilated and christianized many archaic traditions, from Neolithic to Oriental and Hellenistic religions. In this way, the religious history of Christian Europe will be deprovincialized and its universal values will become more evident.

I may also recall some of the results of contemporary work on the religious meaning—or function—of oral, and even written, literature. Some years ago, a number of scholars pointed out the initiatory symbols and motifs of certain categories of fairy tale. Significantly, almost at the same time many critics in Europe as well as in the United States began to investigate the patterns of initiation recognizable in various literary works. In both types of narrative, oral and written, we are led into an imaginary world, and in both we meet characters who undergo a series of initiatory ordeals, a common plot structure that is generally presented more or less transparently. The difference is that, while some fairy tales can be regarded as reflecting the remembrance of actual initiation rites practiced in the past, such is not true of modern literary works.

Specialists have also identified initiatory elements in such classical sources as the sixth book of Vergil's *Aeneid*, in a number of scenarios and personages of the Arthurian legends, in the neo-Greek epic *Digenis Akritas*, in Tibetan epic poetry, and elsewhere. Most probably, these elements are ghostly souvenirs of the distant

past, memories, vaguely recalled, of ancient initiatory rituals. But such cannot be so with initiatory structures found in modern literature from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* to the many novels of James Fenimore Cooper, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner. Nevertheless, these facts are relevant for an understanding of modern Western man. Indeed, in a desacralized world such as ours, the "sacred" is present and active chiefly in imaginary universes. But imaginary experiences are part of the total human being. This means that nostalgia for initiatory trials and scenarios, nostalgia deciphered in so many literary and artistic works (including the cinema), reveals modern man's longing for a *renovatio* capable of radically changing his existence.

Of course, this is only an example of the unconscious reaction against the desacralization of modern Western societies, in some regards a phenomenon parallel to the acculturation of many traditional ("primitive") cultures. This complex and delicate problem warrants far more attention than I can give it here, but I do wish to note that what has been called the "occult explosion" in contemporary North America belongs to the same desperate effort to react against the growing desacralization of the modern world, specifically the almost general crisis of the Christian churches.

The most significant advance in religious studies of the past several decades has been realized in our understanding of primal religions—that is, the religious systems of "primitive," nonliterate peoples. There is no doubt that improvement of fieldwork methods and the growing interest of anthropologists in depth psychology, linguistics, and historiographical methodology have contributed to this success. Especially the researches, hypotheses, and controversies in relation to myths and mythological thinking have played a decisive role. The once-popular theories of the intellectual inferiority of "savages," or of their "pre-logical mentality," have been obsolete for some time. Anthropologists and sociologists as well as historians of religions nowadays emphasize the structural coherence of "primitive" religious beliefs and ideas. Although, as is always true in humanistic disciplines, no general theory on the "primitive mind" has been universally accepted, one methodological presupposition seems to be shared by the majority of today's scholars: namely, the "normality" and, consequently, the creativity of the primal religions.

Indeed, it has been repeatedly pointed out that the archaic mind has never been stagnant, that some nonliterate peoples have made important technological discoveries and that some others have had a certain sense

of history. Such radical modification of our former understanding and evaluation of nonliterate religious traditions has been in part a consequence of growing interest in the structure and the morphology of the sacred—that is, in religious experience and in its ritual and symbolic expressions.

Progressively, scholars have realized the necessity of trying to discover the meanings given by nonliterate peoples to their own religious activities. W. E. H. Stanner, who dedicated his life to the study of Australian Aborigines, emphatically asserted that their religion must be approached "as religion and not as a mirror of something else." Stanner repeatedly criticized the fallacious presupposition "that the social order is primary and in some cases causal, and the religious order secondary and in some sense consequential." Equally significant is the affirmation of the British Africanist E. E. Evans-Pritchard that knowledge of Christian theology, exegesis, symbolic thought, and ritual better enables the anthropologist to understand "primitive" ideas and practices.

An obvious corollary may thence be drawn: that knowledge of the religious ideas and practices of other traditions better enables anyone to understand his or her own. The history of religions is the story of the human encounter with the sacred—a universal phenomenon made evident in myriad ways.

These, then, are some of the themes and topics that the interested reader will find in the hundreds of articles that constitute this encyclopedia. In planning it, the editors and the staff have aimed at a concise, clear, and objective description of the totality of human experiences of the sacred. We have, we hope, paid due attention to traditions both great and small, to the historical religions as well as to the primal religions, to the religious systems of the East as well as to those of the West. Wishing particularly to avoid reductionism and Western cultural bias, we have given far greater space to the religions of non-Western areas than have earlier reference books on religion. Finally, and in conformity with the international design of our encyclopedia, we have invited scholars from five continents to contribute articles related to their specific areas of research.

Our encyclopedia was not conceived as a dictionary, with entries covering the entire vocabulary in every field of religious studies. Rather, it was conceived as a system of articles on important ideas, beliefs, rituals, myths, symbols, and persons that have played a role in the universal history of religions from Paleolithic times to the present day. Thus, the reader will not find here entries on all the popes or on all the patriarchs of the Eastern churches, nor on all the saints, mystics, and mi-

nor figures of the various religious traditions. Instead, here is a great network of historical and descriptive articles, synthetical discussions, and interpretive essays that make available contemporary insight into the long and multifaceted history of religious man.

Here, among many others, are articles devoted to recent archaeological and textual discoveries and, particularly important, articles devoted to the reevaluation of facts and systems of thought ignored or neglected until a few decades ago: for instance, the history of Hermetism and of alchemy, the occult revival in our time, the creativity of "popular" religions, the millenaristic movements among contemporary "primitive" societies, and the religious dimensions of the arts. A more rigorous study of such themes not only illuminates their meanings but, in some cases, opens new perspectives on the evaluation of other cultural phenomena.

By consulting various entries in the encyclopedia, the reader will learn the latest results of anthropological research and the current evaluation of various primal religions. These, in turn, have led to the burgeoning contemporary interest in the structure, meaning, and functions of myth and of religious symbols. A number of articles herein are devoted to these subjects, which are equally important, I might add, for recent Western

philosophical inquiry. As a matter of fact, the exegesis of mythical thinking has played a central role in the works of many distinguished modern philosophers and linguists. Similarly, a more adequate understanding of symbolic thinking has contributed to the systematic study of religious symbols, and, thus, to a reevaluation of the central role of religious symbolism.

I need not list here other examples of recent methodological progress that has made possible our present comprehension of religious structures and creations. It suffices to say that the researches of the last half century concern not only the historian of religions, the anthropologist, and the sociologist but also the political scientist, the social historian, the psychologist, and the philosopher. To know the great variety of worldviews assumed by religious man, to comprehend the expanse of his spiritual universe, is, finally, to advance our general knowledge of humankind. It is true that most of the worldviews of primal societies and archaic civilizations have long since been left behind by history. But they have not vanished without a trace. They have contributed toward making us what we are today, and so, after all, they are part of our own history.

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