people better to live by this standard. People find guidance from religion, however, not just through moral tradition but in many ways. The next three chapters describe some of these ways.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION
1. To what extent is fear of punishment by God needed in society today to maintain good social order and morality?
2. Do people that you know find it easy to go against the opinions of their families and neighbors in order to do what seems objectively right in their own eyes?
3. How do you know what is really good or bad? Is it just a matter of individual feelings with no objective validity at all? Explain.
4. When others seriously hurt you or your friends or the weak and helpless, on what grounds can you say this is really wrong?
5. How would you feel if you had to admit to yourself that you are one of those who are careless about hurting others? Explain why you feel that way.

SUGGESTED READINGS
James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith, 1981. See the end of the chapters of Part IV for comments on changes in moral perspective.
Mary M. Wilcox, A Developmental Journey, 1979. A good general introduction to the ideas of Piaget and Kohlberg, including their theories on moral development.
Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development, 1993 (2nd ed.).

CHAPTER NINE
The Process of Tradition

RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND CULTURE
The introduction to Part II notes that we all must learn how to be human, and that it is our culture that teaches us this. Another word for culture could be “tradition.” The English word “trade” comes from the same root. Tradition is whatever is passed on or handed over to someone. Our parents, teachers, community, and whole culture passes on to us a way of seeing life and living life. That is tradition. It teaches us a way to be human.
Religion has normally been at the heart of every cultural tradition. The basic religious beliefs, values, and practices are usually part of the cultural air each person breathes, so much so that people do not consciously take note of this any more than of their own breathing. In our modern culture we are used to the idea that every person has the right to determine privately which religious tradition to follow, if any. We think of religion as a matter of personal conscience, between the individual and God. Because of that we do not always see the influence that religion has on culture. Even in modern times culture is given certain forms and directions by the presence of religious ideas in the air and by leaders and texts that our culture presents to us as respectable, authentic, or sacred.
Religiousness in turn is socially conditioned, that is, formed by the social context people draw from as they become who they are. Every culture and society is formed over many generations. They are the products of historical processes, of the patterns of human behavior and choices in an ongoing development generation after generation. It is human inventiveness at work over thousands of years, discovering endless possibilities of language, law, custom, value, roles, rules, all the things that go into making us who we are. All of this has a great impact on religious tradition because religion and culture are usually intimately intertwined.
People are not inclined to think that way about their own religious tradition. They tend to believe that the Law of Moses or the Bible or the Qur'an is to be accepted not because of cultural endorsement but because it is truly God's word. They believe in the authority of Moses or Jesus or Muhammad, they say, not because society tells them to, but because these people spoke for God. And yet it is also clear that much depends on where one was born, and to what family. Few Americans worship Vishnu or seek nirvana. Few Japanese pray to Allah and read the Qur'an. There is individual human choice involved, but choices are guided by society and culture, by a person's historical context. What most of us do is to trust that our religious tradition, the cultural heritage of our people, authentically represents the numinous reality as it really is. We implicitly trust that the cultural process that has led us to accept certain beliefs and values and practices is a process that has been in touch with the reality of the numinous, with God or the Tao or the gods or the ancestors.

People do change religions, even against the current of their culture. That is why cults exist at all. People also adhere to minority positions within a larger culture. The presence of Jews in largely Christian and Muslim lands, of Parsees (Zoroastrians) and Christians in India, attests to this. In each case certain people maintain an allegiance to a tradition that is not strongly supported by society as a whole. Even these traditions, though, exist within a social context and are affected by the currents of ideas and values flowing about them. Religious traditions have identifiable roots in the broader cultural traditions and historic patterns.

The interplay of religion and culture can vary over time. In India the Jain tradition is attributed by Jains to a series of twenty-four holy men, especially the last, known as Mahavira ("great man" or hero) and also as Jina (victor). Jainism was at first, as long ago as the sixth century BCE, a rejection of the authority of the Vedas, of Hindu ritualism, and of the caste system, although like the other "orthodox" Hindu traditions, including Buddhism, it accepted belief in karma and the wheel of rebirth. But over subsequent centuries, Jainism gradually re-absorbed many Hindu beliefs and practices.

Much later, beginning in the sixteenth century in India, a guru (religious leader) named Nanak tried to reconcile Hindu and Muslim belief, in the direction of a strict monotheism, through his Sikh beliefs and practices. Too austere for most Hindus and not orthodox enough for most Muslims, the Sikhs were often on the defensive. Nine more significant gurus led the Sikhs, one after another, each adapting to the needs of their respective situations. Since the end of the seventeenth century CE, Sikh males have followed the custom of becoming religious warriors prepared to fight and die for their homeland in the Punjab (in Northwest India), though part of the original Punjab is now in Pakistan). Sikh men wear their death shroud wrapped up as a turban on their heads, carry a large dagger, and let their hair and beard grow long. Sikhism, as it is sometimes called, is no longer so much a reconciliation of Hindu and Muslim traditions as a tradition of its own.

The prevalence of such long-term historical change makes it difficult to know the best way to characterize a given tradition. Protestant Christians, like the most traditional of Buddhists, hearken back to their original sources, as in the Bible or in classic early Buddhist texts. But Catholic Christians and Mahayana Buddhists are comfortable with a long history of further developments in beliefs and practices. Catholicism in particular can cite declarations of formal church councils, from at least 351 CE in Nicaea to the Second Vatican Council held in the 1960s. Orthodox Jews give primary respect to the Law of Moses encoded in the Pentateuch, the first five books of Hebrew scriptures. But they accept prophetic and historical books as commentary on the Law, as well as the Talmud as further commentary, at least up to the sixth century CE. Reform Jews in the nineteenth century made yet more adaptations to their times. So one can identify a tradition mainly with its original sources, or also with the results of long-term development.

If neither of these is adequate, one can look to current beliefs and practices. Certainly a Buddhist may feel that personal religious life as a Buddhist tells that person what true lived Buddhism is. Practicing Buddhists or Christians or Taoists may not be very well prepared to describe the true origin and history of development of their own traditions. Even while they ascribe antiquity to their own traditions, in practice it may be a rather recent form of it that a given person follows. Catholics raised in the forms set for the whole church by the sixteenth-century Council of Trent, for example, often have trouble recognizing that those forms are partly the result of a long developmental process and not simply truths set forth in the original Christian scriptures.

There are degrees of conformity and variety, change and stability, in every society and in religion. We will talk more about people's reasons for choosing to accept or reject their culture's tradition in a later chapter on knowing and believing. For now, though, we can see some of the ways tradition is formed, passed on, and interpreted.

THE LEADERS

People are normally very interested in finding out about mysterious powers and how to deal with them, or in discovering answers to life's ultimate mysteries. Anyone who can claim to understand, interpret correctly, or deal successfully with the mysterious and invisible powers in life is likely to be accorded special status and be respected. There have been a few people in
history, people like the Buddha and Lao Tzu and Moses and Jesus and Muhammad, who have had enormous impact. There are many more people who are less noticed but still very influential. Every culture has numerous religious leaders of various kinds, who learn the tradition and pass it on, or who live it with special vigor, or who modify it and gather a following for their new version of it. People readily look to special leaders for guidance and help in their relations with the numinous. Here are a few of the kinds of important religious leaders. It may seem confusing to consider so many different kinds. The purpose here is only to illustrate the many ways in which religious leaders can have influence.

Technicians of the Sacred

In any primitive society there are two main religious tasks that are performed by part-time specialists: healing and augury. The healers (in English sometimes labeled witch doctors or medicine men and women) are usually called shamans by anthropologists, who borrow the term from natives of Siberia. Siberian shamans must wrestle with spirits who cause disease and other ills. Shamans are also herbalists, using a variety of roots and herbs to aid in cures. Shamans are often also accomplished at augury, though others might share in this skill.

Archaic cultures around the world employ another technician of the sacred, the priest who performs rituals, especially ritual sacrifice. Though primitive people may sometimes offer gifts to keep the spirits happy, archaic cultures believe that the gods expect regular sacrificial offerings, whether of grains and fruits, or animals, or even human sacrifice. Permanent places of sacrifice, whether open air altars or enclosed temples, provide a locale for full-time priests to perform their duties. At this same place augury is liable to be carried out, either by the priests or by full-time "prophets," whose job it is to check animal entrails or organs or to analyze the movements of the stars, in order to discern the will of the gods or the course of fate.

The ancient Brahmin caste in India is an example of a professional priesthood. As far back as archaic times in India the young Brahmin boy would be assigned thousands of poetic chants to be memorized exactly. Countless ritual details had to be mastered until after years of training the Brahmin could function in the village or town as a priest performing the rituals to end drought or cure the sick or consecrate a marriage. In cities the Brahmins also maintained the constant rituals that helped to preserve the universe and keep it running smoothly. It was usually thought best to hire three priests at once, who would repeat the ritual chants and practices together. If one should make a mistake, the other two would correct him so that the ritual would not lose any of its power.

Historic religions have set great store by priestly function. Christianity, Buddhism, and the Hindu tradition still include major groups whose leadership is in the hands of priests. Usually they are no longer considered just technicians and ritual practitioners but learned guides also. Even in historic religions, however, what identifies a priest is still the ancient function of the technician of the sacred: a careful and proper performance of the ritual, especially ritual sacrifices, to control or influence various numinous powers.

As a rule, the role of the augur is not part of historic religion. The uselessness of augurs lies in the fact that a clear prediction of the future allows a person to avoid bad events. If the goat's intestines reveal that tomorrow is a dangerous day for a journey, then a person can stay home and be safe. Historic religions tend to consider this ability to manipulate one's own future and fortune an affront to an ultimate supreme Being or cosmic Power. Trust or submission is the proper attitude toward God's unavoidable will or the Tao's ultimate influence. Nevertheless, people belonging to a historic tradition find it comforting at times to employ prophets or soothsayers anyway. Trust in God, they may say; but for greater safety yet read your horoscope and consult your palm reader.

Wise Ones and Enlightened Ones

Confucian tradition has high respect for the sage, the wise one whose learning and insight and well-balanced perspective produce a life worth imitating and wisdom worth learning. Kung Fu Tzu (Confucius) himself is held in highest reverence because of his wisdom. He received no revelations, was not divine, did not practice any particular austerities or devote extra time to worship of the gods. He was not a prophet nor did he perform rituals. He was simply wise enough that China built an entire social order on his thought and maintain it fairly well for over two thousand years.

In fact, Confucian tradition should probably be thought of as a philosophy and not as a religion. But the so-called philosophical Taoism, the other great native tradition of China, has a religious respect for the Ultimate Tao. Taoism is also based on wisdom. It had its beginning supposedly in the brief writings of the legendary Lao Tzu. His name translates roughly as "the old man," implying that he probably was one whose age had taught him wisdom worthy of reverence. Lao Tzu was stopped at the border of China, the story goes, by a guard who would allow Lao Tzu to depart from China only on the condition that he write down his wisdom so it would not be lost. Lao Tzu quickly composed a few pages that became known as the Tao Te Ching, the Book of the Power of the Way (Way-Power-Book). About 250 BCE Taoism was strongly influenced by Chuang Tzu, whose great wisdom guided generations of Taoists. Neither Lao Tzu nor Chuang Tzu was said to be inspired
by the ancestors or given a revelation by the gods. Their authority lay simply in the wisdom of their words.

Buddhism also could be said to have its origin in wisdom. In this case it is the insight or enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama. Buddhism has its many priests and its holiness communities, but it was begun not by priests or monks but by the prince who turned to reflection and achieved enlightenment, thus earning the title of Buddha, "Enlightened One." At first, Siddhartha Gautama followed the path of Indian yogis and ascetics of his time, training himself in meditation and then fasting until his stomach met his spine. This did not provide release from sufferings. He was learning by experience. Finally, he sat one night in meditation under a tree and broke through into full enlightenment. He moved on then to teach others about what he had learned, giving his first lesson to a few others in a deer park at the city of Benares in northern India. Many came to follow his teachings. His insights into life somehow fit the experience of many who listened to him. Soon his teachings on life's suffering and on release into nirvana through detachment became the core of one of history's great religious traditions. (Not too many years later, that tradition began to describe the Buddha not merely as a wise man, but as the earthly form of a divine being who had taken in order to provide guidance to humankind out of compassion for our suffering.)

The Learned Interpreters

The Chinese sages and the Indian Buddha had all been influenced by ideas that were part of their culture. Lao-Tzu knew about the yang/yin of the Tao, because everyone in China knew about it. The Buddha believed we are all condemned to be reborn into suffering countless times, because that was becoming a widespread belief in India. Even the wisest and most learned have to start with some ideas and values from their cultural traditions. Sometimes the role of the wise and learned religious leader is explicitly acknowledged to be that of interpreter of the religious tradition. The Jewish rabbi is one such. So is the Islamic imam ("leader"), and the Protestant preacher.

After the return of many Jews from the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, the priests in Jerusalem were the religious leaders and custodians of the tradition. Since the law of Moses often needed recopying, the writers ("scribes") who did the copying came to know the law in detail. They often helped to interpret it. The role of the priesthood ended with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Romans. Without a temple in which to offer ritual sacrifices there was no need for priests in Judaism, so the learned interpreters of the law took over as the leaders of Judaism. They were addressed as rabbi, meaning teacher or leader. Their authority to this day comes from their learning. They know the law and the great body of interpretations of the law that accumulated and were gathered into a collection known as the Talmud ("teaching") by the sixth century CE. Today, the major religious leadership role in Judaism is that of the learned person, the interpreter of the law.

Continuing what began with the Jews in the West, Christians and then Muslims also compiled their own sacred texts. For centuries the leaders in Christianity were the priests. Then with the Reformation in the sixteenth century in Europe, many of the Protestant Christian churches eliminated priests and gave the leadership role to those who knew the sacred texts of the Bible very well and could interpret it and preach its message. In Islam the name ulama stands for a body of religious teachers who are learned in the Qur'an and can help others in interpreting and applying the will of God that is written there.

Rabbis and preachers and imams, Confucian sages and Taoist philosophers and Hindu thinkers, and even the priests of many traditions, are all called on to know the religious tradition and guide others to better understanding and application of it. At times in all the religious traditions, there are also those who claim great learning without having it, without even understanding what learning really is. Others equally unlearned will listen and not know the difference. Every tradition has some movements within it, movements which claim the authority of the tradition but which actually depart from it, sometimes without even realizing it. The problem of interpretation is one we will return to later in this chapter.

The Messengers: Great Prophets

English-speaking people are accustomed to use the word "prophet" to label individuals inspired by God to be his spokesperson and, sometimes, to predict the future, even if somewhat obscurely. The function of predicting the future is one that primitive and archaic prophets had, inasmuch as these prophets were really augurs, soothsayers, readers of omens. The best-known prophets are not soothsayers, however, but messengers of God who deliver information and guidance from God. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah, and Amos are some of the messengers of God in the Hebrew scriptures. The primary prophet in the Jewish tradition is Moses. The instructions from God transmitted through Moses provide the foundation of Judaic thought. In the New Testament Jesus is portrayed at times also as prophet, a new Moses bringing to the people a new understanding of God's will. In Islamic belief Muhammad is God's final and supreme messenger. His teachings are written in the Qur'an, though they are not really Muhammad's teachings. They are the eternal will of God recited by God's angel Gabriel to Muhammad so that he in turn could recite them to others. According to
Islamic belief the teachings of God delivered to Muhammad are the fulfillment of the teachings God gave to Moses, Jesus, and other prophets.

The Appointed Agents of God: Messiahs
We have seen that the name messiah is from a Hebrew word meaning "anointed." The ancient Semitic practice (still observed in a few cases today as in the Catholic ritual of confirmation) was to anoint with oil a person who was appointed to a special role. The kings of ancient Judea were anointed. The future king many Judeans hoped for is thus the anointed one, messiah. Christians are familiar with the Greek translation of the word. "Anointed one" in Greek is christos, shortened in English to "Christ."

As far back as the seventh century BCE, the prophet Isaiah had offered hope for an ideal king to come. This was associated with the "Day of the Lord" when Yahweh would bring about a peaceful kingdom, the ideal life without war or bloodshed. Subsequent generations continued to hope that God would send a leader in times of troubles. Most hoped for a king, a royal messiah. Others thought Yahweh might anoint a priest, a prophet, or a teacher to be the agent who would usher in God's kingdom. Some Jews speculated that perhaps it was not an individual person but the whole nation of Israel that was to be anointed by God to bring peace and happiness to all the world in a glorious millennial Day of the Lord. One result of all this was the growth of the apocalyptic thought described earlier. Another result was the birth of Christianity, originally a Jewish sect adhering to Jesus of Nazareth as the agent appointed by God to inaugurate the apocalyptic coming of the Day of the Lord and the Kingdom of God.

The notion of messiah belongs also to Islam. Some forms of Islamic tradition have looked forward to the arrival of a person sent by God to order things the way God wants them. This messiah will not reveal any new truths or instructions. The Qur'an is the last word on such things. But there is still need for a leader who has the authority to propel people toward accepting God's will and living their lives properly. The majority group of Islam, the Sunnis, look forward to a mahdi, one who is divinely guided. He will appear on earth near the end of the world. Shi'ite Muslims expect that God will send a very special imam to restore all things in the end. In various religious traditions it is possible to find messianic ideas. Perhaps the Buddha and other figures who bring salvation in some way can all be called messianic figures. Anyone who claims to function as the agent of God and lead people to salvation can now loosely be called a messiah.

Holy Ones
Some individuals become authorities in a religious tradition because they are thought to be very holy. They are not appointed by God or the gods to this role. It does not necessarily even require insight or wisdom or learning, although this is a deficiency that can make holy people very dangerous. Holiness is a difficult attribute to define. It usually consists of an intense devotion or dedication to the service of the divine or numinous. We often think of holiness as a moral quality; in that case, holiness is firm obedience of all moral laws and a superior measure of virtue such as patience and compassion. But holiness appears in other forms also. Some people are considered holy because they give up pleasures and practice great asceticism. In primitive and archaic societies especially, holiness is identical with sacredness; anything that reflects the presence of the numinous is sacred. This means that strange or mysterious persons are often considered holy, because it is the strange and mysterious that is the numinous. Epileptics are holy, for example. The words they say before or after a seizure are to be listened to as words from the spirits. Even the insane or mentally retarded are considered to be touched by the numinous and are to be treated as sacred. Religious leaders who have charisma, a powerful personality and style of presenting themselves, are often treated with special reverence or followed blindly.

There are people who institutionalize holiness. The monks and nuns in Eastern and Western religions seek holiness in this way. On the other hand, there are holy people who devote themselves to the divine in very individual ways, living as hermits. There are many who cross back and forth across such lines. St. Francis of Assisi was an individualist who devoted himself to God through a simple life of prayer and kindness. But he also assembled others into what became the Franciscan order of friars and nuns in the Catholic Church, although Francis himself did not remain very comfortable in his own order. In India there are gurus (teachers) who have schools of disciples, but when the guru dies the disciples move on. In the lifetime of the Buddha one of his followers, a cousin named Ananda, took the Buddha's ideas and helped make them the basis of a religious community. Holiness is sought alone or with others, in different ways around the world. Those who are considered holy for whatever reason are also respected as guides to the right way to live and deal with the numinous.

Incarnations and Avatars
The word "incarnation" literally means enshrinement or embodiment. It is used to indicate those persons who are not merely human but are in some way actually a god or God living somehow as a human person on earth.

Kings have sometimes been considered to be the incarnation of a god. The king of the Shilluk people along the Nile in the Sudan is actually the god Nyilkang. When the king dies the god moves on into the body of the next
The pharaoh of ancient Egypt was Horus, divine son of the god Osiris. Upon the pharaoh's death he became Osiris and the new pharaoh became his son, the new Horus. For many centuries, until 1959, the ruler in Tibet had been the divine priest-king, the Dalai Lama, the major leader of a form of Buddhism in that country. When one Dalai Lama dies, other priests go looking for the signs that tell them which young child is the new reincarnation of this divine being, the new Dalai Lama. The divine and awesome power that controls reality and society is present physically in the person of the king, pharaoh, or ruler-priests in these cases.

In other traditions it might be the relatively powerless who embody the divine. The guru of India is a person who is both wise and holy. The guru whose yoga training is far advanced can guide others in the path of salvation because the guru has already achieved the insight or enlightenment into ultimate truth. As a person approaches the ultimate truth, he or she discovers that the only true reality is the Atman or Self; this divinity lies within a person. The guru is one who has discovered the inner divinity we all have and are, insofar as we really exist at all. In that sense we are all incarnations of the divine, but only the guru is close enough to this inner reality to truly grasp it and guide others to a realization of their own inner divinity.

Another example of what is meant by incarnation is the Hindu belief in avatars. This word implies a descent from godly status to human existence. According to one Hindu tradition the god who has most often thus descended is Vishnu, worshiped by his followers as the supreme form that divinity takes (though Vedantic tradition says this divinity exists in other forms in other gods also, and ultimately is Brahman, beyond all the gods). The first avatara or incarnation of Vishnu was as a fish. Vishnu has been incarnate nine times so far, in fact. The avataras of Vishnu that is most important to many Hindus is his incarnation as Krishna. According to Vishnu's worshiper, the Buddha was another incarnation of Vishnu. There is still a tenth one to come called Kalkin, who will appear at the end of this long cycle of the whole cosmos.

The Christian use of the word "incarnation" is the most familiar one in the West. The fourth gospel in the New Testament declared that the divine Word of God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. In its rather complex doctrine of God, Christianity came to assert that the one God has within itself three distinct aspects or "persons," one of which is called the Son. This divine Son is also called "the Word" (Logos in Greek). It is the Son who is incarnate in Jesus, but through the Son the whole diviness of God is said to be incarnate in Jesus.

Both Jews and Muslims reject this Christian belief on the grounds that it makes God into a mere god. A god like Zeus could beget a son on earth and did so a number of times. A god like Vishnu could become enshrined as Krishna. But God is infinite and unchangeable, Jews and Muslims say. God is not anthropomorphic like Zeus, nor finite and changeable like Vishnu. So God cannot have a son, except perhaps poetically speaking, nor can God shrink down to a finite size to become human. In response Christians say that Jesus is not a god in disguise but is a fully human person who is nonetheless the real presence of the infinite and absolute God. The traditional Christian formulation says that in Jesus full finite humanness and full infinite divinity meet and join but without any mixing between the two. If this seems hard to understand, the Christian tradition says that is to be expected because God is truly infinite and incomprehensible, just as many Jews and Muslims also insist.

The Significance of Leaders

Religious leaders are often people who have spent many years in pursuit of the divine or the sacred. Every culture has its significant few, those more deeply perceptive, more compassionate, more dedicated, or even more desperate for religious meaning. But they do not produce their ideas out of the air. They plunge deeply into traditions, especially their own, drawing from them the materials from which they form saving insights or build structures of wisdom, morality, community, and contemplation. These support others in their search for meaningful existence in the face of the mysteries of life. Occasionally, leaders shift the direction and focus of their own tradition in ways that constitute the beginning of a new religion, a new way of achieving salvation from limit and estrangement through relation to the numinous. The new comes out of the old, however, and there is continuity between them. A few intensely religious people become leaders because their sensibilities and perceptions are human enough, however divine they might also be said to be, to make contact with the needs and hopes of others. Religious leaders are sometimes people with very special gifts of insight, eloquence, or leadership. Leaders with great abilities to influence their followers are sometimes called "charismatic" leaders, after the Greek word for "gift" (charism).

Some leaders initiate movements distinct enough from prior traditions that the movements are treated as cults. When the people of the ancient city of Antioch called the followers of Jesus "Christians," the Greek word they used was the equivalent of "Christics," much as followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church, are often called "Moonies." The Christian belief that Jesus was raised from the dead seemed too far from traditional Jewish belief to be just a variation of Judaism. Likewise, the Reverend Moon's belief that Jesus saved only human souls and that salvation of the body is yet to be achieved strikes Christians as aberrant.
But members of the Unification Church can hope that someday their movement will become accepted and as revered as the older form of Christianity. In a century and a half the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has achieved something like this, even though their founder and leader, Joseph Smith, was killed in 1844 by members of a mob who saw him as the leader of a powerful cult. Similarly, the nineteenth-century Bahá’í faith has gained respectability in various parts of the world, even though in its native Iran it is still called an apostasy from Islam by traditionalists.

Religious leaders have different kinds of authority over their followers. Some lead by force of personality, by persuasion and eloquence, others by the example of their lives, some by the claim to have divine support. But all of them lead mainly because they were first accepted by a few, and then by many, and then became part of the cultural tradition themselves. All of them spoke out of a cultural context that made them intelligible to others in the first place, and in ways that touch the humanity of others. All of them are significant because they contribute to the flow of tradition, for better or for worse.

Sacred Writings

Like religious leaders, sacred texts are focal points in religious traditions. Many traditions are based on scriptures of one kind or another. The word “scripture” merely means writings. To those unaccustomed to writing, it can seem wondrously magical that strange little markings can convey thoughts and words over distance and through time. Writing was originally developed for the ordinary purpose of keeping commercial and governmental records. Yet few human inventions have changed human cultures as much as the alphabet. Among the many writings in the world, there are some we still call by the special name, “scriptures,” to indicate that these writings are regarded as sacred.

To be classified as scripture or as sacred it is not enough, however, that the texts deal with the numinous. After all, libraries are filled with books on religion. Few of these books are considered sacred. To meet the standard for sacred scripture, a text must also somehow carry special authority. Those reading it must see it as a text that has a power, status, or authenticity that raises it above ordinary human writings. There are various ways of attaining this status.

Truth from Tradition

Some writings have a special status as sacred truth simply because they are traditional. The world’s cultures have usually had great reverence for the past and for tradition. Things handed on from long ago have a luster and an authority. They have endured and have achieved respect. What is new is untested and may soon pass away.

The earliest Christian texts were considered inferior writing by the educated people in the Hellenistic world of antiquity. But now Christians find them profoundly inspiring. Though the Qur’an exhibits a more-than-human beauty and power in the eyes of Muslims, those who drove Muhammad and his followers to leave Mecca and move to Medina perceived only human and sometimes odd sayings in those same verses. As such writings become familiar to new generations, heard repeatedly and even memorized, they acquire enormous respect and reverence.

Most of the world’s scriptures have some additional claim to sacred status besides being traditional. Those who accept a certain text as sacred will tell you that it was revealed or inspired by the gods or God. But if you were to ask how they knew that gods or God had revealed it, the answer would often be simply that everyone knows that; it is tradition that hands on the belief that the text is sacred. As long as everyone has assimilated the belief from prior generations that a certain text is truly sacred, then people will find it normal and natural to accept the text in that light. The longer it has endured as sacred, the more obvious it will seem that it is in fact a true and powerful link to the numinous realities it describes.

Wisdom Literature

The original book of Taoism is the Tao-Te-Ching, the Book of the Way ascribed to Lao-Tzu. The book gained acceptance because it was viewed as unusually perceptive and wise in its statements. Chuang-Tzu was highly respected in his lifetime as a very wise person. His sayings were recorded and now form part of the traditional writings of Taoism. Confucius was a great sage; many of his sayings were written down. In time many other bits of wisdom were linked to his name and added to the collection of sayings attributed to him, forming the Analects (sayings and stories) of Confucius.

The authority of the names associated with these writings is part of the reason they gained respect. Ideas attached to famous figures and human personalities achieve a little more “authority” in people’s imagination. But the Chinese wise men were famous because they were wise. It is not the fame of the authors but their wisdom that is supposed to be the basis for the authority of these Chinese texts. There are also texts in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, in Hindu writings, and in the Buddhist tradition that have authority because of the wisdom they contain.

Revelation and Inspiration

The most frequent explanation given by religious traditions for the sacred
status of certain writings is that those texts were produced not by humans alone, not even by the wisest of leaders, but by a divine being or power. The humans involved were merely the channels for the divine influence. Ideas that have come from a divine source are called either revealed or inspired. These words do not always have clear definitions, but there is a common distinction that is somewhat useful.

Messages directly given by a numinous being are most often called revelations. The avatara Krishna spoke at some length to a charioteer named Arjuna. These words are now recorded in the sacred Hindu writings known as the Bhagavad Gita, written in the early centuries of the axial age and still among the most beloved of Hindu texts. Ahriman Mazda, the Wise Lord, spoke to Zarathus. His followers wrote down these revelations as Zoroaster passed them on, recording them in the Avestas ("Jaws"). In Jewish belief God gave his law to Moses on Mount Sinai and later. Muslim tradition says that Muhammad received the words of the Qur’an from Allah by way of the angel Gabriel. These messages were all held in respect not because they were the words of a holy and wise person, but because they were spoken to a messenger from a divine being and, therefore, possessed undoubtable validity and importance. When these words were put in written form, they endowed the written texts with a certain sacredness. Not just the ideas and the words, but the texts themselves are treated with reverence.

Sometimes the words of sacred writings are not thought of as directly revealed by the numinous being but only inspired by the god or God in a general way that left the writer or speaker free to choose the particular words and images. The most ancient parts of the Hindu sacred writings known as the Vedas, for example, begin with poems for use in rituals, poems composed by seers known as rishis, who were said to be inspired when composing. Even though the author of the Old Testament book of Proverbs who collected the many folk sayings in one book does not seem to have claimed that God revealed these sayings directly, Jews and Christians have traditionally treated the book as somehow the result of divine inspiration.

The Complexities of Sacred Writings
The fact that the authority or sacredness of given texts can derive from tradition, wisdom, revelation, inspiration, or any combination of these all at once, is one source of complexity. The Vedic tradition actually encompasses all of these categories. Similarly, most Christians think of the scriptures as a mix of direct revelation (e.g., God’s words to Moses), inspiration (e.g., Paul’s New Testament letters), and wisdom (e.g., the book of Ecclesiastes).

The historical nature of many texts is the main cause of this complexity. Religious people can mentally lump their own scriptures together as sacred texts produced “back then” when God spoke or inspired certain people. But “back then” can cover many centuries. The earliest words of the Vedic tradition may go back to 1500 BCE, but this tradition includes writings from the sixth century BCE, and perhaps even more recent times. The Jewish tradition began taking written form in the tenth century BCE, but received major additions, including a large body of interpretative writings, up until the sixth century CE.

Even texts put together in a relatively short time have a history. The Christian New Testament texts were produced in about sixty years’ time (50-110? CE). But the first texts were based on sayings and stories already in circulation for over twenty years. For a long time Christians were not sure which of the many early writings should be counted as authoritative. There are lists of scripture used by Christians in the second century that include books like "The Shepherd of Hermas" and "The Epistle of Barnabas" but exclude the Book of Revelation (the "Apocalypse"). It was not until after 150 CE that there was significant agreement on just what books should be included as part of scripture and which excluded, though arguments continued for many years thereafter.

According to Muslim tradition, the Qur’an was delivered by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad over a period of but a few years. But then another historical process followed. Muhammad transmitted verbally to people around him the various sayings that make up the Qur’an. These others had to write them down, a process that continued (and may not have started until) after Muhammad’s death. For a while there was more than one list of these sayings, in various orders. An early Caliph (“successor” to the Prophet as leader of the community) is said to have ordered a single text to be compiled and the other versions destroyed. Most of the sayings were put in order according to their length, rather than in chronological or topical order. The earliest versions seem to have lacked vowel marks. When vowel marks were later added, this determined the meaning of some words that were otherwise ambiguous. Even then the clearest words had yet to be applied to life’s varied and complex situations, and so a tradition of interpretations, as well as methods of interpretation, arose to guide people.

INTERPRETING TEXTS
A Desire for Certainty
People who live by a religious tradition like to be able to feel that the basics of their tradition are well settled and clear. Religions fulfill very important human needs. They make sense of life in the face of suffering, injustice, and confusion. They provide a sense of belonging and identity. They give help,
comfort, and security. All this is possible provided that the religious tradition can speak clearly and authoritatively. When people turn to religious leaders and sacred texts they usually do not want to hear conflicting voices and changing opinions. When they do hear of conflict and change, they either try to dismiss it as peripheral and insignificant, or they attack it as serious error. On the whole, religious believers manage to maintain some sense that what they believe is the unchanging and firm truth.

This sense of stability and certitude, however, must be won by continuous effort, especially by the historic religions. Primitive religion takes stability more or less for granted in its one-possibility universe (sometimes changing nonetheless without much fuss). Archaic religion is open to a variety of beliefs. With so many gods and powers about, there is always a new one to learn about. Historic religion, though, contains what it believes to be universal and all-inclusive truth. The one God or supreme Reality rules all things at once. All aspects of life must be integrated into one all-embracing religious story of reality. (We will see more about this in the chapter on reason and faith.)

The historic belief system expressed in some leader’s words or in sacred scripture seeks to spell out the basic and final unity to everything. This will include a description of the ultimate numinous reality, ultimate salvation including identity and belonging, the moral requirements of life, and all other necessary means for relating to the numinous. It can be difficult, though, to maintain such a complex unity. Life goes on. Ideas change. New problems arise. Stability and unity of religious existence is maintained only by a constant effort at interpreting the tradition and applying old values to new contexts.

### The Necessity of Interpretation

The actual use of the Qur’an by Muslims is an example of this. Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the set of instructions on life given by the Almighty, ordained from all eternity as the final and full truth for human beings. Muslims look to these words, therefore, to settle disputes about religious matters. But problems of interpretation quickly arose. To this day there is a dispute over who is to be the major political leader among Muslims, dividing especially Sunni from Shiite, but raising questions for Muslims in general. Other difficult questions had to be addressed. How were non-Arabic people to be joined to an originally Arabic religion? Must even the poorest and most distant Muslim make a journey to Mecca, as required by the Qur’an? Should the yearly all-day fast during the month of Ramadan be kept strictly, even by Muslims who happen to be living in countries where most people do not observe this fast?

In cases like these Muslims apply Hadith, sayings and practices attributed to Muhammad but not found in the Qur’an. There is no single collection of Hadith that is the sole authoritative collection. In addition during the early centuries of Islam a body of laws known as the Shari’a (the Way) was articulated on the basis of the Qur’an and Hadith and common practice. There are at least four major schools of Shari’a for Sunni Muslims. When Shari’a does not provide answers, then a consensus of opinions of learned imams may be followed. Individual Muslim scholars may also issue a ruling (fatwa) for a specific case. Interpreting how a good Muslim is to live in accordance with God’s will can be difficult. The same is true in any religion. There must be interpretation; it is unavoidable. And once people begin to interpret the tradition or the texts, they may disagree.

Sometimes interpretations of scriptures are collected into a kind of adjunct scripture. In India, Vedic commentaries known as the Brahmanas and the Upanishads took on a sacred character of their own. As noted earlier in this chapter, Judaism treats the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Bible: the Pentateuch or Torah) as most sacred, but it also reveres the words of the prophets and other writings as holy commentary on the Law, and has added to all this the learned commentaries of early rabbis assembled into the collection known as the Talmud. Many Christians rely on the great councils of church leaders in the first five centuries of Christianity as authoritative interpretations of scripture. It was only in 325 CE that Christians found formally explicit words to express their belief that Jesus is truly and fully divine, the Logos of the Trinity incarnate, rather than only a god or a son of God. And it was not until the following century that they found the right words to express that Jesus is also completely human and that Jesus’s humanity remained fully distinct from his divinity. Most Christians, though not all, have accepted these ideas as the correct way to interpret what their bible says. The complexity of these beliefs illustrates why interpretation is difficult.

There are countless more instances of the complex and historical process of interpretation. It is important to have seen at least a few of them in order to appreciate interpretation and why it is necessary, because religious traditions sometimes obscure or even hide their own dependence on interpretation and reinterpretation. The reason for this is that the problem of interpretation is not just how to do it well, but that it has to be done at all. The need for interpretation suggests that the answers to life and how to live it are still not fully clear, that there is still some uncertainty.

It is here that religious leaders can become especially important. Among the religious believers there can be those who officially or unofficially carry the burden of deciding for others what the best interpretation of the scriptures and the whole tradition might be. Gurus and charismatic leaders, messiahs and incarnate divinities, holy ones and priests, learned interpreters and
wise ones, all can give their followers a sense that certainty does exist, that there is some clear and authoritative message people can confidently obey without doubt or confusion. Some religious groups claim that their leaders may even receive ongoing divine guidance in interpreting the tradition and scriptures. Catholics make this claim for the Pope under certain precise circumstances; Mormons do likewise for their chief elder.

**Literal or Loose Interpretation**

Leaders and ordinary believers alike often have difficulty deciding how literally to interpret their sacred writings. A strictly literal interpretation can provide a divinely authoritative set of specific and exact instructions, it would seem, on how to live and what to believe. A strict literalism might thereby eliminate confusion and insecurity. Such literalism has become known as fundamentalism.

Early in the twentieth century, a number of Protestant clergy, theologians, and believers reaffirmed traditional fundamental beliefs of Christianity. Among these was the belief in the “literal inerrancy” of scripture. This belief says that the sacred scriptures of Christian tradition are exactly as God wanted them to be. God inspired the writers to record without error all that God wished to be revealed through Moses, the prophets, Jesus, Paul, and others. Because these Christians called this a fundamental belief, the name fundamentalism has come to be applied to claims of literal inerrancy of the scriptures. Among Jews, those who are called Orthodox are rather fundamentalistic about the Torah and Talmud as words to be obeyed exactly. Traditional Islam has been fairly fundamentalistic about the Qur’an, though there are different schools of interpretation in Islam also. In India there is a Ninsana (interpretation) school that insists that the Vedas are absolutely and literally true.

In every tradition there are scriptural passages, though, that do not lend themselves to literal interpretation. Many Jews and Christians have come to believe that the biblical story about the sun stopping dead in the sky while the followers of Joshua battled with their opponents is not literally true, though once it was taken that way. It seems obvious now that the heaven above is not a hard “firmament” holding back the waters of chaos from descending upon the earth, even though that is how the first chapter of the biblical book of Genesis describes the world.

In every tradition there are also reasons given why even clear instructions in the scriptures should not always be obeyed literally. Not all Muslim nations now amputate the hand of a thief. Few nations with Christian backgrounds are now inclined to stone witches. Every tradition has found some ways of interpreting its own scriptures in new ways when that seems useful.

Careful research has often reinforced this tendency towards loose and more figurative or poetic interpretations. Buddhist texts tell of a virginal conception of the Buddha through his mother’s side. A historical analysis suggests that this story was based more on an imaginative writer’s desire to offer a strong image of the Buddha’s significance than on historical fact. Jews and Christians share the biblical stories about Adam and Eve, the first humans. Scientific data about the age of the earth and about human ancestry suggest that the Adam and Eve stories should not be taken as literal history but as myth-stories that captured some general truths about life.

The intent behind a loose and more figurative interpretation of scriptures has usually been a respectful one. It is not an intent to destroy the reliability of the scriptures but to get at a broader and more symbolic meaning behind all the specific detail, in order to bring that general meaning into greater clarity for people. If there never was an Adam and Eve, for example, the Jew or Christian could still see in the stories a general truth that somehow humankind has ended up estranged from the ultimate wholeness we need. If there never was a Noah’s ark coming to rest on the peak of Ararat, the story of the rainbow and the dove with an olive branch could still be a vivid image about having hope in new beginnings under God.

No matter how good the intent behind these loose interpretations, though, efforts of this kind are seen by more literal minded believers as misguided and dangerous. Religious people are people for whom the mysteries of life are real and important enough to make the religious ways of dealing with these mysteries also important. To some extent a general basic faith in the meaning and value of life carries people on in the face of mystery, but that faith is still threatened by confusion, doubts, and personal trials. As was noted earlier, highly literal and unquestioning adherence to religious instructions in scriptures can provide a greater feeling of security and certitude. Loose interpretations, on the other hand, can suggest that the sacred scriptures are just poetic stories or unclear and vague messages that must be interpreted by the already uncertain human mind.

Nevertheless, every reading of scripture, even the ones that are intended to be the most literal, will include a great deal of interpretation and reinterpretation. Scriptures and the words of religious leaders are not passed on to believers on a one-way, perfectly clear course. Instead there is an ongoing interaction. The sacred words are expressed in a particular language and a cultural context. That context provides religious leaders and writers with questions to be answered, and categories of thought, value, images, and words to be used in answering them. The religious message, whether it comes from wisdom, insight, or divine revelation, has to be expressed in a culture’s categories. The message is then passed on to listeners and readers who receive the message as a way of interpreting their own lives and the reality
they live in. Since they have their own way of perceiving reality and have their own categories of thought, they add their own interpretations to what is passed on to them, sometimes without noticing that they are doing so.

And so it goes down through the generations: leaders, scriptures, interpreters, commentators, and readers or listeners all interacting and forming a chain of tradition. It is a living chain, a flowing back and forth of interpretations and reinterpretations that enable people to make sense of their lives through relation to the numerous in the face of the mysteries of existence. The guides of religion are not static signposts but living currents in the overall human adventure that is religion.

Each generation tends to focus most clearly on the particular leaders and interpreters of texts that their family and recent cultural history have handed to them. Each generation tends to place its faith in the rather specific instructions provided by the religious context in which it comes of age. Each generation faces the mystery and deals with it by means of the detailed beliefs and moral rules that its historical setting has made plausible. In every case there has been the temptation to overlook or deny that the texts, leaders, and interpretations are in fact part of an ongoing historical process. There is the constant tendency to deny that any real change ever takes place. But no tradition is a package of unchanging beliefs, values, and practices. Tradition is a living process. As we will see, it is modern (and postmodern) religion that will admit most fully the fact of ongoing change as part of its own story and life. Modern (and postmodern) religiousness will also turn out to be the most open to uncertainty and flexibility about its own specific beliefs.

Summary

Each religious tradition has its leaders and texts that interpret life and reality for people. The importance of interpreters and interpretations is attested to both by the many varieties of religious leaders and sacred texts that exist, and also by the trust that people put in their traditional leaders and texts. What is less noticed but is an intrinsic part of the story is that the religious activity of interpreting life is an ongoing process, with each generation guided in slightly new or different ways, so that to trust a tradition is actually also to trust a process of development.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. List and explain all the ways you can think of that your ideas, values, and personality have been formed by tradition in some sense.

2. Give some examples of ways in which you and others show trust in your traditions.

3. Which specific leaders have you followed in some way? Moses or Jesus or Buddha? Luther, Wesley, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mother Teresa? Why?

4. Is there any good way to tell which sacred writings are most worthy to be accepted as truly sacred? How about The Book of Mormon or the Divine Principle of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon or the Tao-Te-Ching?

5. Do you think it is legitimate to select or reject sacred texts on the basis of their rational plausibility? Their moral value? The emotional comfort they provide? On any basis? Explain.

6. If any sacred text is truly revealed or inspired by a numinous being like God, then is not a fundamentalist interpretation of it the best one? Explain.

SUGGESTED READINGS


Dominic Goodall, ed. and tran., Hindu Scriptures, 1996. This is based on an earlier anthology by R. C. Zaehner of some significant segments of Hindu sacred writings.

Mary Pat Fisher and Lee W. Bailey, An Anthology of Living Religions, 2000. Presents extensive excerpts from world scriptures, past and present, to illustrate many religions, with liturgical texts relevant to the following chapter.