chapter 1

The Study of Religion

During the fall of 1985, I spent a sabbatical semester in Japan. I was interested in learning something about the beliefs, ideas, images, and ritual life of the Japanese people. Perhaps you will think this pursuit is a strange thing for an Americanist to do. After all, I have spent much of my professional life studying what is called "religion in America" and "American religion," and I am directing this book toward an understanding of religion in the United States. However, I wanted to gain some perspective from another culture, another history, another place with religious traditions. Japan is a fascinating land, with marvelously hospitable people. But, of course, they are human beings like the rest of us. They eat and sleep, eliminate waste, engage in sexual relationships, get angry, give birth, and die. They long for peace and they make war—just like the rest of us.

There are two sets of issues that interest me as a scholar of religion. One set comprises those things that people believe, think, and do that are often ignored by official representatives and spokespersons for conventional religious traditions like Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. Such concerns come under the heading of "folk religion." Japan has a long history of folk religion, and scholars have been studying it for a long time. I went to Japan to study folk religion because I wanted to learn how to study folk religion in the United States.

The other issue that occupies my thinking and tempers my reading is that there are often beliefs, ideas, images, and practices that are closely associated with a nation, a people. In other words, sometimes just being a Russian or an American is like belonging to or following a religious tradition, like Judaism or Christianity. Early in the twentieth century British journalist G. K. Chesterton called America the "nation with the soul of a church." And there is little doubt that Americans attach religious significance to the land and its destiny. I knew that the history of Japan was based on a story about the descent of the emperor and his people from Amaterasu-Omikami, the holy

daughter of the sun. I wanted to find out how the sense of peoplehood in Japan expresses itself religiously in society and its culture.

I discovered many things in Japan. It is a land of contemplation. Through the centuries there has marched a long procession of pilgrims—poets and thinkers in search of the soul of existence. In beautiful words and ideas they have celebrated the order and meaning of life. Some of these thinkers have identified themselves with known religious traditions like Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism. However, these imported traditions have quickly developed a distinctly Japanese character. Today we may hear of the Kyoto school of Buddhist philosophy. And a student of Zen Buddhism quickly learns that, in spite of the Chinese heritage to which Zen is indebted, it is a Japanese form of Buddhism. To observe Japanese culture is to discover that what human beings call religion can be a very contemplative, philosophical, or aesthetic affair. Their religious life takes expression in what we recognize today as a very secular and techno-corporate society.

I saw a tiny, very old Shinto shrine on the grounds of the Sapporo Brewery in Hokkaido. In fields and mountainsides throughout Japan I saw *torri,* gates leading into the sacred precincts of a local shrine. And at the great shrines like Ise, Atsuta in Nagoya, Meiji in Tokyo, or Shiogama on the northern coast of Honshu, I saw hundreds of people making offerings, saying prayers, and receiving special readings of their individual futures. There is not much conscious thought or study given to such practices; people just do them. These actions, too, are part of what we are accustomed to calling religion.

Japan is a land of festivals. There are solemn occasions that take focus at the Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples. But there are also times of great festivity when people feast, dance, parade, and drink great quantities of *sake*. The great festival of the dead, *Bon,* celebrated in August with prayer, fires, feasting, and games, is an occasion that plays an important role in the religious life of Japan. There is such diversity in Japan. Yet all these things may be called religion.

I think of the United States and remember the Memorial Days of my childhood and youth. I once had to deliver a five-minute address at a ceremony held in a cemetery near my home. We marched together with bands playing "Onward, Christian Soldiers," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "The Stars and Stripes Forever." And after the prayers and the hymns and addresses, we went home for a special feast. Memorial Day, like Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July, was an important religious occasion.

On a visit to a Jewish synagogue in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, one may observe a curious excitement over the interpretation of texts and a solemn recitation of prayers that reach back into the hearts of people whose voices have been silent for centuries. One can visit a pentecostal assembly in an auditorium in any American city and observe the jerking movements and hear the groans and cries of people overwhelmed in ecstasy by the Holy Spirit. These pentecostals are a variety of Christian people. One can walk into the precincts of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine or St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan or the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, also known as the National Cathedral in Washington, and find an uplifting silence that dissolves all anxieties and burning desires. Visits to such places as the National Cathedral have been known to demonstrate, even to children from religiously indifferent families, that life is awesomely more than it seems to be. Cathedrals are also places in which to observe or participate in very dignified and stately ceremonies that are nothing like the routine activities of our daily life and work. These sacred precincts and their practices belong to all of the people of the nation in addition to their special significance to many who would call themselves Christian.

On the Hopi mesas of north central Arizona, one may observe some of the kachina rituals. The kachinas are the sacred beings who share their spirit with the Hopi people. They are not so much gods to be worshiped as they are honored and powerful associates. When the dancers in their kachina costumes impersonate those spirits, they lose their personal identity and are transformed into kachinas. The rituals put the people in touch with the power of fertility that is fundamental to the life they celebrate. The messengers visit each house of the village, bringing a cornhusk "to be breathed upon." It contains pollen and prayer feathers. The seed corn is blessed inside the sacred kivas, Hopi ceremonial huts, and as each collector climbs the ladder to leave the kiva, he simulates sexual intercourse. Everyone in the community knows the mystery of life, its beginnings and endings. America is a place of great religious diversity.

We could continue to fill in vast murals in our depiction of the great diversity of beliefs, ideas, and practices that are part of American life, its history and culture. How is it possible that all of this may be called religion? There are those who would insist that a religion is a system of belief in a supreme being, but there are many human traditions in which the notion of a supreme being or beings is not a central issue. Accordingly, it is necessary to ask: Then what exactly is religion? Why do we give the name *religion* to such a diverse set of ideas and practices?

Toward a Definition of Religion

First of all, it is necessary to accept the fact that religion cannot be defined in terms of what we think it ought to be. After all, we all have convictions of one sort or another about such matters. A Shiite Muslim may wish to suggest that the Shiite way of practicing the traditions of Muhammad and the Qur'an is the only true religion. Therefore, to that Muslim, that particular way is the only one, and there are no others. A born-again American evangelical Christian may wish to conclude that true religion is personal acceptance of the salvation provided to the individual by the atonement of Jesus Christ and that anything else is not really religion. A skeptic may view all such matters as evidence of human ignorance or naïveté, silly superstition, a hangover from an age of credulity. All of these attitudes are evidence of a normative understanding of religion. That is, the people who make these assumptions are creating a norm for defining religion—a norm that is based on individual or group convictions and commitments.

In order to study religion, it is necessary to set aside our norms for what religion ought to be or how we define the word. We must accept the fact that religions involve many elements of the lives of human beings like ourselves who are no less and no more intelligent than the brightest or dullest among us and who have needs and relationships common to all. It is our business to understand to the best of our ability what a Buddhist is and what Buddhism means. We must be ready to understand what the religious assumptions and practices of a member of the Fellowship of Atheists really are. In our opinion or according to the norms of our own faith, the Buddhist or the atheist may be a representative of false religion or less-than-adequate religion. But they exist. Their ways of living are part of the human story. They are to be understood. No religious movement may be dismissed by calling it a cult and exiling it to the status of the inferior or the ignorant.

Once we are prepared to understand, we are ready to ask: What do all of those diverse beliefs, ideas, and practices to which we ascribe the term *religion* have in common? A definition emerges: Religion is the systematic set of expressions that reflects the ultimate order, meaning, and possible transformation of existence for a people. Let us see what it means to make such a statement. Let us begin with the phrase "set of expressions." Whatever else human beings are, they are religious. "Religion," wrote Thomas Luckmann, "is rooted in a basic anthropological fact: the transcendence of biological nature by human organisms."[1] The acorn knows no freedom, no transcendence. It matures on the oak tree and falls to the ground. In the process of

decay, a "coded message" of nature may draw it into the earth where it will root itself to become a sapling, perhaps one day an oak tree. It is a biological organism, with no conscious stake in its destiny. So far as we know, there is no freedom, therefore no choice, no responsibility, for the acorn. But as human beings, we are more than biological organisms. There is a "more than" quality to our existence. We transcend—rise above—our own existence. There is an element of freedom to our being, so we also have a measure of responsibility for our lives. We must make choices, decisions; sometimes the failure to make conscious decisions introduces surprise, accident—perhaps serendipitous results—into our lives. The existence of the acorn is in this world and of this world. We, on the other hand, see what is invisible to the acorn. We reflect upon its world and our own. We are not "of a piece" as is the acorn. As William James put it in his 1895 essay, "Is Life Worth Living?" a human being lives in this world while being aware of the fact that the world may be more than it seems to be. In fact, we know that there is much that we do not sense, much that may not be accessible to our ordinary, workaday minds—no matter how intelligent or scientific those minds may be. Human beings are forced to speculate, to imagine, to intuit, and think that what we do not see, what is outside our coded sensual existence, may have an essential role to play in our lives. The only way to ignore this "more than" quality to our existence is to act as if we were acorns—an action much more detrimental to us than to acorns. The acorn does not need to integrate its existence; we do.

The word *religion* comes from the Latin *re ligare,* which means to bind together. The word came into use as a reference for those human ways of integrating existence, of expressing meaning in an integrated universe. We are creatures who must be able to perceive the world as whole, with ourselves sharing that wholeness. This is what we mean when we say that human beings are religious. In some sense it means that all of us are religious because the integration of existence is never an entirely private or individual affair. Being religious does not mean being pious or even practicing a religion.

Expressions of Religiousness

Does this mean that we can be religious in many ways, that anything and everything can become the occasion for us to express our religiousness? One answer is yes. The history of religions is the story of the many ways in which virtually everything in this world has been the focus of human religiousness

in some way and at some time or another. An animal, a rock, a mountain, a hole in the earth may become sacred. In becoming sacred—holy—it serves as an occasion to make life whole.

Whatever else we may be, we are religious because of our transcendent character as human beings—our need for integration. Our religiousness expresses itself in several ways. First, it expresses itself as experience. Experience has two sides to it, the one subjective, the other objective. We are very used to limiting experience to its subjective side, in which it comes to mean something intense, private, and filled with feeling. We may ask someone, Have you ever had a religious experience? In doing so we are wondering whether that someone can point to some emotionally charged incident that was mind-altering or that disrupted ordinary consciousness, such as a vision, receiving an important message, or communication with the "spirit world," or merely the consciousness of some great warmth or inrushing presence—a sense of not being alone. Subjective experience of this kind is a common form of religious experience. It may result in a centering or reorganization of our lives. And, of course, we may not even call it religious.

But experience means something else as well. When we apply for a job, the personnel director may ask us what experience we have had. Obviously, she or he is not inquiring into our private psychology but wants to know whether we have worked with ideas and skills that are related to responsibilities we might have with her or his organization. In the same way, a person may speak or write of having experienced World War II. The reference is to having been in touch with the war in some way that the person's thoughts, ideas, and ways of doing things were affected. This reflects *objective* experience, by which we imply a "living through." That is to say, experience is not only the private, subjective, and emotional, but it is the act of "living with" someone or something in such a manner that we can discover special significance. We can experience education, Jewishness, or World War II. Often we may not be aware of this kind of experience; it may have no intense or explosive moments. But objective experience may be even more important than the subjective kind. And for many of us such "lived with" and "lived through" occasions may well be more important than the peak subjective experiences we may sometimes have. Human religiousness expresses itself in subjective and objective experience. The point is that we humans are social beings and find ultimate order and meaning through the family, the village, the nation, and participation in groups that share a common story.

As transcendent beings, our religiousness also expresses itself in images and ideas that are best described as storytelling. We live not so much in a

world as in a perception of the world. The mind works with images and ideas that tell a story. The traditional words for such storytelling are myth and legend. Myths are the stories we live with that let us know who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. Myths are inescapable. Even the scientist becomes a mythmaker when telling a story of why things happen, creating images of particles and fluidity, and communicating a perception of the world that many people can live with. The perception of the world satisfies the scientist's own religious need (at least to a point) and lends hope that "things will be better" if everyone lives the story offered.

The people responsible for the emergence myths of the Hopi and the ancestors of the Jews and Christians who gave us the Genesis stories were expressing their sense of having a meaningful and ordered place in the world in which they found themselves. The only means we humans have of expressing our transcendence is through myth and story. Only if we are acorns will there be no myths. Only if human beings do not stand beyond their own organism to view it and take responsibility for it will there be no need for myths and stories.

But there is another kind of story besides myth that expresses our religiousness. We call it legend. No individual and no committee creates a legend or a myth. Both are cultural products. They emerge like the shape of the houses in which we have been living for centuries. A legend differs from a myth in that it is related to the significance of a person or an event. A legend dips into and touches history. A myth reaches into the darkness before and beyond history. It creates images of origins and images that place us in the world of time and place—history. Myth tells us who we are and helps to sustain us in our going. Myth is not a negative thing to be exorcised; it should not be confused with a misconception—an erroneous idea. It is a creative reality to be explored and nurtured. No human lives without myth.

Legend, on the other hand, is a story that tells us about the importance or the meaning of a certain happening or person. The exodus of the Jews from captivity in Egypt thousands of years ago is known to us by way of legend. That some such event occurred in Hebrew and Egyptian history is quite likely. But the event itself is not nearly so significant as the meaning it has held in Jewish—and Christian—memory. The meaning and power of whatever occurred is so much a part of the event that the only means of expressing it is through a storytelling form we call *legend*. A historian may try to find evidence to discredit the event but only does so out of a desire to get at the heart of its significance. It will still continue to be important because it furnishes images of hope necessary to human existence. As transcendent beings, we

always look to a future, and in order to do so hopefully, we reach into the depths of history and tradition for the images that serve as paradigms—examples and patterns of hope. The sermons and addresses of Martin Luther King Jr., delivered at the height of the black civil rights movement, drew heavily upon images received from the legend of Exodus. The legends of Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett tell us what frontier American values were, what life on the frontier meant to people in the nineteenth century. It is difficult to separate the significance of these men from the actual circumstances of their lives because they have become legendary figures. In the same way, we carry legends of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and speak reverently of the "founding fathers." All this storytelling activity is an expression of our religiousness, our transcendent need to express order and meaning in existence.

Another expression of our religiousness is conceptual. When it becomes necessary to think about the ultimate order and meaning of life, we develop ideas. We try to make sense of things. Our minds work at clarifying our understanding of these matters. We form concepts—ideas we can use to talk to ourselves and to others. The end result may be a set of seemingly private theories and convictions, or it may be an articulation of teachings we have knowingly received from a great teacher or tradition. All people are thinking people who must clarify and communicate ideas of how life is ordered and what it means. That thinking is an expression of our religiousness.

Our religiousness also expresses itself ethically. As Plato said, "the unexamined life is not worth living." One reason we examine our lives and try to find concepts that satisfy us is that we have some concern for the way we should live. That is, we seek a reliable pattern or set of motivations for our behavior. That is called *ethics,* and it is seldom a private affair inasmuch as we would not be much concerned about behavior if we were individual and separate atoms in the scheme of things. We would only be concerned about not hurting ourselves. Having to live with "others" (others as humans, others as animals, others as trees and water) poses the necessity of finding a way to behave—a way to live, to make life "worth living." And we must learn how and why to do certain things and not others.

Of course, there are actions we take as human beings that are not so much concerned with right behavior and right living as with our sense of participation in the ongoingness of existence. A man comes home from his construction job on a Monday evening in the fall of the year. He hurries to empty the garbage and eat the TV dinner he has shoved into the microwave. He takes

off his shoes and shirt and opens his belt, letting his stomach ease out from under the edge of his T-shirt. He slides into his recliner, elevates his feet, and grabs the remote. On the table next to him is a bowl of chips, some salsa, and a can of beer. He watches the Dallas Cowboys play the Detroit Lions. This man is a ritualist, as we all are. As a transcendent being he is not simply a functioning biological organism. He has to act out some aspect of life that gives order and meaning to his life. He celebrates life. He participates in an event that expresses the beliefs and values of the world in which he works, eats, sleeps, and makes love (does anyone really *make* love?). Someone might point out that this man's ritual life is almost sacramental. The chips and beer are a means of taking into his life the sustaining values of power and winning that are being celebrated on the field.

Ritual is an expression of our religiousness. Ritual is a way of making right what is very wrong in our experience. It is the dramatization of a big picture, by means of which we are able to live with our sorrow, our sense of failure, our knowledge that we have not done as we ought to have done and have been involved in doing what we ought not to have done. When we erect white crosses bedecked with flowers by the sides of the highways, when we place colored balloons and flowers at the site where a friend was killed, we are being ritualistic—acting out some religious sense of order and meaning. Ritual usually involves some special movement or movements, a given set of words, or some special equipment, and it has a story behind it.

Another form of religious expression is the social. Quite often we express a sense of ultimate order and meaning by reference to who we are, to whom we belong, and where we are. When a Navajo speaks of himself as *Diné,* he refers to "the people." Implicit is the notion that *being* and *Navajo* are bound together. *Being Navajo* is to have a meaningful place in a special and sacred order. For the Jew there is ultimate order and meaning expressed in being Israel, the covenanted community, the people of God. In the Chinese tradition the family is a sacred and unique order of existence; even the state is an extension of it. The head of the family enjoys a status akin to priesthood. A priest is one who knows the special ways that are necessary to offer up the values and commitments of a people. Behind this concept of belongingness is the knowledge that the centers of our living—the towns, houses, mountains, streams in our world—are somehow patterned after a basic and original model that exists before and beyond history as we know it. For example, the family may be for us a holy community because it reflects the heart of what is really real. The divine is itself a family, and life is modeled after it. The

social expression of religiousness is the sense of rootedness and belonging that links us to other people and special landscapes.

Thus far the discussion has focused on the way in which human religiousness works at discerning the ultimate order and meaning of existence. We have discussed the modes of religious expression, all of which are directed at the transformation of existence. If, for example, we engage in ritual, it is to distance ourselves from the ordinariness of existence, to gain some perspective from which to perceive our lives. This gaining of perspective plays a role in transforming life. Along with other modes of expression, it is transformative. A question we frequently raise is: Is it possible that the human condition can be altered? If life is more than we are able to perceive or know at any one time, then it is possible that there are other ways of perceiving it. In other words, perhaps we do not ordinarily know reality (what is real). Perhaps the mind can be transformed—become other than what it is (preferably, more than what it is)—so that it may perceive what is not ordinarily perceived.

Some people in the world assume that transformation make us one with the animals, the plants, and other people. The kachina dancer in the Hopi tradition becomes the spirit person whose mask he wears. He is transformed by dancing and ecstasy and crosses the boundaries that he ordinarily recognizes as an everyday person. The Zen monk seeks to overcome his reliance upon ordinary reason by means of *zazen* (sitting meditation) or the use of *koan* (puzzling statements). When he achieves *kensho* (a state of enlightenment or seeing one's own true nature), it is because he now perceives reality differently. He has been transformed.

Categories of Religious Expression

The six modes of religious expression may be condensed into three functional categories or forms, in keeping with a device of Joachim Wach, a sociologist of religion who defined the three primary categories of religion as theoretical, practical, and sociological.[2] The corresponding terms we shall use throughout this study are *verbal, practical,* and *social*. By the verbal expression of religiousness we refer to the use of words *to conceive and communicate* the ultimate order and meaning of existence. In other words, the verbal expression will be discerned in stories, doctrine, ideas, beliefs, and ethical systems. In the tribal or nonliterate traditions we shall expect story, especially myth, to be a fundamental means for the conception and commu-

nication of truth. The literate traditions of the religions that are not confined to tribal culture but are worldwide in scope or potential will combine oral communication (story) with written records. This literature may take the form of sacred writings (scripture) or doctrinal statements.

By the practical expression of religiousness we refer to *practice*—those things that people do, actions that are regularized in order to express the ultimate order and meaning of existence. This will ordinarily include such activities as ritual, worship, and pilgrimage.

By the social expression of religiousness we refer to the manner in which interpersonal identification or grouping itself serves as a form of ultimate order and meaning. For the Akamba of Africa, the tribe is itself an expression of sacred order. To be Akamba is to be part of a system that orders life and gives it meaning. For Judaism, the people Israel is the social expression of religion. To be Jewish is to be part of meaningful existence. For Christianity the church is a sacred social reality; it is the Body of Christ. Belonging and identity are important elements in the social expression of religiousness. This must be understood if we are to comprehend why it is that violence often breaks out between tribes, between Sikhs and Hindus, between Muslims and Christians. It is because religious significance is attached to being Sikh or Navajo. Religiousness, in other words, is expressed not only in ideas, beliefs, and practices but also in the social entity to which one belongs—an entity that is a center of sacred order and meaning. Violence and warfare occur when the sacred identity of a people is threatened.

The three forms of religious expression may function independently of each other or in combinations of two. Each form of expression may show itself in art, music, design, science, or even one's labor. After all, expressions of the ultimate order and meaning of existence go on all the time. By themselves we may call them religious expressions and let it go at that. However, when it occurs that all three forms of expression are integrated in a system that is intentional and concerned with continuity in time and space, we may speak of a religion, or a religious tradition. For example, by itself the verbal expression of our religiousness may constitute a philosophy, a school of thinking. When it combines with practices and expresses itself in a social form that promotes identity, it becomes part of a religious tradition. Regarding system, when we speak of "Buddhism," it is because there is a systematic arrangement of the religious expressions we have discussed. The set of expressions is recognizable; they fit together in such a way that we may call the system *Buddhism*. We may speak of the Navajo way as a religion or religious

tradition because there is a distinctiveness about the manner in which being Navajo gives form to the entire set of religious expressions. Regarding intentionality, Buddhists must intend that all of their religious expressions shall fit together in a distinctive fashion. They intend being Buddhist by following the Buddhist way. A measure of their human identity is derived from that intention. Navajos know that they are Navajo because they understand and practice the ways of their people. They intend expressing themselves religiously by the special system of the Navajo way.

Having made a case for system and intention in the formation of religions, I now want to modify the conclusion. Sometimes it is possible to recognize the presence of all the religious expressions in a systematic and even intentional way without any acknowledgment that we are dealing with a religion. This means that it is possible for a way of life to function as a religion without being called a religion. We might call such systems quasi-religions—systems that act like religion, play the role of religion. Such systems are part of the postmodern world. Students of religion must be alert to this insight. As people who are concerned with understanding religious behavior, they must be prepared to study it wherever it occurs, in whatever form it occurs. Marxism is one of the quasi-religions of our time. Technology, in its collective link with corporate economics and politics, is another. The techno-corporate world is a religious system, even though we may be unaccustomed to calling it one.

Tradition

Two further observations are important to this introduction. First, the study of religion recognizes the importance of tradition. Tradition is a body of teaching and practice that is maintained through time. A tradition must be conserved, transmitted, and received. The contention of this work is that all human activity is based upon tradition. If we wish to become physicists, we do not walk boldly into some laboratory, impudently proclaim that we are physicists, and start proclaiming truths about the physical properties of the universe. Rather, we study *physics,* learn something of the use of the term, learn the findings of the history of physics, begin to understand what physicists have done and thought. Physics has a tradition, and we must learn from it if we wish to be physicists or have any credibility as persons who understand the physical universe. Even if we launch forth in bold and revolutionary ways (as a Newton, an Einstein, or a Heisenberg), we launch

forth as people who speak for the tradition of physics, to which we owe most of our understanding.

Religion is that branch of human knowledge and behavior that has been especially aware of the significance of tradition. That is why we speak of religious traditions—Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity. Christianity is a tradition, or, more accurately, the Christian tradition is an anthology of religious traditions—Reformed, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox. Religions recognize that in the human struggle to find ultimate order and meaning, but especially to find transformation, tradition is an important guide. Tradition is always the place to begin the search for knowledge and wisdom. It is always the testing ground where one may examine one's own insights and experience. Tradition is the conserved knowledge and understanding concerning basic questions about human life and meaning. Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed the typical American inability to comprehend the significance of tradition when he said, "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"[3] Of course, we do enjoy an original relation to the universe, but it is never absolute. Our relation to the universe is always enjoyed along with the "foregoing generation." And every previous generation also enjoyed its relationship along with those who had come before. Certainly in the attempt to understand the original relation we enjoy with the universe it will be necessary to consult the conserved wisdom of the past. Tradition will be essential. Tradition is always the teacher. Although the teacher cannot teach us without our permission, it can shape our lives in ways that are often unexamined.

Second, no religious tradition exists in a vacuum. In a certain sense there is no such thing as Buddhism or Christianity. It is always a matter of studying a religion as it is expressed in the lives of a people in a given place and time. We must always be prepared to ask: Christianity when? Christianity where? The Christianity of the early centuries in North Africa or in Antioch is most definitely a different Christianity from the Christianity of Scandinavia in the nineteenth century. And the Buddhism of Japan is very different from the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, just as American evangelical Christianity is different from the Christianity of Romania. Now, of course, the advocate or representative of one form of a religion may assume that her or his particular way is the true one, the norm by which others should be judged. But the fact remains that there are many forms. Time and place make a difference in the manner in which all religiousness expresses itself. That is why historical methods are

necessary to the study of religion. As one scholar, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, put it thirty years ago: "The most important single matter to remember in all this is that ultimately we have to do not with religions but with religious persons." He was pointing out the importance of history. History is people affecting the direction of their lives by their ideas, commitments, and actions. History is the human penchant for making more of the course of existence than it would take by nature. When we study religion, we study the way of perceiving and transforming the world by particular people in particular times and places. We want "to apprehend how other [people] perceive the stars and their neighbors, the making of a living, love, death, moral conflict, and all that makes human life human and life."[4]

That is why some scholars of religion will tell us there is no such thing as religion; there are only religions, they say. It is certainly true that we must always remember that we are dealing with people in time and place—with particularities. In one way of thinking, there are only Thai Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, Japanese Shingon Buddhists, and Pure Land Buddhists. However, like any observation, this way of thinking can lead to absurdity if it becomes an absolute principle. It would ultimately mean that in order to study Christianity, for example, we must always be satisfied with discussing the members of the Free Will Baptist Church in Mulberry Gap, Tennessee.

The fact is, there are religions (or religious traditions) and the people who are representative of them in time and place, but there is also religion. That is, many human beings want to know how and why their own perception of the world may point to a more universal way of perceiving. They try to transcend their particularities and reach for what is common to people in all times and places. Even if they cannot be totally successful, they touch the edges of more than their own particularities. Their religiousness touches a universal chord. After all, we have already seen how it is that no one lives on one's own, that we are traditional beings as well as "original . . . [in our] relation to the universe." As creatures who are societal and interpersonal beings, whose societal nature reaches through time, there is a certain commonality and universality to our existence. That is what makes it both necessary and possible to speak of religion as well as of religions.

We study religions and religion because they exist; they are a fundamental aspect of human life. The educated and intelligent person always seeks to gain some knowledge and understanding of all important elements in the human pilgrimage. Regardless of what we may think of religions and human religiousness, we are obligated to lay aside our judgments and open our

minds to the thoughts and actions of millions of human beings like ourselves who have expressed themselves as Hindus, Jews, Navajos, or Copts. Our responsibility is to know and to understand.

Many social scientists beginning with Emile Durkheim have sought to demonstrate the fact that the foundation of every society and culture is religious. Religion is that which integrates and serves as the principle of coherence for the people of a particular social order. Religion is the heart of the social constructions of reality that account for human history. That is a very important reason for studying religion, and it is in keeping with our definition of religion as the systematic set of expressions that reflect the ultimate order, meaning, and possible transformations of existence for a people. It also mirrors the observation that we live not so much in a world as in a perception of the world. It is with these thoughts in mind that we turn to those perceptions, those shapes of human religiousness, that have been fundamental to the American experience.