

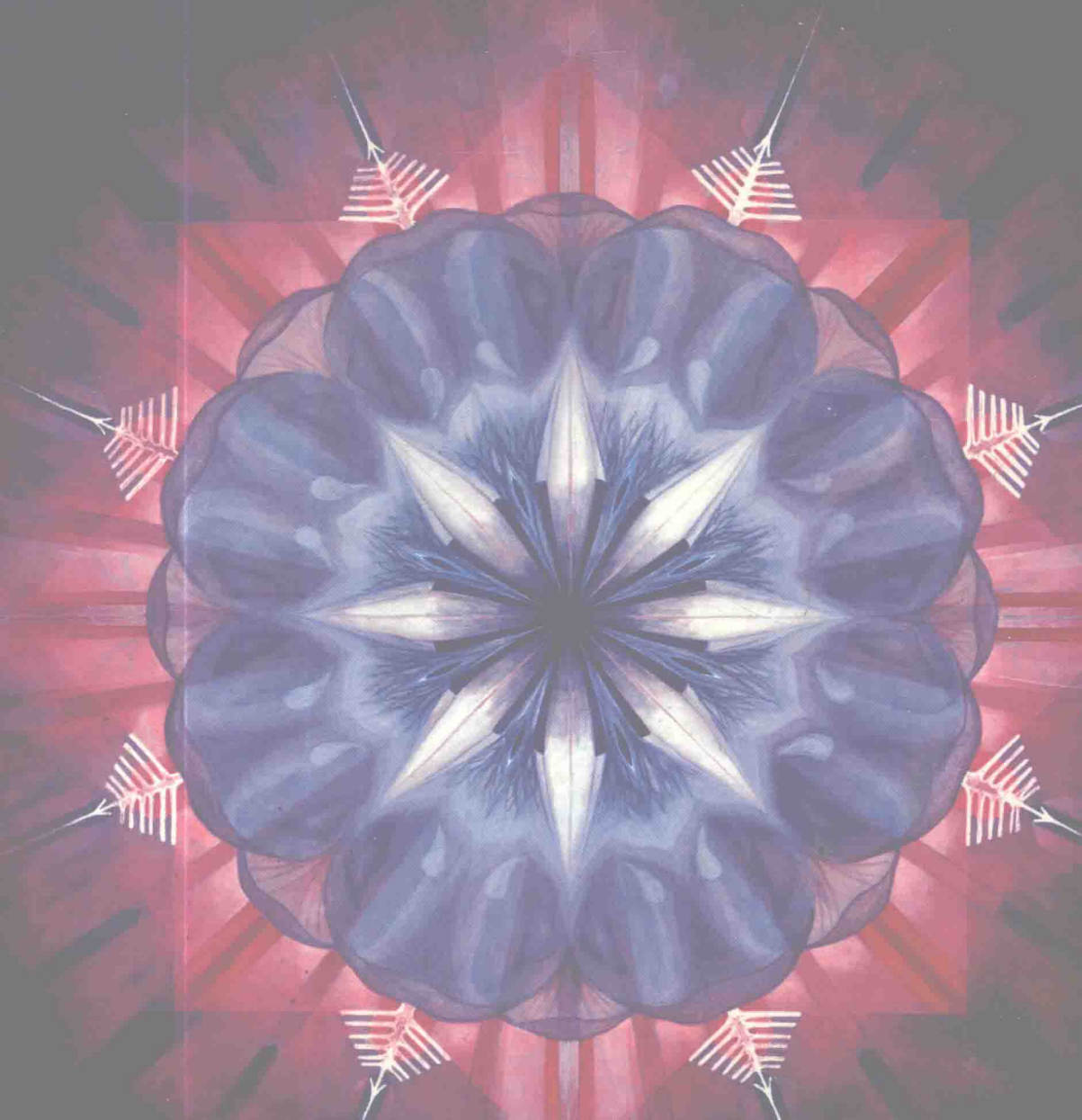
WAYS TO THE CENTER

AN INTRODUCTION TO WORLD RELIGIONS

THIRD EDITION

Denise L. Carmody

John T. Carmody



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PREFACE

In this revision we have concentrated on updating the scholarly base of *Ways to the Center* and further clarifying the logic and language. To make recent scholarly trends available to undergraduate students and teachers, we have again focused on sources likely to be widely available, in this case, stressing articles in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

Most of our many interventions aimed at clarifying the expository prose have been small, but, in the words of an interesting article by Jonathan Z. Smith some years ago, “*Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit*” (“Add a Little to a Little and there will be a Great Heap”) (*History of Religions*, 1971, 11:67). Teachers wishing to reduce the length of the text should note that the case studies (newly marked) are relatively independent units.

A major addition to this edition is a new chapter on general alternatives to religion: secularist and humanistic systems. We have greatly expanded the glossary and placed the glossary items at the end of each chapter. We have also updated the annotated bibliography and the demographic data, added some schematic charts, and on occasion added historical details to clarify what had been a too concise exposition. Finally, we have expanded the questions and oriented them toward discussion (they now can serve as topics for either homework or in-class discussions).

Overall, however, the basic design of the book remains a twofold exposition of the world religions in terms of historical and structural (philosophical) analyses. As well, the text retains a fairly demanding linguistic and conceptual level. We hope this will be less objectionable at the end of the 1980s, when numerous studies have lamented the decline of literacy among college students and urged a reinfusion of rigor and challenge.

There comes a point at which diluting the vocabulary, imagery, and conceptual equipment one uses to display complex phenomena such as the world religions is simply pandering to the baser educational instincts. Certainly one has to sympathize with students who have been ill-prepared for adult study in the humanities. On the other hand, one does them little long-term good by dumbing things down to their level of underachievement. If a college degree is going to be worth the parchment on which it is issued, students have to have been stretched beyond the proficiency they had when entering as freshmen and have to have worked hard. In a nutshell, they have to have spent some time with an unabridged dictionary and extended the range of what they initially could name and so think about. Wittgenstein's famous epigram is remorseless: The limits of our language are the limits of our world. Having tried to clarify and sharpen the language of our text, we make no apologies for the challenges that remain. All the religions insist that there is no lazy person's way to enlightenment. Teachers who try to fudge this bedrock reality of the spiritual life are a major reason American education has come into crisis. Students who won't hear of it deserve to remain uneducated.

A more pleasant bit of news to deliver is our gratitude to the readers of this third edition, who have offered much useful criticism and suggestion: Stephen D. Benin, Memphis State University; Paul Courtright, University of North Carolina; Dimis T. Dowse, University of Tennessee; Alan Miller, Miami University; Leonard Piotrowski, St. Mary's College; James Robinson, University of Northern Iowa; Daniel P. Sheridan, Loyola University; Eugene Webb, University of Washington; and James Whitehill, Stephens College.

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Ways to the Center

INTRODUCTION ON THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS



A contemporary sign for friendship between man and woman

The Nature of Religion
Studying Religion
Scholarly Methods
Outside, Inside, and Center
The Structure of This Book

The religious life of humanity is a vast spectacle hard to keep in perspective. Therefore, we should make our goals and methods clear from the outset. Our primary goal is to make clear how the world's religious traditions have oriented billions of human lives. Our primary method is to place the study of religion in the context of the humanities and approach the traditions with a consistent format. Let us explain these notions in more detail.

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

Picture yourself in New Delhi. You are outside *Rajghat*, the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi, the politician and holy man who led India to freedom from British colonial rule. Before you, squatting on the broken sidewalk, are three small boys with wooden flutes. They are piping tunes toward round wicker baskets. When they lift the baskets' covers, three silver cobras slowly weave their way out. You watch for several minutes, fearful but entranced. Then the boys shove the cobras back into their baskets and approach you for their fee.

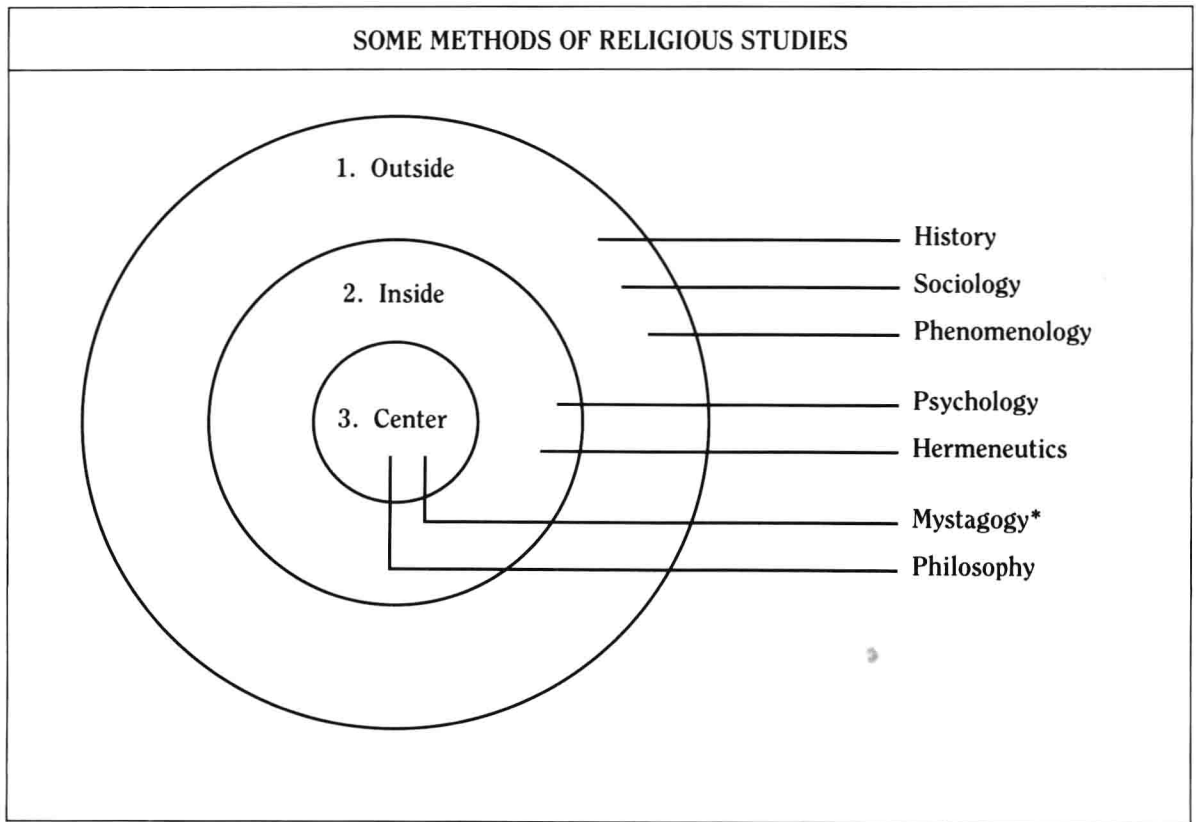
A few rupees seem fair enough—you don't want to upset those cobras.

Does this picture shine a light on the exotic East? Is it a minor revelation of Indian culture? Yes, but only if you know a little background. In India, as in many other countries with ancient cultures, serpents have been potent symbols (think of the story in the third chapter of Genesis). Perhaps because they appear menacing or phallic (penislike), they have stood for something very basic, something very close to the life force. For centuries, groups of Indians have specialized in snake handling, and the skills have been passed along from father to son. Their profession has combined show business and a bit of crude religion. It has been both entertainment and an occasion to shiver about the implications of death and life.

Now picture yourself in medieval England. In 627 C.E. ("common era" = A.D.) the monk Paulinus came to King Edwin in northern England and urged him to convert his people to Christianity. After some debate, one of Edwin's counselors stood up and said: "Your majesty, on a winter night like this, it sometimes happens that a little bird flies in that far window, to enjoy the warmth and light of our fire. After a short while it passes out again, returning to the dark and the cold. As I see it, our human life is much the same. We have but a brief time between two great darknesses. If this

Religious Wisdom: Twenty-five Key Dates

ca. 1500 B.C.E.	<i>Vedas</i>
ca. 1360	<i>Hymns of Akhenaton</i>
1000–500	<i>Redactions of Pentateuch</i>
800–400	<i>Upanishads</i>
750–550	<i>Hebrew Prophets</i>
550	<i>Oldest Parts of Zoroastrian Avesta</i>
500	<i>Oldest Parts of Analects</i>
400–250	<i>Job; Ecclesiastes; Bhagavad Gita</i>
ca. 350	<i>Plato's Laws; Tao Te Ching</i>
ca. 330	<i>Aristotle's Metaphysics</i>
ca. 160	<i>Buddhist Prajna-Paramita</i>
ca. 80	<i>Lotus Sutra, Key Buddhist Text</i>
ca. 50	<i>Buddhist Dhammapada</i>
ca. 50–90 C.E.	<i>New Testament Writings</i>
413–426	<i>Augustine's City of God</i>
425	<i>Buddhist Visuddhimagga</i>
ca. 500	<i>Babylonian Talmud</i>
ca. 650	<i>Canonization of the Qur'an</i>
712–720	<i>Shinto Chronicles</i>
ca. 1100	<i>Al-Ghazali's Revivification of the Sciences</i>
1175	<i>Chu Hsi's Neo-Confucian Synthesis</i>
1190	<i>Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed</i>
1270	<i>Aquinas's Summa Theologica</i>
1536	<i>Calvin's Institutes</i>
1581	<i>Compilation of Adi Granth, Sikh Scripture</i>



*Appreciating the religion's approach to ultimate mystery.

monk can show us warmth and light, we should follow him."¹

For most of medieval Europe, the warmth and light that made life seem good radiated from Jesus Christ. At the core of Europe's complex and in many ways crude culture at that time was a faith that a personal father God so loved the world he had given his son to heal and enlighten it. When they shared that faith, European monks, kings, and kings' counselors largely agreed on their conception of life. Monks, for instance, were willing to give up family life in order to bear witness to God's love. Kings tried to show that their rule derived from what God had done through Jesus, and counselors tried to show commoners how the rule of kings mediated God's will. Often, of course, monks and kings and counselors did things that we find hard to square with Jesus, pursuing wealth and power by means of guile. But their culture forced them all to confront Christian warmth and light, as

Indian culture forced Indians to confront sex, death, and life.

Our two pictures are not quite compatible. The modern Indian scene stressed rather primitive sexual or vital energies, while the medieval English scene stressed lofty love and vision. Westerners have tended to view Indian and European life in that way, as the writings of early Christian missionaries to India suggest. However, the past century of scholarship in religious studies has shown the deficiencies of such an attitude, so we must add a few comments on the two scenes.

First, drawing a picture of medieval Europe that is raw and primitive would not be hard. In Ingmar Bergman's movies about the medieval period, such as *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring*, death and sex and life are jammed together like serpents in a basket. Because of the Black Death, the plague that killed about three-quarters of the late medieval Euro-



Figure 1 *Corpus Christi*, Spanish, second half of the thirteenth century. Wood with polychrome, 72 in. high. The crucifixion was a central focus of medieval Christian piety. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

pean population, monks and commoners marched in processions beating themselves, scourging their flesh with whips to do penance for their sins and keep death away. The harshness of medieval life also led to brutal wars and brutal rapes. The knight and the squire of *The Seventh Seal*, who watch the procession of penitents, have kept company with death since they went to war as Crusaders. The rape and murder of the young girl in *The Virgin Spring* sums up medieval primitiveness. Sex and death pour out in her blood, and only after her father has slain the rapists do we see hope for new life trickle forth in a fresh spring. Medieval Europe, Bergman suggests, was as raw as India has ever been.

Second, were we to go inside the memorial to Gandhi and look at the scene at his commemorative

stone, the sublimity of Indian culture and its visions of warmth and light might rise up and parallel those of Christian Europe. *Rajghat* blends green grass, elegant black marble, and fresh flower petals of orange and pink. They symbolize the beautiful spirit of the Mahatma, the little man of great soul. Gandhi was a politician who moved people by *satyagraha*—the force of truth. Without military arms, much money, or even much respect from British leaders, he forced the whole world to take notice. When he vowed to take no food until India's just claims were met, the world held its breath. When he led groups of nonviolent *satyagrahis* into the midst of club-swinging soldiers, he upset the conscience of the world. By the simple rightness, the sheer justice, of his cause, Gandhi showed how his Hindu conception of God could be very powerful. His

God was “Truth,” and it finally shamed the British into withdrawal.

Snakes and scourges, love and truth—they have shot through India, Europe, and most other parts of the world. In contemporary America, they or their offspring live with us yet. For instance, our nuclear missiles are for many citizens and analysts eerie phallic symbols. Like cobras we are trying to get back in their baskets, the missiles give us shivers. Many people see the missiles’ thrust, their destructive power, and the claims that they give us security or economic life as brutalizing and raping our culture. From Hiroshima to Three Mile Island, nuclear power muddles our wellsprings and hope.

So too with the ways that we whip ourselves for guilt, the ways that we still crave love, the ways that we search after light. Our guilt keeps psychiatrists in business. Our searches for light fill churches and schools. Clearly we are sisters and brothers to religious Indians and medieval Europeans. Clearly their snakes and saviors relate to our own.

Religion is the issue of ultimate meaning that this discussion of cobras and monks spotlights. It is the part of culture—Eastern, Western, or contemporary American—that we study when we ask about a people’s deepest convictions. For instance, *Hinduism is the animating spirit, the soul, the way of looking at the world, that has tied snake handling and *satyagraha* together for most Indians. Christianity is the way of looking at the world that has joined scourging to Jesus for most medieval Europeans. Religion, then, is what you get when you investigate striking human phenomena to find the ultimate vision or set of convictions that gives them their sense. It is the cast of mind and the gravity of heart by which a people endures or enjoys its time between the two great darknesses of pre-birth and death.*

STUDYING RELIGION

Certain attitudes should be cultivated in all study, but the study of religion demands more self-awareness and personal engagement with its materials than most other disciplines do. For instance, although reducing physical science to “objective” observing and testing is simplistic, since all knowledge is ultimately personal,² physical science does not make great demands

on a student’s inner experiences of suffering or love. The humanities (those disciplines that study our efforts at self-expression and self-understanding) involve more of such inner experiences, because suffering and love shape so much of history and literature, yet even the humanities seldom deal with direct claims about ultimate meaning. Only in philosophy and religion does one directly encounter systems about God, evil, and humanity’s origin and end. Philosophy deals with such concepts principally in their rational forms, while religious studies meet them more concretely in the myths, rituals, mysticisms, behavior patterns, and institutions through which most human beings have been both drawn to ultimate meaning and terrified of it.

More than in any other discipline, the student in a religious studies course is confronted with imperative claims. **The religions are not normally warehouses where you pay your money and take your choice.** Rather, they are impassioned heralds of ways of life. More than most people initially like, the religions speak of death, ignorance, and human viciousness. However, they also speak of peace and joy, forgiveness and harmony. **Whatever they discuss, though, they are *mystagogic*, which etymologically means “mystery working.”** The religions work mystery. Their preoccupations, when they are healthy, are nature’s wonder, life’s strange play of physical death and spiritual resurrection, and the possibility of order in the midst of chaos. The religions say that the kingdom of God is in your midst, because you are a being who can pray, “Abba, Father.” They say that the *Tao* (“the Way”) that can be named is not the real *Tao*. Above all, they say that the person who lives divorced from the mysteries of rosy-fingered dawn and wintery death is less than fully human. So Sioux Indians revered the East, because dawn symbolizes the light of conscience. So Jewish scripture speaks of love as strong as death. So, finally, Islam speaks for all religions when it says that Allah—Muslim divinity—is as near as the pulse at our throats. Clearly, then, we cannot study the religions well if we are afraid of mystery or are in flight from death and life.

We also cannot study the religions well if we insist on forcing them into the categories of our own faith. We must first take them on their own terms, giving their experiences and problems a sympathetic hearing. After we have listened to the wisdom of a scripture such as the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, we may and should compare it with the wisdom of our Western faiths. Even then, though, unless we can say with the Chris-