

THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

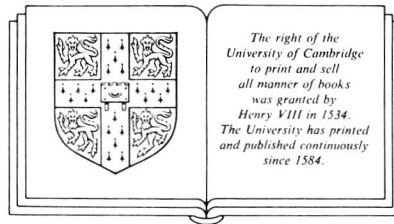
Ninian Smart



The
World's Religions

Old Traditions and Modern Transformations

Ninian Smart



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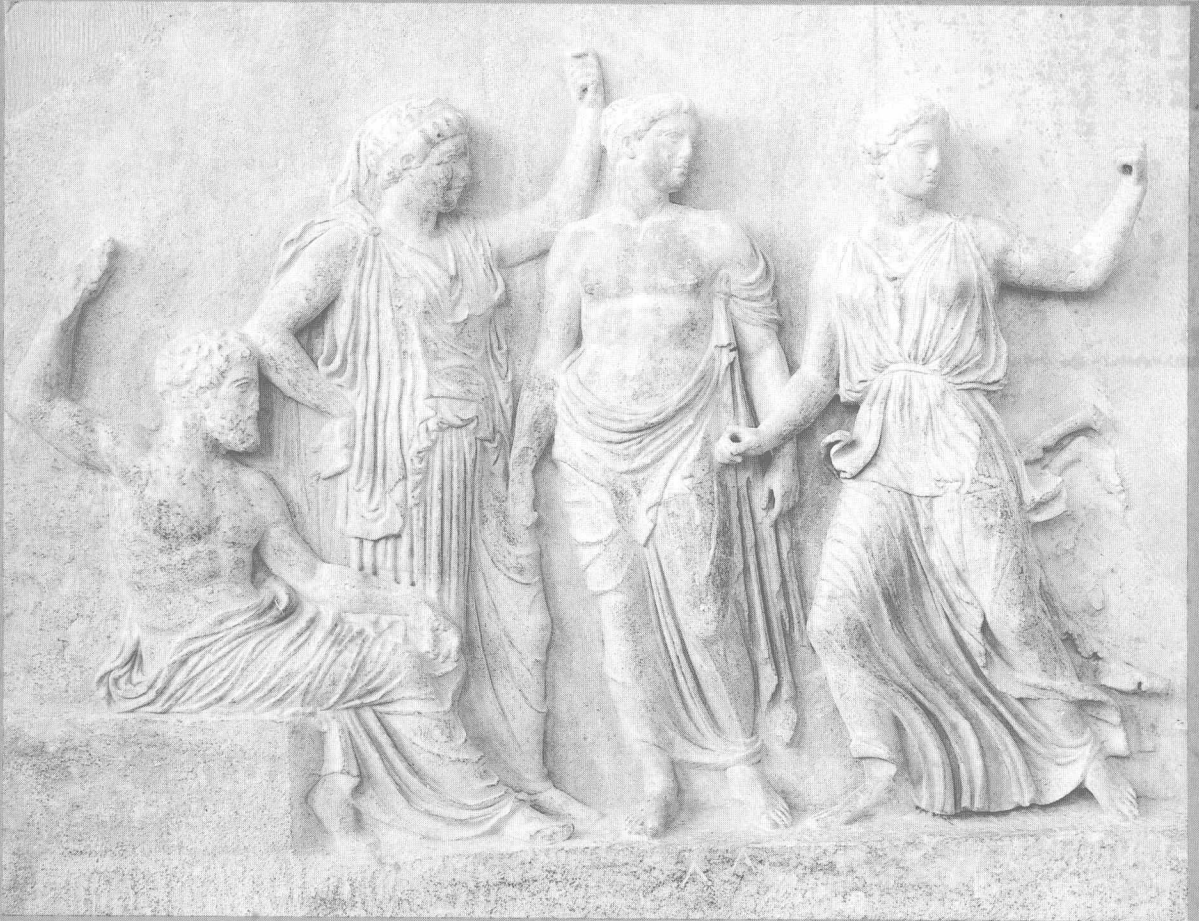
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Relief from Brauron showing Zeus, Leto, Apollo, and Artemis, c. 400 B.C.E. National Museum, Athens.

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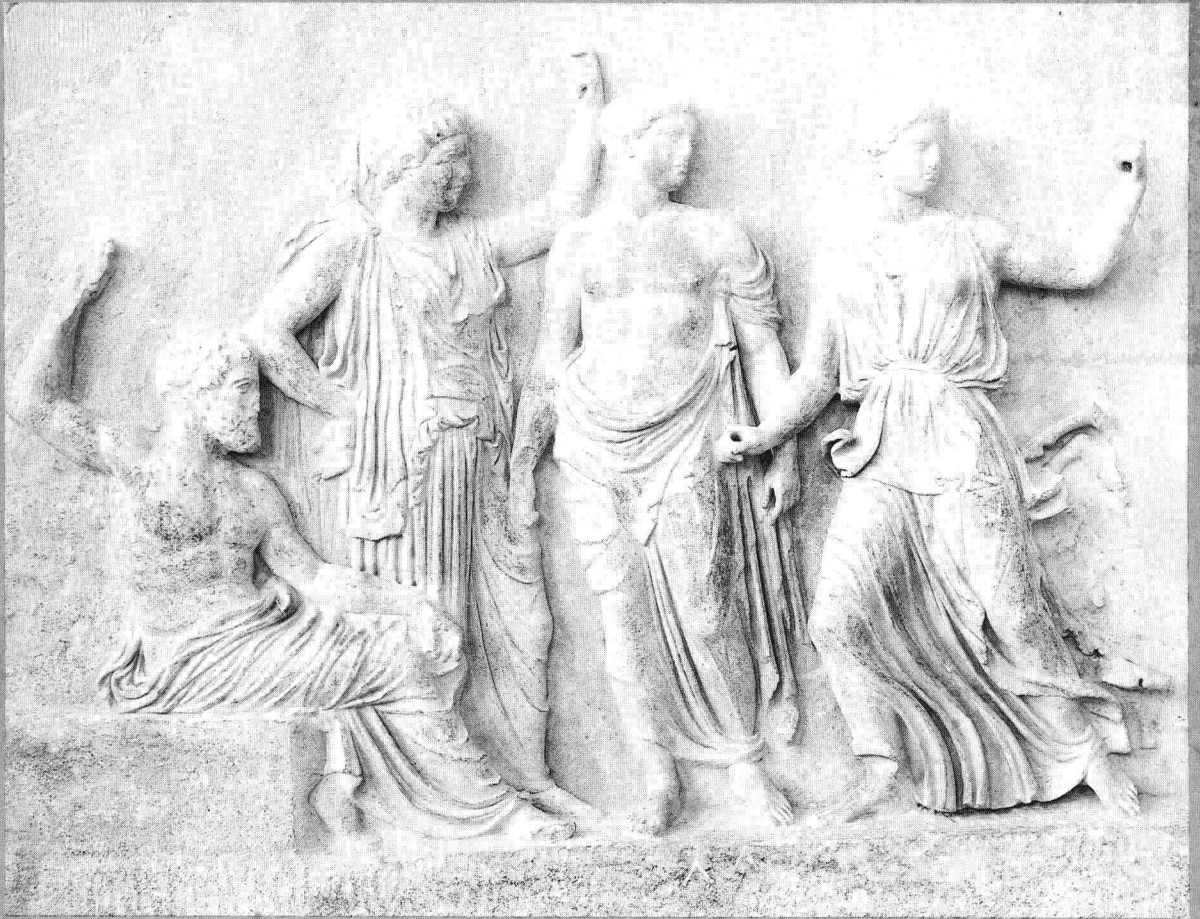
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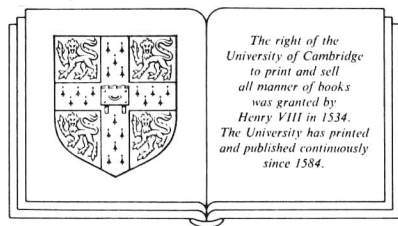


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Preface

Though this book is written in a clear way for the general public and for students who wish to learn about the world's worldviews, it does rest on some theoretical foundations which may be of interest to historians of religion and others concerned with the analysis of human values. I use a seven-dimensional framework to analyze the religions—in terms of ethics, ritual, narrative or myth, experience, institutions or society, doctrine and art. Religions are placed in a historical context, and viewed in relation to their periods of formation and re-formation. I stress too the ways in which they blend with other movements such as modern nationalism.

I am most grateful to Laurence King of Calmann and King Ltd for proposing this book to me, and to Rosemary Bradley, Carolyn Yates, David Britt, Sara Waterson, Tracy Pinchman, and Andrew Shoobred, who notably helped in the execution of the work.

Ninian Smart

Introduction

The Importance of Understanding the World's Worldviews

Understanding the world's religions and ideologies is important in three ways. First, they are a vital ingredient in the varied story of humankind's various experiments in living. The religions and ideas of ancient Greece or of the Maya are worth our recapturing, so far as we can, as part of the great heritage of human civilization. Second, and of more immediate importance, is the fact that in order to grasp the meanings and values of the plural cultures of today's world, we need to know something of the worldviews which underlie them. To understand the Middle East you need to know something about Islam, not to mention Christianity and Judaism; and to understand Japan you need some insight into Buddhism, Shinto, and the Confucian heritage. Third, we may as individuals be trying to form our own coherent and emotionally satisfying picture of reality, and it is always relevant to see the great ideas and practices of various important cultures and civilizations. To make judgments about philosophies and ways of life we need a comparative perspective—to know something of the quest of the Christian mystic and the Hindu yogin, and of the spirituality of the Hasidic Jew and the Mahāyāna Buddhist. In a number of ways, the individual cultures of the world contribute to human civilization, and the religions and ideologies permeating those cultures are not to be neglected.

In undertaking a voyage into the world's religions we should not define religion too narrowly. It is important for us to recognize secular ideologies as part of the story of human worldviews. It is artificial to divide them too sharply from religions, partly because they sometimes function in society like religions, and partly because the distinction between religious and secular beliefs and practices is a modern Western one and does not represent the way in which other cultures categorize human values. Essentially, this book is a history of ideas and practices which have moved human beings.