SCRIPTURES

OF THE

WORLD'S

RELIGIONS



JAMES FIESER JOHN POWERS

Scriptures of the World's Religions

edited by

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Preface

Several avenues are open for understanding the world's religions. One could dialog with believers of the various religions, visit their sacred sites and temples, or attend classes for converts. A more practical approach would be to read surveys of the various religions, some written by believers defending their faith, others by critics, and even more by academic historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers. Yet another avenue is to examine the collected sacred texts revered by these religions. Each of these avenues offers only a single perspective on one of the most complex phenomena of world civilization, and none alone can claim primacy.

The present text introduces the world's religions through selections from their scriptures. There are special benefits to this avenue of exploration. In most cases the sacred texts are the oldest written documents in the tradition, and one gains a sense of immediate connection by studying the same documents that followers have been reading for millennia. The texts are also foundational to a religion's most important doctrines, rituals, and social and ethical positions. Thus, they explain the authoritative basis of traditions that might otherwise seem incomprehensible, or even groundless. Finally, the texts have become the most sacred symbols of these traditions, implying that one is on holy ground each time a sentence is read.

We have prepared our selection of scriptures in different formats. The volume titled *Scriptures of the East* contains the sacred writings of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto. *Scriptures of the West* contains those of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith. The volume titled *Scriptures of the World's Religions* contains all the material in the East and West volumes.

Since very few scriptures were originally written in the English language, these are selections of *translated* scriptures. Efforts have been made to find the most recent and readable translations available. Many scripture anthologies rely heavily on older public-domain translations, presumably as a means of cutting production costs. The trade-off is that the public domain

selections are often outdated both in terms of scholarship and readability. We do not believe the trade-off is worth it and, when possible, have always preferred more recent translations. A few scriptures are still available only in older translation, such as the Shinto *Nihongi*, and therefore are the default choice. We modernized some of these translations in view of recent scholarship. We have also been sensitive in our selection among competing translations. For example, in the *Judaism* chapter we opted for the Jewish Publication Society's translation of the *Tanakh* rather than translations of the Old Testament that are more associated with Christianity. Similarly, in the *Christianity* chapter we used the Scholar's Version of the New Testament gospels, a new translation that was prepared free of ecclesiastical and religious control. Unique to this anthology are several scriptures in Asian languages newly translated by John Powers.

An exhaustive collection of world scriptures would be over a thousand volumes in length. Selectivity, therefore, is necessary. The first difficult choice was to confine the texts to those of religions that are practiced today. This excludes dead traditions that are mainly of academic interest, such as ancient Greek, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian religions. Second, emphasis is placed on religions that are historical in the sense that they have a body of written literature. Indigenous religious practices known only through secondary descriptions by anthropologists are excluded, such as those of African and Native American peoples. Third, preference is given to texts that discuss the lives and teachings of religious founders and present central doctrines. These are not only of greater intrinsic interest, but assure that the essential differences between religions emerge. Fourth, the scriptures selected are those accessible to lay practitioners, and not those intended mainly for theologians. Finally, emphasis is placed on religions that have a wide sphere of influence, specifically Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Less influential religions, specifically Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and the Baha'i Faith, are covered more briefly.

In spite of the above boundaries of inclusion, the notion of *scripture* used here is sufficiently broad to include three strata of religious texts. The first stratum involves texts that the religions themselves deem most sacred. The term *protocanonical* is typically used in reference to this level, which includes the Buddhist *Pali Canon*, the Muslim *Qur'an*, and the Jewish *Tanakh*. The second stratum involves more peripheral sacred texts, often termed *deuterocanonical*, that are usually derived from oral law and oral tradition. This includes collections of oral law, such as the Jewish *Talmud* and the Muslim *Hadith*, as well as texts on the lives of religious founders, such as the Sikh *Janam-sakhi*. The third stratum involves sectarian texts that at some time in the history of that religion were considered scripture by members of that sect. This final category allows for a broader range of texts than are found in most scripture anthologies, and includes sacred writings from the religion's mystical tradition. Examples are the Jewish *Zohar* and Christian writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.

A high priority was placed on including material that is of interest to women. Religious texts and practices throughout the ages have been biased in favor of men and often against women. Religious scriptures are almost entirely written by men, religious institutions are dominated by men, and religion is frequently used to keep women socially subordinate. Unfortunately, this male bias is perpetuated in the text selections in virtually all world religion anthologies. Considering recently evolving attitudes about gender issues in the field of religious studies, it is important to avoid perpetuating this bias. We have therefore also sought out scriptures in all of the represented religions that support the interests of women, present women in positions of leadership, or are written by women. Some of these are Judaism's *Song of Deborah* in the *Tanakh*, the Christian *Gnostic Gospel of Mary*, the mystical sayings of Rabi'a in Islam, Buddhism's *Liberation Songs of the Nuns*, and the Jain debates on enlightenment of women.

We recognize that each religion's canon of scripture presents unique problems of selection, and that no fixed criteria of selection can be rigidly applied. The canons of Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, contain hundreds of volumes of writings, whereas those of the Western religions contain only a few volumes. Accordingly, selections from Buddhism and Hinduism are often shorter, covering a wide range of scriptures. A special problem is presented by the fact that the majority of readers of the anthology will be of Western backgrounds, and thus will generally have greater familiarity with the Judeo-Christian tradition than with other religions. Thus, to make the selections on Judaism and Christianity most profitable to those already familiar with the Judeo-Christian tradition, several important yet historically dated scriptures are included, such as those from the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Gnosticism. The introductory comments to the selections also reflect the varying scholarly traditions of the religions. Form criticism dominates Jewish and Christian biblical scholarship, yet is virtually unknown in many Asian religions. Qur'an scholarship is dominated by devout believers is Islam. Zoroastrianism has seen comparatively little scholarly interest in its scriptures recently.

The readings within each religion are categorized according to the inherent structure of the scriptural canons themselves, following a sequence of historical narrative or their dates of composition. This is preferred over topical arrangement, influenced by anthropological studies of religion, which eliminates narrative and historical context. We believe that our arrangement is more harmonious with the way each religion understands its own canon and that it is more consistent with how religious studies scholars understand a given religion's scriptures. In addition, it allows readers to gain a sense of the historical development of ideas and practices. This is important, since all religious traditions are dynamic systems that create new paradigms in response to changing social conditions and religious ideals, while striving to maintain a perceived connection with their origins. The dynamic relation between tradition and innovation is critical to understanding and interpreting living religious systems. It is hoped that by arranging texts in a roughly chronological

sequence readers will gain a sense of the relations between the origins of religions as reported in early canonical works and subsequent developments.

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