



SCRIPTURES OF THE
WORLD'S RELIGIONS

James Fieser • John Powers

second edition

Scriptures of the World's Religions

SECOND EDITION

edited by

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University of Tennessee at Martin

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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 approaches offers only a single perspective on one of the most complex phenomena of world civilization, and none alone can claim primacy.

This book 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 we gain 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, 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 we are on holy ground each time a sentence is read.

We have prepared our selection of scriptures in three formats. The volume titled *Scriptures of the East* contains the sacred writings of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto, and Australian Aboriginal religions of the East. *Scriptures of the West* contains those of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Baha'i Faith, and indigenous religions of the West. 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. 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 Scholars 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 inevitable. 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, 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. Third, 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 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 is found in most scripture anthologies, and includes sacred writings from sectarian movements and mystical traditions. Examples are the Christian *Book of Mormon* and the Jewish *Zohar*.

A high priority was placed on including material that supports the interests of women, presents women in positions of leadership, or is 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.

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 through our arrangement of 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.

The most visible change to this second edition is the inclusion of two new sections: Australian Aboriginal Religions of the East, and Indigenous Religions of the West. Transliteration of Chinese terms now follows the Pinyin system, rather than the older Wade-Giles one. In the section on Judaism, new selections are added from the Talmud and on statements of faith. In the Christianity section, new selections are added on early Church fathers, Protestant statements of faith, and recent sectarian movements. In the Islam section, new selections are added from the Hadith and statements of faith.

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