

World Religions: Estimated Number of Adherents and Approximate Percent of World Population.

Religion	Adherents (millions)	Percent of World Population (percent)
Indigenous religions (by region)	405	5.8
Asia-Pacific	365	5.0
Middle-East and North Africa	1	<0.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	27	0.3
Europe	1	<0.1
Latin-America and Caribbean	10	0.1
North America	1	<0.1
East Asian traditions: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Shinto, and folk traditions	1,566	22.3
Buddhism in South East Asia	231	3.3
Jainism	4	0.1
Hinduism	1,000	14.0
Sikhism	23	0.3
Zoroastrianism	3	< 0.1
Judaism	14	0.2
Christianity	2,200	31.3
Islam	1,600	22.8
Bahá'í	7	0.1
Other	36	0.5
Total	6,858	97.7

Sources:

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. 2012. *The Global Religions Landscape*. The Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project. <http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape.aspx>

Major R. eligions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents, Adherents.com, http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html

Gardner, Gary T. *Inspiring Progress: Religions' Contributions to Sustainable Development*. A Worldwatch Book. New York: Norton, 2006.

Total 2012 World Population = 7,018 million (according to United States Census Bureau, International Database). <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/region.php>

Figure 1.2 Demographics of world religions; Credit: Matthew T. Riley

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The Nature of Religious Ecology: Orienting, Grounding, Nurturing, Transforming

Approaching the Question, What Is Religion?

This is clearly a complex question, especially when we are increasingly aware of the challenges of religious pluralism, ethnic diversity, and multiculturalism. Religion is immensely varied—personally, socially, culturally, institutionally—and continually changing over time. Indeed, there are as many misunderstandings of religion as there are descriptions of religion. Most popular definitions of religion are based on concepts from Western Abrahamic religions of God and salvation. These concepts are presented as universal but generally do not take into account the varied kinds of religious sensibilities in the world religions, especially from Asian or Indigenous traditions. For example, most Asian religions do not require belief in a Creator God or in redemption and salvation outside this world. Hence, such as Buddhism, are considered to be atheistic, or not focused on God or supernatural beings. Thus, religious sensibilities are not limited to monotheism or even theism.¹ Nor does religion preclude the inner experiences associated with spirituality. The cultivation of a spiritual path has extensive roots in religious traditions and beyond.

Spirituality involves a search for the sacred in which humans experience their authentic being in relation to a larger whole.² This usually entails a spiritual journey of self-cultivation to overcome fragmentation, loss,

and suffering.³ Spirituality is often associated with the mystical traditions that are present in all the world religions as repositories of contemplative insight and practice. There are guides on this path in the form of teachers, scriptures, prayers, rituals, and ascetic disciplines. The spiritual journey situates the human in a larger context so that the small self is seen in relation to the great self. This is what many authentic spiritual journeys aspire to.

For some time in the contemporary period there has been a vibrant interest in spirituality that is seen in contrast to religion, which is identified more with dogmatic institutional forms.⁴ This is not always an accurate description of religion that has been sustained and reshaped by the spiritual struggles of adherents throughout history. Currently, the quest to experience spirituality in nature is growing, and various expressions are emerging. The contributions of these nature spiritualities are significant, especially in responding to the environmental challenges we are facing.⁵ This book acknowledges the appeal of such spiritualities and suggests that there are important forms of ecological spiritualities within the religious traditions and outside of them.⁶

Among scientists there are also a wide range of religious and spiritual sensibilities involving both nature and a sense of the sacred, evident from Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), and Isaac Newton (1642–1727) into the present.⁷ Albert Einstein, who said he did not believe in any god, expressed his convictions in this way: “To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in the most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of the devoutly religious men.”⁸ Einstein is not alone in these thoughts, as many scientists manifest a religious attitude without god.⁹

Indeed, Ronald Dworkin (1931–2013) observes, “A religious attitude involves moral and cosmic convictions beyond simply a belief in god: that people have an innate, inescapable responsibility to make something valuable of their lives and that the natural universe is gloriously, mysteriously wonderful.”¹⁰ In its comprehensive form, then, religion involves a recognition that there is something beyond the human that cannot be named or defined fully yet calls us to value life, both its material constituents and its living expressions.

If we broaden our definition of religion to include the world religions, we acknowledge religion is not simply a belief in a transcendent deity, nor is it just a means to an afterlife. Indeed, belief or faith is not even a

primary category for many Asian traditions as it is in the Abrahamic traditions of the West. This is certainly the case for indigenous traditions as well as Confucianism and Daoism, which are generally more interested in this-worldly practices than belief in a deity or supernatural power.¹¹ Western religions often emphasize orthodoxy, that is, defined doctrines or teachings. However, orthopraxy, or a concern with normative practices, is as significant as orthodoxy in both Western and Asian religions.¹² Moreover, practice is central to all Indigenous traditions. Religions in the West are also closely identified with ethics regulating human behavior. But even ethics, as critical as they are, do not encompass all aspects of religions in their myriad manifestations across cultures and history. Rather, religions rely on stories and symbols for guidance and rituals and meditations for individual cultivation and community vitality.

Religions thus manifest themselves not simply in texts, statements, and doctrines, but even more directly in practice.¹³ The variety of religious practices and rituals around the planet is such that it is difficult to define religion from a single conceptual framework. Moreover, central to these practices and rituals are symbols and symbolic knowing.

Symbol Systems and Symbolic Knowing

For many, religion draws on complex symbol systems that mediate between human imagination and practice. This was the view of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), who understood religion as that which draws together a worldview replete with symbols and an ethos of behavior that creates coherent ways of living. He defined religion as: “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [individuals] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”¹⁴ Geertz saw that the symbol systems of religion evoked symbolic knowing, thus opening the world to interpretation and meaning. Just as Geertz understood that symbols transmitted in cultural practices have a profound effect on human consciousness in shaping worldviews, so also symbols give expression to empirical knowing.¹⁵ Symbolic knowledge is also used in mathematics and science to communicate and interpret concepts. Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras brought together symbol systems that are now considered separate ways of knowing in science and religion.

Such symbolic ways of knowing emerge out of earlier linguistic and conceptual faculties of the human. Indeed, symbol-making capacities

have distinguished humans from our evolutionary origins. Other animals also use symbols, but not in the same way that humans do, to create complex cultures and manage the forces of nature.¹⁶ As early humans awakened to their embeddedness in nature, they created cultural and religious forms that wove them into the natural world—its daily and seasonal cycles and its capacity to nurture with food and water. In this sense, humans developed a rich symbolic consciousness in relation to nature. This was the matrix for meeting the sacred and for articulating this experience in story and ritual.¹⁷ This is evident in the upper Paleolithic cave paintings in France and Spain, such as Lascaux and Altamira, made some 30,000 years ago.¹⁸

Religions have held in trust and passed on symbolic ways of knowing that are shared with art, music, literature, and poetry. Thus, cultures can be understood as systems of symbolic knowing. Such symbolic knowing is different from, but complementary to, discursive reasoning, or empirical knowing, used in disciplines such as science, law, and economics. Philosopher of history Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) proposed a separation of symbolic knowing in his disagreements with René Descartes (1596–1650). He argued that philosophical critique and analytical geometry provided natural science with tools of understanding and calculation. That is, these ways of knowing could measure what extended into space. However, Vico argued that such philosophical critique could not adequately understand the power of poetry and epic story. Similarly, the quantitative analysis so prized by Descartes and the mathematical community could not interpret imagination or memory that also assist humans to learn, to reason, and to discover truth.¹⁹

In his *Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, Ernst Cassirer explored this difference. He posited a type of perception of the “facts of culture.” This arose from what he called the shared “expressive perceptions” of culture that generate particular forms of symbolic knowing. This differs fundamentally from the empirical knowing of the natural sciences, what he described as “thing perception.” For Cassirer, these two forms of perception are primary and cannot be reduced one to the other. However, they can be seen as complementary. Moreover, as neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argues, each form evokes a feeling disposition regarding the nature of objective reality. That is, there is an emotional dimension of knowing in cultural and scientific forms.²⁰

To know a tree, for example, from both a biological and a cultural perspective enhances our understanding of the tree. As Yale paleobotanist Peter Crane illustrates in his book on the ginkgo, these ancient trees have

become closely associated with the religious traditions of East Asia that value their antiquity, beauty, and endurance.²¹ In addition, he points out how scientists have carefully studied the biological complexity, medicinal and nutritional uses, and survival of the ginkgo for more than 200 million years. These varied ways of knowing, scientific and cultural, augment our appreciation of the ginkgo.

Moreover, a feeling dimension for the tree can be seen as a kind of valuing or cherishing. This is expressed by Princeton biologist Steve Pacala, who speaks of his approach to the study of nature as having three phases: “I observe, I cherish, and I conceptualize.”²² He describes this as a pathway for creative scientific discovery that is inspired by an aesthetic sense of beauty and order in nature. Those who express an artistic, ethical, or religious perspective regarding nature’s value generally share this sense of cherishing.

For Cassirer, empirical perceptions in science gave rise to scientific laws that extend throughout physical space and time. Cultural knowing constituted for him an analogous type of intersubjective knowing transmitted within various societies. Thus, art, music, architecture, and belief systems could evoke shared expressive perceptions that would be transmitted over centuries. As these “cultural objects” became interpreted and reinterpreted, they could acquire a trans-historical and trans-local cultural meaning and depth of feeling.²³

For example, food in the world religions becomes a source of symbolic reflection. Rice in Asian cultures is revered as nourishment and is a life-giving symbol for many communities. Similarly, bread in Christian and Jewish religions is central to ritual practices that symbolize historical events, such as the Last Supper and Passover. Corn in Meso-American Indigenous traditions symbolizes the profound interconnection of human communities to the living world, and corn pollen is widely used in ritual. In all these cases, the expressive and detailed knowledge of planting and harvesting of rice, wheat, and corn becomes a focus of symbolic consciousness and celebration.

Such symbolic knowing for the human does not embrace any single interpretation or arrive at a final conclusion. This is because symbols evoke multivalent knowledge and emotions. Humans continue to interpret cultural objects, compounding them with new historical meaning. The potential for adapting and reinterpreting religious symbols as life enhancing or life diminishing is part of the work of theologians, rabbis, humans, and scholars of other traditions. In addition, there is the possibility for an artistic object or place to become universally significant for a

community that reinterprets this significance over time. This is evident in the dynamic roles of religious centers such as Jerusalem, Rome, or Mecca in the West and Benares (Varanasi) in India, Chang-an (Xi'an) in China, or Kyoto in Japan.

Religion has been a vehicle for this kind of symbolic cultural knowing and reinterpreting into the present. With secularization, some traditional religious symbols have lessened in import and impact in the modern world as film, media, and the arts have become more pervasive. However, secularization has not diminished the influence of religion in modernity, as is evident in the religious revival in Russia and China and its endurance in the United States. Nonetheless, with the dominance of science and technology, nature has been increasingly divested of symbolic value in favor of instrumental and economic value. This devaluing of nature has been driven in large measure by an economism that reduces symbolic knowing to the marketplace of materialism.²⁴ Thus, nature is seen as primarily for human use and exploitation.

Some have claimed that the emphasis in the Abrahamic traditions on spiritual transcendence has also led to the desacralization and abuse of nature.²⁵ In addition, as Max Weber observes, the rise of an elect community contributed to a capitalist mystique that valorized an ethic of monetary accumulation and devalued nature.²⁶ Admittedly, then, symbols may be invoked and rationalized to increase community cohesion or to ensure community control. The multivalent character of symbols makes them vulnerable to manipulation of political power and the evocation of authentic transformative spiritual power.²⁷ Discerning between the two is an ongoing challenge for religious leaders, scholars, and practitioners.

In the modern period we appear to have reached something of an impasse with regard to our understanding of the role of nature in human symbolic expression, both religiously and scientifically. Although we have a better understanding of how nature works ecologically, we lack an integral orientation to nature that recognizes our symbolic and biological interdependence. *Homo sapiens* emerged in planetary history with symbol-making capacities that were in direct relationship with the natural world.²⁸ Human linguistic, narrative, and ritual practices co-evolved within nature's rhythms and restraints. In our later development, our symbol-making capacities functioned, as Cassirer points out, in cultural and scientific modes that came to be seen in the modern period as separated from each other and often from nature.

In summary, the study of religion often emphasizes the cognitive, lin-

guistic, and symbolic capacities of the human, as we have seen in the contributions of Geertz and Cassirer. However, in exploring religious ecology the context is not simply that of human knowing but of nature itself. The question for religious ecology, then, is what is the role of religion within the processes of Earth and its ecosystems? This is different from sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, philosophy of religion, history of religion, or theology where religion is examined through a human lens. It is also different from geography of religion, which puts less emphasis on cosmology.²⁹ Religious ecology draws on various modes of symbolic awareness and explores human-Earth relations. The shared symbol-making capacity that has endured in world religions can be a source of wisdom in restoring the central value of nature in sustaining humans and shaping cultures. This is the role of religious ecology, which is an important element of religion that needs further exploration, definition, and study.

Defining Religious Ecology

Religious ecologies are ways of orienting and grounding whereby humans, acknowledging the limitations of phenomenal reality and the suffering inherent in life, undertake specific practices of nurturing and transforming self and community in a particular cosmological context that regards nature as inherently valuable.³⁰ Through cosmological stories humans narrate and experience the larger matrix in which life arises, unfolds, and flourishes. These are what we call *religious cosmologies*. These two, namely religious ecologies and religious cosmologies, can be distinguished but not separated. Together they can provide a context for navigating the tragic and chaotic dimensions of life. They may evoke energies for encountering these inevitable challenges, thus transforming destructive experiences into creative possibilities for new beginnings.

Human communities until the modern period sensed themselves as grounded in and dependent on the natural world, especially the very elements of life. Thus, even when the forces of nature were overwhelming, the regenerative capacity of the natural world opened a way forward. Humans experienced the processes of the natural world as interrelated, both practically and symbolically. These understandings were expressed in traditional environmental knowledge, namely, in hunting and agricultural practices such as the appropriate use of plants, animals, and land. Such knowledge was integrated in symbolic language and practical norms, such as prohibitions, taboos, and limitations on ecosystems' usage.³¹ All

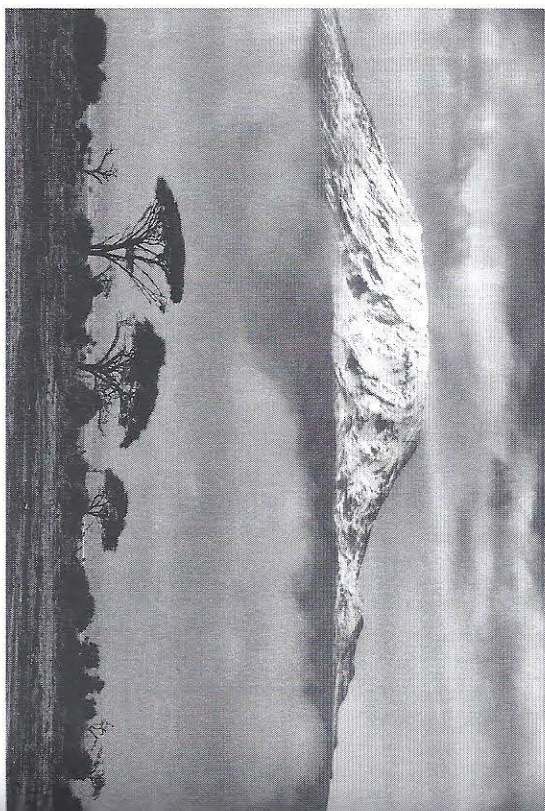


Figure 2.1 Mt. Kilimanjaro as seen from the Amboseli National Park in Kenya.
Photo source: iStock

this was based in an understanding of nature as the source of nurturance and kinship. Thus the Lakota people still speak of “all my relations” as an expression of this kinship (*Mitakuye Oyasin*).³²

Sacred places also manifest these intimate relationships of a people to the land. These include mountains such as Mt. Kilimanjaro in Kenya (figure 2.1), rivers such as the Yamuna and Ganges in India, waterfalls such as those used by Yamabushi ascetics in Japan, and rocks that are the site of piling of stones throughout Central Asia. Pilgrimage sites arise in sacred places that shape and define religious practices such as the Way of St. James pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. Religious ecologies develop in relation to these sacred places, often finding their own symbolic meanings in ritual. For example, Navajo/Diné sand paintings involve complex healing rituals in which a patient sits on colored sands that are ritually laid and symbolize specific sites in their cosmological stories. As a sacred chant is sung, the sands are rubbed onto the patient, who partakes of the healing power of this religious ecology that flows from connection to sacred places.³³

Through symbols and rituals, art and architecture, religious ecologies respond to the incompleteness, brokenness, and fragmentation of life and reorient the human toward the fullness of life. In this spirit, religious ecological sensibilities have developed sacred architecture to align living

spaces and ceremonial places with the sun and stars and the four directions.³⁴ Such architecture embodies a religious cosmology and ecology that places a community in relationship to the natural world and the cosmos itself. This symbolic knowing integrates land and structures as well as institutions and practices.

Religious structures of worship around the world do this, from Jewish synagogues to Christian cathedrals, from Islamic mosques to Hindu temples.³⁵ Across Asia the great Buddhist monuments display this cosmological orientation, such as the massive Buddhist mandala structure of Borobudur in Indonesia (figure 2.2), the Buddhist caves of Ajanta and Ellora in India, and the Buddhist carvings and paintings in Dunhuang, Luoyang, and Dargong in China.³⁶ In Indigenous societies, ceremonial houses were built in certain directions according to cosmological symbolisms that also embodied ecological understandings of climate and land formations.³⁷ In the American hemisphere the ritual lodges of the Northern Plains Indian Sundance and the majestic structures of Mayan and Incan peoples attest to their cosmological symbolism, cosmovision, and geographic knowledge.³⁸ Similarly, *feng shui* practices—or geomancy—in East Asia reflect this ancient inclination to orient buildings in relation to nature. The elements, the seasons, and directions were all used as correspondences to create an intricate system of microcosm–macrocosm relations.³⁹

Weaving into the Fabric of Life: Elemental Dimensions

The elements of earth, air, fire, and water are important in religious ecologies as biocultural realities that literally and symbolically weave humans into the vibrant processes of Earth and cosmos. These elements differ symbolically from the elements listed in the periodic table. However, as biocultural symbols, air, earth, water, and fire can be seen as corresponding to religious ecological processes of *orienting*, *grounding*, *nurturing*, and *transforming* humans. *Orienting* refers to the inclination of humans to turn toward air, sky, and celestial bodies, namely, that which moves above us. *Grounding* refers to earth, the soil and land on which we stand and in which we dwell. *Nurturing* evokes water and food, so essential for life. *Transforming* connects to fire and the powerful forces that can be creative, destructive, or healing. A human life that comes out of the elements of earth and ultimately returns to these elements seeks such deep connection through religious symbols and practices.

Religious ecologies weave humans into the elements of life both practically and symbolically. In a similar way, the scientific discipline of ecology studies the interaction of the elements in ecosystems. Both religious

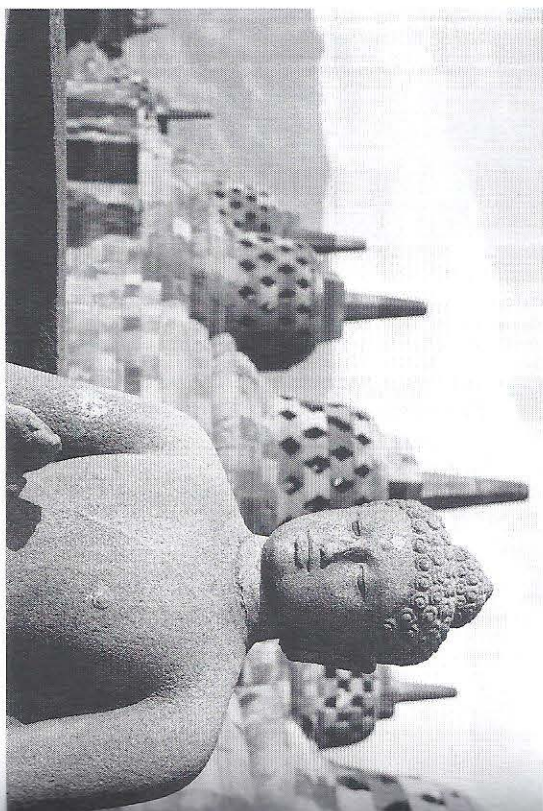


Figure 2.2 Borobudur Buddhist Temple in Java, Indonesia. Photo source: iStock

ecology and scientific ecology affirm the interrelated components of a system, or parts of a whole. Religious ecologies emphasize correspondences and subjective connections through symbols, whereas scientific ecology draws on empirical observation and objectivity through models. In Han China, for example, an elaborate system of correspondence was transmitted in the thought of Tung Chung-shu (Dong Zhongshu 179–104 BCE).⁴⁰ This religious ecology oriented the human to the elements, the directions, the seasons, and the larger world of nature, so that the human is situated in the context of Heaven and Earth, that is, the cosmos and nature.

Correspondences also refer to the complex symbolic systems articulated by cultures for expressing the relationship of the small self of the human (microcosm) to the large self of the universe (macrocosm). This idea is widespread in religious ecologies. In the Vedic hymns of early Hinduism, for example, the *Mahapurusha* is the “great person” whose sacrifice gives birth to all the elements of the universe. By ritual sacrifice in this tradition, a person is integrated into the larger cosmos that holds the ancestors, deities, social structures, and elemental matter.⁴¹ This is the cosmological self that resonates with all living things. In this way religious cosmology and religious ecology are mutually enhancing modes of integrating humans into the social, natural, and cosmic orders of reality.

Orienting, Grounding, Nurturing, Transforming

Religious ecologies can be seen, then, as ways of *orienting* humans to the universe, *grounding* them in the community of nature and humans, *nurturing* them in Earth’s fecund processes, and *transforming* them into their deeper cosmological selves. This gives fresh meaning to the Latin root of the word *religion*, *religio*, meaning “to bind back” or “to bind together.” This implies a return to, or coming into, a relationship with numinous power.⁴² Here we take that “binding” to be an awareness of and commitment to the fundamental wellsprings of life.

Religious ecologies become vehicles for *orienting* humans, experiencing a guiding and sustaining creative force in the natural world and beyond. For some traditions this is a creator deity (Yahweh, God, or Allah in the Western religions and Brahma in Hinduism) or a numinous presence in nature (Great Spirit, *mana*, or *kami* in some Indigenous traditions). For others it is the source of flourishing life (*Dao*, or the Great Ultimate, in Daoism and Confucianism) or Original Mind (the Buddha Nature in Mahayana Buddhism). Theologians and commentators have debated the nature of this creative force, ranging between transcendence above or immanence within nature or some dynamic combination thereof. Some religious thinkers speak of “panentheism,” a sense of the divine permeating all of reality and yet maintaining a transcendent presence beyond the world. This is distinguished from “pantheism,” which identifies the divine with nature itself. For many in the Abrahamic traditions pantheism is to be avoided because God is understood as a Creator deity above nature.

In the most comprehensive sense, then, religious ecologies provide an orientation to this creative force in the cosmos. This elicits our response by asking such enduring questions as: Where do we come from? Where are we going? How do we fit in? Is there a Creator, or is the universe a process of ongoing creativity? The emergence of galaxies, stars, planets, and life is narrated in the origin stories of many traditions. Through such stories, or religious cosmologies, the human is oriented to comprehensive questions about the larger context of life.⁴³

However, it is important to note that not all religions have creation stories that acknowledge a time of origin. For example, both Buddhism and Confucianism suggest that the universe is an ongoing creative entity without a specific beginning. There is no Creator God in these traditions. Buddhism also has a cosmological understanding of the interdependence of life in its teachings about dependent origination or “the together rising up of things” (*pratitya samutpada*). In the Hua Yen school of Chinese

Buddhism this teaching is presented in symbolic form as a cosmic jeweled net of the god Indra. In that cosmic net each jewel reflects all the others, thus mirroring the interpenetrating and interdependent nature of reality. Confucianism has a rich cosmological view of the continuous interaction of the great triad of Heaven (cosmos), Earth, and humans, which is described by Tu Weiming as a "continuity of being." In the Confucian classic *The Doctrine of the Mean*, this relationship of Heaven, Earth, and humans provides a constant teaching of balance and reciprocity. Both Buddhism and Confucianism foster a sense of relational resonance between the myriad communities of life.⁴⁴

Indeed, fostering such relational resonance as a means of *grounding* the human is at the heart of religious ecologies. Humans have a deep desire to belong, to be part of a community or broader fellowship. Such communities include humans in past, present, and future generations—from ancestors and grandparents to parents and children, from the sages and saints of the past to future descendants. For many traditions, the community of life also embraces the larger world of four-legged, winged, and gilled beings along with the meadows, rivers, forests, and oceans in which they dwell. In this light, nature is a revelatory context for orienting and grounding humans amid abiding religious questions about the origins of the universe, the emergence of life—mineral, plant, animal—and the role of humans amid these life processes.

For many practitioners this gives rise to a human desire to enter into Earth's *nurturing* processes that depend on water and food. Most religious communities value water as sacred, using it for ceremonies of purification or initiation. Moreover, individual and communal nurturance is experienced through rituals and ceremonies for gathering and hunting or growing and harvesting food. Planting and harvest rituals, as well as thanksgiving for food and drink, are common in all religious ecologies. When human communities are gifted with nature's bounty in food and drink, the fear of hunger is overcome. This is acknowledged with the Seder in Jewish families, the Eucharist in Christian communities, and Ramadan dinners in the Muslim world. With the offerings of food to the ancestors in Buddhist and Confucian communities, humans are bound to the long lineage of life. Religious ecologies thus link humans to nature's nurturing power through symbols and rituals that help establish patterns of reciprocity with nature, with other humans, with ancestors, and with the numinous forces sustaining life. Nature's fecundity is seen as a source of life, providing rich nourishment for individuals and communities.

Religious ecologies also help in *transforming* individuals from their small self into their greater self. Humans negotiate this transformation in a variety of ways through prayer and meditation, ritual and sacrament, repentance and renewal. In many traditions, prayers and rituals are designed to carry a person through the rhythms of the day—lighting candles and incense in the morning in the Confucian and Buddhist traditions of East Asia, reciting Vedic hymns at dawn to greet the sun in Hinduism, praying five times a day in the Islamic world. This can be done at home or in the monasteries of Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, where the sun's rising and setting are celebrated at dawn and dusk with prayers and chanting. In addition, visual images can enhance such meditation: icons in Orthodox Christianity, mandalas in Tibetan Buddhism, and statues in Hinduism.

Moreover, religious ecologies mark the great life transitions, or transformations, through birth, maturity, marriage, and death with rites of passage, such as the sacraments in Christianity. In both the daily rituals and in rites of passage, images from nature are used. This places a person within the diurnal alteration of dark and light and the seasonal cycles of death and rebirth. In the yearly calendar these are celebrated as solstice and equinox. Humans are participants in the rhythms of nature—each day, every year, and across the expanse of a lifetime. Thus, loss, suffering, and diminishment are given a larger meaning within the changing and renewing processes of nature itself.

Finally, traditions of atonement and renewal are built into religious ecologies with ascetic practices such as fasting or seeking a vision in nature, namely in mountains or deserts, rivers or waterfalls. Testing oneself in nature, training one's body through discipline and denial, performing austerities—all these practices bring one to a sense of purification and renewal.⁴⁵ In this way a person or a community is transformed and restored.

Conclusion

Religious ecologies in their fullest potential orient individuals to their larger role in the cosmos, in Earth's ecosystems, and in human societies. Religious ecologies thus help humans see themselves not as isolated beings in a vast and indifferent universe but as embedded in the cosmic and Earth communities from which they draw nurturance. This realization finds different expressions. For Jews and Christians a human being is made in the image and likeness of God and as such imprinted with possibilities for creativity and love. In Confucianism the human is the

mind-and-heart (*hisin*) of Heaven and Earth, the reflective and feeling consciousness of the universe. For Buddhists, although there is no abiding self, humans are dependent on the dynamic processes of an interwoven world. Some Buddhists refer to this perception of relationship as “inter-being.”⁴⁶ For Hindus, *atman* (self within all things) and *Brahman* (divine self) are mutually indwelling. This is a fundamental insight of the Upanishads, where wisdom is seen as the realization of an inherent identity of all reality with the divine. All these are examples of the pervasiveness of microcosm–macrocosm relationships as a given reality in religious ecologies. However, for humans to realize their place in the larger macrocosm is an achievement through religious practice. For example, the practice of yoga can bring a person into a bodily experience of the rhythms of nature and the cosmos.

Religious cosmologies and religious ecologies—through orienting stories and practices, symbols and rituals, meditation and prayer—are the means by which humans integrate themselves into these interpenetrating communities. They help humans find grounding to negotiate tragedy and loss, contingency and finitude. They nurture individuals and communities to live amid uncertainty and pain with joy, hope, and even laughter. They transform the human to activate healing and reconciliation so that comprehensive compassion may flow into the world.

In the modern period in the West we diminished these multiple relationships so that religion became focused primarily on God–human relations and human–human relations. Human–Earth relations were ignored or attenuated.⁴⁷ The aim of the study of religious ecology is to retrieve, reexamine, and reconstruct these human–Earth relations that are present in all the world religions. This relationality with nature, both symbolically and practically, is one of the elements religions have in common as cosmological and ecological systems. Religions thus hold a promise of extending once again care and compassion to the planetary community of life.

3

Religious Ecology and Views of Nature in the West

Religious ecologies in particular cultures provide an integrated milieu for living in community with other humans, with nature, and with the Earth. Similarly, religious cosmologies create a broad narrative context for humans to explore questions of origin and the unfolding of life. Religious ecologies are not static entities but change over time through interactions with complex currents of intellectual, social, and political thought. Such interactions are continually reshaping relations of humans with nature and those of humans with each other and with the divine. With the development of the science of ecology, many of the processes of nature came to be studied using empirical and analytical methods. In this chapter we explore cosmological concepts and views of nature in the West as background for understanding how scientific ecology developed over the twentieth century and how religious ecology is being interpreted at present. Whereas this chapter focuses on the West, religious ecologies in South Asia, East Asia, and Indigenous traditions are discussed in later chapters.¹

Views of Nature in the West

This overview is intended to illuminate five key movements in Western thought that helped shape human–nature relations: from animism to monotheism, from purpose to ambivalence, from holism to rationalism, from romanticism to transcendentalism, and from anthropocentric to anthropocosmic perspectives. The term *anthropocosmic* refers to a view of