Preface

I have written this book because I am unhappy with the usual surveys of world religions. Ambitious surveys of the world's religions—whether they are college textbooks or popular accounts—convey large amounts of data. You can usually find there a serviceable summary of the Bhagavadgita or the Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching) alongside the Gospel of Luke, but perhaps far more arcane material as well.² There will be potted histories of the "major world religions," though besides the Big Five—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism³—its not clear how to slot in the other traditions like Daoism, Sikhism, Jainism, Shinto, not to mention the tribal religions of Native Americans or sub-Saharan Africans. Usually, as an afterthought, there are attempts to relate all these traditions to questions we modern folk are raising (e.g., about environmentalism, feminism, violence), whether or not those were their questions. And finally, there will be a word or two about just what religion itself is, what defines this category in which we have included all these traditions. How much do we include here? What if Confucians or Buddhists claim they are not "religious"—can we count them anyway? And what about various clearly secular ideologies, especially Marxist ones; do they, in effect, replace religions in some societies? Do we study them as religions?

I do not mean to disparage these books, nor the noble efforts of their authors to portray fairly and accurately the religious lives of ancient and modern people all over the globe, and I cannot replace here what they accomplish in those books. Students interested in facts—facts about the authorship of the Christian gospels and the doctrines of early Buddhism, facts about the Hindu gods and their worship in temples, facts about Zen meditation and Islamic personal law—should turn to these textbooks. What the usual hefty survey lacks is not facts but clear arguments about how those facts were chosen. What argument about the very nature of religion lies behind the chapter-by-chapter account of particular religions? For example, it is often assumed that "real religion" is all about the interior experience of sincere individuals, and thus the religion of lukewarm or hypocritical conformists is ignored. In other words, we are concerning ourselves with a tiny minority, but nowhere is that explicitly stated. Many *Religions of the World* textbooks should be retitled *The Religious Life of Noble Persons*.

Why do we read surveys of the religions of the world? Partly because, in an effort to be less parochial and more cosmopolitan, we want to see how other people answer the big questions. And partly because, assuming that a survey will be a menu of personal options, we believe we can use it to consider the options and pick a religious path that appeals to us. The most popular among such books are those that appeal to the seeker, providing the reader with a taste of a variety of "spiritualities." Pursuing either or both of these aims depends on the idea that religion is a genus, comprising roughly equivalent species. And that each of these examples of religion—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam—serves the same function in society, or at least *should* serve the same function in society that privatized Protestant Christianity serves in open, tolerant, secularized western societies. Religion in this view, or at least authentic religion, is a personal philosophy and set of private practices with virtually no political role.

I am also somewhat unhappy about the way religion is treated in the study of world history. Surely the study of the history of the world is strikingly less Eurocentric than it was a few decades ago, yet a certain ingrained narrative is there. We still tend to have lodged in our heads a seemingly obvious progression that leads from Mesopotamia to Egypt to Greece to Rome to England to Massachusetts to California. India and China are added in, but often as classical and timeless civilizations unrelated to our story, "the rise of the West." The most striking things about that narrative is that *it ends up with us*, and that it rather sidelines the vast Islamic civilization that dominated world trade and cultural exchange for a thousand years (ca. 700–1700 A.D.).

Unquestioned assumptions—about models of world history or the ways religions evolve—produce other blind spots. Why are religions

and civilizations treated like organisms that take birth, grow, flourish, decline, and die? Why is there often a survey of the most ancient Indian mythology, reflected in Vedic Sanskrit texts composed before 1000 B.C., as part of a historical narrative of Hinduism, while there is no similar account of Greek and Roman mythology as the first chapter of European religion? The simple answer is because organizing a book with chapters on major world religions will mean having chapters on Hinduism and Christianity. "Hinduism" includes a treatment of early Vedic ritual and mythology, even while Vedic priests did not think of themselves as belonging to a religion named Hinduism and the vast majority of modern Hindus know very little about ancient Vedic traditions, while "Christianity" replaces the pagan traditions of Greece and Rome. Its prehistory has been covered by the chapter on Judaism, which again is treated as an ancient tradition going back to Abraham, even while the Rabbinic religion of the Judaism we know today was largely the product of the first century and Abraham would hardly have thought of himself as a member of the religion of Judaism. (Some Muslims would interject here that Abraham knew that he was a Muslim.) So the prevailing view has it that some ancient religious histories are relevant and others are not. But consider the medieval Italian peasant, celebrating holy days on an annual cycle, in harmony with the rhythms of agriculture, and venerating saints at sacred sites with ancient pre-Christian roots. Certainly such a person would affirm that she was a Christian. But is her religion really the same as that of the first-century Christian participating in what the Romans would have seen as a nonconformist cult, anticipating the imminent end of the world? Or does she, in fact, have more in common with the Roman pagan, both following ancient traditions and both suspicious of novelty? Similarly, is Mexican Catholicism both a chapter in the history of Euro-American Christianity and a chapter in Native American religion?

The more important problem with popular and textbook surveys of world religions is that they are bloodless. They present each religion as though it were a museum piece. Here's what Hindus believe (or do). Here's what Muslims believe (or do). Here's what Christians believe (or do). Isn't that nice? They all have these uplifting ideas about being a good person! Behind the well-meaning blandness is an unspoken relativist theology based on humanist notions of fairness: all these religions are products of different cultures; all have good things to teach us; if we open our minds and learn about them we will accept each other with respect and good will. This unspoken argument shifts the discourse to a

level where both reader and author are above the religions they study, "respecting" them but not taking them seriously in the religious way religious people take them. It avoids even the most basic arguments about how scholars deal with the problems of defining and studying religion and ascertain the boundaries to this field of inquiry. Are Christianity and Hinduism really two comparable species of the same genus (religion)? Should we present only portraits of only the noblest Buddhists and Muslims? Or the most representative? Most Buddhists do not meditate, and most Muslims do not pray five times a day; are these people accounted for in the usual summary treatments of Buddhism and Islam? And if most people in world history have been unwilling to relativize their own religious beliefs, if many of them were in fact willing to kill or die for them, how should we account for that without simply assuming a sort of smug pact between reader and author that we are somehow more advanced than those benighted, intolerant, and bellicose souls of the past, especially in light of the fact that the twentieth century was the bloodiest on record. If we moderns are not fighting about religion, and we often are, we are still fighting about something. And most often, we still prosecute our wars with a rather religious conviction.

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My interest in the world historical framework for the study of religion was first provoked by my study of history with Otto Nelson at Texas Tech University in 1970, when he suggested that I read W.H. McNeill's *Rise of the West.* That interest was extended when I read M.G.S. Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam* at the suggestion of my fellow graduate student Kevin Reinhart, now a professor of Islamics at Dartmouth College. I thank these dear friends for their inspiration and for all their wonderful, intellectually stimulating and enriching companionship over the last decades. While at Macalester, several colleagues in the History Department also gave me much to think about. I want to thank especially Paul Solon, Jim Stewart, Peter Rachleff, Karin Velez, and David Itzkowitz.

Outside my own field of specialization, I have also been inspired by the work of biblical scholars, especially Gene Gallagher and the late George W. MacRae, and my friends at Macalester College, Calvin Roetzel, Allen Callahan, Susanna Drake, and Andy Overman. Andy and I have taught a course and an NEH seminar together, and those many conversations resulted in the way I have conceived the first third of this book. I am extremely grateful to these friends.

In the 1980s I ventured into the field of Islamics, especially in order to understand the ways Hindus and Muslims in South Asia relate. This resulted in my book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and made me realize the limitations of studying Hinduism in an isolated way. In this field, I have been much influenced and aided by Carl Ernst, Stewart Gordon, Bruce Lawrence, Brendan Larocque, SherAli Tareen, and Mashal Saif.

Many other colleagues at Macalester assisted me as I ventured far outside my specialty. I want to thank especially Brett Wilson, Barry Cytron, Erik Davis, Joëlle Vitiello, Kiarina Kordela, Terry Boychuk, David Martyn, Satoko Suzuki, Arjun Guneratne, Paula Cooey, and the late Juanita Garciagodoy. I also received useful advice and counsel from Van Dusenbery, Daniel Williams, Andy Fort, Roland Jansen, Shana Sippy, Jeanne Kilde, Richard Davis, and Bruce Forbes.

Prior to undertaking this work, my studies have mostly dealt with India. In that field, I have continued to benefit from the generous help of a number of prominent South Asianists. I thank especially Alf Hiltebeitel, Vasudha Narayanan, James Hegarty, Richard Gombrich, Charlie Hallisey, Eleanor Zelliot, Irina Glushkova, Jim Masselos, Philip Lutgendorf, Paula Richman, Lynn Zastoupil, Fred Smith, Christian Novetzke, Lee Schlesinger, and Wendy Doniger.

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Macalester students in my course World Religions and World Religions Discourse have provided me with much to think about, as have my students in Introduction to the Religions of the World at the University of Minnesota. It is primarily for students such as these that I have written this book.

Of course, all my work would be impossible without the love and support of family and friends. I am grateful for the hospitality of my English relatives, Olivia, Dave, Barbara, Betty, Ahmad, Jamal, Kareem, and Yussef. My Texas family has been behind me from the beginning. Thanks to Rick and Nancy, and especially my mother, Marie. I've appreciated the

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For eight beautiful years, my loyal dog Patches led me on daily walks. He didn't give a damn about religion or power but probably helped me more than anyone to stop and think. I hope the results honor his memory.

Iames W. Laine

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