

Trond Einar Augustson

Imagine
there are no
religions

There's no hell below us,
above us only sky



The philosopher, influencer, and author Trond Einar Augustson on this picture is in his rainy hometown Bergen.

You will find more information about him and his books in the epilogue and on www.augustson.online.

Augustson is born in Drammen, Norway in 1949. He has lived most of his life in Norway, but also in Stockholm, Sweden, and Gaborone, Botswana. Since 1988 he has been living in Bergen, but he is spending many months each year in his retreat apartments in Arguineguin, Gran Canaria and in Kikut in the Norwegian mountains. Many of his books are therefore written outside Bergen.

Augustson is married, has four children and 10 grandchildren.

He has his academic basis from the University of Oslo and the University of Bergen. The last five years he has written several books with a non-fiction content of philosophy, religions, and criticism of religions. Augustson has been an atheist since the sixties and has a liberal political view, but he is not a member of any political party. This book is his first in English.

The title and the text on the front page are inspired by John Lennon's melody *Imagine*.

Imagine there are no religions

Author Trond Einar Augustson, 2026

This book is a revised and English version of the book *Religioner og religiøse forestillinger*, published in 2024 with the Norwegian ISBN 978-82-303-6551-9

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Synopsis

This book describes the development, evolution, and distribution of religions and religious beliefs across different regions of the world.

It begins with what we know about the history of Homo sapiens and religions, drawing on evidence from archaeology and written sources.

Religions are generally believed to have originated with animism. Thousands of years ago, our ancestors held that everything, living or non-living, possessed a soul or spirit. Over time, animism in many cultures evolved into polytheism. Even the earliest forms of Judaism, or more accurately the original religion of the Jewish people, included belief in multiple deities. The religions of the Greeks, Romans, and Norse peoples were rich with gods, while Hinduism remains polytheistic to this day. Some Hindu traditions or sects, however, may be considered monotheistic or even atheistic.

In Europe, the Americas, and Africa, the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism continue to dominate into the present century. Secularization has reduced the role of religion in many European countries. In northern Europe, belief in God has now become a minority position.

Monotheism itself appears to have originated in the Persian faith of Zoroastrianism, which shares striking similarities with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In western Asia and northern Africa, Islam is the prevailing religion. Hinduism dominates in India, while Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, and Confucianism are more common in East Asia. Buddhism and Confucianism are regarded as atheistic traditions. Worship or veneration of a god is relatively uncommon in the East.

As with most religions, these traditions are accompanied by myths, beliefs, and conceptions that lack factual documentation. The final part of this book examines such ideas, revealing most of them as delusions.

Throughout history, religion has been a source of conflicts, hatred, and war. Today, the wars in the Middle East and Sudan stand out as particularly devastating.

Religion and political power have often supported one another. Monarchies and Christian churches, for example, have long used opportunities to gain attention together, reinforcing each other through media presence. The author predicts and hopes that when the church loses its influence among the people, monarchy will eventually be abolished, and vice versa. Both institutions are seen as archaic remnants of the past. Probably the Scandinavian countries will be the first to escape their monarchy and state supported churches. They should not exist in pluralistic modern democracies.

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Prologue

This book is an English and revised version of my book *Religioner og religiøse forestillinger* (Religions and religious beliefs) published in 2024, and is also inspired by my book, *Lykken og livet* (Happiness and life), which was printed and published in 2022 and made available on both ebok.no, books.apple.com, and books.google.no. In *Happiness and life*, I referred and discussed what others have thought and expressed throughout history. Philosophers, authors, scientist, and other groundbreaking thinkers were the focus of the first part of the book. Religions were also addressed. The second part of the book covered others' research on happiness, along with my own reflections. *Happiness and life* is so far only published in Norwegian and is therefore only easily available for Scandinavian speaking people. I wished my second book to be available for more people. This English version is more complementary and has more references than the Norwegian original. It is a more complete book!

Other authors also have inspired me writing this book. First of all, I like to mention Richard Dawkins and his books *The God Delusion* and *Outgrowing God*. Yuval Noah Harari have written two elegant and revealing books: *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. The perspective in his books is not quite like Dawkins' and mine. But his books support free thought and are without dogmas. I am also indebted to Lance Grande and his book *The Evolution of Religions* and many more books and authors who have given me inspiration and facts to write this book.

Imagine there are no religions explains religious faith, practices, and ideas. The chronological structure found in *Happiness and life* is to some extent retained where it serves to show how religions and religious beliefs have crossed borders and spread among peoples throughout history. This book also carries a political message, shaped by my liberal and humanistic views and outlook on life.

Intellectual thoughts, religion, science, and societal development, are indebted to those who lived, thought, reflected, and expressed their ideas in earlier times. They have given us something to build upon. Still, I must quickly add that the most recent beliefs are by no means the most well-considered, intelligent, or credible in every context. For example, I cannot find any existing religion, sect, or revival movement that is free from numerous undocumented incredible dogmas that followers must accept as truths. How did it come to this? And how is belief in so much unscientific and unlikely maintained? In the following chapters I have attempted to provide some answers.

This book was written during a time of war in Ukraine and the Middle East. We cannot directly blame religion for the war in Ukraine, even though the Russian branch of the Orthodox Church appears to support Putin's outrageous warfare. However, the war in the Middle East, with the genocide in Gaza, the violence against Palestinians on the West Bank, and Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, and Qatar are most certainly a result of Judaism and Zionism. Human rights and international laws are ignored. Only The Old Testament is respected. And Netanyahu is saving his political future, with help from Trump.

The unrest in the Middle East has existed for many thousands of years, beginning with the imperial ambitions of the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the unrest and attempts creating empires continued with Muslims, Christian crusaders, the British, and the French. Since World War II, the Zionists, the Russians, and especially the Americans have bombed and killed almost without pause. Iran is not an innocent party either. Militias and terrorists are openly supported by the theocratic regime.

We Norwegians first became familiar with and involved in the conflicts in the Middle East

during the Crusades. The efforts may have been well-intentioned from the participants' side, but hardly heroic or justified. However, Norway's contribution to the peacekeeping forces in Lebanon can be highlighted as commendable and useful. Moreover, our involvement in Lebanon has led to greater insight and understanding among Norwegians regarding the suffering and oppression of the Palestinians, more so than among people in many other countries. Today, we are witnessing apartheid-like conditions in Israel, the annexation of Palestinian land on the West Bank, and the near-eradication of Gaza. This is due to and supported by Zionism and evangelical Christians in America and Europe, who see the state of Israel and this ongoing conflict as signs of Jesus' imminent return, and that Judgment Day is just around the corner.

Many Israelis believe they are God's chosen people and that God has given them the right to a vast territory in the Middle East. This perhaps prevents them from recognizing the abhorrent and immoral nature of their own abuses of power.

Marx stated that religion is like opium for people. But what we are witnessing in the territories controlled by Israel is far worse than opium. Israelis have displaced, oppressed, humiliated, and killed Palestinians since 1948. Christians in the USA and Europe allow this to happen without protests, likely because it aligns with their biblical worldview and islamophobia. Religion can make people blind, cynical, cold, and insensitive. Religion is an obstacle to peace and justice in our world, probably the primary obstacle.

When it comes to religious beliefs and my discussion of them, I have deliberately excluded the most horrific and compromising aspects of the relevant religious groups. However, as part of religious practice, sacrifices of humans have been performed in many parts of the world. We have also had witch-burnings in our western part of the world. Even today, there are sects that attempt to change people's sexual orientation, engage in exorcism, speaking in tongues, perform healing, and shamanism. I naturally distance myself from all the above. I do not spend time on such primitive expressions of religion and religious beliefs in this book.

Is there a hope for a common worldwide religion that we all can agree upon? And may such a religion bring peace and reconciliation?

I am quite sure that such a religion or agreement is impossible. The reason for this is not only that religions and religious beliefs are so very different. The main reason is that non-believers are convinced that all theist religions are built on delusions. They just do not make sense. Believing in a soul that fly from one dead individual to another being, is in the same category. What we may hope for is a common agreement and understanding of some principles regulating coexistence and acceptable behaviour. Some examples are honesty, freedom of speech, human rights, democracy, that we all have the same protection by laws and regulations. Do you know any country that fully satisfies all the listed examples? I do not know any country that fully satisfies a single one of these examples.

Lance Grande expresses some hope for religions' impact on moral in his book, *The Evolution of Religions*, Columbia University Press, 2024: "Moral and ethical behaviour did not originate with religions, it was instead an independent product of evolution. It has been found to be present even in some of the great apes. However, religion, in its most positive form, helped establish certain codified rules of ethical human behaviour that often aided in the development of large civilizations. Some examples of such codifications include the *Ten Yamas* of Hinduism, the *Five Precepts* of Buddhism, the *Forty-Two Negative Confessions* of Egyptian Polytheism and the *Ten Declarations* or *Ten Commandments* of Abrahamic Monotheism." I agree with Grande on this. But we may keep the benefits from moral and ethics without accepting any of the religious delusions.

A short history of Homo sapiens, religions, beliefs, and humanism

This brief overview of the evolution of religious beliefs and religions will serve well as introduction to this book. Some information in this chapter is from Simon Adams' book *The History of World Religions*, Anness Publishing, 2016, but first of all the chapter is based on Lance Grande's book *The Evolution of Religions*, Columbia University Press, 2024.

There is of course a history of religious beliefs that is untold and unknown by us because it existed before it was documented in text or we are without archeological findings of any sort. We also know little about native Americans', native Australians', and early African religions. I just refer what is easily found in English literature. This book is not meant to be a history book on religious subjects.

The atheist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud meant that the belief in gods arose from parental figures in childhood. A yearning for a powerful protective figure gave people the idea of deities which could provide a similar security. I like to add that people in earlier days did not understand the sun, thunder, lightning, earthquakes, hurricanes, and the laws of nature. It is understandable that they worshipped the sun as a god, thought that the god Thor made the thunder and Poseidon made the storms. Atheist of our time have greater problems to explain why even well-educated people still believe in gods, angels, saints, souls, holy spirits, hell, heaven, reincarnation, and a lot of other undocumented things. Is it primarily due to family pressure and cultural traditions?

The kingdom of Egypt was founded more than 5,000 years ago. In this kingdom they worshiped many gods. The people were polytheists. Egyptians even considered their pharaoh to be some sort of manifestation of their god. In China and Japan people also believed the emperor to be a god, or at least a close relative to a god, some hundred years ago.

Some regard the Jewish nation to be founded by Abraham 4,000 years ago. But it is probably more correct that Abraham was the leader of a group of people that evolved to a Jewish tribe with common myths and traditions. Talmud, The Old Testament, and the Jewish religion were formed much later. However, we cannot know whether the story about Abraham is just a myth. What we do know is that Noah and his ark was all a myth, probably of Mesopotamian origin. Moses and his leadership in the escape from Egypt, the exodus, and his role with the Ten Commandments is also of low credibility. But exciting myths he has certainly created, if he really ever has existed.

The following list of historical events are as far as I know, without myths. But who knows?

~300,000 BCE (BCE = Before Common Era) Homo sapiens evolve in Africa.

~200,000 BCE Homo sapiens spread from Africa to the Middle East and Eurasia.

~155,000 BCE Signs of mortuary ritual in eastern Africa. Many historians believe that the belief in the supernatural began with our expanding cognitive ability in the Stone Age. Animism, ancestorism with veneration of the elderly and the dead, and anthropomorphic supernaturalism developed gradually and appeared before polytheism. A type of early anthropomorphic supernaturalism included veneration of fertility and motherhood.

~91,000 BCE Ritualistic human burials in the Middle East with the use of red ochre and associated grave goods. Is believed to be an example of ancestorism.

~35,000 BCE Lion figure carved in mammoth ivory with human body and lion head. Found in German cave. Venus figures from that period were found in Siberia, Germany, and Austria. Probably part of veneration of motherhood. Traces of such veneration still is found within Abrahamic Monotheism. As an example, the Roman Catholic Church still practices veneration of Mary, mother of Jesus. She is considered somewhere between a saint and a goddess.

~26,000 BCE Earliest traces of humans in America. They used the Beringia-Siberian land bridge.
From the same period traces of highly ceremonial human burials, suggestive of either ancestor veneration or leader veneration in Sungir, Russia.

~9,130 BCE The temple of Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, suggestive of early Western Organized Religion. Probably a result of polytheistic beliefs.

~9,000 BCE Baghor 1 Shrine, possibly to a goddess, constructed in central India, suggestive of early Eastern Organized Religion. The earliest Dharmic Religions to evolve appear to have been animistic and matristic forms, involving the worship of spirits dwelling in stones, animals, trees, rivers, mountains, and stars, or goddesses. Some of these spirits were good, while others were bad. Among the earliest elements of more formalized Dharmic Religion is what is termed Proto-Vedism or Brahmanism. The Dharmic Religion eventually evolved into a number of major branches, including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.

~4,000 BCE The oldest known Mesopotamian temple built by ancient Sumerians to the god Enki.

~3,400 BCE The start of writing and literacy by the Sumerian people in Mesopotamia.

~2,500 BCE Sumerian text written on clay tablets mention several gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon.

~2,350 BCE Harappan civilization in the Indus River Valley with a seal possibly showing the Hindu god Pashupati in a yoga pose.
In the same period the oldest texts of Egyptian polytheistic traditions were carved into the stone walls of pyramids in Lower Egypt.

~2,250 BCE Staff-God artifact made in South America, Norte Chico.

~2,000 BCE Celtic tribes had different versions of a common religion with a variety of gods.

~1,700 BCE Abraham, patriarch of the Israelites. Is said to have been born in Ur, Mesopotamia. He is also said to have worshipped El as chief, but not as a monotheistic god.

~1,700-1,500 BCE Start of Vedic period when nomads in India began to compose the Rig Veda and codify Hinduism. Many of the early gods mentioned in the Vedas or later Hindu texts correspond to the gods of ancient Greece and Rome.
In the same period proto-Taoism principles developed in China, during the Shang Dynasty.

And Greco-Roman Polytheism developed, influenced by Minoan, Egyptian, and other earlier polytheistic traditions.

~1,300 BCE Yahweh first indicated as a warrior god in the pantheon where El is the supreme deity. Yahweh eventually replaces El as supreme deity after Moses, leader of the Israelites, receiving the Ten Declarations (ten Commandments) on Mount Sinai.

~1,200 BCE Zoroaster lived in Persia. He is the founder of Zoroastrianism.

~1,000 BCE The Hindu beliefs spread in India. These beliefs are polytheistic. The beliefs were written down in the four Vedas.

~950 BCE Completion of the First Temple in Jerusalem, Salomon's temple.

~900 BCE Development of writing and literacy in America among the Olmec civilization.

~722 BCE Assyrians take over the northern Israelite kingdom, and Israelites are exiled.

~600-500 BCE The Greek city-states linked religion with government.

In the same period the Sramana Movement began in India leading to Jainism founded by Mahavira, and formalized Taoism developed in China after the founder named Laozi, also called Lao-Tsu.

Gautama Buddha lived in this period, and so did Confucius in China, the founder of Confucianism.

Roman polytheism grew and expanded by intertwining with powers of the Roman Republic and with the Roman Empire. Deities from new territories of the empire were included in the Roman pantheon.

~586 BCE Babylonians destroyed the First Temple in Jerusalem. This was followed by a rise of the Yahweh-alone movement and emergence to true Abrahamic Monotheism.

~539 BCE The Persian Empire, led by the Zoroastrian King Cyrus the Great, conquered the Babylonians and let the Israelites return to their homeland.

~515 BCE Dedication of Second Temple in Jerusalem.

~300 BCE Buddhism expanded and diversified in India under the patronage of Ashoka the Great, the Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty.

~200 BCE Old Testament is completed.

~146 BCE Greece came under Roman rule. The Romans took over the Greek gods and renamed them.

~100 BCE Mahayana Buddhism had spread through much of East Asia through missionaries and patronage from a number of ruling monarchs.

~42 BCE The Roman emperor Julius Caesar was officially deified by a decree of the Roman Senate.

BCE (Before Common Era) = BC (Before Christ)

CE (Common Era) = AD (Anno Domini)

~4 (CE) Jesus was born in Nazareth? The date is unknown. The December 25 is a consensus proclaimed by Nicene Christianity in 336. The date is probably chosen to overlay the December 25 festival of the Roman sun god, Sol Invictus. Some Eastern branches of Christianity chose and still use January 6 for the birth of Jesus.

Jesus created a new “Jewish sect.” His life resulted in the New Testament with words of wisdom, but also a lot of undocumented myths. Of course, his life also resulted in Christianity.

~30 Death of Jesus.

~50 Earliest writhing of the New Testament began.

~70 Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

~100 Last of New Testament, the Revelations, was written. The first Christian churches were founded.

In the same period Buddhism gradually spreads to China.

~200 Emperor Wu made Confucianism state religion of China.

~300 Christianity was tolerated in the Roman Empire and gradually took over for the Roman polytheism originally inherited from Greece. Polytheism was declared as heretical and illegal by the Roman emperor Theodosius the Great in 380.

~325 Trinitarianism was adopted by Nicaean Christianity.

~380 Roman Emperor Theodosius I made Nicaean Christianity the State religion of Rome. Polytheists were deemed heretics.

~476 Collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

570 Mohammad was born in Mecca. He was the founder of Islam. Islam spread to the Middle East and North Africa the next hundred years.

~600 Buddhism spread to Tibet and Japan.

~650 The Quaran was written down.

~680 The split between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

~700-1600 The rise of Hinduism and various Muslim conquests on the Indian subcontinent resulted in the decline of Buddhism.

~800 Vikings spread their Norse religion throughout northern Europe.

~800 Emperor Xuanzong declared Taoism state religion of China.

~1054 Christianity split into Catholic and Orthodox churches.

~1096 The Crusades to recover the Holy Land began.

~1436 The invention of the Gutenberg printing press.

~1453 Collapse of Eastern Roman Empire as it fell to the Islamic Ottoman Empire.

~1492 European Conquest and Christianization of the Americas began.

~1517 The Reformation split the European church into Protestant and Catholic.

In the same period Animistic Polytheism in America was gradually displaced as a result of European conquest.

1469-1539 The first Sikh guru, Gobin Singh, lived in this period.

~1620 English pilgrims bring Protestantism to America, beginning in New England with Puritanism and later Quakerism.

~1789 Episcopalians formally separated from the Church of England rejecting the supremacy of the English monarchy.

1830 Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.

1863 The Baha'i religion was founded.

1870 The Jehovah's Witnesses were formed.

1869-1948 Hindu icon of religious tolerance, Mahatma Gandhi, lived.

1945 The United Nations was founded by USA, India, Great Britain, France, and Brazil, much as a result of World War II and a hope for peace in the future. UN was built on humanism and human rights. The vision was: peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet.

1947 India, as primarily Hindu, and Pakistan and Bangladesh, as primarily Muslim, gained independence from Britain.

1948 Israel was founded and Palestinians were displaced, resulting in refuge-camps in neighbor countries.

1930-74 Emperor Haile Selassie was the Black Messiah to Rastafarians.

1954 L. Ron Hubbard founded the Church of Scientology and Sun Myong Moon founded the Unification Church or Moonies.

The author's summary of the evolution of religions

According to Lance Grande, some anthropologists and historians believe that early hard polytheism may have originated from animistic beliefs. In these beliefs the sun, the moon, animals, trees, and forces of nature had a spiritual essence or soul. The gods might be a natural intellectual development from the animism and pantheism. This explains why early forms of polytheism are difficult to distinguish from pure animism. There has been an increasing anthropomorphism in the newer history of human beliefs, where the deified entities developed more human-like features. They increased in numbers in the earlier periods of human beliefs and became hierarchical organized.

Even in our so-called monotheistic religions of to-day there are polytheistic ideas. As an example, I like to mention the belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In addition, Christians are supposed to accept the existence of angels, saints, and a creed with an extremely incredible content.

There has been a different evolution of religious beliefs in America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and in the Eastern part of Asia. Traditions, economic situation, educational differences, politics, and other circumstances can explain much of this.

In America they had different animistic and polytheistic beliefs that included human blood- and life-offerings before Columbus and the Spanish invasion. The Catholic church was forced upon the peoples in the years to come. To-day Latin America probably has the most religious peoples in the world. The Catholic church dominates in these Portuguese and Spanish speaking countries.

In the primarily English-speaking USA and in Canada the mixture of different monotheistic religions is much greater than in the southern part of America. But the secularisation that we find in Europe, has not evolved so far. This explains some of the political differences between European countries and the USA. For instance, this has been very clear in the attitude towards the Israeli's treatment of Palestinians, where the Bible seems to explain what action Trump takes. Most Europeans see this conflict as a genocide. Trump has given Israel the opportunity to kill 70,000 people so far in this terrible religious and ethnic conflict. Still, he hopes for the Nobel Peace Prize. Giving him the Fifa (football) Peace Prize is more a form of bribe to make Trump cooperate in the process of arranging the World Cup.

The Middle East has suffered much from religious differences. Islam resulted in conflicts and forced peoples to convert to its beliefs some 1,400 years ago. Still this religion is used as an excuse to suppress people in many countries. The worst examples we find in Afghanistan and Iran. But I doubt I would feel free and safe as an atheist in any Muslim country. And as European I cannot understand how women accept all those rules and social control they are living under in Muslim countries.

Africans have kept some of their healer and shaman beliefs. But the continent is mainly influenced by Christian missionaries that came from the colony powers or other European countries. The northern part of Africa is primarily Muslim. The southern part is primarily Christian. There has been much unrest, wars, and refugee problems in the northern part the later years. At the present the conflict in Sudan is worse, involves much more people, than the conflict between Israel and Palestinians.

In India they seem to have a more relaxed attitude to what religion requires of the individual. Hinduism seems to be more a way of living and keeping a common tradition. There are conflicts with Muslims though. Later years there has been a wave of nationalism in India where Hinduism is part of it.

Further east, like in China and Japan secularisation probably is much similar with what we have in Europe. And Buddhism and other more or less atheistic religions dominates. This of course gives more room for tolerance and more relaxed religious practice. Have you ever met a Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Shintoist, or Confucianist missionary? We all know that the most extreme missionaries have their origin in Protestant sects in the USA. Even Scandinavians have fostered a lot of bothersome missionaries from Protestant sects.

Lance Grande describes Linear Monotheism as a type of religion that evolved in the Middle East from Old World Hard Polytheism (gods are real divine beings rather than personifications of natural forces). There has been a gradual reduction of gods and an increasing importance of a Supreme God. The religions became fully monotheistic when it included just one God. Grande uses the word “linear” to distinguish it from Asian Cyclicism that had some monotheistic elements. According to Linear Monotheism, an individual’s time is linear: one birth, one life, one death, and finally an eternal existence in the afterlife. This is in contrast to Asian Cyclicism, which involves cycles as reincarnation or cyclic balance as Yin yang.

State-supported Linear Monotheism began in Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE. In the twelfth century BCE it appeared in Persia as Zoroastrianism. In the seventh or sixth century BCE we find the start of Abrahamic religions.

The evolution of religions most probably will continue. As long as religions have existed there have been people with atheistic or agnostic views. As an example of what is the situation of today the polls in Norway and other Scandinavian countries show that the belief in a god is becoming gradually less frequent. In fact, those that believe in God are a minority. The same is the situation in most countries in the northern part of western Europe. We also must include France as a very secular country. Since 1905 religion and politics are totally separated by law. But as a curiosum it is not legal to ask the French what they believe in polls. And I just have to mention that a 2010 public survey in Israel indicated that 42 percent of resident Jews considered themselves to be secular. In the USA there is an opposite situation where a clear majority still believes in God, some polls estimate 70 percent. But even there the believers gradually are getting fewer.

For the time being, the winter 2026, there are big demonstrations in Iran. The reason for this is growing resistance against the mullah led regime. The political leaders in the country closed down internet, and are killing thousands of people that show they are disapproving the conditions they have to live with in Iran. People are told that the demonstrations are against Allah. This is enough for a death penalty. The “positive” effect of this religious regime is that there has been a clear tendency towards secularization in Iran later years. There is hope for a democratic and secular future for the Iranian people.

Religions

Creed

A creed is a summary of a shared religious belief that individuals affirm, often in public settings.

In Christianity

Christianity shows early signs of creeds in the New Testament, such as “Jesus is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3) and “Jesus is the Christ” (1 John 2:22). Creeds gradually became more detailed. They were used in teaching, preaching, to mark true faith against what was considered heresy, but primarily as baptismal confessions. Christianity has three early creeds: the Apostolic, the Nicene, and the Athanasian.

In Judaism

The prayer *Shema* (“Hear”) begins with “Hear, O Israel! Adonai (the Lord) is our God, Adonai is one” and is often referred to as Judaism’s creed. It affirms God’s unity and the Jewish people’s duty to follow God’s law. Reciting *Shema* morning and evening is considered a biblical obligation (Deuteronomy 6:4–9).

In Islam

The Islamic creed *Shahada* plays a fundamental role. It is the first of Islam’s five pillars and in Arabic reads: *la illaha illa Allah wa Muhammad rasul Allah*, meaning: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

In Buddhism

Buddhism’s “refuge formula” resembles a creed: “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma (the Teaching), I take refuge in the Sangha (the monastic community).”

Judaism’s Creed (Expanded)

According to *The Great Norwegian Lexicon*, *Shema* is not a typical prayer but a declaration of God’s unity and the Jewish obligation to follow divine law. It was part of the Jerusalem Temple liturgy and consists of three biblical passages (Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41). The second line is a praise not found in the Bible but from temple service. *Shema* is recited during morning and evening services and on other occasions. It can be recited in a prayer group (*minyan*) or alone at home. The first verse is especially important. Many Orthodox Jews cover their eyes while saying it. Traditions vary between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews regarding volume and posture. Orthodox men generally fulfil the obligation to recite the full *Shema* twice daily, while non-Orthodox groups vary in doing it. The first line is traditionally recited before sleep and at deathbeds. Women are exempt from time-bound obligations like *Shema*, but rabbinic tradition encourages them to learn or recite the opening verse. Many Orthodox women now recite the full *Shema*. In Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism, women participate equally in synagogue services and recite the full *Shema*. Reform congregations often omit parts inconsistent with their beliefs, but the opening and closing remain unchanged.

Christian Creed Today

The creed used in the Church of Norway today reads:

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into the realm of the dead, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy universal Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.”

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is one of Christianity’s three ancient creeds. It is the most universally accepted and was adopted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and revised in Constantinople in 381. It is used in Orthodox baptismal rites, Catholic Mass, Anglican Eucharist, and by most Protestant churches, including the Church of Norway. The creed emerged from a theological dispute between Bishop Alexander of Alexandria and Presbyter Arius over whether Jesus Christ is “of the same essence” as God the Father. Arius argued that the Son was a created being, subordinate to the Father. Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea to resolve the conflict. The resulting creed affirmed the divinity of the Son. The dispute continued until the Council of Constantinople in 381, which clarified that Jesus is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father.” The creed gained prominence in both Eastern and Western churches. The Western version added “and the Son” to the article about the Holy Spirit, causing tension between East and West. The Church of Norway uses the version with “and the Son.” Since 2011, both the Apostolic and Nicene creeds are used interchangeably.

Nicene Creed Text (Church of Norway Translation)

“We believe in one God, the Almighty Father, Creator of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary became truly human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried, rose on the third day according to the Scriptures, ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who is worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son, and who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy, universal, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins and look forward to the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come. Amen.”

Islamic Creed (Shahada)

Shahada is Islam's creed and the first of its five pillars. "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His prophet." Though not stated verbatim in the Quran, it combines two Quranic statements summarizing Islam's core message: monotheism and prophethood. *Shahada* emerged in the 7th century and appears on coins and buildings. Declaring *Shahada* marks the individual's entry into Islam. It is recited in prayer calls, daily rituals, and whispered into a newborn's ear.

The author's personal comments and conclusions

There is significant variation among religions in how creeds are emphasized, structured, and used. Jewish and Islamic creeds are relatively straightforward, with a strong focus on monotheism. Christian creeds appear more elaborate, perhaps as a result of compromises after long theological disputes. To a non-believer, Christianity may seem to imply multiple gods or divine figures. Moreover, many elements of Christian creeds require belief in highly improbable claims.

None of the creeds can be said to be credible in a factual sense. They are all based on dogmas without empirical evidence. Christian creeds seem boundless in their imaginative scope compared to other religions.

Claims made in creeds that remain undocumented despite centuries of belief include:

- The existence of a god
- The existence of a Holy Spirit
- That God had a son with a virgin
- That Jesus ascended to heaven
- The existence of a heaven
- That prophets deliver messages from God
- That the Church is holy (the term "holy" lacks tangible meaning)
- That the dead will be resurrected
- That Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead
- That believers will live in a coming world

Zoroastrianism

The sources for this chapter are mainly the English-language edition of Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and my book *Happiness and Life*.

Zoroastrianism is also called *Mazdayasna* and *Bedin*. It is a Persian religion, but also one of the world's oldest religions. Its origin is the ideas and opinions of the Persian *Zoroaster*. The religion has a dualistic view of good and evil and must be considered monotheistic. It preaches that good will triumph over evil. Furthermore, a good and wise deity or spirit called *Ahura Mazda* is mentioned as well as an opposite to this, an evil and destructive spirit called *Angra Mainyu*. This opposite to the good and wise is destructive to humans. This religion also has ideas about human free will, belief in a Messiah, and that we are judged after death. Furthermore, a heaven, a hell, angels, and demons are described. In other words, Zoroastrianism must be said to be the origin of ideas we find in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Greek philosophy, and a number of other religions. The religion has a summary holy scripture called the *Avesta*.

The religion originated among Indo-Iranians who lived as nomads from the lower Volga to Kazakhstan. They lived by cattle farming, which provided milk and meat. Historians have concluded that this people split into two groups in the third millennium BCE. One group chose the area where modern-day Iran is located, while the other chose the Indian subcontinent. This is probably why there are clear similarities between the Indian Rigveda and hymns of Zoroastrian origin.

The religion probably dates back to the second millennium BCE, which is about 4,000 years old, and has a recorded history from the mid-sixth century BCE. The religion was the state religion of Iran and the Persian Empire for more than a thousand years, from about 600 BCE to 650 CE. After that time, the religion was suppressed and its followers persecuted after the Arab/Muslim conquest of present-day Iranian areas. Today, the religion is estimated to have around 100,000 followers in India, Iran, and North America.

The texts in *the Avesta* are considered the most central. In these, Zoroaster's ideas, called Gathas, are said to be recorded. The doctrine involves the belief in a god who first created the world in a spiritual form and then transformed it into a material form. *Ahura Mazda* was the great creator who used his power through *Asha*. Humans have free will to support Ahura Mazda. They are consequently responsible for their choices. Angra Mainyu's destructive powers are formed by *Aka Manah* (evil thoughts) and can be called the opposite of Ahura Mazda and Asha. Later in history, Angra Mainyu was called *Ahriman*, who can be considered the opposite of Ahura Mazda, in other words a devil-like creature or concept.

The life force that comes from Ahura Mazda and is called Asha is opposed to *Druj*, which stands for falsehood and deceit.

The name Zoroaster is a Greek form of the original *Zarathustra*. He is also called *Zartosht* and *Zardosht* in Persian.

Followers of the religion believe that there is a good and original creator deity, Ahura Mazda or the Wise Lord. Ahura means lord and Mazda means wisdom. This deity is presented as omniscient, but not omnipotent.

Ahura Mazda will triumph over evil, that is, Angra Mainyu. In this end-time, all that are created will undergo a resurrection. Also, the souls of the dead and the lost will be reunited with Ahura Mazda in *the Kshatra Vairya*, described as the best region or paradise on earth,

and is revived to immortality. A prominent belief in the religion has been a saviour figure or Messiah.

Zoroastrian theology primarily includes the importance of the threefold path of Asha: Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. There is also great emphasis on spreading happiness, primarily through charity. The spiritual equality of women and men is emphasized. Protection of nature is so central to the religion that it appears as the earliest advocate of ecology and nature conservation.

The religion is not entirely uniform geographically in how the theology is understood, in how it is practiced, in values, vocabulary, and so on. It has also, like all other religions, changed over the centuries. The most important thing for someone who practices Zoroastrianism is to bring happiness and thus contribute to the battle against evil in the world.

The core of the religion can be summarized as follows:

- Follow the threefold path of Asha: Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds
- Practice charity to follow Asha and thus spread happiness
- Take into account the spiritual equality between men and women
- Be good for goodness' sake, without hope of reward

The religion is based on the idea that life is a temporary state in which we mortals are expected to actively participate in the battle between Asha and Druj. Before birth, the child's soul is still part of a higher spirit that has existed since Ahura Mazda created the universe.

Water and fire are considered elements of ritual purity. Followers of the religion most often pray in the presence of some form of living fire.

A dead body is considered a host to decay, so burials are arranged as cremation or burial in soapstone crypts to prevent environmental contamination.

Zoroastrianism has certain similarities with Vedic religion. The religion has also influenced Hungarian, Slavic, Turkish and Mongolian mythology. While the ideas of the religion have been continued in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Examples include the ideas of good and evil, God and Satan, resurrection, judgment day, belief in a Messiah, heaven and hell and much more. Traces of the religion's ideas can also be found in Buddhism. As another example of similarity with Christian ideas is Zoroastrianism's legend of a saviour who will be born of a virgin after a "seed" from Zoroaster fertilizes her while she is bathing in a lake.

The author's comments and conclusions

As a philosopher and author, I have asked myself the question of why the ideas of Zoroastrianism are to such a large extent found in other and younger religions. Is it because this religion found the truth already around 4,000 years ago or is it because other peoples believed in the ideas that were then advocated by a culturally well-developed people who also had a written language that could convey the religious ideas. Or was it perhaps rather the case that the Iranian empire forced people in the areas it had conquered to accept the empire's "truths"? As of today, I tend to believe that most of these circumstances played a role in the spread of the religion's message. However, with my research background and my knowledge base I cannot support the idea that the religion has found an eternal and universally valid truth.

The ideas from this religion have spread early among peoples in Asia and Europe and from around the 16th century, to countries in other parts of the world. It clearly represents the ideological basis of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and can be said to be part of our cultural heritage. In other words, Christianity is not our original ideological basis in our cultural heritage, but Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all appear as “plagiarized religions” with Zoroastrianism as their origin and source.

Judaism

The sources for this chapter are the English-language edition of Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica, The Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia, and my book Happiness and Life.

Judaism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, almost as old as Zoroastrianism, and has many similarities with the latter. The religion is considered one of the Abrahamic religions along with Christianity and Islam. Judaism has around 15 million followers today. They call themselves Jews or the Jewish people. Most of these live in Israel and North America. But there are also many Jews in Europe and South America.

The Torah is the most important holy book of the religion. The laws and teachings come from the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and oral tradition. Some of the oral tradition is recorded in the Mishnah, Talmud, and other works. Christianity and Islam are closely related to Judaism. Both of these newer religions can be called monotheistic and the moral teachings of the Old Testament, which includes the Torah, apply to them as well.

The religion is based on God's alleged revelations to Abraham and Moses. These two prophets or founders of the religion are said to have lived 1500 to 1400 years before our era. When the religion was formed among the Hebrews several thousand years ago, this people group were nomadic herders and only occasionally farmers.

The commandments as they are formulated in Exodus chapter 20:

1. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who takes his name in vain.
3. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do your work. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your sojourner within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, but he rested the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.
4. Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You should not break the marriage.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
9. You shall not covet your neighbour's house.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

These ten commandments have been directly adopted by Christians, even though they now are in a more modern language. While Muslims find almost the same rules for their lives in the Quran.

There are some pretty severe punishments God threatens in the first commandment, not much mercy there! But commandments number 4 through 10 must be said to be fairly universally valid rules that most people can agree with. These rules are found in most religions.

Maimonides was a renowned Jewish scholar who lived in the 14th century. He listed the thirteen main beliefs of Judaism:

1. God created the world and is the king in it.
2. There is only one God, and God is the only one who is and will become God.
3. God has no body or physical form, and nothing else is like God.
4. God is eternal, God has always existed and will live forever.
5. Only God can answer people's prayers, and people must only pray to God.
6. The words of the prophets are true.
7. Moses was the greatest of the prophets.
8. God gave the entire Torah to Moses.
9. God is not going to change the Torah and will not issue a new Torah.
10. God knows people's actions and thoughts.
11. God rewards and punishes people for what they do.
12. The Messiah will come.
13. God will bring dead people back to life when he decides to do so.

The three most important beliefs in Judaism are monotheism, belonging, and the agreement between God and God's people. The most important thing in the teachings of Judaism is that there is a God who wants people to act rightly and with compassion. Judaism teaches that one serves God by learning to know the content of the holy books and following what the books ask for. This applies to rituals, actions, and ethics. The religion teaches that all people are made in the image of God and deserve to be treated with respect.

The religion emphasizes that there is only one God. This God created the universe and is the sole controller of it. Jews use several names for God. The most sacred name is *Yahweh*. However, most Jews avoid using this name because of its sacredness. Judaism also teaches that God is spiritual and not physical.

God is a unity, a whole. God cannot be divided into pieces. People cannot tell what God looks like. They can only tell what God is like and what God does.

All goodness and morality come from God. God is interested in what people do and watches what they do.

God will exist forever and is above all. God knows everything. God is the master of nature. But God is in the world and hears those who pray and will answer them. God is the greatest power in the universe. God allows people to choose what they want to do. He gives them free will. But people are responsible for their actions. God rewards those who do good deeds and punishes those who do wrong. God punishes and rewards in this world. But God gives the final reward or punishment to the soul after the death of man.

Jews believe that God made a covenant with Abraham. The Bible states that God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants if they worshipped God and were faithful to God. God made this covenant with Abraham's son Isaac and with Isaac's son Jacob. God gave Jacob the name Israel. Therefore, his descendants are called the Children of Israel or Israelites. God gave the Israelites the Torah through Moses. The Torah instructs the Israelites on how to build and organize their society. The Ten Commandments were given, along with other laws, through the Torah. There are 613 laws in total.

Jews are sometimes called the chosen people. This is because the Bible says that God told them: “You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a special people for himself out of all the peoples on the earth.”

The author’s comments and conclusions

I think this message from God about the superiority of Jews does not sound credible for well-educated Jews or other people with a more secular understanding of the world around them. Much less is this message credible or accepted by Israel’s neighbours.

Some Jews understand this to mean that they have special duties and responsibilities imposed on them by God. For example, they must build a just society and serve God alone. Those Jews believe that this agreement with God entails the following: If they follow God’s laws, God will give them his love and protection. But they are also responsible for their sins, evil deeds, and disobedience to what God has commanded them. Jews also believe that they must teach other peoples that God exists and that God wants all people to act rightly. Jews further believe that it is their task to be a light to other nations by showing the peoples of the world how to create a better world.

The Jews in today’s Israel can be said to have completely failed in their alleged duties to God. Since 1948, they have systematically persecuted and displaced the Palestinians, and they have established an apartheid state where their Jewish ethnicity gives them special advantages. They have also committed monstrous war crimes in both the West Bank and Gaza. From the fall of 2023 till the winter of 2026, the Israelis have fully demonstrated that they feel superior to everyone else, to the prevailing moral standards of the outside world, to all international laws, and they have shown that they will spare no effort to seize land in neighbouring countries. The West, and especially Christian fundamentalists and the United States, are complicit in this. Without the support of other nations, the atrocities would not have been possible. What hatred from Arab countries and Muslims must we not expect because of the actions of this “chosen people” and naivety of Christian “friends of Israel”?!

Further on the Jewish faith

Jews believe that God has given them a special mission to improve the world. This should involve making the world a better place with more goodness, and in this way come closer to God. They want to create more peace, less suffering for people and animals, promote respect between people and prevent the destruction of the environment and nature. Jews do not try to convince others to become believing Jews. They only want to show the world that God exists. Everyone can serve God by following the seven requirements given to Noah. These requirements are more or less the same as the commandments.

Judaism accepts that people choose to exchange their religion for their Judaism.

Jews emphasize that actions matter more than faith and words. Actions are called “mitzvot.” There are 365 mitzvot that Jews must not do and 248 that they must do. Examples include not taking God’s name in vain and not working on the Sabbath.

The land of Israel is sacred to the Jews. They believe that God created the earth from Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. God is always closest to this land. Jews believe that God asked the Jewish people to build a community of worship in Israel. Many mitzvot in the Torah are linked to actions in Israel. Jews also believe that their history as a nation begins with Abraham. God is said to have promised Abraham and his descendants a new land in Canaan,

that is, in the area where today's Israel is located. They also call it the Promised Land. Many Jews believe that Jews should not live anywhere else but in Israel.

Jews also believe that the Exodus, that is, the escape from Egypt, was part of a covenant with God to build a better world. Furthermore, many Jews believe that a Messiah will come to unite the Jewish people to lead them to God's path. Furthermore, this Messiah will unite the whole world in faith in and in service to God. "And the whole world will be filled with peace!" Some Jews, however, believe that peace will come in the future through cooperation between all peoples and with God's help.

The Torah is the most important document for Jews. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, make up the Torah. The Torah is also referred to as the Five Books of Moses. Jews believe that Moses brought the Ten Commandments and the Torah down from Mount Sinai. The 613 mitzvot in the Torah are as important as the Ten Commandments.

The Jews divide the Old Testament into three parts. The Torah with its five books is the first part. Nevi'im are the books of the prophets and Ketuvim, which means the writings, contains other books of history and moral teachings.

Rabbis believe that there is another part of the Torah and not just the five books of Moses. This part is called the Mishnah, the Oral Torah, or the Oral Law. It explains how to follow the laws in the five books. There is an explanation of the Mishnah called the Gemara. The Mishnah and the Gemara make up the Talmud.

There is no leader among believing Jews who can decide how the commandments are to be understood and followed. Jews have different beliefs about the faith and disagree about the rules, but are considered to belong to one and the same religion and people.

Jews must eat kosher food. But liberal Jews are less strict about it.

Kosher fruits and vegetables are free of traces of insects. Kosher fish have fins and scales. Shrimp, lobster, and shellfish are excluded. Kosher meat must come from ruminants and the animals must be slaughtered in a specific manner. Kosher meat from birds must not come from birds of prey and must also be slaughtered kosher.

The Sabbath lasts from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday or Sunday night. The day is a day of rest and a day to thank God for creating the universe.

Ideally, electrical equipment should not be used on the Sabbath, such as telephones, computers, and televisions. One should not sell or buy, light a fire or bonfire, drive a car or bicycle, cook, write, or build or repair things. Of course, only the more orthodox Jews follow the aforementioned rules to the letter.

Jews circumcise baby boys when they are 8 days old. At the same time, the child is given a name. Bat Mitzvah is a ceremony for girls when they are 12 years old, to mark their becoming women and following Jewish laws and rules. Bar Mitzvah is the equivalent ceremony for boys at the age of 13. It involves reading from the Torah and special prayers.

A large part of Israelis considers themselves secular. Those who consider themselves religious attend Orthodox synagogues, although only 10 percent consider themselves Orthodox in a religious sense.

Conceptions of angels also exist in Judaism. The ideas probably first arose in Zoroastrianism. Angels are described as supernatural spiritual beings and often act as messengers of God in religions where revelation plays a significant role. These include Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Judaism has apparently used Zoroastrianism as a model when it was designed several thousand years ago. Christianity and Islam have later used Judaism as a model for their commandments, rules of conduct, dogmas and beliefs. But Judaism is also characterized by being the religion of the Jewish people and being the background for their rituals and traditions. This might explain that the religion never has gained much support among other peoples.

Christianity

The content of this chapter is taken from the National Digital Learning Arena, Wikipedia, and Encyclopaedia Britannica. Information taken from the National Digital Learning Arena is between quotation marks.

Christianity is currently the world's largest religion when all branches are included. It arose from the myths of Jesus of Nazareth. He lived in the first century CE. The religion is practiced in all countries of the world. However, atheists and agnostics are significantly more numerous than all religious believers combined. Even among members of different churches atheists and agnostics represent a large proportion. The reason for this is tradition, fear of breaking out of a congregation, losing social relations, or direct threats from other members or family.

The Oriental Orthodox Church is the oldest of the Christian churches, but this Christian church had little contact with the church that developed in Europe. In Europe, the Catholic Church dominates in Southern Europe and South America. The Protestant Church dominates in Northern Europe. In Greece and parts of former Eastern European countries, the Greek Orthodox Church dominates.

Christianity is perhaps as much about traditions and rituals as it is about faith. For many, being a Christian means performing rituals and practicing traditions in connection with Christian holidays, church services, and rites of passage such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funerals. Central to Christianity are prayers, church services, and the sacraments.

About prayer in Christianity

“Conversation with God the Father, Jesus or the Holy Spirit is what we call a prayer. A prayer may be free and spontaneous. It may be a Christian conversation or prayer in a community. In a prayer, people may pray for something that they are concerned about, or pray for another individual, that is, to intercede for something or someone. The most important prayer in Christianity is *the Lord's Prayer*. How important it is to pray varies from Christian to Christian. Some pray every day, while others have a more sporadic relationship with prayers. There are also forms of contemplative prayer, which have more similarities to Eastern meditation. Prayer is a way of communicating with God.”

About religious services in Christianity

“Worship services are ceremonies where religious people gather to pray. In Christianity, this involves prayers, hymn singing, reading from the Bible, sermons, and often communion. Sunday morning is the most important time of the week for worship, although it can be held on any day of the week. Some free churches, especially Pentecostal churches, often have a freer form and do not emphasize fixed structure in worship in the same way as the Catholic or Orthodox churches.”

Liturgy

“When Christianity is practiced according to specific rituals, in fixed places, in churches or parish houses, we call it *liturgy*. Liturgy means the regulations for the worship in the church. The liturgical acts are usually led by a priest or bishop, and they are ordained to perform such

religious services. To *ordain* is a religious act that declares or makes something sacred. The content of the liturgy comes from texts that are often taken from the Bible.”

Sacraments

“From birth to death, the church offers believers services in the form of celebrations and sacred acts. We call these sacred acts *sacraments*. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches practice seven sacraments, while the Lutheran Church only has two. These denominations claim that the sacraments were instituted by Jesus himself, and that they are therefore especially important. The Lutheran Church believes that Jesus only instituted baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”

Baptism

“Baptism is common to the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches. Baptism is usually conducted by a priest, who says, among other things: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Baptism means that the baptized person becomes a member of the Christian church in which they were baptized.”

Communion

“The Lord’s Supper is also a common Christian sacrament. The Lord’s Supper is celebrated in memory of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. The priest gives the communion guests a small loaf of bread (wafer) and a small cup of wine. This symbolizes the body and blood of Jesus.”

Confirmation

“Confirmation is called confirmation in the Catholic Church and chrismation in the Orthodox Church. The person being confirmed confirms the baptismal vow in front of the congregation.”

The Sacrament of Penance

“This sacrament is an offer to Catholics and Orthodox Christians to make amends for their own sins. Protestants pray in the service for the forgiveness of sins.”

The marriage

“Marriage is sacred and indissoluble for Catholics. In the sacrament of marriage, the woman and the man promise to be faithful and devoted until death do them part. Since marriage is not a sacrament in Protestant churches, divorce is permitted.”

Presbyterian Church

“In the Catholic Church priestly ordination is given to men who wish to dedicate their lives to the service of God and the church. It is a bishop who ordains the priest in the name of God. A Catholic priest promises to obey his bishop in everything and to live a simple life in celibacy.

Protestant priests are exempt from the celibacy requirement. In the Norwegian Church, we have had female priests since 1961. In many Catholic congregations women priests are also wanted. Until now, the leadership of the Catholic Church, with the Pope at the head, has not wanted it. The reason is that Jesus only called men to become disciples.”

The Anointing of the Sick

“The anointing of the sick was previously called “the last oil”. The Catholic Church wants to be present at the beginning of life at baptism and at the end of life. Therefore, the priest anoints the dying person with the same type of oil that is used at confirmation.”

In the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches the performance of the sacraments is absolutely necessary for salvation. For many free churches and the Protestant churches, such as the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church, it is faith in Jesus Christ alone that leads to salvation, not practice through rituals.

The author’s comments and conclusions

I believe that most readers of this book are so familiar with Christianity that it is acceptable not to describe this religion further here. Christianity has given us many varieties of life views to choose from over the centuries it has existed. The three largest of these are Catholicism, Protestantism, and the Greek Orthodox Church. In addition to these three major churches, there are a large number of congregations and sects, all of them believe that they have found the right path to eternal life and salvation.

In my opinion, over the years, Christianity has spent unreasonable much of human resources and money, and created many conflicts and wars. Religiously motivated oppression of women, homosexuals and transgender people, arrogant missionaries as well as the defence of the churches’ privileges, are also among the conditions for which Christianity must be held responsible. It is especially intolerable that religion and politics are mixed together in certain political parties and in other contexts. Fortunately, we are now beginning to see the end of this. Support for Christianity is rapidly declining in my part of the world. Thrust in religious beliefs and delusions is reduced.

Islam

Information in this chapter on Islam is taken from religion.dk, Encyclopaedia Britannica and my book Happiness and Life.

Islam is a religion founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE. Islam means surrender. The name refers to surrender to the will of Allah. The similarity with Judaism and Christianity is striking. The message of the Old Testament is found again in the Quran. Each commandment coincides with the following verses in the Quran:

1. "Know that there is no god but God." (Surah 47, verse 19)
2. "My Lord, make this city a safe place, and keep me and my children away from worshipping idols." (Surah 14, verse 35)
3. "Do not make God the object of your oaths, in the matter of piety and making reconciliation between people. God is hearing and knowing." (Surah 2, verse 224)
4. "O you who believe, when the call is made for the prayer on the Day of Judgment, hasten to the remembrance of God and leave off trade. That is better for you, if you only knew!" (Surah 62, verse 9)
5. "Be kind to your parents. If one or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them, 'Ugh,' nor be harsh to them, but speak to them with respect." (Surah 17, verse 23)
6. "Whoever kills a person, except for revenge or for a crime, it shall be as if he had killed humanity. And whoever saves a life, it shall be as if he had saved all humanity." (Sura 5, verse 32)
7. "Do not commit adultery. It is an indecent act and a wrong path." (Surah 17, verse 32)
8. "And the thief, male or female, cut off their hands, as a recompense for what they have earned, and as a preventive punishment from God. God is mighty, wise." (Surah 5, verse 38)
9. "Do not conceal evidence. Whoever does so, then indeed there is sin in his heart. God is aware of what you do." (Surah 2, verse 283)
10. "Let not your eyes dwell on it. We make some enjoy it as an adornment of the life of this world, that we may test them. The provision of your Lord is better and more lasting." (Surah 20, verse 131)

Islam is largely based on ritualistic acts for the purpose of worshipping God and seeking forgiveness for sins committed. The Five Pillars of Islam form the core of this religion. The Five Pillars are fundamental acts that every devout Muslim is obligated to perform in order to secure a place in Paradise.

Islam's pillars:

The Five Pillars, which became a unifying foundation for Islam in the years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, are simple tasks where the difficulty increases with the order in which the five pillars are recorded.

The Quran does not mention the Five Pillars. They are defined by Muhammad in a hadith, which is a narrative of Quranic revelations and theological dilemmas in Islam that are not mentioned in the Quran. It states that the archangel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and his followers. Gabriel asked Muhammad to define the core of Islam. Therefore the hadith in which the Five Pillars are defined under the title Gabriel's hadith, was written. Gabriel's

hadith is found in both the hadith collections Sahih Muslim and Sahih Bukhari, where most of the recognized hadiths are collected.

Sunni and Shia Muslims agreed on the basic elements of the Five Pillars. However, some Shia sects add five additional pillars and refer to them as furuu aldin, which means foundation of faith.

1st Pillar of Islam: The Declaration of Faith (Shahada)

The confession of faith is the first pillar of Islam and the first act of conversion to Islam. The Shahada, which means testimony, states the fundamental principles of Islam, monotheism, and Muhammad's status as a prophet in Islam.

The Shahada draws parallels to the first two commandments, which prohibit polytheism. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims use the Shahada. However, in certain branches of Shia Islam, a third commandment has been added, describing Ali's exalted status according to Shia belief.

The Shahada is displayed today on flags and banners in some Muslim countries. Artistic representations of the words of the Muslim shahada can also be found in calligraphy, jewellery, and home decorations. The Shahada also appears as a regular part of the muezzin's call to prayer. The muezzin is the scholar appointed to call to prayer from the minaret. Furthermore, the Shahada is also an important part of Islam's daily prayers, where the Shahada is repeated several times.

2nd Pillar of Islam: The Tide Prayer (Salat)

The prayer of the tide is the second pillar of Islam, an obligation for every Muslim over the age of 10. The prayer of the tide can be performed at home or in the mosque when the muezzin calls to prayer. Before the prayer of the tide begins, it is necessary to perform a ritual of purification called wudu. The ritual is performed by rinsing the body with water. If the Muslim is in a place where water is not available, sand can be used, which is called tayammum.

Although the tide prayer is an obligation, there are some exceptions that may exempt a Muslim from praying the tide. Serious illness, disability, pregnancy, or menstruation exempt the Muslim from performing the prayer.

The prayer of the tide is mentioned in the Quran in the surah of Isra'il, which describes Muhammad's nightly journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and ascension, where Muhammad meets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, among others.

Here, the number of tidal prayers from 50 to five daily prayers is negotiated between Muhammad and the archangel Gabriel. Moses helps Muhammad set the number of tidal prayers to five daily prayers. Men and women are separated in prayer, both at home and in the mosque. The men stand in the front rows in front of the imam, the women behind or in a separate room.

3rd pillar of Islam: Almsgiving (Zakat)

By giving zakat, a Muslim pays 2.5 percent of his annual income to charity. Any Muslim who owns more than the value of 89 grams of gold must pay zakat. Zakat is also paid during Ramadan, where a lump sum per Muslim is paid in a household for the purpose of feeding a poor Muslim during the month of fasting.

The origin of zakat has its roots in Judaism, where zedakah is paid for charitable purposes. The payment of zakat not only has a charitable purpose, but is also a process of purification in which the Muslim renounces materialism by helping others who are less well-off.

Looking at the origins of zakat in a Muslim context, zakat can be traced back to the early years after Muhammad's exodus from Mecca in 622 CE. New converts and expatriate Muslims needed financial support, while the battles with the polytheistic tribes in Mecca needed to be financed. Thus, zakat became an obligation for every Muslim.

Today, zakat is exclusively for charitable purposes. Over the past 50 years, many Muslims have emigrated to non-Muslim countries, and zakat is also collected here. The money goes both to charitable organizations in the new Muslim community and to poor people in the Muslim world. As an example, in Denmark, both mosques and Islamic communities collect zakat money. Among them is the Muslim Community Council, which collects zakat and redistributes it through Danish Muslim Aid.

4th Pillar of Islam: Fasting (Sawm) during Ramadan

The Quran commands Muslims in several verses to fast. Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan. Fasting means that Muslims are not allowed to eat or drink or have sex between sunrise and sunset.

The fast begins with a meal before the fajr prayer, which is said before sunrise. The meal is called Suhoor. At sunset, the fast is broken with an iftar meal. The meal is often enjoyed with family, who will be gathered around more dishes than usual. Alternatively, a Muslim may break the fast with other Muslims at the local mosque.

Since the year 623, Muslims have fasted during the month of Ramadan. It marks the first revelation that Muhammad received through the archangel Gabriel. Furthermore, Muslims fast to perform a spiritual purification and combat material and carnal temptations.

The origins of Muslim fasting can be traced back to both the Jews and the polytheistic Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula who fasted on Yom Kippur. Although fasting is an obligation, pregnant women, the sick, travellers, and elderly Muslims are not required to fast during Ramadan.

Fasting has retained its original form, and therefore in our time it has led to more challenges for the fasting person than having to abstain from eating and drinking. For example, smoking is not allowed for a fasting Muslim, and the spread of the internet and sexualized advertising has made the fasting person's everyday life more difficult, as a fasting Muslim must not only abstain from sex, but also sexual thoughts are forbidden during the fasting process.

5th Pillar of Islam: Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj)

The fifth and final pillar of Islam is the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj. The Hajj is the last duty a Muslim has towards his God. Although the pilgrimage is a central part of Islam, there are some exceptions that exempt the Muslim from this duty. The pilgrimage is reserved for those who are physically able to perform the ritual and have the necessary financial means, as the pilgrimage is not intended as a burden, but a process of spiritual purification.

A person who makes a pilgrimage to Mecca will achieve absolution through the hajj ritual and will then be able to call himself a hajji (pilgrim). The most famous image from the pilgrimage is the many Muslims singing around the Kaaba in Mecca, but they are neither the first nor the only ones to have circled the Kaaba. Historically, Christians, Jews, and polytheists have

performed pilgrimage rituals by circling the Kaaba, as described by the British historian of religion Karen Armstrong in the book *Islam: A Short History of the Kaaba history*. Muslims perform the pilgrimage and consider the Kaaba sacred, as Muslim sources describe it as the home of Abraham, built on the site where Adam erected the first temple in honour of God.

Before the pilgrimage begins, male pilgrims will shave, have their nails trimmed, and brush or comb their hair to put on the ihram robes, which consist of two pieces of white cloth. Female pilgrims do not brush their hair, but also wear white robes during the pilgrimage. Each year, the pilgrimage takes place from 8-12 Dhul hijja (month of pilgrimage).

The first pilgrimage performed by Muhammad and his followers took place on the same days in the year 630. The first pilgrimage for Muslims occurred after the polytheists of Mecca surrendered to Muhammad's army without significant resistance.

In the year 632, Muhammad performed his last pilgrimage, which was later called the Farewell Pilgrimage. Here Muhammad performed all the rituals that are today associated with the hajj and gave his last speech to his followers. The Quran refers to the pilgrimage rituals in several places, including in Surah Albaqara (Chapter of the Calf). Most of the hajj rituals are mentioned here, and the obligation to perform the hajj is emphasized in verse 125 of the chapter with the words:

Go forth for Hajj or Umrah for the glory of God. If you are prevented, then offer a sacrifice according to your means, and do not be crowned until the offering has reached its goal. Those of you who are physically or mentally ill should instead fast, give alms, or offer a sacrifice.

The author's comments and conclusions

Islam has gained an undeserved reputation in recent years due to terrorist attacks, ISIS, the Taliban, the clerical regime in Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. But we must not forget that there is a lot of Western provocation behind the hatred and terror. The source of most of the conflicts lies in the arrogance and exploitation of former colonial powers, but not least in the West's support for Israel's occupation, expansion, annexation, apartheid policy, and genocide. Here I have listed the Middle East's seemingly insoluble causes of conflict and must admit the West's betrayal of the Arab countries and the Palestinians in particular. As for the Taliban and Afghanistan, illiteracy and traditional oppression of women are probably additional causes of their problems.

Islam and its followers are not entirely innocent victims, however. Islam and Arab countries have not adapted to a great extent to modern times with democracy, human rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion and equality between women and men. I am quite disheartened when I see Muslim women in hijab and what is worse here in Norway. Have they not realized that their Muslim sisters in Iran are risking their lives by refusing to wear these headscarves? It is a betrayal to Iranian women to submit to this headscarf tradition when you live in a country without sanctions for such things. Sorry dear fellow Muslims, but you too must change, renounce old ways of thinking that create distance, and you must show tolerance. Issuing death sentences for authors who write things you do not like, cartoonists who create pictures of Allah, caricatures of Muhammad and provocateurs who burn the Quran seems a bit medieval to us in secular countries. As an atheist, I know that some Muslim countries do not give me the legal certainty and security I need to want to travel there.

Hinduism

The sources for this chapter on Hinduism are religion.dk, Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Lance Grande's *The Evolution of Religions*, and my book *Happiness and Life*.

Hinduism is the world's third largest religion with about 1 billion followers. About 80 percent of Indians are Hindus. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that 80 percent of Indians are registered as Hindus. Many of these, of course, have a secular mindset.

The religion is also considered by some to be the world's oldest of the still existing religions. It is probably of the same age as the religious ideas found in Zoroastrianism. The name Hinduism is relatively new. It was introduced by English writers in the early 19th century. The names Dharmic or Indian religions are used on Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.

Hinduism is a rich cumulative tradition that dates back to 3,000 years BCE. The Rigveda is the oldest written source of Hinduism. It consists of hymns dating back nearly 4,000 years.

For Hindus, tolerance is the most important religious virtue. They teach that truth has many facets and that no guru or prophet has a monopoly on truth. Indians refer to their religious identity as Sanatana Dharma. Many Hindus downplay the religious aspect of their religion. They express that Hinduism is primarily a way of life.

Although the caste system has long been abolished by law, it lives on in Hindu traditions. For example, those born into the priestly caste, that is, the Brahmins, are considered to possess a spiritual superiority.

The Hindu prohibition against eating meat was reinforced by influence from Jainism's and Buddhism' prohibition against killing animals. Cows are treated with special respect. The term "sacred cow" is used world-wide for something or someone that must not be criticized.

What characterizes Hinduism is the doctrine of karma and reincarnation, samsara. Here I will review the ten most important points about Hinduism:

1. Vedas

Vedas means sacred knowledge and is the term for the correct knowledge of rituals and the performance of rituals. But Veda is also the term for the religion that forms the basis of Hinduism. The Vedic religion came with the Aryan tribes to the Indian continent in the second millennium BCE. The scriptures of the Vedic era form the basis of Hinduism. The Vedic scriptures date from the period between 1500 and 1000 BCE. The Vedas contain collections of sacrificial hymns, instructions on the performance of the sacrifice, sacrificial formulas and melodies for the words to be read in connection with the performance of the sacrifice.

2. Brahma

Brahma is both a creator god and the designation of the highest and omnipresent spirit, the impersonal everything. As a personal creator god, Brahma forms a "trinity" with the gods Vishnu and Shiva. In the human soul, Brahma is present as atman, the eternal principle that makes the soul immortal.

3. Samsara

Reincarnation or the transmigration of souls consists of a series of rebirths as long as man does not know the path to nirvana. To feel bound to the world is to be bound to the body and thus to ever new rebirths.

4. Karma

The law of karma is the law of life that determines what existence the soul will have after a new rebirth. As one sows, so one reaps! Thus, a person's actions and lifestyle determine the state after the next rebirth. A person's fate is self-inflicted. Karma means "the deeds that bind".

5. The caste system

Existence is permeated by a divine order. This order is expressed in the caste system or class system where Hindus are placed into a system of social classes.

1. the priestly class (Brahmans)
2. the warrior class and nobles (Kshatriya)
3. the peasant, merchant and artisan class (Vaishya)
4. the servant class (Shudra)

Each of these classes or castes is associated with moral rules and duties. Outside, or more correctly below, these castes are the casteless, who are without rights, but not without duties. The caste system was abolished by law when India became independent after World War II, but in practice it still functions.

6. Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita is the most popular book among the sacred scriptures of Hinduism . The book tells the story of a family feud, but the main content of the book is the conversation between the army commander Arjuna and his charioteer, the god Krishna. Krishna teaches him about the path of devotion to salvation, namely that he knows the duties as a warrior and at the same time have all thoughts concentrated on the god.

7. Krishna

This god is seen as both a deity and a hero (Rama). Krishna's love for his consort, Radha, is seen as a picture of the god's love for the soul. Krishna is probably the most worshipped god in Hinduism and is the centre of the modern new religious movement, Hare Krishna.

8. Moksha (liberation)

Hinduism contains a number of paths to salvation: the path of insight, the path of devotion, the path of sacrifice, and of yoga. Salvation is redemption from the cycle of rebirths to a union with the absolute divine behind this existence.

9. Yoga

Yoga means “tension” and consists of two stages: a physical yoga and a mental yoga. In physical yoga one reaches the point of being able to disregard the body and its functions. In mental yoga they are supposed to dissolve consciousness so that liberation occurs.

10. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), rituals, and religious concepts in Hinduism

India’s great philosopher and politician, Mahatma Gandhi, was the spiritual and practical leader of India until its independence from England in 1948. He was educated as a lawyer in England. He lived a frugal life and worked with great energy to make India independent. He developed a non-violent resistance based on the Indian concept of ahimsa, which actually means non-violence. He tried to unite Muslims with Hindus in a free India. He died in an assassination in 1948.

Hinduism is not a unified faith, but a conglomeration of religious groups with very different beliefs. But for most Hindus, the daily rituals in the home and temples are what demonstrate the importance of the religion.

Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism are religions that share a common background and tradition with Hinduism. There are monotheistic, polytheistic, and atheistic versions of Hinduism.

Common to most Hindus is the belief in an immortal soul, atman, which is born an infinite number of times through reincarnation. The circumstances of each new life depend on the behaviour in the previous one, karma. The goal of existence is nirvana where one has broken the chain of rebirths.

Hindus have countless holidays and celebrations. Every year, pilgrimages are made to celebrate together. Many of the holidays are regional or local traditions. The holidays are rarely on the same date every year. The position of the planets and the movements of the moon are crucial. Hindus have their own calendar system for religious holidays. But they use our Western calendar for everyday life.

The largest festival is the four-day harvest festival, which is a thanksgiving for the harvest. In addition, the sun god Surya, the rain god Indra, the cattle and the birds are worshipped.

The Maha festival Shiva Tri is held in February or March in honour of the both destructive and life-giving god Shiva.

Holi is the festival of colours. This is the most widespread and popular. It is held in February or March. It marks the transition from winter to spring. People throw coloured water at each other. Caste differences are put aside during this festival.

Furthermore, the Hindus have a festival for chariots, one for the goddess Ganga, one for the bond of love, one for the elephant, one for the female gods, that is, the mother goddesses Lakshmi, Saravati, and Durga. They also have a separate festival just for the mother goddess Durga and a festival for light.

Most peoples have little to offer compared to the opportunities Indians have for celebrating religious holidays.

The author's comments and conclusions

Hinduism represents much of the common cultural basis for the people of the Indian subcontinent. But the religion is used politically to support nationalism. In today's India, religion and nationalism are used to retain political power and to promote enthusiasm for the policies that are being pursued. The other side of the coin is the oppression of the Muslim minority.

As a religion, Hinduism is too far from our religious traditions here in the West to have gained any significant foothold here. But there are, after all, many Indians in most other countries. Therefore, Hindus easily find like-minded people all around outside India.

The belief is based on the existence of a soul that moves on to a new individual or animal after death. There is no evidence for the existence of neither soul nor reincarnation.

Buddhism

The information in this chapter on Buddhism is found in the English-language version of Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Lance Grande's book *The Evolution of Religions*, and in my book *Happiness and Life*.

Buddhism is an originally Indian religion and philosophical tradition based on the teachings of Buddha. Today, over 500 million people are considered Buddhists, most of whom live in China and India. But there are also many Buddhists in Japan and even more people who use and follow many Buddhist traditions, without claiming they are Buddhists.

Buddhism has played a central role in spiritual, cultural, and social life in Asia. It spread to Western countries in the 20th century.

The teachings of Buddhism were written in several related languages, such as Balinese and Sanskrit. The religion arose during a time of great social upheaval and intense religious activity. There is disagreement about the exact period of Buddha's life. Estimates range from 560 to 368 BCE. At this time, there was great dissatisfaction with the Brahmanical, that is, high-caste, sacrificial traditions and their rituals. There was also unrest in the area, which led to the creation of many small kingdoms and the fragmentation of tribal affiliations. In a religious sense, this was a time of doubt, rebellion, and experimentation. A number of sects arose.

Buddhism itself has also, in the areas where it has existed, divided into different directions with different emphasis on rituals and paths to nirvana. But all directions have a common basis.

Buddhism originated in the Ganges plain in the fifth century BCE. From there, the religion spread eastward along the Silk Road.

The central focus of Buddhism is liberation from dukkha, or suffering, which is part of human life. Buddha recommended the middle path as opposed to an ascetic or hedonistic life. This middle path is summarized in the Noble Eightfold Path, which involves controlling the mind so that awakening and liberation can be achieved through meditation and adherence to the ethical principles of Buddhism.

The Theravada tradition of Buddhism emphasizes achieving nirvana. Nirvana means ending constant rebirth. The Mahayana tradition emphasizes the bodhisattva ideal, where people free themselves from all self-consciousness and self-absorption.

Buddha had either the surname Gautama or Siddhartha. He was born in Lumbini in present-day Nepal and grew up in Kapilvastu on the Gangetic plain.

Buddha observed the suffering (dukkha) of human life and the endless rebirths. This was the background for his search for nirvana. He achieved "awakening" after a long period of meditation under a fig tree that is given the name Bodhi tree. After this, he launched the "middle path" as the right behaviour to achieve nirvana. Buddha was considered "fully enlightened" and founded a monastic order called the Sangha. He spent the rest of his life teaching the Dharma and, according to his followers, finally achieved nirvana when he died at the age of 80 in Kushinagar, India.

The focus of most Buddhist traditions is not worship. Instead, it is concerned with the liberation of the individual from suffering in this world. It teaches you to want what you have and not to want what you do not have. All Buddhists share a spiritual goal of reaching personal enlightenment and nirvana.

Buddhists do not believe in an eternal afterlife. Most Buddhists like their Confucian and Taoist counterparts, are focused on here and now rather than on an afterlife of a heaven or hell.

The Four Noble Truths are central to Buddhism. People expect happiness from states and things that are temporary or impermanent and for this reason cannot achieve happiness. Buddhist teachings state that everything is impermanent. This also applies to the human soul. Believing otherwise contributes to dukkha, or the suffering of life.

The Four Noble Truths

- The truths of suffering and distress, that is dukkha.
- The truth that suffering arises from the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment as well as for being or non-being, that is samudaya.
- The truth that the striving or search for pleasure can be eliminated, that is nirodhu.
- The truth that the elimination of striving is the result of following a method or path, that is magga.

Karma is earned or accumulated by the individual depending on behaviour and thoughts throughout life. People take their karma with them into the next life. Nirvana means to blow out or extinguish. It refers to blowing out a flame. Nirvana is described as complete emptiness, nothingness. Sometimes nirvana is described as going through a gate or passage of emptiness, and that nirvana cannot be felt or experienced. Other times the focus is on the passage into a state of desire-lessness, where the desire to achieve nirvana is not even conscious. According to Buddhist teachings, nothing is independent, purely apart from nirvana. All physical and mental states depend on states and behaviour in previous lives.

A Buddhist doctrine called anatman holds that there is no such thing as an unchanging soul or the like. To explain the concept of no-self or anatman, Buddhists have developed a theory of the components of human existence:

- Bodily or physical form (rupa)
- Feeling or emotions (vedena)
- Ideas (true)
- Mental formation or dispositions (sankhara)
- Awareness (vinnana)

Human existence is only a composite, composition, or fusion, of the five elements above. None of these is the self or a soul. A person is in continuous change, and there is no fixed underlying entity.

All forms of Buddhism are based on the Three Jewels (thratna): Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. A Buddha is a person who has awakened through his own insight. The person has put an end to reincarnations and mental conditions that have resulted in unfortunate behaviour and thought. The person is morally perfected. Some believe that the original Buddha is the only one of his kind so far. Others believe that the world has had many Buddhas.

Dharma is the second of the Three Jewels. Dharma includes the ideals of the Buddha, but also refers to the content and truth of the entire universe.

The third jewel is the Sangha, which refers to the monastic community where monks and nuns follow the teachings and discipline of the Buddha in an attempt to create an ideal society. This involves celibacy and minimal material possessions. The Sangha becomes a way of living out Buddhism. Outside Buddhists can improve their karma by giving alms to the monasteries. There is another definition of the Sangha where having attained enlightenment outside the monastic communities is a viable path to the goal of life. Such people are called Arayas or holy persons.

Bodhipakkhiyadhamma are the seven qualities or factors that promote spiritual awakening (bodhi). One such list is the Noble Eightfold Path. All such lists or paths to awakening contain sila (ethics), samadhi (meditation), and prajna (wisdom). These are called the three practices. Compassion and devotion are also considered important. The Eightfold Path can lead to the cessation of reincarnations. These eight factors are:

- Right understanding or meaning
- Right intention or thought
- Right speech
- Right conduct or action
- Right life or lifestyle
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness or presence
- Right concentration

The Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths and shows the way out of suffering. Buddhists must follow the Five Precepts as a minimum for moral living:

- Receive training in avoiding killing breathing creatures.
- Receive training in avoiding speaking untruths.
- Receive training in avoiding bad behaviour when it comes to sexual behaviour.
- Receive training to avoid all misleading and threatening or angry behaviour or speech.
- Receive training on how to abstain from alcohol, medications, and drugs that can cause “heedlessness.”

Meditation is central to Buddhism. However, it is believed that the tradition of meditation existed before Buddha became an advocate of such practices. Meditation is apparently a tradition that has been around for thousands of years in Indian areas. The Buddhist version of meditation is carried out without the concept of soul, unlike in Jainism and Hinduism, I am referring to the “real self” or soul concept in Hinduism.

Brahma emotions have been identified that are considered desirable among us humans:

- Loving-kindness or kindness. Showing goodwill to all.
- Compassion. The taking on board the suffering of others.
- Empathic joy. A feeling of joy resulting from the joy of others.
- Treat fellow humans equally and impartially.

Devotion is an important virtue for a Buddhist. Knowledge as the basis for proper meditation as well. Ritual prayers, sacrifice, exhaustion, and pilgrimages are among the ways devotion to the religion may be shown.

Vegetarianism is a natural choice for Buddhists, as they are committed to not harming living beings. Buddha accepted that the diet of monks and nuns included meat if the food was the result of begging. However, Buddha believed that being involved in the meat trade was

unethical. Among modern Buddhists, there are differing opinions on whether meat should be included in the diet.

Buddhism had to be based on oral tradition, where the content of the religion was transmitted between generations. It was not until about 400 years after the death of the Buddha that texts were written down in Sri Lanka. In the earliest years of Buddhism, belief in deities was probably present among those who considered themselves Buddhists, but this never became a real or recognized part of the religion. The religion is undoubtedly considered atheistic.

Buddhism was at its greatest extent before the Islamic conquests that began in India in 800-900 CE. Knowledge of Buddhism spread from the Indian subcontinent via the Silk Road to Tibet, China, Mongolia, Japan, and other Asian countries. The religion also had a foothold in Afghanistan and Iran before Islam took over in those countries. By the 13th century, Islam had displaced most of Buddhism in and around the Indian subcontinent.

Buddhism has also had Hinduism to contend with, especially internally within India. India certainly appears to be a primarily Hindu country today, where Hinduism is seen as an important part of Indian identity.

It should also be mentioned that the colonial power England also contributed to some apostasy among Buddhists through its Christian missionaries.

As with any religion, there have always been different faiths and schools within Buddhism, with ongoing internal conflicts.

The author's comments and conclusions

Buddhism must be considered an atheistic religion. In this way, it should fit into Western secular thinking. But the religion has primarily found its place in the north and east of India. It is also part of Chinese and Japanese culture.

In earlier times, its spread was greater, but it was displaced by Islam in the areas west of India. The religion has great similarities with Hinduism, or has simply emerged as a result of it.

For those who believe that nirvana is possible to achieve, Buddhism is an alternative. But here I must warn. Nirvana in accordance with Buddhist teachings and ideas is hardly a reality for anyone. We will all nevertheless reach an actual "annihilation" when we die. To achieve this, we do not have to do anything at all during life. Consciousness ceases when the brain is no longer supplied with sufficient amounts of blood and oxygen. Death is everyone's certain "nirvana". Without any effort or meritorious life in advance.

Confucianism

The information about Confucianism is primarily found in the English-language Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica and my book *Happiness and Life*.

Confucianism is also called Ruism or Ru classicism. It is a system of thoughts and rules of conduct that originated in China in the last two millennia before our era. Confucianism is an atheistic religion. Some call it humanistic or rationalistic, or simply a way of life. People who believe in one or more gods find little of the superstitions and dogmas they themselves have to swallow in Confucianism. Therefore, many are inclined not to accept it as a religion like the theistic ones. But Confucianism is in any case a philosophy of life with humanistic rules of conduct.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE) was the founder of the religion. This historical period is often called the Era of the Hundred Schools of Thought. Confucius himself considered himself a spokesman for the cultural values of the Xia (2070–1600 BCE), Shang (1600–1046 BC), and Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) dynasties. Confucianism was suppressed during the Legalist and Qin dynasties (221–206 BCE), but survived as a religion. During the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 CE), it competed for attention among the ruling class with the Taoists.

The religion had a renaissance during the Tang Dynasty (618 to 904 CE). Confucianism then developed as a response to Buddhism and Taoism and was called Neo-Confucianism. In this form, the religion was used as the basis for higher examinations in China during the Song Dynasty (980 to 1297 CE). This examination system was not abolished until 1905. In the 20th century, the ethics of the religion were blamed for China's weakness, but in the latter half of the last century, the religion regained much of its influence, partly because the work ethic in the code of conduct was beneficial to economic progress.

It has been said that Confucianism regards the secular as sacred and that it represents or realizes the dichotomy between religion and humanism. The ordinary activities of life, such as interpersonal relationships, are also considered sacred. This is because these relationships express natural or universally valid human morality.

Confucianism is based on the belief that people are good, well-meaning, teachable, and can improve themselves through collective effort and self-improvement. Confucius' thoughts focused on fostering honour in a morally organized world. The ethical concepts in the teachings include *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*. *Ren* is related to compassion. *Yi* is related to good deeds. *Li* is related to a system of norms and rules of decency regarding daily life, simply about behaviour and correct interaction with others. *Zhi* is related to the ability to understand what is fair in one's own and others' behaviour.

Traditionally, the population of countries such as China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore and Myanmar are strongly influenced by the rules of life of Confucianism.

There is no word in Chinese that directly corresponds to "Confucianism." The word *ru* means learned or refined man, and the word would be associated with the teachings of Confucius in China. The same applies to the word Ruism.

In the same way that Buddha expounded and recommended the middle way, Confucianism makes the middle way the ideal for people, the community, and the society in which we live.

When Confucius mentions *tian* as something otherworldly, this term must not be understood as a god as in theistic religions. The term is more similar to *Tao* in Taoism. This then means

“the way things are” or the universally valid order. Tian may also be compared to *Brahman* in Hindu and Vedic tradition.

It is said that Confucius always left a small piece of his meals in an offering bowl to honour his ancestors. Confucius probably described social harmony in a patriarchal-based ideal of ancestor worship in the father’s lineage.

The Five Constants were written down as essential in Confucius’ teachings during the Han dynasty, that is, a few centuries after Confucius’ death.

The constants are:

1. Ren (jen) – humanity, charity
2. Yi – justice, distinguishing right from wrong
3. Li – decency, following customs
4. Zhi – knowledge and moral wisdom
5. Xin – faithfulness, sincerity and keeping one’s word

The five constants belong together with the five virtues which, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, are primarily Ren (humanity and charity) as a core value in the religion. This is connected to Li, which indicates ritual norms, decency, and customs. Zhong emphasizes loyalty to people’s own true nature. Shu refers to the importance of reciprocity. Xiao refers to piety.

Confucius believed that social unrest often arose because people did not perceive or understand realities. Therefore, it was important to describe ideal patterns of action in easy-to-understand and comprehensive terms. Confucianism is considered by many to be China’s original religion for more than three thousand years.

The goal of Confucianism is to have a long life, health, and wealth in this world, rather than being rewarded in the next one. After death the main goal is retention of a good name.

The *Three Feminine Obediences* doctrine of Confucianism tells woman to always remain obedient to the men in their life, to her father as unmarried, to her husband as wife, and to her sons as a widow. These obediences are probably and hopefully not considered law in the modern Chinese population.

In 2005, the Centre for the Study of Confucian Religion was established in China. Confucian preachers have been allowed onto Chinese television since 2006. Many feel that the religion provides a useful counterbalance to Western cultural influence.

Defenders of Confucian political choices and decisions want a system where those in power are chosen on the basis of intellect, social skills, and virtues. They would like to see the selection based on exams that reveal the right attitudes and skills. It might be difficult to reconcile Confucian ideas with liberalism and democracy?

The author’s comments and conclusions

Confucianism perhaps has the same role and significance for the Chinese as Hinduism has for Indians. Religion means a lot for the community and the common cultural basis, which is important for the cohesion of large countries.

It is important to note that the religion is atheistic in the same way that Buddhism is atheistic. Thus, the religious background of the Chinese is traditionally atheistic. It is no wonder that Islam and Christianity have not gained any significant foothold in China.

Confucianism has similarities with our Western humanism, but I do not think that the religion could ever have much appeal in the West. It is too influenced by Chinese traditions, and it feels foreign to the rest of us. Some of the ideals that the religion is based on is out of date, even in China.

Taoism

The information in chapter is from English-language Wikipedia, World History Encyclopaedia and my book Happiness and Life.

Taoism is considered by some to be a new religious movement. However, the ideas or philosophy behind Taoism originate from the peasantry and the Shang Dynasty, 1600 to 1046 BCE. The founder, Lao Tzu, lived around 500 BCE and used folk religion as a model or source of inspiration. The religion became the official religion of China during the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907 CE).

Both the names Taoism and Daoism are used for the religion. The similarities with Confucianism are striking, and its content is as more a philosophy of life than a religion.

Taoism's goals include self-development to achieve a deeper understanding of Tao and thus a more harmonious life. Ethics usually focus on reducing stress, being natural, spontaneity and simplicity. It is an important principle to realize that self-interest often conflicts with the interests of the community. We must be aware that thoughts and behaviour affect both ourself and others. Three "treasures" are compassion, frugality and humility.

Yin-yang is one of the principles on which the Taoist philosophy is based. This concept expresses the balance in life, such as the balance between dark and light, positive and aggressive, female and male.

The gods and immortals in Taoism can be divided into two categories. Namely gods and xians. Gods are deities of various kinds, while xians are immortal individuals with supernatural abilities or a principled and moral person. The religion is now recognized or approved by the current Chinese authorities. Its prevalence is primarily in China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

There is a difference between Taoist philosophy and Taoist religion. Taoism as a philosophy is an optimistic philosophy that focuses on the holistic union of an individual with all that is valuable. This includes both the entire physical world and society. Religious Taoism has its background in folk religion. Some believe that Taoism is a religion with origin in and affiliation with Chinese history and tradition. Female shamans played an important role in early Taoism. Some Taoists distance themselves from belief in gods. Others believe that Tao is a force stronger than gods. But there is room for belief in gods and deities also among Taoists. Belief in ghosts, shamanism, and exorcism are among the less fortunate aspects of the religion.

Taoism has existed for centuries in the same areas as Buddhism and Confucianism. The religions are largely influenced by this. Rituals, beliefs and moral concepts are common to all three religions. Not only did the religions borrow ideas from each other, but they have also been involved in power struggles and disputes among themselves.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Taoism suffered from religious persecution, wars, modernists, colonialism, and Christian missionary work. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Taoist priests were forcibly sent to labour-camps and many temples were destroyed or converted to other uses. During this period, many Taoists emigrated to neighbouring countries, but also to Europe and North America. Taoists received better conditions during the Reform Period from 1979, which provided greater religious freedom in China. Temples were restored and Taoist literature was published.

Tao has four primary characteristics: Tao is the source of all existence, has countless mysteries, has a pervasive sacred presence, and governs the cosmological processes of the

universe. Tao is a reality that permeates everything. Tao is the beginning of things, and Tao is the way things appear throughout their existence. Tao is, however, not a self-conscious creator, but the pattern of nature.

Ziran (self-organization) is an important concept in Taoism, a way of flowing within the Tao, a state from before things were created or created themselves. To achieve naturalness, you must identify with the Tao and flow with the natural rhythm of the Tao as it is within yourself. Then you must free yourself from selfishness and desire and appreciate simplicity. One way to cultivate ziran is through a Taoist meditation in which people empty their minds.

Most Taoists have a concept of an afterlife in which the soul becomes part of the cosmos. Some imagine a state in which one becomes a ziran after death. The Taoist desire for immortality is inspired by Confucian thoughts, and how they imagine contact with and worship ancestors after their death.

The Taoists have a colourful conception of the cosmos and creation. Before creation, the Tao rested in chaos. After this, it developed into a unity of concentrated cosmos with a potential for transformation. In the next step, the energies of yin and yang gave rise to further development. Classical creation accounts in Taoism are non-theistic. But there are many conceptions within the religion, many more than it is appropriate to mention here in this book.

The human body is considered a microcosmos. The forces of the cosmos are therefore found in the body. Some Taoists also believe that various gods have their place in human organs. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the universe can contribute to greater self-insight.

To the extent that Taoists can be attributed a belief in God, it must be considered apophatic, that is, God is described only as what he is not, in contrast to the Christian notion that man is created in the image of God. Taoism includes many deities and spirits and may also be considered polytheistic. At least some sects can be considered polytheistic.

Within Taoism, the Nine Exercises are used for self-development:

1. Inactivity
2. Softness and weakness
3. Defending the feminine
4. Be nameless
5. Clarity and calmness
6. Be good
7. To be without desires
8. Know how to stop and be happy
9. Give up and retreat

While ancient Chinese religions required sacrifices to gods and ancestors, Taoism forbids animal sacrifices. However, sacrifices are still made to deities. Praising deities can be done in many ways, not just through sacrifices. Examples include scripture reading, purification rituals, confessions, wishes, praise, lectures, public feasts, and statements.

Adhering to a set of ethical precepts is important in Taoism. The Five Precepts of Taoism are identical to the Five Precepts of Buddhism and prohibit killing people or animals, stealing, sexual debauchery, lying, and intoxicants.

In addition, five injunctions apply:

1. To maintain harmony with the ancestors and never show disrespect to the lineage.
2. To support and encourage those who do good deeds.

3. To support those who are not so well off.
4. If someone comes to harm you, do not plan revenge.
5. As long as everyone has not attained Tao, you should not expect it of yourself either.

There are several rules for Taoists to follow, but these are primarily aimed at priests, monks, and nuns.

Taoists have a tradition of divination, often with astrology as a background or based on “signs of the times” or special unexpected events. Some Taoists also practice exorcism.

There are several methods used in Taoist meditation. One method involves silence (Jing gong) and is very similar to and clearly influenced by Buddhist meditation. There is also a “silent” or apophatic version, xinzhai (fasting of the heart and mind), baoyi (embracing), shouyi (protecting), jingzou (sitting still), zuowang (forgetfulness). Taoists believe that these types of meditation lead to the dissolution of the self. Additional methods are practiced such as guan (observation) which gives a feeling of “free flow”.

Alchemy is also part of the Taoist tradition, but is probably no more effective for Taoists than for others. The goal of Taoist alchemy is physical and spiritual transformation, getting in touch with cosmic forces, undertaking spiritual journeys, improving health, or becoming immortal.

Taoist writings documenting their beliefs and their development over time date back to around 500 BCE, but have been supplemented up to the modern era. Much of the traditional older beliefs within the religion are actually based on ancient Chinese literature that initially has nothing to do with Taoism, but is referred to because this literature is an important common Chinese cultural foundation.

In 2010, a census showed that around 950 million Chinese people, or 70 percent of the population, practiced some form of Chinese folk religion. 12 million of these claimed to be Taoists. However, in Taiwan, a full 33 percent, or 7.5 million, were Taoists. The People’s Republic of China has encouraged the use of Taoist traditions and practices. However, during the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong, all religions were suppressed in China. More than 10 percent of the population in Hong Kong and Singapore consider themselves Taoists.

Many believe that Taoism arose as a counter-reaction to Confucianism. Taoists want to downplay the rituals that characterize Confucianism, its hierarchical social order, and conventional morality. Taoists prefer more spontaneity and individualism.

When Buddhism was introduced to China, it was considered a foreign version of Taoism. Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese using Taoist vocabulary. In the centuries since then, the two religions have apparently become increasingly similar, borrowing ideas and rituals from each other. Buddhism’s influence has given rise to monastic traditions, vegetarianism, the prohibition of alcohol, the doctrine of emptiness, and much more. In fact, all three religions, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, should be said to have merged into something quite similar. All three religions embrace a humanistic philosophy that focuses on moral conduct and human perfection or refinement. Most Chinese also identify with all three religions to a large extent. The Neo-Confucian school is a practical result of this. Here the three religions merge into something truly Chinese.

Like Epicureanism, Taoism is without a creator god and without gods who control the forces of nature. Another similarity to Epicurean ideas is wu wei (effortless action) which has a parallel in the biosas (live unknown) and focus on naturalness (ziran) instead of conventional values.

The author's comments and conclusions

The humanism of Taoism has similarities with the humanism of both Christianity and the secular humanism. Taoism lacks Christianity's worship of God. The original forms of Taoism were quite colourful with elements of shamanism, healing, spiritism, alchemy, fortune tellers, rainmaking, journeys to the underworld to help the dead and much else that we modern people would easily shrug off. But Taoism radiates humanity and tolerance, peace and harmony. This gives a more sympathetic impression than the monotheistic, assertive and war-making religions we surround ourselves with here in the West and not least in the Middle East.

Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism have influenced each other through their coexistence for centuries in China. Together they today contribute to the common cultural heritage, unity and cohesion of the Chinese people. In this way, the religions live well in the political landscape that China constitutes today. While they suffered during the Cultural Revolution when Mao Zedong probably believed, like Marx, that religion is opium for the people. Today's Chinese regime certainly sees these three, mainly atheistic religions, as an aid to keeping the country together. But the humanism of the religions and other humanistic ideals seem to have little appeal among the country's leaders. The leaders are apparently more concerned with maintaining a large number of external enemies through many confrontations with neighbouring countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan. The United States and Western Europe are also pointed out as unfriendly. The leaders do not hesitate to suppress religious minorities within China, such as the Muslim Uyghurs.

Shintoism

Most the information here about Shintoism is found in the English-language edition of Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and my book Happiness and Life.

Shintoism has evolved in Japan. Shintoists often characterize the religion as a primordial religion or nature religion. However, the religion does not have a specific originator, doctrine, dogmas or sacred scriptures. There is also great disagreement about when the religion originated or emerged as a religion. Was it before Buddhism came to the country or has Buddhism contributed to the transition of Japanese traditions into an organized religion?

There is also no supreme authority or governing body for Shintoism, which means that beliefs and practices vary widely among followers.

Shinto means the path to kami, the sacred power. The term was adopted to distinguish this Japanese religion from Buddhism.

Shintoism was in earlier times polytheistic and animistic (everything has a soul). People found kami in nature, in the sea, in the mountains, and in men who excelled. Kami could also appear in ideas such as growth, creation and judgment. Different clans had different designated kami. Nowadays, kami is more a kind of omnipresent force or soul that is worshipped at altars at home and in public buildings or temples. In the temples there are priests (kannushi) who help with the offering of food and drink to the kami who has his being or is dedicated to the place where the offering takes place. There is also a tradition of religious dances and festivals. Within Shinto purity through purification rituals is important. Washing and bathing, especially before worship, are important to maintain. There is little focus on specific moral regulations or beliefs about life after death. But the dead can achieve becoming kami. Shinto is primarily governing or guiding the social life and behaviour of the Japanese, but has less significance for their expressed beliefs or philosophy.

Buddhism came to Japan in the years from 300 BCE. Kami worship became an early part of Buddhist doctrine in Japan. The religions merged in such a way that even today Japanese people often consider themselves both Buddhists and Shintoists.

During the Meiji period from 1868 to 1912, Buddhist influence in kami worship was stopped. A state Shintoism was established. People were encouraged to worship the emperor as a kami. After World War II, Shinto was separated from the state and state rule.

There are about 100,000 public Shinto shrines in Japan. The religion is by far the largest in the country. Buddhism is the second largest religion. Most Japanese participate in the activities of both religions.

It is probably quite special and unique for Japan that practicing two religions at the same time is recognized as normal. This makes the religious practice of the Japanese quite pluralistic. While Buddhism emphasizes achieving nirvana in order to avoid suffering in repeated lives, Shintoism focuses more pragmatically on solving the trivialities of people's daily life. Shintoism has also integrated elements from Confucianism and Taoism in addition to Buddhism.

Shintoism is polytheistic and involves the worship of many deities called kami or jingi. Kami can also be translated as god or spirit. Japanese people would argue that there are an infinite number of kami. They exist everywhere. But they are not considered omnipotent, omniscient, or immortal. Kami can include both living and dead, both organic and inorganic matter. There are kami in earthquakes, droughts, plagues, wind, rain, fire, and sunshine. There is an animistic perspective on kami.

Kami may be both benevolent and destructive. If warnings about good behaviour are not heeded, people can be punished with both illness and death. Some kami are even malicious. Therefore, sacrifices are made to kami to obtain blessings and avoid punishment.

It is possible for humans to become kami. Examples include former emperors or leaders of sects.

In Shintoism, there is no dualistic understanding of good and evil. The concept of *aki* encompasses misfortune, unhappiness and disasters, but does not correspond to the Western understanding of evil.

Modern Shintoism places primary emphasis on the life we live and little emphasis on an afterlife. There are, however, notions of a soul. Many believe that the soul survives physical death and continues to help the living. After 33 years, souls become part of the family kami. Some believe in *obake*, which are restless spirits or souls who died under terrible circumstances and then seek revenge.

Shintoism regards humans as pure. There are several purification rituals used to maintain purity. Several places have been designated as bathing places for purification. Certain actions are particularly inauspicious for human purity. Examples include death, disease, witchcraft, incest, bestiality, excrement, and blood from menstruation and childbirth.

Immersing the body in the sea is considered the oldest and most effective form of purification. Bathing under a waterfall or sprinkling salt over your body is considered very beneficial.

In practice, sincerity, honesty, hard work, and thanksgiving directed to kami are virtues and proper behaviour.

The religion is considered somewhat oppressive of individual freedom. Subordination to a larger social order is considered right and correct moral. Nationalism is among the traits the religion is accused of.

Shinto practitioners do not pray directly to kami, but often ask a priest to perform the prayer. Some even ask kami for more pragmatic things, such as rain. There are also examples of priests being asked to clean a believer's car so that it is less likely to be in a collision. Similarly, transportation agencies or airline companies may ask for purifications to avoid accidents. Shinto priests may also cleanse building sites before construction begins. The age of 33 for women and 42 for men is considered particularly prone to accidents. A prayer to kami can help in such times.

Pilgrimage to a Shinto shrine is an important aspect of the Shinto religion. Some of these are classified as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. At such sites, people can get a stamp in their pilgrim book as proof of having been there.

The traditional offerings include food, wine, clothes, swords and horses. Money is probably the most common nowadays. It is also believed that the kami appreciate music and dance. Therefore, ritual music and dance performances are organized at some shrines.

Many Shinto homes have an altar dedicated to the family and ancestors. Amulets that can bring various forms of happiness and security are commonly used. You can also buy arrows at some shrines, which are supposed to destroy evil. Dolls of the Indian monk Bodhidharma are said to bring good luck and fortune. Festivals are held in honour of the kami before the rice harvest, to drive away evil and other matters that the kami can take care of.

For believers, it is customary to bring newborns to a nearby shrine for a kind of initiation into the faith community. This should preferably take place on the 32nd day after birth for boys and on the 33rd day after birth for girls. There is also a ritual associated with the transition to

adulthood around the age of 20. Marriages are also usually performed at shrines. Funerals most often take place at a Buddhist temple in Japan. Cremation is practiced there.

The Japanese tradition of setting boats with candles on the water is actually a Buddhist tradition where people imagines that the souls of their ancestors have come to visit. In gratitude for this, the souls are symbolically set out on the water and symbolized by the flame from the candle.

Some Japanese believe that kami can take place within a human being and speak through them.

Healers also have a place within Shinto practices and beliefs.

From the 9th century onwards, kami worship and Buddhism were more or less merged into a common religious practice. The two religions borrowed rituals and beliefs from each other. In the centuries that followed, there was far from harmony between the two religions. Nationalist movements have always had a tendency to prefer kami worship to the rituals that follow imported Buddhism. In addition to this latent conflict, Confucian ethics also entered as a third element in the religious life of the Japanese.

After World War I and the American occupation, Japan received a new constitution that separated religion from the state. The emperor declared that he was not a kami. This meant that public subsidies to shrines ceased. The Association of Shinto Shrines took over responsibility for the shrines.

Nowadays it is difficult to distinguish between Shintoists and Buddhists in Japan. However, many of them would claim that they have no religion, as the concept of religion is associated with nationalism and doctrine. However, the religious rituals live on.

Shinto is said to engage over 80 percent of the population in some way. This is despite the fact that only a small proportion of them claim to be Shintoists. Less than 40 percent of the population identified with any organized religion in 2008, 26 percent reported visiting Shinto shrines and only 16 percent claimed to believe in kami.

The author's comments and conclusions

I understand that the Japanese population is quite secular. They are not particularly religious. But it is possible that old rituals and traditions are held in higher regard than we do in Europe.

Just as the atheistic religions create unity and a sense of shared cultural heritage in China, Shintoism creates the same, and perhaps even a partially suppressed nationalism in Japan.

After World War II, religion and politics were separated in Japan. It was necessary after the period of aggressive nationalism and unforgivable acts of war by the Japanese.

Sikhism

The information in this chapter is primarily from English-language Wikipedia, but also Encyclopaedia Britannica and religion.dk.

Sikhism is an Indian religion and philosophy. The religion primarily targets Sikhs, an ethnically related group of people originating in the Punjab region of India. The religion originated in the 15th century. The founder was Guru Nanak (1469-1539). The faith's tenth guru was Gobind Singh (1666-1708). Gobind Singh provided a written basis for the faith so that the guru tradition was discontinued, or at least toned down. Or to put it in the Sikh way: The spirit or soul of the tenth guru was transformed into the holy scripture of the Sikhs, called the Guru Granth Sahib. The Sikhs call their faith Gurmat, which means the way of the Guru. The Sikhs believe that all their Gurus had the same soul or spirit.

Vahin guru is the most important mantra of Sikhism. This can be translated as "The indescribable light that brings man out of his spiritual darkness." The divine in Sikhism is considered to be above human characteristics such as gender, fear and hatred. Therefore, Sikhs do not fear God, but rather have interest, curiosity and openness, with a desire for a spiritual approach through spiritual practices.

The religion emphasizes an active, creative and practical life where truthfulness, faithfulness, self-control, purity, and meditation are in focus. People should strive for union with God, know God's wishes and live according to them. Faith and meditation in the name of the one creator, equality, justice, welfare for all, and an honest way of life are among the ideals that should be fostered and lived.

Sikhs do not recognize that particular religious traditions have a monopoly on absolute truth.

The definition of a Sikh is any person who believes in:

1. An immortal life.
2. Ten Gurus from Guru Nanak Sahib to Guru Gobind Singh Sahib.
3. Guru Granth Sahib.
4. Views, utterances, and teachings of the ten gurus.
5. Baptism bequeathed and described by the tenth guru, and having no obligations to other religions.

The religion arose and developed during a time of religious persecution, but gained followers among both Hindus and Muslims. Indian leaders, or rather Islamist Mughal leaders, tortured and executed two of the Sikh gurus because they refused to convert to Islam.

Sikhism is both monotheistic and pantheistic. They claim that there is only one God and that this God is omnipresent, formless, timeless, sexless, immortal, incomprehensible and invisible. Metaphorically, God is often presented as masculine, but the power of God is presented as feminine.

Sikhs consider the following emotions to be *the Five Thieves*: Selfishness, Anger, Greed, Attachment/Dependence, and Lust. They further believe that the world today is in an "age of darkness" because people are not concentrating on God and salvation. The situation can only be improved by intense devotion.

Miri-Piri is a doctrine practiced by Sikhs since the seventeenth century. Miri stands for the social and political aspects of life. Piri leads the individual to the spiritual aspect of life.

A practice in Sikh meditation is to remember and repeat the sacred name *Wahi guru*. Such words or names are also repeated in the recitations during meditation in other Indian religions.

There is balanced equality among Sikhs. There are no rules that exclude women from any position.

The written guidelines of the Sikhs use Hindu terminology. There are references to the Vedic poetry and the gods of Hinduism such as Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, Parvati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Rama, and Krishna. But these should not be worshipped. Furthermore, reference is made to the spiritual concepts of Ishvara, Bhagavan, and Brahman. The Quran and the god Allah from Islam are also mentioned as an example of “the Almighty” having several names. In other words, there is no concealment of a common origin or that ideas are taken from others.

When a child is born, the book of Guru Granth Sahib is often opened at random and the child is named after the first letter at the top of the left page. All boys are given the surname Singh and all girls are given the surname Kaur.

Sikhs are usually cremated, but cremation is not mandatory.

Sikhs do not believe in reincarnation, nor do they claim to be based on the teachings of prophets. The Gurus are considered “enlightened souls.”

Sikhs have always sought to liberate Muslim and Hindu women from the social requirement of covering their hair, head, and face. The conflict with Muslims and the persecution of Sikhs by Muslim rulers lasted for centuries. This led to a militarization of the Sikhs.

After the British colonized the Indian subcontinent, the Sikhs entered into a peace treaty with them. But from around 1850, the Sikhs’ control over their own territory began to crumble. This was due, among other things, to unclear rules about how successors should be appointed after leaders. Wars also eventually broke out with the colonial power.

The last Maharaja of the Sikh empire, Duleep Singh, converted to Christianity in 1853. This was of course quite destructive for the Sikhs’ independence.

The Sikhs contributed greatly to the movement that would lead to India’s independence in the 20th century. The final partition into Muslim east (Bangladesh) and west (Pakistan) and Hindu-dominated India occurred in 1947. The new borders turned out to be unfortunate for the Sikhs. They dominated the Punjab province which was now divided between Pakistan and India. The Sikhs opposed the partition, but to no avail.

The Sikhs’ weak point in the turmoil surrounding the partition between India and Pakistan was that they were too few to constitute a majority in any single district. It is estimated that the fighting after the partition resulted in the deaths of around 2 million Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Relatively speaking, the Sikhs suffered the most. They also lost much of their property and were displaced from large areas. Both Sikhs and Hindus fled from Pakistan to India. While Muslims fled from India to Pakistan.

In 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the military to suppress a Sikh militant uprising. This is likely why her Sikh bodyguard, Beant Singh, assassinated her. The assassination resulted in a larger Sikh uprising.

As of today, Sikhism has 25-30 million followers. The religion is considered the fifth largest of the world’s religions. In Indian Punjab they constitute over 50 percent of the population. But they are spread all over the world, especially in English-speaking countries.

The Sikhs have four overarching precepts:

1. Never cut, shave or dye hair on any area of the body.
2. Some groups of Sikhs are vegetarians and for them meat is a forbidden food.
3. Adultery is forbidden.
4. The use of tobacco, narcotics and alcohol is prohibited.

The following are considered undesirable and should be avoided:

1. Piercing.
2. Murder of girl child.
3. Steal and gamble.
4. Cover your face (women).
5. Bare heads or wear caps (men).
6. Priests.

The author's comments and conclusions

Sikhism has not spread to a great extent to people other than ethnic Indians. There are probably many reasons for this. One reason may be that the religion is too similar to other monotheistic religions, so that it does not create sufficient curiosity. Another may be the religion's lack of missionary zeal. A third may be due to the traditional headdress of male Sikhs, the turban, which does not seem practical in everyday life. Yet another reason may be that the target group is primarily the people of Punjab.

Agnosticism, Atheism, and Humanism

Agnosticism and atheism are the oldest beliefs among us humans. At the same time, they are the beliefs with by far most followers today. Calling them beliefs is actually not very precise. They are in fact two examples of lack of belief. They should rather be called perceptions.

These views of life are the oldest, for the reason that our ancestors had to reach a certain intellectual level, have a conceptual apparatus and also have developed a language to formulate abstract fantasies about spirits, deities, heaven and hell. Gradually, these basic assumptions came into place. As an example, I can mention lightning and thunder, which provided the basis for the ideas about the god Thor. Only after some Stone Age people made their ideas about gods and other things known, did we get the first people who questioned their beliefs, shook their heads or completely rejected the beliefs of others. The first agnostics and atheists were thus in place in our past. “The gods” know how long ago it was.

There are no statistics that can document the number of agnostics and atheists in the world today. But some religions and philosophies are fundamentally atheistic. Examples are Buddhism, Confucianism, and some branches of Hinduism. In addition, there are all those who are primarily and consciously atheists or have rejected or shown incomprehension towards any non-documentable religious belief.

Religions and religious beliefs, atheism and agnosticism must be kept secret in many countries. Atheists who come forward with their lack of faith may in many places risk both imprisonment and the death penalty. Then it becomes tempting to keep their opinions to themselves. I dare, based on all this, to claim that the earth is primarily populated by agnostics and atheists. As a group, they are many billions more than the Christians who can claim they belong to the second-largest faith in terms of followers, or more correctly, in terms of members.

Definition of atheist according to the Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia

“An atheist is a person who is a supporter of atheism. An atheist assumes that there’s no god or gods.”

Most atheists are self-professed atheists, and not members of an organized group. However, there are also groups and associations that are focused around an atheistic point of view, such as the association called *the Atheists* in Norway.

The author’s comments regarding atheists

Already in 2016, the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten published a survey that showed that among members of the Church of Norway, a third declared themselves atheists. Only 48 percent of the members considered themselves Christians. Secularization in Norway has progressed rapidly, so that now ten years after Aftenposten’s survey, only a minority of Norwegians believe in a god.

Definition of agnosticism in the Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia

The definition is written by Eivind Tjønneland: agnosticism in the Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia on snl.no. Retrieved April 4, 2024 from <https://snl.no/agnostisisme>. The author's translation:

“Agnosticism is the philosophical position that if something is inaccessible to our experience, then we can neither know whether it exists, nor know anything about it if it does exist. Agnosticism may apply to a god, absolute principles, the reason for existence, and similar issues. The position is distinguished from atheism, which implies an absence of belief in god or a belief that god or gods do not exist.

The term agnosticism originated with Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) and played a crucial role in the 19th-century religious debate. Many thinkers took as their starting point Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) argument about antinomianism in the so-called “transcendental dialectic” in his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*, which argued that classical metaphysical questions about freedom and immortality and the possible existence or essence of a deity lie outside the realm of reason.

In England, both Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) developed agnostic forms of epistemology in agreement with David Hume (1711–1776), although the term did not come until later. In his 1936 book *Language, Truth and Logic*, Alfred Jules Ayer (1910–1989) went a step further and argued that all claims about a deity are meaningless, even those of the agnostic. If “God” is a meaningless word, then the sentence “perhaps God does not exist” must also be meaningless.”

Humanism

This section on humanism is from my book *Happiness and Life*.

For me, humanism is the answer to modern man's need to be part of a community where humanism, tolerance and scientific understanding are in focus.

Humane ethics is a philosophy of life, not a faith or religion. It is neither required nor expected that a humane ethic people perform certain rituals, live their life in a certain way, or have a certain political affiliation.

According to the Great Norwegian Lexicon, humanism is an example of a secular view on life that encompasses both a humanistic view of humanity, a perception of reality, and ethics. These elements form the basis for a meaningful life without religion.

The view of humanism is anthropocentric, which therefore emphasizes people's freedom and ability to make meaningful and ethical choices for which they themselves are responsible.

Humanism means that people should not be reduced to means for the ends of others, and therefore stands in opposition to totalitarian ideas.

The perception of reality is rationalistic, emphasizing reason and free thought. Humanism expresses a searching and scientific attitude that rejects metaphysical and dogmatic explanations of the origin and character of life.

The ethics of humanism are based on ethical and democratic values as formulated in the Human Rights and have the principle of reciprocity at their core.

Humane ethics as a term for a life view was launched by the Norwegian Kristian Horn in connection with the launch of civil confirmation in Norway in 1950. Today, the term life view

humanism, used by Horn in 1967, or simply humanism, is also used. Internationally, the term humanism or secular humanism is often used to describe this view of life.

Broadly understood, humanism is a perspective that places humans at the centre (anthropocentrism) and does not reduce them to a function of other forces, such as gods and nature. It emphasizes the inviolable value of humans, while rejecting belief in a reality beyond this world.

Humanism emerges as a modern view of life, which, on the basis of scientific knowledge, freed from religious tutelage, will realize the good life for individuals and society. It limits itself both to previous human ideas, religious authorities and philosophy that can call reason into question.

The historical roots of humanism are particularly the philosophy of the Enlightenment of the 18th century and the natural scientific thinking of the 19th century. Impulses can also be traced back to the Greek myth of Prometheus, who wanted to take fire from the gods and give it to humans. In the standard work *The Humanist Philosophy* from 1982 (English first edition: *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 1949) the philosopher Corliss Lamont points out the background of humanism on various fronts: Renaissance humanism, freethinkers and rationalists, ethical contributions from different religions and philosophies, naturalistic and materialistic philosophy, natural science and scientific methods, democracy and human rights, literature and art.

Precursors in antiquity are materialist philosophers such as Democritus and Epicurus, the sophist Protagoras with the sentence “Man is the end of all things” and Socrates with his ethical reflections. Central names in the 19th century are Charles Darwin, August Comte and Ludwig Feuerbach, as well as in the 20th century Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre. In more recent times, the UN Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 has been the most important normative anchor of humanism.

Corliss Lamont with his 2007 book *Humanism* (English first edition: *On Humanism*, 2004) is one of the leading thinkers of humanism. He links his view of life to both the recognition of reality, ethics, and aesthetics. In the sense in which he uses the word, humanism is an attempt to think about how we should live our lives without religion.

In Norway, humanism as a philosophy of life is associated with the organization Human-Etisk Forbund, founded in 1956. This organization is a member of Humanists International, formerly called the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which was founded in 1952 with UNESCO Director-General Julian Huxley as its first president.

The statutes state: “Humanism is a democratic, non-theistic and ethical view of life that upholds the right and responsibility of man to shape and give meaning to his own life. Humanism rejects supernatural perceptions of reality.”

So far, the Great Norwegian Lexicon description of humanism. It seems quite wrong, however, for a humanist to attribute some kind of prophetic authority to individuals.

Humanism is described quite well in the “**Nordic Humanist Manifesto 2016**”, which constitutes the common ideological basis of the Nordic humanist associations:

1. Humanism is a secular view of life. It is based on the belief that humans are part of nature, born free and with equal human dignity and rights, endowed with reason and conscience.
2. Humanists believe that there is no predetermined meaning to life. We are free to find meaning and purpose in our own lives, through individual reflection, social interaction, and the help of the rich culture we humans have created in science, philosophy, and art.

3. Humanism promotes rationality. Critical inquiry, evidence-based argumentation, and a scientific mindset are our best tools for gaining reliable knowledge about the world.
4. Humanists encourage critical examination of all ideas and beliefs, including our own. We should seek out the best arguments and strive to change our opinions and beliefs when we are proven wrong. Freedom of expression is essential for testing opinions in open debate.
5. Humanists consider democracy, the rule of law, and human rights to be fundamental, rationally justified values. We are part of a community and have responsibilities to our fellow human beings and to the environment, both locally and globally. We must ensure that our planet is habitable for future generations.
6. Humanists promote equality for all. Humanists respect freedom of religion and everyone's right to choose their own beliefs. The state should be secular and not give any belief special privileges.

A manifesto is a text that forms the basis of an ideology, an artistic movement, or another kind of cultural movement by explaining the principles and intentions that underlie it. In a church or religion, a manifesto is more commonly called a creed. Supporters of a philosophy can use a manifesto to define what they consider to be fundamentally important in life.

It is regrettable that the terrorist AB Breivik has given the word manifesto a bad name. But the term is the same as it is defined as, despite the fact that such monsters have used it. Hitler's "Mein Kampf" was also a kind of manifesto, when we are going to bring out that kind of outgrowth from history. "Creed" will in any case be completely wrong for the humanists. They normally do not perceive it as they believe, but have made up some thoughts about life that are changeable in line with new knowledge.

Humanism and the above-mentioned manifesto have developed from religions and political movements and beliefs over several centuries.

In an article about stoicism in the Norwegian newspaper Dagens Næringsliv on October 8, 2019, the following can be referred:

Stoicism originated in Athens around 300 BC when Plato's student Zeno of Kition philosophized with his students in the shade of a large stoa, that is a colonnade.

Stoicism was carried forward by Roman thinkers such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. This philosophical movement has been called the mindset of the hard times. It has enjoyed a popular philosophical revival in recent years with books, websites, lectures, and courses.

Central ideas in Stoicism are:

- Realize that you can't control much of what happens in your life.
- What you can control is how you perceive and judge what is happening.
- Accept that negative things happen from time to time, in your life, like for everyone else.
- See yourself as part of a whole, not as an isolated individual. You are part of humanity and of nature.
- Think about everything you have that is not your own. It is only on loan, and one day it will be taken back.

More can be found online at modernstoicism.com. It is easy to draw parallels to the Nordic Humanism Manifesto.

The concepts of human-ethic and humanism

Human-ethic and humanism are two terms that are used interchangeably. Actually, humanism is a broader term than what emerges from the manifesto here. There are humanist ideas in most religions. Human-ethic people are secular, non-religious, humanists. They can be atheists or agnostics.

Paragraph 2 of the Norwegian Constitution reads as follows: “The basis of values remains our Christian and humanistic heritage. This Constitution shall secure democracy, the rule of law and human rights.”

It is unlikely that only secular humanism was in mind when paragraph 2 was formulated, but rather a broader perspective on humanism, such as we find traces of in most religions, constitutions, and in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It must also be noted that the Norwegian constitution itself does not particularly secure the considerations stipulated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This applies, among other things, to the constitution’s acceptance that inheritance will be decisive for who will be king or queen, that is, the head of our country, as well as the constitution’s confirmation of the special position of the Evangelical Protestant Church. The Norwegian constitution was revised and renewed only a few years ago without the aforementioned main features being changed. It is permissible to ask whether our constitution is worth celebrating on May 17. But we can still celebrate our freedom, our democracy, and our luck as citizens of a fantastic country, both on May 17 and in other contexts.

As a reader, you have probably long known that I am an atheist. I have been an atheist since the sixties. It has never been a burden to assert my views in the places I have lived. But I imagine that the “Bible Belt” (south and southwestern part of Norway) would have presented me with challenges both privately, socially and in my work. I notice and accept that many people with faith in God have problems with atheists and their lack of acceptance of their belief in higher powers. We distance ourselves from what is most important to them. As an example of how such attitudes can be felt, I will tell you about a colleague whom I of course will not name here.

The person had read my book *Happiness and Life*. She probably did not like my conclusions and said somewhat triumphantly: “I believe in God and Jesus. But you believe too. You believe that there is no God.”

What she was expressing here is a misunderstanding that she shares with many, but nevertheless what she was saying is only grammatically correct. Atheists do not believe in anything improbable, unprovable, and undocumented such as gods, saints, holy or evil spirits. For my part, I also do not believe in Santa Claus, angels, Satan, shamans, heaven, or hell. We atheists are of course not believers for the reason that we do not believe. We only relate to what for which there is scientific cover to claim and agree.

Religious

**faith,
myths,
conceptions,
rituals,
beliefs,
and delusions**

Are they all results of misconceptions and delusions?

Adam and Eve and other myths

Yuval Noah Harari's books *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus* are the inspiration and prime sources of this chapter.

Some 14 billion of years ago The Big Bang created matter, energy, time, and space, as a result of physical and chemical processes. After some hundred thousand of years matter and energy had transformed into atoms and molecules in a chemical process. Suns (stars) and planets were gradually formed.

Approximately 4 billion years ago some molecules integrated on earth to form the first organisms. This process is both chemistry and biology and was the start of a development that Charles Darwin explained in his book *On the Origin of Species*. The process of survival of the fittest had started.

About 70.000 years ago humans (the specie *Homo sapiens*) interacted in the first so called cultures as a start of human history. Some 12.000 years ago farming gradually became the main way for *Homo sapiens* to get food. Farming could feed much more people than the hunting and gathering culture.

The introduction and understanding of science are only some hundred years old. It was felt like a revolution forcing people (and the church!) to reconsider many conceptions. Science became a myth buster and started a long-lasting fight with the pope, religions, and religious beliefs. This fight still goes on.

The Old Testament has lost much credibility thanks to science. As a good example I will mention the Genesis' creation story with the six-day process, where God creates the universe and life. God even formed Adam from dust, created the Garden of Eden and much more. Another example is the deluge and Noha's building of a ship to save couples of different species.

As a result of The Old Testament and all myths in it, only 15 percent of Americans think that humans evolved through natural selection alone, free of divine intervention. 32 percent believe that we have evolved from earlier life forms in a process lasting millions of years. But they believe that God led the evolvment. As much as 46 percent believe that God created us in our current form sometime during the last 10,000 years. These percentages are from a 2012 Gallup survey in the USA.

I respect that some Christians still believe in Old Testament myths, but their delusions I do not respect. They are free to believe whatever they want, but must accept, however, that they are considered naive.

As an anecdote I must mention that a relative of mine, with much Christian indoctrination from his family through his life, told me that the Norwegian oil and gas that we found under the North Sea, was formed during God's deluge some 6,000 years ago. Trees and animals had been covered by sand and water and thereafter were transformed into crude oil. I think that he has gained more correct information about the process of oil formation by now.

I hope that most of the readers of this book consider The Old Testament as a book filled with a lot of myths that we no longer consider as facts, thanks to science. The problem is that even the New Testament is filled with myths that have no scientific proof or credibility. In the following chapters I will mention many of them.

Conceptions of gods

The information in this chapter is primarily from Richard Hawkins book *The God Delusion*, Yuval Noah Harari's book *Homo Deus*, English-language Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica and my book *Happiness and Life*.

Most major religions that involve belief in a god are today monotheistic, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. As an exception among the major religions, we have Hinduism with all its gods. True, Hinduism has atheistic tendencies or sects. It also has a monotheistic tendency or interpretation where Brahman is considered a monotheistic concept of God.

In the religions of earlier times, polytheism was the most common. For example, Greek and Roman mythology and religions can be mentioned, where the number of gods was in double digits. Norse mythology was also based on polytheism. I have given polytheistic religions a broader discussion in my book *Happiness and Life*. I will spare the reader of this book the details of these notions. In other words, I will content myself with monotheism. It is sufficiently imaginative and colourful.

According to Yuval Noah Harari the first monotheistic religion was formed in Egypt more than 1,300 years B.C.E. The pharaoh Akhenaten declared that the god Aten was the all-mighty god of the universe. Akhenaten made the worship of Aten a religion of the state. At the same time the pharaoh banned the worship of other gods. After Akhenaten's death the Egyptian people stopped worshipping Aten and dug up their old gods.

In most monotheistic religions, the god is often portrayed as a supernatural being, a creator, the primary object of belief, omnipotent, omniscient, and often attributed with the basis of moral rules, of which the Ten Commandments are a good example. This type of a god expects worship from believers, at least that is how it is interpreted by those who have joined the religions in question. Pantheists, however, consider their god to be the universe itself. And in deism, no god is involved in humans other than that a god has been responsible for creation.

Many religions emphasize the importance of a personal relationship with a god through worship and prayers. God is then seen as someone who takes care of the given moral principles in the religion. Some religions have many names for their god. Some of the names are so sacred that they should not be mentioned. Judaism and its Yahweh is an example of this. There are also religions where attempts to depict God may have fatal consequences. Depicting Allah is probably one of the most dangerous things to do.

The gender of God has probably been made irrelevant or God is considered genderless in modernized forms of religions. Although the god of Jews, Christians and Muslims has clearly had a masculine character in earlier times. I have never seen the god of Christians depicted in a female form. This of course comes from the view of women among those who have defined the truth in this religion. The views of women are not more modern or better in Judaism and Islam. But in these two religions it is not allowed to depict or make a figure that represents God.

There has at all times been disagreement among people about whether any god exists at all. Both philosophers and scientists have come to different conclusions. Proving the existence of a god must in any case be attributed to those who believe in a god. It is not the responsibility of atheists and agnostics to prove that there is no god. So far, there is not a single scientific proof of the existence of a god, despite the fact that gods have been believed in for thousands of years. These omnipotent gods have not found it worth the trouble to give people irrefutable

proof of their presence. This is probably the main reason for the rapid secularization we have witnessed in recent decades in Western countries.

The degree of secularization in a country shows positive correlation with high educational level, good and stable social, economic, and political conditions. In short, belief in a god is least common in environments with well-educated, well-off people who live in a democracy with great social and political security and stability.

When Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Homo Deus* proclaims that God is dead, this is just a manner of speaking. For him and for me a god has never existed. We are good examples of well-educated and well-off people who are atheists.

I will end this chapter with Richard Dawkins' description of the god that is most popular today: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

Richard Dawkins has quite another vocabulary than mine. But he probably finds reasons for his description in the Bible.

The author's comments through an anecdote:

I just have to tell you about one individual among my South American friends. He is, as many South Americans, without objections to Christians' delusions. He is publishing, constantly, religious inspired contents on Facebook. One of our common friends told me lately that he also claims that he has direct access to God. He speaks to God, more or less daily, and gets direct answers. He therefore always knows what is right to think and to do.

For a believer in God this may sound quite normal?

Conceptions of angels

The sources for this chapter are Wikipedia, the Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia, and religion.dk.

The word angel comes from the Greek *angelos*, which means messenger. In many religions such supernatural beings are part of the faith. The ideas about angels have their roots primarily in the Middle East. The Old Testament mentions cherubim as a heavenly being with wings. They can have two or four faces. Another type of angel is the seraphim. They are six-winged beings and surround God's throne. In the Old Testament, the face of the archangel Gabriel is described as shining like lightning.

Zoroastrianism is considered an important source of inspiration for the angelic motif in the other monotheistic religions originating in the Middle East. For example, the idea of guardian angels is probably inspired by the Zoroastrian concept of *fravashi*, who were a kind of protective spirits who had their abode in heaven.

The idea of seven archangels, mentioned in the Old Testament apocrypha of Tobit and Enoch, is reminiscent of the seven *Amesha Spenta* "the immortal saints" or "life-promoting immortals" in Zoroastrianism. There was close contact between followers of Zoroastrianism and Jews during the exile in Babylon, the years 586 to 538 BC, which might have led to the idea of angels emerging in early Judaism. According to the texts in the Old Testament, Yahweh ruled over a heavenly army of supernatural beings. The angels could both help and punish people. It was not until the exile in Babylon and under the influence of Zoroastrianism that belief in angels gained a greater role in Judaism. The angels now received their own names, personalities and mutual rank. In the time around the beginning of our era, the view of angels and their roles were among the issues on which the different schools of thought within Judaism of the time disagreed.

It is especially in the Jewish apocalyptic writings from this time that angels and their important "cosmic" functions are told. With the archangel at the head, they form a heavenly hierarchy. The number of archangels is stated to be four, six or seven. The highest of rank is Michael, the guardian angel of Israel, others are Raphael, Gabriel and Uriel.

In the Book of Genesis, the "sons of God" are those that sinned with the "daughters of men." In the apocalyptic writings, these are perceived to be fallen angels, and they may later also act as demons in the service of Satan. However, this notion did not become part of rabbinic Judaism.

Angels may intervene physically, as when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, or they can go to battle on Israel's side. Angels also appeared to Moses, and an angel of God went in front of the Israelis through the Red Sea. In the Jewish scriptures, such as the Talmud and Midrash, angels appear in many and different roles, but even the evil angels are subject to God. The later Jewish narrative tradition, the Aggadah, has nevertheless developed ideas about evil angels and about the angel of death waiting at the sickbed.

The Jewish philosophers, such as Maimonides, considered angels more as spiritual beings subordinate to God. Within modern Judaism, most angels are considered to be symbolic and poetic figures. However, within Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, angelic belief has gained greater importance. Here, angels of both sexes are found and have enormous power. Within Kabbalistic circles, angels can be invoked using amulets and special prayers.

Jewish ideas about angels were carried forward into Christianity. In the New Testament, angels are described as heavenly messengers and messengers of revelation, as personal

guardian angels, and as praising servants at God's throne. According to the Gospels, Jesus is said to have spoken of angels on several occasions. Among other things, he has said that those who follow him "have their angels in heaven who always see the face of my Father who is in heaven."

Two angels are mentioned by name in the New Testament: Gabriel, who told Mary that she will have a son who will be the promised Messiah, and Michael, who fought against the Devil. Both of these angels also appeared in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we are told about angels especially in connection with the return of Jesus and the Last Judgment. In the book of Revelation, angels appear as a sign that Jesus is coming back: "And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the four living creatures and the elders, and there were myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands." (Rev. 5:11). It is also said that angels will proclaim judgment on people on Judgment Day. As God's messengers, the angels will, among other things, bring punishment to those who have acted against God's will (Rev. 15-16). Angels are also described as playing trumpets or as companions of Jesus. In the Old Testament Satan is described as a son of God and an angel. In the New Testament he is the Devil who tempted Jesus in the wilderness.

There is no specific teaching about angels in Christianity. However, the Catholic Church believes in guardian angels. Every child who is born is assigned a guardian angel who lives as the individual's protector throughout their life.

Catholics also pray to Archangel Michael because pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) had a vision in which he saw Satan's presence in the world. This led him to write a prayer to the archangel for protection. Catholics still say this prayer today.

The evil angels of the Old Testament are not mentioned in the New Testament. However, in the Middle Ages, witches were believed to have made a pact with Satan, who was meant to be a "fallen" angel.

Angels also have a central place in the Quran. In Surah 2,177, Islam is summarized as follows: "To believe in God and the Last Day, and in the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets." In Islam, there are four archangels: Gabriel, Michael, Israfil, and Izrael. In addition to these, they believe in the story of the archangel Iblis who ended up as the devil. The Quran discusses the tasks and functions of angels. They are said to be spiritual beings of light who are in the presence of God and praise him. They are also messengers to humans. The Prophet Muhammad received revelations through an angel, according to tradition the angel Gabriel. Muhammad also used Gabriel as an advisor. Michael protects Islamic shrines, while the angel of death, Israfil, collects the souls of the dead.

Based on the Quran, Muslim theologians developed a doctrine about angels, their nature, the angelic hierarchies, and their work among humans. Izrael is the angel of death. The archangel Iblis rebelled against Allah and was therefore banished to be the devil. However, angels are generally described as closer to Allah than humans. Angels are said to have been created by Allah before humans were created.

Angels are most often depicted as winged humanoid beings. The origin of this may lie in the biblical texts, which mention superhuman beings such as cherubim and seraphim with wings.

Mesopotamian and Egyptian deities and divine beings could also be depicted with wings. The wings served both as protection for objects or people and enabled the conception of beings moving between heaven and earth.

The author's comments and conclusions

I fully understand that some Christians try to downplay the ideas and descriptions of angels in both the Old and New Testaments. The descriptions and ideas are considered fairytales for most people. Nevertheless, we cannot erase this rather central idea from the Bible. So, unfortunately, some religious people stick to the idea of angels.

Conceptions of Satan

The source for this chapter is primarily the English-language edition of Wikipedia.

Satan is often called the devil or Lucifer. This “being” or “demon” seduces people into sin in every conceivable way. There are probably nuances in how Satan is portrayed in the different religions. For example, Satan (or Shaitan) is described in the Quran as a being of flames. He was thrown out of heaven because he refused to bow down to Adam and he causes people to sin by imprinting evil suggestions in their minds. In Christianity, Satan is often portrayed as a fallen angel who has acted against God. While in Judaism, the concept of Satan is often more of a metaphor.

In the early Middle Ages, Satan played a minimal role in Christian theology. But Satan later became more important as a demonic concept when witches were felt as a larger problem for the church and elsewhere in society. During the Enlightenment, Satan’s existence was highly criticized by thinkers such as Voltaire. But belief in Satan is still alive in Christian circles, perhaps primarily among people outside Europe.

The idea of Satan as an antithesis to God and an evil being seems to have its roots in Judaism created during the Second Temple period, that is after 515 CE, and appears, among other things, in the Apocalypses. Belief in Satan is less prominent within Judaism in the centuries after this.

Within Christianity and the New Testament, the notion of Satan has been given a greater place than in Judaism. An example is the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the desert. He was asked to turn a stone into bread. There are also stories of Satan and Jesus in the temple and on a mountaintop. In the latter place, Jesus was promised all the kingdoms of the world if he would only bow down and worship Satan.

In the Bible Satan and his demons are attributed with the ability to cause diseases such as fever, leprosy, and arthritis. Satan is also attributed with the “power of death.” For Christians, the idea of Satan as a fallen angel has probably been the most common throughout history.

Exorcism was previously practiced by Jews on a large scale. Perhaps for this reason, the early Christians were convinced that Satan and his demons had the ability to possess people. Demonic possession has survived in the consciousness of Christians to this day. But in the Middle Ages, belief in such things was probably at its height. This was among the reasons for the witch trials that were at their greatest extent in the Middle Ages. It is believed that most people who believed themselves possessed suffered from anxiety, religious fear, and thoughts of evil.

Although belief in witches, demons, and Satan has declined in modern times, the belief still lives on among those who are susceptible to it. This is of course exploited by psychopaths and people with other behavioural abnormalities. Naive, ignorant, and mentally ill people become easy prey for Christian leaders.

In the eleventh century the church condemned the belief in witches, but at the same time documents that many people believed in such things at the time. Witches were believed to fly through the air on broomsticks in company with demons, that they performed sexual rituals, killed and ate children. Around 1430, the Catholic Church began to view witches as a vast conspiracy led by Satan himself. But Luther was no better. He recommended that people devoted themselves to music against Satan’s temptations. “The devil cannot endure mirth and joy.”

Witch trials continued until the 18th century. It is estimated that around 60,000 people were executed during the period of witchcraft belief and burning. The trials lasted the longest in Poland and Hungary.

The earliest English settlers in North America believed that Satan ruled the new continent. The Puritans among the settlers also believed that the native peoples were worshippers of Satan.

The author's comments and conclusions

Among today's American fundamentalists, many of the earlier ideas still live on. Many are extremely Bible-believing and contribute to the fact that Americans as a people still appear irrational and superstitious to more secular Europeans. Anyone who wants to be president of the United States must pursue a style of speech and policies that are applauded by this part of the population. Therefore, the presidents always have a superficial Christian exterior with affiliation to a church or congregation and show support for almost anything that today's Israel might come up with against its neighbours in the Middle East.

As an anecdote, I can tell you about a former member of my family. She had grown up with a Bible-believing mother and father and belonged to one of the strictest and darkest churches, or rather a sect. She told me, quite seriously and clearly frightened, that at night she could hear the devil himself sniffing around like a dog outside her bedroom door. This was her reality, unfortunately. She had been instilled with the existence of the devil throughout her life by her parents and by the preachers in her sect, and believed that he could physically approach her at night. She was filled with anxiety and feared being possessed by the evil one. Therefore, she always slept with the bedroom door locked and the window closed. Her life was shorter than one would expect from a Norwegian woman. Perhaps anxiety and tension contributed to her early heart attack.

This poor woman had a sibling who was a conscientious doctor and psychiatrist. He told me in all seriousness and confidence that he often had to resort to exorcisms to cure the mentally ill.

Both of these people are long dead. But they were victims of religious preaching that destroyed their mental and physical health. In fact, their lives were miserable.

Conceptions of heaven and paradise

Much of this chapter is taken from Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Heaven as a place for one or more gods, angels, saints or blessed deceased people, and others, is a concept in many religions. Often this heaven is described as an atmosphere or region high above our atmosphere, and far beyond human reach.

According to Michael Shermer's book *Heavens on Earth* a 2011 Ipsos/Reuters poll found that 51 percent of people in 23 different countries said they were convinced that an afterlife exists, ranging from a high of 62 percent of Indonesians and 52 percent of South Africans and Turks down to 28 percent of Brazilians and only three percent of the very secular Swedes. As a curiosity an American study found that even some atheists and agnostic people believe in an afterlife, but these respondents were Americans. The Americans have a stronger affection and thrust in religions than Europeans.

In most cultures, heaven is understood as a place of order, a place from which the creator rule, a place of goodness and truth. Heaven is free from hunger, thirst, oppression, disease, and stupidity. Rather, heaven is a place of complete satisfaction, knowledge, peace and tranquillity, joy, and communion with God. Heaven is often considered the reward for a pious life.

The Garden of Eden, paradise and heaven have great similarities to an outsider and are difficult to distinguish from each other without entering into mysticism and foolishness. In Norse mythology Valhalla, Odin's home, was the hope after death. Here there was fighting during the day and beer and food in the evening, after the worthy warriors had been brought back to life. They ate from the pig Særimne who woke up unharmed for the next day's feast. Mead was drunk from the udder of the goat Heidrun. The stupid ideas were more numerous and greater here in the Nordic countries than in many other places where civilizations were a little further along and more mature.

In ancient cosmology, heaven was located either in the far east or the far west, on a deserted island or mountaintop. Heaven is a place of abundance. The similarity to the nature of the earth is probably related to the fact that the earth lost its "Garden of Eden" due to the sins of Adam and Eve.

There are several myths about attempts to invade the sky. Examples of this are the flying Icarus, the Hindu legend of the conquest of the sky by the asura (demon) king Bali, and legends like the Tower of Babel. Such legends, almost without exception, have a dramatic and bad end for the initiators.

In most cultures, the road to heaven is dangerous, with high and narrow bridges, narrow passes, deep gorges with the waters of death, etc. To earn a place in heaven requires a sacrificial and godly life. Taking care of the sick and others in need, making offerings, praying, or performing other religious acts is probably recommended in most religions.

In ancient Mesopotamia, there was a creation myth consisting of a three-story universe. There, the sky was at the top, the earth in the middle, and the underworld at the bottom. The gods ruled in the sky. The earth was the home of mortal humans. Here they would serve the gods with sacred buildings, food, and worship. Minor gods and demons were also imagined to live on earth. When humans died, they went to the underworld. Only a handful of human heroes went to heaven.

In older Judaism, a distinction was also made between heaven and earth. The prospect of an afterlife was little discussed. "Heaven is the domain of God, while the earth has been given to

men.” Heaven was the vault above the earth, literally. Windows could be opened up there to let rain, snow, hail, or dew fall. God was in the highest regions of heaven. From here he engaged himself in the doings and deeds of all creatures. God’s throne was surrounded by angels and other heavenly beings. The ideas can also be found in Mesopotamian polytheism. There is also the idea of three levels in the cosmos, with the underworld, the earth, and then the sky at the top. God was in heaven, but also in the temple in Jerusalem, his palace on earth. The underworld where people ended up after their death was beyond God’s reach. These ideas changed after the sojourn in Babylon and the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. After this, the perception among Jews was that there are no limits to God’s power, even after the death of people.

Belief in a heavenly life after death became common after the Hellenistic period of the Jews from 323 to 30 BCE. At that time, there was a mixture of different beliefs in Judaism, such as resurrection after death, immortal soul, transformation into an angel or star.

Classical Rabbinic Judaism arose after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Through this, a variety of concepts of heaven were permitted. After death, the souls of good people were preserved by a resurrection in the Garden of Eden or were hidden under the Holy Throne.

Christianity began as one of many Jewish reform movements in Palestine in the first century CE. The reform movements shared a strong belief that the predictions of the transformation of heaven and earth in Isaiah 65:17 was imminent. They believed that a perfect world would emerge, in which nations would be judged and Israel would be resurrected. For example, there was a vision of a heavenly Jerusalem where angels sang continuous praises to God.

Traditional Christian theology teaches that communion with God is the goal of those who die and have earned this communion. In heaven, the Virgin Mary is a kind of queen who protects the dead.

In traditional Christian theology, it is further believed that those who die after having led righteous lives are immediately included in heaven as part of the divine. At the resurrection, body, soul, and spirit are once again unified.

Worship, fellowship, and creative pursuits are part of more modern Christianity’s image of heaven. There is also an emphasis on happiness and eternal spiritual development.

In Islam, there are ideas about heaven that have similarities with Judaism and Christianity. The Quran mentions a division into seven heavens. God has the power to resurrect the dead and judge them on the Last Day. Before the resurrection, the souls of the dead are a kind of intermediate stage where they can sense their future state of perdition or salvation. On the Day of Judgment, the sky will split, the mountains will turn to dust and the earth will give up its dead. All people will then undergo a final test. The faithful who has lived an impeccable life will experience a paradisiacal existence and reunion with their ancestors. The more meritorious a life a person has lived, the closer he or she will be to God.

In Hinduism, heaven is a mythical philosophical speculation. In Vedic texts from around 1500 BCE, heaven is described as the abode of gods such as Indra (the thunder god), Surya (the sun god), Agni (the god of sacrificial flames), Soma (the elixir god), Varuna (the god who looks after the cosmic order) and Yama (the first dead man). Ritual sacrifices were considered necessary for the world to exist, and funeral rites ensured that the soul or spirit of the deceased could ascend to the world of ancestors above. Rebirth in heaven depended on descendants being able to pay for the necessary rituals.

In later periods, some form of salvation was considered necessary. An individual's position in life was considered to be the result of their behaviour in previous lives. Being reborn in heaven was convenient, but not a permanent state. Even the gods must die eventually, according to the ideas prevalent in the period 800-500 BCE.

The ultimate goal is to escape life on earth and become one with the eternal spirit Brahman. But the path to Brahman required spiritual practices beyond the abilities and capacities of most people. In recent years, an alternative path to salvation from life has been described more as salvation through a deity.

Buddhism began in the early fifth century BCE as a movement seeking spiritual liberation through knowledge and spiritual discipline. The founder of the religion, Buddha, was "enlightened" and attained nirvana. In this state, all influences from past lives are erased, and rebirth ceases. The parallels to Hinduism are obvious. But Buddhism is atheistic, with no concept of a god or saviour.

There have been and still are several ideas about heavens. In Greece and the Roman Empire, there were the Isles of the Blessed and Mount Olympus. Even in Chinese Confucianism and Buddhism, there also are traces of ideas about heaven.

The author's comments and conclusions

I interpret the notions of paradise and heaven as a "carrot" for believers. Through promises of a better life after death, they are given an initiative to live according to the rules and commandments of the individual religion. It is tempting to attribute to the founders of religions the idea that this carrot is disciplining for the followers of the religion, but also attractive for potential new believers.

I will come back to the whip that was used. It is hell, of course.

The notions of paradise, heaven and the Garden of Eden have, as described here in this chapter, crossed national borders and between peoples for thousands of years. But despite this, there is nowhere and at no time a single scientific tangible proof of the existence of these carrots. There is not really a single non-scientific proof of it either. I must mention the angels of our shaman-inspired princess. They are supposed to have left some white feathers that she, in her bewilderment, never remembered to pick up and take care of. She also claimed to be able to communicate with the dead, presumably individuals in a paradise. But even the "*Snåsamann*", a Norwegian healer, has distanced himself from this claim. Dead people have no contact with our world, he said. And he is absolutely right!

We should all try to create a "kingdom of heaven" for ourselves and our fellow humans here on earth while we live. But even such a thing has proven quite difficult for most people.

Conceptions of hell

Most of this chapter is information from the English-language version of Wikipedia and Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Hell is a place where some individuals will have to spend their afterlife, according to many believers. The place is designed so that souls are punished with various sufferings and hardships for the sins they have committed in their living lives. Usually, punishments and sufferings are imagined to last forever, as in Islam and Christianity. However, in religions that believe in reincarnation, hell is imagined as an intermediate stage between reincarnations. Often, the hell images are located below the surface of the earth.

In religions that do not consider the afterlife as a place of punishment, the place is referred to as the underworld or the world of the dead. Examples of this are Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman religion.

Hell is described in most religions as a place of demons and the souls of the dead. Here the souls are punished for sins committed. In some religions the place is described as cold, in others as hot, often with an eternal fire. For example, hell in Swahili mythology is a very cold place.

In ancient Egypt, it was believed that the hearts of the dead were weighed against the feather of truth. If the heart was lighter than the feather, it could be given a place in the underworld or “afterlife.” If the heart was not the lightest, it would be eaten by a crocodile.

Colourful ideas about hell are found in European, African, and Asian ancient religions. It is always a life of merit that can save the deceased from perdition in hell.

In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, hell is a place of punishment. In Judaism, hell is often described as something non-physical, but more like a state of great shame. But there are also Jewish ideas about the pure annihilation of the souls of those who have sinned enough to deserve such a fate. Judaism around the time of Jesus taught that being descended from Abraham automatically prevented Jews from ending up in hell. But to earn this privilege, you had to confess your sins.

Since Augustine, many Christians have believed that the dead rest in peace if they have lived as Christians, or that their souls live on in torment if they belonged to the lost. This was the state until the resurrection and subsequent judgment.

According to the Catholic Church, damnation is eternal, loss of blessing and eternal damnation alike. Furthermore, the Catholic Church believes that hell is a state of self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed. You will find yourself in hell as a result of mortal sin that you don't repent of. You have chosen to be without communion with God.

Methodists, Baptists, and some Greek Orthodox churches teach that hell is the final destination of those who are not found worthy after the resurrection and final judgment, where they are eternally punished for their sins and separated from God. This is not in accordance with the Protestant understanding. Protestants believe that salvation depends on accepting Jesus as your Savior. While the Greek Orthodox and Catholic churches teach that judgment depends on both faith and actions. Some modern theologians believe that the soul dies at the same time as the body, but both return in connection with the resurrection.

There have been and still are countless variations of Christian ideas about hell and life after death. There are so many ideas about the issue that I do not find it appropriate to attempt to give a comprehensive description of them all in this book.

In Islam, hell is called Jahannam and is the opposite of heaven. Just like heaven, hell is also divided into seven levels. Hell is filled with flames, boiling water and other things that can be used as punishment for those who are condemned to such after death. After the Day of Judgment, hell is the place for those who have not believed in God while they were alive, or have disobeyed God's laws or his messengers. Enemies of Islam are sent to hell directly after their death. There is disagreement about whether the stay in hell is eternal or whether there is hope for forgiveness. The devil is primarily there to punish people, not to fight against God. Muhammad is said to have stated that the flames in hell are 70 times hotter than ordinary flames on earth. There are seven levels in hell so that sinners can be punished in proportion to the severity of their sin. Polytheism is considered the greatest sin of all.

In Islam, it is claimed that hell is inhabited by devils, ugly angels, scorpions and snakes who torment sinners. Furthermore, the Quran describes lakes filled with blood and fire and darkness where only fire provides light.

In Buddhism, it is believed that there are five or six levels of rebirth. These levels may again be internally graded. The hell level is Naraka and is considered the least favourable rebirth. One of the disciples of Buddha, Devadatta, attempted to kill Buddha several times. His destiny was to be reborn in the Avicii hell. But no rebirth is permanent, so even Devadatta can be reborn in better lives.

Early Vedic religions lack concepts of hell. However, in the law books and the Rigveda, three levels are mentioned; earth, heaven, and Bhunas or Antariksa (the middle level). But in addition, a level is described that can be perceived as something similar to hell. As in Buddhism, the level is called Naraka. It is believed that people who make mistakes go to hell and receive the punishment their sins deserve. Being dipped in boiling oil, burned on a stake and other tortures are described. When the quota of punishment is met, one can be reborn in another level.

Taoism originally did not have a concept of hell or a soul, but Taoism later adopted the concepts from Buddhism.

Zoroastrianism, however, has concepts of hell that may have inspired more modern religions.

The author's comments and conclusions

The concept of "hell on earth" is easily understandable to most people, regardless of religious background. Unfortunately, it is precisely here on earth that hell is created time and time again. Human hatred, religious, ethnic, political contradictions, economic inequalities, and despots create wars with conditions that give the feeling of what hell can be. But apart from hell on earth, it has not been shown that hell, in the religious sense, is a reality.

Without any proofs of hells existence some Christians still fear that homosexuals will end in hell. If they are living with another homosexual person and have sex, they certainly deserve an afterlife in hell in their opinion.

During my years in the Norwegian "Quaran" school (Kristelig Gymnasium) I also was told that people producing or selling wine or other alcohol containing beverage will most certainly end in hell. What about me that love wine?

Conceptions of soul

Most of the information in this chapter is found in the English language edition of Wikipedia, Encyclopaedia Britannica and my book *Happiness and Life*.

In both religious and philosophical traditions, the soul is the spiritual part of an individual. The soul can include an individual's identity, personality, and memory. The soul is a non-material aspect of a living individual, which many believe is capable of surviving physical death. Usually, soul concepts are reserved for humans, but are also used of non-living objects in some religions.

The earliest descriptions of soul in *the Oxford English Dictionary* date back to the eighth century. They refer to the immaterial spiritual or thinking aspect of an individual, in contrast to an individual's physical body.

In Judaism and Christianity, it is believed that only humans have immortal souls. However, immortality is controversial in Judaism. Immortality was probably something that came about via Plato. For example, Thomas Aquinas borrowed directly from Aristotle in his treatise *On the Soul*. Aristotle believed that all organisms had souls, but only the human soul was immortal. Other religions such as Hinduism and Jainism advocate that all living organisms or individuals have souls that are physically represented by the body or physical expression. The actual self is the soul. The organism or body is only there to experience *the karma* of the individual life.

In animism, it is believed that non-biological things such as rivers and mountains also have souls.

In ancient Egyptian religion, individuals were believed to be made up of several elements, some physical but also spiritual. Similar ideas are found in ancient Assyrian and Babylonian religion.

In the Baha'i religion, it is claimed that the soul is a sign of God, like a heavenly pearl that humans do not understand. Furthermore, this religion advocates that the soul not only lives after human death, it is also immortal. Heaven can be seen as the soul's closeness to God, while hell represents great distance from God. Humans have no prehistory or existence before life here on earth, and the soul's development is in the direction of God and away from the material world. The Baha'i religion is a monotheistic religion established in Iran (Persia) in the 19th century. It has between five and seven million followers.

Buddhism advocates that the soul is non-existent as a separate permanent entity. Human suffering is largely due to clinging to the belief in a true self or soul of some kind.

Within Christianity, some believe that their souls are judged by God when they die. God decides whether the soul goes to heaven or to hell, awaiting the resurrection. The Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, and some Protestant churches agree with this view. Other Protestant churches believe that the soul is part of life and believe that the dead are not conscious until after the resurrection. Still other Protestants believe that the souls of those who have not earned heaven are destroyed in hell rather than being subjected to eternal suffering and damnation. Believers will inherit eternal life in heaven or in God's kingdom on earth. In this way, they achieve eternal fellowship with God. There are also Christians who reject the punishment of the soul. However, most Christians believe in an eternal future for the souls of the faithful.

There are several opinions about the origin of the soul. Some believe that God creates the soul directly at conception or later. Others believe that the soul is inherited from the parents. Still

others believe that the soul exists before conception. There is naturally great disagreement about whether the foetus has a soul or at what point the foetus eventually acquires a soul. This affects the abortion debate among Christians.

Augustine (354-430) described the soul as a special substance consisting of intellect and adapted to govern the body.

Some Christians claim that humans have a body (soma), soul (psyche), and spirit (pneuma). However, most Christians believe that spirit and soul are used interchangeably in the Bible and are one and the same thing. That is, every human being has both a body and a soul. As a curiosity, Paul believed that the body fights against the soul. He probably meant that the body had a desire for sin, sinful desires.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the soul is a part of every part of the body. The soul can only be released from the body at death. Augustine of Hippo supported this view.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that the concept of soul refers to the inner aspects and qualities of a human being and is part of the concept of being created in the image of God. The soul represents the spiritual principle or aspect of humanity. All souls, living or dead, will be judged by Jesus when he returns to earth. The existence of each individual soul is totally dependent on God. The spiritual and immortal soul is created by God.

Protestants generally believe in the existence and immortality of the soul. However, there is disagreement among them regarding the afterlife. According to John Calvin, the soul exists as a consciousness after death. While Martin Luther believed that the soul dies at the same time as the body and that consciousness sleeps until the resurrection of the dead.

Adventists and newer sects originating in the Adventist Church also do not believe that the dead have a soul separate from the body. The dead are unconscious until the resurrection.

The Quran uses two words for soul. Ruh which can be translated as spirit, consciousness, pneuma or soul, and nafs which means the self, ego, psyche or soul. Nafs is related to the Hebrew ruach and nafesh. Ruh and nafs are used interchangeably.

“Allah takes the soul when a person dies. Those who do not die, He can take when they are asleep. Allah keeps those whom He has decreed to die and releases the others on certain conditions.”

In Jainism, all living beings, from plants or bacteria to humans, have a soul. According to this belief, there is no beginning or end to the soul's existence. The soul is eternal in nature and changes form until it reaches liberation. Jiva is this immortal soul in living organisms. Ajiva means non-soul and should be understood as matter and, for example, body, time, or space. Jiva can be samsan, trapped in rebirths, or mukta, which means liberated. Jiva becomes attached to a body depending on the karma of the soul.

Virchand Gandhi has stated: “The soul lives its own life, not for the sake of the body, but the body lives for the sake of the soul. If we believe that the soul can be controlled by the body, the soul will lose its power.”

In Judaism, there was originally no understanding of the existence of the soul. But over time, Judaism has assessed the quality of each individual's soul in relation to how they relate to the commandments. Kabbalah and other mystical traditions have ideas about the nature of the soul. The soul is divided into five elements:

Nefesh which is related to natural instinct.

Ruach which is related to the intellect and experience of God.

Neshamah which is related to emotions and morality.

Chayah who is considered part of God.

Yechidah which is important in the interaction with God.

Scientists believe that humans do not have a soul, but are a soul. A human being is thus immortal and can achieve reincarnation if they wish. They believe that a person's future happiness and immortality depend on their spirituality and how they live and act in life on earth. The Scientist word for soul is Thetan.

Shamanism often involves a belief in multiple souls within the individual. Soul flight, soul journey, out-of-body experience, ecstasy or astral projection are among them.

In Shintoism, a distinction is made between the soul of the living (tamashii) and the soul of the dead (mitama). These two types of souls can have several types of sub-souls.

Sikhs believe the soul (atma) is a part of God. "God is in the soul and the soul is in God." The soul is a spiritual spark or light in the human body. A prerequisite for life. The soul is the driver of the body and the one who gives life to the body.

In Taoism, it is believed that each person has two types of soul, called hun and po, which are yang and yin respectively. In total, Taoism claims that there are ten souls, three of the hun type and seven of the po type. A person who loses many of these ten souls is said to have mental illness or to be unconscious, while a dead soul may be reincarnated at a lower level or lose the ability to reincarnate.

Rudolf Steiner believed in his anthroposophy that the soul had three stages in its development. The first stage is concentrated on emotions, passion and will. The second stage concerns the intellectual and cognitive. The third stage is the consciousness that searches for universal, objective truth.

The following about soul I have copied from Michael Shermer's book *Heavens on Earth*:

"The neurobiologist and philosopher Owen Flanagan summarizes the three primary characteristics of the soul: the unity of experience (a sense of self or "I"), personal identity (the feeling of being the same person over the course of a lifetime), and personal immortality (the survival of death). Polls consistently show that between 70 and 96 percent of Americans believe in a soul as so characterized. The vast majority of people base such belief on religious faith, but science tells us that all three of these characteristics are illusions."

In his book *Homo Deus* Yuval Noah Harari claims that religious people feel that Darwin, with his theory of evolution, has deprived them of their souls. He means that a deep understanding of Darwin's theory will make anyone understand that there is no soul. This might be the reason that many religious people reject Darwin's theory.

The author's comments and conclusions

Descriptions of the soul in different religions are adapted to the need for both carrot and stick. The carrot is, for example, the soul's closeness to God and the divine, reincarnation to a better next life, eternal life, or nirvana. The stick is, for example, reincarnation to a degrading next life, eternal torment in hell or permanent annihilation. Some still believe that permanent annihilation (read nirvana) is the carrot.

Concepts about the soul have developed and changed over time in all religions where the soul is a concept. Concepts about the soul have migrated from religion to religion. This is probably the only type of soul transmigration that can be proven.

Over the many thousands of years that people have had fantasies about souls, not a single scientific proof of the existence of souls has emerged.

For people with a scientific and medical background, and who were not religiously indoctrinated in their upbringing, it makes absolutely no sense that a soul can escape a dead body and live its own life in a heaven, a hell or find another body or organism through an incarnation. Nor has it been proven that living people have a soul in any form whatsoever. But we humans have plenty of consciousness, conscience, reason, intuition, drives, hopes, dreams, thoughts, and emotions. This is part of and a result of the body, the genes, the upbringing, the education, and the social context in which we live. Feel free to call it soul as a collective term. But such a soul is definitely a part of the body, and its existence ceases when the body dies. Quite simply because the brain loses its blood and oxygen supply when death occurs.

After my opinion Epicurus already in the third century BCE expressed a more scientific and trustworthy view on death and afterlife than the religions that was invented both before and after his time:

“Therefore death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, since for the time when we are living, death is not present, and for the time when death is present, we are not alive. Therefore, it is nothing either to the living or the dead, since it is not present for the former, and the latter is no longer alive.”

Conceptions of holy spirit

To demonstrate righteousness to the question about the existence of the Holy Spirit, I will begin this chapter by referring what the Church of Norway writes on its website about the Holy Spirit:

“The Bible’s way of talking about the Holy Spirit of God is linguistically connected to the two words “breath” and “inspiration.” In the Christian faith, God is triune, meaning that God is one, but at the same time three:

God - our Creator

Jesus Christ – our Savior

The Holy Spirit

We encounter the Spirit already in the second verse of the Bible: The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:2)

The Bible uses many descriptions for the Holy Spirit, such as wind, breath, fire, or power. The Spirit is also the breath of life in man. When God created man, he breathed into him the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).

In the story of Noah and the flood, the dove is the very symbol of hope, when it returns to the ark with a fresh leaf in its beak (Genesis 8 :8). The dove heralds life, future and hope. The Spirit is also described as a dove at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan (Matthew 3:16 and Mark 1:10).

Jesus himself says this when he speaks to his disciples about the Holy Spirit: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26).

The Greek word used for the Holy Spirit is translated in our Bible as “the advocate.” The Greek word used in the original text, *parakletos*, is the same as “*advocate*.” The Holy Spirit is to help and guide us and be the defender of our faith.

In the Old Testament we read in the book of the prophet Joel: *One day it will come to pass that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh* (Joel 3:1). In a Christian understanding, this prophecy is fulfilled on the first day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, which we can read about in Acts chapter 2, v 1-4:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Tongues like fire appeared to them, and they came and sat on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The Pentecost story is about Jesus’ disciples, who were both confused, full of sorrow and frightened by what they had been through with Jesus, being transformed into strong and clear witnesses of Jesus Christ: *Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit*. In other words: They were filled with inspiration and power to continue as Jesus’ disciples, with the promise that the Holy Spirit would give them power and strength. That is why the celebration of Pentecost is often linked to mission, and to our looking beyond ourselves and being able to celebrate church services together across different church denominations. As Christians, we are one with each other in the entire worldwide Christian church.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned especially when we celebrate baptism. This is said to the one who has been baptized: Almighty God has given you his Holy Spirit in baptism, born you again and taken you into his believing church. May God strengthen you with his grace for eternal life. Peace be with you.

Martin Luther describes in his Small Catechism how important the Holy Spirit is for Christians and for the whole church: I believe that I cannot by my own reason or power believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, my Lord. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts. Sanctified me and kept me firm in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and preserves it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily forgives all sins in me and in all who believe. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead, and give me and all who believe in Christ eternal life.”

In other words, the Holy Spirit is the third expression or manifestation of the Christian God. However, some Christian churches consider the Holy Spirit more as a force and not as a physical expression. In Judaism, the Holy Spirit is also the divine power of God. A similar understanding of the concept is found within Islam.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the mention of the Holy Spirit, also called the Holy Ghost in the English language edition of Wikipedia:

In Judaism, the Holy Spirit is a sacred power, quality, and influence attributed to God over the universe and its creatures. In Christianity, the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, while in Islam the phenomenon is seen more as a sacred means of action or communication with humans.

In the Old Testament, the phenomenon is referred to as *roach*, *elochim* or *the power of God*. Jews interpret this as one of God’s attributes and not as part of a Trinity as Christians understand.

According to theologian Rudolf Bultmann, the Holy Spirit can be viewed in two ways. Either as animistic, which means a personal force that can possess a person and take possession of them. In this way, a person is given the power to show strength in actions that they would not otherwise be able to do. Alternatively, the Holy Spirit can be described dynamically. Then the force that fills a person is of a more impersonal type, as if the person were to be filled with a liquid. Both versions find support in Jewish and Christian Bibles. Animistic descriptions are most common in the Old Testament, while dynamic ones dominate in the New. According to Jewish thought, the state of possession of the Holy Spirit is temporary, while in Christian understanding it is more permanent.

The idea of a Holy Spirit may come from older Greek religions where there is a distinction between spirit and psyche. Some scholars believe the idea of a Holy Spirit is originally a Stoic idea. I would also like to highlight the similarities in Zoroastrianism. This religion had the ideas of both holy and evil spirits before the Greeks and Jews. Their holy spirit is called *Spenta Mainya*.

So far Wikipedia and my additional comment in the last paragraph. Encyclopaedia Britannica emphasizes the following about the Holy Spirit:

There are instances of the Holy Spirit healing, prophetic utterances, and casting out demons in the Acts of the Apostles. People are also given the ability to speak in tongues. The Holy Spirit is often depicted physically as a dove. The Old Testament does not portray the Holy Spirit as something physical or corporeal. The New Testament is also not consistent or explicit about the physical aspect of the Holy Spirit.

The definition of the Holy Spirit as a personalized physical person on a par with the Father and the Son was formulated and adopted at the Council of Constantinople in the year 381.

There are minor differences in emphasis and understanding of the Holy Spirit between Catholics, Protestants, and Greek Orthodox Christians. Over the centuries, disputes have continually arisen over what is the correct understanding.

The author's conclusions and comments

The idea of a holy spirit dates back thousands of years. It first appeared in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Greek religions. Christianity and Islam have adopted the idea and provided many explanations for the phenomenon. However, it is difficult for people with a secular outlook to understand that upstanding and well-educated people refer to a holy spirit as a reality.

Conceptions of prayer

The sources for this chapter include the Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia and Wikipedia.

Prayer is practiced by believers of most religions. Prayer is a collective term for communication between people and higher powers. In prayer, people may address deities, ancestors or spiritual beings, saints and others. The purpose can vary between, for example, praise and prayer for help.

In Christianity, prayer is meant to create contact with God. Prayer can be silent, as in meditation. It can take place in private, in groups, or in connection with church services.

The Lord's Prayer is considered by many to be the most important prayer of Christians. It is used in all Christian worship services. It can be adapted to the specific needs of the group or individual praying, through expansions or additions. The prayer can be used as a form of praise, to confess sins, or to ask for God's help.

The Christian church service is considered prayer and dialogue with God. Prayers during church services are called liturgical prayers.

The New Testament writers copied the Jewish prayer tradition. But the prayers were adapted to Christian doctrine by including Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Prayer can be practiced very differently within and between religions. For example, Quakers pray without words or gestures. More common, however, are certain common movements and body positions among those praying. The liturgical prayers in Christian churches are most often performed standing with folded hands. Muslim prayers are most often performed kneeling on prayer rugs. Short, repetitive prayers are used as a means of achieving contact with the deity, for example the Jesus Prayer in the Orthodox Church or the Dhikr prayer among Muslim Sufis.

A prayer bead is a necklace or garland of beads that is called a rosary in the Catholic Church and is especially used there for meditation on Mary. In the Orthodox Church, the prayer bead accompanies the Jesus Prayer, in Islam it accompanies the recitation of Allah's 99 most beautiful names. Prayer beads are also used in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Prayers have several purposes. The sense of community it creates within the individual religion or sect is probably particularly important. The participants' motives may be many. They may be expressions of joy, of repentance, of confession of sins, of forgiveness of sins, of praise of the deity and of achieving healing or other wishes for themselves and other fellow human beings.

In Hinduism, prayers have existed all the way back to the Vedic literature. What distinguishes the Hindu prayer tradition are the recitations or mantras, which are short prayer formulas intended to express the essence of the deity. The mantra tradition is repeated in meditation.

The author's comments and conclusions

There has been research on the effects of prayer. However, this research has not yielded clear results. For example, one study found that prayer support for people who have undergone heart surgery resulted in a higher incidence of complications after the operations. Other studies have shown that those who pray for others can achieve a psychological benefit in the form of joy or reassurance from such activity.

For a non-believer, it is of course an absurd thought and naive notion that prayer should provide contact with a deity and in any way contribute to a concrete benefit for the one praying or being prayed for. But there can obviously be something valuable in the community that prayer creates in a congregation or other gathering of believers. It can also be the case that praying for the well-being of others gives the person praying a feeling of having done something valuable for another person. This gives satisfaction and happiness to the one praying, even if the result for the one being prayed for is hard to document.

As an anecdote I will mention the traditions of a Christian friend that loves his children and the large family they have given him and his wife. For fifty years they have had a cottage in a nice place in one of the Norwegian fjords. His children and grandchildren have had numerous weekends in this cosy cottage. But my friend is showing some tendencies of patriarchy in how traditions shall be honoured. Every breakfast is started with a prayer before eating. No respect is shown to the rest of the large family, who must have some atheist members. When my wife and I spent a weekend at his cottage we also had to participate in the prayer. For those that are familiar with such traditions this might sound normal. But for us living in the secular Norway it is really showing no respect. He knows I have been an atheist for more than sixty years.

Conceptions of saints

Sources for this chapter have been English Wikipedia and Encyclopaedia Britannica.

A saint is a holy person who is believed by a group of people to have a special relationship with higher powers and who also has high and impeccable morality or special abilities as a teacher. This is roughly how the definition of a saint is in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Saints can have relationships with gods, spirits, or other sacred beings in a religion. The individual saint can appear as a prophet, saviour, monk, nun, priest, priestess, and more.

Designation as a saint will most often occur as a result of actions performed by the person in question. It will normally require a sacred institution that can declare that the requirements to be considered a saint have been met. In the Roman Catholic Church, there is a so-called canonization of saints by the pope. Normally, the person in question must have performed at least one miracle.

In Confucianism, ethics are prominent. King Tang, who lived in the 11th century BCE, is described as a person of the highest degree of morality and was given a special authority that could be considered saintly.

Confucius himself was also declared “Lord of Heaven.” Temples were built in his personal honour and to honour his ethics and morals.

In Buddhism, there is also a saint-like concept. Those who attain nirvana have a saint-like authority or rather a saint-like legacy. Certain individuals who are considered reincarnated, such as the Dalai Lamas, are also considered a type of saint.

In Hinduism, ascetics are a type of saints or “good” ones. But Hinduism is diverse and inclusive so that even Buddha is considered a saint with a connection to the god Vishnu. Ramakrishna is in a similar relationship to the god Shiva.

In Zoroastrianism and Judaism, one cannot find a clear indication of saint worship.

Jesus and his disciples never mentioned saints. They arose when Christians were persecuted in the 3rd century. People who died for their faith were proclaimed martyrs, and believers believed they gained direct access to heaven. The veneration of saints was thus begun within Christianity. It was not until the 10th century that the system of papal canonization arose with pope John XV. Initially, at least two miracles and an impeccable life were required.

In the Catholic Church, saints are venerated but not worshipped. However, they are attributed with special qualities or powers and can be invoked for help. In total, Catholics count over 10,000 named saints. Mary, the mother of Jesus, has a saint-like status in the Catholic Church. She is prayed to by some Catholics.

In the Orthodox Church, saints are venerated, but there is no formal canonization process in it. Adam, Eve, Moses, and various prophets are considered saints in the Orthodox Church.

In the Protestant Church, saints are recognized but not venerated.

Islam does not recognize the existence of saints. However, in the more popular part of the Muslim world, notions of martyrs and holy men can be found.

The author's comments and conclusions

Saints must be considered a product of grassroot religious fantasies with no basis in the Bible or other fundamental religious scriptures. It is quite difficult to understand that the pope and other religious leaders maintain the notion of saints in our modern world.

Mutualism

According to the Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia, mutualism is an interaction between species that is mutually beneficial to the species. An example is wrasse that removes and eats parasites such as salmon lice on salmon. Another example is insects that provide pollination and in return receive nectar.

It is tempting to use the word mutualism on the relationship between the monarchies and the church in the countries in question. An example is King Charles III's coronation and blessing in the church. Camilla also received her blessing. This took place with English pomp and splendour in Westminster Abbey. The Archbishop of Canterbury was responsible for the whole thing. The coloured weekly press and countless television channels spread the event to the people.

King Charles is the leader of the English church. On the 23rd of October 2025 he performed a common prayer with pope Leo. King Henry VIII split with Rome in 1534 when one of his divorces was not accepted by the pope. Now king Charles wanted to improve the relation with the pope. Queen Camilla also joined the service. It could not be more pathetic. At the end of the short service, pope Leo said: "Let us pray. God our Father, you have created the heavens and the earth and made us in your own image: teach us to see your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children. Through Christ our Lord." I had expected a more concrete prayer these days, the autumn 2025, with the wars in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, the attacks on democracy in many countries, and the global warming that is far from under control. But as you might expect: I do not care what the pope and king Charles say or do! My problem is that many people take them seriously.

In Norway, we have the same close relationship between the king and the church. King Harald and queen Sonja were blessed in the cathedral in Trondheim. This happened in 1991 with the bishops of both Nidaros and Oslo present and responsible for the ceremony and prayers. The royal family traditionally lines up every Christmas Day in the Holmenkollen Chapel to attend the service there. Every baptism, confirmation, and wedding in the royal family has taken place with the participation of the church and the media. Not only that. King Harald himself has ensured that the Norwegian king must profess the Evangelical Lutheran religion. When the Norwegian constitution was revised and modernized not many years ago, he insisted that this requirement must be continued. He got his way. The same mutualistic tradition is found in the Swedish royal house. While the Danes, in connection with their last change of monarch, had distanced themselves somewhat from church and God.

To further this comparison with wildlife and biology, the definitions of facultative and obligate mutualism in the Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia must be mentioned. Some species are so dependent on the mutualism they have with another species that they cannot survive without this interaction. This is called obligate mutualism. Facultative mutualisms are mutualistic interactions that are not essential for the parties.

I am quite certain that there is an obligate mutualism in the relationship between our royal house and the Norwegian Church. The future existence of both of these anachronisms is largely based on the other. They are unlikely to survive this century. Both institutions are increasingly ridiculous and irrelevant in a pluralistic, secular democracy where a well-educated public no longer wants to support them financially or otherwise, much less allow them to retain a constitutional role.

We easily find similar mutualistic conditions in other countries and systems of government. President Erdogan's rule in Turkey is a good example. He uses Islam and the people's traditional loyalty to this religion as an ally to retain power. But in the spring of 2024 this

strategy seemed to be unravelling. His party lost power in Istanbul, Ankara, and several other places. Perhaps because of the secularization of the country? Or is it the country's need for a 50 percent interest rate, after many years of economic mismanagement, that is now affecting the president's support?

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is using Hinduism and the nationalism associated with this religion in his political game. So far, he has had some success, which not only gives his party increased support, but also leads to the oppression of the Islamic minority in the country. He and his party won the elections that were held in June 2024.

In Poland, the Catholic Church has colluded with the politicians to stop secularisation, prevent access to abortion and oppress homosexuals and transsexuals.

In the United States, Christian influence is significant in abortion legislation. Homosexual rights are threatened. And in foreign policy, both Christians and Jews are doing their part to make the Middle East literally a hell on earth.

Putin also uses the church. In his case, the Orthodox Church, which celebrated Easter in early May 2024. Putin appeared in one of Moscow's churches with the sign of the cross and in good dialogue with the clergy who led the ceremony. He is supported by the Orthodox Church in Russia. The Church also approves of the war in Ukraine.

On May 7, 2024, Putin was inaugurated as president for his fifth term with great pomp and circumstance, and even the Norwegian ambassador was present, as the only one from any European country. Putin was blessed by the head of the Orthodox Church, after once again making the sign of the cross. Both Putin and the Orthodox Church have understood the importance of mutualism. It gives both parties extra strength and legitimacy among the population, until the game is revealed. The Tsarist family used the church in the same way. Most people know their destiny.

When the church has lost the interest among people, the monarchy will be abolished, and vice versa. That is the authors prediction and hope for these archaic institutions. The Scandinavian countries probably will be the first to get rid of their monarchy and subsidised churches. They should not be part of modern, pluralistic democracies.

Symbiosis is most certainly a more correct word than mutualism in the context I have used it in this chapter. I have used mutualism to gain attention on the cooperation between churches and different rulers.

Epilogue

It is probably correct to say that my career as an author began with my book *Happiness and life*, which was published in 2022. As a representative for colleagues, in leadership positions at the Directorate of Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, in NORAD, National Health Institute in Botswana, in leading positions in municipalities and counties, I have written scientific articles, reports, law propositions for the Parliament, regulations, circulars, biographies and much more that are not directly related to philosophy and religious criticism. But I have studied philosophy since I was a teenager and I have spent much of my life philosophizing. As an academic, I have been in business and writing continuously since 1973, the first years as a dentist. Since then, I have completed research training, leadership training and university exams in scientific theory and statics in both Oslo and Bergen.

My interest in philosophy and religions was pushed upon me when I started at Kristelig Gymnasium (a Christian secondary school in Oslo) in 1963. As I sit here now writing and thinking back on that time, I am grateful for the insight I gained and the commitment I initially felt. Two years at this Norwegian version of Quranic schools were more than enough. I chose another school and resigned from the Norwegian State Church. At that time, this was an unusual behaviour. Most people believed in God and accepted the church's abuse of power and its special benefits. Today, as an old rebel, I am pleased with the fact that those who believe in a god are in the minority in my country. Norway has become increasingly secular, so that those who think differently feel that they are more equal to members of the Church of Norway (the new name of the Norwegian State Church). It is precisely this half-hearted attempt to equate different views of life that inspired me to write this book. Knowledge is the best means of abolishing notions and superstitions from our so-called cultural foundations. Freedom from imposed religious practice and preaching does not come by itself. We must continue to strive to escape and become free from these forces and delusions from earlier times.

I think Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion* expresses my feelings and explains my intentions with this book very well: "Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israel/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as "Crist-killers", no Northern Ireland "troubles", no "honour killings", no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money ("God wants you to give till it hurts"). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it."

Richard Dawkins probably lives in danger, just like John Lennon experienced he did in New York. Describing religions as what they really are, have some costs. I know that from my own experience. Some religious people, are not capable of discussing religions or religious beliefs. They think that they should be protected from criticism regarding their faith and all the problems it has created throughout history. This protection I cannot offer. There are too many bad sides with religions for the individuals that believe, and for the world. But I will always defend religious people's right to believe whatever they like, and I will stand up for their freedom of speech. I do not respect their religions though. And believers must accept non-believers' freedom of speech without threatening or telling us that our behaviour or points of view are blasphemy. It is eligible and very important criticism! Without it there will be no progress in human intellectual development. Too much medieval thinking will remain.

I will end this book with an anecdote found in Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*:

Albert Einstein expressed his scepticism and thoughts about religion at many occasions after he fled from Germany to the USA in the thirties. This of course led to indignation among American believers who seldom experienced criticism of religion. I refer to this letter from the founder of the Calvary Tabernacle Association in Oklahoma:

“Professor Einstein, I believe that every Christian in America will answer you, “We will not give up our belief in our God and his son Jesus Christ, but we invite you, if you do not believe in the God of the people of this nation, to go back where you came from. I have done everything in my power to be a blessing to Israel, and then you come along and with one statement from your blasphemous tongue, do more to hurt the cause of your people than all the efforts of the Christians who love Israel can do to stamp out anti-Semitism in our land. Professor Einstein, every Christian in America will immediately reply to you, “Take your crazy, fallacious theory of evolution and go back to Germany where you came from, or stop trying to break down the faith of a people who gave you a welcome when you were forced to flee your native land.””

This is an example of the attitudes and intellectual level that slows the speed of secularization in the USA.

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Last page's photo of a cherry tree I have taken in one of the many parks in Bergen.

