

## SASTOR.COM GLOSSARY

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**ablution:** ritual washing typically related to purification.

**aboriginal:** original or early inhabitant; indigenous; native groups, animals, or plants.

**aesthetics:** the study of beauty; sometimes used for the formal study of artistic judgment.

**agnostic:** one who neither believes in God nor claims that God does not exist, but instead emphasizes that the existence and nature of God are unknown.

**allegory:** typically a symbolic tale or image, whose meanings are hidden behind the literal, face-value interpretation.

**altruism:** possessing a concern for other beings over and above one's personal welfare.

**ancestor worship:** religious actions that are concerned with venerating or appeasing spirits of dead relatives.

**animism:** belief that features of the natural world, such as particular plants, lakes, mountains, animals, persons, and such, are abodes of spirits or souls.

**anthropology:** (*anthropos* – human being + *logos* – study); social science that concerns itself with the study of human beings; now primarily focussed on social organization and culture.

**anthropomorphic:** representation of gods with human characteristics or form.

**anthropotheism:** belief that gods are merely humans who have been elevated to divine status.

**apeiron:** Greek term for a single, undifferentiated, and subtle essence, which is the source of all things, and to which all things return.

**apocalyptic:** concerning the end of the world including prophecies of catastrophic destruction; sometimes also concerns final judgment.

**apocrypha:** mostly texts, whose authenticity are in doubt.

**apologetics:** a branch of theology that seeks to justify the doctrines of a particular faith through formal arguments.

**apologist:** defender or advocate for a particular religious tradition, belief, or view.

**apostasy:** rejection of the faith that one once held.

**appease:** to pacify, propitiate, relieve, or satisfy; often refers to sacrifice, offerings, praise, and rituals designed to pacify a god or spirit in order to avoid harm.

**archetype:** in Jungian psychology, a mental image and universal prototype inherited from ancient humans and found in the collective unconscious.

**asceticism:** the practice of self-denial and austerity; often a feature of disciplines concerned with the purification of one's spirit or soul.

**atheist:** one who does not believe in the existence of any supernatural divine entity.

**autochthonous:** see indigenous.

**avatar:** manifestation or incarnation of a deity, especially in Hinduism.

**biological evolution:** well-documented scientific theory that life differentiates through time based in part on principles of adaptation to the environment and success in reproduction.

**blasphemy:** irreverent or contemptuous act or statement directed toward a deity or sacred space or rite.

**bracketing:** see *epoché*.

**Buddhism:** ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha (Awakened One); based on moral and contemplative practices.

**canon:** core collection of scriptures designated by a religious group as legitimate or authoritative.

**capitalism:** economic and social system based on the private ownership of wealth, property, material goods, and other capital, as well as the means of its production and distribution, which is related to the free market, competition, and the profit motive.

**Cartesianism:** reason is the source and test of knowledge, in contrast to the focus on experience in empiricism.

**Catholic:** “universal”; typically used for the Roman branch of Christianity in distinction from the Greek or Eastern Orthodox and Protestant branches that separated from it.

**celibacy:** principle of abstaining from sexual intercourse or even any sexual activity, generally motivated by spiritual concerns.

**charisma:** power, charm, talent, appeal that inspires devotion in others; can be understood as divinely given.

**Christianity:** beliefs and practices of followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who hold him to be the sole son of God; grounded in the principle of love.

**cognitive science:** study of the mind’s processes; cognitive studies of religion draw from a wide range of psychological, anthropological and other approaches including focus on the evolutionary interplay among biological, social, and cultural components that shape and perpetuate mental processes.

**communism:** typically applied to a political philosophy of more extreme than moderate sharing of resources by a society for the welfare of all.

**communitas:** word popularized by American anthropologist Victor Turner to refer to feelings of connection and solidarity with a group.

**comparativist:** a person or approach that seeks to analyze similarities (and differences) between two objects of study; in religious studies, it often applies to approaches that seek out common themes across different religious traditions.

**Confucianism:** moral and ethical approach to life based on the teachings of the Chinese scholar Confucius; grounded in maintaining orderly relationships through the cultivation of human virtues.

**contemporary:** living at the same time, e.g. Karl Barth was a contemporary of Paul Tillich; occurring in the present, e.g. contemporary attitudes.

**cosmology:** a branch of philosophy and subset of metaphysics that deals with the origin (cosmogony) and nature of the cosmos; now mostly under the disciplines of science in the West.

**creationism:** belief that the universe, earth, humans, and other living organisms were created by divine act rather than natural processes; typically refers to the literal truth of a Biblical account of creation in opposition to evolution.

**creed:** formal statement of belief, e.g. Nicene Creed in Christianity.

**cult:** sect; veneration directed at a person or object; commonly used as a pejorative term for someone else's religious group, which is seen to be strange or sinister.

**culture:** the collectively shared beliefs, activities, and values of a social group.

**damnation:** the notion of being condemned to some terrible punishment, often for a religious failing, and often for eternity.

**dao:** term in East Asian religions for “way” or “path” with reference to a religious and philosophical worldview and guide to a meaningful and harmonious life; in Daoism, it can be understood as a generative source as well as ongoing natural pattern; also written as *tao*.

**Daoism:** philosophy, beliefs, and rites grounded on a profound relationship to the mysterious workings of nature; also written as Taoism.

**darshana:** Sanskrit term for viewpoint, perspective, or worldview; typically applied to religious/philosophical systems, such as Buddhism, Jainism, Vedanta, or Yoga.

**deism:** belief in a supreme being, typically a creator deity, who no longer intervenes in the functions of the universe; movement arose in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with an emphasis on reason as opposed to beliefs in supernatural events and relationships with divine entities.

**didactic:** instructive; intended to teach a moral lesson; can have a patronizing tone.

**discipline:** any branch of knowledge or body of teachings.

**discursive:** related to reasoning and rational argumentation, as opposed to intuition.

**divination:** seeking guidance from supernatural sources (e.g. gods or spirits), often with the aid of some material medium (e.g., person or instrument).

**dogma:** religious doctrine or other principles that authorities insist is incontrovertibly true.

**dogmatism:** assertion that only one's own views, including religious doctrine, are true.

**dualism:** division into two opposite aspects, such as good and evil; also applied to worldviews that are not monistic and thus see reality as made up of more than one fundamental component (e.g., God and the creation).

**Eastern religions:** term applied primarily to Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto.

**eclectic:** bringing together various ideas, practices, styles, or aesthetics from diverse sources.

**empirical:** dealing with evidence gathered by the senses, as through experimental observation; often set in contrast with knowledge obtained through theorizing.

**Enlightenment, the:** 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectual movement in the West that emphasized the use of reason in the pursuit of truth, as it critiqued irrational beliefs and practices.

**enlightenment:** term used as equivalent to the Hindu concept of *moksha*, or the Buddhist notion of *nirvana*, and referring to freedom from ignorance or illusions concerning the nature of the self and reality.

**epiphany:** sudden revelation or understanding; originates with the sense of the sudden appearance of a god (see theophany) or muse, which is both startling and inspiring; now used more for any sudden insight or comprehension; there is also a Christian festival of this name.

**epistemology:** branch of philosophy and subset of metaphysics concerning the source and nature of knowledge.

**epoché:** phenomenological “bracketing” where suspension of one’s own beliefs and an openness that neither confirms nor denies truth claims assists one in empathetically engaging with another’s worldview.

**eschatology:** the study of conceptions of end-times (*eschaton*); also used to refer to the end-time doctrines in particular religious traditions.

**esoteric:** inner or secret religious knowledge or rites reserved for initiated groups; meaning hidden from or dangerous to the non-initiate; rituals and readings requires guidance from a master; counter to exoteric.

**ethics:** branch of philosophy dealing with evaluating behaviour on a scale based on conceptions of right and wrong and the application of ethical theories to moral problems.

**evangelical:** pertaining to the spreading of the Christian gospel; often characterized by fervent zeal.

**evolution:** development and diversification through time; especially of living organisms—see biological evolution—but also applied to societies, etc.

**excommunication:** a punishment in which a member is excluded from a religious community and some of its privileges.

**exegesis:** explanation and interpretation of a text; especially the scholarly and critical explication of scripture.

**existentialism:** philosophical approach that is grounded in the experience of the individual human being’s encounter with reality, which is ultimately governed by personally meaningful choices made in the face of a fundamentally meaningless or irrational world.

**exorcism:** religious ritual to expel demons or spirits from a person or place.

**exoteric:** outer religious rites, readings, and knowledge accessible to all.

**extant:** still in existence, surviving; remaining (e.g. most monks argue that there is no extant lineage of fully ordained Theravada nuns).

**fatalism:** belief that one’s fate is pre-determined or pre-destined and humans are powerless to change their fate.

**feminism:** primarily social and intellectual movement that strives for equality of the sexes, typically through the removal of women’s oppression.

**fieldwork:** term generally used to indicate work conducted away from one’s home-base; for anthropologists, this usually involves the method of “participant observation.”

**functionalism:** theoretical approach in the social sciences which is centered on revealing the interdependent roles played by facets within a society or culture and how these operate (i.e., their function) in maintaining the character of the whole.

**fundamentalism:** religious orientation grounded in an attempt to return to fundamental or core beliefs and practices in a tradition; often associated with rigid, literal, and narrow interpretations based on readings of primary scriptures.

**Gnosticism:** Western religious and philosophical movement during the pre- and early Christian period that emphasized the need to attain a special knowledge (*gnosis*) for salvation from ignorance and mortality.

**grace:** a spiritual essence, typically conveyed by a divine power.

**guru:** advanced spiritual teacher, often capable of granting initiations; associated with Asian traditions, especially Hinduism, but now used more generically for a sage or expert.

**henotheism:** worship of one god without denying the existence of other deities.

**heresy:** beliefs or practices judged by authorities to be against orthodoxy.

**hermeneutics:** interpretation.

**hierophany:** appearance of the sacred; broader than theophany (appearance of a god); used by Eliade for his emphasis on manifestations of the sacred as distinct from the profane.

**Hinduism:** constellation of beliefs and practices that include acceptance of the scriptural authority of the Vedas and the class/caste system; religion of the majority of the populace in South Asia.

**humanism:** humans can resolve their problems, build societies, and establish values and morals without reference to god.

**humanities:** disciplines concerned with the self-expression of human beings; typically includes language and literature, history, philosophy, and the arts.

**icon:** image or likeness; painting, statue, or other visual representation of the sacred.

**iconoclasm:** opposition to the use of religious images; Islam, for example, is iconoclastic with regard to depicting Allah or Muhammad.

**immediate:** experience or knowledge received directly or intuitively without the mediating role of rational, discursive thought.

**imminent:** about to happen; near; of this world as opposed to transcendent.

**indigenous:** native; already existing locally rather than imported from abroad.

**individuation:** for Jung, the important coming together of the complementary conscious and unconscious aspects of the self.

**ineffable:** beyond words and description; inexpressible because words are inadequate or because uttering a name or description is forbidden.

**insider:** term used in Religious Studies to refer to adherents of a particular religious tradition.

**intelligent design:** a revamped form of creationism that argues the universe provides evidence of a guiding intelligent entity more consistent with a divine designer than with the natural selection of evolution.

**irreducibility:** refers to a reluctance or inability to simplify something out of concern for losing an essential quality, or distorting it beyond meaningful recognition in order to fit a model.

**Islam:** beliefs and practices based on the message transmitted by the prophet Muhammad and preserved in the Quran; characterized by strict monotheism.

**Jainism:** ethical and philosophical system grounded in the teachings of Vardhamana Mahavira, known as the Jina (Conqueror); based on moral and contemplative practices.

**Judaism:** beliefs and practices of the Jews, a people who follow the teachings contained in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh); monotheistic; centred on maintaining a contractual agreement (covenant) with God.

**kinship:** human relationships designated as durable; typically constructed through birth, sexual union, or socially constructed rites such as marriage or adoption.

**kultursgeschichte:** (German: history (geschichte) + culture (kultur)); deals with the history of cultural dynamics (e.g., movements and key figures in art, religion, language, and so on), in contrast to political histories, for instance.

**laity/lay person:** ordinary person; non-ordained religious adherent (i.e. not a monk, nun, renunciant, or religious specialist).

**lama:** honorific title of an accomplished Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader; some lamas known as *tulkus* are thought able to control their rebirth and continue to occupy high religious office, such as the Dalai Lama.

**liminal:** (*limen* – threshold); term popularized by the American anthropologist, Victor Turner, which refers to a transition period or state, often characterized by the absence of structures that sandwich it.

**literalist:** one who interprets the content of texts at their face value, rather than discerning other meanings (e.g., symbolic, metaphoric, allegorical, hyperbolic) within them.

**liturgy:** formal prescriptions typically for the performance of religious rituals.

**logical positivism:** rejects metaphysics and restricts philosophical problems to those that can be solved through logical analysis.

**logos:** Greek for “word”; in Christianity it is described as a principle of absolute, divine reason and order that is embodied in Jesus Christ.

**magic:** activities involving the manipulation of features of reality that are hidden to the non-practitioner, and which thus appear mysterious or miraculous.

**mandala:** geometrical cosmic map, especially in Tantric Buddhism and Hinduism.

**martyrdom:** derived from the Greek term for “witness”; condition of willingness to suffer or die for one’s religious beliefs.

**Marxism:** political and economic philosophy based on the teachings of Karl Marx with an emphasis on class struggle and economic constraints on history and culture; typically socialist or communist, as opposed to capitalist.

**matriarchy:** a society dominated by women.

**mediate:** to intervene, link, or convey; as opposed to “immediate.”

**medium:** person who claims to communicate with spirits or through whom spirits communicate and are consulted.

**messianic:** relating to a messiah, a savior; especially the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament to deliver the Jewish nation or to Jesus, who is understood by Christians to be the promised Messiah and savior of humankind.

**metanoetic:** “beyond noetic”; mystical experience, for example, is often described as a deep insight into truth and reality beyond the reach of rational, discursive, mental activity and intellect to which “noetic” is related.

**metaphysics:** “beyond physics”; branch of philosophy that typically includes cosmology, ontology, and epistemology; it probes into questions concerning the ultimate nature of existence.

**methodology:** system of methods used within a given discipline or area of study.

**milieu:** the social environment, context, setting, or backdrop.

**millenarianism:** believing in a coming golden age of peace—often with a sense that this age is imminent or, at least, inevitable; sometimes used for a group seeking radical change to solve current societal problems; often used for the Christian notion of a future 1,000 year period of Christ’s reign.

**mimetic desire:** the motive force that concerns desiring that which others desire; for René Girard, the origins of violence and the sacred are linked to this desire.

**mind-brain:** refers to the multiple neuro-cognitive systems responsible for how we understand reality, and act in various settings and situations.

**missionary:** one who typically leaves home for a distant place with the intention of converting others to a particular set of beliefs often through teachings and charitable deeds.

**modernism:** primarily intellectual and aesthetic movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century that reacted against tradition by promoting change and novelty.

**moksha:** Sanskrit term primarily found in Hinduism to refer to release from the bondage of ignorance, illusion, and the cycles of rebirth.

**monastic:** a monk or nun living in solitude or religious community; relating to these renunciants, their monastery, or way of life.

**monism:** belief in “oneness”; notion that there is ultimately only one substance or essence; no distinction between god and the world or matter and mind.

**monk:** male monastic; often living under religious vows along with other men.

**monotheism:** belief in the existence of a single god (i.e., God); Islam is a monotheistic religion.

**morality:** a code of virtuous conduct based on accepted notions of right and wrong.

**mysticism:** generally applied to a religious approach entailing a direct (i.e., unmediated) personal engagement with a supernatural principle or deity.

**myth:** typically ancient story involving supernatural events and beings, such as deities and heroes, believed to be true by particular communities.

**mythology:** collective of traditional stories believed by some to be true and pertaining to past events that involve supernatural deeds, events, or persons, such as deities, spirits, or heroic human beings.

**neurotheology:** term designates the seemingly unlikely pairing of brain science and theology in Andrew Newberg's neuroimaging studies that correlate brain activity with intense prayer, meditation, or visualization.

**New Age:** idealized conception of an emerging contemporary period, characterized by a disparate set of beliefs and practices arising from the counter-culture movement of the 1960s; concerned with body, mind, and spirit development and self-realization through an eclectic fusion of ideas and activities drawn from both contemporary and traditional (often Eastern) spiritual teachings.

**nirvana:** Sanskrit term primarily found in Buddhism (and Jainism) that refers to the extinguishing of sorrow derived from illusions and ignorance.

**noetic:** relating to mental activity or the intellect.

**NOMA:** acronym for "non-overlapping magisterial," which maintains that there are non-overlapping spheres of expertise separating the domain of scientists from that of theologians.

**non-duality:** neither dualism nor monism; typical of East Asian religious ideas of complementariness, such as yin and yang, but resists see true opposition or separateness between these or any other pairings (e.g. imminent-transcendent, earth-heaven, ordinary world-enlightenment).

**numinous:** referring to the divine, spiritual, mysterious, transcendent, sacred power.

**nun:** female monastic; often living under religious vows with other women.

**Occam's Razor:** principle in philosophy and science that when choosing among suitable explanations for an unknown phenomenon, the one with the least assumptions is to be preferred; also known as Ockham's Razor.

**omnipotent:** having all powers; a commonly assigned attribute of God.

**omniscience:** having all knowledge; a commonly assigned attribute of God.

**ontology:** a branch of philosophy and subset of metaphysics that deals with the nature of existence or being.

**oracle:** religious specialist functioning as a medium communicating with gods or spirits or the message derived from this or other forms of divination.

**ordination:** ceremony or ritual act that confers special religious status on someone who has left lay life for a more full commitment to religious vows and pursuits.

**orthodoxy:** "correct belief"; essential beliefs and practices; opposite of heresy.



**orthopraxy:** “correct action/practice”; emphasized in traditions where practice is more central than belief; e.g., Hinduism and many other Asian traditions.

**outsider:** term used in Religious Studies to refer to those not belonging to a religious tradition under examination.

**pagan:** pejorative term for an adherent of polytheism, animism, or any religion other than Christianity—or other than western monotheistic traditions more generally; now increasingly value-neutral label for an adherent of neo-paganism or other nature religion.

**panentheism:** doctrine that God permeates every aspect of the entire creation but is simultaneously beyond it.

**pantheism:** doctrine that the entire universe collectively is divine, or is God; thus there is no God distinct from the creation.

**pantheon:** full assembly of deities in a religion, e.g. the many Greek gods and goddesses or the Daoist pantheon.

**parable:** story designed to teach a lesson or reinforce a moral; similar to allegory, but the characters are not symbols as with an allegory.

**paradigm:** overarching set of values, principles, and perspectives through which a cultural group approaches or understands reality; it serves as a sort of template that shapes or defines their understanding.

**patriarchy:** a society dominated by men.

**Patristic Era:** period dominated by the Church fathers, patriarchs (i.e., influential male figures) whose theological ideas shaped Christian doctrine for several centuries after the death of Jesus; typically extends till about the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but certain Christian groups regard it as longer, or even ongoing.

**pejorative:** having a negative connotation, expressing contempt or disapproval.

**periodization:** categorization scheme to characterize a relatively large block of time by some overly simplified unifying feature (e.g., Jurassic Age, Medieval Period, the Renaissance).

**phenomena:** the objects of a person’s perceptions or items of reality as they are perceived by a person’s senses or mind.

**phenomenology:** 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical movement, spearheaded by Edmund Husserl, which emphasizes the study of human consciousness through the subjective experience of its interaction with items (i.e., phenomena) of reality.

**philology:** (*philos* – love + *logos* – word); the formal study of language, including its origins, grammatical structures, and intended meanings; often narrowly applied to the study of texts in ancient languages.

**philosophy:** (*philia* – love + *sophia* – wisdom); systematic pursuit of wisdom; in the West, it is routinely applied to approaches that primarily use reason in this endeavour.

**pilgrimage:** a religious journey, entailing some ordeal, to one or more sacred sites.

**polemics:** the practice of argumentation and refutation of an opponent’s opinions, particularly in theological and philosophical writings.

**polytheism:** belief in the existence of more than one deity (gods or goddesses).

**postmodernism:** primarily intellectual and aesthetic movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> century that developed from modernism; fundamentally characterized by the uncovering of implicit assumptions and hidden structures in human creations for the sake of scrutiny; rejects notions of an objective reality or single, dominant perspective.

**predestination:** religious concept that disallows free will and asserts that events are fixed to happen in a certain way; for John Calvin this refers to the idea that God determined the destiny of the entire universe and everything in it even before creation.

**priest:** religious official; typically sanctioned to perform rituals.

**profane:** not sacred; worldly; everyday or ordinary.

**prophet:** person who makes proclamations about the will, disposition, or plans of the divine; these can include predictions of what will happen or forecasts of what may happen unless people change their errant ways (e.g. the prophets of the Old Testament).

**propitiate:** sacrifice or other means to pacify or please gods and spirits; see appease.

**proselyte:** a convert from another religious tradition.

**proselytize:** active attempt to convert others to a particular belief.

**Protestant:** one of many branches of Christianity that developed in protest against the Western Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation.

**purity:** religiously clean state not in danger of polluting the sacred.

**quantum mechanics:** branch of physics that uses statistical mathematics to explain the nature and behaviour of reality at the atomic and sub-atomic levels.

**quietism:** refers to religious traditions and practices that emphasize meditation, mental tranquility, devotional contemplation, and some forms of mysticism.

**redemption:** concept prevalent in Christian doctrines, that the death of Jesus of Nazareth paid the ransom necessary to deliver (i.e., redeem) humanity from the penalties of its sinful condition.

**reductionism:** the intellectual tendency to explain away the complexities of a phenomenon being examined, by oversimplifying its causes or nature.

**reincarnation:** term for a soul being reborn into another body after death; for Buddhism “rebirth” is a more accurate term due to its doctrine of *anatman*, no soul; see also transmigration.

**religion:** a person or group’s collective of beliefs, values, and activities concerning their relationship to their conceptions of ultimate reality.

**religionist:** students or scholars of the discipline of Religious Studies; in older usage for someone deeply committed to a particular faith.

**religionswissenschaft:** German term for “science of religion.”

**Renaissance:** “rebirth”; post-medieval (c. 14<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> century) movement in the West that ushered in a revival of creativity, especially in the arts, music, and literature, inspired by access to classical Greek and Roman literature.

**renunciant:** a religious practitioner who renounces ordinary, secular, lay life in the pursuit of religion; could live a solitary ascetic existence or in a religious community.

**revelation:** disclosure of truth or knowledge from a divine source.

**rites of passage:** rituals that mark a change in status, e.g. birth, puberty, marriage and death.

**ritual:** series of traditional actions deemed to be necessary, meaningful, or appropriate in particular situational contexts.

**sacrament:** term typically used in Christian traditions to refer to rites that serve as an outward and visible sign of an invisible process deemed to be sacred, such as the receipt of grace.

**sacred:** set apart and regarded as worthy of special attention or veneration.

**sacrifice:** ritual offering (e.g. slaughtered animal, food or drink, valued possession) directed to gods or spirits to thank, propitiate, or exchange for guidance or blessing.

**sacrilege:** intentional violation of a sacred site or object.

**saint:** one of the terms for a revered and highly accomplished religious person.

**sanctuary:** protected or sacred space, such as a church or temple.

**salvation:** being saved; varying notion in many religions that human beings need to be safely delivered from the perils they face now or in an after-life.

**sceptic:** a person who doubts and questions accepted opinions, religious beliefs, or even the possibility of knowledge in some sphere.

**Scholasticism:** movement of philosophical theology in the West, originating as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE and enduring till the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE; attempted to validate religious teachings with rational philosophical methods.

**science:** any organized body of knowledge gained through experience; in modern usage it refers to knowledge derived through the application of the “scientific method.”

**scientific method:** orderly approach to confronting a question concerning the functioning of the natural world: involving formulating hypothetical solutions, devising experiments to test the hypotheses, observing the experimental tests, and reaching conclusions based on rational analyses of the data collected.

**scientism:** generally a pejorative term referring to the inappropriate application of the methods and values of the scientific method to areas of human activity, often to attempt to grant these the status that accompanies science, or alternately, to demean their value as unscientific.

**scripture:** religious literature of a particular community, generally deemed sacred and originating from some supernatural source; often originally orally transmitted before being committed to writing.

**sect:** term used for a religious group or school within the larger tradition, for example, Zen is a sect of Buddhism and Rinzai is a sect within Zen; can also have pejorative connotations of a heretical or dangerous subgroup.

**sectarian:** refers to the views or identity of a particular sect and reinforces the differentiation between groups; can include a sense of narrow-minded adherence to one group or actions taken on behalf of that group.

**secular:** term used to indicate anything that is of a worldly, rather than spiritual, nature.

**secularization:** sociological term for a process through which something loses its spiritual value and becomes more worldly.

**seminal:** person, text, event, or idea that importantly influenced later developments.

**semiotics:** systematic study of signs and symbols.

**shaman:** specialist in supernatural affairs who typically mediates between the worldly and otherworldly realms; often found in small-scale societies.

**Shinto:** ritual-based tradition, with political overtones, indigenous to the islands of Japan, centered on the appeasement of spirits known as *kami*.

**Sikhism:** tradition primarily based on the moral and religious instructions contained within a revered book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which includes the teachings of ten teachers (*guru*), the first of whom was the founder, Guru Nanak.

**socialism:** typically a political philosophy in which resources are moderately shared by a members of a society for the welfare of all.

**society:** any group of people who share some cohesive feature.

**somatic:** relating to the body.

**soteriology:** the study of conceptions of salvation (being saved); often used to refer to the doctrines of salvation in particular religious traditions.

**soul:** the essential, life-giving principle within living beings, often believed to endure after death of the physical body; frequently thought of as immortal and linked to the moral imperatives of a religion.

**spirit:** a generally incorporeal supernatural being; one's essential being or animating, life-giving principle.

**spiritualism:** beliefs and practices consistent with the notion that spirits of the dead can communicate with the living.

**structuralism:** theoretical approach in the social sciences concerned with uncovering the fundamental structures within an object of study, such as a myth; these structures often involve embedded binary oppositions, such as good/evil, nature/culture, or sacred/profane.

***sui generis*:** of its own kind; unique; irreducible to other categories.

**supernatural:** something that seems beyond the natural order of reality.

**syncretism:** merging of different religions or elements of different religious traditions.

**taboo:** from Polynesian *tapu* or *tabu*; refers to a strong social prohibition, the breaking of which generally entails being susceptible to punishment, delivered either by the social group, or from some divine agency.

**tao/Taoism:** See *dao* and Daoism.

**Tantra:** typically secret body of beliefs and practices of Eastern origin, concerned with self-realization mostly through body-mind ritual activities centred on the transcendence of dualities, symbolically understood as male and female principles.

**teleology:** the study of the purposes, goals, or ends (Greek: *telos*); also used to refer to the mediate and ultimate objectives in religious systems and practices.

**thaumaturge:** wonder worker; performer of miracles or magic.

**theism:** belief in the existence of a deity or god.

**theocracy:** “god + rule”; government where religious officials rule in god’s name.

**theodicy:** (*theos* – god + *dike* – justice); branch of theology that seeks to justify the existence of evil and injustice in a world presided over by a good and just deity.

**theology:** (*theos* – god + *logos* – study) intellectual reflections on the nature of the divine; typically done within the framework of a religious tradition’s accepted beliefs.

**theophany:** appearance or manifestation of a god, see also the broader term, hierophany.

**totemism:** a cluster of beliefs and activities centered upon a perceived relationship between a person or group (often kin) and an entity, such as a plant or animal.

**transcendent:** beyond or above the ordinary; apart from and beyond the limitations of the material world, such as the power or realm of the divine.

**transmigration:** see reincarnation; this term is slightly more broad in its sense of a soul or spirit of some type moving from one existence to the next; includes movement up and down a hierarchy of beings (e.g. levels of hell dwellers, ghosts, animals, humans, and gods common to many Asian cosmologies).

**triumphalism:** attitude that one’s religion is superior to other beliefs and traditions.

**utilitarianism:** ethics are defined by the effects of actions; actions are deemed right if they are useful or beneficial to the happiness and well-being of a majority.

**Verstehen:** German for “understanding”; coined by the sociologist Max Weber to point to the need to interpret social actions and explanations.

**vitalism:** belief in a vital force upon which all life depends.

**Western religions:** term applied primarily to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; also known as the Abrahamic religious traditions, since they all hold Abraham as a founding father.

**Wicca:** modern, nature-based religious movement loosely linked to pre-Christian pagan traditions of Western Europe.

**worldview:** the overarching perspective through which one understands reality; derived from the German term *Weltanschauung*.

**yuga:** Sanskrit term for long cycles of cosmic time, particularly in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist world-views.