Today, one can explore world religions without ever moving beyond the borders of Canada.
Chapter One

The Religious Impulse

Look at the collage of photographs and consider the following questions:

1. What do you see when you first look at this collage?
2. What does it reveal about the nature of Canadian society?
   Be specific.

Introduction

Imagine a country where, on any given morning, young people rise to greet the day in the following ways. Many simply wash and dress, then eat a quick breakfast before heading off to school. Some turn to the rising sun and say a prayer of thanks, while others go to church to recite a series of prayers and sing hymns of worship. Still others walk to a neighbourhood synagogue to read excerpts from the Torah. A young girl rises, lays out a prayer rug—carefully placing it in the direction of Makkah (Mecca)—and begins a series of prayers and prostrations to God. A young boy spends several minutes expertly twisting his hair and covering it with a turban. A student preparing to write a set of exams takes an hour in the early morning to sit in the lotus position and quietly meditate, centring her thoughts before facing the hurly-burly of a busy day. Two brothers begin the day with a smudge ceremony, burning sweet grass and using it to cleanse their bodies and senses.

This multi-faceted description actually represents the religious and cultural reality in our country—Canada. The United Nations has declared Canada the most multicultural society on the planet and has declared Toronto the world’s most multicultural city. In fact, because Canada is home to such a richly diverse group of people, it has become the platform for one of the great encounters of the modern world—the interaction of the world’s major religious traditions. Religious pluralism is a central, ongoing, and definitive feature of contemporary Canadian society. The world’s various religious traditions are now well established as important, even essential, threads in the fabric of Canadian life.
Learning Goals

At the end of this chapter, in addition to understanding the purpose and approach of Exploring World Religions, you will be able to:

- identify some of the diverse religions represented in Canada today and understand how religious pluralism is a defining feature of Canadian life
- know the major common features and questions associated with religion
- identify common problems and questions associated with the search for spiritual meaning
- know the relationship between religion and ethics
- evaluate religion’s place in a highly technological and scientific age
- explore and employ primary and secondary research material appropriately in completing an assignment
- demonstrate an ability to recognize prejudice and bias in primary and secondary sources
- distinguish between fact, opinion, and argument as they apply to the study of religion
- identify the role of religion in human experience and culture
- differentiate between religion and ethnicity
- describe how misconceptions can influence people’s views of various religions, beliefs, and practices
- differentiate between popular and religious symbolism associated with one major religious celebration in Canada
- understand the relationship of religion to the State in Canada

Figure 1.1
In December 2000, three great religions shared important religious observances during the same week. Christians celebrated Christmas, Jews marked Hanukkah, and Muslims ended the holy month of Ramadan with Eid al-Fitr, a joyous feast of thanksgiving after a holy month of fasting from dawn to dusk. Each of these religions follows a different calendar, but at this particular time, these celebrations overlapped.
Are you religious? What does the word religious suggest to you? Do you believe in a god or many gods? Do you feel that you have a soul? Is there a reality beyond that of the material world? Is death the end or a new beginning? Is there a purpose to life or is it just a series of random events? Is there really such a thing as right and wrong? What do you believe in?

The roots of religion appear to run deep and are clearly older than civilization and perhaps older than humankind (*Homo sapiens*) itself. Even early humans such as Neanderthals demonstrated an understanding of a supernatural force. Some observers believe that an essential characteristic of humankind is to have faith, and to have an intuitive sense of the supernatural—a force, power, or reality beyond the material world. The one common thread throughout countless diversities of human religion has been the instinct or impulse to worship something.

Many people would say that they have at least occasionally felt a sense of the supernatural or of a greater spiritual reality beyond the everyday world. Today, we live in an age of apparent religious revival. For some, it is a New Age where the threads of different religious traditions can be woven together to form a personal fabric of individual faith. The religious impulse, so apparent in traditional societies, seems to be thriving in the modern age of scientific advances and technological wonders.
EXPLORING RELIGION

The Common Features of Religion
Rather than attempting to define a series of beliefs, experiences, and practices for each religion, perhaps it is easier to note the features that appear to be common to religious expression and practice. Most religions share many, if not all, of these characteristics:
• a belief in the supernatural and in a spiritual world beyond our physical material world
• a belief in the existence of a soul
• a collection of sacred writings or scriptures
• organized institutions
• a strong sense of family and community based on rituals and festivals that represent and celebrate shared beliefs and practices
• a set of answers about the most pressing human questions, for example, the meaning of suffering
• rules of conduct designed to help followers lead an honourable life and to provide order and purpose to individual and community life
• a system of ethics that offers a guide to moral behaviour
• significant founders or inspired leaders who introduced or spurred the development of the faith
• a search for perfection or salvation
• a life of faith and worship
• techniques for focusing or concentrating one’s awareness
• an enriching impact on the lives of its adherents

Why Is Religion Practised?
Since the beginning of human existence, people have turned to religion in one form or another. The religious impulse seems to be part of being human and has many explanations. One aspect of the religious impulse is a recoiling from something, such as fear, while another is a search or quest for something better, yet somewhat unattainable. While we have physical needs that must be met, we also have a sense of something beyond the material world—a greater reality that we can barely sense but cannot easily verify with our formal knowledge and five senses. A number of factors may lead us to turn to religion or express ourselves spiritually. Let’s consider the following factors:

Fear
For all of our development and sophistication, modern humans share the same deep-seated fears that our predecessors experienced throughout time. Our education, our riches, and our
self-confidence are limited in the face of fears and insecurities about death, loneliness, and being or doing wrong. Often, our personal challenges or problems seem overwhelming. We feel physical or emotional pain from sickness, loss, and disease. At times, life may seem unbearably sad or hopelessly tragic. Life’s trials are simply too difficult to bear or resolve on our own. Most of us struggle to be good and to become better people, but we are concerned that we may fall short of this goal. We fear the power of nature, our self-destructive tendencies, and internal and external conflict. We question the way we lead our lives. Are our lives pointless, or do they have meaning?

Wonder
For many people, this world is an unfathomable splendour. The stars in the sky, the power of storms, the beauty of nature, and the rich diversity and complexity of the natural world remain largely unexplained. The miracle of creation is rarely explained by science in terms that make real sense to the majority of people. Rather than actually explaining this miracle, science often describes it.

How and why did all this come about? Is there a plan? Was the development of earth a series of accidents, or can it really be neatly summed up in formulas and axioms? Is there an overall design to life and the universe? There seems to be so much that is unexplained in satisfactory terms. Some of us believe in a more spiritual realm of existence beyond everyday life. Much of the New Age movement is an attempt to experience the world more directly and to let our senses come in direct contact with the wonder of existence.

Questioning
Many of us refuse to accept that we are simply framed by birth, life, and death. The great insecurity of our lifespan is unsettling. It seems that our lives hang by a thread and can be cut short, perhaps by an accident, a genetic flaw, or a poor choice in a difficult situation. Some people point to the fact that so many individuals seem to live unrewarding lives. We are confronted by our failures and our weaknesses. The desire to be better, to be uplifted, and to be rescued from our condition is present in most people at some point in their lives. Few of us want to believe that we live our lives alone and face death alone. We don’t want to believe that our lives are determined solely by chance or accident, much like a lottery, with some people winning long, happy lives and others facing shorter or more difficult ones.

For some people, religion offers the answers to these issues and provides an opportunity to celebrate the beauty of their lives and to enjoy a sense of belonging in their faith community.
Identity
Are humans simply a unique physical presence with a name and a set of experiences? Can we be summed up by our physical description as tall, short, fat, slim, strong, or weak? Do our tastes in music and clothes really sum up who and what we are? Many Canadians suffer from an identity crisis as we confront the questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives. Can human life be so neatly categorized by terms such as student, jock, rocker, teacher, daughter, etc.? At some point in life, most people sense a deeper, more lasting reality—something that is far beyond a mere physical or cultural description, something more permanent and purposeful. Some describe this reality in terms of a soul.

Intuition
Increasingly, people feel unfulfilled by the commercialism and materialism of modern life in Canada. Our rational minds have helped us to dominate the earth, but we may still feel that something is missing. Many religions were founded by leaders who felt inspiration or had revelations. They had a vision of a different reality. Some religious prac-
Practices are designed to seek refuge from the so-called reality of the world and tune in to a deeper mystical truth.

**Big Questions . . . No Easy Answers**

Most people, and young people in particular, are curious about the difficult questions in life. What is right and what is wrong? Who are we? Why are we here? How was the world created? Is there a god or gods? What is the central meaning of life? Why is there suffering in the world?

Take a brief moment and list the “big questions” that you have considered or perhaps are actively considering at this moment in your life. Write out a list of at least five of these questions, then share them with your classmates.

**Your Credo**

*Exploring World Religions: The Canadian Perspective* looks at many aspects of religion, including personal belief. Take a moment to consider your beliefs carefully and quietly. Make a list of, write a paragraph about, or create a collage of your most cherished and deeply held beliefs. You are free to comment on whatever is important to you. This may include family, values, life, death, right and wrong, etc. Entitle your work “My Personal Credo.” A *credo* is a statement of belief.

**Purpose of the Textbook**

The credo that you have written is central to your personality and life today. It is likely that some of your thoughts may change over time. Perhaps it was difficult to express some of your ideas. You may have more questions than answers at this time in your life. It can be frustrating to discover that your beliefs may be not only limited or uncertain but also in conflict with each other.

This textbook invites you to consider a stimulating range of belief systems, practices, and experiences. You are free to accept or reject them, but it is helpful to attempt to understand these faiths before making decisions on their merits or significance to your life. You might gain new perspectives on, or a new appreciation for, the traditions to which your parents may have exposed you. The religions explored in this textbook play a complex and central role in present-day Canada. They allow us to look deeper within ourselves and find answers to the mysteries of life. You will undoubtedly see common threads among these faiths and will also notice what appear to be walls dividing one faith from another. In your exploration of these great religious traditions, perhaps you will find personal answers and a personal credo.

**Figure 1.3**

Kensington Market is a multicultural neighbourhood in the old part of Toronto. Each December, the local residents celebrate the Kensington Market Festival of Lights, which is a mix of Christian, Jewish, and *pagan* traditions. Held on December 21, the shortest day of the year, this colourful community event celebrates Christmas, Hanukkah, and the winter solstice.
Religion and Ethics
Most of us are concerned with being good and doing what is right. Life presents us with many choices, some of them complex and difficult. If we do something wrong, we often feel guilt or shame. While we may project our anger and disappointment with ourselves toward others, we may still suffer with the negative emotions that come from doing wrong.

Both religion and ethics are concerned with being good or doing the “right thing.” Ethics may be defined as the search for good judgment about how to act or behave. Daniel Bonevac, William Boon, and Stephen Phillips wrote about it in the following way in

Searching for Answers
Popular music sometimes deals with concerns and issues that many people face, including those relating to personal spirituality or ethics. Read these lyrics from a very popular song written and recorded by the Irish band U2, then answer the questions that follow.

“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”
I have climbed the highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you
Only to be with you
I have run
I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls
These city walls
Only to be with you

But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for

QUESTIONS
1. What appears to be the central message of the song?

2. In your view, what is the overall tone of the song?

3. Do you think that many people feel that they “still haven’t found what they’re looking for”?

4. Have you found what you’ve been looking for? Explain.

5. What particular religious faith does the composer seem to be referring to in the lyrics? How do you know this?

I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in her fingertips
It burned like fire
This burning desire

I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone

But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for

I believe in the kingdom come
Then all the colours will bleed into one
Bleed into one
Well, yes I’m still running

You broke the bonds and you
Loosed the chains
Carried the cross
Of my shame
Of my shame
You know I believed it

But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for . . .

I believe in the kingdom come
Then all the colours will bleed into one
Bleed into one
Well, yes I’m still running

You broke the bonds and you
Loosed the chains
Carried the cross
Of my shame
Of my shame
You know I believed it

But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for . . .
Their book *Beyond the Western Tradition.*

*It is a practical discipline focussing on such questions as:*

- What should I do?
- What kind of life should I lead?
- What kind of person should I try to become?
- How can I tell right from wrong?
- What obligations do I have to other people?
- When am I justified in criticizing others?
- When are they justified in criticizing me?

Many people feel that ethics and religion are the same or, at least, inseparable. Others hold that ethics do not necessarily depend on religion or on being religious. *Can We Be Good Without God?* is the title of a book by Canadian humanist Robert Buckman. Humanists believe that leading a good and useful life should be the central goal of our existence. Buckman claims that how one lives between birth and death is ultimately what matters in life.

The religions that you will encounter in this textbook offer a wide range of ideas and experiences designed to help individuals lead a good and useful life. In time, you will likely note some important differences among these faiths, but you may also notice a number of basic commonalities. Whether one feels that ethics and religion are separate or fundamentally and eternally entwined, the challenge of doing good is a significant concern for most people.

### Science and Religion

Some people, today and in the past, view science and religion as rivals and antagonists. They appear to be competitors in the race to understand and explain the true nature of the world, and its origins, purpose, and future direction. In the past, the *evolutionary* theories of Charles Darwin, suggesting that all living things have evolved from a few simple forms, seemed to signal a head-on clash between science and religion, in spite of the fact that Darwin himself continued to be a religious man. The literal truth of religion, particularly Christianity, appeared to contradict the measurable, quantifiable discoveries of science. Much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was consumed by a bruising battle as scientists and religious people put forth their competing explanations of the world.

While one might expect that in the twenty-first century, this struggle will continue, so far this does not appear to be the case. Instead, the similarities of science and religion seem to offer a complementary partnership and mutual respect. For instance, both science and religion are concerned with truth and understanding; specifically, the search for purpose and meaning, as well as practical questions about the origins of the earth and the guiding forces that regulate it. For many people, the truths of science and religion can be mutually supportive and complementary. While some religious adherents may accept and heed scientific fact and discoveries, others do not. Science, on the other hand, has learned to be aware of its limitations. The
unending stream of scientific knowledge continues to suggest some sort of order to the world. Generally, for adherents of science and religion, there appears to be a growing acceptance of the value of the other and an understanding that both disciplines play a role in understanding the universe.

**Technology**

We are living in the Technological Age—a time when humankind’s ingenuity and effort have created vast new opportunities and possibilities. Technology has not only made the world a global village but has also, in a sense, shrunk the universe. Space exploration has progressed from speculative science fiction to recorded history. New inventions and discoveries are moving humans far beyond the initial wonders of the Industrial Revolution to a digital, wireless world, whose central feature is dynamic, wholesale

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**Sandy Mackellar**

Sandy Mackellar is a Grade 11 student in Scarborough, Ontario. Read about her views on religion, and consider the questions that follow.

I have never been an extremely religious person, but I have often questioned if there is a God or one true religion. I have studied a few religions in school, however, none of these faiths ever said exactly what I believed. I felt it was becoming more and more important to me to know in what I believed, as I had not really considered it before. There were a few aspects of a couple of religions that I could believe in or relate to but I never found one religion to which I could completely devote myself. I do believe in a higher power, and I figure that the fact that I have faith is more important to me than being able to classify that faith into one specific religion.

My dilemma with religion is that I have a hard time putting so much trust and belief into something that I have no proof exists. It used to be very important to me to find the religion that would suit me best. Now I am happy feeling that I do not need to be part of an organized religion in order to prove that I believe.

There are many things about life that I believe in, but I cannot tie them all down to one religion in particular. I believe that each person has a purpose in life and that everything happens for a reason. I believe that fate is ultimately what chooses the paths our lives take, and I believe that life does not necessarily end after death. This is a comforting thought, but I often contemplate whether or not this is why religion was originally created.

Religion can be so overwhelming because there are so many to look into but no “evidence” proving the truth of any one religion in particular. This is why right now I just believe what I believe without devoting myself to any specific religion.

**QUESTIONS**

2. Do you think that Sandy is a “religious” person? Explain.
change. Biotechnology and genetic research are challenging the limits of the human lifespan and reducing the threats of age-old diseases that once ruled humans’ time on earth. For many, the increasingly technological future heralds an era of tremendous wealth, health, and happiness.

For others, technology does not provide all the answers nor does it meet all their needs. Some people point out that environmental destruction is one of the negative by-products of technological development; others remark that humans need to look far beyond our basic needs for true meaning and happiness. The search for meaning, especially in a technological web that is difficult to understand and master, continues. Despite all the promise of the new technologies, many individuals believe the central questions that are at the heart of most religions still need answers. Some of these questions include
- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- How should I live my life?
- What is my relationship to others?
- Is there life or existence after death?
- How and why was the universe created?

Figure 1.5
Even in such a dizzying technological age, when communication is instantaneous and constant, many people still feel the need to communicate with another reality—a higher power, a god. The religious impulse is deep within most human beings. Why do you think this is so?

Check Your Understanding

1. Identify five common features of religions.

2. In your view, which two reasons best explain why people throughout time have turned to religion? Why?

3. What is the essential difference between religion and ethics?

4. Do you think that science and religion can coexist? Explain.
In any field of study, people need tools to facilitate their work. For example, a graphic designer uses a computer and graphic software, and a biomedical scientist uses a microscope and biological specimens. Someone studying world religions would use primary and secondary sources of information as their research tools.

Primary sources include first-hand evidence, such as eyewitness accounts, photographs, videos, and artifacts. Secondary sources are second-hand accounts created by people who did not actually experience a given event, but instead based their findings on primary sources. Secondary sources could include documentaries, books (other than autobiographies or diaries), and other forms of print media such as newspapers, magazines, and Web sites.

A researcher choosing primary and secondary sources must view each through a critical eye to make sure the information is reliable and accurate, and also to recognize any bias in the material.

**Bias**

An individual demonstrates bias when he or she forms a fixed opinion about someone or something without examining the facts thoroughly and fairly. While a bias may be positive or negative in nature, the important point is that it is often an inaccurate or limited view of something or someone. In its worst form, it is a slanted, one-sided position.

Bias usually develops out of our frame of reference—experiences, family, friends, religion, occupation, etc. This frame of reference may predispose us to certain opinions and values and may blind us to people, ideas, and information that are unfamiliar or that challenge our central beliefs. If we are biased at the start of our research, it will shape and twist all the information that we find. The goal of research is to be critical of, but also open to, new information. If we don’t recognize or restrain our bias, we may not learn new information and may actually reinforce our bias. This will result in a research report that presents a seriously distorted, ill-informed point of view.

**Recognizing Bias**

The first step is to understand that most people are biased to a certain degree. We are not blank slates; we come to our work with a set of preconceptions and, perhaps, prejudices. The challenge is to recognize our biases and not to become their prisoner.

When researching, you must be able to identify an author’s frame of reference and be equipped to quickly recognize bias in a source, whether it is a book, a Web site, or a resource person. In some cases, bias may be easy to detect, but often it is more subtle and implicit. Even when information is biased, it may still have value depending on how you use the information, thus, you must become adept at separating information from conclusions. In extreme cases, a source may be completely unreliable because it is blatantly biased. When validating your sources, be alert for features that may indicate bias or prejudice:

- The ratio of fact to opinion in the material. (See the following section.)
- The amount of simplification and generalization. If the source offers sweeping, simple answers to complex questions, be wary.
- The tone of the source. Screaming titles, wild claims, and charged, emotional language may be interesting to read but may mask a seriously prejudiced position. If the source
Skill Path Primary and Secondary Research

appears to be too “persuasive,” it is probably biased.  
• Who and what is included or excluded from the text and documentation. A narrow frame of reference does not usually result in a balanced account.  
• Who? When? Why? What? Where? Does the source cover the five Ws in its presentation of material? If not, it may be omitting important information.

Facts, Opinions, and Arguments

A fact is something that is exact and specific; we know it exists or happened, and can prove it is true. For example, as stated on page 4, it is a fact that, in December 2000, three great religions shared important religious observances during the same week. Christians celebrated Christmas, Jews marked Hanukkah, and Muslims ended the holy month of Ramadan with Eid al-Fitr.

Opinions are views, thoughts, and feelings that may or may not be based on facts. In this chapter, for example, the authors of the book expressed the following opinion: “We believe that the rich variety of religious traditions born across the globe, and practised in Canada today, offers positive experiences open to all Canadians.”

Arguments are explanations or reasons that support or reject a viewpoint or opinion. They are based on facts, and try to offer an explanation for an event and then draw some conclusions. Arguments often include words such as because, since, and therefore. For example, in the introduction to this chapter, the authors explain that “because Canada is home to such a richly diverse group of people, it has become the platform on which one of the great encounters of the modern world is taking place—the interaction of the world’s major religious traditions.”

Practise It!

1. In the list below, identify each source as either primary or secondary, and explain the reason.
   • a photograph of a member of the Algonquin nation
   • the Web site of the Canadian Society of Muslims
   • an interview with a Roman Catholic priest
   • a digital map of world religions
   • an Aboriginal artifact
   • an article on the history of Hinduism
   • a diary belonging to the Dalai Lama
   • a documentary on the Prophet Muhammad
   • a poster of a Shinto festival
   • a video on Joseph Brant
   • statistics on world religions

2. Read the following paragraph and identify each of the sentences as F (fact), O (opinion), or A (argument).

Multicultural and religious pluralism are features of Canadian society. Canadians are far more tolerant and understanding of cultural and religious differences. Canada is the best place in the world to study religions. In such a vast country, it is likely that some Canadians may not be aware of the extent of Canada’s cultural and religious diversity. Since Canada is so diverse, it is likely to hold a key position on the world stage during the twenty-first century.
UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND CULTURE

Religion and Ethnicity
It is common for people to confuse religion with ethnicity. While religion is primarily concerned with beliefs, rituals, and practices, ethnicity refers to a person’s origins, race, or culture but not necessarily to his or her religion. For example, there are South Asians who are Christians, and there are North Americans from many different cultural backgrounds who are Buddhists. One cannot assume to know a person’s religion other than through his or her personal declaration. The key elements in determining religious adherence are belief and practice, not ethnicity.

Religion and Popular Culture
It is also easy to confuse the beliefs and practices of religion with what we see reflected in popular culture. Consider how many books, television programs, movies, and songs deal in some way with religious themes or the supernatural (Figure 1.6). Take a moment to write down as many pop culture references to religion as you can.

Popular culture is an exciting, stimulating, and pervasive phenomenon that has gained tremendous power and acceptance in modern societies. It has also gained a level of respect and acceptance that it may not deserve. Stereotypical images, often negative in tone, may be superimposed on certain groups of people. For example, Canada’s Muslim community has often defended itself against the simplistic images of “the Arab terrorist” perpetuated by films and television
programs. Music videos, late-night talk shows, movies, and so on are major sources of information for many of us. Our understanding of the world is heavily influenced by our exposure to popular culture. Popular culture is here to stay, but it is too often a poor substitute for genuine understanding.

As we explore some major faith traditions practised by Canadians today, we need to be willing to drop our preconceptions and encounter these faiths on their own terms. We also need to realize that some features and qualities associated with a religion may, in fact, be more cultural in origin. As a religion spread to other parts of the world, it often became associated with new beliefs and practices rooted in the welcoming culture, even though they were not really part of the religion’s original core beliefs or values. This can make it difficult for the observer to actually know what the central message, rituals, and values of the religion might be. This complex point might be illustrated best by investigating one of the most popular North American religious traditions, Christmas.

**Christmas**

Christmas is, perhaps, the most well-known communal celebration in North America. Virtually everyone is familiar with and influenced by this event, regardless of his or her religious affiliation. The Christmas season has a huge impact on the economy since the shopping period associated with it can make or break the financial success of a company over an entire year. In fact, some economists estimate that 40 per cent of annual purchasing takes place during this time. Some people go into debt for months or even years after a Christmas “blowout.” Most people take holidays at this time, and many firms and organizations shut down for a period ranging from a few days to a couple of weeks. Cultural arts centres feature Christmas concerts and plays. Movie theatres release a number of new films for the Christmas season, some with Christmas themes. Television and radio play Christmas music that is both *sacred* and *secular*, or having to do with the material world.

People tend to act differently during the Christmas season. They give more to charities in terms of money, goods, and their most precious commodity—time. They are often more light-hearted and are quick to offer a cheery “Merry Christmas,” “Happy Holidays,” or “Season’s Greetings.” The postal system and the Internet are swamped with the exchange of Christmas cards. Whatever your religious affiliation, it is hard not to be caught up in the swirl of excitement that is Christmas. While many children and adults eagerly await Christmas and the rich array of Christmas traditions and practices that are celebrated in so many homes, not all may be knowledgeable about the origins and purely religious meaning of Christmas.

Although it is one of the central Christian celebrations, many faithful Christians worry that the religious significance of Christmas is lost in the non-religious hoopla sweeping society. As well, followers of non-Christian faiths are sometimes troubled by seeing their families and friends get...
caught up in a celebration that is so central to another religious tradition. They may worry about the future of their own faith, the unity of their families, or the confusion of Christmas messages.

Christmas is a powerful example of a celebration with deep religious roots that over time has adopted a vast array of symbols, practices, traditions, and ideas having little to do with Christianity. For example, the exact date of Christ’s birth is actually unknown, and December 25 is not the likely date. However, through time, it became the appointed day to celebrate the birth of Christ by most Christians.

The Essential Christmas
The annual tide of Christmas cheer that swamps North America in December can be a difficult experience for a non-Christian. Modern celebrations of Christmas are both spiritual and secular, and participants themselves may often be unaware of which aspect they are celebrating.

Christmas is, in its origins, about the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity. Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph. This poor, young couple witnessed the birth of their son in a lowly stable in the town of Bethlehem, attended by shepherds and three Magi, sometimes referred to as “wise men.” (These wise men were possibly Zoroastrian priests who had followed a heavenly star to the miraculous event.) Adding to the drama, the tiny baby was being sought by King Herod, who had instructed his agents to slay the child because he feared prophecies that the child would become a king.

Across Canada and around the globe, Christmas is celebrated in ways that have nothing to do with the sacred origins of the tradition. In fact, much of Christmas is a curious mixture of global tradition, popular cul-

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**Figure 1.7**
Two views of Christmas: the sacred (the Nativity) and the secular (Santa Claus).
Which one most closely represents your personal view? Explain.
ture, and sheer commercialism (Figure 1.7). Let’s look at the tradition of Santa Claus, as an example.

Although Santa Claus has become a central part of Christmas tradition, particularly for children, this figure has no real connection to the birth of Jesus Christ. Saint Nicholas had origins in Turkey as the patron saint of children. In Holland, he became known as Sinter Cleas. The tradition of hanging stockings by the fire and waking to find them full of gifts and food was brought to North America by Dutch settlers.

In 1822, Clement Moore, an American, wrote the poem “The Night Before Christmas” for his children. This poem, well-known to many North Americans, described the popular image of Santa Claus as we know him today. It was a successful attempt to create an American gift-giver distinct from the British Father Christmas.

Later, the Coca-Cola Company presented a striking image of a chubby, happy fellow dressed in fur and carrying sacks of presents for children around the world. While his sleigh, pulled by eight reindeer, flew across the evening sky bringing joy and gifts to children everywhere, Santa proclaimed, “Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

The Future of Christmas
The way Christmas is celebrated will likely continue to adapt and change in the years to come. For Christians, the concern is that the important origins of this holy event may be smothered by commercialism and the addition of traditions that are alien, and perhaps hostile (in the rampant commercialism and materialism of Christmas shopping), to the celebration of the original event. In some parts of England, the season is referred to as “Winterval” to render it more open to people of other faiths and traditions. In many schools in Canada, Christmas celebrations have been replaced with interfaith celebrations, sometimes called “Winterfests,” featuring songs and traditions from other religious and cultural traditions. As Canada and the world become more multicultural, it is likely that religious traditions will become somewhat blurred and that traditions and customs will increasingly overlap. Author Ellie Tesher, who lives in a multi-faith family in Toronto, makes this observation about the holiday season:

Today, I live, as do countless other people, in this polyglot city of colour and light, in a mixed union with grown children and stepchildren whose friends and relationships cover the map. There’ll be a Hanukkah menorah and a Christmas tree inside our home, not to mention a photo of the Dalai Lama, pungent incense and Buddhist texts, and still no confusion—because everyone knows who they are and who they come from.
Check Your Understanding

1. Carefully explain the difference between ethnicity and religion.

2. How has popular culture influenced your view of religion?

3. What examples of multi-faith practices or customs are you aware of? Describe at least one.

Religion in Canada Today

Religion and the State
In Canada, religion and the State are separate institutions. Religion is a personal, not a political, matter or a federal responsibility. Canadians are free to follow and celebrate any religious tradition that they choose. They are also free not to observe any religion. Canadians may be atheists, and believe that there is no God, or agnostics, by believing that nothing can be known about the existence of God, just as easily as they may be Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, etc. This freedom of religion is specifically entrenched in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as shown in these brief excerpts:

Fundamental Freedoms
- freedom of conscience and religion
- freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication

Equality Rights
- the right to equal protection without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

However, freedom of religion and the separation of Church and State are not absolute, nor probably would a majority of Canadians wish it that way. The existence of a god is explicitly recognized in many important national institutions such as the Canadian constitution and the national anthem:

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law: . . .

From the Constitution Act, 1982

God keep our land glorious and free!
From “O Canada”

Representatives of different religions are often asked to open or close ceremonies at important events held by the three levels of government—federal, provincial, and municipal.
These ceremonies are becoming increasingly interfaith in character and involve participants from a variety of religious traditions. For example, when representatives of Aboriginal groups attend federal government events, they often present Aboriginal traditions and rituals.

Interestingly, statistics seem to suggest that attendance at religious services is in a serious downward spiral. A Statistics Canada study indicates that regular attendance (at least once a month) by Canadians at religious services declined by almost 10 per cent between 1988 and 1998. The study also revealed that the most regular worshippers were married couples with children, senior citizens, recent immigrants (especially those from Asia), and residents of rural areas.

Many Paths . . . One Direction

*By dialogue, we let God be present in our midst. For as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God.*

—Pope John Paul II

*Exploring World Religions* takes the view that the pursuit of truth is a worthwhile goal and that most people are eager to understand themselves and life’s mysteries in greater depth. The authors of this book believe that the rich variety of religious traditions born across the globe and practised in Canada today offer positive experiences, open to all Canadians.

By exploring the different religions in this book, we can examine how each of these faiths defines and arrives at the truth. In discovering the beliefs and practices of world religions in Canada, we can learn more about other Canadians and our country. In fact, it is through dialogue and understanding that we discover ourselves.

*We cannot afford to be ignorant of what our next door neighbours (some just an e-mail away) may believe about the nature and destiny of mankind.*

—Jordan Pearlson, founding rabbi of Temple Sinai, Toronto

Our Approach

*The measure of a religion is its best ideals. We expect others to estimate our religion by its best expression; and in turn, as an elemental courtesy, we should judge others by their best.*

—Floyd H. Ross and Tynette Hills, *The Great Religions*

The authors of *Exploring World Religions* see Canada’s diversity as a sign of strength and richness. We invite you to share our wonder, curiosity, and respect for different ways of understanding and encountering our world. In this textbook, we search for the best elements in these faiths while being mindful of the difficult history of religious conflict that has coloured too much of the past. Our approach is comparative, not competitive. We seek no hierarchy. We believe that Canada is one country in one world.

The origins of most of the religions that we shall study are far from the
borders of Canada and are often shrouded in history. However, Exploring World Religions regards these religious traditions as vibrant and alive, and playing an integral part in the daily lives of their followers in Canada. While we are mindful of the origins and roots of these faith traditions, our emphasis is on the current Canadian context and the religious fabric of Canada today.

Figure 1.8
Canada’s increasingly multicultural character has prompted one Canadian, Sheena Singh, to create what is perhaps the world’s first multicultural calendar. Singh’s calendar includes all of the major world religions, including faiths such as Zoroastrianism. It indicates virtually all of the major cultural and religious holidays of the world’s peoples. According to Singh, “The calendar opens dialogues between peoples from different backgrounds and encourages them to share what makes them what they are.” To learn more about this calendar, visit http://www.multicultural-calendar.com.

Check Your Understanding

1. How is religious freedom protected in Canada?

2. How would you account for the fact that married couples, senior citizens, recent immigrants, and rural Canadians are most likely to attend religious services? Comment briefly on each category.
Activities

Check Your Understanding

1. Define and provide examples of the phrase *religious pluralism*.

2. Describe four reasons why people turn to religion. Which of the four, if any, apply to you?

3. Explain why ethnicity may not be a reliable indicator of a person's religion.

Apply Your Learning

8. Visit the multicultural calendar Web site http://www.multiculturalcalendar.com, then report on the upcoming religious observances for the week.

9. Review a TV program schedule for the coming week, and circle all the programs with religious themes. Report your discoveries and conclusions to the class.

10. Assume that you have just been appointed principal of a very multicultural school, with representatives of most of the world's religious traditions among the student body. How would you organize the school, e.g., celebrate special events, to reflect the different traditions and values of the students?

11. Find examples of popular songs that deal with religious themes. Write out the lyrics and offer a brief interpretation. For lyrics, you might visit the Web site http://www.lyricsworld.com.

Think and Communicate

4. Do you believe in a god or gods? If so, and you were given the chance to speak to this higher power, what would you say?

5. In small groups, discuss what you believe to be the major ethical questions facing Canadians today. On chart paper, list the various answers to these questions. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.

6. Working in pairs, discuss the following: How do you decide what is right and what is wrong? Do you think that you always try to do what is right? Explain.

7. Write a poem that summarizes or expresses what you are searching for in your life.
Glossary

agnostic [ag NOSS tik]. A person who doubts that humankind can know the existence of a possible god and the possible existence of anything beyond this life.

atheist [AY thee ist]. One who holds that no god exists.

credo [CREE do]. A philosophy or a set of beliefs.

Dalai Lama [DOLL eye LOMMA]. The ruler and spiritual leader of Tibet. Dalai means “great ocean” and lama means “teacher.”

Devil. The supreme spirit of evil in Jewish and Christian belief.

ethics. A system of morals; rules for human conduct.

evolutionary [ev va LOO sh’n ary]. A person who believes that evolution explains the origin of species.

humanist. An adherent of humanism—an outlook or system of thought that views humankind, rather than spirituality or religion, as the source of all value or meaning.

Magi [MAY jie]. The “Three Wise Men” who attended the birth of Jesus Christ. They may have been Zoroastrian priests.

Makkah [MECCA]. A city in Saudi Arabia. It is the most important Muslim pilgrimage site.

multi-faith. Of many faiths.

Nativity [nuh TIV VA tee]. The birth of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity.

Neanderthal [nee ANDER tholl]. An early form of human being who lived in Europe during the Ice Age.

New Age. A broad movement characterized by alternative approaches to traditional Western culture, particularly in relation to spirituality, mysticism, holism, etc.

pagan [PAY g’n]. A person holding religious beliefs other than those of any of the other main religions of the world. In the past, this term was sometimes used by Christians to describe non-Christian faiths.

religious. Devoted to religion.

religious impulse. The universal urge to believe in something beyond ourselves.

religious pluralism. A positive attitude toward the existence of many faiths in one society.

ritual. A prescribed religious procedure or performance.

sacred. Connected with religion.

secular. Concerned with or belonging to the material world.

smudge ceremony. A spiritual cleansing ritual performed by members of Aboriginal religions.
soul. The spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or an animal.

spiritual. Concerned with sacred or religious things and related to the human spirit or soul.

symbol. A mark, character, or object that serves to represent an idea, process, or function.

synagogue [SINNA gog]. A Jewish place of worship.

theology. The study of religion, especially religions with a belief in God.

Torah [TORE uh]. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible.