



The Gospel According to Femigod

Challenging the dominant themes in
mainstream and organised religion

The Gospel
According to
FEMIGOD

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organised religion

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ISBN: 9780992642600

For my darling sister, Pero. I love you dearly. No matter what you want, it's yours.
Beyond money and weapons.

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Why I chose to write this book

At the tender age of 11, desperate to form a bond with a higher power, I dedicated my life to Christ and became a born again Christian. By the age of 20, disillusioned by it all, I stopped identifying myself as a Christian, and began to explore other avenues of spiritual development.

In this book, I will share my personal experiences and journey with you en route to taking an objective, dispassionate look at religion and spirituality. I'll explore the contradictions inherent in the world's major religions, and then assess the alternatives, from philosophy to myth, from astral travel to sacred geometry.

As a child, I attended Sunday service, and (evening) Bible study three times a week. I used to read my Bible upon waking and just before bed at night. I looked to the heavens for my heart's desires, and prayed for my every need. As fasting is believed to bolster this plea to God, I would occasionally forego eating for days on end.

I have borne witness to involuntary 'possessions': when a spirit – good or bad – takes control of a living soul's faculties. On most occasions, I believe, the person is unaware during *and* following the event. When a demon takes over an individual, it is said that it must be cast back into the depths of Hell, from where it came. That was the message given when one attempted to disrupt our prayer session one evening. Despite movies such as *The Exorcist* stating that such activities can only be performed by a priest, it was my brother-in-Christ to the left, slightly older in age and stronger in faith that dealt the blow. During the entire episode I was passive, dumbstruck.

I have witnessed many 'speaking in tongues':

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” (Acts 2:1 – 4)

Indeed, I have attempted to do so many times. Moved by the occasion and the spirit of those around me, I felt compelled to do as commanded.

I have been present when 'miracles' were being performed. One evening, a group of highly-revered Christian 'leaders' attended our service with the intention to, amongst other things, heal the sick. They told us that they had been sent by God to provide normal visual acuity (commonly referred to as '20/20 vision') to those wearing glasses, enable those in wheelchairs to walk again, and cure a myriad

of other illnesses. One by one, members of the congregation traipsed forward as hands were laid upon them.

As part of my development, I spent what little money I had on books, tapes, leaflets and the like. I spent many a day immersed in the material, keen to absorb as much as possible. I was fascinated by the stories of those who had acquired metaphysical powers as a result of their devotion, and once wanted to develop what is described as the *spirit of discernment*: a telepathic ability reserved for the enlightened, giving the ability to recognise what is of God.

Where were my parents during all of this? They were not around. Because had they been, I'm sure they would have tempered my passions by encouraging me to find balance in playing football or studying. I attended boarding school in a country where religion means *everything* to the people. A country where people regularly quote from the scriptures to make trivial points about everyday life, engage in group prayer sessions often, and stand around in large groups arguing over the interpretation of Bible verses. In a country where people are revered for the ability to pray, to worship and quote scripture, I was in good company.

The unofficial title of "Prayer Warrior" is reserved for individuals who are known to invoke passion and energy, screaming at the top of their lungs whilst jumping around the room as they – sometimes, quite literally – cry to God to grant prayers. Prayer Warriors can energise and inspire those around them, much like a sales manager seeks to motivate his team each morning. Even before they begin to get into their groove, their presence is felt when they enter the room; many fall silent, sitting in awe of the spectacle that awaits. At some point during a typical prayer session, the announcement is made for the Prayer Warriors to "please make their way to the front." An individual or group that requires important matters to be resolved ("special prayer") are then asked to kneel on the floor as hands are laid upon them. Members of the congregation are also expected to be involved, but don't have the privilege of being called to the front: they must simply stand by their seats. In fundamentalist Christian circles, Prayer Warriors are well respected.

Unfortunately, I never spoke in 'tongues'

"Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2: 7 – 11)

According to the Bible, when the Holy Spirit causes someone to speak in 'tongues', it must be a known language, for the benefit of those present. As evident from the above, the disciples "declared the wonders of God" to those present in their native language, which ordinarily they could not speak. All the 'tongues' I have ever heard were all completely unintelligible, and no one ever informed me that they understood what I had said.

The highly-revered Christian leaders who attended the service, to the best of my knowledge, didn't perform any miracles that evening. As I stood at the front of the Chapel watching people go forward, I was aghast at how many people declared that they had been healed. "It's a miracle!" they shouted as they threw their hands up. About an hour following the service, several admitted that they weren't able to see, and had to go back to retrieve their glasses. Apparently the person in the wheelchair required special prayer, a lot more than the time span of the service, so to the best of my knowledge she didn't walk that day. Following their departure, I recall an air of disdain from the regular attendees who had hoped to witness some modern-day miracles.

And though I stopped identifying myself as a Christian at the age of 20, my real passion for it began to wane at about 14. During that 6 year period, as a form of 'encouragement', my father would remind me of the following: One day, as I was lying on the couch, he happened to wander by and ask me what I was thinking of. My response: "The rapture." I don't recall how he took it, but as he's repeated it often enough, I imagine he was rather taken aback. The term is used by fundamentalist Christians to signify the return of Jesus Christ, when all those who are deemed to be 'worthy' will be lifted up into the air to meet him. I must have been about 12 at the time.

I experienced a lot at a young age, perhaps much more than I should have. I played football later in life and despite exhibiting moments of sheer brilliance, it's possible that the lost time ensured I would never play professionally. Despite this, I'd like to think that in many ways the distance from my parents played a large part in shaping my curiosity and the search for spiritual enlightenment that still drives me today.

As I grew older, my worldview expanded beyond the confines of boarding school and the country that influenced my development. Many things I held sacred not only diminished in value, but no longer seemed to matter. As this occurred, and as I matured, my values changed. Fortunately for me, my spiritual foundation was not built upon external factors, as I always relied on myself for research and development. If I'm honest, I never felt fully comfortable within the confines of doctrine, as it ran contrary to my natural values. As I grew older and became more confident, not only did I begin to ask further questions, but other people's opinions also meant less to me.

Two decades on I am still keen to know what our purpose is or whether we even have one: Are we here as an adoring audience for a deity, or are we called to something higher? And at the other end of the spectrum: where is everything headed? Is there a final judgement and potential reward when we finally leave our Earthly existence or will our consciousness be snuffed out in an instant?

Thomas Jefferson said:

"Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blind-folded fear."

I believe it is incumbent upon us to ask questions and critically appraise the ‘truths’ we are told with respect to all matters. The acceptance of any dogma without examination is not just unhealthy, but dangerous. Unfortunately, such questioning is no longer encouraged, and we have been conditioned only to ask questions within a narrow bound. Anyone who goes too far beyond this is shunned for daring to step out of line. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in many mainstream and organised religions, which often prohibit and even ridicule open discussion on contentious matters. Why would God not welcome healthy debate?

Many of today’s religions are filled with contradictions, inaccuracies and outright lies. Unfortunately, people seldom ask the important questions and are blinded by their soft exterior. It is true that there are many worthy ideals attached to religions, which is the reason they are cherished in society. However, there is a side that people never talk about. Do you know what your religion is hiding and what lurks in its doctrine?

Though the cause may be worthy, this does not excuse the fact that there are many more questionable issues attached to religion. Fortunately, there are just as many alternatives for spiritual development that you may not even have heard of. Spiritual knowledge (and development) isn't limited to religion, and if you want to gain a better understanding of it, you can learn a lot from many unusual sources. Despite being relegated to the fringe, many practices and arts were often highly revered in the past. Now is the time for these paths to be revisited.

The point isn't so much about where you look, but the very fact that you are looking. Even if spirituality is not your end goal, open up your mind to new ideas beyond the stale restrictions of religion and see where it takes you. Which questions are important to you and what answers have you found so far? Or perhaps you will simply develop more questions, and start a larger process of discovery for yourself. True goals are the ones you work towards, not the ones handed to you on a silver platter.

Why Femigod? I have no desire to start a new religion, nor do I wish to start any new age movement. It’s not my desire to be worshipped, nor do I believe I am the reincarnation of an enlightened spiritual individual. My name is Femi and my simple contention is this: that all humans are powerful beings, much more powerful than we are led to believe. A god is a powerful being, and as I venture on my spiritual quest, I claim this for myself: I am god. We are all god.

For those who are unaware; the book is broken down into the same Book-Chapter-Verse format as religious scriptures. The large number at the beginning of each chapter mimics the beginning of a new Chapter in religious texts, whilst superscripted numbers indicate the beginning of each new ‘verse’

The Gospel According to Femigod will examine:

i. Book One: Understanding Mainstream and Organised Religion – a brief description of each of the main world religions is presented, explaining their key doctrine;

ii. Book Two: Questions and Contradictions – quoting directly from the scriptures, this section details the dominant themes inherent in religion. Many questions will be asked, and contradictions will be laid bare for all to see;

iii. Book Three: Philosophical Approaches – the focus is on the concept of God and spirituality from a philosophical perspective. The views of both contemporary and classical thinkers will be examined;

iv. Book Four: Classical Archetypes in Myth – we examine how myths and legends have played a part in setting the moral compass of societies; and

v. Book Five: Metaphysical Alternatives – this section introduces a wide array of esoteric, alternative and metaphysical tools that can help you develop your own spiritual path outside of religion.

He who has ears, let him hear.

Book One: Understanding Mainstream and Organised Religion

¹ Though the purpose of this book is to question mainstream and organised religion, you still need to have a good grasp of what each entails. ²If you don't know the details of a belief system, how can you legitimately question it and come to understand its shortcomings?

³The major religions (in terms of numbers of believers worldwide) are outlined below in descending order:

- i. Christianity;
- ii. Islam;
- iii. Hinduism;
- iv. Buddhism;
- v. Chinese traditional religions;
- vi. African traditional religions (& African diasporic religions);
- vii. Sikhism; and
- viii. Judaism.

⁴Of course, entire religions can't fully be described in only a few pages, but the basics of each will be outlined so that you have a general understanding of their beliefs, and examine some common practices. ⁵(However, feel free to skip some of those that you're more familiar with.)

⁶From here you will see both the differences and similarities within these faiths and begin your examination of them all.

Christianity

² With two billion adherents, Christianity is the most popular religion in the world when measured in number of those who identify themselves as Christians. ³It's the prevailing belief system in Europe and the Americas, and many parts of Africa.

³It should be noted that Christianity, Islam and Judaism are *very* closely related in many ways due to their shared holy books and overlapping histories. ⁴You'll find many things that are similar or even identical between these three religions.

General Beliefs

⁵Christianity is, by definition, a religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, which *should* make it fairly simple to understand. ⁶However, many aspects of Christianity still maintain the importance of the Old Testament of the Bible to varying degrees, so overall beliefs can be hard to summarise simply because they are not constant across the religion.

⁷Some of the main tenets within Christianity:

- i. Belief in God, his son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit;
- ii. Acceptance that Jesus was physically raised to heaven after death;
- iii. Acceptance that God is the all-powerful creator, and must be worshipped and obeyed;
- iv. There is judgement by God after death, and possibly eternal punishment or eternal reward;
- v. Jesus will return to Earth before the final judgement at the end of days;
- vi. The Bible is the inspired word of God; and
- vii. Everyone has sinned.

⁸The biggest split in the Christian world is between Catholics and Protestants. ⁹Catholics believe that they are the one true church, as set out by Peter during the time of Jesus. ¹⁰The Church establishes the official beliefs and dogma that its followers must adhere to, and its rituals are believed to be vital for personal salvation. ¹¹Its leader is known as the Pope.

¹²In approximately 1500 CE, a large group broke away to create the Protestant version, with salvation believed to be gained through Jesus directly. ¹³As the years have passed, divisions within Protestantism have led to a vast number of sects, which are known as denominations. ¹⁴Whilst some may vary by only the slightest piece of dogma, others can be vastly different from more traditional forms of Christianity.

Holy Text

¹⁵The main religious scripture for Christians is the Bible, made up of two portions: the Old and New Testaments. ¹⁶The latter was written during and after the time of Jesus, which drastically sets it apart, in time as well as intent, when compared to the much older Old Testament.

¹⁷The Bible was written by a large number of different people who were writing at various times in history. ¹⁸The New Testament was written mainly in Greek, whereas the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. ¹⁹Between them, they have both been translated many times to bring the manuscripts into modern-day English and to offer further interpretations of the original meanings. ²⁰Today, you can find dozens of different English versions of the Bible.

²¹Some claim that the Bible is literal, without error and should be taken as the word of God himself. ²²Others feel that it was inspired by God, but since it was written (and frequently re-translated) by man, it should not be accepted as literal spiritual truth.

²³One final distinction between Catholics and Protestants is the Bible: Some parts were taken out during the Protestant reformation (those parts are now known as the Apocrypha). ²⁴That includes several Old Testament books such as the two books of Maccabees, Judith, and Tobit. ²⁵There is some additional text added to the books of Esther and Daniel as well. ²⁶The books of the New Testaments are the same between both Catholics and Protestants.

Proselytising

²⁷Proselytising is a common practice with some Christian denominations, but certainly not all of them. ²⁸It is seen in Christianity far more than in other religions and some denominations are highly focused on it. ²⁹Jehovah's Witnesses are well known for their door-to-door campaigns, and the Seventh Day Adventists are also very involved with proselytising.

³⁰Christianity is really the only one that practices proselytising on such a widespread basis. ³¹The reason is that it is stated in the Bible on more than one occasion that it is God's will.

The Concept of Sin

³²While most religions have some sort of code that outlines which behaviours are permitted and which ones are not, Christianity has a very mixed approach on prohibited behaviours, usually referred to as sins. ³³You can also expect a different range of sins between Protestant (and the varying sects) and Catholic teachings.

³⁴One portion of the Bible that is considered by many to be the foundation of defining sin is the Ten Commandments, supposedly given to Moses directly by God. ³⁵They are listed in the Old Testament, specifically in the books of Exodus and in Deuteronomy:

- i. You shall have no other gods before me
- ii. You shall not make a carved image of anything in heaven, on the earth or in the waters under the earth
- iii. You shall not take the name of the Lord God in vain
- iv. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, do no work on the seventh day

- v. Honour your father and mother
- vi. You shall not murder
- vii. You shall not commit adultery
- viii. You shall not steal
- ix. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour
- x. You shall not covet your neighbour's belongings

³⁶There is also the concept of original sin, which is more of a Catholic doctrine. ³⁷It goes back to the fall of Adam and Eve, when they ate from the tree of Knowledge against God's will. ³⁸That innate sin is supposedly still within all mankind, creating a natural state of imperfection in all people.

³⁹Unfortunately, there is no certain or clear-cut list of what counts as a sin in Christianity, and that is somewhat left up to the denomination to determine.

The Afterlife

⁴⁰For Christians, the concept of an afterlife is an important one because it represents the reward for living a Godly life (or the punishment for failing to do so). ⁴¹As with everything already mentioned, there are some variations between Christian groups on the specifics.

⁴²All of Christianity accepts that there is a final afterlife where our souls will reside after we die. ⁴³If we are deemed worthy, then we spend eternity in Heaven. ⁴⁴If not, our souls are directed to Hell. ⁴⁵Heaven is considered a blissful paradise, and though the traditional view of Hell is a lake of burning fire, many modern denominations play down the punishment aspect of the potential afterlife. ⁴⁶How to determine if you are going to be found 'worthy' is, again, where the differences between denominations comes into play.

Islam

³ On a worldwide scale, Islam is the second largest religion, with about 1.6 billion followers. ²It is the main religious path for the northern part of Africa, the Middle East and parts of Polynesia.

³Because of its roots in the Middle East and continuing dominance in the region, much of the terminology is in Arabic. ⁴Allah will be used to describe the God of Islam, out of respect and also to clearly differentiate the Muslim God from the Christian one (though it can be argued that they're *essentially* the same.)

General Beliefs

⁵There are Five Pillars of Islam that make up the foundation of the religion, though these are acts and practices rather than beliefs in themselves.

1. The shahada (declaration of faith)
2. Daily prayers (five times a day)
3. Giving to charity
4. Fasting during Ramadan
5. Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca

⁶These are fairly self-explanatory, though there are a few things to mention about the *shahada*. ⁷It consists of the Arabic phrase that means there is only one God and Muhammad is his messenger. ⁸The exact wording is "I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and Muhammad is his servant and messenger." ⁹This expression is part of daily prayer, and it is said to be powerful enough to convert anyone who says it to Islam.

¹⁰Aside from these five pillars, there are other beliefs that all Muslims hold:

- i. There is only one God (Allah)
- ii. Angels exist as messengers of Allah
- iii. The Quran was a divine revelation
- iv. Allah has chosen several prophets to also be his messengers
- v. There will be a time of judgement before Allah
- vi. Destiny is ordained by Allah

Holy Texts

¹¹In English, the holy book of Islam is also called the Koran or the Quran, given in its entirety to Muhammad in a divine revelation. ¹²He received it over the course of about 23 years from the Angel Gabriel.

¹³Because the Quran is believed to have come directly from Allah, there are few different versions of it available. ¹⁴It has been translated into other languages, but the Arabic version has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. ¹⁵Because of the belief that the Quran is divine, it does not come under scrutiny

or interpretation.

¹⁶Hadiths are another important text in Islam, though not of divine origin. ¹⁷This is text that contains the words and actions of Muhammad during his life, which then acts as additional guidance for Islamic life beyond the official Quran itself. ¹⁸Entries in the hadith are often preceded by a list of people who said or heard these sayings, leading back to the original statement by Muhammad.

¹⁹Within this religious practice, there are two major branches: the Shi'a and Sunni, akin to the differences between Protestants and Catholics. ²⁰Though they share many basic beliefs and tenets, there are some differences between the two. ²¹In terms of numbers, there are about 1.3 billion Sunnis; and 300 million Shi'a.

Proselytising

²²Muslims don't usually do very much proselytising, although helping to teach others about the religion is considered a noble practice. ²³It's called *dawah* in Arabic, and while similar to some evangelical practices in Christianity, it is generally less 'pushy'. ²⁴The point is to inform or teach rather than to coerce a conversion.

²⁵One unique concept within Islam is that you can convert to the religion simply by stating the declaration of faith described above. ²⁶Most religions require a more lengthy process of learning and ritual before you can be considered a true convert. ²⁷Muslims also believe that people are naturally Muslim at birth, so any conversion is simply a return to their natural spiritual state.

Concept of Sin

²⁸In Islam, sins are any actions that go against the will of Allah. ²⁹Not all sins are considered equal: some sins are simply mistakes, some are transgressions and some are depravity.

³⁰There are seven major sins, called the *al-Kaba'ir*. ³¹Though the concept is similar to the seven deadly sins in Christianity, the sins themselves are notably quite different:

1. Idolatry
2. Witchcraft
3. Murder of someone innocent
4. Consuming the property of an orphan
5. Usury (borrowing money with interest)
6. Retreating in battle
7. Falsely accusing chaste women

³²These seven actions are explicitly mentioned by Muhammad as noxious things to be avoided. ³³An additional list of 70 actions are also sometimes referred to as major sins, such as adultery, blasphemy, breaking any of the five pillars, lying, stealing, consuming pork, gambling etc. ³⁴Like in the Christian Bible, there are very long lists of potential sins, and there are varying ways to interpret many of them.

³⁵In order to gain forgiveness for your sins, you only have to repent or regret that you've committed them and ask Allah to forgive you.

The Afterlife

³⁶Those who have sinned in the eyes of Allah can be punished in *jahannam* (similar to the Christian version of a burning Hell). ³⁷But because they believe that Allah is merciful, once their souls have been cleansed by fire, Muslims are permitted to move on to *jannah* (the garden, or Heaven). ³⁸Some do believe that non-Muslims are punished in *jahannam* permanently but others feel that with enough time, even a non-Muslim can be worthy of entry into heaven.

³⁹Those who die while fighting for God will go directly to heaven and any ‘enemies of Islam’ are sent directly to *jahannam*.

Hinduism

⁴ We now come to the third most popular world religion, Hinduism. ²Even though it has just over a billion followers, the Hindu religion is still very much exclusive to India.

³Before we go any farther, let it be clearly stated that Hinduism is complicated. ⁴It has a very different world view from most other religions (especially to people who are more familiar with monotheistic beliefs). ⁵Deity and belief concepts are much more diverse, multi-faceted and very often imprecise. ⁶This religion is a very personal one and it centres on one's own personal growth and spiritual learning. ⁷When compared to rather rigid and rule-based religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, it can appear very unusual.

General Beliefs

⁸Even as a diverse religion, Hinduism does have some tenets that are common amongst all of its followers, but since people tend to forge their own paths these beliefs and practices are not universal. ⁹There are a few areas where they do agree:

1. Acceptance of Brahman as the ultimate universal force beyond the individual gods
2. The Vedas contain revealed spiritual truths
3. Moral and righteous living (called dharma)
4. Immortality of the soul
5. Reincarnation
6. Karma

¹⁰Hindus strive to gain spiritual knowledge and understanding during their lives as a way of getting closer to the divine forces they believe in. ¹¹The practices of yoga and meditation are two ways that Hindus develop their own personal spiritual understandings and focus the mind.

Holy Texts

¹²There isn't a single religious text that is associated with Hinduism, but rather a wide range of collected texts that have been written over the course of many centuries. ¹³Some are considered by followers to be divinely revealed or inspired, but not all of them. ¹⁴There are several dozen writings but a few are more crucial and central than others.

¹⁵The Vedas are the oldest group of texts and are thought to have been revealed over a period of several centuries to many different writers. ¹⁶They are broken down into four parts: *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, *Atharvaveda*. ¹⁷These are all fairly large books, filled with a mixture of poetry, prose and hymns. ¹⁸Most of their content revolves around the rituals and prayers to be used by the priesthood.

¹⁹Another group of texts is called the Upanishads, and they were written some time after the Vedas. ²⁰The theme of the Upanishads is spiritual growth and ways in which to develop a closer relationship with the central universal force of Brahman. ²¹This is also where the concept of karma is laid out. ²²The Upanishads are not a revealed text. ²³These verses were written by various scholars who studied the Vedas and wanted to further explain their meanings. ²⁴Overall, the Upanishads are a more

philosophical text than the Vedas.

²⁵The Mahabharata is a very long epic poem, filled with the legends of the time (around 400BCE).
²⁶Though the entire text is important, the final book of the Mahabharata, known as the Bhagavad Gita, stands out. ²⁷This part of the text includes a narrative between Krishna and a warrior named Arjuna.
²⁸Many noble qualities are discussed in this piece and it is one of the central texts in Hinduism.

Main Deities

²⁹Though it is a polytheistic religion for all intents and purposes, there is a *single* creator force that runs the universe, known as Brahman. ³⁰It is not really worshipped as a deity like the others, but the vast myriad of gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon are all considered manifestations of Brahman, though treated as completely individual beings.

³¹After Brahman, there are three principle gods: Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. ³²Together they are called the Trimurti (sound familiar?), and each god has a consort goddess that he is paired with. ³³Each one has a long list of alternate names, forms and reincarnated avatars. ³⁴This will make understanding them a little difficult.

³⁵Brahma is considered to be the god of creation, and most images of him have four heads and four arms. ³⁶His consort is Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, the arts and science. ³⁷She also has four arms like her husband.

³⁸The next is Vishnu who maintains and supports creations as the omnipresent manager of the universe. ³⁹Because he is in control of the existing universe, Vishnu is more actively worshipped than the other gods. ⁴⁰His wife is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

⁴¹Finally, the last of the Trimurti is Shiva. ⁴²To complete the natural triad with the creator and maintainer, Shiva takes the role of the destroyer. ⁴³Even so, he is not looked at as a negative influence. ⁴⁴Rather, Shiva is often worshipped as a family man and household deity. ⁴⁵His wife is Parvati, who is associated with the general concept of feminine power as well as love.

Proselytising

⁴⁶For the most part, Hindus (aside from Hare Krishnas) do not proselytise. ⁴⁷They believe that all religious and spiritual paths will eventually lead to the same place of universal deity, so no one religion is better than another. ⁴⁸Because of this viewpoint, they can find the concept of proselytising offensive and are generally not receptive to anyone else trying to convert them.

The Concept of Sin

⁴⁹Since Hinduism is philosophically different from Christianity, it should come as no surprise that the idea of sin is basically non-existent. ⁵⁰There really aren't any prohibited actions that would be called sins, but any behaviour that takes one away from dharma should be avoided.

⁵¹They believe that actions create positive or negative karma, which then affects one's next and future lifetime. ⁵²In other words, everything you do influences your karma, and actions cannot be atoned for

nor forgiven.⁵³You're accountable for everything that you've done in life, but you can 'balance' negative actions with more positives ones, within reason.⁵⁴Karma has its own chapter later in this book where you can find out more.

The Afterlife

⁵⁵Hinduism has no concept of heaven or hell, and the afterlife for Hindus is simply a rebirth into this world.⁵⁶The soul is immortal and lives forever, so it does not come to an end with death.⁵⁷Among the Hindu texts, the Upanishads do mention reincarnation on a few occasions but it's the Bhagavat Gita that covers the afterlife in the most detail:

“As a person gives up old and worn out garments and accepts new apparel, similarly the embodied soul giving up old and worn out bodies verily accepts new bodies” (chapter 2, verse 2)

⁵⁸The idea of karma is key here, and it means that the acts of your life are used to determine what your next life will be.⁵⁹It can be seen as reward/punishment for good/bad living, but also as a way of providing your soul with additional lessons to be learned as each lifetime is complete.

⁶⁰The end of this cycle is called *moksha*, which is when all suffering that comes from a mortal life is over and your soul is returned to the force of Brahman.

Buddhism

⁵In our discussion of mainstream religion, Buddhism will stand out for some very obvious reasons. ²The main distinction is that there is *no* god in Buddhist beliefs.

³Buddhism has between 400 and 500 million adherents, making it the fourth most populous belief system in the world. ⁴Most of the world's Buddhists live in China and Southeast Asia, though there are followers of this faith all over the world.

⁵Because there is no deity figure in Buddhism, some would say this is more of a lifestyle than a religion. ⁶But since most aspects of this path are intended as a way of gaining spiritual awareness and to connect with a divine force, it is considered a religion.

General Beliefs

⁷The overall aim of Buddhism is to gain spiritual awareness and to escape the suffering that comes with a mortal life. ⁸There is a strong focus on suffering and asceticism through the entire faith.

⁹Out of all the teachings of Buddha, the Four Noble Truths are at the central core:

1. Life is suffering
2. The cause of suffering is desire
3. Suffering can be ended
4. The path is the end of suffering

¹⁰Clearly, this is a very oblique set of ideas that will require more explanation for non-Buddhists to understand. ¹¹The general idea is that all suffering in life comes from earthly desires, and only through the Buddhist path (the Eightfold Path) can this cycle of suffering be ended. ¹²Since Buddhists believe in karma and reincarnation, this suffering is part of the cycle that runs from one lifetime to the next.

¹³The Noble Eightfold Path outlines the ways you need to live in order to free yourself from worldly desires and suffering of mortal life:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

¹⁴Like the Noble Truths, these are also vague and open to interpretation.

¹⁵Besides these specific doctrines, there are other beliefs that are crucial to the understanding of Buddhism. ¹⁶The seeking of wisdom and knowledge is vital, as is the use of meditation to further free

your mind from worldly constraints.

There are 2 *main* paths of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. ¹⁸The Vajrayana sect is popular in Tibet but is much smaller than either of the two primary groups, as such, it is not considered a major division within the faith.

One of the primary differences between the two schools is that Theravada seeks enlightenment for the individual whereas Mahayana has a larger goal of enlightenment for *all* living beings. ²⁰The specific holy texts vary from one school to the other, though the main text of the Pali Canon is common to both (more on this in the next section).

Mahayana Buddhism is more ritualistic than Theravada, and has much more elaborate temples. ²²Overall, the Theravada school is a more simpler version of Buddhism than the Mahayana, but there are many smaller underlying differences between the two.

Holy Texts

²³As with Hinduism, there isn't one central text used by Buddhist followers. ²⁴Several writings from the time of Buddha are used as spiritual guides, and different ancient texts are used to varying degrees by the two branches.

²⁵The central text is called the *Pali Canon*, originally an oral text, until finally being committed to writing about 450 years after the death of Buddha. ²⁶It contains three sections, called pitakas.

²⁷The *Vinaya Pitaka* covers the rules of conduct and behaviour for Buddhist monks and nuns. ²⁸The *Sutta Pitaka* is a mix of content that usually covers the life of Buddha, his conversations and teachings. ²⁹The last pitaka is the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* which is mostly unique to the Theravada school, and it contains a collection of metaphysical and philosophical teachings that are more esoteric than the rest.

³⁰Within the Mahayana school, they also use another text called the Sutras (or Suttas). ³¹Again, this is a large collection of separate writings that can't really be described as a whole because they cover a wide range of principles and were written by many different people.

Proselytising

³²Though Buddhists are usually happy to teach and share their faith, it is uncommon for them to actively seek to convert others. ³³As with many other eastern religions, their position is that everyone can find their own way to the Divine and that no one religion is better or '*more true*' than the other.

³⁴In this regard, there is no reason why a Buddhist would feel the need to convert anyone.

Concept of Sin

³⁵As a religion that embraces karma and reincarnation, Buddhism contains no real concept of sin.

³⁶For someone following the Eightfold Path, behaviour that would pull them away from the right

actions *might* be considered a sin, but that is only a rough approximation. ³⁷The term really isn't used in Buddhism. ³⁸The closest idea might be the five Precepts, given as acts to be avoided in the Suttas. ³⁹They are:

1. Destroying living things
2. Stealing
3. Sexual misconduct
4. Lying
5. Intoxicating drink and drugs

⁴⁰The text outlining these 'sins' is quite long, but here is one quote from the Pali:

“Furthermore, abandoning lying, the disciple of the noble ones abstains from lying. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the fourth gift.” (Abhisanda Sutta 8:39)

Afterlife

⁴¹The idea of reincarnation (that our souls travel in an endless cycle of lifetimes) is a very important part of Buddhist belief. ⁴²Buddhists say that we continue in this cycle until finally freeing ourselves by following the Eightfold Path. ⁴³That goal is called nirvana, and though it could be seen as a form of 'heaven', it doesn't exist as a mythical paradise.

⁴⁴Since life is seen as being made up of suffering, the idea of releasing it is considered the ultimate blessing. ⁴⁵Nirvana is a mixture of nothingness, eternal peace and joy, though not the equivalent of Christians' heaven.

Chinese traditional religions

General

6 There are approximately 400 million followers of Chinese traditional religions or Shenism (a loose term for the worship of gods, spirits or consciousness), though it's impossible to say exactly how many.

²It is the collection of ethnic religious traditions that have historically comprised the predominant belief system in China and among Han Chinese ethnic groups from as far back as 5000 BCE up to the present day. ³It describes mythology and includes the worship of ancestors, nature deities, clan deities, demigods, cultural heroes and dragons. ⁴One of these traditions, Taoism, will be discussed below.

⁵It is polytheistic in belief, with a multitude of cultures and locations worshipping different gods, goddesses, and demigods. ⁶The list below reflects a few of the major ones:

i. Pangu is believed to have been the first living being and creator of both the Heavens and the Earth. He is believed to have emerged from a cosmic egg

ii. Shangdi is also considered a creator god, prior to Pangu. He was the supreme deity during the Shang dynasty.

iii. Tudi Gong is said to preside over the earth, and is also the god of wealth, minerals and buried treasure.

iv. Mazu ("Ancient Mother", also known as Tianhou) is both a Buddhist and Taoist goddess who is the protector of fisherman and sailors. She is immensely popular in coastal areas of South and South-Eastern China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia.

v. Guanyin from Buddhism has also entered the Chinese traditional pantheon due to immense popularity throughout the Chinese mainland.

⁷Deities are believed to reside in particular places, so Temples and shrines are usually erected around certain sacred parts of the city.

⁸Although texts relating to Chinese traditional religion exist, such as *Journeys to the Underworld*, they are not systematized and there is no main scriptural collection to which all devotees adhere. ⁹The same is true of rituals performed by followers, which varies from location to location.

¹⁰It is characterised by ancestral veneration, as it's believed that such reverence will influence these spirits to aid their living descendants. ¹¹Because of its inclusiveness, these days it is not uncommon for believers of other faiths to still engage in such practices. ¹²In essence, it is a part of the culture, with public holidays such as *Tomb Sweeping Day* (Qingming Festival) taking place in the region. ¹³During this period family members pray to their ancestors, sweep their tombs and offer food and libation. ¹⁴Many believe that if the spirits are not properly cared for, they will become hungry ghosts that cause trouble for the living.

The *Ghost Festival* (used to mark Ghost Month) is a traditional holiday celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month. ¹⁶During this month, ghosts and spirits are believed to emerge from the lower world to visit the earth. ¹⁷Sacrifices to ancestors and deities are often performed, with bamboo paper replicas known as '*Hell Bank Notes*' or '*Ghost Money*' burnt as offerings.

The *Mid-Autumn Festival* or Moon Festival is connected with moon worship, as the ancient Chinese believed this celestial body to be connected with rejuvenation.¹⁹ On this day, the Moon Goddess, *Chang'e*, is honoured.

Taoism

²⁰Better described as an Eastern religion/ philosophical path or tradition, adherents are predominantly based in China, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea. ²¹Because of its inclusive nature, many followers also identify with other religions so exact numbers of followers can be hard to pin down. ²²Due to this pluralism, various sects and belief systems exist.

²³Laozi, a 6th century BCE philosopher of ancient China is traditionally considered the founder of philosophical Taoism.

General Beliefs

²⁴The main objective of the belief system is to live in harmony with Tao, which is considered the ultimate force behind everything that exists. ²⁵Tao or Dao (*pronounced Dow*) means “way”, “path” or “principle”.

²⁶The focus of Taoism is the veneration of nature, with the aim of life being personal adjustment to the rhythm of the natural (and supernatural) world. ²⁷They believe that this can be achieved by balancing yin-yang, and developing *qi* ("life energy" or "energy flow") through meditation and self-investigation. ²⁸The body is considered a source of this energy, which can be harnessed for various means, such as immortality.

²⁹Different branches of Taoism have differing beliefs, especially concerning deities and composition of the pantheon. ³⁰Whilst popular Taoism typically sees the Jade Emperor as the official head deity, intellectual Taoists, such as the Celestial Masters sect, view Laozi as Taishang Laojun (or one of the Three Pure Ones.)

There are 2 kinds of Taoism – the *Tao-chia* and the *Tao-chiao*:

1. The first is best described as the philosophical arm, teaching practitioners how to live in the here and now. This conduct is shaped by several concepts such as *Wu-Wei* (translated *nondoing*), *Wu* (*emptiness*), and *Fu* (*return*).
2. The *Tao-chiao* ("Teachings of the Way") is considered the religious and mystical branch of Taoism, with schools and disciplines that follow the ideal of longevity and immortality through meditation and liturgy.

³²The most well-known symbol of Taoism is the yin-yang (or Taiji) symbol. ³³The circle represents Tao, with the black and white halves representing the Yin-qi (feminine energies) and Yang-qi (masculine energies), which gives birth to the manifest world.

Holy Texts

³⁴There are several texts used by followers of this faith, the main one being *Tao-te-Ching* or *Daodejing*

meaning *The Way of Power* or *The Book of the Way*.³⁵ It is the religion's key work of literature, regarded as the most influential, as it is believed to have been written by Laozi.³⁶ It is said to describe the path to achieving peace, the nature of life and how a ruler should lead his life.

³⁷The *Zhuangzi* was named after its alleged author, Zhuang Zou (or Master Zhuang).³⁸ He was a philosopher that lived around 4th century BCE and is credited as writing all or part of the text.³⁹ Some believe that he wrote the first seven chapters, while his students and others wrote the rest.

Proselytising

⁴⁰As this philosophy/ religion is more concerned with looking inward, they do not believe in proselytising.

Concept of Sin

⁴¹Because of the nature of the religion, the concept of sin is generally not discussed.⁴² However, there are Three Treasures of Taoism, which if broken can be considered 'committing a sin'.⁴³ Chapter 67 of *Tao-te-Ching* lists them as:

1. Compassion,
2. Frugality; and
3. Humility.

⁴⁴Taoists also believe that sickness is often caused by sin and bad deeds that disrupt the healthy flow of qi.

Afterlife

They believe that we don't just have one soul, but several that form individual consciousness.⁴⁶ At death, it is said that part of our soul returns to the Heavenly sphere/ realm, while the other returns to Earth.⁴⁷ Thus there is the idea of the continuation of one's spirit as it develops in consciousness.

African traditional religions (& African diasporic religions)

General

⁷ Despite the influx of Christianity and Islam into Africa, there still remain between 70 and 100 million adherents of traditional African (and diasporic) religions across the globe. ²The largest tradition, Yoruba, will be discussed below.

³The majority are based within the continent, with a scattering of believers in parts of the United States, South America and the Caribbean. ⁴It was colonisation that resulted in the dissemination of this belief system across the globe; many slaves held on to their traditions which they modernised when they moved to the new world.

⁵Despite the diversity of the different forms of religion, there are certain values they all share. ⁶Perhaps surprising to some may be the fact that many of these qualities are shared with Chinese traditional religions:

1. Ancestral veneration
2. Polytheism
3. Oral traditions
4. Mythology
5. Divination
6. Alchemy

Most are of the belief that there exists a higher power – a creator god (known variously as *Chukwu*, *Nyame*, *Olodumare*, *Ngai*, *Roog* etc) – that is remote and does not generally interact with man. ⁸He is believed to have created several smaller gods who generally deal with humans on a day-to-day basis. ⁹Upon death, people are believed to move on to the spirit world or reincarnated.

During rituals, singing, dancing, beating on drums and possession is common place. ¹¹On occasion, blood sacrifices are made to the gods and ancestors, depending upon the nature of the particular occasion. ¹²Various talismans are given to ward off any spells that may have been cast against the individual.

More often than not there are no holy books or texts that people make reference to. ¹⁴As such, priests who are trained in these practices are very important when any religious ceremonies are to be conducted. ¹⁵In any case, ceremonies tend to be communal, with children taking part from a very young age.

Oral tradition ensures that beliefs pass down from one generation to the next through art, song, festivals, proverbs, custom and belief.

Yoruba

It is the most influential amongst all the African traditional religions, because of the great Yoruba people and nation which existed prior to colonisation by the Europeans.¹⁸ Despite the dominance of Christianity and Islam within the country, the majority of its 15 million adherents are based in Nigeria, with practitioners also in Benin and Togo.

General Beliefs

There are no unified customs or set of practices that exist in the Yoruba religion.²⁰ Practitioners are concerned with the mythology and ritual techniques that will help them in everyday life, and these vary from location to location.²¹ It is a practical religion, with ritual techniques that deal largely with the problems of the individual in this world.

Yoruba magical techniques and rites are prescribed by the 'priest' (Babalawo) or 'priestess' (Iyalawo), known for their medicinal skills and divination.²³ The word *ogun* refers to either magic or medicine in Yoruba, and the Babalawo engages in magical practices, to both protect, as well as benefit the follower.

Unfortunately, the concept of witchcraft still plays a major part in the culture of the people.²⁵ An age-old belief, it is still portrayed often in popular local media.²⁶ Witches (*aje*) are almost always women, and the onus seems to be placed on the individual to prove otherwise.²⁷ Nevertheless, open accusations are infrequent, with people more likely to visit their local Babalawo in order to take preventive action against spells through rituals and talisman.

Main Deities

It is polytheistic in its belief, with *Olodumare* (controller of the universe) being the Supreme Being and creator of all things.²⁹ They believe He is a remote god that generally doesn't interfere in the day-to-day lives of human beings.³⁰ *Olodumare* is said to have created the *Orishas* (or divine beings) that were charged to take care of the world and interact with it.³¹ Whilst each is considered a manifestation of the Supreme Being's power, they are not him.

The major Orisa in a town will have shrines and a set of Babalawo with unique dress and insignia.³³ Each has its favourite sacrificial offerings, and its followers observe a distinctive set of food taboos.³⁴ Some of the more popular ones include:

- i. Obatala* (or Orisha-Nla) is said to be the Creator's second son, though some have suggested he is merely Olodumare's favourite Orisha. It is believed that he was granted the authority to create land over the water beneath the sky, and founded the first Yoruba city, Ife.
- ii. Ogun* is the divinity of iron, politics and hunting. As the patron of blacksmiths, they traditionally sacrificed animals in his name for appeasement.
- iii. Oshun* is associated with healing, fertility and the feminine essence.
- iv. Shango* is the god of thunder, war, fire and lightning. He comes from royalty, having been the third king of the Oyo Kingdom prior to his posthumous deification. Veneration of this orisha

enables the adherent to exercise a great deal of power over others, as well as themselves.

v. *Oya* is the Tempest or Guardian of the Cemetery.

vi. *Esu* (or *Elegbara*) is often translated by Yoruba people to describe *The Devil*; however, some believe this is incorrect. They say he is simply the Trickster of the Orisha pantheon, who deals a bad hand to those that do not pay homage or are deemed to be spiritual novices. As such, one would be required to make a sacrifice to the gods and/ or ancestors in order to restore balance in their life. Also regarded as the divine messenger, he is said to take prayers to *Olodumare*.

Along the way, the Yoruba have also incorporated gods from other traditions into the Orisha pantheon, such as *Nana Buku*, *Oshumare*, *Babaluaiye* from Dahomean Vodou.

Holy Texts

This is an oral tradition with no religious text to speak of, as such the role of the priests is very important for divination.

Divination is believed to give the *Babalawo* unreserved access to the teachings of *Orunmila*, the Grand Priest, and Orisha of wisdom. ³⁸Many of the divinations that these priests perform have made it into print in very recent times.

Proselytising

Though a Yoruba adherent may tell you about the tradition, you'd be hard-pressed to find any that will actively seek to convert you.

Concept of Sin

There is no concept of sin in the conventional sense of the meaning, as the focus is more on practitioners' day-to-day lives. ⁴¹Not observing the respective food taboos may be considered a sin, but there certainly wouldn't be any punishment from the gods. ⁴²The practice of witchcraft would certainly be considered a despicable act within the community. ⁴³But more often than not, they seek to cast out the evil spirit that causes the person to commit such acts.

Afterlife

The Yoruba believe in reincarnation, but where they differ from other faiths is their belief that this occurs within the family. ⁴⁵For example, when a person dies, it is believed that their spirit will be reborn back into the extended family. ⁴⁶A good example of this is the name: *Babatunde*, which means father has returned. ⁴⁷For instance, if the patriarch of a family has recently passed away, it is likely that the next child born will be given this name to signify his rebirth. ⁴⁸The same applies to the matriarch, the child will be named *Yetunde*, meaning mother has returned.

African Diasporic Religions

Due to migration, a number of religions across the globe can trace their lineage back to Yoruba. ⁵⁰These include the following:

i. *Santeria* (or ab'orisha) (Cuba) – 3 million followers (discussed in Book 5)

- ii. *Candomble* (Brazil) – 2 million followers
- iii. *Umbanda* (Brazil) – 400,000 followers
- iv. *Trinidad Orisha* (Trinidad and Tobago)
- v. *Oyotunji* (U.S.)

Sikhism

8 With a following of just over 25 million, Sikhism is still a relatively large religion. ²This faith is based mainly in India though there are Sikh communities all over the world. ³Because they are centred in India, many confuse their faith with Islam or Hinduism, even though there are no major similarities between them.

General Beliefs

⁴Sikhism is a strictly monotheistic faith which believes that there is a single god, with whom followers can develop a closer relationship through worship and meditation:

“Meditate and listen to the Name of the Lord, and give it to everyone. In this way, the filth of lifetimes of karma shall be removed and egotistical pride shall vanish from your mind.” (Guru Granth Sahib, pg 135)

⁵The name most often given to God is Waheguru (Wonderful Lord).

⁶There are five practices that are central to Sikhism, and they are known as the Five Ks (simply because the words all begin with K), introduced by Guru Gobind Singh. ⁷These are not really beliefs but outward practices that Sikhs must follow as a way of creating a visible identity for themselves.

1. *Kesh* – keeping hair uncut
2. *Kangha* – wooden comb carried to care for hair
3. *Kara* – steel bracelet worn to identify as a Sikh
4. *Kachera* – cotton undergarments
5. *Kirpan* – small dagger or sword

⁸Sikhism has a prominent military mindset, as Sikhs see themselves as soldiers for truth, honesty, loyalty and courage. ⁹There are also Five Virtues, vital qualities that all Sikhs strive to live by:

1. Truth (*sat*)
2. Compassion (*daya*)
3. Contentment (*santokh*)
4. Humility (*nimrata*)
5. Love (*pyar*)

Holy Text

¹⁰There is a single spiritual text used by the Sikhs called the Guru Granth Sahib which contains hymns, prayers, descriptions of God and rules of conduct for Sikhs. ¹¹Though it was written over many years by different authors (including notable people from other faiths), it was gathered together as a single book by the Guru Arjun Dev (the fifth Guru) and then given the authority as the only sacred text to Sikhs by Guru Gobind Singh. ¹²It is seen as the head of the religion, though the book is not worshipped in an idolatrous way. ¹³When unused, it is often wrapped in cloth and kept in a quiet area. ¹⁴Certain prayers are said when the book is first opened and again when it closes for the night.

¹⁵Parts of the Guru Granth Sahib are written in various languages but all are written in the Gurmukhi script that connects all of the words in a single continuous piece. ¹⁶The text is completely written in hymn form, with various types of musical measures attributed to different sections. ¹⁷Overall, there are 33 sections to the book, and 18 of them are divided in terms of their musical format (called ragas). ¹⁸Though the sections are titled, most references or quotes from the text are identified simply by page number because the layout of the book creates the same page format no matter what the printing (there are 1,430 pages).

Proselytising

¹⁹Sikhs are happy to share their faith with others, but otherwise do not actively seek to convert anyone. ²⁰They believe that faith must not be coerced, but needs to come from the heart. ²¹They are generally not too receptive to the practice from others for the same reasons.

The Concept of Sin

²²The idea of sin for Sikhs is primarily about any actions that would lead one away from spiritual growth, but there are a few things that are specifically prohibited within the faith. ²³Breaking the Five Ks (listed above) is one, and the Five Evils must also specifically be avoided:

1. Lust (*kaam*)
2. Rage (*krodh*)
3. Greed (*lobh*)
4. Attachment (*moh*)
5. Ego (*hankaar*)

²⁴They don't believe there is any evil figure like Satan that leads people to sin, but that these negative behaviours come from human nature itself. ²⁵There is also no specific path to atone for these actions: everything one does is believed to impact karma. ²⁶And though it is possible to repent of sins and ask for forgiveness, the consequences will still be borne in the next life. ²⁷Since sins cannot be erased, further positive actions must be taken to improve karma.

²⁸Sikhs are also prohibited from drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs. ²⁹The principle behind this is that a Sikh must be ready for action at any moment (particularly in the defence of others) and so anything that would impede this readiness must be avoided.

The Afterlife

³⁰As with most religions that embrace reincarnation, there is no immediate afterlife for souls following death. ³¹Positive and negative actions during life create karma, and this leads to the state of the next lifetime. ³²With enough prayer, devotion and worthy behaviour, you can break the cycle of reincarnation and your soul will be reunited with God.

Judaism

¹ Since it's such a well-known religion, it may come as a surprise that Judaism is actually a very small faith. ²There are only about 13 million Jews around the world, with the largest communities living in the United States and Israel.

³Of all the mainstream monotheistic religions, Judaism is the oldest, and forms the foundation upon which Christianity and Islam are built, and makes up the original part of the Abrahamic triad. ⁴The prophets of Jesus and Muhammad are not recognised by Jews, who still hold the original faith laid down by Moses.

General Beliefs

⁵Like its cousins, Christianity and Islam, Judaism is a staunchly monotheistic religion that worships a single God and holds that theirs is the one true faith.

⁶A great deal of Jewish practice involves following the various laws in the Torah and Talmud. ⁷Together, these laws are known as *halakhah*. ⁸You can see more about some of the laws in the 'Sins' section below.

⁹Jews believe that God will send a saviour to Earth in order to bring peace and harmony to mankind. ¹⁰Unlike Christians, Jews do not accept Jesus as the son of God, and continue to wait for this Messiah.

¹¹There are 13 Principles of Faith, which were written by Maimonides, a rabbinical scholar. ¹²These points illustrate some of the more spiritual beliefs in Judaism that are not tied to the various laws of the Torah:

1. Belief in God as the perfect Creator
2. Belief in the unity and indivisible nature of God
3. Belief in the non-physical state of God
4. Belief in God's eternity
5. Belief that God alone should be worshipped
6. Belief in divine prophecy
7. Belief in the revelations to Moses
8. Belief in the divine and revealed nature of the Torah
9. Belief in the immutability of the Torah
10. Belief that God is omniscient
11. Belief in spiritual reward and punishment
12. Belief in the coming arrival of the Messiah
13. Belief in the resurrection of the dead

¹³This sums up their beliefs fairly well, though the majority of Jewish life revolves around the laws of God.

Holy Texts

¹⁴The central text in Judaism is the Torah, which is believed to have been revealed directly from God

to Moses at Mount Sinai. ¹⁵This is very close to the same text that makes up the first five books of the Christian Bible (the Old Testament), which are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. ¹⁶In Hebrew, the books are known as Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bemidbar and Devarim.

¹⁷The Torah is often read with other texts, which are also considered important but are not revered as being directly from God. ¹⁸These are the Nevi'im (eight books of the Prophets) and the Ketuvim (11 books of 'writings'). ¹⁹When these three texts are grouped together, they are known as the Hebrew Bible or the Tanakh. ²⁰Many books from the Christian Bible are found in the Tanakh, such as the books of Psalms, Chronicles, Ecclesiastes and others.

²¹Like the Muslims, the Jews have a secondary book that complements their scriptures and offers further insight and understanding into the meaning of the Torah. ²²It is known as the Talmud.

Proselytising

²³Different schools have different ideas towards converts, with Reform Judaism being the most open to accepting non-Jews into the faith. ²⁴Even so, it is not a common practice to directly proselytise or attempt to draw people to the religion.

²⁵Converting to Judaism involves a lot more ritual and effort than most other religions, and the specifics will vary depending on which school you are looking to join. ²⁶A certain level of instruction into Jewish law is usually required, as well as an immersion in a ritual bath and circumcision for males.

²⁷The most likely avenue to convert people to Judaism is when there is a mixed marriage between a gentile (non-Jew) and a Jew. ²⁸Some schools will insist that the other person convert before they will allow the marriage to take place.

The Concept of Sin

²⁹The breaking of God's laws is the typical definition of a sin in Judaism, but with 613 commandments (known as mitzvot) throughout the Torah, there are many variations on which rules *must* be followed and to what degree. ³⁰This is where the different branches of Judaism come into play.

³¹Orthodox Jews will follow a greater number of laws, with the Haradi following them all. ³²Regardless, Jews consider the Ten Commandments to be beyond question.

³³One interesting and unusual result of the third commandment ("You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain") is that many Jews will use the term 'G-d' to refer to God in order not to take the name too casually or frivolously.

³⁴As mentioned above, there are many other laws that are followed to varying degrees by each school of Judaism:

- i. Not mixing dairy with meat (part of the kosher diet laws)

- ii. Head coverings for married women and for men
- iii. Resting on the *Shabbat* (Saturdays)
- iv. Males must be circumcised

The Afterlife

³⁵Concepts of the afterlife in Judaism are considerably different from Christianity and Islam. ³⁶The belief in resurrection after death is a fundamental one (it's one of the 13 principles of faith listed above) but there are not a lot of specifics on what comes after you die. ³⁷Jews focus more on *this* life rather than the one beyond.

³⁸The term *Olam Ha-Ba* means 'the world to come' and it covers the general idea of a Jewish afterlife. ³⁹It is also used to describe a period on Earth after the coming of the Messiah.

⁴⁰There is also no concrete view of a punishment in the afterlife (i.e. Hell), which always strikes non-Jews as being a little odd. ⁴¹People often assume that the large number of rules that Jews follow in their religion will lead to punishment if they are not followed. ⁴²That is actually not the case. ⁴³The laws are followed as a way of honouring God rather than as a way to avoid punishment (or gain a reward).

⁴⁴An entry in the Mishnah states:

“Be not like servants who serve a master for the sake of receiving a reward; instead, be like servants who serve their masters not for the reward and let the awe of God be upon you.” (Pirkei Avot 1:3)

Book Two: Questions and Contradictions

1 No religion is perfect, they are riddled with odd concepts, inconsistencies and confusion. ²In Book Two, we examine some of these discrepancies and subject religious beliefs to rational examination.

³As Christianity and Islam are the largest of the mainstream faiths, they are the central focus of this section of the book, but others among the major religions will also be covered, as well as some of the ancient religions and faiths.

⁴This section concludes with a chapter on the darker side of Christianity, an area which is generally not discussed because it doesn't fit the narrative of the faith. ⁵It also raises a lot of issues that many people in the know aren't allowed to talk about, nor are willing to.

⁶A few notes to bear in mind when reading through this chapter:

⁷Each quote from the holy texts is given in its entirety, even when there are parts of a verse that may not apply. (⁸A complete quote simply keeps everything in context.)

⁹Aside from these technical details, this section is aimed at the questionable elements of each religion, in order to get to the heart of each issue.

¹⁰You should never accept any faith without at least some level of scrutiny or examination. ¹¹Take a good hard look at these contentious problems that plague religion today.

Why Is God Male?

² The three main monotheistic religions all centre on a single *male* deity. ²God is seen and described as male in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. (³In Christianity, this is further compounded by the addition of Jesus as the *son* of God.)

⁴The official position is that God is genderless and that the use of all-male terminology in the various holy books is just a matter of linguistic convenience.

⁵Whilst this is a very simple and *convenient* explanation, it doesn't fully address the problem. ⁶Those who follow these religions are consistently conditioned to believe that their supreme deity is male whenever the words from their holy books are quoted, as well as in visual representations, which reinforces the notion that males are superior to females. ⁷Perhaps this is the entire point.

Women in Religious Authority

⁸The idea that God can only be represented by men seems to be an inevitable result of this gender bias. ⁹Only in very recent times have women been 'permitted' to hold the role of priests and other positions of authority within many mainstream faiths, and even when allowed, usually limited to a few progressive sects or denominations. ¹⁰The Catholic Church maintains its ban on ordaining women as priests, and there are similar restrictions in Islam and Orthodox Judaism.

¹¹There are some specific pieces of scripture that are used to justify such treatment:

¹²For Christians, the main Bible passage that excludes women from preaching can be found in 1 Corinthians, which states:

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the Law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” (1 Corinthians 14:34 – 35)

¹³Though there have been many attempts to water this passage down in a less sexist fashion, it remains a clear-cut statement about the role of women in the Christian church.

¹⁴The Quran makes no specific mention of women leading prayers at all, but there are some items in the hadith that address the issue of female imams:

“A woman may not lead a man in prayer, nor may a Bedouin lead a believer of the Muhajirun or a corrupt person lead a committed Muslim in prayer.” (Ibn Majah 1134)

¹⁵It is reasonably straightforward, though it offers the loophole about it being acceptable for a woman to lead a *women-only* congregation. ¹⁶There are other hadiths that also lean towards the banning of women from leading prayer, but they are ambiguous and subject to debate on translation. ¹⁷Overall, it is not generally accepted that a woman can hold a position of authority within Islam, though some

smaller sects do allow them to lead prayers in all-women groups.

¹⁸In Judaism, women are only banned from becoming rabbis within groups of Orthodox Jews, who are strict in interpreting one line of non-Talmudic Jewish law. ¹⁹In the Shulchan Aruch book of Jewish law, the Choshen Mishpat 7:4 states very simply:

“A woman is invalid to serve as a judge.”

²⁰Though it does not actually refer to rabbis or other religious positions specifically, the Orthodox have decided that it applies because rabbis are often in situations where they must act as informal judges in matters of Jewish law.

Polytheistic Viewpoint

²¹Religions that are polytheistic do not have the same degree of gender bias since they include entire pantheons of both male *and* female deities. ²²But even in such instances, the male gods often have a role of authority over the females.

²³In many ancient religions, there was a male god who was seen at the ‘leader’ of the other deities. ²⁴Zeus was in charge of the ancient Greek pantheon (as was his alter-ego Jupiter for the Romans), and the Norse gods all looked to Odin for authority. ²⁵Though Isis was a beloved goddess in ancient Egypt, the pantheon was led by a male – Osiris (or later Ra).

²⁶Speaking of ancient religions, they were almost all polytheistic, made up of both male *and* female figures. ²⁷The notion of having just one god is a relatively new idea. ²⁸The historical viewpoint of polytheism vs. monotheism will be addressed in a later chapter.

²⁹The Chinese and African traditional religions are no different in this respect. ³⁰Despite individual traditions being very distinct from one another, the dominant theme still persists, with male gods generally considered superior to the female ones. ³¹Usually a reflection of the societies views on the role of men.

Better Gender Balance for Hindus

³²One exception to the male-dominated class of current mainstream religions is Hinduism. ³³For the Hindu, the most encompassing form of God is known as the universal and genderless force of Brahman. ³⁴But that force is manifested through many other gods and goddesses. ³⁵Though the deity constructs in Hinduism are extremely complex, there is a triad of gods that are considered ‘*great gods*’. ³⁶They are Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. ³⁷You could consider this another aspect of male dominance, but each of these gods has a female consort who is of equal importance. ³⁸These goddesses are Parvati, Lakshmi, and Saraswati (being associated with Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma in that order).

³⁹All of the female deity elements are known together as Shakti, and are considered to be the central creative force in the universe. ⁴⁰This is a good balance with the spirit of Brahman.

Genderless Isn't a More Reasonable Viewpoint

⁴¹If you are able to look past the male-oriented presentation of the monotheistic God and truly accept the underlying dogma that God has no gender, that doesn't necessarily clear up the entire issue.

⁴²A non-gendered God may seem perfectly normal and fine for those who follow these paths, but even a slight moment of analysis should make one wonder. ⁴³If God is the creator of everything, and that is supposedly the case, then why are all biological beings reproduced by the joining of two sexes, with the female being the one to create new life?

⁴⁴With only a few exceptions, all life on Earth is born from the female after mating with the male. ⁴⁵This natural reality seems to strongly contradict the idea of a single genderless creator being. ⁴⁶A more reasonable position would be that our deities follow a similar form to us (union of both male and female), with the female as the ultimate creator of life. ⁴⁷Many older religions adopt this natural world-view, just not the modern monotheistic ones.

⁴⁸There is one mysterious Bible quote that seems to hint at this:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’” (Genesis 1:26)

⁴⁹A single deity would hardly refer to himself as “us” and “our”, so why such odd phrasing here?

⁵⁰Perhaps God had a partner (or partners) in creation after all (refer to the Gospel of Judas).

The Divine Female

⁵¹Now, to be fair, there are several elements of divine femininity in some of the mainstream religions, though they all come secondary to God *himself*.

⁵²In Christianity, the role of Mary has added a female element, though her status within the religion is somewhat ambiguous. ⁵³There were actually two Marys who have continued to be viewed as divine figures in Christianity: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, whom some consider one of Jesus's followers. ⁵⁴Each has her own role within modern religious views.

⁵⁵Mary who was the mother of Jesus is held in very high regard, often referred to as the Virgin Mary or the Madonna. ⁵⁶For those who consider Jesus to *be* God that also makes Mary the mother of God himself. ⁵⁷She holds a unique role within various branches of the Catholic Church, but is not worshipped in the same sense within Protestant denominations.

⁵⁸If you're not familiar with Mary, there is more to her story than just being the mother of Jesus. ⁵⁹She conceived him as a virgin, and was herself conceived without original sin. ⁶⁰This means she was born with a unique level of grace, *not* that her mother was a virgin as many people believe. ⁶¹Beyond that, she was also taken bodily to heaven after her death (the Assumption of Mary).

⁶²Praying to Mary is prominent amongst Catholics (especially women), who ask her to intercede on their behalf with God. ⁶³Though she is considered to have remarkable power in granting prayer, it is

ultimately God who does the work. ⁶⁴She is only a go-between. ⁶⁵Though people pray to her, she is not considered to be a goddess in any sense and is still definitely below God in the religious hierarchy of the Catholics. ⁶⁶So even though she has her own prayers, shrines, and feast days, Mary is still not a true deity figure.

⁶⁷And next we have Mary Magdalene. ⁶⁸While the first Mary was important because of Jesus's birth, Mary Magdalene played an important role during his later life. ⁶⁹She was with Jesus during the crucifixion, his burial and resurrection. ⁷⁰Mary was also listed many times as a favoured disciple and mentioned by name many more times than any other woman in Jesus's life. ⁷¹There is additional mystery surrounding Mary which will be covered more appropriately in the chapter on the Hidden History of Christianity.

⁷²Most people have a general impression that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, although it is not a fact presented in the Bible. ⁷³It was first suggested by Pope Gregory in 591 CE because Luke refers to someone named Mary as a "sinful woman". ⁷⁴With such flimsy reasoning, it seems as if this determination was more an effort to demean the position of women in Jesus's life than to create an accurate picture of her. ⁷⁵In 1969, Pope Paul VI declared that the sinful woman spoken of by Luke was another woman entirely, Mary of Bethany. ⁷⁶Even though Mary Magdalene has been cleared, the idea of her prostitution past still lingers today.

⁷⁷In the Apocrypha, there is a *Gospel of Mary* which is believed to have been written about Mary Magdalene. ⁷⁸The text is fragmentary, but current interpretations have Mary recalling certain teachings from Jesus that the other disciplines had not been privy to. ⁷⁹This continues to highlight her importance in his life.

⁸⁰Like Jesus's mother, this Mary has also been given feast days but is not prayed to in the same manner. ⁸¹Some Anglican denominations have elevated her to a higher position and pray to her for intercession just like the Virgin Mother, but it is not a widespread practice.

⁸²So far, this discussion has centred on Christianity, mainly because of the unique roles held by these two women. ⁸³There are no comparable female characters in other mainstream religions, though Mary (as the mother of Jesus) is included in the Quran since the events of Jesus's birth are part of that holy book. ⁸⁴She is praised in the Quran and usually named Maryam. ⁸⁵Still, she holds a very minor role in Islam.

⁸⁶Wicca and other neo-Pagan religions have embraced a more natural viewpoint about the main creator deity being female. ⁸⁷Though the pantheons of other cultures may have been adopted by modern Pagans in their worship, the over-arching idea that the ultimate deity is a Mother Goddess is common. ⁸⁸She has the consort of the Horned God, which embodies the male half of the universal energy.

⁸⁹Interestingly, this is also the case with Mazuists, who worship the goddess Mazu (literally *Mother Ancestor*), goddess of the sea and protector of fishermen. ⁹⁰Born as Lin Moniang in Fujian around 960 CE, she was deified following death. ⁹¹She is widely worshipped in the south-eastern coastal areas of China, as well as Taiwan and Vietnam, all of which have strong maritime traditions.

Means of Subjugation

⁹²As we've seen, the need for a single male God seems to be a relatively unique stance within monotheistic religions, even though it goes counter to many other natural or historical facts. ⁹³Has it developed as a means of men keeping power over women? ⁹⁴It certainly appears so. ⁹⁵There is no other logical explanation for this contention.

Why Does God need to be Worshipped?

3 As an omnipotent Being, why would God find it necessary or even a requirement to be worshipped?

²For those who question the concept of religion, this tends to stand out for the simple fact that it is a trait of the emotionally needy. ³Is it not enough that we acknowledge his existence? ⁴Rather there is a need to go one step further: to praise and worship. ⁵Other than pure ego, there does not appear to be any other reason for this.

⁶Is this a characteristic of mainstream religion or simply a misconception? ⁷In other words, is there scriptural evidence that says God commands us to worship him?

⁸Many Biblical references to praise and worship come from the writings of those who describe their own desire to praise God: the book of Psalms, for example, is filled with such exhortations. ⁹Most of this section of the Bible was written by David, so it can be argued that these aren't actual instructions from God. ¹⁰However, since they have been included, it would be safe to say that they are just as much guidance as anything dictated *directly* from God.

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.” (Psalm 150:6)

¹¹The book of Luke states:

“He answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’” (Luke 10:27)

¹²The book of Hebrews instructs not only us, but also the angels to worship God:

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28)

“And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’.” (Hebrews 1:6)

¹³It is clear at this point that it is a Biblical directive to worship God, a duty above and beyond simply believing and following his word.

¹⁴In any case, worship is a key doctrine across Christianity, regardless of denomination. ¹⁵There is no dispute amongst them on this ground.

¹⁶Does this hold true outside Christianity? ¹⁷Yes. ¹⁸You can find similar edicts about worship in the Quran and the Torah:

“I am God, there is no other God but me. You shall worship me and observe the Salat prayer to commemorate me” (Sura 20:14)

“You shall fear YHVH your God; Him alone shall you worship, to Him you shall hold fast and by his name you shall swear” (Devarim 10:20)

The Jealous God

¹⁹You can also infer that God compels our praise from the statements of him being a jealous God who will not tolerate the worship of any other gods or idols. ²⁰This is laid out clearly in several parts of the Bible, for example, in Deuteronomy and Exodus:

“Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you. For the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.” (Deuteronomy 6:14 – 15)

“Do not worship any other god, for the Lord is a jealous God.” (Exodus 34:14)

²¹The Quran holds similar warnings, even going so far as to state that this is common ground with Christians (Christians are the People of the Book):

“Say ‘People of the Book, come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah’. If then they turn back, say ye ‘Bear witness that we are Muslims bowing to Allah's will.’” (Sura 3:64)

²²Being jealous that one is worshipping another deity appears to be another in a long line of threats to keep us on the ‘right’ path. ²³Still, you have to wonder why such a negative *human* emotion is attributed to God at all.

Some Possible Reasoning

²⁴Within Christianity, the usual explanation is that God demands our worship for *our* own sakes, not for his. ²⁵Some reason that he tells us to worship him in order to create a stronger personal relationship. ²⁶This seems to be a reasonable viewpoint, but it loses all appeal when the level of punishment for worship of other gods is considered. ²⁷The entire concept of humans being punished by God is an issue in itself, which is covered in greater detail elsewhere in this section.

²⁸Presumably, worship leads to a closer connection which leads to Heaven, hence it is for our own good. ²⁹But then why are angels required to do so? ³⁰And wouldn’t it be clearer for God simply to ask us to get closer to him rather than worship him, since that is supposedly the end purpose? ³¹It doesn’t add up.

³²Another common response is simply that the all-powerful Creator *deserves* to be worshipped. ³³While

that may be so, it doesn't address the frequent demands that God makes. ³⁴Further, saying that he deserves to be worshipped isn't an explanation of *why* he must be.

More Than Just Ego?

³⁵We began this discussion with the assumption that God is an omnipotent Being that does not require anything from humans. ³⁶But what if this assumption is inaccurate?

³⁷For instance, what if God came into existence *because* of worship? ³⁸If you accept the possibility that our thoughts – and the energy behind them – have the capability of creation, then it is not difficult to see how thousands of years and millions of adoring believers could create a God where one did not exist in the first place. ³⁹With that concept in mind, a God created by belief would need ongoing worship in order to continue existence. ⁴⁰It wouldn't be enough just to believe, but we would need to have a strong and powerful relationship to provide him with power to survive.

⁴¹This isn't an ideal explanation since it doesn't rationally address why these entries are already in the Bible. ⁴²It certainly doesn't explain why so many writers included statements about the need for worship. ⁴³Even so, it is an interesting way to view this issue.

A Needy God?

⁴⁴So is God needy or does he simply add these commands as a way of further strengthening your relationship with him? ⁴⁵No explanation is ever really provided on this, so you will have to draw your own conclusions.

Why Does God Want Us to Kill for Him?

⁴ This is a controversial topic because God is, on the one hand, supposedly a loving deity. ²On the other, religious texts are rife with the command to kill in his name.

³This is one of the biggest contradictions in religion: that God has forbidden killing, yet has demanded it on many occasions from his followers. ⁴In essence, there is a get-out-of-jail-free card if it is done in his name. ⁵Even if you don't believe in a loving God, this is extreme behaviour.

⁶The declaration that we are not supposed to kill one another is not up for debate, or at least it shouldn't be from a moral perspective. ⁷It is also one of the Ten Commandments, regarded as unquestionable laws from God by both Christians and Jews. ⁸For Muslims, murder is considered a major sin. ⁹Yet we read so many examples of contradictory demands on the subject.

When We're Asked to Kill

¹⁰Most of these orders are rooted in punishing those who are not following God's laws. ¹¹But since sinners are doomed to an eternity of suffering in the afterlife, why would it be necessary to murder them? ¹²Seems like overkill:

“For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death.” (Exodus 31:15)

¹³Now, Exodus is riddled with such things, but to declare a death sentence on someone who works on the Sabbath is extremely drastic. ¹⁴There are similar verses with regards to adultery, worshipping other gods, taking the Lord's name in vain or for cursing one's mother or father. ¹⁵Unfortunately, it does go beyond these examples:

“All who would not seek the Lord, the God of Israel, were to be put to death, whether small or great, man or woman.” (2 Chronicles 15:13)

¹⁶So it seems that in some instances, simply being an unbeliever would be enough for a death sentence, even children.

¹⁷The Bible is not the only culprit in this regard. Similar examples can be found in the Quran, as a “... reward for disbelievers”:

“And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places where they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Inviolable Place of Worship until they first attack you there, but if they attack you there then slay them. Such is the reward of disbelievers.” (Sura 2:191)

¹⁸If you tally up most of the examples, the targets tend to be sinners, non-believers or anyone who is otherwise an enemy of the religion. ¹⁹It seems that the advantage in this lies with religious leaders who

could use it as a way of advancing their followers' faith (hence increasing their own power). ²⁰In fact, this makes more sense than having a God who demands it.

²¹Few people follow these extreme edicts today, and it may be questionable just how many people obeyed them in the past. ²²However, these verses are still contained within religious texts, waiting to be interpreted by an extremist as an excuse to kill. ²³Today, people seem to turn a blind eye to these verses and shrug them off as being relics of an older and more violent time. ²⁴But if you can decide that some parts of the 'holy book' are to be ignored due to cultural changes, why follow *any* of it? ²⁵And if you do, why not pick and choose what suits you?

When God Kills

²⁶Those are the instances when God has asked us to kill for him, but what about the many, many times God has directly carried out the killing himself? ²⁷Here are just a few of the better-known examples:

“I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish.” (Genesis 6:17)

“Then the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah – from the Lord out of the heavens.” (Genesis 19:24)

“When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.” (Exodus 13:15)

²⁸When God chooses to kill, it usually involves large numbers of people, even innocent children. ²⁹These sound like the acts of a deranged dictator committing brutal acts of genocide, rather than an all-loving Creator. ³⁰The first of these examples is about as severe as possible: destroying the entire planet and *all* life on it. ³¹Whether you believe these events took place or not, they create extreme fear in the hearts of anyone who questions authority.

Old vs. New Testament Gods

³²One explanation that Christians put forward is that times were different in the era of the Old Testament and that God had some sort of change of heart following the coming of Jesus. ³³Does that mean God's violent approaches during the time were wrong? ³⁴That would be hard to believe given God's omnipotence. ³⁵Besides, the commandment not to kill is also in the Old Testament, so that argument doesn't hold weight.

³⁶A similar line of argument is advanced about miracles and other events in the Old Testament. (³⁷See the chapter on why God doesn't reveal himself.)

Atrocities in the Name of God

³⁸If you go beyond the explicit commands to kill and the fatal acts committed by God, you also need to factor in how much death has come about throughout history on account of religion.

³⁹Christianity seems to be leading the way in this regard. ⁴⁰The Crusades ran for 500 years and were intended to free Jerusalem from Muslim rule, returning the 'Holy Land' to the Christians. ⁴¹During that time, it is estimated that over a million people were killed as the Pope's forces battled through the region. ⁴²All this occurred simply because the Church felt that Christians deserved the land. ⁴³Other eras included the Inquisitions, and the witch-trials that went far beyond Salem.

⁴⁴They usually go far beyond the rules laid down in the Old Testament, but scripture has been used as a sword to justify the killing.

Modern Day Examples

⁴⁵We do not see large-scale killing in the name of religion these days, at least not officially sanctioned or directed by the Church. ⁴⁶But this problem has not been completely laid to rest in modern times. ⁴⁷The conflicts throughout the Middle East, parts of Africa and Central Asia are very good examples. ⁴⁸Is it about democracy or about control and profits? ⁴⁹Is the U.S. (and its allies) still playing the role of the Christian conqueror seeking to overthrow the Muslims in the ongoing quest for supremacy? ⁵⁰Very much so. ⁵¹How this can be reconciled with an all-loving God is anyone's guess.

From a Merciful God?

⁵²Trying to reconcile all of this death with a loving, merciful God is impossible, so maybe the problem is that it is a faulty premise to begin with. ⁵³Perhaps the very concept is wrong, and his primary role is as a destroyer and punisher? ⁵⁴That is certainly something to think about.

⁵⁵This is a closer interpretation of the gods from other ancient times, such as Greece or Scandinavia. ⁵⁶The concept that any god was a completely peaceful or loving figure was not part of their beliefs, and the fact that some gods (or goddesses) were violent or made violent requests didn't contradict their natures. ⁵⁷That was simply the way they were.

⁵⁸Of the many questions that always come about when discussing mainstream religion, this is one of the hardest to reconcile because there is so little room for interpretation. ⁵⁹The hypocrisy of a God that commands no killing and yet demands killing be done is hard to excuse in any rational way.

Why Does God Live Far from Humanity?

5 This is a much more obscure question, in comparison to the others covered in this book. ²Why are we always told that deities exist or reside in a distant place far from Earth? ³Why wouldn't they choose to live closer to their creations, particularly when they seem to want or need our adoration?

⁴Of course the most obvious possibility is that they simply don't exist and legends have no choice but to place these beings as far away from us as possible or else we would see for ourselves that they are not there. ⁵Whilst this is a valid point of view, it's too simplistic for our discussion.

In a Physical Place

⁶Not all religions see their deities as astral creatures that live beyond the skies. ⁷The well-known pantheon of ancient Greece was thought to live on the summit of Mount Olympus, which was a very Earthly home.

⁸Interestingly, even when a real physical home is envisioned for the Gods, it is still placed at a distant and unreachable location. ⁹Since the Gods are not literal beings who walk amongst us, any religion that has its deities living next door, for example, is going to run into trouble when the bell is rung and they fail to answer. ¹⁰As they're not earthly beings, it's hardly surprising that they are not given to having a residence just around the corner.

¹¹Then again, you can provide a more earthly location for deities without necessarily expecting to see them wandering around us. ¹²The Neo-Pagans, certain Folk religions and Shinto take an interesting approach to this: they are of the view that the gods and goddesses live amongst us as an embodiment of nature; we just don't see them in their human forms.

¹³Some of the more traditional, older religions for example – African, Chinese, Japanese – believe they reside in specific locations, so shrines and temples are erected to appease them.

In an Astral Place

¹⁴Christians envision God as living in heaven, as the Bible has stated on more than on occasion:

“This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name’” (Matthew 6:9)

¹⁵But where is heaven? ¹⁶Throughout the Bible, there are references to earth being “under the heavens”. ¹⁷The very first line of the Bible states:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1)

¹⁸Many other places describe heaven and earth as separate places, and that heaven is somewhere above the sky. ¹⁹Of course, sometimes the term is used to describe the sky in general, so it's not always clear.

²⁰For the ancient Norse, the gods lived in Asgard, which is similar to the Christian heaven, though the landscape is very different given their polytheistic pantheon. ²¹The Norse believed that there were nine worlds connected by a tree called Yggdrasil, and that our physical universe was just one aspect of existence. ²²Asgard was another, which is where the Gods lived, and it was also where the honoured dead would reside.

In Our Hearts

²³There are also claims that God lives within us all, though we can't be sure if this is meant to be taken literally. ²⁴There are several examples of this line of thinking:

“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in your midst?” (1 Corinthians 3:16)

Everywhere?

²⁵There are also references to God existing everywhere at once – omnipresence – which contradicts the notion of a heaven. ²⁶At least this applies to the Christian and Islamic God.

“‘Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?’ declares the Lord. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 23:24)

“Both east and west belong to Allah, so wherever you turn, the Face of Allah is there. Allah is all-encompassing, all knowing” (Sura 2:115)

²⁷Other faiths seem to have their gods (and goddesses) living in a more conventional way, with a sole location that is not omnipresent. ²⁸And some simply accept that their gods do exist everywhere and do not concern themselves about the specifics. ²⁹Having the spirit of God within you is a strongly Christian concept that most other religions do not subscribe to because they see their deities as more independent beings.

Shifting residence

³⁰The location of a deity's residence seems to shift depending upon the purpose. ³¹When a scripture wishes a believer to feel closer to a god, he is described as being right there in their hearts. ³²But on the other hand, if the intention is to make you feel awed or intimidated, the description shifts to an unknowable realm above us.

Is There a Single God?

6 Since the dominant religions of the day are monotheistic (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), the answer is typically: yes.²As well as these three, Sikhism, Rastafarianism and Baha'i are also monotheistic.

³Not all mainstream religions are monotheistic though. ⁴Hinduism is a major mainstream religion, but it is most definitely a polytheistic one, with a very large pantheon of gods as well as goddesses. ⁵Most ancient religions were also polytheistic. ⁶Buddhism stands out as an oddity, as its adherents do not believe in a god at all.

⁷Christianity, Islam and Judaism technically worship the same god, so don't truly represent three completely separate religions. ⁸In fact, in terms of the number of religions, the concept of having just one god isn't that widespread.

Polytheistic View

⁹Even religions with many deities can have a single-god-force concept behind them. ¹⁰Hinduism is a prime example of this. ¹¹Even though there are hundreds of distinct gods in the faith, Hindus believe that Brahman is the single god-force that controls the universe. ¹²This single creator force is usually distant and generally not worshipped; it is through the individual deities that believers connect to him. ¹³The religion of Vodou also believes in a single creator known as Bondye, although followers worship individual deities known as the Loa. (¹⁴For the sake of this argument, any religion that operates with a multitude of deities will be considered fundamentally polytheistic rather than monotheistic.)

¹⁵Shinto is also polytheistic, going so far as to believe that everything has a spiritual essence (kami), including inanimate objects. ¹⁶Any of these kami may be worshipped or prayed to, meaning there are practically an infinite number of 'gods' in existence.

¹⁷Most polytheistic religions believe deities embody different qualities and characteristics, which creates a more orderly way of seeing the world and offers more tailored ways of communicating with the Divine. ¹⁸For instance, when one needs assistance with marriage or romance, a plea could be made to the god (or goddess) of love, or rituals to the gods of healing could be performed when one is sick. ¹⁹Many natural phenomena are also said to be gods (thunder, earthquakes, the sun) because early people needed a way to explain the things around them that were otherwise a mystery. ²⁰Either that or they knew something we don't.

Single God but Still Jealous

²¹The scriptures of all three monotheistic holy books have clear statements that their God is the one true god. ²²Here are some from the Bible, the Quran and the Torah respectively.

“Do not worship any other god, for the Lord is a jealous God.” (Exodus 34:14)

“I am God, there is no other God but me. You shall worship me and observe the Salat prayer to commemorate me.” (Sura 20:14)

“You shall fear YHVH your God; Him alone shall you worship, to Him you shall hold fast and by his name you shall swear” (Devarim 10:20)

²³They claim that there is only one god – their god; however, there appears to be a great deal of concern about a competition they say does not actually exist. ²⁴Within Christianity, God is well known to be jealous of the worship of other gods. ²⁵In fact, the Bible describes God as being jealous on many occasions, as well as prescribing the punishment for disobedience. ²⁶Islam doesn't go quite as far in describing Allah's anger at defiance.

²⁷Again, the jealousy seems to be a mechanism intended to instil fear into the hearts of believers and persuade them to shun other religions. (²⁸Of course, most are told that they worship a different god from the others, the intention of the leaders of the faith being to retain followers and grow membership.)

²⁹Christians often explain away the jealous references by the vague notion that an all-powerful God deserves our undivided worship and has the right to be jealous if we turn our backs on him. ³⁰That is a justification rather than an explanation, particularly since this is a negative human emotion, rather than that of an all-powerful being.

The One True Path

³¹A secondary part of this debate is whether or not any one religion is the *only* true path. ³²Religions that have a single god tend to be adamant that their belief system is the one true faith, and they consider other religions to be wrong or false. ³³Oddly enough, this includes each of the three Abrahamic religions even though they fundamentally worship the same God.

³⁴Is it all just a power play to create as narrow a view of God as possible in order to reduce the possibility of followers straying? ³⁵It does seem a little odd that most religions with one god are so forceful in their insistence of being the only true religion as well.

³⁶There is no such concept in Hinduism. ³⁷Hindus do not feel that their religion is better; they accept that any path to God is fine.

³⁸Not all polytheistic religions have held this viewpoint though. ³⁹The ancient Greeks were not as accommodating even though they were staunchly polytheistic. ⁴⁰It was typical policy in ancient Greece to punish people who did not worship their gods (specific deities may have varied by region or city), but that was more a matter of civil obedience, as they also believed that the gods would punish a city that did not worship and give sacrifice to them. ⁴¹They wanted to keep the gods happy in order to stave off any natural disasters. ⁴²They didn't claim that other gods did not exist, but simply stated that you should not worship them. ⁴³This made it somewhat less exclusionary than the modern monotheistic religions.

Why Would God Appoint Priests?

⁷ Of course, the term ‘priests’ in this context is used loosely to describe the collective of ‘holy’ men that are said to do God’s work.

²But if God is truly omnipresent *and* omnipotent, then surely he will be able to hear and see us individually. ³If this is so, then why do we need a myriad of priests?

⁴Many are put on a pedestal by their ‘flock’, because they – by their own declaration – are ‘the chosen ones’, worthy of contact. ⁵This suggests that ‘ordinary’ people are not worthy to receive God’s message directly, nor stand in his presence. ⁶Surely this is a contradiction in the message, and against the nature of what God is supposed to stand for. ⁷If he is present everywhere and all-powerful, then what is the purpose of priests?

⁸Why are they *required* to pass prayers along or help grant forgiveness on God’s behalf? ⁹It seems redundant, adding a level of unnecessary red tape to religion. ¹⁰This concept is predominantly found in the Catholic Church, though other sects are guilty of this too.

¹¹Protestant denominations do not generally take this approach; their prayers are believed to be heard by God directly as Jesus functions as a ‘priest’ on their behalf. ¹²One explanation for this view can be found in the Bible:

“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.” (Matthew 27:50 – 51)

¹³The reference to the temple indicates that when Jesus died, the need for a hidden temple of priests was no longer necessary. ¹⁴In light of the above Biblical reference, it seems unusual that this practice still persists or ever existed.

¹⁵One Bible verse that has been used to explain the need for priests is John 20:23, which reads:

“If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:23)

¹⁶Following his crucifixion, Jesus appeared to his disciples saying the above words. ¹⁷The Catholic Church considers this to be justification that forgiveness is to come from those who work on God’s behalf rather than Jesus himself.

¹⁸This is not a very convincing argument and it appears the Catholic Church maintains the need for the Pope and the priesthood simply as a way of continuing a centralised control over its members. ¹⁹Not only does it insist on keeping this unnecessary tradition, it also continues to insist that only men can be ordained as priests. (²⁰This male/female bias was discussed in more detail in the chapter regarding the gender of God.)

²¹Much like Protestant ministers, Rabbis can be very powerful within their local community as well. ²²It can be argued that in many cases they are much more so because they receive rabbinical ordination and education in matters of Jewish law, answering questions related to the law and settling any disputes that may arise. ²³Many individuals grow up attending services from a young age, so they look up to these people as authority figures, surrogate parents in many respects. ²⁴As such, when the ‘holy’ man within the community says something, it is accepted without question. ²⁵In their eyes, these individuals can do no wrong and are exalted as God’s manifestation on earth.

²⁶However, it must be remembered that these individuals are still human beings. ²⁷Whatever interpretation they make of the words within any of the scriptures is bound to be tarnished by prejudices. ²⁸It is unfortunate that many adherents of these faiths take the word of a man. ²⁹Also, because of the training they receive, a lot of these interpretations are merely regurgitation of a central message. ³⁰In essence, the ‘headquarters’ of the faith maintains control, and the word is farmed out to the respective *followers* without question.

³¹If God is omnipresent, then the question of why intermediaries are required must be raised. ³²If it is true – as is taught within all these sects – that God is all around us, then what is their purpose? ³³A contradiction arises within the message because these individuals are singled out as the chosen ones of God. ³⁴If this is the case, then where does the rest of the congregation fit in?

Historical Views of Priests

³⁵Though ancient religions lacked the central authority that many modern-day religions have, many did have an established priesthood that was deemed necessary for people to interact with the gods.

³⁶Ancient Rome and Greece both had polytheistic religions with large temple complexes built to appease a number of different gods and goddesses. ³⁷They were typically maintained and operated by priests (or priestesses). ³⁸Most religious functions of the time involved rather complex rituals and sacrifices, rather than simple prayer, which meant people with more knowledge and authority than the average follower were necessary to perform these tasks. ³⁹Ancient Egypt, Sumeria and many other regions had the same approach.

⁴⁰Religions such as Yoruba and Shinto also maintain a class of priests that perform rituals. ⁴¹Unlike Catholicism though, it doesn’t tend to focus on sin and personal salvation, which makes the comparison a little difficult. ⁴²However, these priests are required to perform many tasks that ‘ordinary’ adherents of the faith are not able to. ⁴³For instance, when it comes to ancestor veneration or offering sacrifices to certain gods, a ‘holy’ man must be sought for the purpose. ⁴⁴Often requiring years of training, it is exclusionary for those who simply wish to practice their faith. ⁴⁵It also acts as an extra barrier to the spirit world or gods that surely everyone should have access to.

Centralised Control

⁴⁶When all is said and done, very little reasoning can be found for hierarchical structure in religion. ⁴⁷Other than as a means of power and control, little purpose can be found to justify it. ⁴⁸After all, many have found their own path to the Divine through various means, both alternative and mainstream. ⁴⁹If a more personal relationship with any god is the goal, then surely it makes sense to communicate

directly.

Why Are Religions Based on Ancient Texts?

8 Even with the variety of spiritual beliefs on the planet today, one thing they all have in common is that they are based on ancient texts written by man.

²All of them *claim* to be inspired by God, but they are fallible because man is imperfect. ³One also has to wonder why supposedly intelligent beings would turn to books that were written hundreds (if not thousands) of years ago for guidance, accepting that they can accurately speak about life today. ⁴Can true spiritual thinking even be captured by the written word?

One Text or Many?

⁵Though most religions have a central text at the heart of their faith (typically the three monotheistic faiths), not all abide by this model.

⁶Technically the Bible used by Christians today is a collection of separate works, but we have come to see it as a single book because that is how it has been presented for many hundreds of years. ⁷Many other writings from the same era have deliberately been excluded (these are the Apocrypha, covered in more detail below) which should lead one to wonder why the officials of the day chose certain writings over others.

⁸Followers of Judaism and Islam believe that their religious texts were revealed completely by God (to Moses and Muhammad, respectively), which sets them apart from the Bible, as they are truly single documents.

⁹Hinduism and Buddhism both use a range of texts, which are also collections from many authors over many different time periods. ¹⁰These religions accept that wisdom and spiritual knowledge can come from a mix of sources, in contrast to single-book faiths that tend to operate a one-size-fits-all approach.

¹¹Even some of the monotheistic one-book faiths rely on additional texts as well. ¹²Though each has a central holy book, both Judaism and Islam have developed secondary texts that have become just as important. ¹³The Muslims use hadiths, and the Jews, the Talmud. ¹⁴Both are collected works containing judgements, decisions, opinions, interpretations and considerations about the main holy book. ¹⁵They are written by men and are used to help understand and interpret the main scriptures.

¹⁶Thinking logically, the need for secondary texts places the nature of the main scriptures in doubt. ¹⁷If decades of further interpretation and deliberation are required just to come close to understanding the main text, then it's unwise to place any faith in it. ¹⁸It's clearly not a wise approach to follow a book that requires a whole set of other books to know what the first says.

Apocrypha

¹⁹The nature of the Bible – consisting of separate writings to make one – logically leads to the question of why some were included over others. ²⁰Religions such as Hinduism that use a similar model don't necessarily fall into this category because of the distinct nature of each text, which means that

followers are free to pick and choose which they wish to follow (within reason). ²¹But when individual texts are bundled together for use as a single book, it's usual that some end up being excluded over time. ²²In the case of the Christian Bible, this is known as the Apocrypha.

²³Technically, the term refers to *any* text of dubious accuracy but in this case it is a collection of Biblical material that is no longer considered canon. ²⁴There is no single reason for this: some parts were left out because there was no way to clearly identify who wrote them or when, whilst others were removed because they didn't *fit* the prevailing attitudes of the time. ²⁵Some texts referred to Jesus in ways that contradicted the official stance of his divinity, and there were some writings that held Mary in too high regard for the male-dominated clergy.

²⁶Some parts were removed during the Protestant Reformation because they were not included in the original Hebrew versions of the Bible (such as the books of Maccabees, Judith and Tobias) whilst others (Gospels of Judas and Mary) were never included at all. ²⁷For a book that is supposedly inspired by God, there has been a great deal of editing and exclusion.

Translations

²⁸Not all holy books have suffered through multiple translations over time. ²⁹The Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs, for example, is still primarily distributed in its mix of Punjabi, Arabic and Sanskrit as originally written. ³⁰Several other Sikh texts are widely available in their original scripts and have only recently been translated into English or other languages to reach a wider audience. ³¹The original versions are still easily found, and can be compared to modern translations to minimise any loss or change in meaning.

³²The Christian Bible, on the other hand, has undergone *numerous* translations throughout history that have completely altered the original message. ³³The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew as well as in Aramaic, and then later translated into Greek. ³⁴The New Testament was mostly written in Greek to begin with. ³⁵Latin translations were also made, for both testaments. ³⁶Some of those were made from the original Hebrew, and some were made from the Greek versions (which had been translated from Hebrew already). ³⁷You can see where this is going.

³⁸A big part of why the Bible is more suspect than other holy texts is that Christianity was a major political force in some parts of the world, particularly where the Catholic Church had influence. ³⁹Changes were made during various 'translations', subtly amending the text to support the political atmosphere at the time. ⁴⁰These changes have persisted to present day, making it difficult to discern the original intent. ⁴¹On average, the most commonly used version among followers today is the New International Version, which is the reason it has been used in this book.

⁴²To further add to this confusion, the wide range of different denominations and divisions within the faith has led to a huge number of 'translations' of the Bible. ⁴³This has been more a matter of interpretation than true linguistic translation. ⁴⁴Versions have been created to simplify, modernise, or otherwise *tweak* the supposed word of God. ⁴⁵After so many changes and alterations, how can you really know what was originally intended? ⁴⁶And how can the 'perfect' word of God have so many different interpretations?

⁴⁷The issue of translation persists in other faiths besides Christianity, but is nowhere near as chronic.

⁴⁸As mentioned already, many other texts are still used in their original languages and there haven't been centuries of accumulated changes to deal with. ⁴⁹The Quran is still usually read in Arabic, and the Torah is still available in its original Hebrew.

Books Are Static

⁵⁰This is the main problem with a religion that believes in the literal translation of the words in a book.

⁵¹Life constantly changes around us; situations and circumstances are constantly evolving and present every person with a unique viewpoint of the world. ⁵²How can a flat book of unmoving text ever really address that? ⁵³Priests and other types of clergy claim to bring these words into a modern-day interpretation, but they are still basing *their* opinions, tarnished by their prejudices, on a static set of text.

⁵⁴It would make more sense to speak to any deity figure directly, through prayer, meditation or other techniques rather than rely on a book for guidance.

Divinely Inspired?

⁵⁵How much of a holy book is truly the word of God, and how much of it contains the word of man?

⁵⁶The Quran is explicit about this, and states that the entire text of the book was given to Mohammed (over the course of many years) from an angel. ⁵⁷But Mohammed is still a man. ⁵⁸A similar situation applies to the Torah, which was supposedly given to Moses from God over his 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai.

⁵⁹The Christian Bible is described as being 'inspired' by God, and there is ongoing debate within the faith as to what that really means. ⁶⁰How much came directly from the hand of God, and how much of it was simply the ideas of people who lived at the time? ⁶¹The bigger question might be whether it even matters.

⁶²The Bible makes it quite clear that questioning the text is not a good idea:

“If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name – the Lord your God, the Lord will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses.” (Deuteronomy 28:58 – 59)

⁶³Faiths with multiple sources (again, such as Hinduism and Buddhism) do not necessarily consider all their texts to come straight from any particular god. ⁶⁴Many are simply words of wisdom from earlier believers and accepted as just that.

Common Sense Approach

⁶⁵Of course, the written word is our primary method of sharing knowledge and it would be foolish to say that books have no place in spiritual discovery at all. ⁶⁶But you have to temper your belief in a book with common sense and your own personal experiences. ⁶⁷No book is perfect and no faith that is

bound by centuries-old words is going to be perfect either. ⁶⁸Wisdom can (and will) come from many sources.

Does God Care What We Wear or Eat?

9 This question really goes to the heart of the minute and rigorous laws that some religions have about the most innocuous parts of our lives, not limited to just clothing and eating restrictions. ²These types of rules are found in many religions, even those that are otherwise considered to be very liberal and free from dogmatic concepts. ³The question is simple: why do these things matter?

Foods That Are Prohibited

⁴Out of the major mainstream religions, Judaism has the most restrictive rules about diet. ⁵These come specifically from the book of Vayikra (Leviticus in the Old Testament of the Bible). ⁶Though these rules are found in the Bible, Christians on the whole have come to accept that these rules are no longer required by God, following the coming of Jesus. (It is interesting how they have chosen to ignore this part of the Bible.) ⁸The term *kosher* is used to describe the diet as laid out in the Torah.

⁹*Vayikra 11* is where you will find the most rules about clean versus unclean animals. ¹⁰The entire section is too long to quote here, but it basically outlines a rather complex list of animals based on whether they have cloven hooves or chew their cud. ¹¹Certain fish may or may not be eaten depending on whether or not they have scales:

“Say to the Israelites: ‘Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud. There are some that only chew the cud or only have a divided hoof, but you must not eat them. The camel, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is ceremonially unclean for you. The hyrax, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is unclean for you. The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is unclean for you. And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you. Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams you may eat any that have fins and scales. But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins and scales—whether among all the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water—you are to regard as unclean. And since you are to regard them as unclean, you must not eat their meat; you must regard their carcasses as unclean. Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be regarded as unclean by you.’” (Vayikra 11:2 – 12)

¹²Jewish tradition has taken it one step further and also forbidden the consumption of meat and dairy at the same time. ¹³They even extend that to mean these foods can never physically touch, and cannot be cooked in the same pots or stored in the same coolers. ¹⁴This is not a rule explicitly laid out in any scripture, but comes from a rabbinical interpretation of one single verse in Shemot:

“Bring the best of the first fruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God. Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk” (Shemot 12:19)

¹⁵From this single line, the lives of kosher-keeping Jews are affected. ¹⁶They seem to overlook the fact that the Torah also states that *all* plants and animals are given to us to eat:

“Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.” (Bereshit 9:3)

¹⁷Islam is known for its cultural restrictions, but there are only a few rules when it comes to diet. ¹⁸Pork is forbidden as is the blood of any animal. ¹⁹Animals must also be slaughtered a certain way to ensure that no blood remains in the meat (this applies to Jewish kosher laws as well). ²⁰Alcohol is also forbidden. ²¹The Quran does make it clear that these laws can be broken if the believer has no other choice.

²²This practice is also common amongst the Yoruba religion, whereby adherents are informed that their particular god does not like certain foodstuff. ²³In order to appease the orisha, followers are advised to avoid certain foods so as not to anger the gods. ²⁴Why this is so is not specifically known, but an explanation can be seen in the nature of these gods. ²⁵Unlike the Abrahamic religions that see their God as omnipotent, these gods are said to harbour human-like traits; therefore, are averse to certain kinds of food. ²⁶There is no belief that severe punishment will necessarily follow due to consumption.

Avoiding Violence with Vegetarianism

²⁷This is one area where ‘food rules’ do have a reasonable spiritual foundation. ²⁸A religion that espouses a life of non-violence will naturally insist that followers abstain from eating food from animals. ²⁹This is more about the actions behind the food, rather than the actual food itself though. ³⁰Depending upon the faith, there are often exceptions for eggs and dairy products, since the animals that produce them are not killed.

³¹Many Hindus follow a vegetarian lifestyle for these reasons, though the dietary rules laid out in their many sacred texts can be contradictory. ³²Beef is usually restricted or forbidden but not because it is considered unclean in anyway. ³³In fact, the cow is considered a very holy animal, and as such they choose to protect it.

³⁴A very extreme version of this is found in Jainism. ³⁵Their philosophy of non-violence extends to plant life as well as animals. ³⁶For example, root vegetables are not eaten, because their harvest will not only kill the plant, but also many insects in the process of digging up the roots.

Hygiene Concerns

³⁷One possible explanation for some of the food rules found in the Old Testament is that they were included more as health warnings than for a true spiritual purpose. ³⁸Perhaps at the time, certain foods were more likely to make people ill, so they were advised to avoid them. ³⁹It would have been a better choice to say so truthfully, rather than make a Godly edict about which foods must not be eaten. ⁴⁰However, there are some scriptural references that make this an unlikely explanation:

“You will make yourself unclean by these; whoever touches their carcasses will be unclean until evening” (Leviticus 11:24)

⁴¹If this were about germs and other health-related matters, then why would a person only be unclean until the sun goes down? ⁴²It would appear that there is much more to this than just germs.

⁴³The concept of being *spiritually* unclean, versus physically unclean is an odd one to understand. ⁴⁴If the spirit transcends the body, then it couldn't possibly be affected by the foods we eat.

Modesty

⁴⁵Again, some rules do have a somewhat reasonable explanation behind them – from a moral perspective for instance. ⁴⁶When it comes to clothing, the idea is that believers of many religions must be modest in their attire.

⁴⁷The concept of being modest is not extreme in itself, and is found throughout many mainstream and even alternative religious paths. ⁴⁸But why would that be? ⁴⁹Why is it so important to God that we hide parts of our bodies? ⁵⁰If we have been made in his image, why should modesty even be an issue?

⁵¹Though the clothing restrictions are on the whole harmless, when they become so drastic as to require a person (usually a woman) to cover their heads and/or faces in order to be 'appropriate' in public, this runs into the area of subjugation.

⁵²It's worth noting that most of the rules apply to women much more than to men. ⁵³In many cases it has become a way to control women and keep them in a lower status in society. ⁵⁴Dress restrictions are well known in Islam, yet the Quran offers only a handful of vague rules about modesty. ⁵⁵The need for a woman to be covered in black from head to toe is a cultural rule rather than a spiritual one.

⁵⁶One example of a spiritual dress code that isn't based on modesty is the turban of the Sikhs. ⁵⁷It is prohibited in their faith to cut one's hair. (⁵⁸Of course, this could fall into one of these minutiae rules itself. ⁵⁹Was this rule really inspired by God?) ⁶⁰One of the last gurus declared that the turban must be worn as a symbol of being Sikh, though it is also simply a handy way to wear extremely long hair.

Other Minutiae Rules

⁶¹Though eating restrictions and dress-codes are the most common type of pointless rules found in mainstream religions, there are others.

⁶²Here are a few examples found in Vayikra (Leviticus):

“Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head, or clip off the edges of your beard.” (Vayikra 19:27)

“Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seeds. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of materials” (Vayikra 19:19)

⁶³The ironic thing is that Christians no longer follow these rules. (⁶⁴Jews do.) ⁶⁵Christians judge them to be immaterial in a modern world, yet insist other rules must be followed to the letter. ⁶⁶Unless God

himself decides to reveal more to us, how can people make these determinations in good faith?

Test of Obedience?

⁶⁷It is often explained that these rules are ways to show dedication to God. ⁶⁸But why would a deity put pointless restrictions on people? ⁶⁹Just to see if they'll listen? ⁷⁰As a form of testing devotion? ⁷¹Other explanations involve the viewpoint that God was trying to create a clear and visible boundary between believers and non-believers. ⁷²How one feels in their heart is unseen so why would such arbitrary practices need to be followed to demonstrate dedication to God?

⁷³With so many things that we could be doing or thinking, it makes little or no sense why God is concerned with clothing styles or food choices. ⁷⁴You would think that a loving deity would be happy if you lived a good life and helped others, rather than fuss over what type of meat or vegetable one chose to eat – or not.

Why Doesn't God Reveal Himself?

10 This is a major question and point of contention between non-believers and those of faith. ²Why is everything left up to *faith* when God could simply reveal himself (*herself, itself or themselves*) and eliminate all questions and doubts that plague mankind about his existence?

³The typical response is that we should simply believe because this is what God expects of us. ⁴They say that we demonstrate more allegiance when we blindly believe absent of physical proof. ⁵Again, this is another example of a deity that goes out of its way to make things difficult, yet punishes unbelievers. ⁶Or at least this is what we're told.

Evidence in the Past

⁷What makes this question puzzling is that during Biblical times, God is alleged to have made his presence well known through miracles and disasters, as well as physically. ⁸For a God who wants faith without proof, this is contradictory.

⁹Of course, miracles as described in the Bible and other holy books are generally not historical fact and may never have taken place at all. ¹⁰But since they are accepted amongst believers, they should be considered when discussing religion.

¹¹God is believed to have made himself *visibly* evident in many places in the Bible, though there were as many negative manifestations as there were positive ones. ¹²God would intervene on Earth to save people, but also made his presence known just as much in order to punish people. ¹³One well-known example of an appearance of God in the Old Testament is when Moses and the Israelites were trying to escape from the Egyptians. ¹⁴To help them escape, he opened up the Red Sea to let them pass. ¹⁵Needless to say, this kind of display would make anyone a devout believer. ¹⁶So why does it no longer happen?

¹⁷Jesus is believed to have performed several miracles during his lifetime, including the raising of Lazarus from the dead, turning water into wine and walking on water. ¹⁸Oddly enough, not all of the gospels record these events the same way. ¹⁹That is to say, certain events are mentioned in some gospels but not others. ²⁰One would think that a disciple of Jesus would keep track of major miracles when recording the events of his life. ²¹Yet Luke does not include Jesus walking on water, and only John describes the famous water-into-wine miracle.

²²Outside of Christianity, the concept of miracles and overt manifestations of God is not as common. ²³For Muslims, one of the biggest miracles and physical proofs of Allah's existence is the Quran itself. ²⁴It is supposedly filled with scientific details that could not have been known by Muhammad, as well as prophecies that have since come true. ²⁵One example:

“And it is We who have constructed the heaven with might, and verily it is We who are steadily expanding it.” (Sura 51:47)

²⁶This is taken as a reference to the expanding nature of the universe, something obviously not

discovered during Muhammad's time. ²⁷A vague reference at best.

²⁸In Judaism, many of the Old Testament miracles (such as the parting of the Red Sea) are just as part of their belief as Jesus's miracles are for Christians. ²⁹Additional miracles are said to have taken place during early Judaic times, such as the miracle of the oil, which is the root of modern Hanukkah celebration.

³⁰To take an example of Godly activity from Hinduism, in the 13th century, Saint Jnanadeva touched a water buffalo and the animal then spent the next hour reciting verses from the Vedas. ³¹A shrine still stands at the spot.

³²Miracles are only one example of a divine manifestation. ³³The Bible, as well as the Torah and the Quran, have many instances where angels have appeared to speak to men and women to pass on messages from God. ³⁴Why do they no longer bring these messages to Earth? ³⁵Or perhaps they do, but never make it to the final cut of the nightly news?

³⁶Regardless of the specific religion, they all include acts from the deity which offered proof of existence in the past.

Are We Ignoring Modern Miracles?

³⁷In this modern age of science and scepticism, are we possibly seeing miracles but not recognising them, or choosing to ignore them for what they really are? ³⁸We have all heard stories of supposed miracles, such as unexplained healings and the infamous crying or bleeding Catholic statues. ³⁹They are shrugged off as superstitious nonsense, particularly when they take the form of a holy shape being seen in a burnt piece of toast.

⁴⁰If you wanted to accept these small events as further evidence that God does keep performing miracles, why are they such tiny events compared to the huge acts that were performed in the past? ⁴¹Wouldn't our persistent and possibly jaded scepticism be the precise reason why additional miracles *should* take place in this modern era?

⁴²But not all of these modern 'miracles' are considered small, even though there aren't many events comparable to the displays that took place during Biblical times. ⁴³There was one such event that took place in 1995 that Hindus claim as a major modern-day miracle, known as the *milk miracle*. ⁴⁴At temples dedicated to Ganesh around the world, it was reported that statues were seen to drink milk that was given as an offering. ⁴⁵The phenomenon is said to have lasted a few days and then stopped without explanation. ⁴⁶Interesting that this is another statue-based miracle like those found in modern-day Catholicism.

It Depends on What You are Looking For

⁴⁷Many religions see deity – and consequently miracles – existing all around us, infused in Nature and the Earth. ⁴⁸Many say that the beauty of the sunrise is proof of God. ⁴⁹For those that revere a distant God, this may be enough.

Rewards for Faith

⁵⁰Most of God's actions tend to be punishments for various moral indiscretions, whereas a closer look at Jesus's miracles shows that many of them are rewards for a follower having faith. ⁵¹Did these events truly occur? ⁵²Or were they created (or at least embellished) as a way of coercing people into having blind faith? ⁵³For example:

“Jesus turned and saw her, ‘Take heart, daughter,’ he said, ‘your faith has healed you.’ And the woman was healed at that moment.” (Matthew 9:22)

⁵⁴This particular quote refers to the *Bleeding woman* that was healed *because of* her faith. ⁵⁵Many of Jesus's miracles contain similar statements highlighting faith as the key.

⁵⁶Perhaps these ‘miracles’ are more allegorical and not true historic events: a dramatic way of saying good things will happen to you if you believe.

⁵⁷It could be that the punishment-oriented tales of the Old Testament were no longer being heeded so the writers of these texts decided to change tack and offer up a more reward-based incentive instead.

⁵⁸The most likely answer to our question is that most of these ‘God-inspired’ events never took place, but have been added into the Bible or other texts as an illustration of how good things happen to believers (and bad things happen to non-believers).

Why Does the Devil (Satan) Exist?

11 Though the title of this section specifically references the Christian notion of evil, the question is valid for most mainstream religions.

²Amongst the polytheistic religions, the idea of deities that embody positive as well as negative traits is commonplace. ³Having a god or goddess that rules over anger, war, destruction, deceit, etc., would make sense as these things exist as part of the human condition. ⁴The deities themselves are usually a mix of qualities and not strictly *all* evil. ⁵They have balance, just as humans do.

⁶On the other hand, a monotheistic religion that holds a single God to be omnipotent doesn't logically have a reasonable place to put a Satan figure. ⁷So why does he exist?

Where Is Satan's place?

⁸Some suggest that God and the devil create a balance of good and evil, but since the former is also considered all-powerful, there is no balance. ⁹It is odd that God would create humans with the intent of punishing them for failing to worship him or for living a sinful life, yet also create evil to lead them from his path.

¹⁰Why not simply create humanity without the burden of sin and temptation, allowing all to live in harmony with the Divine? ¹¹If God wants to be worshipped, that would make more sense from his point of view as well as ours.

¹²Those who follow a religion with a Satan concept say that he exists as a way of testing us to prove our worth. ¹³But shouldn't we already be worthy since we are created *by* God – in his image? ¹⁴And since our 'unworthiness' comes from sins caused by devilish temptation, then surely we are blameless.

¹⁵It would seem that the addition of a satanic figure is just another way of adding fear into the lives of believers in order to keep them in line. ¹⁶It also conveniently adds a cosmic scapegoat where the blame can lie when evil acts are committed.

Who is Satan?

¹⁷There are some conflicting ideas about Satan, and who this figure actually is. ¹⁸The simplest answer is that he is God's nemesis and the source of all evil. ¹⁹Not only does he have influence on Earth but he also rules over Hell.

Similar Figures in Other Religions

²⁰In Christian mythology, Satan is not only the great deceiver, but also the ruler of Hell. ²¹Not all religions have their 'evil' deities taking on such a dual role.

²²For the ancient Greeks, the underworld was ruled by Hades but he had no influence on the living and no particular interest in how people acted or behaved before they died and joined him. ²³Set was the closest deity to the devil that the ancient Egyptians had, but Osiris and Anubis were the gods who handled the dead and the underworld.

²⁴Hinduism doesn't really have a devil figure, nor does it create the personification of evil at all. ²⁵Shiva is seen as a destroyer, but only as a natural force and not one of evil intent. ²⁶His consort, as Kali, is another fearsome figure, though she is a representation of change and also the nature force of destruction. ²⁷Again, not an evil figure as Satan is made out to be.

²⁸For a Hindu, we all have evil tendencies within us; it's one of the natural facets of being human. ²⁹We make our own choices, which impact our karma and thus our future lives. ³⁰They believe that many of the temptations that befall us come from the karma we've built up and the lessons that our souls need to learn from. ³¹There isn't a single evil force out there that looks to derail humanity's quest for the Divine. ³²This is the general outlook of Sikhs as well.

³³Modern neo-Pagan religions are often incorrectly portrayed by Christians as being Satanic. ³⁴Since the concept of Satan doesn't generally exist outside of the monotheistic religion, this is not the case. ³⁵Neo-Pagans worship a multitude of different gods and goddesses, none of whom are Satan.

Scared into Obedience

³⁶The concept of the devil seems to function as a spook story, a bogeyman who hides beneath our (spiritual) beds to scare us into faith. ³⁷There seems to be little other logical explanation for the existence of such a being.

Why was Mankind Created?

12 Though the existential question about *why we are here* transcends any religious discussion, it plays a vital role in discussions surrounding different faiths and their principles.

²In many belief systems, our lives are supposedly to be spent serving and worshipping a God in the hopes of being worthy to spend an eternity with him – further serving and worshipping him.

³Otherwise we are cast into the depths of Hell.

⁴Many of the arguments put forth here are part of the Christian doctrine though they will equally apply to Judaism, as creationist details (found in Genesis) are also part of the Torah.

God Needs To be Worshipped

⁵This is a frequent explanation, though it raises more questions than it answers when reasoned logically. ⁶This has been addressed in more detail in its own chapter, but a further point should be made here.

⁷If, from a Christian perspective, we exist solely to do God's work and to worship him, then our total existence is to provide some sort of audience and appeasement for God's ego. ⁸This seems to be in complete contradiction to the notion of an all-loving God. ⁹It also means that nothing we do whilst we are here is relevant. ¹⁰Though this may be unappealing, and not reflect well on his nature, this seems to be exactly what Christians who hold this point of view are saying.

Perhaps for Company?

¹¹It would be a somewhat reasonable assumption that a spiritual or astral being might get lonely and need companionship, like a human taking on a pet. ¹²However, this suggests that there is no real purpose to our existence other than the relationship itself.

¹³But just how lonely are the gods? ¹⁴The deities in a polytheistic world-view are most certainly not alone. ¹⁵Hindus believe that their main gods all have wives and children, so they are clearly not desperate for additional company. ¹⁶Deities in ancient Greece and Egypt also had spouses, children and other spiritual creatures surrounding them. ¹⁷The heavens were busy places in those days.

¹⁸For the Abrahamic faiths that believe in only one God, loneliness seems like a more plausible scenario. ¹⁹However, if you follow this line of argument, it implies that God is lacking something; therefore, he is not the perfect being that he's described as. ²⁰When he created Adam (the first man) he recognised that he needed a companion. (²¹Note that Eve was created as his 'helper', not equal in the second, more popular creationist story.)

“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’” (Genesis 2:18)

²²But was the Christian God really alone? ²³Though the details are a little sketchy, it seems that God

was already surrounded by adoring angels *before* the creation of mankind. ²⁴A dream recorded by the Biblical figure of Daniel describes his view of Heaven:

“A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.” (Daniel 7:10)

²⁵If this is indeed accurate, then God is literally surrounded by swarms of angels who attend his every need. ²⁶Perhaps angels aren’t much fun, or they are less interesting than mankind?

²⁷The Quran also paints a similar picture of a large swathe of angels worshipping and attending to Allah:

“They [angels] celebrate His praises night and day, nor do they ever flag or intermit.” (Sura 21:20)

To Care for the Earth

²⁸This immediately begs the obvious questions, “Then why did God create the Earth?” and “Didn’t he make it self-sufficient?”

²⁹Immediately after God created man, he states that the purpose of man is to rule over the earth:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’” (Genesis 1:24)

³⁰This also begs the question why the animals need someone to look after them? ³¹They are pretty self-sufficient, and mankind continues to do much more harm than good to the planet. ³²Of course, just because we have not handled the task too well, it doesn’t necessarily mean we weren’t originally created for this purpose.

³³Was the care of the planet our intended purpose, or was it simply added to the text by a man who wished to elevate his status over all living things, and justify his mistreatment of the natural world around him?

³⁴This approach, that we are some kind of caretakers for the planet, would also explain why we were not created as heavenly beings in the first place. ³⁵If God did require companionship, why make us Earth-bound and separate from him? ³⁶This line of thought usually ends with the idea that we need to be tested first in order to prove ourselves, but this is treading over old ground.

Are We the Best Creation?

³⁷One aspect to all of this debate is the central notion that we are the pinnacle of creation, the best thing that God has made. ³⁸This is especially true if you subscribe to the ‘caretakers of the Earth’

theory. ³⁹We tend to *assume* that our intelligence puts us atop of the rest of the animal kingdom, the reason why God needed us as caretakers. ⁴⁰Have we created this theory due to our own egos? ⁴¹Quite possibly.

⁴²Some research has shown that some cetacean species (orca whales, and dolphins specifically) have proportionally larger brains than we do and they may be capable of extremely complex reasoning. ⁴³Some have even theorised that their language is a form of Clifford's algebra (a geometrical form of mathematics). ⁴⁴Could it be that dolphins are actually smarter than we are? ⁴⁵And if that is possible, why would God have such an interest in mankind since we are second-best? ⁴⁶Then again, perhaps the dolphins have their own religions that were revealed by God as well. ⁴⁷Wouldn't that be an interesting turn of events?

The Nature of Creation

⁴⁸Perhaps there is a more fundamental issue than man that we should be thinking about: the creation of the Earth, the universe and the entire physical plane. ⁴⁹If a deity has creative potential, perhaps it cannot help but let that force out. ⁵⁰Of course, this isn't a logical answer and merely states that a Creator Force created us *because it can*. ⁵¹But if that drive to create is at the base nature of a deity, then maybe it can't be denied and has no other reason beside that.

Why is Religion So Concerned with Sex?

13 Sexuality and many topics associated with it often form a large part of religious belief, or at least of their practice. ²Unfortunately, no matter how many times we discuss these issues, there are seldom any real answers. ³Most likely it comes down to the basic notion of power and control.

Maintaining Power over Women

⁴A large number of sexual references in religion are intended (or at least used) to place men in a position of control over women. ⁵The number of references in the Bible to men having unreasonable power over women are too great to list, which says a lot about the nature of the religion. ⁶But to stick to the topic of this chapter, we will only look at those of a sexual nature:

“If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father 50 shekels of silver. He must marry the young woman for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.” (Deuteronomy 22:28 – 29)

⁷There are almost too many elements in this verse to dissect here: a woman who is raped must marry her attacker, the attack can be measured in financial terms, compensation is due to her father, not to her. ⁸Clearly, there is no concern for the woman herself. ⁹Again, this is not practiced in this day and age. ¹⁰It has become another part of the Bible (and Torah) that Christians (and Jews) have *chosen* to overlook.

¹¹In another commentary on the ‘proper’ role of women, Peter declares:

“Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives,” (1 Peter 3:1)

¹²One possible reason for encouraging marriage is that it gives an opportunity to further assert dominance over women. ¹³If nothing else, this passage encourages men to tell their wives to ‘submit’ to them or they’re violating an order from God.

¹⁴The issue of banning birth control is a further example of subjugation, as it prevents a woman from taking ownership of her own body. ¹⁵Though this is a very contentious issue, mainly within the Catholic Church, there isn’t much in the Bible about it. ¹⁶Ironically, many Catholic women do use birth control even though it is expressly forbidden in their Church’s doctrine. ¹⁷That being said, it still continues to spur legal and political debates across the world.

Precious Virginity

¹⁸Why there was ever such a high value placed on virginity we will never know, but this concept goes beyond religion and is a dominant theme throughout many cultures of the world. ¹⁹Many religious rules and regulations differ between virgins and non-virgins. ²⁰Of course, since you are supposed to

stay a virgin until marriage, it is presumed than any non-virgin is ‘happily’ married. ²¹Either that or she is considered promiscuous. (²²Note that it is *always* women’s virginity that is the issue, not men’s.)

²³As long as virginity is held in such high (and pointless) regard, the attitude towards sex will remain restricted, particularly when it is outside of marriage. ²⁴A woman’s value should never be based upon how many men she does or doesn’t sleep with.

Modesty

²⁵Many religious texts are concerned with modesty, and present various rules and regulations about how believers (usually women) are to be covered up when in public.

²⁶The main reasoning behind this is that women will tempt men because they have too much flesh exposed. ²⁷Of course, the blame is squarely placed at the feet of the woman. ²⁸But doesn't this mean the problem is the men’s lack of self-control rather than the women’s choice of dress? ²⁹Even by today’s social standards, this argument is still contentious, though the level of ‘acceptable’ modesty can vary from culture to culture. ³⁰It also begs the question of why God would make women attractive if the intention was not for men to be drawn to them.

³¹The Bible wants women (but not men) to dress modestly:

“I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes” (1 Timothy 2:9)

³²Unfortunately, the idea of ‘modesty’ is extremely subjective and always open to interpretation. ³³Different Christian sects have interpreted the above verse to varying degrees of severity, some even literally.

³⁴When it comes to modesty, Islam cannot be left out of the discussion. ³⁵Muslim women are sometimes expected to dress in flowing robes that cover up the body, head and/or face, and in certain countries, even their hands and feet. ³⁶Known as a *hijab*, it is usually worn by females beyond the age of puberty, in the presence of any non-related adult males. ³⁷This is all meant to be in the name of modesty, but the reality is that the Quran makes the same generic statements that one would find in the Bible:

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what would ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers (....)” (Sura 24:31)

³⁸Whilst this is more detailed than the verse in the Bible, it is still open to interpretation. ³⁹The use of a veil to cover up the entire body is one that has developed through tradition and culture rather than true religious practice, as not all countries and practicing Muslims observe this.

Allowable Relationships

“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.” (1 Corinthians 7:1 – 2)

⁴⁰According to mainstream religious doctrine, if one is to have sex then it must be within the confines of marriage. ⁴¹To varying degrees, other sexual relationships are also forbidden. ⁴²By placing strict limits on what should otherwise be a natural act between consenting individuals, religion maintains control over every aspect of the follower’s life. ⁴³Why else would God have a problem with two people having sex?

⁴⁴Please note that the verse is explicit in referring to male/female relationships *only*. ⁴⁵Same-sex couples are excluded. ⁴⁶Homosexuality is considered an act that is punishable by death:

*“If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.”
(Leviticus 20:13)*

⁴⁷Statements against homosexuality are also to be found in the Quran:

“Lo! Ye come with lust unto men instead of women. Nay, but ye are wanton folk” (Sura 7:81)

⁴⁸It’s likely that certain relationships were frowned upon for cultural reasons and written into various texts for this reason alone, rather than because any deity has an actual problem with them. ⁴⁹There is no rational reason for prohibiting sex between consenting adults, when there is no harm to society. ⁵⁰What adults do behind closed doors should be their business alone. ⁵¹And if God created us all in his image, then surely this is a natural act.

⁵²There is a curious case to be found in the Bible (and Torah) that appears to go unpunished, so perhaps we are to accept that the act in itself was not a sin. ⁵³Please note that both Christians and Muslims revere Lot as a righteous man of God. ⁵⁴According to Christian mythology, Jesus is a descendant of Lot through David’s great-grandmother, Ruth, who is descended from Lot’s son, Moab. ⁵⁵In reference to Sodom and Gomorrah, Simon Peter described him as “a righteous man amongst the wicked”. ⁵⁶But perhaps they don’t feel this way about his daughters:

“One day the older daughter said to the younger, ‘Our father is old, and there is no man around here to give us children—as is the custom all over the earth. Let’s get our father to drink wine and then sleep with him and preserve our family line through our father.’ That night they got their father to drink wine, and the older daughter went in and slept with him. He was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up. The next day the older daughter said to the younger, ‘Last night I slept with my father. Let’s get him to drink wine again tonight, and you go in and sleep with him so we can preserve our family line through our father.’ So they got their father to drink wine that night also, and the younger daughter went in and slept with him. Again he was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up. So both of Lot’s daughters became pregnant by

Concubines and Multiple Wives

⁵⁷With so many restrictions on sexuality, this stands out as an unusual point. ⁵⁸Both the Bible and the Quran have repeated mentions about concubines, multiple wives and married men having children with servants. ⁵⁹It’s the one big exception to the marriage-only rules – and of course it only applies to men.

⁶⁰*Prophet* Muhammad himself had anything from around 12 to 24 wives, although the exact number is not known. ⁶¹It is said that he married the youngest at five or six years old, consummating the marriage when she was only *nine* years old. (⁶²Fortunately, there are laws against paedophilia these days!) ⁶³The Bible reports, in 1 King 11, that Solomon officially had 700 wives and 300 concubines. ⁶⁴He is also revered as a righteous man.

⁶⁵Are these events to be taken as directives from God or simply to be ignored as being part of a different time? ⁶⁶If the latter, then how can one justify keeping the other edicts about sexual relationships and marriage?

Celibate Priests

⁶⁷We can’t forget the debate on whether or not a priest should be allowed to have sex. ⁶⁸Though this is a practice seen mainly amongst Catholics, there are other spiritual groups that hold to celibacy as a ‘sacred’ calling. (⁶⁹Buddhist monks, for example, also abstain from sex.) ⁷⁰For the Catholics, it was a decision made by the leaders of the Church many hundreds of years after the death of Jesus. ⁷¹Some claim that the church started to restrict marriage as a way of keeping control of church property that was usually passed down to children upon death. ⁷²This eventually led to the requirement of celibacy. ⁷³It’s not a Biblical mandate at all, but a remnant of a millennia-old power grab that no one has thought to reverse. ⁷⁴Are the high incidences of paedophilia amongst the clergy the result of these archaic, out-of-touch rules? ⁷⁵In which case, restricting sex has caused far more harm than good. ⁷⁶Whatever the case, there are many that continue to suffer at the hands of abusers.

A Non-Mainstream Look

⁷⁷This topic has covered the three monotheistic faiths almost exclusively, so a few words on other viewpoints need to be included.

⁷⁸Buddhism and Hinduism are generally not that restrictive when it comes to sexuality and have few actual dogmatic problems with it. ⁷⁹Buddhists try to diminish any attachment to material pleasures but sexuality is not explicitly regulated.

⁸⁰Modern neo-Pagan religions embrace sexuality as a normal part of life and actively use the theme of fertility in many of their sacred beliefs and rituals. ⁸¹The same is true of certain mystical Taoist sects during the Han dynasty who are said to have practiced certain sexual techniques, known as *HeQi*, meaning “Joining Energy”. ⁸²This supports the view of certain secret societies who believe that because a great amount of energy is produced at the point of orgasm, one’s predominant thought at climax is likely to come true.

⁸³In the Yoruba tradition, witches are generally described as having an insane appetite for sex. ⁸⁴Unsurprisingly, most of those who are accused of being witches tend to be women. ⁸⁵Fortunately, witch hunts are few and far between in modern times. ⁸⁶Other than this, the tradition has little actual doctrine when it comes to sex.

⁸⁷Some religions in the past even embraced sex. ⁸⁸During the pagan festival of Saturnalia (in honour of the deity Saturn), as well as feasts, carnivals, gift-giving and gambling, orgies are said to have been engaged in.

Arbitrary Control

⁸⁹There are no answers presented by religion, other than the need to exert further control over followers. ⁹⁰By stipulating that natural acts such as sex, love and relationships be regulated by religion, the leaders of these organisations are able to establish a greater level of power and control over every aspect of the lives of followers.

Overt Spiritual Contradiction

14 This chapter will provide examples to illustrate how religious texts directly contradict themselves.

In the Torah

²Much of the five books of the Torah involve mythical events such as the creation of the world and the flood of Noah, so contradictions are almost expected. ³But if you are going to found a religion based upon certain historical events, you would at least expect them to be written with consistency.

⁴The problems start from the very beginning: the creation of Earth. ⁵There are two accounts of this particular event (one wonders why it needs to be included twice), that differ substantially from one another.

⁶In *Bereshit 1:1 – 31* and *Bereshit 2:1 – 3*, the Torah presents the sequence of how God created the Heavens and the Earth, separated light from darkness and then proceeded to create trees, fruit, creatures, birds, fish, livestock, animals and finally, man and woman at the same time. ⁷Curiously, *Bereshit 2:4* follows immediately after this with a completely contradictory creationist story. ⁸It commences by stating that this is the account of how “the heaven and earth were created”. ⁹In this version, water floods the earth, then God forms Adam *only*. ¹⁰It is only then that God gives him trees, then animals, birds and wild animals. ¹¹It is not until *Bereshit 2:21 – 23* that God causes Adam to sleep and takes a rib from him to form Eve to be his helper.

¹²Of course, no one was around to witness it, but if the information was provided by God himself, then why does the story change?

¹³The legendary story of Noah and the ark includes a command to bring animals on board. ¹⁴But how many?

“You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you.” (*Bereshit 6:19*)

“Take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth” (*Bereshit 7:2 – 3*)

¹⁵The Torah is very clear on appropriate relationships, specifically forbidding incestuous relationships of any kind. ¹⁶But it seems just fine for Abraham to marry his own half-sister:

“Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere.” (*Vayikra 18:9*)

“Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife.” (*Bereshit 20:12*)

In the Bible

¹⁷It is commanded very clearly in the Ten Commandments that: “Thou shall not kill”, yet there are many occasions when it is directed that people be put to death, as was discussed in an earlier chapter.

¹⁸In a sense, we’ve already covered some Biblical contradictions since the books of the Torah are also part of the Old Testament.

¹⁹Here are a few additional examples, taken mainly from the New Testament, to balance things out.

²⁰Though they seem like small matters, there are several historical details that vary from one book to the next. ²¹It may not seem relevant but if you are going to look to certain writings in order to understand religious events, you have to wonder why they do not match. ²²This begs the question: who is right, and how can you trust *any* of the recollections to begin with?

²³One such example is the story of Jesus’s crucifixion. ²⁴It is a crucial event for his followers, the pinnacle of *modern* Christianity, yet three different versions of the last words are recorded across three of the Gospels:

“About three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)” (Matthew 27:46)

“Jesus called out in a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit’. When he had said this, he breathed his last.” (Luke 23:46)

“When he received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (John 19:30)

²⁵Some may venture to argue that you cannot condemn an entire faith based on such minute details, but you have to wonder about *any* sort of accuracy when even such important historical moments are recorded inconsistently.

²⁶Having our sins forgiven by God is vital for salvation, but are the rules for this forgiveness consistent? ²⁷Are some sins unforgivable or can all acts be forgiven by God?

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

“Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.”
(Mark 3:28 – 29)

“Joshua said to his people, ‘You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God, he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.’” (Joshua 24:19)

²⁸The first verse makes it clear that *all* of our transgressions can be forgiven by God. ²⁹But there are many further examples where certain sins are unforgivable. ³⁰The example from Mark even contradicts itself in the next verse.

In the Quran

³¹The text of the Quran is written in a fairly ‘poetic’ style which isn’t always that straightforward, particularly when it’s been translated into English. ³²This makes it harder to pull out concrete points on a verse-by-verse basis. ³³Still, there are a few clear contradictions that stand out.

³⁴One notable religious restriction for Muslims is that alcohol is not to be consumed. ³⁵But the Quran also says that strong drink is good for you:

“Strong drink and games of chance. Say: in both is great sin” (Sura 2:219)

“And of the fruits of the date-palm and grapes, whence ye derive strong drink and good nourishment. Lo! Therein is indeed a portent for people who have sense” (Sura 16:67)

³⁶There are further contradictions that are more fundamental to the beliefs of Muslims than just prohibited foods. ³⁷How should Muslims treat non-believers, for one thing? ³⁸It’s a bit of a stereotype that Muslims are hostile towards non-Muslims, but the Quran is a little confusing on the subject:

“Tell those who believe, to forgive those who do not hope for the Days of Allah, it is for Him to recompense (for good or evil) each person according to what they have earned” (Sura 45:14)

“Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth” (Sura 9:29)

³⁹What about the nature of evil? ⁴⁰Are we responsible for evil actions or does that come from Allah?

⁴¹The Quran claims both:

“If some good befalls them, they say ‘This is from Allah.’ But if evil, they say ‘This is from thee’ (O prophet). Say ‘All things are from Allah’” (Sura 4:78)

“Whatever good, (O man!) happens to thee, is from Allah. But whatever evil happens to thee, is from thyself” (Sura 4:79)

⁴²What makes these contradictory statements even more interesting is that they are literally beside each other in the Quran. ⁴³One line says that all things come from Allah, but the very next verse says that evil comes from yourself.

Compared to Modern Knowledge

⁴⁴A lot of writings in these books make reference to supposed facts that have since been discovered to be false or at least incorrect. ⁴⁵For a book that supposedly came from God himself, how could this be?

⁴⁶Shouldn't everything be accurate regardless of accepted human knowledge available at the time?

⁴⁷We'll leave the very questionable issues of the creation of the world out of this since the 'bad science' involved there would take an entire chapter (but you can read more on this in the next chapter on Creationism).

⁴⁸Many entries in each of the holy books appear to be written in metaphor or otherwise poetic text, so you have to accept that some phrasing isn't intended to be scientifically accurate.

⁴⁹During ancient times, it was believed that the Earth was flat, and knowledge of the sun, the planets and stars was limited. ⁵⁰This is often reflected in the holy texts:

“Till, when he (the traveller Zul-qarnain) reached the setting-place of the Sun, he found it going down into a muddy spring.” (Sura 18:86)

*“Tremble before him, all the Earth! The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.”
(1 Chronicles 16:30)*

“The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” (Matthew 24:29)

⁵¹The realms of astronomy aren't the only places where we find erroneous information in mainstream religious texts. ⁵²Biology is another area where these books fall short. ⁵³Many Old Testament people are described as living for many hundreds of years, and creatures such as the unicorn, sea leviathan, satyrs and a cockatrice are all mentioned (though modern translations have removed these fanciful references).

Many Books Equals Many Thoughts

⁵⁴Religions that rely on a collective of texts, particularly those written over a long period of time by many writers, are the most likely to be contradictory.

⁵⁵When a faith uses a single book (like the Bible or the Quran), contradictions are a significant problem, especially when the books are declared to have been inspired by God. ⁵⁶Clearly, when things are stated that are in direct opposition to another, many questions should arise. ⁵⁷Yet it seems to be less of an issue for believers since their faith requires them to believe regardless of the details.

⁵⁸For faiths that are built upon separate texts, the need for them to be perfectly aligned is not as important. ⁵⁹Hindu scriptures, for example, do not claim to be infallible nor unquestionable. ⁶⁰Their belief is that each is valuable in its own right, with the aim to bring one closer to the Divine.

The Concept of Creationism

15 How do various mainstream religions handle the big question: “Where did we all come from?”

²One reason why Creationism is such a hot topic is that it is one of the very few areas in any religion that ever comes head-to-head with science. ³And since science seeks to provide a rationale, that means religion usually falls short.

⁴The need to explain our origins goes beyond any specific religion, and you'll find stories, tales and myths about the creation of the world in almost every single belief system and culture around the planet. ⁵We will talk in detail about a few creation stories through the course of this chapter, but contrast the Christian (along with Jewish and Muslim) concept of creation with science.

What Does Science Say?

⁶Admittedly, even science isn't perfect when it comes to establishing something that happened so long ago. ⁷Very little can truly be *proven* though many theories are generally accepted by the scientific community based on the evidence we see around us today.

⁸According to scientific research, the Earth is approximately four to five billion years old. ⁹This has been estimated by testing radioactive elements in the earth, as well as testing the age of meteors that have landed on the planet.

¹⁰However, if you accept a literal Biblical history of the planet (including that the planet was created in six standard 24-hour days), then our Earth should only be around 6,000 years old. ¹¹This is based upon the timelines and historical events documented in the Bible. ¹²Needless to say, there's a huge discrepancy of about 4,999,994,000 years.

¹³That covers just the Earth itself but the rest of the universe should be part of the discussion.

The Big Bang

¹⁴One prevailing theory about the creation of the universe (not just our own little planet) is that there was a single cataclysmic event known casually as *The Big Bang*. ¹⁵The explosion created matter from energy and the entire universe is still expanding outwards from the blast.

¹⁶By examining the movement of planetary bodies with this expansion, scientists have made an estimate of how long it has been since the point of origin (i.e. The Big Bang). ¹⁷Currently, the estimate is approximately 14 billion years.

¹⁸Those who believe that a Creator God is behind our existence turn their noses up at this entire theory because they feel it provides an impossible scenario where something was born from nothing. ¹⁹And yet, that is the very situation they are suggesting with a God-created universe.

The Long Days of God

²⁰Christians believe that God created the world and all living things over the course of six days. ²¹He is said to have rested on the seventh, which is why Christians and Jews both take a day of rest each week (Saturday or Sunday, depending on your viewpoint).

²²According to Genesis 1, the story goes that creation took place in the following sequence:

1. Light and darkness
2. Sky and water
3. Dry land and plants
4. Sun, moon, stars
5. Sea creatures and birds
6. Land animals and man
7. God rested

²³The entire account can be found in the Book of Genesis but it is too long to include here. ²⁴The basic concept of a seven-day creation period is the same in the Quran and the Torah.

²⁵This brings us to our first attempt to explain the religious viewpoint: that God measures events in particularly *long* days. ²⁶In other words, many Christians (and Jews) suggest that the days described in the Bible are not literal and should not be taken to mean typical 24-hour days as we know them. ²⁷If you consider the days to be metaphorical, representing billions of years, for example, then this could be an accurate representation of how life on Earth possibly came about. ²⁸This is the viewpoint of those that attempt to reconcile the Biblical story with scientific evidence.

²⁹Actual timing aside, there are a few other discrepancies with this order of creation. ³⁰For one, plants are said to have been created before the sun, which is not going to make them very happy, especially if you believe that each day was a billion years long.

³¹Another problem is that the sun, stars and moon were added in on the fourth day. ³²The idea that the Earth came first and *then* all the stars in the universe does not make sense at all. ³³You may be able to rationalise the age of our planet in ‘seven very long days’, but the rest of the stars are much older than the Earth and could not possibly have come later. ³⁴This is simply a reflection of how our ancestors saw the Earth as the centre of the Universe.

³⁵Another odd thing that stands out is the idea that God needed to rest on the seventh day. ³⁶For an omnipotent Creator, it does not sound plausible that he would require rest at any time, regardless of what great things he had done.

Evolution

³⁷Evolution is a related topic, though it is markedly different from the issue of creation. ³⁸The creation of mankind is almost always described as humans being created in God’s image (though specifics vary from faith to faith). ³⁹With that in mind, there is no way to reconcile our creation by God *and* evolution over millions of years from other species. ⁴⁰The DNA evidence illustrating the natural connections between all life forms on the planet are apparently just one of the many mysteries of God.

⁴¹Part of the problem is the ego that comes from being a beloved creation of God. ⁴²Many people do not

wish to face the idea that we may simply be the end product of natural selection and millions of years of genetic accidents, possibly the direct descendants of now-extinct apes.

More Alternative Views

⁴³Of course, these theories are not the only ones out there. ⁴⁴Not by a long shot. ⁴⁵One interesting view comes from the Hindu creationist and archaeologist, Michael Cremo. ⁴⁶He believes that mankind may have been in existence for over a quarter of a million years, possibly *millions*, which puts him at odds with most of the scientific community, as well as most religions. ⁴⁷One of his books, *Forbidden Archaeology*, covers his complete theories in detail. ⁴⁸The main gist is that many archaeological discoveries have been made – tools, potteries, carvings, human remains – that are hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of years older than conventional science would suggest; however, many have deliberately been kept quiet in order to maintain the status quo.

Dinosaurs

⁴⁹Can we really have a discussion about creation without mentioning dinosaurs? ⁵⁰The extensive fossil record of enormous reptiles that no longer exist today has a tendency to throw a wrench into the Biblical creation account, though many Christians are able to ignore or look past this topic. ⁵¹Some fundamentalists have even suggested that the fossilised remains are actually Satan’s work, as a way of misleading us.

⁵²Some feel that dinosaurs did exist, but this was in recent times, not millions of years ago. ⁵³That would suggest that dinosaurs existed at the same time as humans, a fact that has no evidence at all. ⁵⁴Certainly there would be some written record of such amazing creatures, had they lived alongside us.

Myth vs. Reality

⁵⁵The fundamental issue is whether to believe that religious creation stories are real, or simply a mythical explanation of the creation of the universe and our planet.

⁵⁶For religions that embrace a number of different texts as their holy scriptures, more than one story may exist. ⁵⁷Not all followers believe that these stories are literal and are very happy to accept them as myth only.

⁵⁸Christianity is one of the few religions that tries to see the scientific world through a Biblical lens, even against the most glaring evidence.

Sikhism

⁵⁹They do not have a clear-cut creation story at all, which departs radically from ‘the trinity’ that dedicate large sections of their holy texts to documenting our origins.

⁶⁰Sikhs accept that God is the source of all creation, and that is pretty much the end of it. ⁶¹They believe that the origins of the world and the rest of the universe are simply unknowable and don’t fret over the details. ⁶²To sum it up:

“The Creator who created this creation – only He himself knows” (SSGS 4)

Buddhism

⁶³Buddhists agree with the Sikhs that the origins of the universe are unknowable and have no bearing on our own lives today. ⁶⁴Of course, the beliefs are not identical since Buddhists do not believe that there is a deity behind creation at all.

Hinduism

⁶⁵One unique aspect of the Hindu creation mythos is that this is neither the first nor the only world. ⁶⁶They believe that life is a cycle and this concept extends to their view of the universe. ⁶⁷There is a constant creation/destruction cycle in place and this includes the universe as a whole. ⁶⁸There is more than one version of the creation story because Hindus use a wide variety of sacred writings in their faith. ⁶⁹The particular God that is in charge depends on which branch the story comes from (either Brahma, Shiva or Vishnu), but the tale with Brahma is the more common since he is known as the creator within the deity trinity.

⁷⁰In one version a golden lotus flower is floating amid an endless dark sea. ⁷¹Brahma was within the flower (or sometimes it's an egg) and when he was born, he used parts of the flower to create the heavens, the earth and the sky. ⁷²Then he created the elements and then all the living beings from the parts of his body. ⁷³This reflects the idea that all things are *part* of the Divine.

Ancient Greece

⁷⁴The Greek story of the Earth's creation is vague and lacks any real detail. ⁷⁵Instead, the focus is on the background of the Gods rather than the planet. ⁷⁶This reflects the priorities of the ancient Greeks, in that the Gods influenced people's day-to-day lives and were therefore more important than the origins of the Earth. ⁷⁷The tale is fairly long, but here is an abbreviated version.

⁷⁸Out of darkness and chaos, Gaea and Uranus were born (Mother Earth and Father Sky). ⁷⁹They had many children, including the great Titans. ⁸⁰Two of the Titans, Cronus and Rhea, had many children of their own, including Demeter, Hades, Poseidon, Hera and Hestia. ⁸¹Cronus ate each one as they were born because he was afraid they would overthrow him. ⁸²Rhea tricked him with a stone when Zeus was born. ⁸³When Zeus was grown, he fought with Cronus to free his brothers and sisters. ⁸⁴This led to a fearsome war between the younger Gods and the Titans.

⁸⁵The Gods won and created a new kingdom for themselves on Mount Olympus. ⁸⁶Zeus then told Prometheus to create humans to populate the world, and to worship the Gods. ⁸⁷Between these original Gods and Goddesses, more deities were born to create the complete pantheon of Greece.

⁸⁸Another unique point of the Greeks' version of creation is that their own pantheon of deities were *not* the ones responsible for creating the world or mankind. ⁸⁹One theory about the entire Titan versus Olympian God concept is that it reflects the overcoming of a more primitive generation that came before the age of Greece.

Native American

⁹⁰There is no single Native American myth as each tribe and region had its own tales and myths relating to creation. ⁹¹The stories are actually quite diverse, reflecting the different heritages that were found across the continent. ⁹²One common theme is that animals were involved in either the initial creation of the world or alongside the creation of mankind, which clearly showed the importance of animals in the lives of the people. ⁹³The number four is often important as well, usually in reference to the four cardinal points or corners of the Earth.

African

⁹⁴As with the Native American myths, there is no single myth that is common to all of Africa. ⁹⁵Indeed there are thousands of tribal belief systems across the continent and they all have their own versions of a mythical creation. ⁹⁶Here is just one example, from the great Yoruba people of Western Africa.

⁹⁷Originally, the world was only sky and water. ⁹⁸Several great gods lived there, and one decided he wanted to create land and living creatures. ⁹⁹That was Obatala. ¹⁰⁰He discussed this with the other gods and got advice on how to do it. ¹⁰¹He hung a golden chain down from the sky and took sand, a chicken, and a palm nut with him. ¹⁰²After climbing down the chain, he poured out the sand and let the chicken scratch around to spread it around the world into all the dry land. ¹⁰³Obatala planted the palm nut and plants spread across the lands. ¹⁰⁴He lived there for a while but when he got lonely, he fashioned humans out of clay for company.

Some Commonalities

¹⁰⁵As they all cover the fundamental concept of our creation, there are some commonalities between all these stories. ¹⁰⁶They mostly begin with darkness and water, but the details vary greatly. ¹⁰⁷Floods are a common theme and though they are not always involved in the initial creation, they feature in subsequent destruction/recreation events.

¹⁰⁸There is usually a sequence of events that start with the more basic elements, such as land and water or darkness and light. ¹⁰⁹Creation is always a multi-stage event where certain things are created in order rather than a single flash of everything coming into existence at once.

¹¹⁰Except for Buddhism, there is always a conscious force behind creation rather than it being a natural phenomenon. ¹¹¹Some great deity existed before the Earth and made the decision to create our world and everything on it.

¹¹²Cycles sometimes come into play and a myth begins with the destruction of a mysterious ‘previous’ world. ¹¹³There is usually no knowledge or understanding of the world that came before this one, except that is believed that the previous one often made the gods angry in some respect and so He (or they) had to start over.

¹¹⁴Creation stories are different from other myths because they usually don’t include any morals or reflect cultural behaviour. ¹¹⁵And yet, nearly every culture in the world has some sort of story about how the world began. ¹¹⁶The point is that there is a primal human need to explain our origins even when actual knowledge is impossible to possess. ¹¹⁷We weren’t there when the Earth was created, yet we tell

stories of this anyway.

The Concept of the Afterlife

16 What happens to us after we die?

²Some believe that nothing happens when we die, that our spirits come to an end and our awareness and existence simply cease and we disappear into nothingness. ³However, it is a more commonly held belief, regardless of what faith, belief or following, that there is something more waiting for us after death. ⁴With so much energy bound up in our souls (or spirits), is it reasonable to think that we simply disappear when we die? ⁵Does religion answer these questions, or does it just raise more?

Reincarnation

⁶This is an old concept still seen in mainstream religions today (usually those with older roots). ⁷Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism are the major faiths that believe in the idea of reincarnation, as well as the African traditional religions. ⁸Many alternative religions believe the same, but not all of them.

⁹The principle here is that our souls do not simply move on to a new realm after we die, but that they come back to Earth in a cycle. ¹⁰Our deeds throughout our lives are accumulated and their overall value dictates what type of life we have in our next incarnation. ¹¹It becomes a continuous cycle that only ends when perfect enlightenment is reached, which the Buddhists call *nirvana*. ¹²The Hindus have a similar concept, but their name for the ending of the cycle is *moksha*. ¹³In either case, your soul rejoins the universal creative force and stops its Earthly cycling. ¹⁴The Yorubas believe your soul reincarnates into the family, and do not believe in the concept of karma.

¹⁵Unlike the heaven/hell concepts in certain religions, there is no way to remove bad acts from your record: karma tallies everything up. ¹⁶The only way to ‘balance’ out sins is by committing additional positive or virtuous acts instead. ¹⁷In essence, you’re unable to seek forgiveness or atone for sins as you can in Christianity or similar faiths.

Punishment and Reward

¹⁸The realms of heaven and hell (and their equivalents in other faiths) tend to exist in monotheistic religions that believe theirs is the one true path to salvation. ¹⁹Christianity, Islam, Judaism and the Baha’i Faith all fall into this category. ²⁰This illustrates each faith’s constant need to offer either a carrot or stick to their followers. ²¹The idea of reward and punishment is a fundamental concept for each, and the heaven/hell belief is the ultimate representation of this.

²²For Christians, heaven is a paradise made from gold and precious stones:

“The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth and the twelfth amethyst” (Revelation 21:19 – 20)

²³One might wonder why there's such a focus on material wealth, given that it is shunned in verse after verse throughout the Bible. ²⁴Perhaps to appeal to our earthly desires? ²⁵You'd think that a believer would simply be satisfied with an eternity in the presence of God – worshipping and adoring him.

²⁶The Quran details relatively similar destinations for Muslims. ²⁷In this case, heaven is known as Jannah and is seen as a beautiful garden:

“Allah hath promised to Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of Allah. That is the supreme felicity.” (Sura 9:72)

²⁸Their idea of heaven seems to focus a lot less on materialism, rather on the beauty of nature, as well as the greatest reward of all: ‘the pleasure of Allah.’ (²⁹Let's not forget the 72 virgins though.) ³⁰To be fair, the Bible also refers to the latter in other passages.

³¹Both religions – more or less – have the same concept of hell:

*“Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire”
(Revelation 20:15)*

“... fear the Fire, whose fuel is men and stones, prepared for the disbelievers” (Sura 2:24)

³²Though the Muslim version sounds similar, it does have some additional features. ³³For them, hell (known as Jahannam) has more than one level and each individual's punishment is proportionate to sins committed, unlike the Christian hell, which lumps everyone together regardless of their respective transgressions. ³⁴Another difference in beliefs is that Islam allows a soul to be purified in the fires of Jahannam, after which it may be released to Jannah. ³⁵Christianity does not have such an exit strategy. ³⁶For them, if your name is not down, you're not going in.

³⁷Though Judaism also falls into the same (heaven/hell) category, their view of the afterlife is far less concrete. ³⁸There is a general sense that good living will take you to heaven and bad living will take you to hell. ³⁹But Jews are more focused on living in this life, so do not fuss so much about what is waiting for them in the afterlife. ⁴⁰Possibly because their detailed rules of behaviour give them a stronger focus on the here and now.

⁴¹There is a ‘third way’ – for Catholics, Anglo-Catholics and many Lutherans – which is known as Purgatory. ⁴²When a soul has earned its way into heaven, but hasn't been completely forgiven of all sins, it must be temporarily cleansed in the ‘final purification’ (or ‘final theosis’). ⁴³It's like a temporary hell that purifies the soul before it can continue to its final resting place, similar to the Muslim view.

Earning that Reward

⁴⁴Unfortunately, gaining entry into Heaven is not as simple as making a choice between door #1 and door #2.

⁴⁵Certain denominations of Christianity feel that you will earn your way to heaven by accepting Jesus as your ‘personal Lord and Saviour’. ⁴⁶Islam is the same (but without Jesus). ⁴⁷The Bible offers one perfect example of this, during the crucifixion of Jesus. ⁴⁸Without quoting the entire exchange, *Luke 23:39 – 40* talks of the criminal who is being executed next to Jesus. ⁴⁹He admits to his crimes, then asks Jesus to remember him in Heaven. ⁵⁰Jesus immediately tells him that he will be with him in paradise. ⁵¹This is a nice and simple answer, but seems too easy for some.

⁵²Catholics have a stricter outlook, that you can only enter heaven if your sins have been absolved, which requires the intervention of a priest. ⁵³After you’ve confessed your sins, he tells you that you have been forgiven, and you can then go on living your life until you sin again and make a return trip back to the confessional. ⁵⁴A priest will sometimes assign a small punishment in order to earn that forgiveness, but not always.

⁵⁵Another Christian sect, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, believes that preaching to others is a key factor in being saved. ⁵⁶This is the main reason why they are so heavily invested in proselytism.

The Afterlife of Old

⁵⁷Ancient religions also had their views on where we go after death. ⁵⁸Although there were some aspects of punishment and reward, it was usually not as extreme or as ‘exalted’ as today’s mainstream religions.

⁵⁹The ancient Greeks believed that souls went to Hades, regardless of how they lived their life. ⁶⁰There was no option of a heavenly paradise and people certainly didn’t go to live with the gods afterwards.

⁶¹Oddly, the ancient Norse had a very different outlook on the afterlife even though they had a relatively similar polytheistic belief system to the Greeks. ⁶²Heroes who died in battle would go on to reside in the halls of the various gods for an eternity of feasting and mead. ⁶³Those who died of other causes would go on to Helheim, which is not well described, but was considered a somewhat dull and bleak place compared to the godly halls of Asgard. ⁶⁴That reflected their belief that dying in battle was the ultimate honour.

⁶⁵In ancient Egypt, a soul would be weighed against the feather of *Ma’at* (justice) to see if it were virtuous enough for the afterlife, otherwise it would be devoured. ⁶⁶They believed that the afterlife was similar to our earthly world, so you would need your physical body and your possessions. ⁶⁷This is why they practiced mummification, and why both royalty and the wealthy were buried with vast treasure troves.

Afterlife as You Believe it

⁶⁸Those who believe in more New Age concepts feel that people experience what they expect to after they die. ⁶⁹While this may be an open-minded and flexible vision of life-after-death, it can be hard to figure out. ⁷⁰This would mean that someone who believed in the Christian or Islamic paradise of heaven would have their soul permanently held there after death, whereas someone who believes in reincarnation would keep returning to Earth. ⁷¹It could be possible, but who knows?

⁷²The bottom line is that no one can know for sure what happens after we die. ⁷³Every faith has its own beliefs but none can be taken as undisputed fact over any of the others.

Hidden History of Christianity

17 This chapter relates to the lesser-known secrets hidden in Christianity's history. ²As the largest and most powerful religion in the world, it is only fair to give it a little extra scrutiny.

³Several different topics are going to be covered in this section, which have deliberately been kept from the public eye, primarily for political reasons.

⁴The fact that certain issues are disputed by 'Bible scholars' may be due to genuine inaccuracies or simply because 2,000 years of disinformation has made it virtually impossible for Church members to see the truth. ⁵In other words, though some of these ideas are disputed, there is no way to know whether there is valid reason to disbelieve them or whether we are still being deliberately led astray by the Church.

⁶At this point it's best you approach this with a critical and open mind.

Was Jesus Married?

⁷As the central figure in all of Christianity, the nature of Jesus's life should be looked at with extra care. ⁸One of the biggest mysteries surrounding Jesus is whether he was married or not. ⁹Typical Biblical history says that he was not, yet many clues have been uncovered that suggest he may have been. ¹⁰And his most likely wife was Mary Magdalene.

¹¹Even when you start to look through some of the hidden texts that have been excluded from the Bible, you still do not come up with any real proof one way or the other, though there are many curious things with regard to Jesus and Mary that can't be ignored.

¹²The apocryphal *Gospel of Philip* has many statements that provide further potential proof of Mary's relationship with Jesus. ¹³There he states that Mary was Jesus's "companion" and that he loved her more than all the disciples. ¹⁴There is even a declaration that he often kissed her.

¹⁵A recently discovered scrap of papyrus has helped add fuel to this debate. ¹⁶Known as the *Gospel of Jesus's Wife*, this fragment contains an incomplete statement that reads, "Jesus said to them, 'my wife...'" ¹⁷It is written in Egyptian Coptic but was likely translated from earlier texts in Greek. ¹⁸The Vatican claims that the document is a fake, but coming from them this is hardly surprising.

¹⁹As someone with esoteric knowledge, Leonardo Da Vinci also has a little additional proof for us. ²⁰The painting of *The Last Supper* is believed to hold a few clues about Mary if you know where to look. ²¹The person sitting directly to Jesus's right is extremely feminine looking and some have speculated that Da Vinci painted in Mary to hint at her prominent role amongst his followers. ²²It could mean that Mary actually sat on Jesus's right hand at the supper, or perhaps that the painter included a subtle hint of a truth that has otherwise been hidden.

²³And of course, if Jesus was married then you have to consider if he had any children. ²⁴Though there is little concrete proof, some suggest that he did have children and that his family line has continued to exist to this day. ²⁵The story goes that Jesus and Mary had a daughter named Sarah who would go on

to have children of her own. ²⁶Today, the family line is thought to exist in the Merovingian dynasty of Europe. ²⁷A society known as the Priory of Sion allegedly exists to protect this line and the secret of Jesus's offspring.

²⁸So why hide any of this? ²⁹When the Church decided that Jesus was a divine being, the idea of him being married or a father was considered contradictory to the message. ³⁰It is said that, as a result, any statements or writings that depict Jesus as an ordinary man were undesirable to say the least. ³¹This is the real reason why many books were removed from the Bible.

³²What about his ancestors? ³³In order for Jesus to fulfil the prophesied role of the Messiah, he had to be a direct descendant of King David. ³⁴Two different genealogies are given in the Bible which contradict one another, but the common belief is that one is his history through Joseph (legal but not biological) and the other is through Mary. ³⁵In any case, they both lead back to the legendary King David. ³⁶Of course, the history given that is supposedly through Mary doesn't actually say so, but starts with "Jesus, son of Joseph, son of Heli..." (Luke 3:23). ³⁷If you follow this line of thinking, you come to the bigger question of whether King David ever existed at all. ³⁸There are only a few books dedicated to his story in the Bible and outside of this, there is scant proof that he ever existed.

Appearance

³⁹There is another aspect of Jesus – of equal importance – that we haven't touched on yet: his appearance. ⁴⁰So many modern paintings of Jesus depict him with particularly distinct facial features.

⁴¹Jesus was of Jewish descent. ⁴²His appearance was different from typical European Caucasians, which was considered to be inappropriate by Pope Alexander VI. ⁴³In order to give the religion mass appeal, it was decided in the late 1400s to depict him as more Caucasian-looking than Semitic. ⁴⁴Alexander decided that his own son, Cesare Borgia, would be the perfect model for the new look. ⁴⁵This is still considered a historical theory, but since Borgia was known to be a close associate of Leonardo da Vinci, there is a definite possibility that this is true. ⁴⁶In any case, it's impossible that the contemporary depictions of Jesus are accurate, as he was not of Italian-Spanish descent.

The Nature of the Holy Grail

⁴⁷It might be a little surprising to see an Arthurian reference here, but it does squarely connect with the history of Jesus. ⁴⁸Interesting how so many myths and tales are intertwined, isn't it?

⁴⁹In older, pre-Christian times, the symbol of the chalice represented the Divine Feminine and the sword stood for the Divine Masculine. ⁵⁰They were both equal in power in the times before Christianity took hold. ⁵¹Perhaps the famous 'holy grail' was never a truly physical cup at all, but a symbol that represented the female side of God which has been hidden for so long.

⁵²This is really an extension of the above theories of the relationship between Jesus and Mary. ⁵³Her role in his life has been suppressed for so long that it has taken on a life of its own, becoming something that needs to be sought after and rediscovered.

Suppression of Scriptures

⁵⁴Another curious part of Christian history is how (and why) so many texts that were written about Jesus's life and times were simply not added or removed from the Bible.

⁵⁵The idea of the Apocrypha isn't cut and dried, because different versions of the Bible have included different portions over the years. ⁵⁶For the purpose of this discussion, the point is more about why certain writings were excluded rather than the specifics of which ones were left out.

⁵⁷In modern times, there have been great discoveries of apocryphal documents, many written during the period of Jesus, though many written much later. ⁵⁸In 1945, a collection of thirteen codices containing over fifty texts was discovered in upper Egypt, which has come to be known as the Nag Hammadi library. ⁵⁹Experts have suggested that these belonged to a nearby Pachomian monastery, and were buried after Bishop Athanasius condemned the use of non-canonical books in his Festal Letter of 367 AD. ⁶⁰This has given us a chance to see many of the writings that were rejected as canon or otherwise kept separate from the 'official' Bible.

⁶¹Many of these texts are considered closer to gnostic teachings (relating to, or possessing intellectual or spiritual knowledge) than to true Christianity, and that is very likely why they were shunned.

⁶²Metaphysical concepts that went against the standard dogma of the time were not wanted, even though dozens of documents had these themes.

⁶³And as mentioned already, documents that allude to the mortal nature of Jesus's life may have been removed in order to help create the mythical version of Christ that the Church wished to promote.

⁶⁴There will also many forms and types of Christianity with various teachings, which the early Church wished to silence in order to form a single religion.

⁶⁵For a text that is supposedly inspired by God, there was a lot of human editing going on over the centuries. ⁶⁶Most of these extraneous texts are now available to the public through online sources, so you can read for yourself what kinds of material were deemed undesirable by the Church of the past.

⁶⁷You might be shocked at what you find.

Hidden 'Societies' and Power Brokers

⁶⁸One of the unfortunate facts about mainstream religion is that many decisions are made to gain power rather than because of any true spiritual foundations. ⁶⁹Whether it be financial or political, the need for more power often drives the acts of major churches, a fact they don't want to advertise. ⁷⁰As such, many secretive branches develop in order to pursue these agendas out of sight. ⁷¹Some of these societies are official (with their agenda hidden) whilst others remain in the shadows, outside of any actual church.

⁷²Here are a few of the more noteworthy societies, though their very nature as being *secret* does make it difficult to get any accurate or revealing information about them.

⁷³When it comes to controversial theories about secret groups, the Freemasons are almost certainly the first group you think of. ⁷⁴Though there are religious overtones and associations within the Masons, they are not officially connected to any major church. ⁷⁵They are a completely independent society, and one that has connections through politics and history. ⁷⁶In fact, they are sometimes condemned by

the Catholic Church (possibly because the Church doesn't like such powerful competition?).⁷⁷The Freemasons are a fraternal organisation (for men only), and they operate with a great deal of ritual that is not known outside the group.⁷⁸Their symbolism is taken from the field of architecture and construction as an allegory for the building of Solomon's Temple.

⁷⁹With a number of prominent political figures as members, you can't help but wonder about its influence in major national issues as well. ⁸⁰Known Freemasons include:

- i. Benjamin Franklin
- ii. Gerald Ford
- iii. Buzz Aldrin
- iv. Andrew Jackson
- v. Gen. Douglas MacArthur
- vi. Paul Revere
- vii. Franklin Roosevelt
- viii. George Washington
- ix. Harry S Truman

⁸¹Many figures from early American history were involved in the Freemasons, so you can see how the formation of the entire country could have been influenced by Masonic ideals and their own political agenda.

⁸²Within the Catholic Church, one of the more contemporary secretive groups is the *Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei*, also just know as *Opus Dei* (which is Latin for 'work of God').⁸³Though their official position is that an ordinary life can be holy, the group has an unusually high level of secrecy about it. ⁸⁴The group maintains extremely strict rules for members, has a notable disrespect towards women and many members practice the use of bodily flagellation as a method for atoning sins. ⁸⁵A very wealthy group, there is a great deal of concern about how much influence they have within the Church and to what direction they wish to push it.

⁸⁶And no discussion of secret societies would be complete without talking about the infamous *Knights Templar*.⁸⁷They are a mysterious group from the Middle Ages that has further connections with the Arthurian Grail legends. ⁸⁸The Knights were created as a military order during the time of the Crusades, and considered to be the most highly trained of all those who fought. ⁸⁹When Jerusalem was lost, they quickly fell out of favour with the Church and claims of heresy and scandal led to the immediate dissolution of the Knights. ⁹⁰Many were burned for their supposed crimes.

⁹¹Due to their inexplicable end, theories about Knights persist today and there are beliefs that some survived to continue their brotherhood to this day.

⁹²There are rumours that they discovered something while in the Holy Land under Solomon's temple that led the Church to move in and silence them so brutally. ⁹³Could it have been the Holy Grail? ⁹⁴And if it was, wouldn't that possibly add credence to the theory that the 'Grail' is more than a mere cup?

⁹⁵It's just another layer of mystery waiting to be solved.

⁹⁶For such a powerful and widespread religion, Christianity seems to have more than its fair share of secrecy and controversy. ⁹⁷One has to wonder whether it would have taken off as it did if all the truth had been laid out from the start? ⁹⁸Just how much about this religion can really be trusted?

Book Three: Classical Archetypes in Myth

1 Curious why a section on myths is included in a book examining religion and spirituality? ²Well, it shouldn't really come as a surprise. ³Many cultures have their moral compass set by the myths and stories they tell, and people grow up with them as a way to promote virtues that authority figures wish to develop.

⁴In certain cases, a culture's myths are indivisible from its religion. ⁵The myths of the Native Americans, the ancient Greeks and a mixture of cultures across Africa are closely tied to their spiritual beliefs. ⁶Religion is not the only place where moral ideals and spiritual truths can be found.

⁷So now that we've examined mainstream religions and questioned their ability to provide spiritual guidance, it's time to look at some alternative sources. ⁸In this section of the book we'll look at myths and legends from around the world, to see what they can offer. ⁹We'll also illustrate some ways in which they fulfil similar functions to religion.

Greek Myths

¹ When it comes to the tales of the Greeks, it is easy to forget that these stories were the foundation of the religion at the time. ²We have become so familiar with the characters and scenarios that this fact is often overlooked. ³So although these stories and archetypes are being included in this section, they represent a strong spiritual tradition in a way the other myths may not. ⁴A little more concerning the actual faith of the ancient Greeks is discussed in the alternative religions section.

⁵It's impossible to put a time frame on these stories as they were originally not written down, but were passed down through oral tradition during the time of ancient Greece, which dates as far back as 800 BCE. ⁶It was much later on that many stories were recorded permanently so their origins are still vague.

⁷Some myths are fragmentary and are stories that perhaps only contain a few sentences of text, describing a single moment or scene. ⁸Others are epic-length and contain dozens of separate tales within them. ⁹In any case, there are several dominant themes that stand out in all the Greek myths.

Punishment for Crossing the Gods

¹⁰This is *the* major theme, these stories being used to reinforce the supremacy of the deities and to remind people that they will suffer if they do not worship or respect the Gods.

¹¹Whilst angering the Gods often coincides with bad behaviour on the part of the character, this isn't always the case. ¹²Many myths do reinforce positive morals but sometimes the story does nothing more than tell people not to anger the Gods.

Story of Arachne

¹³Arachne was a wonderful weaver who created beautiful decorative clothes with images in the weaving. ¹⁴She grew prideful of her skill and claimed that she was a better weaver than the Goddess Athena. ¹⁵The Goddess heard the boasting and challenged Arachne to a weaving contest. ¹⁶They both created elaborate tapestries to see who wove better.

¹⁷Not only did Arachne do a better job, she brazenly created a scene that showed the Gods in many embarrassing situations. ¹⁸Athena flew into a rage, destroyed the weaving and the loom and then turned Arachne into a spider.

¹⁹This myth shows the punishment for pride against the Gods as well as for general disrespect. ²⁰Perhaps if Arachne had been more modest, Athena wouldn't have reacted quite so harshly. ²¹Actually, it probably wouldn't have mattered. ²²The Gods never liked it when humans declared themselves better than deities or triumphed over them in any way. ²³This sort of pride seemed to be the one the ancient Greeks most feared.

King Tantalus

²⁴There are actually several different stories involving King Tantalus and they all have him doing

something foolish to make the Gods angry. ²⁵The most notable (and odd) was that he cooked up his own son to serve to the Gods when he was invited to their banquet table on Mount Olympus. ²⁶He was punished by having to endure torment in the underworld, where he was always just out of reach of fruit and water. ²⁷We don't really know why Tantalus did such a thing but the moral is quite obvious: when the Gods are showing you favour, you must always be thankful to them.

Explaining the Natural World

²⁸The ancient Greeks were an amazing people but they still had a long way to go when it came to scientific understanding. ²⁹Whether they took these tales literally or not, many myths contain stories that explain the origins of natural events that were otherwise a mystery. ³⁰These themes are not seen as often in more modern myths because they were not necessary once science had shed some light on the world around us.

³¹Natural phenomena would be tied to the individual deities rather than to a mythical story. ³²For example, lightning came from an angry Zeus who threw bolts down from Mount Olympus, and Poseidon caused earthquakes from deep under the sea. ³³The story mentioned earlier about Arachne is a good example of this as well, to explain the remarkable weaving skill of the spider. ³⁴Here are two myths with a notable scientific theme.

Demeter and Persephone

³⁵This story was very important among the many Greek myths, because it explained the changing of the seasons and control of the crops and harvest. ³⁶The secret ceremonies of the Elysian Mysteries grew from this story so it is much more than your typical mythic tale.

³⁷Demeter was the Goddess of the harvest and Persephone was her beautiful daughter. ³⁸Hades, the god of the underworld, fell in love with Persephone and kidnapped her to be his wife. ³⁹She wasn't happy with the arrangement, and refused to marry Hades. ⁴⁰She also refused to eat because once you ate any of the food in the underworld, you would never be able to leave.

⁴¹Without her daughter, Demeter was sad and the crops of the Earth all died. ⁴²This could not be allowed to continue for long, so Zeus demanded that something be done. ⁴³Hades reluctantly admitted that the girl had to be released, but it turned out she had grown hungry during her stay after all. ⁴⁴She had eaten six pomegranate seeds, which meant she was trapped. ⁴⁵Demeter refused to accept this and they had to make a deal. ⁴⁶Persephone would stay with Hades for six months of the year (one for each seed eaten), and she would be free to live with Demeter on the Earth for the other six months. ⁴⁷As Demeter's mood shifts from one period to the next, we get the change in seasons because her sadness brings winter and the death of the crops when Persephone leaves.

Echo the Nymph

⁴⁸Another natural phenomenon that the Greeks tried to explain through myth was the echo. ⁴⁹There was once a beautiful and talkative nymph named Echo, who did a favour for Zeus by distracting his wife with conversation while he was having an affair. ⁵⁰When Hera found out, she punished poor Echo by taking away her voice. ⁵¹She was only able to repeat the words she had just heard spoken by others. ⁵²This is about how sound echoes but it is also another good example of how the Gods will punish

those who cross them.

Heroic Epics

⁵³The Greeks loved a tale that told of great courage and heroism, so there were many long epics among the myths that were filled with such adventure. ⁵⁴They typically involved a great hero who was on a quest for some object or purpose, and who had a great number of other adventures along the way.

⁵⁵This classic story line is seen in the Arthurian myth of the Holy Grail, among other literary works.

⁵⁶Here are a few of the main epic tales:

i. *Jason and the Golden Fleece* – our hero seeks the Golden Fleece and has to battle the Harpies, sail through the Clashing Rocks, plough a field with fire-breathing bulls and conquer an army of soldiers who grew from planted dragon teeth.

ii. *Perseus and Medusa* – Perseus has to find and kill the snake-haired Medusa, trick three witches to find out how to do it, rescue Andromeda from a sea creature and then fight to win Andromeda's hand in marriage. This particular epic is known today through the *Clash of the Titans* movies.

iii. *Labours of Hercules* – Hercules has to complete 12 tasks, including the slaying of the hydra, the capture of three-headed Cerberus, defeating the Cretan Bull and retrieving a belt from Hippolyta of the Amazons.

⁵⁷The ultimate in epics were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written by Homer around 850 BCE. ⁵⁸The *Iliad* tells a number of tales surrounding the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey* has the character of Odysseus suffering through 10 years of adventures after the war is over. ⁵⁹The stories are filled with supernatural creatures and seemingly endless interference from the Gods. ⁶⁰Some are based on earlier myth, but the story as a whole is a creation of Homer.

⁶¹Today, the stories of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are often lumped together with the other Greek myths even though they are not the same type of tales. ⁶²In other words, most of these works would have been new stories for the Greeks of the time rather than the true age-old myths we've mentioned here so far.

⁶³Because each of these epics is filled with many separate tales, it's hard to generalise about the morals and themes that are common. ⁶⁴The most obvious is the importance of strength, courage and bravery to the ancient Greeks. ⁶⁵But brute strength was seldom enough: wits and cleverness were just as vital to solve many of the tasks that these heroes were up against. ⁶⁶As with the European fairy tales (Chapter 7 below), you will see many instances where trickery is used as a method for winning a challenge or escaping a trap.

⁶⁷Virtuous traits like these are emphasised and the stories show that reward comes to those who possess them, whereas more ambiguous moral lessons are not presented at all. ⁶⁸Perhaps the Greeks didn't put as much value on right versus wrong, or simply didn't look to their myths to guide them in this respect.

Accessibility of the Gods

⁶⁹Another common theme seen in so many myths is that the Gods and Goddesses interacted with Earthly beings on a regular basis. ⁷⁰Stories are not *just* about deities and how they relate to each other.

⁷¹There are many that involve humans, and not always with us being punished. ⁷²Various deities came and walked among the ‘common people’, enjoyed having affairs and fathered children with humans.

⁷³Unlike most modern religions that set God at a distance from us, the Greeks really wanted to emphasise that their whole pantheon of Gods and Goddesses were just around the corner at all times.

⁷⁴Not only did they take part in many people’s lives, the Gods themselves also had all the shortcomings of a human as well. ⁷⁵Overall, there was a strong connection to the deities as being *people* in many ways.

⁷⁶In addition, they stand out as one of the few cultures that didn’t create a home for their deities in a distant astral realm. ⁷⁷The gods of Greece resided on the top of Mount Olympus, which was a physical and relatively near location. ⁷⁸It’s just another way in which the Greeks kept their gods close to their hearts.

Love of All Things Beautiful

⁷⁹This may seem like an odd theme to find in myth, but it was a very important one to the Greeks.

⁸⁰Many stories have an element of beauty to them, often with beautiful women capturing the hearts of men and Gods. ⁸¹There was constant commentary about how attractive the Gods and Goddesses were, as well as beautiful objects or fine music. ⁸²It may have been a literal appreciation for beauty, though it could also have been a more metaphorical way of illustrating an ideal.

Conquering and Control

⁸³As mentioned above, there are many myths that sought to explain the workings of the natural world.

⁸⁴And though we see a similar trend in African or Native American myth (below), there is a distinct difference in attitude in the Greek world. ⁸⁵The Greeks clearly saw themselves in a position of power or control over much of the natural world, as opposed to other cultures that were in harmony with their surroundings.

⁸⁶Many stories concerned characters and heroes who did battle with monsters and beasts, symbolising man’s conquering of the natural world. ⁸⁷Just take a quick look at the examples listed in the various epic quests above and you can see this to be true.

Advanced Civilisations

⁸⁸This is a separate topic, but deserves mentioning. ⁸⁹Of the mythical eras included in this book, the realm of ancient Greece is one that would be considered part of an advanced civilisation. ⁹⁰Other civilisations such as the Egyptians and even the Norse show very similar themes in their myths because they all fit into the same ‘place’ of development. ⁹¹To keep from repeating too many thematic points, the myths from these cultures haven’t been included since the same ideas are already presented above.

⁹²You can see how the attitudes of people change in a more advanced culture when compared to older eras. ⁹³For spiritual growth, seeing how these beliefs evolve can help you to find a true path of your own.

Sumerian Myths

3 Even within the world of mythology, the Sumerian legends date back a very long time – at least 5,000 years ago.

²As fascinating as this sounds, there is very little detail available in terms of known mythology from this period. ³The Sumerians were a fairly advanced civilisation for their time, but with so much time having passed since their era, only a few stone tablet fragments remain. ⁴As such, our examination of these myths will be a little different, but you'll soon notice some very interesting parallels with other myths and current mainstream religions.

⁵The religion of the Sumerians was a polytheistic one, and their pantheon of deities was quite similar to that of ancient Greece. ⁶Deities ruled over the sun, moon, earth, sea and sky as well as more human areas such as love, war and the afterlife.

A Great Flood

⁷This story comes from a damaged clay tablet so not all the details are known. ⁸Mankind is said to have made the god Enki angry through bad behaviour, so he decided to destroy all of humanity. ⁹He sent a great flood that covered the world for seven days and seven nights. ¹⁰King Ziusudra built a huge boat and saved his family as well as all the seeds of plants, and animal kind, and they repopulated the earth once the sun returned and dried out the water.

¹¹Sound familiar? ¹²Many people immediately see the similarity with the Biblical story of Noah and the flood and the usual conclusion is that the writers of the Bible have borrowed from this older Sumerian story. ¹³Others have said that this is actual proof that the event actually took place because two very separate cultures recorded it in their myths. ¹⁴Unfortunately, that doesn't pan out.

¹⁵Biblical scholars placed the event of their great Flood as taking place roughly 4,900 BCE based on other 'measurable' events recorded in the Old Testament. ¹⁶That would mean that the flood occurred *during* the Sumerian era, which is highly unlikely since their story of it describes an event in their own *distant* past.

¹⁷So was the telling of two similar flood stories just a coincidence based on a very primitive or basic archetype that humans tend to gravitate towards? ¹⁸It is possible. ¹⁹Other cultures have flood myths of their own, which would indicate that people have naturally used this type of disaster in their stories because it resonates so well. ²⁰In any case, it seems highly probable that we have a widespread case of ongoing plagiarism where one myth feeds into another. ²¹The obvious theme here is that the gods can (and will) punish all of mankind if they are displeased, but you can also see how myths seep from one culture into another.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

²²Technically, this is a Mesopotamian story rather than a Sumerian one but the cultures are similar enough to bring them together for a moment.

²³The story of Gilgamesh is a long epic poem that is considered to be one of the earliest pieces of literature that still exists today. ²⁴If you're looking to find the most original archetypes and mythical constants, this is the place to look.

²⁵Very little of the original story remains but subsequent documents that are based on the original epic have been found to help put together the majority of the tale. ²⁶As with other epics, the story is made up of many smaller tales linked together around central characters. ²⁷Gilgamesh is a God-like king who is oppressive and cruel to his subjects, so the gods send him a 'wild man' named Enkidu to be his friend, and to distract him from brutalising his citizens, as well as from his political ambitions.

²⁸They have many adventures together until Enkidu is killed by the gods because the two are getting into too much trouble. ²⁹In despair, Gilgamesh continues his journey to seek out immortality. ³⁰He never finds it, but when he returns to his kingdom he has been humbled by everything he's learned and becomes a more kind-hearted and just king.

Similarities with Ancient Greece

³¹Many aspects of these myths are similar to the tales told in ancient Greece, even though this is a much older time period. ³²That makes for a good illustration of how a culture's mythical collection is more a reflection of their own development rather than simply how long ago they existed. ³³More primitive cultures in Africa have myths revolving around natural elements almost exclusively, but Sumerian ones involved elements that we see in Greece and Egypt. ³⁴The hero's journey is just one example of where these myths lined up with Greek ones.

African Myths

4 We've now come to a larger cultural group that will be a little harder to summarise, since Africa is a huge continent and the myths span hundreds of different tribal backgrounds. ²Even so, you'll find a few important similarities that reflect life from this part of the world.

Understanding the Natural World

³As in many other cultures, myths in Africa were often told to explain some of the otherwise inexplicable natural events that were seen and experienced every day. ⁴Animals are major characters, usually more so than people. ⁵They are described individually though they represent their entire kind.

⁶It's one of the most common themes that you find in the myths from older cultures that didn't have a sophisticated understanding of the world. ⁷Many of these tales are very similar to Native American ones, showing that there was a common mindset amongst these peoples, despite the physical distance.

Why the Sun and Moon Live in the Sky

⁸This story comes from Nigeria, in Western Africa:

⁹At one time, the sun lived on the Earth and was great friends with water. ¹⁰They visited together all the time but water could never go to sun's house because it was too small to hold him and all his people (the sea creatures). ¹¹Sun agreed to build a bigger house so that water would feel more welcome to visit.

¹²The sun and his wife, the moon, built a huge house and invited water. ¹³As water and his people *poured* into the home, sun and moon were slowly pushed out and ended up on the roof. ¹⁴It didn't stop there. ¹⁵Sun didn't want to insult his friend so told them to keep on coming in. ¹⁶Eventually, both sun and moon were pushed right up into the sky, and they continue to live there to this day.

Why Fish Live in the Water

¹⁷This is another Nigerian tale. ¹⁸Fish once lived on land with the rest of the animals, and was friends with leopard. ¹⁹Unfortunately, fish fell in love with leopard's wife, and would sleep with her whenever leopard was away. ²⁰When leopard came home early one day and found them in bed together, he went and told the king about it. ²¹Fish had nothing to say for himself and was ashamed for betraying his friend. ²²It was decided that fish would be banished to the waters for his crime, and he and his people have lived there ever since.

²³This is a classic story about crime and punishment. ²⁴Not only is adultery an important issue that spans all cultures, but note that, rather than taking matters into its own hands, the leopard went straight to the king. ²⁵It suggests that authority figures are in place to resolve matters for the community as a whole, much like priests, as representatives of God.

Why the Cheetah has Tear-Stained Cheeks

²⁶This tale comes from the Zulu people, and combines the natural world with an obvious moral lesson about laziness and theft.

²⁷There was once a very lazy hunter who never wanted to work for his meat. ²⁸One day he sat in the shade and watched a mother cheetah bring down a young gazelle in a matter of minutes. ²⁹He was so jealous when he saw her take the fresh meat to her little cubs that were hidden in the grass. ³⁰Why couldn't a cheetah be bringing meat to me instead, he thought?

³¹Then he got an idea. ³²He would steal a cub and train it to hunt for him. ³³That way he could spend his days relaxing instead of hunting but still have meat every day. ³⁴So he waited until the mother cheetah went to the waterhole and stole all of her cubs. ³⁵He had only planned on taking one but he couldn't decide on which one was the best. ³⁶When the mother cheetah returned to an empty den, she wept loudly for many days.

³⁷The wise man of the village heard the wailing, and asked her what had happened. ³⁸She told him about the missing cubs and he knew what had happened. ³⁹The rest of the villagers drove out the lazy hunter and the wise man returned the cubs to their thankful mother. ⁴⁰She was happy to have her children back but would always have the marks from her tears.

⁴¹Many ancient cultures relied on this concept of the wise, old authority figure that was all-seeing and all-knowing. ⁴²As is read, he didn't even have to be told what happened, he simply knew. ⁴³The moral of tale is not only that it doesn't pay to be lazy, but those who are will be shunned by society – in other words, punished.

The Man Who Never Lies

⁴⁴This is a less typical story that has no animal figures in it at all, but has a very strong message about behaviour and honesty. ⁴⁵It is a South African folktale.

⁴⁶There was once a king who heard about a local man who never lied. ⁴⁷The king was jealous that the man was so revered by everyone, and decided to do something about it. ⁴⁸He invited the man to the palace to stay with him.

⁴⁹One day, the king stood by his horse with his left foot in the stirrup and he told the honest man that he was going hunting. ⁵⁰He told the honest man to go to his summer house and tell the queen about his expedition, and to prepare a big lunch for his return. ⁵¹The man agreed to pass on the message and left. ⁵²But the king didn't get on his horse and never went hunting. ⁵³He laughed thinking about how the man would now tell a lie.

⁵⁴When the wise man got to the summer house, he told the queen that she may or may not need to prepare a big meal because the king may or may not have gone hunting. ⁵⁵She felt that it was a strange message and asked him to clarify it. ⁵⁶The man stated that he had only seen one foot in the stirrup when he left the king and did not know if he had put his right foot into the stirrup or his left foot back down on the ground.

⁵⁷The king arrived later and expected to laugh at the man who had now told a lie. ⁵⁸He was astonished that he hadn't. ⁵⁹The man knew to only say what he had seen with his own eyes. ⁶⁰This is an excellent

moral indeed.

Proper Social and Moral Attitudes

⁶¹While many of these myths are oriented towards understanding the natural world, they often also deal with social behaviour and moral values. ⁶²Bad behaviour is usually met with rebuke or punishment while virtuous or clever behaviour wins out in the end. ⁶³Sometimes the lesson is directed at the human in the story, but not always. ⁶⁴The fact that the morality components are sometimes directed at the animal characters simply represents how the people of Africa saw animals as their equals in many ways.

Native American Myths

5 As with the chapter on African myths, remember that there were hundreds of distinct tribes living across the continent, and though we tend to lump them all together as Native Americans, they were all very different groups of people with their own series of myths and beliefs.

Cooperation and Respect for Nature

²Joseph Campbell (discussed in Chapter 8 below) was a mythologist, writer and lecturer, his work is focused on comparative mythology and comparative religion. ³The myths of the indigenous people of North America are a perfect example of his theory about hunter/gatherer communities, as many of their tales revolved around the animals that made up such a vital part of their lives and survival. ⁴Here are some examples of myths that show animals working to help mankind.

⁵Animals usually bore the characteristics of a human, and could even have human spouses or children. ⁶It's clear there was a close relationship with humanity, and that respect is reflected in folklore.

Grandmother Spider Brings the Sun

⁷Long ago, the Cherokee people lived in darkness and wished they had light. ⁸Fox knew that people on the other side of the world lived in sunshine but they wouldn't share their great light. ⁹Possum first volunteered to fetch the light, and tried to hide a piece of the sun in his bushy tail. ¹⁰It burned off all the fur, and that is why the possum has a bald tail today. ¹¹Still, the people had no light. ¹²Next went the buzzard. ¹³He tried to balance a piece of the sun on his head but just burned off his feathers. ¹⁴That's why the buzzard has a bald head today.

¹⁵Lastly, Grandmother Spider offered to go. ¹⁶She made a pot out of clay, and travelled on a web she spun across the world. ¹⁷No one noticed the little spider and she brought back the sun in her pot. ¹⁸The people got their light and she taught them about making pottery as well.

Weather and the Stars

¹⁹Many myths touched on these areas, with the usual intention of explaining the phenomenon that the people saw on a regular basis but could not explain. ²⁰Because many tribes were nomadic, understanding the weather and the stars were very important, and so myths were created for them.

How the Stars Got into the Sky

²¹This tale comes from the Inuit people of the north, and tells of how the stars were formed and why they shoot across the sky each night.

²²Legend has it that there was a bear, named Nanuk, who was chased off the edge of the world by a pack of dogs. ²³They plunged straight over and turned into stars. ²⁴This legend explains how stars got into the sky.

²⁵Other stars are also associated with roaming dogs, but these are the hunting packs belonging to

Aningan, the moon. ²⁶Sometimes they get too rambunctious and get away from Aningan; these are shooting stars.

²⁷Aningan also likes to chase his sister (the sun) during the summers. ²⁸That's why she circles the sky and cannot get away below the horizon. ²⁹This is clearly a myth that would only make sense to those living far enough north to have 24-hour sunshine through the short summer months.

Hopi Creation Story

³⁰The number four was very important to many Native people, often representing the four cardinal points or four peoples of the Earth (black, yellow, white and red). ³¹A good example of the importance of the number four is a creation tale from the Hopi people. ³²Grandmother Spider is said to have collected four kinds of earth and moulded them into four peoples: black, yellow, white and red. ³³This was the first light of creation. ³⁴The men woke up and began to live, though their bodies were still damp and soft. ³⁵This was the second period of man's creation. ³⁶Then the sun rose and helped to dry the people, and they hardened into their true and final forms. ³⁷This is the final part of mankind's origins. ³⁸This story is said to illustrate the relationship between the four colours of people in the world, but also the importance of various stages in our lives: birth, childhood and maturity.

Arthurian Legends

6 Named after the famous (and most likely fictitious) King Arthur, few collections of myths have captured modern imagination more than this one, involving wizards, kings and the Knights of the Round Table. ²Most people have heard of Merlin, Guinevere, Lancelot, the Lady of the Lake and the Holy Grail.

³One of the great appeals of this myth cycle is the reality that seems to permeate these larger-than-life characters. ⁴There is a strong pseudo-history that makes you feel that these events may have truly taken place. ⁵They are not simply one single work, but have been written over hundreds of years by different authors. ⁶This gives the illusion that these authors are in fact telling their own versions of real events. ⁷It also means that some stories have varying components and different endings, though the cast of characters generally stays the same.

⁸Unlike the other myths in this book, the Arthurian legends are a smaller group of literary tales that do not represent the myth structure of an entire culture or time period. ⁹They are also not tied to any spiritual or religious belief system either. ¹⁰The Arthur mythos is unique in that it seems to have sprung up through literary creativity and has been built upon by many individuals over several centuries.

Quest for the Holy Grail

¹¹This is the one realm of Arthurian fantasy where myth crosses the line with religion, at least on the surface. ¹²First you need to understand the nature of the Grail before you can learn about the quest to find it. ¹³Though tied to Christianity, the Holy Grail in this context is in fact a *fictional* object that has been included in several different pieces of literature starting in a poem by Chretien de Troyes in the 1180s.

¹⁴The object of the Holy Grail is very similar to the non-fictional version known as the Holy *Chalice*, which is considered to be a real item that was used by Jesus during the Biblical Last Supper. ¹⁵Their stories have been intertwined, though they are two distinct objects. ¹⁶In this mythos, the Grail was indeed the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper and was also used to catch Christ's blood when his side was pierced during his crucifixion. ¹⁷The cup was given great mystical and magical qualities, depending on the specific story about it.

¹⁸Many tales have been told about the Grail, but the general story of the Quest is as follows. ¹⁹After the crucifixion of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea travelled to Britain with the Grail. ²⁰He hid the Grail for safekeeping, and it stayed hidden for hundreds of years. ²¹It was told that it was held in a castle and guarded by a man called the Fisher King. ²²At some point the Fisher King was wounded, could not heal and the lands around him suffered as long as he did. ²³It was believed that only someone pure of heart could heal the Fisher King and reclaim his wasteland kingdom.

²⁴Early versions of the story have a knight named Percival as the finder of the Grail, but later tales give that role to Galahad. ²⁵We'll focus on the latter version of the story as it is the more well-known ending.

²⁶King Arthur's knights are sent on a quest to find the Grail after Galahad accidentally sits in the chair reserved by prophecy for the one who would recover the sacred Grail. ²⁷When Galahad survives, Arthur knows that it's time to begin the quest. ²⁸Indeed, it is Galahad who does find the cup, and he is immediately taken up to heaven.

²⁹The moral and theme of the Quest is the search for what is holy, sacred and spiritual, and those who brave the unknown will be greatly rewarded. ³⁰Given the power of the Church during the period, the implication of spiritual reward is very blatantly a Catholic one. ³¹If you remove the religious meaning of the Grail itself, though, the theme remains relevant and equally as potent.

³²The power of this story extends right up to the present day. ³³People continue to search for the Grail, not knowing where the facts of Christian history end and myth begin. ³⁴The contemporary novel *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown revived a huge number of Grail theories with its story of conspiracy within the Church, secret societies involving Leonardo Da Vinci, and the idea that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had fathered a line of descendants. ³⁵Da Vinci has played a significant role in many areas of esoteric and even occult matters, and you'll find more about him in a later section on sacred numbers.

The Sword in the Stone

³⁶The famed sword known as Excalibur belonged to King Arthur, but it is *not* the same sword from this story. ³⁷Excalibur was given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake later on in his life after he became king.

³⁸The sword from the stone was an earlier tale when Arthur was a young boy.

³⁹When King Uther died, during troubled times, his son Arthur (then an infant) was raised outside the kingdom for his own safety, as someone would surely try to kill the heir to the throne. ⁴⁰But this led to many conflicts over who the next ruler would be. ⁴¹To stop the fighting, Merlin magically embedded a sword in a large stone with the inscription (paraphrased here), "Whoever pulls out this sword is the rightful born king of all England". ⁴²Many tried but could not budge the blade. ⁴³The arguments ceased and the land was more or less peaceful again. ⁴⁴Years later, a young Arthur tried his hand on a whim and shocked onlookers when the sword slid out with ease.

⁴⁵The theme that you can take from this tale is that we all have a destiny that will affect our lives, even if we are not actively seeking it. ⁴⁶Arthur pulled the sword out without knowing what was going on. ⁴⁷He had no particular aim to be king, and yet his path brought him right where he needed to be. ⁴⁸The nature of the sword also prevented others from falsely taking that role. ⁴⁹They too could not alter their own destinies.

Knights of the Round Table

⁵⁰The concept of the Knights of the Round Table has some important symbolism to it that should be mentioned, though it is not a myth of its own right. ⁵¹The knights were the bravest and most trustworthy in Arthur's kingdom, which is what earned them the status of being of the inner circle.

⁵²The circle theme goes further though. ⁵³The reason for the knights meeting at a (literal) round table was that they were all equal and no man was considered superior enough to sit at the head.

The Death of Arthur and Avalon

⁵⁴After a rather eventful and glorious life, Arthur was fatally wounded in battle and taken away to the island of Avalon. ⁵⁵Even within the mythical landscape of Arthurian Britain, Avalon was a mysterious place. ⁵⁶The power of Avalon was supposed to be able to heal him, and the tale of King Arthur ends with him still living there, so that he may return someday when his country needed him most.

⁵⁷Some have speculated that Glastonbury is the real Avalon (they claim it would have been an island so many years ago due to a changing coastline) and that the present-day castle ruins are where King Arthur is buried. ⁵⁸It makes for fanciful tourism, but there is no solid evidence that any of this is true. ⁵⁹Even so, the modern neo-Pagan community has made Glastonbury into a sacred place that connects us to the mystical world of King Arthur.

⁶⁰The nature of Avalon is not that hard to understand as an archetype. ⁶¹This is a version of the heavenly afterlife that we can hope for after having lived a ‘good’ life here on Earth.

⁶²There are many other stories involving King Arthur and this specific cast of characters, all concerning great courage, valour, betrayal and magical exploits. ⁶³These have just been a few examples to illustrate the main tales, specifically the Holy Grail quest (which is the most important of the entire mythos).

Finding Meaning in the Legends

⁶⁴As with all myths, there are important moral themes to be gleaned here. ⁶⁵It’s the Quest for the Holy Grail that stands out among all the stories in terms of spiritual meaning. ⁶⁶As mentioned, the main theme of the legend is the seeking of the sacred, though spiritual meaning can be seen in many of the other shorter tales as well.

⁶⁷The religious aspects of Arthurian legends are far more obvious than in any other myth structure we’ve covered in this book, which puts these stories closer to religion than most others.

Fairy Tales

¹Fairy tales are fantasy-based stories with some type of moral or lesson attached to them. ²We are clear that they didn't actually happen, which is what distinguishes them from legends or historical myths. ³We've all heard of the two children lost in the woods who found a house made of gingerbread, and the magic beans that grew into a beanstalk leading to a heavenly giant.

⁴So what do such fictional works have to do with this topic? ⁵A story passed from generation to generation is part of our moral upbringing, regardless of its fictional nature. ⁶Fairy tales can tell us a lot about ourselves.

⁷We will look at the Grimm Brothers' collection of tales – most of which are of a European origin – which include popular stories like Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, Cinderella and Snow White. ⁸For the moment, try to forget the Disney adaptations. ⁹In reality, the original stories of Grimm were much darker.

Crime and Punishment

¹⁰One common theme in all these tales is punishment for bad behaviour: usually harsh and violent. ¹¹The tales we know today are a lot more pleasant and palatable to children, but the original stories are filled with misery and death.

¹²There are plenty of rewards as well, but the approach was much more punishment-oriented in an attempt to illustrate exactly what happened to 'bad' children who were greedy, vain, lazy, dishonest and cruel. ¹³It's in this respect that fairy tales mirror religious writings concerning punishment.

Tricks and Deals

¹⁴Deals are often made between the characters in a fairy tale, though they are usually one-sided and seemingly impossible to 'win'. ¹⁵This is what leads to the many tricks we see as the characters try desperately to wriggle out of a bad situation or to swing a poor deal in their favour.

¹⁶Though it may seem that resorting to trickery is a negative lesson to teach children, it is usually seen as a form of cleverness or intelligence: that a quick mind can help you out of any situation. ¹⁷In other words, negotiation is a virtue.

¹⁸Here are two well-known fairy tales that illustrate the point. ¹⁹They both demonstrate negative behaviour, the consequences, and how the victims were able to use their quick wits to escape.

Hansel and Gretel

²⁰Two children are abandoned in the woods by their parents after several unsuccessful attempts to be rid of them. ²¹Lost in the forest, the boy and girl find a witch's home made from sugar and cake. ²²She lures them inside with even more tasty treats, and then locks them up with the intention of fattening them up to eat. ²³Hansel is locked up while Gretel is forced to help the witch cook and clean. ²⁴When it's time to eat poor Hansel, Gretel tricks the witch into climbing into the oven herself to test if it's

hot enough, and the witch is quickly roasted to death.

²⁵The story plays on children's fear of being left alone without their parents, and also shows how greed can lead to disaster. ²⁶If they had not been so intent on gorging themselves with sweets, the witch would never have caught them. ²⁷But since the children hadn't ended up in the forest because of their own carelessness, they were able to trick their way to freedom. ²⁸Had they gotten lost due to their own misbehaviour, it's unlikely they would have been so lucky in the end.

Rumpelstiltskin

²⁹A boastful statement is the opening to this tale, when a man announces the ridiculous notion that his daughter can spin straw into gold. ³⁰The greedy king locks up the miller's daughter to force her to spin him gold or she is to be put to death. ³¹As she cries through the night, a strange little man appears and offers to help in exchange for her necklace. ³²She agrees and the man fills all the baskets with spun gold.

³³Of course the king wants more and the young girl has to make further deals each night for more gold. ³⁴She eventually runs out of jewellery to trade, so he demands her first child if the king marries her. ³⁵Desperate, she agrees. ³⁶After the final night of gold-spinning, the king does in fact marry the girl. ³⁷When her first child is born, the little man returns and demands the baby to make good on the deal. ³⁸She makes one final bargain with him: if she can guess his name within three days, she can keep her child.

³⁹After two days of failed guesses, she sends a messenger out to the mountains and he comes back with the right name. ⁴⁰When the little man returns on the final day, the girl guesses correctly and gets to keep the baby. ⁴¹Incensed, he stamps his foot so hard into the ground that he gets stuck up to his waist. ⁴²In an attempt to free himself, he grabs his other foot, but in his frenzy rips himself in half.

⁴³Even though the girl was innocent at the start, the main theme of the story is how small lies (along with vanity and ego) can lead to much larger disasters. ⁴⁴Yet again, the innocent girl used her smarts to trick her way out of her problem.

Destined for Greatness

⁴⁵This is the theme we also see throughout the Arthurian legend mythos, particularly the Sword in the Stone. ⁴⁶These are stories that are less concerned with punishment, presenting a happily-ever-after ending for characters who have a miserable life otherwise. ⁴⁷The theme in these cases revolves around destiny and that we all have a certain role to play, even if it doesn't seem like it at the beginning. ⁴⁸Tales like these were intended to give children (and adults) hope for the future, because you never know when a strange twist of fortune may come your way and change your life forever.

Cinderella

⁴⁹This is one of the best examples of a destiny-themed tale. ⁵⁰It's a longer story than the two previous examples, but since most people are very familiar with it, only a brief outline is presented below.

⁵¹A young girl is treated cruelly by her stepmother and two stepsisters, and made to live like a servant

in her own home.⁵²One day, the king is to throw a three-day banquet for all the maidens in the kingdom to find a suitable bride for his unmarried son.⁵³The evil stepsisters choose to go, but do not allow Cinderella to attend because she has no gown to wear.⁵⁴As she cries over her mother's grave, a magic bird grants her wish and throws down a golden ball gown for her.

⁵⁵She runs to the ball (or proceeds in a carriage made out of a pumpkin) and is immediately noticed by the prince, who dances with her all night long.⁵⁶The same happens for the next two nights of the banquet.⁵⁷On the last night, she leaves quickly so that the prince won't know who she is, but leaves behind a single golden (or glass) slipper.⁵⁸The prince takes the slipper and vows to marry the woman whose foot it fits.⁵⁹Needless to say, he eventually comes across Cinderella and the two of them are wed and live happily ever after.⁶⁰The stepmother and sisters have their eyes pecked out after that by Cinderella's 'friendly' pigeons.

⁶¹Again, the evil behaviour was harshly punished but that is a minor detail in this story.⁶²The main theme is that the pure-of-heart character wins out in the end and is rewarded with a glorious life even after living through cruelty.

Family Values

⁶³And just as religion can often be considered dated due to changing social values, so can fairy tales.⁶⁴Stepmothers were common during those times due to the number of women who died in childbirth, which led to a lot of men getting remarried later in life.⁶⁵Representing her as evil is simply to depict an outsider to the traditional family unit.

⁶⁶It's possible that these tales simply reflected a past trend of stepmothers who often resented their new children.⁶⁷Modern society is a little better at accommodating all types of family arrangements.⁶⁸Even so, the stereotype of the evil stepmother persists.

⁶⁹Another old-fashioned notion is that girls need to be rescued by men.⁷⁰The Cinderella and Rumpelstiltskin stories are perfect examples of poor girls needing a man to rescue them with marriage.⁷¹Women no longer need a man in order to be happy or successful in life, though classic fairy tales like to say they do.⁷²Other examples include Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel.⁷³This is a further clear example of where religion and fairy tales meet.

Help From Animals

⁷⁴This is one major thematic element that is common in many fairy tales.⁷⁵In our examples above, the magic birds in Cinderella are a good example of this.⁷⁶Sometimes these animals are magical, but otherwise they simply have some type of human qualities that normal animals don't exhibit.⁷⁷Snow White was helped in the forest by animals many times, and there was a wish-granting dog in *The Magic Tinderbox*.

⁷⁸The theme of helpful animals is possibly a remnant from more primitive myths that focus on animals as being wise and helpful because society still relied upon them (such as stories from hunter/gatherer societies).⁷⁹There can also be an underlying message that we need to be kind to animals because you never know when they can be of assistance.

The Work of Joseph Campbell

8 Many have studied myths over the years, and though they have made contributions to understanding the deep and complex archetypes they hold, Joseph Campbell's work stands out among them. ²He is famous for the very simple and powerful expression: "follow your bliss". ³His work was influential in the original *Star Wars* trilogy.

The Hero's Journey

⁴Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* detailed his theories on the mythic nature of the hero's journey (also known as the monomyth). ⁵He stated that the whole of the human race can be seen as reciting a single story of great spiritual importance, and indicated that the aim of his work was to demonstrate the similarities between Eastern and Western religions.

⁶He has analysed myths involving heroes, quests and journeys from around the world, including many different cultures and time periods. ⁷Campbell has found that there are a large number of similarities to them all, and his construct has 17 identifiable steps in the hero's journey that you'll see over and over again:

1. Call to adventure
2. Refusal and then acceptance of that call
3. Supernatural aid
4. Crossing the first threshold
5. The belly of the whale
6. Road of trials
7. Meeting with the Goddess
8. Woman as temptress
9. Atonement with the father
10. Apotheosis
11. Ultimate boon
12. Refusal of the return
13. Magic flight
14. Rescue from without
15. Crossing the return threshold
16. Master of two worlds
17. Freedom to live

⁸Clearly many of these concepts are metaphorical since not all myths will have scenes that literally take place in the belly of a whale. ⁹To explore all 17 points is too lengthy for this book, but a quick explanation of a couple of steps should suffice to illustrate the overall point.

¹⁰Let's look at step 5, *the belly of the whale*. ¹¹This takes place not long after the journey has begun and it represents the moment of the journey when the hero is first immersed in danger. ¹²The term used comes from the Biblical story of Jonah and the whale, though the phrase 'entering the lion's den' would be just as suitable. ¹³On a more metaphysical level, this stage also represents the hero's transformation from an initial traveller into the true archetypical hero figure that he is destined to be.

¹⁴Point 13 is another fanciful element that isn't a literal description. ¹⁵Once the boon or reward has been achieved at the climax of the journey, the hero must return home. ¹⁶But he never has to relive the entire journey as he did initially, and there is usually a fast-paced 'short cut' that returns him to the normal world with ease.

¹⁷It was this archetype of the hero's journey that George Lucas used for his initial *Star Wars* movies, and we see it in many other tales such as *The Odyssey* and *The Lord of the Rings*. ¹⁸Campbell even found that many of these points could be found in the Biblical life story of Jesus.

¹⁹Some have stated that Campbell's concepts are overly simplistic, and that they lump together too many cultural differences into one construct. ²⁰Even so, it provides a tidy framework for understanding the important points of a lengthy 'hero's journey'. ²¹It also goes to highlight which concepts are most important to us as archetypes across different cultures.

The Function and Purpose of Myth

²²Campbell saw myths as a vital cornerstone to society, and important for the development of mankind for several reasons. ²³He outlines some specific reasoning for this belief in *The Mask of God*, giving four primary reasons for the necessary existence of myth:

1. *Metaphysical* – Myths exist as a way of creating additional wonder or awe to life, and to perpetuate the belief in the mysteries of the universe.
2. *Cosmological* – They can also explain the nature of the world around us, creating a type of proto-science to help man understand scientific concepts that he has otherwise yet to discover.
3. *Sociological* – Maintaining social order is always important, and myths can play a role in that by reinforcing behaviours and beliefs that go along with an orderly society.
4. *Psychological* – This refers to the movement of life, from birth through to maturity and ultimately death. Myths often focus on life stages and coming-of-age issues in this regard.

²⁴He also described an evolution in myth, showing a very clear line of development depending upon the nature of the society at the time. ²⁵Societies that were still in the hunter/gatherer stage had myths mainly involving the strengths and powers of animals and wildlife. ²⁶This shows up in an earlier section of this book about African and Native American myths.

²⁷After that come the agrarian societies, with myths about annual seasons, harvests and natural cycles. ²⁸More sophisticated societies like the ancient Greeks or Egyptians then continued with another era of myth that revolved around newer concepts. ²⁹They had more myths about planetary events as well as concepts of warfare and political power. ³⁰Finally, the more contemporary myths (such as the Arthurian mythos) tackled ideas of love, beauty, knowledge and virtue.

“Follow Your Bliss”

³¹Though not directly related to his studies of myth, this has become one of Campbell's more lasting legacies and deserves a mention. ³²It's a simple enough statement but has been misunderstood by many, at least in terms of what he meant when he first said it.

³³He had been studying the Upanishads (some of the holy texts from Hinduism) when he came across the idea of *ananda*, which somewhat translates to *bliss*. ³⁴He felt that this could be used as a guide for one's life:

“If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are – if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time.” (The Power of Myth, Chapter 2: The Journey Inward)

³⁵It's a wonderful viewpoint and can be a very satisfying way of living your life. ³⁶He was advocating that people dedicate themselves to whatever gives the most personal and spiritual satisfaction, though it wasn't intended as support for a selfish or indulgent world-view.

More on the Works of Joseph Campbell

³⁷Though *The Mask of God* and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* are two of his best known works, he has written several other excellent books on myth, anthropology and culture that would be of great interest for further research:

- i. *The Power of Myth*
- ii. *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*
- iii. *Posthumous collected works*
- iv. *Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays*
- v. *Transformations of Myth through Time*
- vi. *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*

Book Four: Philosophical Approaches

1 Understanding spiritual concepts, moral beliefs and fundamental archetypes can take you beyond religion itself and into the realm of philosophy. ²This is a great area to study if you want to grasp the issues raised by religion but not from *within* religion itself.

³On the whole, philosophy doesn't necessarily delve into spiritual or religious topics, but many philosophers have spent their lives theorising upon many of the issues raised. ⁴Studying philosophical concepts is a good way to develop spiritual understanding without the bias and contradictory offerings of mainstream religion.

⁵Many great philosophers have been devoutly religious people, and their theories and concepts stem from those beliefs. ⁶Since the purpose of this book is to develop spiritual understanding *without* religion, *some* of these thinkers will be left out. ⁷For example, Thomas Aquinas is considered to be one of the most influential philosophers, but since his studies and writings are from a strictly Catholic perspective, they aren't as well suited to this topic as others.

⁸Please be warned that philosophical terminology and concepts can be difficult to grasp for the layperson, so further study in the area is encouraged.

Alvin Plantinga

2 As one of the more contemporary philosophers we are going to look at, Plantinga's ideas are much more connected to our modern way of thinking than the others. ³He also has a heavily religious leaning to his work, which fits our overall subject matter nicely.

Who is He?

³Of Dutch descent, Alvin Plantinga was born in 1932. ⁴He began to study philosophy in 1951 after hearing a lecture by William Harry Jellema. ⁵He continued his studies at Calvin College, Harvard and the University of Michigan, eventually earning a Ph.D. in the subject. ⁶He taught at both Calvin College and the University of Notre Dame, and has written several books.

⁷His field of expertise involves a combination of philosophy, Christian religion and metaphysics. ⁸He looks at many aspects of these themes along with epistemology, which is the study and understanding of knowledge itself.

⁹It should be noted that he holds a definitive Christian bias, and though he looks at many spiritual topics from a logical perspective, that bias is still evident. ¹⁰His body of work covers many different areas, but here are a few of his theories that would be of interest to any spiritual discussion.

Evil and Free Will

¹¹Within philosophical circles, the concept of a wholly good God creates a logical problem with the nature of evil. ¹²The initial problem is that a Being that is omnipotent and all-good would not allow evil to exist in the world, and yet evil most certainly does. ¹³This creates a paradox.

¹⁴Plantinga's view on this involves our free will, and though it is accepted by many (not all) to resolve the logical issues of evil, it's not intended to be any kind of truth in itself. ¹⁵In other words, this is simply a theoretical possibility rather than any provable certainty.

¹⁶He speculates that the nature of free will allows for mankind to make evil choices without necessarily negating the existence of a completely good God figure. ¹⁷He feels that true moral goodness can only come from free-willed beings so it makes logical sense that God would allow evil choices to be made in the name of free will. ¹⁸In short, his theory is this:

“A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom, and that is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes do go wrong, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness, for

He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.” (The Nature of Necessity, 1974)

¹⁹It’s a bit of a lengthy quote but it sums up his ideas about evil nicely. ²⁰If you find the concept of evil to go against many of the mainstream religious teachings on their deities, you should read more about his theories on this. ²¹They are covered in much more detail in *The Nature of Necessity*.

Reformed Epistemology

²²Though this may not be as much a mainstream topic as the nature of evil, it is considered to be one of Plantinga’s major theories and contributions to philosophy. ²³Epistemology is the study of knowledge itself, and this is an offshoot of it, involving certain religious concepts. ²⁴Reformed epistemology is not Plantinga’s personal creation though. ²⁵He is one of several philosophers who follow this school of thought.

²⁶This line of thinking claims that the belief in God is a *basic belief*, which (according to epistemology) is defined as a belief that does not need to be based on other truths or proofs to be valid.

²⁷More typical schools of thought consider the belief in God to be irrational (though not necessarily incorrect) because there is no empirical evidence to support that belief. ²⁸A truly rational belief is one that has evidence to back it up.

²⁹Of course, many philosophers do not buy into this reformed idea, stating that if you can declare the belief in God to be a basic belief, then you can do the same for just about anything.

³⁰Plantinga digs deeper into the subject in three of his books: *Warrant: The Current Debate*, *Warrant and Proper Function* and *Warranted Christian Belief*. ³¹All three examine a concept he calls *warrant*, which could be used to logically justify beliefs that exist without evidence. ³²His thinking involves memories, perception, self-knowledge and probability.

Naturalism or Evolution

³³Another hot-button topic in religion is evolution, and Plantinga has some unusual thoughts on this as well. ³⁴His specific theory is known as the *evolutionary argument against naturalism*. ³⁵It has not been universally accepted as a philosophical theory. ³⁶It’s not an easy concept to get your head around, though it is a very interesting idea if you are interested in our origins from any type of deity.

³⁷The concept of naturalism involves the belief that everything around us (including ourselves) is purely natural and that there is no deity whatsoever. ³⁸This notion is closely tied to the theory of evolution. ³⁹But if you look at the two of them together, they supposedly form a paradox according to Plantinga.

⁴⁰Evolution makes changes in organisms over many generations, based on survival of the fittest. ⁴¹When applied to humans, this would mean that the way we think is also geared toward survival, not necessarily towards ultimate truths. ⁴²With this as our evolutionary background, Plantinga feels that our thought processes cannot be trusted because there is no guarantee that they are leading us to a true

outcome. ⁴³That means that our belief in evolution itself can be flawed simply because of the way we think. ⁴⁴In other words, our beliefs cannot be trusted if you accept a naturalistic evolution theory, and that includes belief in the theory itself. ⁴⁵Of course, if you can't trust your thinking then *all* arguments become moot. ⁴⁶Even so, it's an interesting idea that no one else has proposed.

His Works

⁴⁷If you wish to find out more about Plantinga's views, here are some additional books on philosophy and religion beyond the ones already mentioned above:

- i. God and Other Minds*
- ii. God, Freedom and Evil*
- iii. Does God have a Nature?*
- iv. Essays in the Metaphysics of Modality*
- v. Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism*

Soren Kierkegaard

3 Kierkegaard was one of the first philosophers to develop the school of thought now known as *existentialism* and is often described as the father of this movement. ²Much of his work was highly critical of the Church and he frequently intermingled religion and philosophy in his writings.

Who Was He?

³Kierkegaard was born in 1813, to a wealthy family in Denmark. ⁴His education consisted of history, Latin and theology, and he made it clear that philosophy was of no interest to him. ⁵He stated that he was more interested in the practical application of knowledge rather than the theoretical. ⁶Nonetheless, he seemed continually drawn to the subject.

⁷He was once engaged to be married but he backed out of the relationship. ⁸He otherwise lived his life as a bachelor and died in 1855. ⁹Many of his published books and articles were written under a pseudonym because he felt that any good work should stand on its own merits, regardless of the author.

Existentialism

¹⁰Though famed for some of his more specific theories, Kierkegaard is better known for this entire school of thought. ¹¹This way of thinking considers that all philosophical understanding has to come from one's own personal experiences. ¹²Our lives are the results of our own choices, and everything boils down to that fact.

¹³Because everything stems from our personal experiences, the very nature of social norms and moral laws cease to exist. ¹⁴The meaning of life is a popular topic within this scope and discussions often lead to the ultimate meaninglessness of life. ¹⁵This line of thinking leads to a more extreme form of existentialism, known as nihilism. ¹⁶Nietzsche was another philosopher who leaned this way. ¹⁷We will talk about him later.

¹⁸Existentialism is a very large (and rather vague) school of thinking, but there are a few key concepts worth considering here.

Despair

¹⁹Kierkegaard wrote extensively on the nature of dread and despair, covering the topic in several books such as *The Concept of Dread* and *Sickness Unto Death*.

²⁰You should be aware, though, that existentialists apply the term "despair" differently from conventional usage. ²¹It means any state of being when one's personal self-identity can be taken away because it is based on an external element (such as if a singer were to lose their voice). ²²It's not the sense of sadness or depression that is the more common use amongst us non-philosophers.

²³Kierkegaard felt that there were several levels of despair, ranging from this simple definition to a more complex one that involved a true sense of misery that comes from not accepting or living as

your identity insists.

²⁴Kierkegaard saw this concept of despair as being a crucial part of the religious experience, that it was the foundation of sin:

“Sin is this: before God, or with the conception of God, to be in despair at not willing to be oneself, or in despair at willing to be oneself. Thus sin is potential weakness or potential defiance; sin is the potentiation of despair.” (Sickness Unto Death)

²⁵On the surface this appears to be a complex notion, but the overall premise is fairly simple: in a world where your own experiences are key, you have to find identity within yourself.

Subjective Truth

²⁶If existence is based on the individual’s own experiences, then the argument between the subjective or objective nature of truth becomes relevant. ²⁷Kierkegaard believed that truth was subjective, or at least that any important truths were subjective because it was only personal experience that mattered.

²⁸In other words, there is no single version of ‘truth’ that stands on its own. ²⁹All forms of truth are coloured by the awareness of the individual.

³⁰This idea is frequently subverted into a simplistic statement that you can believe whatever you wish and that makes it true. ³¹But that is not Kierkegaard’s point here at all. ³²He felt that only true passionate beliefs were relevant and that they were more important than half-hearted ones, regardless of which ones were actually true.

The Existence of God

³³Though Kierkegaard clearly believed that one’s personal experiences were the centre of each person’s own reality, he did not see it as being in conflict with the potential existence of God.

³⁴And yet he was unable to establish any logical explanations or theories about the existence of God.

³⁵In fact, he was quite clear that you could not prove His existence at all and that it had to be taken only on faith. ³⁶Many of his works on this subject were directed at examining how God could *never* be proven, rather than ways to prove this theory.

³⁷He felt that people lived through three stages of life during their grown and intellectual development.

³⁸The first stage was aesthetic, where one is mainly concerned with things in life that are pleasing to the senses. ³⁹After that comes the ethical stage, when more abstract moral decisions begin to gain importance. ⁴⁰Lastly is the religious stage. ⁴¹He considered this to be the most enlightened of the three, so he clearly held religion as being important.

Other Works by Kierkegaard

⁴²The works already mentioned will give you a very good understanding of his theories, but here are a few other titles attributed to him that will offer up a little more depth to his teachings.

i. Fear and Trembling

- ii. *Concept of Anxiety*
- iii. *Repetition*
- iv. *Upbuilding Discourses (there were several collections of these)*
- v. *Philosophical Fragments*
- vi. *Practice in Christianity*

Friedrich Nietzsche

4 We mentioned Nietzsche briefly along with Kierkegaard, and now it's time to take a closer look at his theories, ideas and philosophical work. ²Some philosophers have a strong religious or spiritual dimension to their work, whereas Nietzsche leaned away from this.

Who was Nietzsche?

³Friedrich Nietzsche was born in 1844 in Prussia (now Germany), and had a fairly standard education at a private school. ⁴He always had an interest in non-mainstream ideas and enjoyed poetry. ⁵He gravitated towards theology and philosophy, but quickly found that he had lost much of his previous faith and left his theology studies. ⁶His dissatisfaction with Christianity would colour his philosophical views from then on.

⁷At a very young age (just 24), he became a professor of philology (the study of historical linguistics) at the University of Basel and also published his first books. ⁸Poor health made teaching impossible, but he continued to write further books on philosophy. ⁹His supposedly anti-religious views made him unpopular in many scholarly circles and he was no longer welcomed to teach at any major schools. ¹⁰Nietzsche eventually had a mental breakdown, possibly as the result of an earlier bout of syphilis. ¹¹Further illness led to his death in 1900.

God is Dead

¹²This is probably the most famous phrase ever uttered by Nietzsche, and he mentions the concept in *The Gay Science* as well as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. ¹³Here is a good (though lengthy) quotation that sums up his sentiments on this:

“God is dead. God remains dead. We have killed him. Yet his shadow still looms. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned had bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” (*The Gay Science*, section 125)

¹⁴That's a pretty bold statement, though further examination of his works shows that Nietzsche wasn't just making a literal statement regarding atheism. ¹⁵He means that our societal reliance on God has died, that we no longer have that higher power to give our lives meaning. ¹⁶It was more a statement on a possible future for humanity, one where we have no one but ourselves to rely on.

¹⁷Though it is true that he became an atheist as he grew older, these ideas were more a reflection of what he saw in society as a whole rather than just his own personal viewpoint.

Nihilism

¹⁸While Kierkegaard leaned toward the person-centred view of existentialism, Nietzsche took this one

step further into nihilism. ¹⁹This rather bleak world-view is evident in his “God is Dead” statement. ²⁰But the entire philosophy is more than that.

²¹Nihilism is the fundamental belief that there is no meaning or purpose to life, and that the concept of morality is completely arbitrary. ²²The viewpoint of nihilism is a difficult one to live with because it invariably leads to a deep level of despair.

²³Atheism (simply the non-belief) in any form can lead to nihilism but there is no true causal link between the two. ²⁴An atheist can easily find meaning in life that is not attributable to a deity.

Evolution of the ‘Overman’

²⁵In his original German, this concept was the *Übermensch* but we’ll stick with the English for now.

²⁶This idea also comes from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where he presents the *overman* (also translated to superman) as an alternative to the God he considered to be dead. ²⁷He felt that humanity needed to evolve in this direction to create a new moral compass once God has been removed from society.

²⁸He states:

“The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth.... Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss... what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end.”(*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, page 3)

²⁹It’s a very interesting concept that man himself is simply one step away from a larger, more meaningful development. ³⁰He saw that the values created by the overman would be distinct from those values we obtained from God because they would be of this world, rather than the ‘otherworldliness’ that a deity figure represented.

³¹Some took his idea of a superior man too literally, and some of his writings were used by the Nazis as the rationale behind their desire for a pure master race. ³²His anti-Semitic sister edited some of his unpublished works after his death, leading to a widespread belief that Nietzsche was in fact anti-Semitic himself. ³³Further research into his writings has since disproved this belief.

Masters and Slaves

³⁴In two of his books, *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche explores the duality of morality that is rooted in the master/slave archetype. ³⁵He felt that those in power would have a very different moral viewpoint to those who were not. ³⁶Those in the master position are more likely to see the elements in their own lives as being reflections of moral goodness (wealth, power, security), but those in the slave position will typically see wealth and power as being negative traits.

³⁷Furthermore, the slave morality was a way for slaves to justify their own positions in life and to morally reject those things that they could never have. ³⁸Instead they valued compassion, meekness and humility, which suited their position better.

³⁹He personally didn’t advocate for either philosophy, but merely stated that it existed as an example of moral relativity. ⁴⁰It also represents a deep cultural divide where two opposing moral forces are

constantly conflicting. ⁴¹Ancient Greek society focused on the master morality whereas modern Christianity holds the slave morality. ⁴²According to Nietzsche, the ideals contained in Christianity are a reflection of the slave mentality held by the Jewish people.

Eternal Recurrence

⁴³The eternal recurrence, or the eternal return, describes a cyclical physical universe, though not in the form of spiritual reincarnation. ⁴⁴It wasn't Nietzsche's original idea but it was a concept he embraced. ⁴⁵He saw it as a fascinating possibility but didn't completely subscribe to the idea – it was a theoretical interest for him. ⁴⁶The idea was that the world was in a state of continual recurrence, and that there was no escape from this. ⁴⁷In other words, we are doomed to live out our lives over and over again with no change and no respite. ⁴⁸It takes the belief in fate to a whole new level.

Other Works by Nietzsche

⁴⁹Besides the books already mentioned, you can explore his philosophy further through his other important writings:

- i. The Twilight of the Idols
- ii. The Will to Power
- iii. Human, All too Human
- iv. The Anti-Christ
- v. Ecce Homo (his autobiography)

Immanuel Kant

5 After reading the sections on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, you may be getting the idea that philosophers are generally pessimists. ²Kant should be a nice change of pace as he clearly held strong views on morality and God that will be of interest to anyone questioning standard religious dogma.

Who Was He?

³Like Nietzsche, Kant was born in Prussia (though the modern-day location is now part of Russia, not Germany) in 1724. ⁴He had a very strict religious upbringing and most of his early education focused on Biblical studies rather than more typical academics of the time. ⁵Even so, he developed a strong scepticism for religion and eventually left the faith altogether as an agnostic.

⁶He soon became a teacher and started doing further work in philosophy. ⁷His life was spent at various teaching positions while he continued to write. ⁸His critical attitude toward the Church got him into trouble until he swore that we would never write on the subject of religion again, an oath he kept until the death of the King. ⁹Kant himself died in 1804.

Theory of Perception

¹⁰Kant's book *The Critique of Pure Reason* is considered to be one of his most important works and that is where this concept is most fully outlined. ¹¹The ideas put forward in the book have influenced thinkers ever since, but they are not easily explained to the non-philosopher. ¹²Take a little time to digest this summary as best you can. ¹³This is his theory of transcendental idealism.

¹⁴He felt that experience was made up of our perceptions of the world around us as well as a framework of innate knowledge we already possess (he used the term *a priori* knowledge). ¹⁵This *a priori* knowledge is fundamental and it exists without any prior experience to create it. ¹⁶The most common example of this is the statement, 'all bachelors are unmarried'. ¹⁷The fact is inherent within the statement itself and nothing further has to be inferred from any prior experience for it to make sense.

¹⁸Our understanding of our perceptions is coloured by facts we already know rather than just on what we perceive at that moment. ¹⁹The basic premise is that objects around us are perceived partially based on the person doing the perceiving. ²⁰So the reality outside us is not absolute, or at least not perceived in an absolute manner.

²¹He also felt that space and time were not true objects of their own, but rather a framework that we perceive through. ²²If we need both space and time to perceive anything, then there is no way for us to perceive those things on their own.

The Nature of Morals

²³Kant's works on this subject spanned the course of three of his works: *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*. ²⁴Needless to say, these are not simple theories because they took him three separate books to elaborate upon. ²⁵He put forward a number of moral formulas that worked together to create his 'categorical imperative':

- i. *Formula of Universal Law* – Consider the rationality of your choices as though they were universally held laws that everyone followed. If that scenario is irrational, then said choices should not be followed from a moral point of view.
- ii. *Formula of the End in Itself* – Always consider other people to be an end unto themselves and never just the means to an end.
- iii. *Formula of Autonomy* – This is a mix of the first two formulations, fundamentally stating that we are all bound by the two prior formulas.

²⁶Though these ideas are far more complicated than this summary, the basic premise seems to simply be: treat others as you would like to be treated yourself.

Belief in God

²⁷Kant believed in God, or at least the general idea of a supreme being from a logical viewpoint (like most philosophers). ²⁸In his mind, the very concept of morals must come from a belief in God and since he felt that morals did exist, therefore God must also exist. ²⁹However, he did admit that it is not possible to truly know or understand the full nature of God.

³⁰Though he personally did believe in God, he was vocally critical of the Church and many ‘artificial’ aspects of organised religion. ³¹To Kant, only true moral living would be pleasing to God and all the rest was irrelevant.

More of His Work

³²Here is a short list of books by Kant that would be a great help for any continuing research on his thoughts and theories. ³³His main works have already been mentioned.

- i. *Critique of Judgement*
- ii. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*
- iii. *Metaphysics of Ethics*
- iv. *Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven*
- v. *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*
- vi. *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*

Rene Descartes

6 You may know of Descartes as more of a mathematician than a philosopher, but his contributions to philosophy were extensive and often touched on matters of morals and the existence of God.

Who Was He?

²Rene Descartes was born in France in 1596 and had a highly academic upbringing. ³He had a law degree by the time he was 22 though he had a stronger interest in mathematics, logic, ethics and metaphysics. ⁴He eventually felt that further knowledge could only come from within himself. ⁵He reportedly had three intense dreams that set him on the path of philosophy. ⁶He never married and died of pneumonia at the age of 53, whilst in the employ of Sweden's Queen Christina, as her philosophy tutor.

⁷Many of Descartes theories stem from his belief in the nature of thought. ⁸His famous quote, "I think, therefore I am" is a good testament to that.

Dualism of the Mind and Body

⁹How our physical body relates and connects to our mind or soul has long been a subject for great debate and questioning, and one might say the answer still eludes us. ¹⁰Descartes proposed a dualistic theory that our minds are distinctly separate from our bodies. ¹¹He even went so far as to determine that the point of connection was the pineal gland at the base of the brain. ¹²The mind was the seat of control for the body, but the connection did go both ways and the mind could also be influenced by the body.

¹³This is the subject of two books by Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* and *The Description of the Human Body*.

Belief in God

¹⁴Descartes had a strong belief in God, though he tended to look upon religion from a very rational or logical point of view. ¹⁵In his most influential work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he discussed a number of topics including several variations on this spiritual theme. ¹⁶He took a very logical approach and came up with two distinct arguments that supposedly prove the existence of God. ¹⁷The first went like this:

- i. Something cannot come from nothing
- ii. An idea must have at least as much true reality as it does objective reality
- iii. I have an idea of God
- iv. I cannot be the originating source of this idea because I am not an infinite or perfect being. I do not possess enough formal reality to create such an idea. Only an infinite and perfect being can create such an idea
- v. Therefore there must exist a concept as God that is the cause of my idea

¹⁸Simply put, he feels that any idea that we can develop in our minds must have some basis in reality.

¹⁹This concept is found through many of his theories.

The Nature of Thought

²⁰Also explained in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he had many ideas on our thoughts and how they connected to the physical world around us. ²¹Like many philosophers after him, he held specific ideas of how we perceived the world and how those perceptions truly reflect ‘reality’. ²²He believed that thought held to five main principles:

1. We are only able to access our own ideas, objects in the world are only accessed indirectly
2. Ideas are made up of many components, such as perceptions, memories, concepts, beliefs, and more
3. Our ideas and the things they represent are separate and distinct from each other
4. These things are external to the mind
5. It is possible to hold ideas that are accurate as well as false

²³The fact that the real world and our ideas about it are separate is linked to his mind-body theories about dualism that have been mentioned already.

True or False

²⁴One last theory from *Meditations on First Philosophy* involves truth and falsities. ²⁵This concept usually comes on the heels of his discussion about the existence of God. ²⁶When presuming that God is a perfect being, how then can error or falsehood even exist? ²⁷I’ll let Descartes explain his thoughts in his own words, more or less:

“I find that I am an intermediate between God and nothingness, between a supreme entity and nonentity. Insofar as I am the creation of the supreme entity, there's nothing in me to account for my being deceived or led into error, but inasmuch as I somehow participate in nothing or nonentity – that is, insofar as I am distinct from the supreme entity itself and lack many things – it's not surprising that I go wrong. I thus understand that, in itself, error is a lack rather than a real thing dependent on God. Hence, I understand that I can err without God's having given me the special ability to do so. Rather, I fall into error because my God-given ability to judge the truth is not infinite.” (Meditation IV: on truth and falsity)

²⁸So he basically believed that our ability to make mistakes was not an actual ability in itself, but rather a lack of proper judgement, which then doesn’t contradict the existence of a perfect God.

Further Works by Descartes

²⁹Though his major books have been mentioned already, there are other examples of his work available if you want to continue reading about his philosophy.

- i. *Discourse on the Method*
- ii. *Principles of Philosophy*
- iii. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*

³⁰But if you are going to do any study of Descartes, you'll want to start with the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

David Hume

⁷ Hume was a sceptic and many of his theories were based on questioning existing ways of thinking which set him apart from many contemporaries. ²He also deviated from the philosophical norm with his opinions that passion and sentiment were superior to logic: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions.”

Who Was Hume?

³Born in 1711, David Hume was raised in Edinburgh and attended the university there at a young age. ⁴He found nothing to be of interest besides philosophy and he claimed to have an inspiration that led him to this field, though he did not record what exactly that revelation was. ⁵He spent many years writing his first works before he decided that his life needed a little more scope. ⁶Unlike other philosophers, he was never a teacher in the subject (or any subject for that matter) and lived his life doing a mix of jobs and surviving as a writer. ⁷He never married and died in 1776.

Induction and Causation

⁸Induction is the reasoning we typically use to make assumptions about future or unseen events. ⁹We tend to assume that behaviour in the natural world will continue as we know it into the future, and whether or not anyone is watching. ¹⁰Hume felt that this is not a rational approach because there is no real foundation for such a belief. ¹¹There is no way to reasonably determine whether something will continue happening in an expected manner simply because it has happened up to this point.

¹²He thought that our natural tendency to this sort of belief is more instinctive than intellectual. ¹³This is a very suitable explanation as it would be a highly adaptive trait that we are able to see patterns and predict future conditions even though there is no logical or rational reason to do so.

¹⁴Another close concept to induction is causation, and again Hume took the sceptic’s approach. ¹⁵His idea was that we cannot truly perceive any causal connection between events, and our tendency to see causality is just an extension of the induction problem just mentioned. ¹⁶This is because any one event could have a variety of outcomes and a particular causal relationship is never certain.

¹⁷Both of these theories were presented in more detail in Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. ¹⁸If you are following up on these ideas, be aware that he didn’t use the term ‘induction’ himself which can make it a little confusing.

Free Will and Determinism

¹⁹Hume was considered a compatibilist who felt that both free will and determinism could exist at the same time. ²⁰In this context, determinism is the belief that all things that happen are a result of previous causal events and that these events can unfold no other way. ²¹Philosophically, this is usually in direct contrast with the idea of free will, where you are freely able to make choices about your actions. ²²If all things happen because they are bound to happen in precisely one way, then how can you truly be free to make choices?

²³In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume considers that the two seemingly opposite ideas can in fact exist simultaneously. ²⁴In his views, all actions and decisions must have some kind of causal connections. ²⁵So our free choices are always based on previous knowledge, experiences and events. ²⁶In this sense, our freedom is not separate from determinism. ²⁷He felt that truly random actions could not exist and therefore all actions were based on some sort of cause.

Concepts of the Self

²⁸Hume put forward the idea of ‘bundle theory’, which states that all objects are merely a collection of properties. ²⁹An object cannot be thought of in any way separate from these properties, and no object could even be conceived in such a way.

³⁰This viewpoint can then be extended to the nature of the self as being a collection of experiences and perceptions. ³¹We cannot conceive of ourselves without using some defining qualities of emotion, experiences, thoughts and memories. ³²So Hume concluded that the ‘self’ doesn’t exist at all as a distinct object, but is a bundle of qualities just like any other object.

The Existence of God

³³And staying with our spiritual theme for this book, we should also take a look at Hume’s ideas regarding religion and God. ³⁴He didn’t feel that seeing an orderly universe around us was proof of a Creator as there can be many types of seemingly organised design that stem from non-directed creation (the growth of plants, for example). ³⁵Even if we did agree that creation has an intelligent designer behind it, that is no rational reason to presume that God is either all-knowing or all-powerful. ³⁶There is no logical connection between these assumptions.

³⁷He covers a great deal on religion in *On Superstition and Enthusiasm* but his own personal views were likely agnostic (leaning towards atheism). ³⁸Basically he couldn’t find any reasoning to disprove God so he considered it a possibility.

Additional Works by Hume

³⁹And as with our other philosophers, here is a quick list of additional works written by Hume that describe his theories further:

- i. A Treatise of Human Nature*
- ii. An Enquiry concerning the principles of morals*
- iii. The Natural History of Religion*

⁴⁰He also wrote several essays involving politics and his thoughts on local English history.

Classical Philosophers

8 No discussion of philosophy would be complete without a look at the Classical philosophers, particularly those of ancient Greece. ²Many great thinkers developed unique and revolutionary theories during that time that still resonate today. ³Specifically, we will look at Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. ⁴Philosophical constructs were less complex than they are today, so this is a good place to start for anyone unfamiliar with the subject.

Socrates

⁵Though he is now known as a great philosopher, there are no texts or writings attributed to him. ⁶He was a speaker and teacher, not a writer. ⁷The writings of Plato (one of Socrates's students, and a philosopher in his own right) hold the most information on Socrates's ideas, and this is where we get most of our knowledge about his thoughts.

⁸One particular concept that Socrates is known for today is the Socratic Method of intellectual debate. ⁹The premise is that a back-and-forth dialogue of opposing viewpoints can be a useful tool for teaching and for simply creating further understanding of an issue for both parties. ¹⁰It may not seem too revolutionary to us today, but the idea was cutting edge for its time and many teachers embraced it.

¹¹Socrates felt that acquiring knowledge and wisdom were the ultimate goals in life. ¹²During a time in Greece when family, political and financial successes were considered the paramount goals in life, his ideas were seen as unusual. ¹³More than just unusual, they were considered to be a threat to society by local officials and he was sentenced to death for 'corruption of the young'.

¹⁴Though his thoughts weren't sophisticated compared to more modern philosophers like Kant or Nietzsche, he influenced many people during his time, which led to further developments in the field. ¹⁵One of Socrates finest statements is simple, yet sums up the ethereal nature of wisdom:

"The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

Plato

¹⁶As a student of Socrates, it's no surprise that Plato would go on to come up with his own thoughts and theories about logic, ethics and other philosophical topics. ¹⁷But since he often wrote of what was being said or taught by Socrates, it is not always easy to discern the origins of some concepts.

¹⁸One particular theory involves the concept of realism, which states that the things we perceive as reality are only reflections of their true forms. ¹⁹For example: when we see an apple, we are only seeing a copy or shadow of the true apple that exists outside of our awareness. ²⁰Basically, nothing we are able to perceive is actually real. ²¹He goes further to say that the *real* world is outside of our knowledge and senses. ²²Though his framework for reality is complex, he did have one statement that summed up the gist of it all:

“How can you prove whether at this moment we are sleeping and all our thoughts are a dream; or whether we are awake, and talking to one another in a waking state?”

²³Plato had many theories on the nature of knowledge itself and was one of the first teachers of epistemology. ²⁴He felt that our souls originally possessed *all* knowledge and understood the nature of reality, but that knowledge was lost when we were born into our physical bodies. ²⁵And as we learn new things, we are simply recalling that which we had previously known. ²⁶It may seem a bit of an irrelevant point but the underlying theory was that we cannot acquire new knowledge at all. ²⁷We can only remember what we once already knew.

²⁸These are his best-known contributions to philosophy, though he also wrote on many political subjects as well. ²⁹Not surprisingly, he felt that philosophers were better suited to rule than politicians because wisdom was more important in governance than popularity.

³⁰One of Plato’s most notable works is *The Republic*, a large text made up of 10 volumes covering mainly philosophical and political topics, written in the form of a Socratic dialogue.

Aristotle

³¹From the same era as Socrates and Plato, Aristotle rounds out the three great Classical thinkers from this period in Greece. ³²He was a student of Plato and though he is known for many philosophical concepts, he also worked in the physical sciences as well. ³³He looked into the basic elements; motion, optics, geology, probability and more. ³⁴For this discussion, we’ll stick to his philosophical thoughts.

³⁵He shared Plato’s idea that objects have a true or universal form beyond what we are able to perceive, but Aristotle held that that universal form was held within the object rather than apart from it.

³⁶His work *Metaphysics* has the most influence on modern philosophy. ³⁷It’s fairly extensive and covers a wide number of concepts, both philosophical and otherwise. ³⁸He discusses his theories on reality, substance, matter, logic, essences, categories and universal forms.

³⁹A quote from this text that makes an interesting point on the journey to spiritual wisdom is as follows:

“The investigation of truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but everyone says something true about the nature of all things, and while individually they contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.” (Metaphysics)

Chain of Thought

⁴⁰These are certainly not the only classical philosophers who have made a big impact on thought and philosophical understanding today, but they are the names that stand out when more modern philosophers talk about who has influenced them. ⁴¹Understanding these three provides a good foundation for further reading on the subject. ⁴²The fact that they also represent a chain of teacher-to-student relationships (Socrates taught Plato, who then taught Aristotle) shows how ideas and theories

progress over time.

Book Five: Metaphysical Alternatives

1 Our final section involves a wide array of esoteric, alternative and metaphysical tools that can help you develop your own spiritual path outside of religion.

²In this chapter you'll find information on techniques and methods to get in touch with energies, both within and outside of ourselves, and various ways of looking at the world around us that is beyond organised religion.

³Not all of these tools is a path on its own, but understanding and being aware of them can open your eyes to unlimited possibilities, as well as new ways of viewing the universe, reality and spirituality.

⁴Some may be familiar to you, such as the practice of astrology, but you may discover some completely new ways of thinking with theosophy and the art of astral travel.

⁵There is a large section on Pagan religions, which don't fall into the category of being outside of religion, but these faiths are so different from the mainstream that they are often viewed as such.

The Astral World

² That there is a world beyond our own is not a unique or even unusual concept. ²The very core of mainstream religion holds that there are beings and worlds beyond the Earth, so this area is just as much a part of religion as it is of spirituality.

³The astral world or plane is considered by some to be a place where the ‘Higher Self’ or ‘Infinite Self’ dwells, possibly awaiting reincarnation here to earth, or where it rests for a while, until it is ready to commence life on a higher plane. ⁴For others it is also a place where demi-gods, spirit guides and other enlightened beings dwell.

⁵For the purpose of this chapter, the term *astral* refers to the spiritual world of energy that is otherwise invisible to us in the physical dimension. ⁶And if you’re not familiar with it, there is a lot to discover. ⁷Astral travel is the out-of-body experience that accompanies the journey to this world, whereby our soul or spirit leave the physical body.

Meditation

⁸The first step to gaining access to the spiritual world outside of our physical existence is meditation. ⁹It is often used in its own right as a way of calming the spirit and creating mindfulness, but with a little practice, these techniques can be used for much more.

¹⁰Followers of many mainstream religions use meditation as part of their spiritual practice, particularly Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and followers of the Baha’i faith. ¹¹Many neo-Pagan religions also embrace meditation as a spiritual tool.

Basic Techniques

¹²You don’t have to sit in the lotus position while chanting mantras in order to meditate. ¹³In fact, it usually works better if you are relaxed and in a naturally comfortable position. ¹⁴This means your favourite chair or even just lying down in bed (providing you don’t fall asleep). ¹⁵It will almost certainly take several attempts (dozens, maybe even hundreds) in order to develop good meditation abilities. ¹⁶Do not give up and consider that your newly developing patience is a good meditative skill all on its own.

¹⁷First, find a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed and where you feel relaxed. ¹⁸Not just physically comfortable either. ¹⁹Somewhere that you can be calm, safe and mentally at peace. ²⁰Sit or lie down and get settled.

²¹Start to focus on your breathing. ²²Let that be your sole focus and don’t let yourself think about anything else for several minutes. ²³Then start to control your breathing, continuing to think about that alone. ²⁴The specific pattern isn’t important as long as it’s natural and allows you to control your breathing. ²⁵An easy one is to take a breath in for a four-count, then let it out slowly for a four-count. ²⁶This is really flexible, though, so you can experiment with a rhythm that works well for you.

²⁷When your mind stops thinking about your body (even your breathing) and anything else, you are

meditating. ²⁸How long you choose to meditate is up to you, though novices may only be able to hold that not-thinking-about-anything state for a few minutes at a time.

²⁹Following a regular routine of meditation will reduce stress and also give you a better sense of personal mindfulness. ³⁰Being able to control your thoughts and emotions will make a huge impact on your day-to-day living too. ³¹A high level of inner-peace is often considered one of the benefits of a spiritual lifestyle, which you can certainly develop from meditation. ³²This is why it is part of so many journeys to discovering the Divine.

³³Before we continue, you should understand that meditating can be a goal on its own, as a way of reducing stress, focusing the mind and becoming more aware of our physical bodies. ³⁴Whether you wish to take the additional step to astral travel is up to you.

Astral Travel

³⁵Now we move on to more advanced techniques which you can use to access the astral world.

³⁶Once you've reached a meditative state, release all physical sensations and let your mind completely wander. ³⁷Try to visualise a scene and let your thoughts develop all the details until you truly feel that you are there. ³⁸With practice, you will feel that you are genuinely and even physically in your inner world with no awareness of your body. ³⁹This is the origin of the term 'out-of-body experience'.

⁴⁰Sometimes the thrill and shock of realising what you've done can be enough to break the spell and cause you to lose your astral awareness. ⁴¹Consider this a typical roadblock, which you will overcome with more practice.

⁴²After you are secure in your new world, the toughest task is to trust your experiences, and not chalk them up as pure fantasy. ⁴³This is part of the fluid nature of the astral world. ⁴⁴You also have to trust that many of the things you see and experience are real. ⁴⁵With practice, your mind won't wander around so much creating distractions to your new reality.

⁴⁶Once you have started this journey, you can walk (or even fly) around your inner landscape and learn about aspects of yourself.

Lucid Dreaming

⁴⁷This is another technique for astral travelling, which can be a good option for anyone who has difficulty with the more traditional meditative practices outlined above. ⁴⁸A lucid dream is one where you are consciously aware that you are in a dream state, and can therefore control aspects of the outcome. ⁴⁹Lucid dreams can happen spontaneously, or one can learn to create them intentionally.

⁵⁰Developing lucid dreaming skills can be tough because you have very little control over your thoughts and actions whilst in a dream state. ⁵¹One very successful technique is to develop a thought-habit during your waking hours that will still be a mental habit once you are asleep.

⁵²For example, each time you look out of a window, consciously evaluate your surroundings and decide whether you are dreaming or not. ⁵³It may sound silly to do this when you know you are awake, but it

will work if you stick with it and take it seriously. ⁵⁴If you start to do this on a regular basis, you'll find that your mind continues to do so even when you are sleeping. ⁵⁵So as soon as you have a dream, when you look out of a window, you will automatically assess your surroundings to evaluate whether or not you're awake. ⁵⁶It may not always work as your dream-mind may not notice anything amiss, but with a little luck and practice, your conscious mind will come to the forefront and determine that you are in a dream state.

⁵⁷It doesn't always have to be a window either. ⁵⁸Simply pick a mundane habit such as looking at your hands or into a mirror and asking yourself if you're asleep or awake.

⁵⁹Once you have perfected your technique, you will *consciously* think and act within the dream world. ⁶⁰A dream is just as much part of the larger astral world as anything else. ⁶¹Think of it as a doorway rather than a tiny distinct room of its own. ⁶²Once you are actively moving within the dream world, you should consider yourself within the astral plane.

Astral Residents

⁶³The astral realm isn't just a vague mix of imagination and thought processes. ⁶⁴It is believed that there are beings who live in this world, and you can use the above techniques to contact and communicate with them. ⁶⁵This may be the biggest path to spiritual understanding of them all.

⁶⁶We are going to discuss angels in a chapter of their own, so this topic will be left out for now. ⁶⁷Spirit guides, animal totem spirits, even the spirits of the deceased can all be found living in the astral world and they are all available for communication. ⁶⁸You can also find yourself in contact with more powerful beings, and possibly even those of deity level. ⁶⁹Pagans often use meditation and ritual as a way of speaking with the Divine in a very personal way.

⁷⁰With regular astral work, you can develop true relationships with other beings and even find yourself being taught as a student during your meditative journeys. ⁷¹Be respectful at all times and do not make any demands of them. ⁷²If they offer to help you, accept gratefully, but also be polite if they choose not to.

At the End of Your Journey

⁷³Doing a lot of astral travelling can have some physical effects on the body, but they will be minimal. ⁷⁴Astral travel done during a meditative state can leave you a little light-headed, so it's a good idea to get into the habit of grounding yourself afterwards. ⁷⁵Spend a few minutes outside with your feet having physical contact with the earth and having a bite to eat to shake off that flighty feeling.

⁷⁶If you tend to do your travelling during lucid dreaming, this won't be an issue since your body is already sleeping through the whole process and you're already used to coming back to earth when you wake up. ⁷⁷On the other hand, this can leave you less rested than regular sleep because your mind has been actively conscious throughout the night. ⁷⁸Try not to spend too many nights in the astral or you will start to feel the effects. ⁷⁹Allow nights for regular sleep to keep your body running smoothly.

⁸⁰You should never be afraid of astral journeying or worry about whether you can find your way back to your body. ⁸¹Despite some unfounded notions that have persisted in this area, you cannot 'lose your

soul' or become permanently trapped in the astral realms. ⁸²The connection between your mind and body is too powerful to give way.

Spiritual Learning and Discovery

⁸³These are amazing skills to learn but you may wonder what the point of all this is. ⁸⁴We already mentioned that meditation alone will bring some inner harmony, peace and mindfulness to your life which could be a wonderful spiritual goal all on its own.

⁸⁵Some entire spiritual paths, such as shamanism, revolve around astral workings. ⁸⁶It's hard to deny that there is a spiritual component to this practice. ⁸⁷You can find out more about shamanism in a later section of this book.

⁸⁸Learning from residents in the astral world is a huge opportunity to learn as long as you keep an open mind and accept that you are receiving knowledge and information, even though it may seem as if it's all coming from inside your own head. ⁸⁹Be prepared to be patient though. ⁹⁰Not all astral learning is like sitting in a typical classroom. ⁹¹Things may be confusing, vague and filled with indirect symbolism.

⁹²There are other sources of wisdom in the astral world that you can take advantage of once you are able to navigate your way around. ⁹³Particularly important are the Akashic records, which have been described as the complete collection of all human experience and knowledge, as well as the history of the cosmos. ⁹⁴It's not an easy place to find or reach so you should only seek it once you have gained more astral experience. ⁹⁵Once there, you can have access to a wide range of information, though not everyone experiences the records in the same way. ⁹⁶Many see the realm as a library filled with books, but some use a more visual method that creates screens that show images like a television or a movie theatre.

⁹⁷The records will usually restrict your access to certain things that are relevant or important to you personally. ⁹⁸You don't get to just rummage around through the universe's entire store of knowledge as you wish.

⁹⁹Famed psychic Edgar Cayce reported on many visits to the Akashic records while he did readings for his clients. ¹⁰⁰Among other things, he claimed to have learned about the mystical civilisation of Atlantis. ¹⁰¹His books are still some of the best for learning more about astral travelling, psychic phenomenon, channelling, past lives, as well as the Akashic records.

¹⁰²At the barest minimum, the practice of astral travel opens our eyes to a wide new landscape of experience beyond our physical reality. ¹⁰³That alone makes it a worthwhile path to follow.

Channelling

¹⁰⁴Not all astral exploration comes from visiting these realms personally. ¹⁰⁵Since we already talked about beings who live in these worlds, it is necessary to mention the practice of channelling as well.

¹⁰⁶The term refers to the practice of being in contact with an astral being or consciousness, and allowing that being to communicate through a willing human medium. ¹⁰⁷These beings can then leave

messages, answer questions or provide us with important knowledge, usually without the medium being aware of the exchange. ¹⁰⁸Someone else typically has to record the conversations, though some channellers can do their own writing during a session.

¹⁰⁹This allows us to connect with other beings without actually entering the astral world ourselves. ¹¹⁰Of course, the ability to channel is rare and only those with the right psychic abilities are able to do it.

¹¹¹Unfortunately, the act of channelling is hard to prove and there have been many fakes and charlatans over the centuries who have used this technique for personal gain. ¹¹²If you wish to learn from channelled knowledge, you should do so with caution and a critical mind.

¹¹³Studying and reading about spiritual topics is an important way to gain understanding, but nothing beats personal experience. ¹¹⁴The more you can explore the world around you (and those other worlds we cannot see), the better you will be at making spiritual decisions and gaining enlightenment.

Tarot

3 As a tool for self-discovery and connecting with energy beyond our own, the Tarot is an invaluable resource for anyone searching for spiritual understanding. ²This chapter will discuss the nature of the cards, and a basic outline of how to use them.

The Cards

³Tarot cards are well-known and you likely have a rough idea what they're all about. ⁴Tarot as we know it today first originated in the 15th century, so the practice is old, though cannot be described as *ancient*.

⁵The standard deck has 78 cards, divided into two sections: the Major and Minor Arcana. ⁶The Major Arcana has 22 cards, with each one symbolising a significant archetype, whilst the Minor Arcana has the remaining 56 cards – similar to a typical deck of playing cards (four suits of fourteen cards each). ⁷Though the deck is used as a whole, each section deserves further explanation on its own.

The Major Arcana

⁸These are also called the Trump cards, and they are the more powerful symbols in the deck. ⁹They are numbered as follows:

1. The Fool
2. The Magician
3. The High Priestess
4. Empress
5. Emperor
6. The Hierophant
7. The Lovers
8. The Chariot
9. Justice
10. The Hermit
11. Wheel of Fortune
12. Strength
13. The Hanged Man
14. Death
15. Temperance
16. The Devil
17. The Tower
18. The Star
19. The Moon
20. The Sun
21. Judgement
22. The World

¹⁰As you can see, each of these cards embodies some fundamental aspects of our life, though some might seem a little odd at first.

¹¹There are some traditional images found on each card that hold further symbolic meaning beyond the meaning of the card itself. ¹²They can be quite detailed and many little elements can have something to say. ¹³For the purpose of this introduction, here is a *very* brief description of each card:

- i. Fool – New beginnings, optimism, naivety
- ii. Magician – Creativity, mastery over the four base elements
- iii. High Priestess – Mystery and the unknown
- iv. Empress – Nurturing motherhood
- v. Emperor – Authority and power
- vi. Hierophant – Organised religion, social stability, traditions
- vii. Lovers – Partnerships, completion, life purpose
- viii. Chariot – Controlling opposing forces, a possible journey
- ix. Justice – Balance, fairness and legal issues
- x. Hermit – Contemplation, consideration, quiet thought
- xi. Wheel of Fortune – Good luck, success
- xii. Strength – Power and energy
- xiii. Hanged Man – Reflection, personal sacrifice
- xiv. Death – Change, transformation (not literal death)
- xv. Temperance – Removal of extremes, balance
- xvi. Devil – Excessive attachment to material things or addictive vices
- xvii. Tower – Destruction, chaos, fundamental personal conflict
- xviii. Star – Possibilities, optimism and hope
- xix. Moon – Deep emotions, hidden secrets, psychic abilities
- xx. Sun – Happiness and good fortune
- xxi. Judgement – Breaking from past mistakes, atonement
- xxii. World – Completion, fulfilment and success

¹⁴Modern decks have gone a step beyond the traditional designs and recreated the meaning of the cards with new symbolism. ¹⁵In some cases, they have held onto most of the smaller symbols but some have taken a rather blunt-nosed approach to only recreate the one central meaning of the card, thus losing the depth that the original images would have held. ¹⁶That's not to say that the original cards hold the only possible collection of symbols that could ever be used in this way. ¹⁷Many modern decks have a very refreshing and creative way of summing up these concepts and can be a great choice for additional Tarot learning.

¹⁸Another way of viewing the 22 cards of the Major Arcana is as a pathway of personal development, starting with the innocence and naivety of the Fool and ending with the enlightenment of the World.

¹⁹An entire story can be told if you move through the cards in sequence. ²⁰Each card also has ties to each of the 22 pathways in the Kabbalah's *Tree of Life*.

The Minor Arcana

²¹These cards are far less rich in their meaning and their imagery is usually a little more simplified as

well. ²²There are four suits, each with 10 numbered cards and four face cards (usually page, knight, queen and king). ²³They are very similar to plain playing cards. ²⁴The suits will vary by deck, but will be some variation of coins, swords, wands and cups.

	<i>Coins</i>	<i>Swords</i>	<i>Wands</i>	<i>Cups</i>
1	New job	New creative choices	New learning opportunity	New emotional period
2	Juggling too many things	Opposing forces	A choice or decision	New relationship
3	Success at work	Heartbreak and suffering	Signs of success	Celebration, happiness
4	Grasping at money	Take a break and relax	A foundation has been laid	Boredom, stagnation
5	Material or financial losses	Accepting failure gracefully	Discord and in-fighting	Focus on the positive
6	Acts of charity	Let go of your problems	Passing of struggles	Pleasant nostalgia
7	Patience is necessary	Betrayal is coming	Take a defensive position	Overwhelmed by choice
8	Time to develop your skills	Paralyzed by fear or indecision	Control the situation	Leaving the familiar
9	Enjoy a little luxury	Facing your fears	Overcoming discouragement	Getting your heart's desire
10	Financial prosperity	Struggle, despair and suffering	Handling a burden	Happiness in the family
Page	A message of good luck	A message of a problem	A message of travel or career	A message of love
Knight	Local travel	Travel by air	Distant or exotic travel	Travel by water
Queen	Improvement in finances	Opportunity for a presentation	Employment advancement	Beginning of a relationship
King	New business opportunity	New viewpoints or ideas	Desire for something new	Motivation for a project

²⁵The court cards (Page, Knight, Queen and King) can also mean specific people rather than the meanings above. ²⁶Pages are usually young people under the age of 18. ²⁷Knights are men in their 20s or 30s. ²⁸Queens are mature women and kings are mature men. ²⁹Oddly, there is no female equivalent to

the knight figure.

Non-Standard Decks

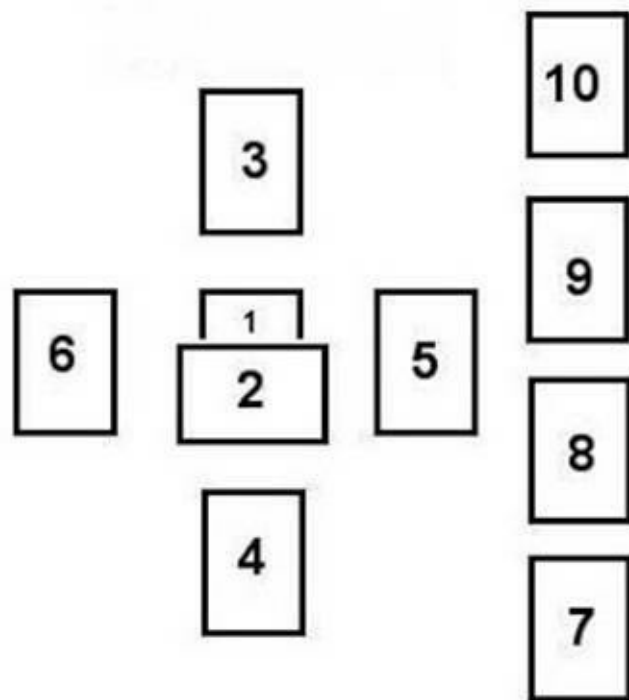
³⁰Not all Tarot decks follow the traditional format and many modern ones have a different arrangement of cards. ³¹Some may only differ by a few cards, and some will have a completely new set of images and meanings that you will have to learn separately from this overview. ³²Those titled as “oracle” or “fortune-telling” decks will usually depart significantly from the norm. ³³They can work just as well but are a little harder to learn for a novice. ³⁴Some good beginner decks would be the *Morgan Greer*, the *Rider Waite* or even the *Quick and Easy* Tarot deck. ³⁵These all follow the traditional imagery and are easier to learn from.

How to Read the Cards

³⁶As with most metaphysical practices, everyone has their own way of doing things. ³⁷The general idea for reading Tarot cards is that you shuffle the cards while thinking about a certain question or situation and then deal out the cards. ³⁸There are hundreds of ways to lay out the cards, and we’ll handle that in a moment. ³⁹Once the cards are spread, you can see either an answer to your question or some other sort of insight into the issue. ⁴⁰The meanings of each card are read as you see them above, but their position within the layout gives those meanings more context.

⁴¹For example, a reading with the five of cups in a position that represents your personal goals would have a different overall meaning from the same card in a position indicating a past difficulty.

⁴²There are literally countless ways to lay out your cards, but certain patterns have been used for a very long time, so have become the most typical spreads. ⁴³The one below is called the *Celtic Cross* and is a good way to illustrate how the cards work.



⁴⁴Once shuffled, you lay out the cards as above; the positions in the spread have the following meanings:

1. This card represents you or some aspect of your position in the situation
2. Crossing – This card shows you your immediate obstacles or conflicts
3. Crowning – Describes the immediate situation
4. Base – A deeper influence to the situation
5. Past – Recently passed influences
6. Future – Events that are just about to manifest
7. Present – This describes your role in the situation at present
8. Opinions – What others may be thinking or doing about the situation
9. Hopes – This shows your true hopes/fears about the situation
10. Outcome – The final outcome of the issue

⁴⁵It's not the simplest spread, but it shows how much more in-depth a Tarot reading can be beyond a simple yes/no format of fortune-telling. ⁴⁶Another option is a three-card spread, showing a basic past, present and future scenario.

⁴⁷You read each card based on *both* its meaning and position, which gives you an almost infinite number of possible readings, even if you stick with one spread each time. ⁴⁸The answers to your questions aren't always clear and it can take some thought and further study to understand what the cards may be telling you. ⁴⁹Unlike depictions in the movies, the cards can't yell out a certain person's name or anything specific. ⁵⁰Expect nuances and generalities in your readings.

⁵¹As you learn to read the cards, make a lot of notes and record the spreads that you do. ⁵²Answers and understanding may not come until later on, when you suddenly see what the cards were talking about days, weeks or even months later.

How Does it Work?

⁵³There are two theories behind how the Tarot cards work. ⁵⁴You are either tapping into your own natural intuitive skills, or you are allowing an outside energy to guide the cards. ⁵⁵To some, it makes no difference either way as the final result is all that matters. ⁵⁶But if you are going to use these cards as tools for further personal development and exploration, you should decide which school of thought you are going to follow. ⁵⁷In either case, continued use of the cards will help build your intuition and hone your own awareness of situations around you.

Learning with the Tarot

⁵⁸The Tarot is best known as a divination device, and it certainly works well as that. ⁵⁹But as a tool to learn more about spirituality and possible divine energy, how would that work?

⁶⁰First, you would want to take on a more detailed study of the symbolism that each card holds. ⁶¹Using a deck with detailed imagery (ideally the traditional style if you are a novice at Tarot), take one card at a time and learn the meaning behind the many images that it holds. ⁶²To illustrate, let's take a closer look at the *Fool*.

⁶³The traditional image shows a young man about to step off of a cliff, illustrating the naive viewpoint that this card represents. ⁶⁴But further study can tell us more. ⁶⁵The man is looking up rather than

focusing on where he is heading, which not only shows the obstacle of the cliff but also that he is not aware of it because of his own foolishness. ⁶⁶He carries a tote bag, representing the skills or ‘goods’ to get by on his journey. ⁶⁷Lastly, a small dog jumps about his feet depicting a loyal friend who is trying to warn him of impending danger.

⁶⁸Exploring the symbolism will help you develop a greater understanding of each card, as well as a better feel for the archetypes and concepts that tend to be present in nearly every situation. ⁶⁹The individual elements in the cards are there for a reason. ⁷⁰By realising that each card holds various images in one theme, you can learn more about how emotions, events and attitudes connect to help you better handle situations in your own life.

⁷¹There are also patterns and connections between the cards, and other areas of esoteric study that can be very enlightening once you start to see them. ⁷²The cards connect very strongly to astrology, numerology, and even mythology. ⁷³For example, the *Hanged Man* card shows the image of a man hanging upside down from a tree by one leg. ⁷⁴This is similar – and connects with – the story of how the Norse God, *Odin*, hanged from the world tree, *Yggdrasil*, for nine days and nights in order to gain the wisdom of the runes. ⁷⁵The theme of self-sacrifice is important in both cases. ⁷⁶Tarot cards also make excellent points of focus for meditation or even astral travel.

Contacting Other Realms

⁷⁷As mentioned earlier, there is some debate as to whether Tarot uses your own natural abilities, or is used as a conduit for other spiritual beings to communicate through the reader. ⁷⁸Regardless of which is correct, you can use the Tarot as a tool to reach farther into the astral world.

⁷⁹This technique can take a bit more time to master and it may not work for everyone, but communication with spirit guides or astral beings is another use for the cards. ⁸⁰Typically, the practitioner would already have learned ways to do so via meditation or astral travel, but once you have done so, you can ask your guides to help you with answers through the cards. ⁸¹Because the cards represent many different ideas, it makes a good vehicle for symbolic communication.

⁸²However you choose to use the cards, understanding the nature of the Tarot is going to open your eyes to a wide range of universal symbolism and other esoteric arts.

Angels

⁴ In the chapter on astral worlds, we introduced the idea of beings that live in realms beyond our physical perception. ²That can include a number of different entities but for the moment we will look at the most common of them: angels.

³There is a lot more to understanding these ethereal beings than the stereotype of winged creatures in robes who serve God. ⁴They actually exist in more than one religious form.

Angels through History and Scriptures

⁵In attempting to define what an angel is, you can gain a lot from looking back in history. ⁶Religious scripture holds most of our written knowledge on these beings, though the descriptions obviously have a bias toward each individual faith.

⁷When it comes to the Christian outlook, you'll find that they hold a more important role for Catholics than for Protestants.

⁸The typical depiction of an angel is as a winged human-like being, usually dressed in white robes. ⁹The Bible doesn't support this claim, only describing wings for the Seraphim, the higher order of sacred angels. ¹⁰In one verse:

“Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.” (Isaiah 6:2)

¹¹There is also mention of angels with wings in the Quran:

“Praise be to Allah, who created out of nothing, the heavens and the earth, who made the angels, messengers with wings – two, three or four (pairs); He adds to Creation as He pleases, for Allah has power over all things.” (Sura 35:1)

¹²Notice anything odd? ¹³Both examples have *multiple* wings rather than the rather mundane *single* pair usually depicted in artwork.

¹⁴There also tends to be a noticeable military slant to the concept of angels, especially when you see pieces of Classical artwork, particularly the archangels, who have armour and shields like any Earthly soldier. ¹⁵In fact, the only place in the Bible where they are described as being warriors is in Revelations. ¹⁶In one example:

“Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.” (Revelations 12:7)

¹⁷Even in the realms of heaven there is war. ¹⁸And yet today many people view angels as peaceful creatures. ¹⁹Interesting how views change over time.

The Archangels

²⁰These angels stand out from the rest because of their importance and because they are known by name and character. ²¹You hear about archangels in several religions (namely Christianity and Islam) but they are mentioned elsewhere. ²²We'll stick to the monotheistic religions for now, since that is where they are most frequently encountered.

²³Biblically speaking, these are high-ranking angels with great power and status in Heaven. ²⁴They are often identified as saints, but not in the same way as humans who have achieved such status.

²⁵There are three well-known and well-documented archangels: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. ²⁶They are all mentioned by name in books of Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant branches), Islam and Judaism. ²⁷The specifics will vary by faith, but here are the known traits of these powerful beings:

i. *Michael* – He is known as the leader of God's angelic army, in the great battle during the End Times of Revelations. In that battle, it will be Michael who finally defeats Satan. From another perspective: Michael is considered the patron saint of the Jewish people, and by Catholics as the being who collects the souls of the dead to take to Heaven. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists (two smaller Christian sects) consider him to actually be Jesus Christ as he exists in Heaven. (The name means 'who is like God'.)

ii. *Gabriel* – One of Gabriel's main roles is as a messenger from God to man, most notably as the angel who speaks to Mary and announces that she will have a child (Jesus). Gabriel is also the angel who revealed the Quran to Muhammad, though he is known to Muslims as *Jibrail*. He is often depicted carrying a horn, and is believed to be the one to mark the return of God to Earth during the End Times with a blast.

iii. *Raphael* – Known to Muslims as *Israfil*, he is the angel associated with the art of healing. He is not mentioned by name as often as the other two, and mainly in the Book of Tobit, which is not canon for many Christian denominations (it's in the Apocrypha).

²⁸Other known archangels include *Metatron*, *Uriel*, *Suriel*, *Raguel* and *Azrael*. ²⁹It also depends on what faith you are following because the texts that include these beings may or may not be considered official canon. ³⁰*Lucifer* was also an archangel before he fell from grace (if you believe that he is also the same as Satan).

Contemporary Views

³¹Regardless of historical or scriptural descriptions, people today have their own views on what angels are.

³²Today many people see angels as beneficial and helpful spirit guides, or the stereotypical 'guardian angel' that watches over us. ³³The idea that we each have our own personal angel is a common one as well. ³⁴There is clearly a disconnect between this view and the original Biblical descriptions of the mighty warriors of heaven. ³⁵Meditation, crystals, and some New Age rituals can help you get in contact with any personal angels you might have.

³⁶Another view of angels is that they may be otherworldly beings. ³⁷Some say that the beings who have made appearances both in modern day and Biblical times may in fact be aliens, as in physical (or

semi-physical) beings from another planet.

³⁸Stories of people seeing angels descend from above seem to support this view. ³⁹And if alien beings really visited Earth a few thousand years ago, the witnesses would have had difficulty grasping their true nature. ⁴⁰This could be the basis of the wall carvings from ancient civilisations. ⁴¹The Old Testament of the Bible also states that some of them had children with humans. ⁴²Is it possible that we have demi-gods/part aliens living amongst us? ⁴³After all, Greek mythology speaks extensively on this subject. ⁴⁴Certainly food for thought.

⁴⁵Others suggest aliens are in fact semi-physical and/or non-physical entities, which would explain why many humans have described seeing spirit and spirit-like beings. ⁴⁶Again, a very interesting line of argument.

Ascended Masters

⁴⁷The term *ascended masters* is also frequently tied in with modern-day angels. ⁴⁸Though they are not really angels, they do fit with this subject. ⁴⁹These beings are said to have once been human but, having become fully enlightened, were released from the cycle of physical reincarnation.

⁵⁰There are many such masters known by name but since the only way to meet or know them is through the astral realms, the information can be difficult to verify. ⁵¹It is generally believed that Jesus, Confucius, the Buddha and Krishna are all ascended masters who can be directly contacted through meditation or astral travelling.

⁵²Ascended masters play a large role in the belief system of theosophy, so you will hear more about them in that chapter, later in the book.

Enochian Magick

⁵³This is a bit of an offshoot from the topic at hand but a fascinating one nonetheless. ⁵⁴Not everyone is content simply to know about angels or possibly pray to them for protection or guidance. ⁵⁵Some branches of magickal practice seek to work with them in a proactive way.

⌘	A	⌒	I	⌒	S
∇	B	∴	L	∕	T
⊖	C	ε	M	⌒	U
⌘	D	∴	N	⌒	V
⌒	E	∴	O	⌒⌒	W
∕	F	Ω	P	⌒	X
⌒	G	∴	Q	∴	Z
∴	H	ε	R		

⁵⁶This school of magickal arts is known as *Enochian magick* and comes from the work and supposed revelations that came to Dr. John Dee and Edward Kelley in the late 1500s.

⁵⁷The key to working with angels in this way is the language, known as the ‘Angelic language’ or ‘Enochian script’. ⁵⁸This was part of the information revealed to Dr. Dee, and each letter is represented by a unique symbol, usually written from right to left. ⁵⁹It’s not a language per se, but rather a way of coding regular English.

⁶⁰The principles of Enochian work are part of the larger system of Ceremonial Magick, and there is more on this topic in the section on Theosophy. ⁶¹This is a highly complicated system of magick which differs from the more casual ways to work with angels mentioned above. ⁶²There is the script to the right as well as a number of tables filled with seemingly random patterns of letters.

⁶³There are four main tablets, known as the *Four Watchtowers*, which correspond to the four elements.

⁶⁴Each is filled with these characters, and depending upon how you read them, you can learn the secret names of God, his angels and many other celestial beings. ⁶⁵Another very elaborate and powerful sigil (a symbol used in magic, usually a type of pictorial signature) within Enochian magick is the *Sigillum Dei Ameth* (or the Seal of Truth), which is said to represent the nature of God Himself. ⁶⁶It’s an interconnected series of rings, pentagrams and six-pointed stars all filled with further Enochian script.



⁶⁷This is just a quick taste of Enochian magick and you'll need to do a lot of your own research if you really want to grasp this difficult occult science. ⁶⁸It's not for the casual novice.

Astrology

5 The idea of gleaning knowledge and insight from the stars is hardly a novel concept, and though it is not universally accepted as a proven science, many put a great deal of faith in what it tells us.

²The main benefit derived from studying astrology is that you start to see profound connections between our physical world and other universal forces. ³There are other ways of taking a peek at cosmic wisdom as well, and these are examined at the end of this chapter.

Basic Concepts of Astrology

⁴Though the influence of heavenly bodies on our existence is actually quite widespread and can be felt in most aspects of our lives, most people see astrology as a means of predicting personality types and future events based on a person's birth date.

⁵The fundamental idea is that we are influenced by whatever constellation the sun was in at the precise moment of our birth. ⁶If the sky is in such an orientation that the sun is in Taurus, then we are considered to be of that sign. ⁷The constellations make a specific rotation across the calendar year, so we can determine our signs based on the date rather than actually having to gaze through a telescope.

⁸The year is broken down like this:

- i. Aries (March 21 – April 19)
- ii. Taurus (April 20 – May 20)
- iii. Gemini (May 21 – June 20)
- iv. Cancer (June 21 – July 22)
- v. Leo (July 23 – August 22)
- vi. Virgo (August 23 – September 22)
- vii. Libra (September 23 – October 22)
- viii. Scorpio (October 23 – November 21)
- ix. Sagittarius (November 22 – December 21)
- x. Capricorn (December 22 – January 19)
- xi. Aquarius (January 20 – February 18)
- xii. Pisces (February 19 – March 20)

⁹In case you were curious, the list always starts with Aries even though it is not the first sign of the calendar year. ¹⁰It is always listed first because March 21st is the Spring Equinox, one of two times in the year when night and day are exactly equal; as such it was considered the beginning of the year during the time when astrology was first being developed. ¹¹The convention has stood ever since.

¹²Most people already know their signs, but if you don't, then take a note of it so you can examine the below list of traits and see how accurate they are. ¹³If your birth date is right around the cut-off point between two signs (known as the cusp) you will likely exhibit some qualities from both. ¹⁴The details of each sign can be lengthy, so consider this a quick snapshot of the most prominent qualities:

- i. Aries: independent, ambitious, organised, immature, poor focus or attention span
- ii. Taurus: quiet, tidy, patient, honest, stubborn, excessively high standards

- iii. Gemini: creative, dramatic, adventurous, distracted, has unexpected mood swings
- iv. Cancer: active, sensitive, organised, moody, hates to break up a routine
- v. Leo: ambitious, charismatic, successful, lazy, dislikes any difficulties in life
- vi. Virgo: logical, intelligent, quiet, critical, can be very self-centred
- vii. Libra: creative, logical, easy-going, indecisive, doesn't like too much hard work
- viii. Scorpio: intense, perfectionist, ambitious, jealous, keeps a cool head no matter what
- ix. Sagittarius: talkative, friendly, social, procrastinates, always looking for something new
- x. Capricorn: intelligent, organised, impulsive, stubborn, often prefers to be alone
- xi. Aquarius: fun, social, adventurous, controlling, can be highly inflexible
- xii. Pisces: emotional, sensitive, mysterious, shy, usually looking to the future

As Above, So Below

¹⁵This is the underlying principle that has led to the development of astrology. ¹⁶Even those who are familiar with astrology may find this to be new information since most don't look too deeply into the origins of the practice.

¹⁷This is an esoteric principle that originally came from the *Emerald Tablets of Hermes*, a lesser-known source of metaphysical knowledge. ¹⁸These texts were supposedly written by the Greek god *Hermes* (specifically *Hermes Trismegistus*, or *Hermes Thrice Great*). ¹⁹These teachings are the basis for the school of Hermeticism, which is a gnostic faith related to theosophy, which is covered in a later chapter of this book. ²⁰There is a line in the tablet that reads as follows:

“That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one thing.”

²¹It's usually shortened to: “As above, so below”. ²²In other words, the events in the heavens directly influence the events on Earth. ²³So as you see larger patterns and influences above, it will follow that we see the same here on Earth.

Full Birth Charts

²⁴Understanding basic character traits that connect with each sign is only a small aspect of using astrology. ²⁵There is an entire solar system of heavenly bodies casting their influence down upon us, and each one can be mapped from the moment of your birth. ²⁶What was Venus doing when you were born? ²⁷Where was the moon?

²⁸By making a detailed chart of where *all* the major planetary bodies were at your birth, you can create an extremely in-depth view of your personal qualities as well as what your overall life is fated to be. ²⁹Not only are the positions relative to your birth location important, but also how these bodies relate to one another. ³⁰Two planets that create a 120-degree angle with the Earth will work together with their influence, but those that are at 180 degrees will be out of sync and create tension. ³¹These relationships are called ‘aspects’.

³²The concept of ‘houses’ also plays a large role in astrology. ³³The full set of 12 houses is a little too elaborate to outline, but the sky is divided into 12 portions (which are not the same as the heavenly

sections made by the 12 Zodiac signs).³⁴ Each house rules an aspect of your life, such as communication, home, health, beliefs, and social standing.³⁵ A complete chart sees the positioning of major planetary bodies within these houses as well as how they relate to each other.

³⁶Needless to say, this isn't something you can master in such a short lesson. ³⁷Starting with basic signs and first learning to understand their qualities and traits is the first step. ³⁸When you're ready for more information, computer software and astrology websites can create a full birth chart for you, as long as you know the time and location (in longitude and latitude) of your birth.

For Divination

³⁹Astrology has a big influence on who you are from birth, but that influence can continue as time passes in your life. ⁴⁰Depending upon your chart at birth, your life is heavily influenced by certain signs, houses, planets and other heavenly bodies. ⁴¹Therefore you can see where each of them are going to be in the future, and map out a rough idea of what kinds of events you may expect to encounter.

⁴²Astrology can also tell you when certain decisions have a higher chance of success. ⁴³For instance, by waiting until Venus is in a different part of your chart, you can increase the likelihood of success if you are hoping to go on a date, and watching for Saturn can help when applying for a job. ⁴⁴This is where the daily and monthly horoscopes in the newspaper come from.

⁴⁵Another way of using astrology for divination is the technique of *horary astrology*, which is much less well known than the concepts so far discussed. ⁴⁶This practice involves creating a planetary chart at the precise moment you ask a question, and then finding the answer among the locations of the stars, signs and planets. ⁴⁷The time that you choose to ask the question is what creates the chart, which can add a significant variable to the answers. ⁴⁸Horary astrology is an obscure art, but still offers up another avenue of research as you dig deeper into the knowledge you can glean from the stars.

Chinese Astrology

⁴⁹There are many other forms of astrology, besides the Western version discussed above. ⁵⁰Rather than focus on the moment of birth, the Chinese zodiac works around a 12-year cycle where it is the year of your birth that counts. ⁵¹The idea that someone will exhibit certain traits based on their sign is still the same. ⁵²Below is the Chinese zodiac, including some of the birth years for each sign:

1. Rat (1972, 1984, 1996) – charming, intense, social, blunt, ambitious, stubborn
2. Ox (1973, 1985, 1997) – calm, reliable, honest, hard-working, steadfast, materialistic
3. Tiger (1974, 1986, 1998) – impulsive, active, flamboyant, generous, impatient, moody
4. Rabbit (1975, 1987, 1999) – gentle, compassionate, sensitive, artistic, self-indulgent, superficial
5. Dragon (1976, 1988, 2000) – courageous, bold, passionate, intelligent, arrogant, demanding
6. Snake (1967, 1977, 1989) – creative, thoughtful, careful, responsible, possessive, suspicious
7. Horse (1966, 1978, 1990) – talkative, popular, flexible, open-minded, arrogant, immature
8. Goat/Ram (1967, 1979, 1991) – honest, shy, artistic, generous, weak-willed, pessimistic
9. Monkey (1968, 1980, 1992) – quick thinking, changeable, sociable, intellectual, reckless, selfish
10. Rooster (1969, 1981, 1993) – tidy, detailed, perfectionist, confident, pompous, critical

11. Dog (1970, 1982, 1994) – loyal, idealistic, practical, affectionate, lazy, worrier

12. Pig (1971, 1983, 1995) – hard-working, dedicated, trusting, honest, naive, self-indulgent

⁵³Each sign is also associated with one of the five Chinese elements, as well as either yin or yang energy. ⁵⁴It's interesting to see the similarities between these signs and the Western ones. ⁵⁵For example, the Ox and Taurus seem to have a lot of traits in common, including their animal symbolism. ⁵⁶There are other cycles involved in Chinese astrology which may result in more than one animal sign influencing your life. ⁵⁷In any case, this is just a taste of a different system to add to your knowledge.

Numerology

⁵⁸Closely linked to astrology is the study of numbers, which is far more detailed than it appears at first glance.

⁵⁹One thing to note about numerology is that it's not a standalone practice. ⁶⁰You also need numbers from other sources to apply it to. ⁶¹You can see meaning in any numbers you come across, as well as in names and words when you convert the letters into numeric equivalents. ⁶²The usual chart is as follows:

- i. A -J -S = 1
- ii. B-K-T = 2
- iii. C-L-U = 3
- iv. D-M-V = 4
- v. E-N-W = 5
- vi. F-O-X = 6
- vii. G-P-Y = 7
- viii. H-Q-Z = 8
- ix. I-R = 9

⁶³The most common way of applying numerological principles is with your own name. ⁶⁴Determine what the letters in your name equal, and then add them together to get a final number. ⁶⁵Numbers with multiple digits are added again to reduce it down to a single digit.

⁶⁶The personality traits of each number are as follows:

- 1. Independence, leadership, ambition, creativity, arrogance, impatience
- 2. Sensitive, harmonious, peaceful, happy, dependent, manipulative
- 3. Friendly, hopeful, positive, vocal, shallow, extravagant
- 4. Trustworthy, logical, steadfast, honest, stubborn, narrow-minded
- 5. Fun, romantic, curious, flexible, irresponsible, flighty
- 6. Peaceful, family-oriented, trustworthy, compassionate, jealous, possessive
- 7. Quirky, psychic, introspective, spiritual, remote, disorganised
- 8. Successful, ambitious, practical, authority, tense, materialistic
- 9. Tolerant, determined, active, sympathetic, moody, impractical

⁶⁷For example, if your name is *John Smith*, each number added together equals 44, which is then added together to form a single digit, in this case, 8. ⁶⁸Therefore, Mr. Smith is expected to be an ambitious

individual who likely thrives in business.

⁶⁹Unlike the influence of the stars on your birth moment alone (at least in regard to your birth sign), the numbers in your life create an ongoing influence, drawing you towards whatever meaning they hold. ⁷⁰This is particularly true about your name. ⁷¹And since it is the numbers themselves that *create* the influence, if you were to change your name, you could also change the situation within your life. ⁷²This makes using numbers in your life very different from astrology.

⁷³This is a brief example to give you a taste of numerology. ⁷⁴Each number has a longer list of meanings and associations that go beyond the personality traits given above. ⁷⁵You can find hidden information in all aspects of your life through numbers, and there are a huge number of such connections with other esoteric arts, such as Tarot, astrology, the Kabbalah, and even within many aspects of religious scripture.

Different Tools

⁷⁶The central theme of this section is that we have many other tools at our disposal to consider when learning about the forces and influences that surround us. ⁷⁷A little additional knowledge can make a lot of seemingly random events start to make sense when looked at holistically. ⁷⁸From here, you can make more informed decisions towards creating a more satisfying life.

The Law of Attraction

6 This is one of the hottest new esoteric theories out there today, and it may be the simplest idea this book offers as a tool for spiritual growth. ²It was popularised in recent times by Rhonda Byrne's 2006 book, *The Secret*, which was heavily promoted by Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres.

The Basic Principle

³The idea is that 'like attracts like', and you can bring things into your life simply by focusing on them. ⁴This goes a step beyond the 'power of positive thinking' movement from the 1950s, which revolved around the book of the same name by Norman Peale. ⁵It is more than simply being upbeat and enthusiastic about life.

⁶Those who believe in the law of attraction aren't always able to agree on the exact mechanism that is behind the phenomenon. ⁷One possibility is that the energy that is inherent in our thoughts acts as a magnet, attracting universal energy, which draws our hopes and desires into our lives.

⁸You can also look at the law of attraction in conjunction with various views on the nature of reality, particularly subjective reality. ⁹This theory suggests that the physical perception of reality varies from person to person. ¹⁰This is a common theme amongst the greatest thinkers. ¹¹If the concept of a subjective reality is valid, then you have more control over your existence than you realise.

How to Use It

¹²If it were as simple as just thinking about something for a moment, we would all have ideal lives filled with love, health and prosperity. ¹³Unfortunately, this is not the case. ¹⁴There needs to be a serious level of focus and visualisation in order to create the optimal level of energy attraction. ¹⁵In other words, you can't casually think that you'd like more money one day and have a winning lottery ticket the next.

¹⁶The techniques involved in meditation are a good place to start. ¹⁷They are discussed more in the astral travelling chapter. ¹⁸Using meditation along with strong concentration, visualisation and mental focus are the keys to attracting success into your life.

¹⁹You also need to be specific. ²⁰Good visualisation skills are only the first half of the battle. ²¹*What* you visualise is just as important as *how* you do. ²²Thinking about how nice it would be to have money isn't enough. ²³Picture yourself physically getting a pay rise or imagine the feeling of being healthy. ²⁴You have to picture exactly what you want to happen, and see it clearly. ²⁵Feel the emotions it will bring.

The Book and Movie

²⁶Oddly enough this actually came out as a movie originally and a book afterwards, though most people are more familiar with the latter. ²⁷It's one of the few alternative concepts that has had such widespread exposure to the general public.

²⁸The idea behind the law of attraction comes from many sources, some of which are very old. ²⁹The

movie revolves around the more historical and mysterious origins of this important ‘secret’, involving the Hermetic Emerald Tablet, ancient Egypt, the secret society of the Knights Templar and more.

³⁰While the movie wraps the whole concept in historical mystery, the book is a straight-forward self-help guide which simply introduces the Law of Attraction and how to make it work in your life. ³¹It would be the best place to start if you really wanted to take this approach seriously in your own spiritual growth.

The History Behind It

³²This is hardly a new idea, though many earlier proponents of it were not widely known outside of metaphysical circles.

³³The version of the Law of Attraction put forward in *The Secret* was based on the New Thought movement of the 1800s. ³⁴This group believed in the same ideas, but there was a lot more to them than just one metaphysical theory. ³⁵They believed that our thoughts had a huge impact on our reality though there was a strong Christian slant to their version of Divinity.

³⁶The group started with the idea that all illness began in the mind; therefore everything could be healed through faith in God and positive thought. ³⁷Though the original belief stemmed from a health and healing point of view, it grew to include other forms of positive thinking to connect with God.

³⁸Different forms of the group still exist today but have not gained any major influence in the spiritual or religious world, other than having been the originators of the Law of Attraction.

³⁹In his 1937 book *The Art of True Healing*, notable occultist, Israel Regardie, discussed additional techniques of meditation and prayer that could be used to heal the physical body. ⁴⁰Regardie was also a major player in the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* (along with prominent occultist Aleister Crowley), so you can see some clear connections between this concept and other spiritualist schools.

⁴¹Ironically, that same year Napoleon Hill published *Think and Grow Rich*, which to date has sold more than 60 million copies worldwide. ⁴²He also took the approach of presenting ‘a secret’ and discussed how certain types of thoughts would attract what you wanted in life.

⁴³If you’re looking to make changes, this is one of the simplest places to begin. ⁴⁴Whether you believe in the concepts or not, positive thinking never hurt anyone.

Theosophy and Other Mystical Schools

⁷ Though the main topic of this section is theosophy, a few other related fields will be discussed as well.

²Theosophy is a mystical school of thought and practice that seeks to acquire knowledge of the universe and understand the nature of the Divine in the process. ³In many ways, it's a direct mix of religion, philosophy and New Age thinking that offers a meaningful alternative to typical mainstream religion. ⁴Though this is the main focus on this chapter, there are many other paths to this end.

⁵Many of these schools are closely aligned with either Christianity or Judaism, though they are not considered religions. ⁶They offer an alternative path to spirituality, which is not restricted by the shortcomings of the mainstream.

The Theosophical Society

⁷This is one of the most influential groups in this field, though certainly not the only one. ⁸You don't need to be associated with the Society in order to learn more about theosophy or follow its teachings. ⁹But a historical look at this group can be very helpful in understanding the nature of theosophy.

¹⁰This group was founded in 1875 by Henry Steel Olcott, William Quan Judge and Helena Blavatsky. ¹¹The purpose of this group was to study occult and mystical practices that could be used to discover the hidden mysteries of knowledge and the universe.

¹²Over the years, the society grew and divided into a huge number of similar but distinct groups, though the Theosophical Society still exists today. ¹³The modern incarnation of the group maintains a mission of encouraging dialogue and enquiry into all world religions as well as branches of philosophy, science and the arts while maintaining a highly ethical standard and acceptance of all people.

Theosophical Principles

¹⁴According to Blavatsky, the key purposes to a theosophical path are:

1. To create a harmonious and equal society of mankind, without divisions of religion, race or social standing
2. The study of ancient religions to have a true understanding of *all* major faiths to produce a sense of universal ethics and morals
3. To understand the inner Divinity in mankind

¹⁵She also sums up the nature of the Theosophist very nicely:

“Once a student abandons the old and trodden highway of routine, and enters upon the solitary path of independent thought – towards God – he is a Theosophist; an original thinker, a seeker after the eternal truth with ‘an inspiration of his own’ to solve the universal problems.” (What are the Theosophists, 1879)

¹⁶Theosophy is more of a spiritual approach to understanding the Divine, and does not follow specific texts or practices. ¹⁷Think of it as more of an outlook than a solid path of its own. ¹⁸Having said this, there is a heavy leaning towards a Christian-themed form of God. ¹⁹Other systems and practices are also incorporated into theosophy, such as the Kabbalah, astrology, meditation, Tarot and more. ²⁰One of the main techniques used to gather new wisdom in Theosophy is contact with astral beings known as the ascended masters. ²¹They are described in more detail shortly.

²²For a more detailed study on the nature of theosophy, reading some of Madame Blavatsky's original works on the subject is best. ²³*The Secret Doctrine* and *Isis Unveiled* are the best for beginners, whilst *The Voice of Silence* is a text recommended for the more advanced spiritual seeker. ²⁴*A Textbook of Theosophy* by C.W Leadbeater is another excellent book for beginners, written many years after Blavatsky's work.

²⁵Other schools have sought after knowledge as a spiritual path, a few of them closely related to theosophy but with their own approaches. ²⁶These are covered a little later.

Ascended Masters

²⁷We mentioned ascended masters earlier, but because they are a fundamental part of theosophical teachings, they need to be described in more detail.

²⁸An ascended master is a spiritual being who was once a physical human like the rest of us. ²⁹Their souls are said to have gained enough knowledge and enlightenment to release them from the cycle of bodily reincarnation and they now live as energy or spirit. ³⁰A few examples are said to be Buddha, Jesus, Krishna and Confucius. ³¹Of course, there is no acknowledged set list of such masters and it takes a lot of time and experience in meeting with them in the astral planes to learn who exists there. ³²And don't expect all ascended masters to be well-known historical figures either. ³³Many are virtually unknown to the modern world. ³⁴In various New Age circles, the master known as Ramtha is well known, though few will have heard of him (he channels through a psychic, J.Z. Knight).

³⁵Working with ascended masters goes beyond the specific path of theosophy, so don't feel that this is something you can only pursue within this framework. ³⁶Any astral work can lead you to these enlightened beings.

³⁷It is within the studies of theosophy that you find the most dedicated approach to learning from these masters. ³⁸In fact, the discovery of these enlightened souls may have come from within the school of theosophy. ³⁹Blavatsky was one of the first Western writers to even mention the concept, as she studied extensively with an ascended master known as Koot Hoomi.

The I Am Movement

⁴⁰The focus on ascended masters led to an offshoot of the original theosophical movement, creating the 'I AM' Activity founded by Guy Ballard in the 1930s. ⁴¹Because of its belief that Jesus is one of the more important masters, the I AM group considers itself to be Christian, though it doesn't adhere to the typical dogma of the faith. ⁴²It was a popular movement in its time and though it does still exist today, it is a much smaller organisation. ⁴³If you have further interest in learning about ascended

masters and their collective wisdom, you may want to seek out more on the 'I AM' Activity via their website.

Hermeticism

⁴⁴We've mentioned Hermeticism briefly in the astrology section but there is a much larger belief system than previously discussed. ⁴⁵Hermeticism is based on the writings of the Greek God, Hermes, though whether or not this is true is very much up for debate. ⁴⁶As they are said to date to around 250 CE, it's understandable that their origins are a little vague.

⁴⁷Many early Hermetic writings were lost in the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria but there are two main works that are still in existence today that form the basis of modern Hermeticism.

⁴⁸The *Corpus Hermeticum* is a 14-volume collection of writings containing a large number of dialogues between Hermes and other individuals (including God). ⁴⁹Concepts such as alchemy, the nature of the Divine, the human mind and astrology are to be found at length.

⁵⁰The next text is a shorter one named the *Emerald Tablet*, which is the one discussed in the astrology chapter. ⁵¹This document holds many brief statements about the relative nature of the universe, including the well-known occult maxim: "As above, so below".

⁵²At the core of Hermeticism is the belief in a single all-powerful creative force, which is not quite the same as the Christian version of God. ⁵³They also believe that there are many other astral beings, such as angels and elemental spirits, who exist around us.

⁵⁴They believe that the framework of the universe consists of the four classic elements (earth, air, water, fire) and an understanding of them holds a greater understanding of reality. ⁵⁵This is usually seen in the study of alchemy, as a mystical or occult science. ⁵⁶Along with alchemy, theurgy is common with Hermetic followers. ⁵⁷It is a form of magick that works with angels and other deity beings.

⁵⁸There are many different schools and groups within the larger system of Hermetics. ⁵⁹The Church of the Rosy Cross is one of them, though many people know them better as the Rosicrucians. ⁶⁰As a secret philosophical society, there have been many theories and mysteries surrounding the Rosicrucians.

⁶¹They were founded in the early 1600s by Christian Rosenkreuz, with the intention to promote a universal reformation of mankind. ⁶²As is common amongst Hermetic groups, they practise many arts such as alchemy, meditation and psychic studies to develop their knowledge.

⁶³As with many other mystical groups, the Church of the Rosy Cross evolved and divided into many small groups over time. ⁶⁴The Order of the Temple of the Rosy Cross, Fraternitas Rosae Crucis and The Rosicrucian Fellowship are just a few examples.

Gnosticism

⁶⁵Gnostic studies are closely aligned to Christianity, but there is a lot to be learned from their ideas even if you don't care much for their specific religious bias. ⁶⁶There are also some gnostic branches of Judaism. ⁶⁷And though, historically, there are strong ties to Christianity, a gnostic path is quite distinct and should not be confused with the spiritual side of Christianity. ⁶⁸In fact, it is often considered

heretical because it holds some ideas that directly conflict with the basic teachings of the Church.

⁶⁹Though the overall purpose or goal of Gnosticism is gaining knowledge, like the other groups mentioned in this section, it is a path that has a lot of religious dogma attached to it. ⁷⁰Gnostics believe in a distant God, that the creation of the world was the result of a lesser being called *the demiurge*.

⁷¹Additional divine beings also exist, known as *Aeons*, thought to be emanations from the single divine being of God itself.

⁷²Much of the gnostic outlook of the universe is guided by ancient Greek philosophy, particularly the views of Plato in regards to the nature of reality. ⁷³The concept that we only perceive a shadow of reality and that there are perfect forms that we cannot directly see is a central one in Gnosticism. ⁷⁴In many ways, this is a school of thought that mixes Christian religious teaching with ancient classical philosophy. ⁷⁵It's an alternative way of seeing the world.

⁷⁶Besides the standard Bible, there are many other texts that serve as gnostic scriptures. ⁷⁷The apocryphal, *Gospel of Judas*, is seen by many as a gnostic text because it talks about the spirit coming and going from the physical body, which is in line with gnostic thought about the physical world around us. ⁷⁸Other apocryphal works such as the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Revelation of Jacob* are all filled with gnostic concepts.

⁷⁹The fact that so many texts containing gnostic teachings were excluded from the canon Bible, even though they were all written in the same era, is indicative of the suppression that pervades the Christian religion.

⁸⁰Though it is not well known today, there have been many followers and believers of Gnosticism throughout history. ⁸¹The recent discovery of the Library at Nag Hammadi in Egypt has uncovered a huge collection of documents attesting to this. ⁸²Dozens of gospels, letters, and treatises were found in their original Greek, revealing a wealth of gnostic knowledge that implies that early Christianity wasn't as simple as most people think, but has been watered down to appeal to a mass audience.

Western Ceremonial Magick

⁸³At this point we are verging into the realm of strictly occult sciences, which are not quite as philosophical as the societies discussed above.

⁸⁴Names like Aleister Crowley and Eliphas Levi are well known in the world of ceremonial magick.

⁸⁵The specific school of Enochian Magick would fall into this category as well, though we covered it in the section on angels already.

⁸⁶Though practitioners of ceremonial magick are interested in acquiring knowledge, they have more interest in the skills and achievements that can come from performing magickal rituals. ⁸⁷It's a path more associated with practical achievement than abstract knowledge. ⁸⁸It involves summoning and commanding spirits (including many varieties of angels and demons), performing all forms of divination, and active work in fields such as astrology, kabbalah, alchemy and witchcraft.

⁸⁹Aleister Crowley is most likely the best-known figure in this group, and he was integral in the creation of several magickal schools and societies. ⁹⁰He was initiated into the *Hermetic Order of the*

Golden Dawn and was also a member of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*.⁹¹ From there, he was drawn to Egyptian mysticism and founded his own version of it, which was called *Thelema*.⁹² Overall, Crowley has had a huge impact on many groups in the world of ceremonial magick.⁹³ It was he who devised the unique spelling of magick with a 'k' to differentiate his practices from conventional stage magic.

⁹⁴Since ritual is a big part of ceremonial magick, there are a number of tools that go along with these practices.⁹⁵ Pentacles, swords, robes, bells, wands and a mix of talismans and sigils are all part of these magickal arts.⁹⁶ For anyone looking for a more active path than the others, this would be an interesting choice for further study.

⁹⁷Unlike schools that see the development of knowledge as a goal, ceremonial magick has a more hands-on intent.⁹⁸ While you can learn quite a bit from the various books on the subject, this is one area where joining a group or organisation would be much more beneficial to learning the unpublished secrets of magick.

Unique Paths to the Divine

⁹⁹This may seem like a very unconnected section to the book, but all of these groups and schools represent alternatives to mainstream religious or philosophical teaching.¹⁰⁰ Each one has its own unique outlook and mix of practices that can lead followers to their own personal discovery of the Divine and the mysteries of the universe.

Sacred Geometry

8 This topic may come as a complete surprise, but once you start to learn more about some of the surprising features of certain numbers and geometry, you'll start to realise that there is much more to it than meets the eye.

²If you have read the contemporary novel by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, then you will have some familiarity with many of the following topics. ³Though it's a fictional story, many concepts of sacred geometry and numbers are portrayed with reasonable accuracy.

⁴Mathematics already has a profound elegance to it, but to the spiritual seeker, you can find a bizarre array of repetitions and coincidences that point to a divine power once you start to see beyond the surface. ⁵Could these things point to a single Creator, or do they just reflect a natural state of things that gravitate in a certain direction without a planned design? ⁶Either approach is just as intriguing.

⁷This succinct quote from Dr. Stephen Marquardt sums up the nature of mathematics and how it creates the foundation of all living things:

“All life is biology. All biology is physiology. All physiology is chemistry. All chemistry is physics. All physics is math.”

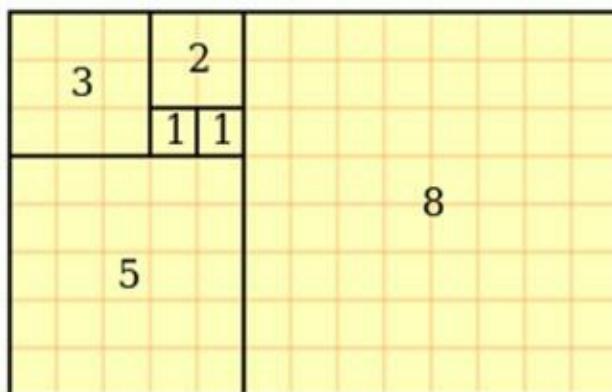
The Fibonacci Series

⁸One of the foundational concepts in sacred geometry is *the Fibonacci series*. ⁹Without overburdening you with the mathematics, it is a sequence of numbers in which each digit is the sum of the two previous numbers. ¹⁰In other words:

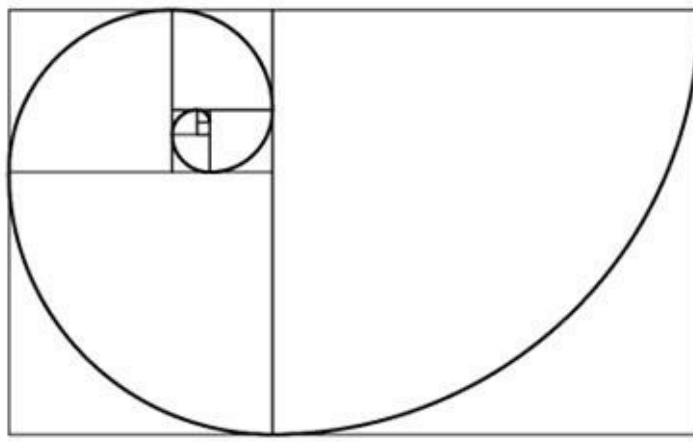
1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55,89 ...

¹¹At first glance, it simply looks like a pattern of numbers, but there is a greater depth to this pattern to the point where it is almost uncanny.

¹²If you create a set of squares, each measuring a Fibonacci number on a side, it looks like this:



¹³And if you then draw a curve through each square, you get this spiral:



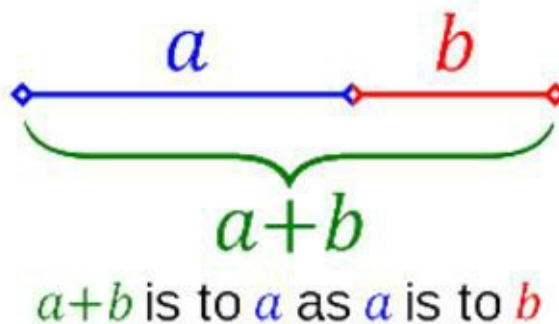
¹⁴This spiral is remarkable because it is seen throughout nature, created with amazing mathematical accuracy. ¹⁵Many spiralled sea shells create this pattern, and you can also see it in the arrangement of seeds in a sunflower head, the shape of a flowering artichoke and how a fern will unfurl itself. ¹⁶On a much larger scale, spiral galaxies form this design with their arms.

¹⁷A spiral created with Fibonacci numbers is very similar, but *not* identical, to another mathematical spiral known as *the golden spiral*. ¹⁸The differences are not relevant here, but please be aware of the two variations.

¹⁹Though the series is interesting in itself, I encourage you to look further into the wonders created by the mathematics.

Golden Ratio

²⁰Also known as the *Divine Proportion*, this figure is symbolised by the Greek letter phi (ϕ). ²¹Numerically, the ratio is 1.61803... (the number is irrational and continues indefinitely) and this proportion is also seen throughout nature, and has been involved in many great works of art and architecture over the centuries. ²²Explaining this is going to be a little tougher than the Fibonacci series, but as long as you understand the general idea, you'll be fine. ²³Here is a graphic representation:



²⁴A divided line that is in the Golden Ratio will have its segments (a and b in this case) proportional to each other, as the total length is in proportion to a . ²⁵To put that another way, b times 1.61803 equals a , and a times 1.61803 equals the sum $a+b$.

²⁶It is related to the Fibonacci series in that the ratio between each number in the sequence is in a Golden Ratio when compared to the previous number (or at least, very close to phi). ²⁷If you look at the Fibonacci numbers given in the previous section, $89/55 = 1.618618$ and $34/21 = 1.619047$ which shows

a clear relationship to phi though it is not exact.

²⁸What is special about this ratio is that we are inexplicably drawn to it and it seems to represent an ideal form of beauty, which is why it appears so frequently in art. ²⁹We also see phi very frequently in the facial structure of an attractive person.

Art and Architecture

³⁰Many large and enduring architectural constructions have prominent examples of the Golden Ratio within their designs, though it is not something you will consciously be aware of. ³¹The great pyramids of Egypt, the Greek Parthenon, the Great Mosque of Uqba and the cathedral of Notre Dame are just a few examples. ³²Paintings have also been found to include many instances of the Golden Ratio, most notably the works of Leonardo Da Vinci. ³³In fact, he warrants another section all on his own below.

³⁴Were these ratios worked into both artwork and buildings intentionally or is the human mind simply drawn toward these mysterious proportions without a conscious thought?

³⁵To wax religious for a moment, you can even find phi in the Bible. ³⁶The measurements given in the book of Exodus for *the Ark of the Covenant* (the chest to hold the original Ten Commandment tablets) are “two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide and a cubit and a half high”. ³⁷The ratio between length and the other two sides is 1.666, which is close to phi. ³⁸The measurements given for the construction of Noah’s Ark is 50 by 30 cubits, which also yields a ratio of 1.666. ³⁹Even if you don’t consider that close enough to phi, it is still curious that the measurements would be so closely related to each other in proportions. ⁴⁰Is this evidence of a connection between the two ‘arks’?

The Human Body

⁴¹This ratio exists in the human body – in more than one place. ⁴²You can find examples of phi within the form of the face; people who are considered attractive are more likely to have their facial ratios closer to phi. ⁴³One example is the distance from the top of your head to the tip of your chin in relation to the width of your face (not including ears). ⁴⁴It also exists in the ratio between the distance from the tip of your nose to the bottom of your chin and the distance from the centre of your lips to the bottom of your chin. ⁴⁵There are too many possible ratios of phi to list without a long series of diagrams.

⁴⁶Beyond the face, the distance from your elbow to the tips of your fingers is in the Golden Ratio with the distance from your elbows to your feet (when your arms are hanging naturally at your sides).

⁴⁷That’s not to say that all bodies are built in the same proportions, but the commonalities are remarkable.

Elsewhere in Nature

⁴⁸Just as the Fibonacci series is seen in nature, you can find further examples of phi as well. ⁴⁹The most dramatic one is within a beehive. ⁵⁰For any thriving population of wild bees, the relation between the male and female bees is almost always 1.618 (with the females in the higher quantity of the two).

⁵¹You simply have to wonder about the way the universe works in order for this kind of precision to be found in what should be more random occurrences.

Leonardo Da Vinci

⁵²You can't have a discussion of sacred geometry without mentioning Leonardo Da Vinci. ⁵³Though his writings didn't mention the concept at all, it is found throughout his work.

⁵⁴His most famous painting, the Mona Lisa, is a prime example of the Golden Ratio. ⁵⁵Her face can be framed in a perfect Golden Rectangle, which is a two-dimensional version of the line segment shown above (where the long side is $a+b$ and the short side is simply a). ⁵⁶You can also see phi in the proportion of her head and neck when compared with her torso, as well as the ratio of distances between her chin and bottom lip and then her chin to the tip of her nose. ⁵⁷They are the same ratios as mentioned above with regard to the 'perfect' shape of the human face.

⁵⁸Without some complex diagrams, there are too many examples to list. ⁵⁹Suffice it to say, the Golden Ratio is well represented in this famous painting. ⁶⁰Could this be why we find it to be so enigmatic?

⁶¹*The Last Supper* is another good example of the Golden Ratio. ⁶²Many elements within the painting conform to these proportions, mostly in how the people are arranged with respect to the central figure of Jesus, and the positioning of the table within the room.

⁶³You can also see a clear study in Golden Ratios in Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* drawing (a male figure with arms and legs outstretched, within a circle and a square). ⁶⁴The entire purpose of this piece is to describe the proportions of the human form, though Da Vinci doesn't explicitly mention any specific ratios or mathematical constants. ⁶⁵Though this piece is not specifically drawn with phi in mind, it does tie in nicely with Da Vinci's interest and knowledge of ratios and natural proportions.

⁶⁶And while we are on the subject of Leonardo Da Vinci, it should be made clear that many of the claims about him in the above mentioned book, *The Da Vinci Code*, are inaccurate. ⁶⁷Further, the evidence is not conclusive as to whether or not he was ever part of a secret society. ⁶⁸Even so, when you see the many mathematical aspects of his work, you can't help but wonder what else was going on in the mind of this great man.

A Divine Force?

⁶⁹Numbers alone might not inspire too much spirituality in some people, but others see the hand of a deity or divine energy in the universality of these concepts.

Feng Shui

9 Feng Shui is the Chinese art of mystical placement, using locations and orientations to create harmonious and even advantageous arrangement within our lives. ²By having certain items placed in particular points of our homes and workplaces, we can effect a significant impact on the way the universe treats us.

³This is a passive technique that can help improve your life. ⁴It's a quiet process that slowly adds influence in the background without any additional work. ⁵Once you've oriented the right elements in your home, you can see for yourself whether there are noticeable changes in your circumstances.

Qi

⁶Before you can understand the nature and practices of feng shui (pronounced *fung sh-wei*), you have to know about qi (pronounced chee), discussed briefly with respect to Chinese traditional religions. ⁷The energy force known as qi is at the very foundation of feng shui. ⁸Qi flows through all things and it binds the universe together. ⁹A very contemporary way of looking at qi would be the concept of the Force used in the *Star Wars* fictional universe. ¹⁰Once you see that there is flowing energy between all things around us, you can understand that freeing that flow can be beneficial to our lives. ¹¹And conversely, blocking the movement of qi is going to have negative repercussions.

¹²The idea of qi is found in many aspects of Eastern philosophy, not just feng shui. ¹³It is a major part of many disciplines of martial arts and traditional Chinese healing techniques.

¹⁴After qi, you have to know the significance of the elements and directions that are important aspects of feng shui.

The Five Elements

¹⁵Yes, there are *five* fundamental elements in Chinese philosophy rather than the four we are used to in the West. ¹⁶Their placement within your space is the main factor in feng shui, so you will need to be familiar with them and their relevance. ¹⁷Each one is connected with a direction, colour, season, animal, and area of your life. ¹⁸Since feng shui is mostly about location and placement, the directions are the most important aspect of the elements.

1. Water – north, blue, winter, snake, travel and journeys
2. Wood – east and south-east, green, spring, dragon, family and blessings
3. Fire – south, red, summer, phoenix, fame and recognition
4. Earth – north-east and south-west (and centre), browns, between seasons, ox, relationships
5. Metal – west and north-west, white or silver, autumn, tiger, children and nurturing

¹⁹The elements can be thought of as a natural cycle that holds them in order (as listed above). ²⁰Each one is seen to beget the next, as follows:

²¹Water nourishes a tree (wood), which creates fuel for fire. ²²Ashes from burning return back to the earth, which is the source of metal. ²³Cold metal causes water to condense on its surface to complete

the cycle.

²⁴This is a circular cycle of creation, but there is a relationship of destruction between each element as well:

- i. Fire destroys metal
- ii. Metal destroys wood
- iii. Wood destroys earth
- iv. Earth destroys water
- v. Water destroys fire

²⁵So there is going to be conflict if one element is located in the wrong place or in conjunction with other elements that are not complimentary. ²⁶If you are looking to create additional energy from the water element, you definitely want to keep anything related to earth away.

²⁷You don't necessarily require the actual elements, though it is best if you can. ²⁸The section below on other symbols lists some alternatives if you don't have the actual elements.

The Eight Directions

²⁹The directions used in feng shui are the same as any other, with the four cardinal directions of north, south, east and west, and then the intercardinal points to make a total of eight. ³⁰The centre is also important though it's not really considered to be a direction. ³¹Each one holds its own influence over your life.

1. North – career, employment, livelihood
2. South – fame, recognition, ambition
3. East – health, well-being
4. West – children, heirs, descendants
5. South-west – romance, marriage, love
6. North-west – patriarch, bread winner
7. South-east – wealth, abundance, money
8. North-east – knowledge, wisdom, education
- Centre – general luck for the household

³²The items located in these sections of your living (or working) space will impact these areas of your lives, and this is where the concept of placement comes in.

Other Symbols

³³To add a further layer of meaning to all these ideas, there are more items that represent universal forces that you can incorporate into your feng shui arrangements. ³⁴Placing these objects in the right location will create the right mix of forces:

- i. Pagodas – education
- ii. Abacus – career
- iii. Bells or chimes – general good luck

- iv. Ducks – love or marriage
- v. Globes – element of earth
- vi. Mirrors – element of water
- vii. Triangles – fire
- viii. Circles – metal
- ix. Squares – earth
- x. Rectangles – wood
- xi. Wavy lines – water

Your Bagua

³⁵This is where you can start to utilise feng shui principles in your own space. ³⁶A bagua is a ‘map’ of the directions within your home (or whatever space you are working with).

³⁷Use a compass to accurately determine the cardinal points in your space. ³⁸It’s important to be accurate and not just guess. ³⁹Each direction takes up 45 degrees, with 22.5 degrees on either side of them for the intercardinal points. ⁴⁰In other words, east isn’t just a single point in your home. ⁴¹It creates a section that is 22.5 degrees on either side of true east.

⁴²Make a drawing of your living space, including the doors and walls. ⁴³It doesn’t have to be perfectly to scale, but try to get it as close as you can. ⁴⁴Then use your compass to start marking off directions. ⁴⁵You’ll end up with an eight-piece pie over the drawing of your home, which will give you a good idea of how to maximise the use of each direction in various rooms.

⁴⁶Note that some schools of feng shui operate a little differently and do not use compass readings in this way. ⁴⁷An alternative approach is to take the location of your front door (where qi enters your home) as the north and orient the rest of the map based on that. ⁴⁸Further study and a little personal experimentation can help you determine which approach works best for you.

How to Implement These Ideas

⁴⁹The basic principle of feng shui is to place items in your space that will harmonise with the natural energies to produce the wanted effects. ⁵⁰For example, if you want to improve your employment prospects, you would look to the north. ⁵¹Since it has the element of water, you should add more water features to the northern part of your home. ⁵²You could also add images of a snake, mirrors or anything that’s the colour blue.

⁵³Another scenario might be a desire to have children. ⁵⁴In this case, add more metal in the west along with tigers and objects made of silver.

⁵⁵Conversely, you may also find that the improper placement of items in your home may be getting in the way of your goals. ⁵⁶To use the above example, regarding kids, make sure to keep items of fire away from the west, as fire ‘destroys’ metal, which makes it a destructive force in this location.

⁵⁷This is just an overview of the subject to get you familiar with the concepts and how you can apply them to your life. ⁵⁸Further research will be necessary to truly master the art of feng shui.

The Kabbalah

10 This is a form of Jewish mysticism that has become popular outside of the Judaic community, and is seen in many other types of occult practices.²The ideas of the Kabbalah go well beyond the Jewish faith and it can be considered a school of spiritual thought all on its own.

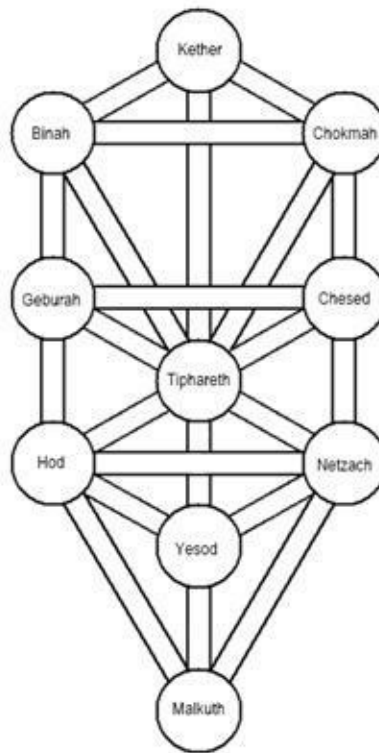
³There is a very strong connection between the Kabbalah and the Torah. ⁴Much of the terminology is Hebrew due to the origins of these ideas.

The Sephirot

⁵The connected tree of eleven spheres is a common symbol of the Kabbalah and is central to understanding the concepts, though this is by no means the entire nature of the Kabbalah. ⁶We will start here just because this is what most people first think of when it comes to this topic.

⁷Each sphere is called a *sephirah* (plural – *sephirot*) representing a distinct ‘emanation’ of the Divine.

⁸The diagram below shows how each one is connected to the next, creating a bridge from the earthly *Malkuth* to the spiritual crown of *Keter*.



⁹The names and brief meanings of the spheres are as follows, starting from the top:

- i. Keter (crown) – the highest state of Divine will and eternal spirit
- ii. Chokmah (wisdom) – conscious intellect, creative power
- iii. Binah (understanding) – ideas being manifest, realisation
- iv. Daat (knowledge) – a reflection of Keter or seen as a void
- v. Chesed (kindness) – love, the principle of action

- vi. Geburah (severity) – strength, change and power
- vii. Tipharet (beauty) – harmony, balance
- viii. Netzach (eternity) – endurance, perseverance
- ix. Hod (glory) – intellect, submission to the will of Kether
- x. Yesod (foundation) – imagination, physical creation
- xi. Malkuth (kingship) – our physical plane of existence

¹⁰The specifics of each sphere are difficult to pinpoint as it really depends on the nature of one's study, and you can find many different interpretations of these spheres.

¹¹The diagram is often referred to as the *Tree of Life*, though it is usually called that when studied outside the Jewish religion. ¹²Aside from the spheres, there are 22 named paths between each of them, with *Tipharet* being the most interconnected of them all. ¹³Not all versions of the tree include the sphere of *Daat*. ¹⁴It has been included in the list above so that all the spheres are represented. ¹⁵When it is, it sits between *Kether* and *Tipharet* in the Tree.

¹⁶The tree not only holds the sephirot themselves, but their positions are further defined by the three columns or pillars. ¹⁷The pillar on the left, containing *Binah*, *Geburah* and *Hod*, is known as the pillar of severity and collectively represents water and the female gender. ¹⁸Through the centre, headed by *Kether*, is the pillar of mildness, which is connected to air and is neutral in gender. ¹⁹And to the right is the pillar of mercy. ²⁰That column of spheres is associated with fire and the male gender. ²¹This view of the tree is just another way of making connections between the emanations and seeing how the universal forces can work together within this pattern.

The Texts of the Kabbalah

²²As mentioned, the Kabbalah is an entire realm of mystical knowledge that goes beyond just the Tree of Life. ²³There are several texts that should be mentioned here. ²⁴The *Zohar* was written in the 13th century, and is one of the main foundational works of this school of mystical thinking. ²⁵It's a long three-volume text describing the complete spiritual pathway along which a soul will travel on its way to enlightenment. ²⁶It's a very in-depth book and typically not understood except by those who already have a high degree of Kabbalah and Torah knowledge.

²⁷The *Sefer Yetzirah* ('Book of Formation' or 'Book of Creation') is another key text, which describes the creation of the universe through 32 ways of wisdom. ²⁸These correspond to the 10 spheres of the *sephiroth* along with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. ²⁹This text is filled with gnostic thinking that ties many aspects of numerology into the esoteric views of Judaism. ³⁰It would take a great deal of studying to get to the heart of all this information.

How to Work with the Kabbalah

³¹These spiritual pathways can be used in many ways besides further study of the Torah, which is why the Kabbalah has gained popularity with non-Jewish people. ³²Meditation on each sphere, as well as the pathways between them, can create a metaphysical framework for understanding the astral world or simply gaining a better appreciation of the nature of Divinity.

³³You can also use the Tree of Life to relate to other studies. ³⁴For example, there is a good connection

between the Tree of Life and the Tarot. ³⁵As mentioned, there are 22 paths between the spheres, and that corresponds to the 22 cards of the Major Arcana of a traditional Tarot deck. ³⁶The connections are quite oblique at times, mainly because the concepts embodied in the spheres are so vague that seeing paths between them takes time. ³⁷One example is the path between *Kether* and *Binah*. ³⁸The movement from the state of the Divine to the manifestation of creativity is represented by the Magician. ³⁹And the card does indeed represent the creative force of the elements.

⁴⁰Unfortunately there is not enough space in this book to do this topic justice. ⁴¹The Tree of Life is a unique mystical tool that can be used along with many other esoteric arts and is worth further study by any spiritual seeker.

Pagan Religions

11 We've talked about neo-Pagans and various Pagan faiths at several points throughout the book, but now it's time to delve into this subject properly. ²In a sense, they are not really alternatives because these faiths are considered religions. ³But they have such a different belief system from mainstream faiths that they stand apart from them. ⁴They are also not as well known, so this is your opportunity to explore a few other potential paths of faith you might not be aware of.

What is Paganism?

⁵Before we talk about the main Pagan faiths, you need to understand what the word *Pagan* really means. ⁶Many people, particularly those within the Christian church, see the word as meaning 'ungodly' or people who hold primitive idol-worship beliefs.

⁷When the Christian Church first came about, it clashed with the native Pagan beliefs and quickly worked to demonise them as a way of driving more people to convert. ⁸That attitude is still around today, though it is slowly shifting as more and more people are thinking for themselves and rediscovering the ways of their ancestors.

⁹Technically the word comes from the Latin *paganus*, which literally means 'country-dweller'. ¹⁰Not very devilish, I'm afraid. ¹¹As more of the nobility converted to Christianity, it was the 'simpler' village people who continued to hold on to their original faith, so the term ended up being used for anyone who was non-Christian. ¹²Today, the term 'heathen' is often used by some to denote non-Christians within Pagan circles, though the term is specifically reserved for those of a Norse or Asatru path.

¹³In a simple sense, that is what the term means today, but it can be hard to pin down exactly what a Pagan is. ¹⁴Buddhists are not Christian but they would not be classed as Pagan either. ¹⁵A good generic meaning would be anyone who doesn't follow any mainstream religion, and such paths are often (but not always) polytheistic and nature-oriented. ¹⁶Most of these religions are not overly organised and tend to be followed independently through small groups or by individuals. ¹⁷The nature of scriptures will vary and texts never take centre stage as they do in Christianity or Islam. ¹⁸Pagan paths tend to revolve around their deity concepts and the practice of ritual instead of a set of dogmatic rules.

¹⁹Here are some of the more popular Pagan paths that people follow today. ²⁰If you see similarities with deity names and mythology, you just need to remember that what we consider mythology today was once an active breathing religion.

²¹You should also note that most of these faiths are associated with a particular culture or time period. ²²Some say that it is inappropriate to follow a path that you do not have cultural ties to, but others feel that the gods do not care one way or the other. ²³It would be a good idea to do some detailed research prior to considering if a particular path speaks to you, especially if it exists outside of your own cultural history.

Wicca

²⁴This is probably one of the more well-known faiths, though the average person doesn't really know much about it. ²⁵If you associate this with rebellious teenage girls who dress in black and 'cast spells' for fun, you definitely need to learn a little more.

²⁶Wicca is one of the most modern of the Pagan religions, having been created or founded in the 1950s.

²⁷Some might say that the practices and beliefs go back farther but there is little proof of that. ²⁸With its modern popularity, the original nature of Wicca has changed greatly and many people follow their own versions today that can better be described as Eclectic Paganism (more on that later).

²⁹True Wicca is a duotheistic religion, with a single God and Goddess rather than a varied pantheon.

³⁰Their identities are not as constructed as the deities in other pantheons because each embodies much more than the simple 'love goddess' or 'war god'. ³¹The God is seen as the *Horned Stag* of nature while the Goddess is the universal *Earth Goddess*.

³²Having said this, many use basic Wiccan concepts whilst worshipping Greek, Celtic or Egyptian deities. ³³This is where many Wiccans deviate from the traditional origins of Wicca.

³⁴There is a high reverence for nature and there are celebrations with the changing seasons. ³⁵Actually, there are eight sacred days in the year based on traditional harvest times, the seasons and astronomical events like solstices and equinoxes. ³⁶The concept of 'harm none' is a somewhat integral part of Wiccan beliefs, though not everyone holds it to the same standards.

³⁷The practice of witchcraft is integral with Wicca as a way of learning about the mysteries of the universe while taking some control over otherwise uncontrollable elements in one's life. ³⁸Spells are rituals that involve personal energy and willpower along with the natural energies of crystals, colours and elements to create changes in our surroundings. (³⁹Note that many people also perform witchcraft without being Wiccan.)

⁴⁰The original form of Wicca was coven-based and the practices of the religion could only be learned from an existing group. ⁴¹With so many books on the subject these days, it's accepted within the Wiccan community that you can be Wiccan without belonging to a group (known as being 'solitary').

⁴²Rituals usually involve the invoking of the gods or goddesses, sacred tools and a designated altar space. ⁴³Casting a circle of energy is a common element in many rituals for traditional Wiccans. ⁴⁴Such rituals are performed as forms of celebration as well as to cause change (better known as spells).

⁴⁵There aren't really any scriptures associated with Wicca, though the books written by its founder Gerald Gardner are a good place for a historic look at their practices. ⁴⁶Even so, these are just factual books not scriptures like you will find in other faiths.

Asatru

⁴⁷This is a form of Nordic Paganism, based on the beliefs of ancient Scandinavia (think the culture and time period of the Vikings).

⁴⁸They believe that there is a universal energy force called *the Wyrd* that binds us all and directs our lives (much like the concept of destiny or fate). ⁴⁹When it comes to personal behaviour, there are nine traits referred to as *the Nine Noble Virtues* that followers of Asatru strive to live by. ⁵⁰They are usually

listed as:

1. Truth
2. Courage
3. Fidelity
4. Honour
5. Discipline
6. Self-reliance
7. Hospitality
8. Industriousness
9. Perseverance

⁵¹Practices within Asatru include many rituals used for celebrations, blessings and giving thanks. ⁵²The most common are the *blot* and the *sumbel*. ⁵³The *blot* (pronounced bloat) is a ritual for giving thanks to the gods or to offer a blessing, and was originally a sacrificial ritual. ⁵⁴In modern times, this has been simplified to an offering of drink to the deities. ⁵⁵Mead is traditional, but other types of beer or even juice can be used. ⁵⁶A space is made sacred, the purpose for the blessing is spoken, the deities are called upon and asked to join the ritual, and the offering is given to the Earth and also shared among the group.

⁵⁷The *sumbel* is more of a celebratory ritual that is usually performed in larger groups. ⁵⁸Drinks are shared around, with each round having a ritual meaning. ⁵⁹First the gods and goddesses are hailed, and then thanks and recognition are given to the ancestors. ⁶⁰After that, there is a round where songs are sung, stories are told and other social speaking is done.

⁶¹The common deities in Asatru include *Odin*, who is the head of the Norse pantheon and father to the thunder god *Thor*. ⁶²Odin's wife, *Frigga*, was ruler over marriage and domestic matters. ⁶³Most people have heard of *Loki*, the trickster god who is also father to *Hel*, the goddess of the dead.

⁶⁴The gods live in an astral realm called *Asgard*, and each has their own hall there. ⁶⁵The souls of the dead are transported to the appropriate hall depending upon how they lived their lives and how they died. ⁶⁶Those who died honourably in battle would go to Odin's own hall of *Valhalla*. ⁶⁷Besides *Asgard*, the mythology of the Asatru includes many other astral places which are all connected by the world tree, *Yggdrasil*.

⁶⁸For Asatru, there are two collections of prose poems called *the Eddas*, which are the closest things they have to scriptures or sacred texts. ⁶⁹They are 13th century collections of Norse myth that are not considered to have been revealed by any deities. ⁷⁰The Younger Edda is mainly prose whereas the Elder is written in more poetic form. ⁷¹Both were written in Iceland.

Druidry

⁷²This is a very nature-oriented religion that has come from ancient Britain and the people known as the Celts. ⁷³Since little is known about true Druid practices, much of the typical modern practice is recreated with the intent of at least following the spirit of the older ways.

⁷⁴Celtic deities are worshipped, as are ancestors and less-defined spirits of nature. ⁷⁵*Danu* is the main

mother Earth goddess and the father god is the *Dagda*.⁷⁶*Cerridwen* is a wise old crone who brews up wisdom in a cauldron and *Blodeuwedd* (pronounced blo-day-weth) is a fair young maiden who was made of flowers.⁷⁷Not all Druids hold this sort of polytheistic outlook though.⁷⁸Some prefer to see the Divine as a simpler God and Goddess without specific details, whilst some are monotheistic and worship just a single Creator Spirit.

⁷⁹Because details are scarce, many Druid rituals are fairly modern constructions.⁸⁰Most are performed as forms of worship and celebration, as well as marking the seasons, thanking the gods and occasional spell-casting.⁸¹Working magic in this way is less common among Druids than among Wiccans, where it is an integral part of their practices.

⁸²Another variation of Druidry are the *Celtic Reconstructionists*, who aim to keep their practices more historically accurate than the Druids (more on reconstructionism below).⁸³This type of path is more structured and will be more consistent from one group of followers to the next.

⁸⁴There are no scriptures or holy writings of the Druids, which contributes greatly to their varied belief systems and practices.⁸⁵It's really a faith born of one's own inner attitudes and personal relationship with the Earth rather than one wrapped up in strict dogma.⁸⁶Certain overall beliefs or personal traits are prized for Druids, including wisdom, creativity and love.

⁸⁷When it comes to the afterlife, Druids generally lean towards a view of reincarnation but it can depend upon the individual.

Santeria

⁸⁸*Santeria* is known as a syncretic religion, meaning that its origins are actually a mixture of two (or more) other religions.⁸⁹In this case, Santeria is a blend of West African traditional beliefs (Yoruba specifically) and Catholicism.⁹⁰It may seem an odd mix, but as more and more Africans went to the Caribbean to work in the sugar industry, the two diverse faiths found themselves as constant companions.⁹¹Workers (and slaves) adapted many Catholic concepts as a way of making their beliefs more acceptable to their employers (and/or slave masters), who were not comfortable with the 'heathen' ways of the Africans.⁹²Today it is a very popular faith throughout the Caribbean islands.

⁹³It is a polytheistic faith, and the deities are known as *orishas* though they are closely aligned to various Catholic saints.⁹⁴In a strict sense, they are not true deities but rather go-between beings who interact with humanity on behalf of the Great Creator, *Olodumare*.⁹⁵Orishas include *Oshun*, who is the goddess of love, beauty and fertility.⁹⁶She is tied to the Catholic Lady of Charity.⁹⁷*Shango* is a father god who rules over war, thunder and masculine energy.⁹⁸His Catholic counterpart is Saint Barbara.⁹⁹*Eshu* plays the role of the trickster and messenger of the gods, and is also known as Saint Michael (or the archangel).

¹⁰⁰The orishas all have colours and foods associated with them that are used during rituals and offerings.¹⁰¹Shrines are commonly kept in the home to honour a particular deity, complete with statuary, decorations, food and alcohol.

¹⁰²As with the other faiths mentioned, rituals are an important aspect of the Santerian faith and the practice of sacrifice is common: literal animal sacrifice.¹⁰³While that may not appeal to everyone, the

idea of offering up an animal to the gods is a time-honoured practice that has existed for millennia. ¹⁰⁴It's certainly not part of every ritual and not every practice sacrifices to the same degree. ¹⁰⁵Chickens are the most common choice, and their death is a way of making an offering to a god as well as cleansing sins with the blood.

¹⁰⁶Some rituals are performed by the practitioner, but others require the assistance of a priest or priestess of Santeria. ¹⁰⁷They can be used as forms of worship, to give thanks or to ask the deities for help. ¹⁰⁸Ancestor spirits are also highly revered and frequently called upon during rituals or other personal ceremonies.

¹⁰⁹Details on Santerian beliefs can be hard to come by as the followers are quite private about it and it is not discussed with outsiders.

Vodou

¹¹⁰Also known as *Voodoo* or *Vodun*, this is a better-known pagan religion, though it is highly misrepresented by the mainstream media. ¹¹¹Like Santeria, this is a faith of African origins. ¹¹²Both are frequently confused due to some overlapping belief systems. ¹¹³You'll find followers of Vodou mainly in Haiti though there are some other communities of followers in other parts of the Caribbean.

¹¹⁴Like Santeria, this is a mix of African and Catholic faiths, though the original African origins are Dahomey rather than Yoruba. ¹¹⁵There is a single all-powerful Creator called *Bondye* who does not interact with humans. ¹¹⁶The deities that Vodouists worship are the *Lwa* (also spelled *Loa*). ¹¹⁷The qualities of these lwa are very similar to the orisha of Santeria, but they are clearly different beings once you start to study their traits closely.

¹¹⁸*Papa Legba* is a very important lwa because he rules over doorways and controls access to the other gods. ¹¹⁹He is invoked at every ritual. ¹²⁰The realm of the dead is ruled over by *Baron Samedi*, who is also very partial to women and rum. ¹²¹*Erzulie* is the lwa of love and beauty, and is known to be a little flirtatious. ¹²²The Catholic saints that are associated with the lwa are not always constant, and can vary from region to region. ¹²³For example, Papa Legba is linked with St. Peter but also sometimes with St. Anthony or St. Lazarus.

¹²⁴The gods of both Santeria and Vodou are seen more as regular people than you would expect to see in most other religions. ¹²⁵Orishas and Lwas both have rowdy senses of humour, enjoy food and alcohol and aren't the least bit bothered by sex. ¹²⁶It makes for a very vibrant religion.

¹²⁷Symbols known as *veves* are a very powerful element to any Vodou ritual, and each lwa has its own specific design. ¹²⁸They are drawn at various times during certain ceremonies, always by hand and usually with a powdered substance like corn meal, brick dust or wood ash. ¹²⁹Here is the traditional image for Papa Legba:



¹³⁰Another concept that is important in Vodou is possession, where the spirits of the lwa take over the bodies of the believers during a ritual. ¹³¹The term 'riding' is used, as in: "a believer has been ridden by Oshun". ¹³²This is believed to create a direct and personal way to communicate with the gods, though the person being ridden is usually unaware of the event at the time.

¹³³Ritual styles and beliefs are very similar to Santeria but it is important for any spiritual seeker to understand that they are separate and should be treated as distinct.

Greek Reconstructionism

¹³⁴A few 'reconstructionist' faiths are listed here, which simply means that these paths are aimed at recreating how these beliefs were practised during their own era. ¹³⁵As such, Greek Recons strive to follow the beliefs, practices and rituals as historically accurate as the ancient Greeks did during their time. ¹³⁶This path is also sometimes known as *Hellenic Reconstructionism* or just the Hellenic faith.

¹³⁷Even though the Greek myths are extremely well known today, the details of their religious practices are less so. ¹³⁸This is the challenge of any Reconstructionist faith.

¹³⁹The deities of ancient Greece are commonly known from their roles in myth, as mentioned previously. ¹⁴⁰To be historically accurate, many Greek rituals would require sacrifice of some sort to act as an offering to the gods. ¹⁴¹Most modern Hellenics prefer a gentler approach, using grains, fruits or vegetables instead. ¹⁴²Household shrines to the Gods are very common as a way of honouring them. ¹⁴³Like many other religions listed here, the defining qualities of Greek Recon are the practices and rituals rather than the internal beliefs that are held by the followers. ¹⁴⁴Rituals of offerings, sacrifices, worship and purification are common.

¹⁴⁵Personal behaviour typically includes qualities that were considered noble for the time, and include a strong sense of devotion to the Gods, honesty, humility, courage and loyalty to one's community.

Kemetic Reconstructionism

¹⁴⁶This branch of reconstructed religion is from the ancient Egyptian culture and dates back to the era of pyramids. ¹⁴⁷It's known as Kemeticism, Egyptian neo-Paganism or the Kemetic faith.

¹⁴⁸As with the Greek faiths, the pantheon of deities is fairly well known in modern culture. ¹⁴⁹One

difference is that the Egyptian timeframe is more extended than the Greek.¹⁵⁰ What we now consider to be *ancient* Egypt spans thousands of years, and religious beliefs evolved a lot during the period.¹⁵¹ This means that it is not quite as easy to pin down the roles and qualities of their gods since they weren't completely static.¹⁵² *Ra* was a very important sun god though he was blended with another figure to become *Amun-Ra*, whilst some regions worshipped *Aten* as the primary sun god instead.¹⁵³ *Osiris* was the god of crops and agriculture, and he was married to *Isis* who was the supreme female deity and powerful mother goddess.¹⁵⁴ Other deities include *Anubis* who was the god of the Dead (a role eventually overtaken by *Osiris*), and *Set* was the god of chaos, war and darkness.

¹⁵⁵ Many people of other Pagan paths have also adopted the Egyptian pantheon.¹⁵⁶ The actual reconstructed religion is one of the less common faiths these days.

¹⁵⁷ In many ways, it's similar to Hellenic reconstructionism.¹⁵⁸ The faith is more about the acts and practices rather than the internal spiritual beliefs.¹⁵⁹ Rituals have the same purposes for Kemetics, creating a sacred place for worship, offerings and blessings.¹⁶⁰ Qualities such as truth, balance, order, morality and a reverence of the Gods are important within this faith.

Eclectic Paganism

¹⁶¹ In actuality, most Pagans fall into this catch-all group, so the idea needs to be mentioned even though it's not considered a faith of its own.¹⁶² One of the great things about all of the above-mentioned Pagan faiths is that they all accept that other paths to the Divine are valid, true and worthy.

¹⁶³ None insists that it is the only way to god.¹⁶⁴ As such, all offer flexibility for their followers.

¹⁶⁵ Many people today have formed their own paths from the concepts and teachings of more than one faith, though there is usually a little common sense thrown in.¹⁶⁶ Few people would hold an Asatru blot ceremony and then call on Shango and Isis to partake.¹⁶⁷ Cultural lines are usually held in place.

¹⁶⁸ The focus is on personal worship with a deity and the specifics of how this is done vary from person to person.¹⁶⁹ People tend to get caught up with labels because that is how mainstream religion operates, but there is no reason why you have to classify yourself as belonging to a set faith.

Alternative Path

¹⁷⁰ For people who are disillusioned with the heavy dogma and institutionalisation of mainstream religions, these alternative faiths offer a breath of fresh air.

Shamanism

12 Usually thought of as a somewhat primitive concept, the nature of Shamanism is a vital part of any major spiritual discussion. ²Though we've already talked about astral travel, the earlier section covered it more as a technique to be explored. ³Now we're going to examine it further in the scope of a fuller spiritual path.

History of Shamanism

⁴The path of the shaman goes well beyond written history, with the practice being found in almost every culture and continent. ⁵Because it has become so widespread, there are many variations and not all practices are universal. ⁶A shaman might also be called a 'medicine man', and he (or she) would be a revered individual in a village who offered a mix of spiritual and herbal healing services.

⁷The role of the shaman is mostly tied to more primitive cultures and civilisations from times before organised religion. ⁸Nomadic groups, societies of hunter/gatherers and early farming cultures were all examples of cultures where shamans were of great importance. ⁹Even some of the more sophisticated civilisations still made use of shamanism, such as the Aztecs and the Mayans.

¹⁰In most cases, the era of the shaman died out as organised religions made their way across the world, slowly but surely stamping out these more 'primitive' practices.

Modern Day Shamanism

¹¹Those who follow this path today are usually doing so for their own spiritual growth rather than as a medical healer. ¹²That's not to say that a modern shaman doesn't follow a practice of healing herb-lore; it's more that followers use these skills for themselves rather than for larger groups of others.

¹³Today many people take a shamanic path simply because they appreciate the knowledge that can be gained through astral journeying and the belief that older cultures had a greater wisdom that is slowly disappearing from today's world.

The Nature of Shamanism

¹⁴As a spiritual path, shamanism is not usually classed as a religion because it is more of a practice than a belief system. ¹⁵Historically speaking, it was only embraced by certain individuals and not the populace as a whole. ¹⁶Though the members of the village may have believed in the shaman's power, they did not follow any particular path or practise it themselves.

¹⁷There are few deity figures in shamanism, though there is a strong leaning towards animism where spirits and souls are found in all living things. ¹⁸Spirits of ancestors are also very important.

¹⁹Shamans use meditation and trance to communicate with spirits in order to gain knowledge, help the village, or to use spiritual energy for healing. ²⁰Herbal knowledge often goes hand-in-hand with the astral work of a shaman. ²¹Drumming is a very common part of shaman traditions around the world, and the repeating rhythms are used as a way of inducing a trance state. ²²But it's the communication

and interaction with the astral realms that really defines shamanism, particularly the modern-day variety.

Totem Animals

²³Though not all shaman practices included animals in the same way, this is a concept that we typically attribute to this type of spiritual path. ²⁴It's particularly popular with modern shamans. ²⁵A spirit or totem animal is unique to each individual, and represents a guiding spirit or force in life. ²⁶Each animal has its own qualities that are important to personal development at any given time. ²⁷That is, you may find yourself working with different animals over the course of your life depending upon your spiritual needs.

²⁸Some people simply choose an animal to focus on because it holds the qualities they emulate, but that's not how it works. ²⁹A true totem comes to you through signs in the conscious world or through astral communication. ³⁰It quite often isn't what you are expecting. ³¹When in an astral state, you can ask a spirit to come forward as a guide and teacher. ³²You may immediately see or sense an animal whilst in your altered state, or one may make itself known in the physical world afterwards. ³³Be open to all possibilities. ³⁴Animal totems aren't always flashy species like the wolf or jaguar. ³⁵You might end up with a spider, chipmunk or garter snake as your animal.

Drug Use

³⁶The term 'drug use' is not meant in any derogatory way, but simply as a reference to the age-old practice of shamans using various substances to heighten their awareness to bring on visions or spirit communication. ³⁷Depending on the region, herbs and plants such as mescaline, peyote, ayahuasca and others have long been part of shamanic practice.

³⁸Modern cultures may look down on this as a fraudulent way of achieving a certain spiritual state but that is a very narrow-minded way of looking at it. ³⁹If accessing realms other than our own is accomplished through the mind, then what difference does it make how that unique state of consciousness is achieved? ⁴⁰This is a bit of a simplistic statement but the sentiment stands. ⁴¹Using hallucinatory substances doesn't necessarily negate any spiritual experiences.

⁴²While drug use may have been common in older times, many such substances are now illegal or otherwise prohibited. ⁴³Modern shamans who have direct cultural ties to ancestral cultures can sometimes get exceptions on religious grounds but most other practitioners have to make do with none pharmaceutical forms of alternate consciousness.

⁴⁴The next chapter is dedicated to this topic and you'll find greater detail there.

⁴⁵Modern-day shamanism is a very personal path and it includes a wide range of ideas, practices and knowledge. ⁴⁶The main point is that you can develop a huge range of understanding from time spent in the astral world or simply in an altered state of consciousness.

Altering Your Mind

13 We first brought this topic up in the shamanism chapter, but it is diverse enough that it deserves a larger discussion of its own. ²In many instances, this refers to the use of drugs (either man-made or natural) to alter your level of consciousness to help in communicating with spirits. ³But you can change your state of consciousness in other ways as well, and they'll be mentioned later.

⁴From a historical standpoint, it is natural substances that are relevant, and that's what we'll be discussing in this section.

⁵Please note that this chapter is for informational purposes only and neither condones (nor condemns) the use of drugs for any purpose, including as a means of altering your mind for spiritual reasons. ⁶All of the drugs mentioned can have negative effects on your health if not treated with respect. ⁷Bear in mind also that they do not offer an express lane to the Divine.

Drugs and Substances

⁸Shamans from around the world have long used various types of herbcraft to help them connect with spirits and travel through the astral dimensions. ⁹In today's lingo, these types of substances are called entheogens.

¹⁰To try and outline the use of such substances through all the different shamanic cultures around the world would be impossible. ¹¹Documented use of entheogens tends to be more prevalent in North and South America, but examples can be found in Africa and Asia as well. ¹²This could simply be due to the availability of psychoactive plants in these regions of the world.

Effects of Such Drugs

¹³While the idea of using drugs to open up one's mind for spiritual purposes is hardly unusual, many people aren't really clear on what they do or what the actual effects are. ¹⁴It's not as simple as ingesting a herb and immediately starting a personal conversation with God. ¹⁵Each one has its own unique impact on the mind and body, but there are a few common elements. ¹⁶Most are hallucinogens, heightening the senses to the awareness of the non-physical, or at least presences that cannot be viewed by the naked eye.

¹⁷These experiences are drug-induced and are not necessarily going to be meaningful or spiritual in and of themselves. ¹⁸It takes training and practice to harness this altered state for more esoteric goals.

¹⁹One could rationally argue that the visions and signs that a shaman receives under the influence of drugs have no meaning at all, but if you always take this approach, you'll never open your eyes to new and diverse concepts.

Specific Mind-Altering Drugs

²⁰Though we can't cover them all, there are some more common ones that should be mentioned in conjunction with the spiritual traditions that use them.

²¹*Peyote* is a well-known entheogen that many people in the general population have heard of, as it's a psychotropic drug used in some primitive cultures. ²²It is the common name for a little spiny cactus that is common in Mexico and southern Texas, throughout the Chihuahuan Desert. ²³The more technical name for the active substance is mescaline. ²⁴Many shamans from this area have used peyote, and the *Huichol* people have a particularly powerful connection with it. ²⁵They consider it to be on the same level as a deity and believe that its powers are the source of all things in creation.

²⁶Next up are *magic mushrooms*, though shamanic cultures generally didn't refer to them in this way. ²⁷They gained some popularity during the American drug culture of the 1970s and that tends to be how modern society still views them. ²⁸There are many different species of mushroom that have hallucinatory effects, all due to the psilocybin compound they contain. ²⁹Both hallucinogenic mushrooms and peyote are dried and then eaten or chewed to induce their effects.

³⁰The drug cocktail known as *ayahuasca* is the final substance we are going to look at in any detail. ³¹Though you've likely not heard of this one, it was a very common drink used by shamans in South America. ³²Indians in Peru and along the Amazon River used this brew to bring on their altered states. ³³Unlike the other two, this is a mix of substances rather than just a single herb, and is brewed much like a tea from a number of native plants. ³⁴There are too many potential ingredients to list, but the main psychoactive compound is known as DMT (dimethyltryptamine). ³⁵Like the others, this is a hallucinogen.

The Cosmic Serpent

³⁶Jeremy Narby is an anthropologist who lived among the *Ashaninca* people (from the Peruvian Amazon) to study the ecology of the region. ³⁷He ended up spending more time researching the ritual use of ayahuasca among the shamans. ³⁸His book *The Cosmic Serpent* is an excellent look at shamanic practice in the Amazon, and how the use of ayahuasca is an important part of that. ³⁹Though certainly not the only researcher to study the historical use of drugs in shamanism, Narby did make a great statement that describes the nature of ayahuasca among the people who use it:

“The central proposition that shamans make, is that nature is intelligent. Plants and animals are intelligent, and we can communicate with them. Ayahuasca is their number one tool for having this communication. Ayahuasca is considered to be a major plant teacher - no teacher is not intelligent. Ayahuasca is considered to be an intelligent being, and a source of intelligence, among other things about the intelligence in nature.” (The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge)

⁴⁰Other substances used by shamans or spiritual leaders through history include salvia, cannabis, opium, datura, tobacco, and many others. ⁴¹Unlike the hallucinogens, drugs like cannabis and opium are relaxants that reduce stress and allow you to clear your mind for spiritual pursuits.

Flying Ointment

⁴²Though this chapter is primarily about drugs and shamanistic cultures, there is another well-known example of using such substances for spiritual gain. ⁴³The *flying ointment* of medieval witchcraft in

Europe is a similar type of hallucinatory substance.⁴⁴ Myth tells of this ointment being used to create the infamous flying broom of a witch but the flying was of the metaphorical kind.⁴⁵ The idea was that the salve was rubbed on the skin and the psychotropic compounds were absorbed that way, rather than by drinking.⁴⁶ Traditional recipes for flying ointment contained such fearsome herbs as deadly nightshade, henbane and hemlock.

Non-Medicinal Approaches

⁴⁷As we mentioned at the start of this section, there are other ways of changing your state of mind besides using drugs or herbs.

⁴⁸Some other methods for bringing a change of consciousness include trances brought on by dancing, drumming, fasting or spending time in a sweat lodge.⁴⁹ Drumming was traditionally one of the most common non-medicinal ways to bring on a trance or meditative state.⁵⁰ Practitioners believed that repetitive sounds pulled your consciousness away from your physical state and allowed your mind to shift awareness to the astral world.⁵¹ This is very similar to the focusing-on-your-breathing technique described in the chapter on astral travel.⁵² The use of rattles or chanting is also said to bring about the same results.

The Use of Drugs Today

⁵³Due to modern-day laws regarding these potent herbs and medicines, none of these substances are easy to acquire unless you are able to find them growing naturally.⁵⁴ There are some exceptions for some of these substances due to their long history as religious tools.⁵⁵ For example, *peyote* is completely legal in Canada, but the laws in the United States restrict its use to people who are legally registered as Native Americans.⁵⁶ Laws regarding *ayahuasca* are still vague and several groups are currently fighting to create religious exemptions for its use.

⁵⁷Modern drugs (such as LSD) are considered alternatives that could replace the more traditional substances.⁵⁸ If you are going to utilise mind-altering substances in your spiritual quest, you should do plenty of research and take care when doing so.

Karma

14 Many religions (mainstream and otherwise) believe in a cyclical system of reincarnation rather than a one-way trip to the afterlife, and they typically have some version of karma involved in these beliefs. ²Though it's been mentioned as we discussed each faith earlier, it deserves to be discussed as a topic on its own. ³It's more complex than you think.

Faiths that Embrace It

⁴As mentioned, the concept of karma goes hand in hand with reincarnation. ⁵It cannot exist if you believe in a final afterlife after our earthly human existence. ⁶The religions that accept karma as part of their teachings include Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism. ⁷Various neo-Pagans also embrace the idea, though it wasn't originally an ancient Pagan concept.

⁸Even though these specific religions hold karma as part of their doctrine, this doesn't mean you have to follow these faiths in order to believe that it exists. ⁹Since karma is simply a force of nature, there is no deity involved and therefore no specific path required. ¹⁰In other words, you can believe in karma without being a practicing Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist.

The Nature of Karma

¹¹Karma is a force that operates outside any deity influence. ¹²It's not a god nor being that acts upon us with any conscious will. ¹³Think of it as a constant force that operates naturally, such as gravity.

¹⁴Over the course of your lifetime, every action you take has an impact on your karma. ¹⁵This goes for all the positive as well as negative actions. ¹⁶It's best described as the sum total of all you have done. ¹⁷Only once you die and everything has been tallied up does the force of karma step in to direct your next life. ¹⁸As such, a life filled with negative energy will attract further negativity in the next life.

¹⁹Since karma only acts on the *sum total* of your actions, this means that no single action can determine your next life. ²⁰Any negative behaviours can be 'cancelled out' by good ones, and vice versa. ²¹There is no forgiveness for acts either. ²²Once they are done, they are forever part of your life's karma. ²³You can only rebalance the scales with better choices as your life continues.

²⁴Depending upon your specific religious path, you may even have the opportunity to reincarnate as something non-human, if your karma warrants it. ²⁵Whether or not this would be seen as punishment or reward depends on the person.

²⁶Be aware that each faith has its own specific views on karma – this is just an overview that covers the main points.

What Karma Is Not

²⁷Though the term is widely known throughout the Western world, it is generally not well understood.

²⁸The common (and inaccurate) idea seems to be that karma is a universal force of justice that metes out punishments and rewards as life goes on. ²⁹That's not how it works, at least not from the original

Eastern interpretation of the concept. ³⁰If you steal from someone, and then find yourself losing money in a similar fashion a week later, people often attribute this to karma. ³¹Not so.

³²Karma is the effect of an *entire* life of actions and it plays out in how your next lifetime is formed. ³³Karma does not control the actions (or reactions) of the world around us to punish or reward immediate actions. ³⁴You should consider karma as something that takes place between lives, not during.

Learning Life's Lessons

³⁵This is another concept that goes along with reincarnation but is not quite the same. ³⁶Still, it provides another potential way of looking at reincarnation and how our actions can impact our many futures.

³⁷If you consider your spirit or soul to be similar to a child, then each lifetime represents more and more maturation and development. ³⁸The cycle of reincarnation provides the perfect scenario for this learning and each lifetime has its own lessons. ³⁹As you complete each cycle, your soul returns to the next life in such a way that you can learn something that your soul has yet to understand. ⁴⁰It's not about punishment or reward, simply a continuous selection of environments to be experienced.

⁴¹Someone who is cruel may need to learn how it feels to be treated poorly in order to understand empathy and compassion. ⁴²As such, their next lifetime may be filled with cruelty. ⁴³It may seem like a direct punishment for bad behaviour but that is not the purpose. ⁴⁴Some lessons may need to be taught simply based on attitudes rather than actions, or sometimes just because it's something that your soul requires.

⁴⁵This theory would help to explain why some people spend their entire lives in a state of self-absorption. ⁴⁶The likelihood is that they are newer souls that make decisions just as a child would. ⁴⁷Once they have lived a few more lifetimes, they start to become more mature and enlightened. ⁴⁸We see people in various states of maturity like this all the time, maturity that has nothing to do with their natural chronological age.

⁴⁹This is more of a New Age or neo-Pagan viewpoint that doesn't necessarily fit into a specific religious outlook.

A Darker Side of Karma

⁵⁰The Hindu caste system is partly the result of the belief in karma. ⁵¹The caste system places certain families above others in a social hierarchy, with the belief that it is their karma that has led them to be born this way. ⁵²It creates a system in which certain people are heavily oppressed (and others highly privileged) simply by the family they were born into. ⁵³Though the system may have its roots in karmic beliefs, it persists today due to long-standing cultural tradition. ⁵⁴It is becoming less acceptable in Hindu society, though it is still prevalent in countries like India.

⁵⁵While it may seem somewhat logical to base on the concept of karma, it also creates an artificial environment for living souls. ⁵⁶The purpose of each life is to learn and improve your karma, which the caste system doesn't allow for. ⁵⁷In other words, the universe should be the one to dole out karmic justice, not us.

Conclusion

During the *Scopes Monkey Trial* in 1925, the famed civil rights prosecutor, Clarence Darrow stated:

“...I am an agnostic... I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure...”

Aptly enough, Darrow’s strategy during proceedings was to challenge the literal interpretation of the Bible, which he described as a “fool religion”

No matter what labels we ascribe to ourselves, perhaps it is more realistic – and accurate – to say that we are *all* agnostic. For nobody can say with complete certainty that any God exists (and if so, what its true nature is), nor can anyone say with complete certainty that none exists. It is pure human folly that leads to definitive conclusions about matters that we know little or nothing about.

The controllers of religion can’t possibly know the ultimate truths any more than you do, so why should *they* be allowed to regulate and restrict your life with their narrow rules and viewpoints? The first step is seeing the weaknesses in certain faiths in an honest and critical light, so that you can make your own decisions instead of blindly following someone else’s interpretations, thoughts and prejudices. If God exists, ‘he’ is not religion.

Ironically, even with thousands of years of scripture and dogma, is it really possible to say that any of us *truly* knows what exists beyond our awareness?

Even if many of these ancient texts were inspired by a higher force or energy, aren’t the chances high that they have been tarnished by the imperfections of man?

Religions, like many other ideologies, are focused on converting new followers and increasing their power and wealth. And though it may be over-simplistic to tarnish all with the same brush, despite preaching about love and forgiveness on the surface, many have simply succeeded in dividing the world. It’s a pity that not everyone chooses to see it this way.

It is common amongst the Abrahamic religions to state that theirs is the one true path to the Divine. But you will note that even amongst them, there are thousands of sects who are all bitterly opposed to one another. Which one amongst them is the truth? More importantly, how does this demonstrate the love that each purports to espouse? If a religion tells its followers that they must obey without question, surely this is cause for concern. Fortunately, not all of the mainstream religions are as rigid in their doctrine regarding the path to ‘salvation’. A lot are pluralistic, accepting that there are many paths and people may choose one which suits them.

Most people are born into a particular religion. Asking them to abandon it (or even look at it critically) is tantamount to asking them to cut off their own arm. Because it has been engrained into

them all of their life, they are simply not willing to challenge what has become a part of them. They are scared about what their family will think, what friends will think and how society will judge them. And so they become trapped and refuse to ask questions, even if it flies in the face of their true nature. Why stay in a relationship that makes you unhappy?

Just remember that all mainstream religions need to gain members and to maintain control over current followers. All the information you get from within them will be biased along these lines. Looking elsewhere is how you find information *you* can trust. The idea of letting go of religion is scary to those who have always held onto it for support, but you now have some additional tools that will allow you to carve out a path of your own.

Know the details of both mainstream and alternative religions in order to build a good foundation for more esoteric study. Only once you know the framework of a religion can you honestly start to ask questions and find contradictions. A number of provocative questions that you should already be asking yourself have been suggested, and you will undoubtedly come up with more as you study further.

One of these should undoubtedly be why these faiths are dominated by males – both in the manifestation of their deity and the individuals who control them. There is no empirical evidence that suggests men are superior to women. If anything, the two should work as equals, in harmony, to achieve a set of goals. Many religions go a step further to subjugate females and portray them as lesser beings. There is already legislation in place in society which aims to reverse all forms of discrimination, yet religions do not wish to keep up with the times.

If God does exist, why would it be concerned with minutiae aspects of our daily lives, such as what we should be allowed to wear or eat, who we have sex with and when we do? The notion that an all-powerful being would even care about such trivialities is absolutely absurd, especially since it created these aspects of our nature in the first place. Surely, it would simply want us to be happy?

Make no mistake about it, this is all about power and control.

Beyond the conventional world of faith, there is wisdom that can be garnered from other pursuits. There are many ways of perceiving the ‘reality’ around us, the purpose of our existence and where we are going. These issues are not specific to religion. There is no reason why religious leaders should tell you with any certainty that they know, or provide you with any definitive answers. Though philosophy can be a somewhat complex endeavour, it holds some of the most intriguing ideas that mankind has ever developed. It is the very essence of questioning everything:

“Philosophy is questions that may never be answered. Religion is answers that may never be questioned.” (Author unknown)

Of course, not all philosophy is divorced from religion, but the point is that it encourages questions to

be raised. You don't have to agree with every point, but it allows you to think critically about the issue at hand. This is where it differs from many mainstream religions. You do not have to agree and you will not go to Hell if you don't.

Also look to the myths and fairy tales that can be found in every era and culture around the world as you journey on your path. Certain concepts are simply universal and transcend religious teachings, so why ignore all this knowledge just because it's wrapped in the label of 'myth'? There is a reason why these collective truths have been around since the dawn of time and why they are a staple of cultures that have little or no connection to one another. Joseph Campbell's phrase to "follow your bliss" summarises this nicely. *Your* bliss, not someone else's.

And there are many esoteric arts that can lead you to additional experiences and understanding, well beyond the reach of religious influence – many more than those listed in this book. Many of these practices have been pushed to the sidelines by a society that has become intolerant of alternative ways of thinking; but that does not lessen their value.

Just because they are not widely popularised by reality television, just because they are not regularly taught in schools, just because they are not widely touted by the mass media does not mean that they do not hold any worth. In fact, the beauty of the metaphysical alternatives discussed is that you can study them in your own time without the influence of those that will choose to steer you towards a particular way of thinking. The principles involved are universal, do not cost much, and above all, are not constrained by narrow doctrine.

But even as you continue to learn and discover new avenues to the Divine, do not presume that you can ever come to any complete conclusions. It is important that you keep learning and building your knowledge because:

“The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.”

The universe is a vast place. It is infinite in possibilities. It is infinite in ideas. It is my hope that we continue to question everything on our journey of discovery.

Someone else said it first, someone else said it best, so it's fitting to conclude:

“The sum total of all possible knowledge of God is not possible for a human being, not even through a true revelation. But it is one of the worthiest inquiries to see how far our reason can go in the knowledge of God.” (Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on philosophical theology*)

He who has ears, let him hear.

Acknowledgment

Thank you very much for taking the time to read the book. As it is my first, it took a long while, but it has certainly been worthwhile.

It was my intention to inspire those who read it, so I hope I achieved my goal.

Thank you for the support.

Motivational videos

Let's face it: life is tough! Like you, I sometimes have trouble wondering why I should keep going. For this reason, I have included a number of motivational videos to keep you going on your journey. These videos have certainly helped me whenever I get down in order to inspire me to proceed, so I hope they do the same for you. Not all of them may be to your taste, but I hope they will provide you some comfort.

"If you're going through hell, keep going!" (Winston Churchill)

From Struggle Comes Success -- Inspirational Video

<http://youtu.be/ObD0F0vJSJA>

Nick Vujicic - No arms no legs no worries - look at yourself after watching this!

http://youtu.be/XKTg_INHgpc

Best motivational video ever 2013 - GET RESULTS

http://youtu.be/_pEBz6PzF50

Charlie Chaplin as Hitler [Motivational Video]

<http://youtu.be/uJdxIb1Kmt0>

How Bad Do You Want It (Success Football) [Inspirational Video]

<http://youtu.be/jHXZgoqokKk>

Maybe, the most inspirational video ever

http://youtu.be/B7r7YY_EO0A

Best Motivation Video - Never Give Up! [HD]

<http://youtu.be/41Zjh3AirjU>

Be Fearless (greatest motivational ever!)

<http://youtu.be/NjjYVROiJIA>

Tony Robbins - What They Seldom Teach You in School

<http://youtu.be/LlC5j264Rk8>

Steve Jobs - Inspirational Speech "If today were the last day of my life"

<http://youtu.be/a5SMYfbWYyE>

Motivational Speech from Pursuit of Happiness

<http://youtu.be/DvtxOzO6OAE>

Connect with Femigod

Thank you so much for taking the time to read the book. It was my intention that this book would be useful for everyone, even those who are not seeking a spiritual path.

If you have questions of any kind, then please feel free to contact me directly:

E-mail: femigod@gmail.com

My blog: femigod.com

Please follow me on Twitter: [@femigod](https://twitter.com/femigod)

And connect with me on Facebook: [Femigod](https://www.facebook.com/Femigod)

Wishing you all the best in life, love and success.

Femigod

About the author

Originally from Nigeria, but raised (predominantly) in the UK, Femigod started writing seriously in September 2011 following a conversation with his father on what he wanted from life. The purpose of the blog – femigod.com – was one of exploration of what he wanted from life. Since May 2010, he has lived in Hong Kong.

His first eBook, *The Gospel According to Femigod*, published 17 August 2013.

He says it like this: “I have a bunch of words bouncing around in my head. I put them down on paper.”

Otherwise, he is opinionated, honest, a libertarian minarchist, capitalist and agnostic. His interests are reading, writing, staying fit, travelling and being creative.

Finally...

If you like this book and it was useful to you in anyway, then I would love to hear from you. Please feel free to contact me via any of the above means or by writing a review at Amazon by clicking the following link, which will take you to the Amazon page – <http://amzn.to/1eDL7uD>

I read all the reviews personally and would love to connect with you.

Thanks again for your support.

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