**Religion**

**God**, the center and focus of religious faith, a holy being or ultimate reality to whom worship and prayer are addressed. Especially in monotheistic religions , God is considered the creator or source of everything that exists and is spoken of in terms of perfect attributes—for instance, infinitude, immutability, eternity, goodness, knowledge (omniscience), and power (omnipotence). Most religions traditionally ascribe to God certain human characteristics that can be understood either literally or metaphorically, such as will, love, anger, and forgiveness.

***Conceptions of God***

Many religious thinkers have held that God is so different from finite beings that he must be considered essentially a mystery beyond the powers of human conception. Nevertheless, most philosophers and theologians have assumed that a limited knowledge of God is possible and have formulated different conceptions of him in terms of divine attributes and paths of knowledge. A range of types, each shading into the other, can be abstracted from this survey. In the monotheism of Judaism and Islam, Holy Being is conceived at its most transcendent and personal level. In the Christian doctrine of the Trinity , an attempt is made to synthesize transcendence and immanence. In the Asian religions considered, the immanence and impersonal nature of Holy Being are stressed (although some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism do not exclude personal aspects of the divine).

**Philosophical and Religious Approaches**

The philosophical and religious conceptions of God have at times been sharply distinguished. In the 17th century, for instance, French mathematician and religious thinker Blaise Pascal unfavorably contrasted the “God of the philosophers,” an abstract idea, with the “God of faith,” an experienced, living reality. In general, mystics, who claim direct experience of the divine being, have asserted the superiority of their knowledge of God to the rational demonstrations of God's existence and attributes propounded by philosophers and theologians. Some theologians have tried to combine philosophical and experiential approaches to God, as in 20th-century German theologian Paul Tillich's twofold way of speaking of God as the “ground of being” and “ultimate concern.” A certain tension is probably inevitable, however, between the way that theologians speak of God and the way most believers think of and experience him.

**Primary Attributes**

God may be conceived as *transcendent* (beyond the world), emphasizing his otherness, his independence from and power over the world order; or as *immanent* (present within the world), emphasizing his presence and participation within the world process. He has been thought of as personal, by analogy with human individuals; some theologians, on the other hand, have maintained that the concept of personality is inadequate to God and that he must be conceived as impersonal or suprapersonal. In the great monotheistic religions, God is worshiped as the One, the supreme unity that embraces or has created all things; but polytheism, the belief in many gods, has also flourished throughout history.

These contrasts are sometimes united in a single theological scheme. Thus, while theism (belief in a supreme being) emphasizes divine transcendence and pantheism (belief that God is the sum of all things) identifies God with the world order, in panentheism God is understood as both transcendent and immanent. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity and similar doctrines in other religions acknowledge both the unity and the inner diversity of God. Christianity is a form of monotheism in which the absolute unity of God has been modified. It has also been argued that God has both personal and impersonal aspects, or even that he alone is truly personal and that at the finite level there is only an imperfect approximation of personal being. These attempts to unite seemingly opposite characteristics are common in religious and mystical writers and are intended to do justice to the variety and complexity of religious experience. Fifteenth-century German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa, for instance, believed that God can be apprehended only through mystical intuition. Nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Sшren Kierkegaard insisted on the parodoxical nature of religious faith. These formulations suggest that the logic of discourse about God is necessarily different from the logic that applies to finite entities.

***Judaism, Christianity, and Islam***

In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three religions rooted in the biblical tradition, God is conceived primarily in terms of his transcendence, personality, and unity.

**The Jewish Idea of God**

The idea of transcendence is introduced in the opening verses of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which God is presented as creator, and this conception impresses itself on all Jewish discourse about God. To say the world is created means that it is not independent of God or an emanation of God, but external to him, a product of his will, so that he is Lord of all the earth. This explains the Jewish concern over idolatry—no creature can represent the Creator, so it is forbidden to make any material image of him. Nonetheless, it is also part of the creation teaching that the human being is made in the image of God. Thus, the Hebrew understanding of God was frankly *anthropomorphic* (humanoid). He promised and threatened, he could be angry and even jealous; but his primary attributes were righteousness, justice, mercy, truth, and faithfulness. He is represented as king, judge, and shepherd. He binds himself by covenants to his people and thus limits himself. Such a God, even if anthropomorphic, is a living God. It is true that the name of God, Yahweh , was understood as “I am who I am,” but this was not taken by the Hebrews of biblical times in the abstract, metaphysical sense in which it was interpreted later. The Hebrew God was unique, and his command was, “You shall have no other gods beside me!” (although in some biblical passages the Spirit of the Lord and the angel of the Lord and, in later Jewish speculation, the divine wisdom appear to be almost secondary divine beings).

**Christian Conceptions**

Christianity began as a Jewish sect and thus took over the Hebrew God, the Jewish Scriptures eventually becoming, for Christians, the Old Testament. During his ministry, Jesus Christ was probably understood as a prophet of God, but by the end of the 1st century Christians had come to view him as a divine being in his own right , and this created tension with the monotheistic tradition of Judaism. The solution of the problem was the development of the doctrine of the triune God, or Trinity, which, although it is suggested in the New Testament, was not fully formulated until the 4th century. The God of the Old Testament became, for Christians, the Father, a title that Jesus himself has applied to him and that was meant to stress his love and care rather than his power. Jesus himself, acknowledged as the Christ, was understood as the incarnate Son, or Word , the concrete manifestation of God within the finite order. Both expressions, Son and Word, imply a being who is both distinct from the Father and yet so closely akin to him as to be “of the same substance” (Greek *homoousios*) with him. The Holy Spirit—said in the West to proceed from the Father and the Son, in the East to proceed from the Father alone —is the immanent presence and activity of God in the creation, which he strives to bring to perfection. Although Christian theology speaks of the three “persons” of the Trinity, these are not persons in the modern sense, but three ways of being of the one God.

**Islam**

Islam arose as a powerful reaction against the ancient pagan cults of Arabia, and as a consequence it is the most starkly monotheistic of the three biblically rooted religions. The name *Allah* means simply “the God.” He is personal, transcendent, and unique, and Muslims are forbidden to depict him in any creaturely form. The primary creed is that “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the apostle of Allah.” Allah has seven basic attributes: life, knowledge, power, will, hearing, seeing, and speech. The last three are not to be understood in an anthropomorphic sense. His will is absolute, and everything that happens depends on it, even to the extent that believers and unbelievers are predestined to faith or unbelief.

***Asian and Other Religions***

Despite the differences, the conceptions of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have an obvious kinship. The great religions of Asia, however, belong to a quite different realm of theological ideas. Even to use the word *God* in an Asian religious context may be misleading, because it generally carries the connotation of personality. A broader expression that would include both the idea of a personal God and the idea of an impersonal or suprapersonal absolute is *Holy Being.*

**Hinduism**

In Hinduism, Holy Being can be understood in several ways. Philosophically, it is understood as Brahma, the one eternal, absolute reality embracing all that is, so that the world of change is but the surface appearance (*maya*). In popular religion, many gods are recognized, but, properly understood, these are manifestations of Brahma. Each god has his or her own function. The three principal gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—charged respectively with creating, preserving, and destroying—are joined as the *Trimurti,* or three powers, reminiscent of the Christian Trinity. Strictly speaking, the creator god does not create in the Judeo-Christian sense, for the world is eternal and he is simply the god who has been from the beginning. In *bhakti* Hinduism, the way of personal devotion, the god Ishvara is conceived as personal and is not unlike the Judeo-Christian God.

**Buddhism and Chinese Religion**

It is sometimes said that Theravada Buddhism, is atheistic, but this is not so. The gods are real, but they are not ultimate. The ultimate reality, or Holy Being, is the impersonal cosmic order. A similar concept is found in ancient Greek religion, in which cosmic destiny seems to have been superior to even the high gods. In the Mahayana Buddhism of China and Japan, the Buddha himself was transformed into a divine being, although the connection with the historical Buddha became very tenuous. The many Buddha figures of Asia are cosmic beings.

In the indigenous Chinese religions, the ultimate Holy Being also seems to have been conceived as an impersonal order. In Taoism, it is the rhythm of the universe; in Confucianism, it is the moral law of heaven.

**Polytheism and Animism**

In polytheism, there are many holy beings, each manifesting some particular divine attribute or caring for some particular aspect of nature or of human affairs. Polytheism was the most common form of religion in the ancient world and was well developed in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, and elsewhere. It tends, however, to develop into a form of religion that has a unitary conception of the divine, either through philosophical criticism or through one of the deities in the polytheistic *pantheon* (assemblage of gods) acquiring an overwhelming superiority over the others. The gods of a pantheon were usually conceived in some family relationship, which ensured from the beginning a sense of their unity. Polytheism probably developed out of a more primitive form of religion (still practiced in many parts of the world) called animism, the belief in a multitude of spiritual forces, localized and limited in their powers, some friendly and some hostile. In animism the sense of Holy Being is diffused throughout the environment.

***Grounds for Belief***

Although conceptions of God have varied considerably by historical period, culture, and sect, a belief in Holy Being in some sense has been predominant in almost all societies throughout history. This belief has been challenged, however, since ancient times by the philosophical doctrines of skepticism, materialism, atheism, and other forms of disbelief. The proportion of unbelievers is higher in modern societies than in most societies of the past.

**Varieties of Disbelief**

Arguments against belief in God are as numerous as arguments for it. Atheists absolutely deny the existence of God. Some, for instance, believe the material universe constitutes ultimate reality; others argue that the prevalence of suffering and evil in the world precludes the existence of a sacred being. Agnostics believe that the evidence for and against the existence of God is inconclusive; they therefore suspend judgment Positivists believe that rational inquiry is restricted to questions of empirical fact, so that it is meaningless either to affirm or deny the existence of God .

**The Nature of Belief**

If, as Paul Tillich argues, God is the ground or source of being and not simply another being, even the highest or supreme being, then he does not exist in the sense in which things exist within the world. It may even be misleading to say, “God exists,” although this is the traditional way of speaking. To believe in God is to have faith in the ultimate ground of being, or to trust in the ultimate rationality and righteousness of the whole scheme of things . This way of expressing the matter also leaves open the questions of transcendence and immanence, personal being and impersonal being, and so on. The primary basis for belief in God is to be found in experience, especially religious experience . There are many experiences in which people have become aware of Holy Being manifesting itself in their lives—mystical experiences, conversion, a sense of presence, sometimes visions and verbal communications—which may come with the force of a revelation. Besides specifically religious experiences, there are others in which people become aware of a depth or an ultimacy that they call God—moral experiences, interpersonal relations, the sense of beauty, the search for truth, the awareness of finitude, even confrontation with suffering and death. These are sometimes called *limit situations* (a term used by the 20th-century German philosopher Karl Jaspers), because those who undergo such experiences seem to strike against the limits of their own being. In so doing, however, they become aware of a being that transcends their own, yet with which they sense both difference and affinity. They become aware of what 20th-century German Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto, in a classic description, called *mysterium tremendum et fascinans,* the mystery that at once produces both awe and fascination.

**Formal Arguments For the Existence of God**

To many people these experiences of Holy Being are self-authenticating, and they feel no need to inquire further. All human experience, however, is fallible. Mistakes of perception are everyday experiences, and false conceptions of the natural world, the earth, the heavenly bodies, and so forth have prevailed for thousands of years. It is therefore possible that the experience of Holy Being is illusory, and this possibility has led some believers to look for a rational basis for belief in God that will confirm the experiential basis. Numerous attempts have been made to prove the reality of God. Medieval Scholastic theologian Saint Anselm argued that the very idea of a being than which nothing greater or more perfect can be conceived entails his existence, for existence is itself an aspect of perfection. Many philosophers have denied the logical validity of such a transition from idea to factual existence, but this ontological argument is still discussed. Thirteenth-century theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas rejected the ontological argument but proposed five other proofs of God's existence that are still officially accepted by the Roman Catholic church: The fact of change requires an agent of change; the chain of causation needs to be grounded in a first cause that is itself uncaused; the contingent facts of the world (facts that might not have been as they are) presuppose a necessary being; one can observe a gradation of things as higher and lower, and this points to a perfect reality at the top of the hierarchy; the order and design of nature demand as their source a being possessing the highest wisdom. Eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant rejected Aquinas's arguments but argued the necessity of God's existence as the support or guarantor of the moral life. These arguments for the reality of God have all been submitted to repeated and searching criticism, and they continue to be reformulated to meet the criticisms. It is now generally agreed that none of them constitutes a proof, but many believers would say that the arguments have a cumulative force, which, although still short of proof, amounts to a strong probability, especially in conjuction with the evidence of religious experience. Ultimately, however, belief in God is, like many other important beliefs, an act of faith—one that must be rooted in personal experience.