INTRODUCTION

The subjects covered in this volume are as old as the human race and as new as today's newspaper headlines. They are presented not to be judged as much as to inform, explain, and enlighten.

The Religion Book: Places, Prophets, Saints, and Seers offers a broad overview of religion through the millennia, providing nearly 300 entries and 100 photos. Covered in-depth are the five well-established and documented world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that have supported and informed lives for thousands of years. You will also read about spiritual practices of the ancients that have been rediscovered through archaeological evidence and oral history. Druidism and goddess worship, the Red Paint culture, Native North American spirituality, and the ancient Celts still speak to people, especially as new information is uncovered and published. Some of their ancient wisdom is being melded into what is often referred to as New Age religion. The modern resurgence of Wicca is only one example.

Readers will encounter holy places such as Jerusalem, Mecca, and Amesbury, England, near Stonehenge; prophets from the pages of the Bible and Zoroastrian scriptures; founders such as Jesus, Moses, Siddhartha, and Joseph Smith; saints like the apostle Paul and Francis of Assisi; seers, including Wiccan priestess Laurie Cabot; and charismatic leaders like David Koresh. A few figures from popular legend and folklore appear as well, including King Arthur, Merlin, and even the Abominable Snowman. Angels and demons have their place, along with in-depth discussions about how creeds, doctrines, and dogmas came to be established.

The Religion Book discusses religious movements, such as the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century and the Death of God movement of the 1960s, as well as more secular movements inspired by religion, including the environmental and civil rights movements. It examines various approaches to religion and religious study, such as the historical/critical method of biblical scholarship and the "conservative versus

liberal" debates that span the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the Scopes "Monkey Trial" of the 1920s, the modern-day appointment of openly gay clergy, and beyond.

If what you are looking for is not listed alphabetically as an individual entry, it is likely included under a related subject. Cross-references throughout the book, as well as the comprehensive index, explain where to find what you seek. Within an entry, more cross-references lead to related topics. "Abraham," for instance, leads to "Judaism, Development of," which links to "Ark of the Covenant," and so on. Or "Abraham" might lead to "Islam, Development of," which will direct you to "Muhammad." The list of resources at the end of the book provides valuable direction on acquiring more information about the topics covered.

Origins of Religion

Archaeology has unearthed ritual burial sites going back to the time of the Neanderthal, some twenty-five thousand years ago. Our first ancestors likely would not have gone to the trouble of burying their loved ones with prized hand axes and implements unless they were convinced those items would be needed in the next life. But this kind of planning for "the next life" is evidence of a spiritual concept of life extending beyond the physical, mortal one. In other words, early humans were likely practicing a basic form of religion. A good case can even be made that the advent of religion was a primary building block for the development of humanity.

Two common theories explain the existence of religion. One is that religion is entirely a human invention. This was the view of Karl Marx, who said, "Man makes religion; religion does not make man.… Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature … the opium of the people." Others believe a spiritual reality exists that various cultures tap into and express in their own unique ways. There are planes of existence, according to this view. A spiritual plane exists that is separated from the material world we normally experience. It is "outside" or "other." But it is not separated from us by an impermeable barrier. The wall is full of doors and windows. Religion is a major access point, allowing us to catch glimpses of what's happening on the other side.

To use a computer metaphor, the spiritual plane is the hardware that contains the "works." Religions are the software that access that hardware. This metaphor is valuable because it sheds light on the age-old hindrance to peaceful religious coexistence. Any software will work fine as long as its rules are followed. But you can't mix software very well. They don't use the same language, so they don't speak to each other. Hence, what works for one individual or culture might not be of any use to a different individual or culture. Each software producer, of course, rightly claims that its own product works best, because for them, at least, it does. But it takes a while to really get to know the ins and outs of a piece of software. You can read about its claims, but to really get to know how to use it takes time, effort, and application.

Pondering this issue, I wondered if I ought to offer my own thoughts on the matter—the culmination of thirty years of religious study—and "interpret" the material I would be presenting. But as soon as I framed the question, the answer became obvious. It simply is not my job, within the confines of this book, to judge or interpret

anyone else's religion. *The Religion Book,* therefore, presents not one person's interpretation but the histories and the stories themselves.

Where it might be enlightening, the book examines the often conflicting theories and interpretations of spiritual and historical matters. For instance: Was there really a man named Noah who built an ark? Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, along with that of many indigenous peoples, tells the story of such a man, so the story is presented here, along with various schools of interpretation as to what the story means. But the final judgment will have to be made in the mind of each reader.