

Universal Religions in World History

*Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam
(Explorations in World History)*

BY DONALD JOHNSON AND JEAN JOHNSON

NEW YORK: MCGRAW HILL, 2007

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REVIEWED BY PATRICK GRANT

EA readers are surely aware that most major world religions originated in Asia. *Universal Religions in World History*, a concise text by Donald and Jean Elliot Johnson, therefore, is worth a review in this journal. In just over 200 pages, the authors have managed to include a remarkable array of information. The basic premise is that three religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, stand out as universalizing religions, having spread throughout the world. Although these three are prominently emphasized, other religions are included. There is a short explanation of both Judaism and Hinduism, since these two faiths provided a setting for Christianity and Buddhism, respectively. The final chapter has a small section on Sikhism.

The book is helpful in some important ways. At the beginning of each of the five chapters is a box entitled “Getting Started” with about ten essential questions to guide readers. Teachers using this text would find it especially useful to ask students to consider these questions before reading the chapter, and then base discussion on them.

The last chapter examines several intriguing themes, including the underlying theme, as the authors point out, of “the slow and subtle process” of conversion. Throughout the ambitious scope of this text, students will gain an impression of how urbanization contributed to religious diffusion. Readers will find succinct and intriguing descriptions of the great cities of Baghdad and Cordoba. There is little attention to Central Asia, however, thus no account of Timur and his city, Samarkand. Yet one will learn why Karballa is important for the Shi’a in Iraq. The treatment of Mongol religion in this last chapter is also very interesting.

This book does have some problems that need revision for a future edition. It concludes with a set of endnotes, but has no bibliography—students would appreciate an annotated bibliography with suggestions for further reading. There is only one primary source about Japan in the endnotes. While the authors give much attention to Zen and Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, they mention Nichiren only briefly and without the important context of the Kamakura period. Readers interested in China will notice that some names are spelled using Pinyin and some using Wade-Giles, with no apparent reason for inconsistency. Confucian and Daoist thought are mentioned only very briefly, with incomplete definitions of *wu wei* as “non-action,” *li* as “proper action,” and *ren* as “appropriate feelings.” Baha’i is given fleeting treatment as “a more recent example of eclectic religious synthesis.”



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There are three small maps, one for each of the three universalizing religions. These maps, however, do not include many of the places and regions featured in the text. The map showing the spread of Islam, for example, shows no place east of the Indus or south of the Red Sea, even though there is considerable text coverage about Islam in India, Indonesia, and East Africa. The book could also make greater use of primary sources and stories that are important to help students understand religions. For students of religion and world history, epic tales serve to fascinate as well as instruct. This book includes some photographs of art, but could be greatly enhanced with more attention to Buddhist and Christian art, as well as Islamic calligraphy.

Nevertheless, the authors offer interesting perspectives about religion. I recommend using this book as one of several comparative student texts. Teachers and students would gain much by reviewing multiple sources to study an extensive range of maps, read the fascinating stories found in religious texts, and appreciate the art and calligraphy that are so very important to religion. ■

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