

A DEFINITION OF "RELIGION"

Professor Russell Kirkland
Department of Religion
University of Georgia

"Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."

— William James (1842-1910), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

"Religion" is not mere intellectual assent to certain propositions about the nature of life. Rather, it involves what people do in their lives: "religion" has been called "*enacted tradition*" or "*embodied belief*." It originates in humanity's tendency to seek to maximize *the meaning and value of our life-experience* by (re-)aligning that life-experience with *a higher or deeper reality*, with "an unseen order" that somehow transcends ordinary human existence. That alignment can serve to *integrate* diverse aspects of our lives (individually and collectively), and to imbue our lives with *a sense of purpose and direction*. The concern with *establishing and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the higher/deeper reality while conducting our everyday life* often generates religious values — *guidelines for thought and action* that often develop into powerful cultural forces. The myths, symbols, rituals, and intellectual reflection that grow up around people's experience of the higher/deeper reality form the basis of **religious traditions** ("**religions**"). "*Religions*" evolve within human culture and society, and are affected by the surrounding physical, historical and cultural realities.

"Myths" Verbal representations of a higher/deeper realities and of their connections with ordinary human existence.

"Symbols" Visual or otherwise non-verbal representations of higher/deeper realities and of their connections with ordinary human existence.

"Rituals" Non-utilitarian acts (i.e., activities performed without any obvious utilitarian purpose) intended to (re-)actualize the ideal relationship with the higher/deeper realities.

