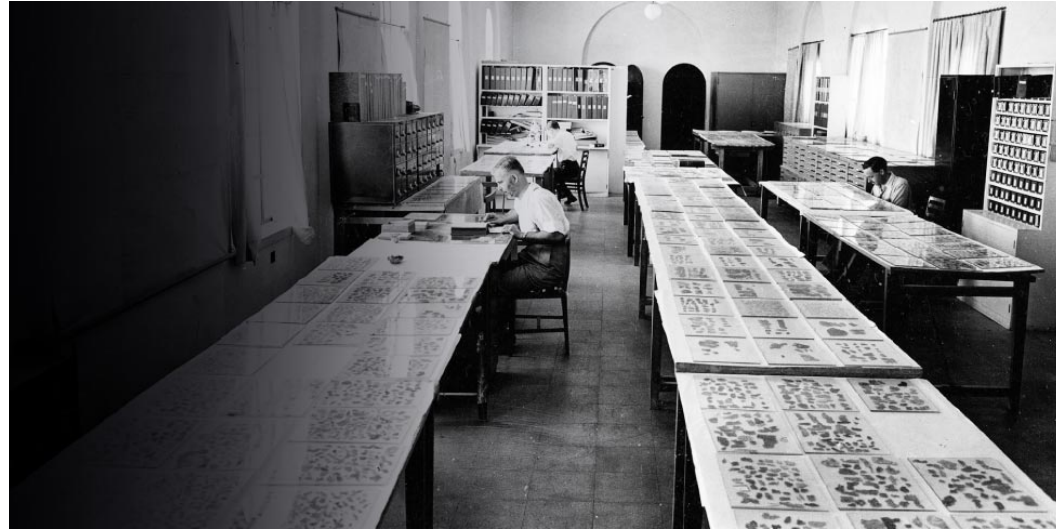


History of World Religions

What is Religion?



Jason Suárez
History Department
El Camino College



Two course objectives for this semester

To approach the study of religions from an **academic perspective**

- Not a devotional or normative study of religion – *what to believe and how to live*
- Not trying to determine what is *true or false*
- Not trying to determine what is *right or wrong*
- Not to be *trained* in them

Understand religious traditions within their **historical context**

- To understand what religion *was/is*
- To understand *historical origins* of religious traditions



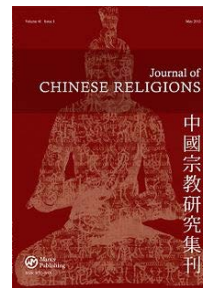
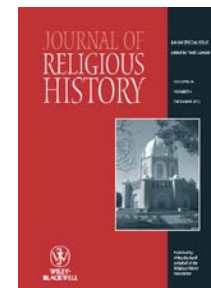
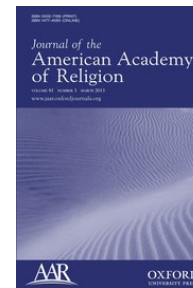
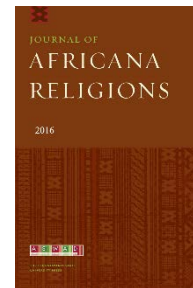
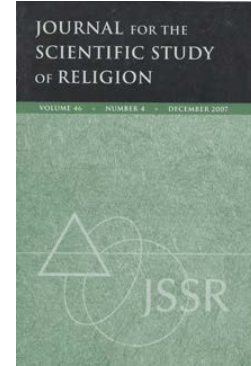
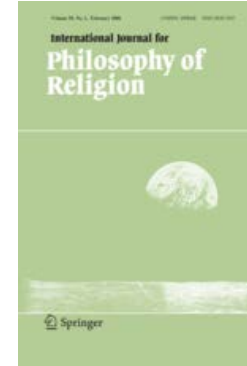
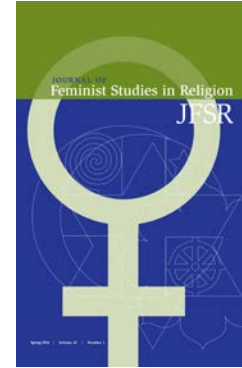
The study of world religions

A recent development connected with **European expansion**

- Begins around the late 19th century and is influenced by colonialism and Western domination – *comparative*
- Initially reflected a *Christian bias* as other religions are compared to Christianity to promote *European universalism*

Is it a **discipline** or **field** in academics today?

- It is a discipline because it possesses a *unique way of approaching its subject*
- It is a field that must be *studied using multiple academic lenses or methods*
- To study a religion, students need to *examine its history, beliefs and cultural context*



Theology

- *Theos* (God) and *logos* (word or discourse)
- Theology is thus a **discourse** about God - there is a God
- Practitioner trying to understand their religion

Philosophy of Religion

- Asks fundamental questions about religion that theology takes to be true
- Explores the **meaning** and nature of religion
- Does God exist? Is it possible to know if God exists?

Psychology of Religion

- Research methods and interpretive frameworks applied to religion
- Explores nature of why people **embrace** religion
- Religion satisfies all of the basic desires that humans share

What is our methodology?

Adopting a **historical-critical** approach - to understand *the meaning* of the text in its historical context

- Try to understand what the original authors *intended*
- Try to understand what original readers likely *understood*
- Try to understand **historical causation**

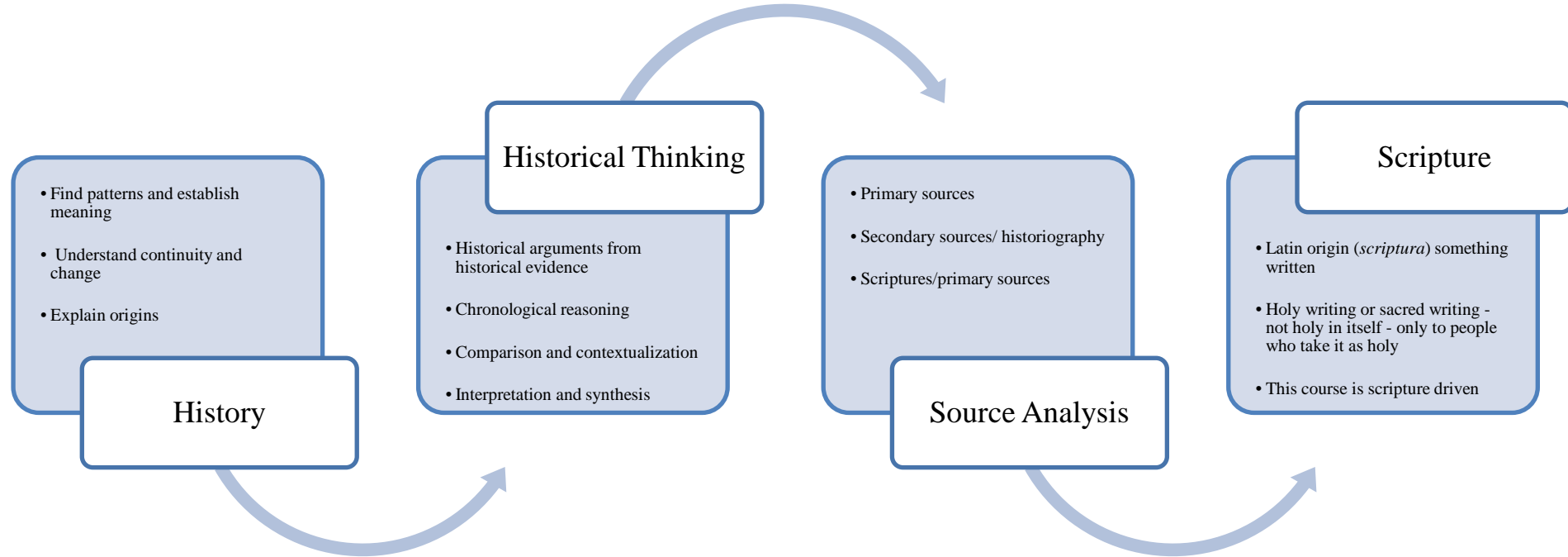
Approaching religious texts as **historical documents**

- Course approaches religious texts not as *scripture*
- They are a collection of historical documents to be *analyzed* using the historian's methods

The challenge of studying world religions is that we are still trying to *understand* what religion is even today



Our methodology in detail

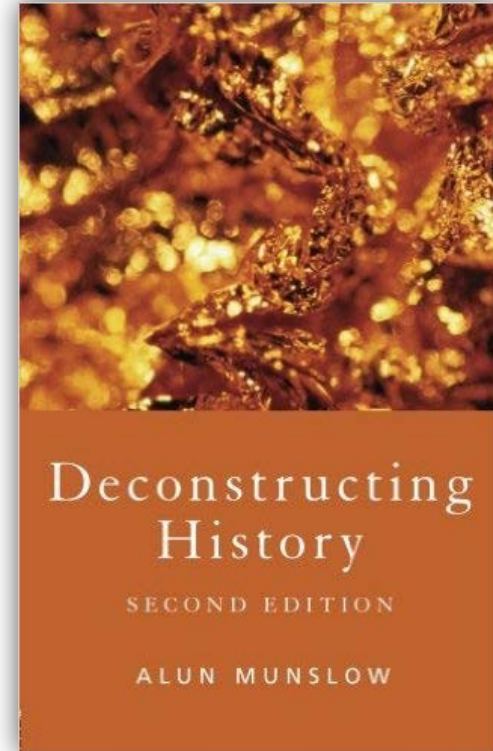


Deconstructing history – Alun Munslow

“The most basic function of the historian is to understand, and explain in a written form, the connections between events and human intention or agency in the past.”

“I will argue that the genuine nature of history can be understood only when it is viewed not solely and simply as an objectivised empiricist enterprise, but as the creation and eventual imposition by historians of a particular narrative form on the past: a process that directly affects the whole project, not merely the writing up stage.”

“I will argue that history is the study not of change over time per se, but the study of the information produced by historians as they go about this task.”



Designating eras

Chronometry and eras in the Western Tradition

- Measurement of *time* and of dating
- Methods have *changed* over time

Dionysius Exiguus (470-544) – first to divide time using the life of Christ dating his birth to **A.D. 1**

Pope Gregory XIII (1502-1586) – reformed the Julian calendar

- B.C and A.D. (*Anno Domini*) – before Christ and in the year of our lord
- B.C.E and C.E. – before the common era and common era



Duccio de Buoninsegna (c. 1255-1319)

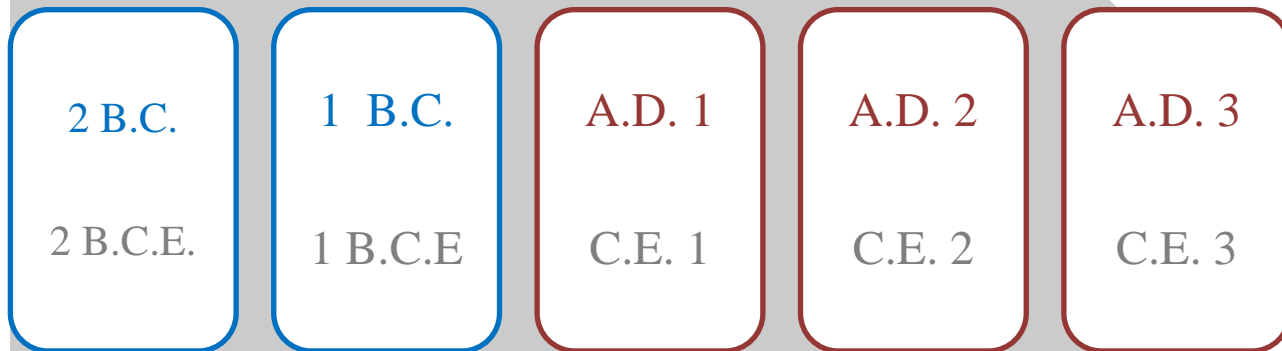


Optional Viewing: [Professor Kevin Butcher – Dating the Birth of Christ](#)

The initiation of B.C. and A.D.

In A.D. 525 **Dionysius Exiguus** of Scythia Minor introduced the A.D. system, counting the years since the birth of Christ.

Before Christ



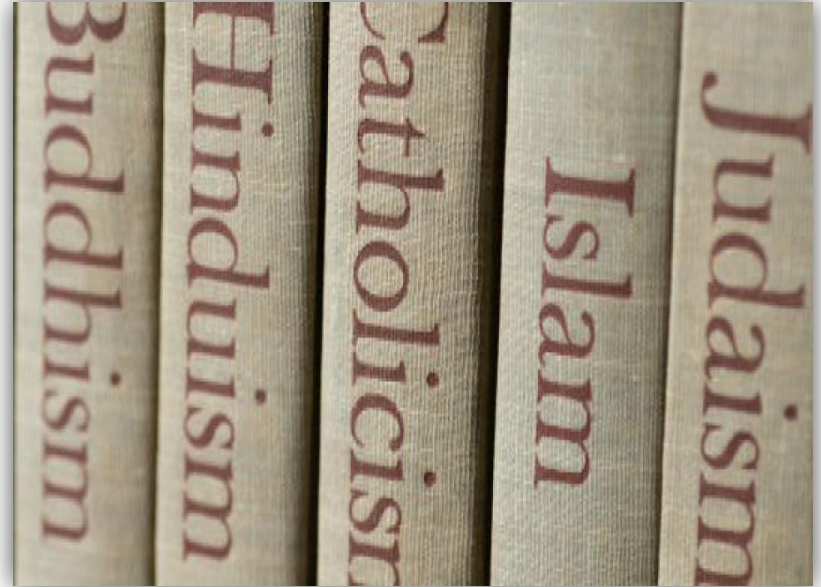
The designation of B.C. was added by the **Venerable Bede** when he published his "Ecclesiastical History" in 731.

✓ *In sixth century Europe, the concept of "zero" was still unknown. Thus, the year 1 B.C. was followed by the year A.D. 1.*

How do we define religion?

“Most people have a clear idea of what they mean by religion and can usually identify religious behavior when they see it. Nevertheless, when we have to define religion, we soon discover that the task is quite difficult, because religion is manifested in many different ways in our world.” - *Irving Hexham*

“Because of the pervasive use of the word religion in the cultures of the modern Western world, we already intuitively know what religion is before we even try to define it: religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity. Most of the debates about whether this or that *-ism* is really a religion boil down to the question of whether or not they are sufficiently similar to modern Protestant Christianity.” - *Brent Nongbri*



Additional complications – religion then and now

“What is modern about the ideas of religions and being religious is the isolation and naming of some things as religious and others as not religious.”

“An especially popular way of viewing religion is as a kind of inner disposition and concern for salvation conceived in opposition to politics and other secular areas of life.”

“If we want to go on talking about ancient Mesopotamian religion, ancient Greek religion, or any other ancient religion, we should always bear in mind that we are talking about something modern when we do so. We are not naming something any ancient person would recognize. In our current context, we organize our contemporary world using the concepts of religious and secular.”

Brent Nongbri - *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*



[Standing male worshiper](#)

Period: Early Dynastic I-II **Date:** ca. 2900–2600 B.C.

Geography: Mesopotamia, Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar) **Culture:** Sumerian

Starting with the word – the etymology of *religio*

Classical Period/Early Middle Ages

- Plautus (255-185 B.C.E.) - a sense of *reserve*
- Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.) - *prohibitions* instituted either by gods or by humans
- Lactantius (240-320 B.C.E.) - *worship* carried out by Christians
- Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 B.C.E) - “We cannot say confidently that *religio* means only the worship of God, since we should thus clearly be violating usage by abolishing one meaning of the word, namely, the *observance of duties in human relationships.*”
- Salvianus of Marseilles (5th century) - a designation of the *monastic life*



[Scenes from the Life of Saint Augustine of Hippo](#)

Artist: Master of Saint Augustine (Netherlandish, ca. 1490)

Date: ca. 1490 Geography: Made in Bruges, Flanders, South Netherlands

When does *religio* become religion?

Middle Ages

- Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) *Summa Theologica* – **multiple uses**
- Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) - “All religio has something good in it; provided that it is **directed towards God**, the creator of all things, it is sincere Christian religio”

Early Modern

- Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) *De vera et falsa religione commentarius* - right and wrong ways of **worship**
- Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) *De veritate religionis christianae* - “there is not, neither ever was there **any other Religion** [religio] in the whole World . . . “



Hugo Grotius (1583–1645)

Jan Anthonisz. van Ravesteyn (c.1570–1657)

Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

What is religion then?

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) - “the recognition of all duties as divine commands.”

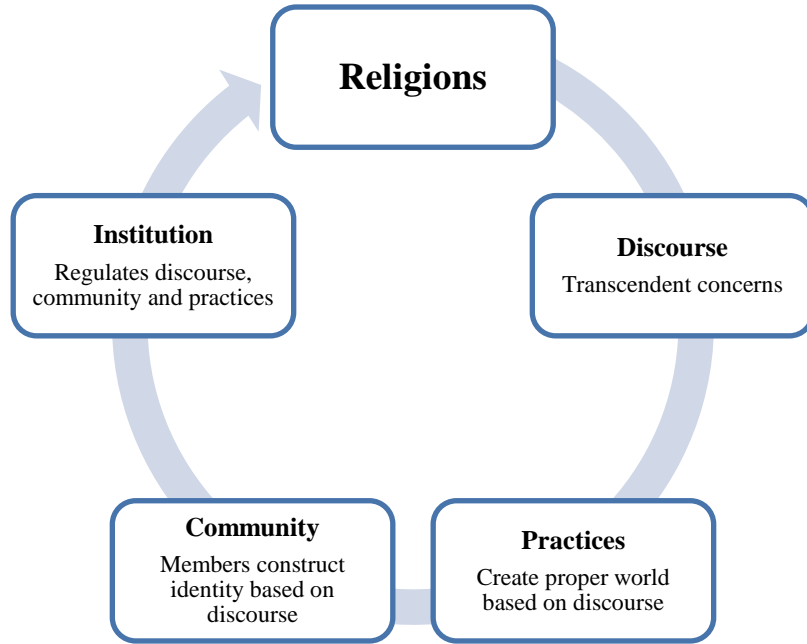
Max Müller (1823–1900) - “a body of doctrines handed down by tradition, or in canonical books, and containing all that constitutes the faith . . .”

Ninian Smart (1927-2001) - “a set of institutionalized rituals, identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.”

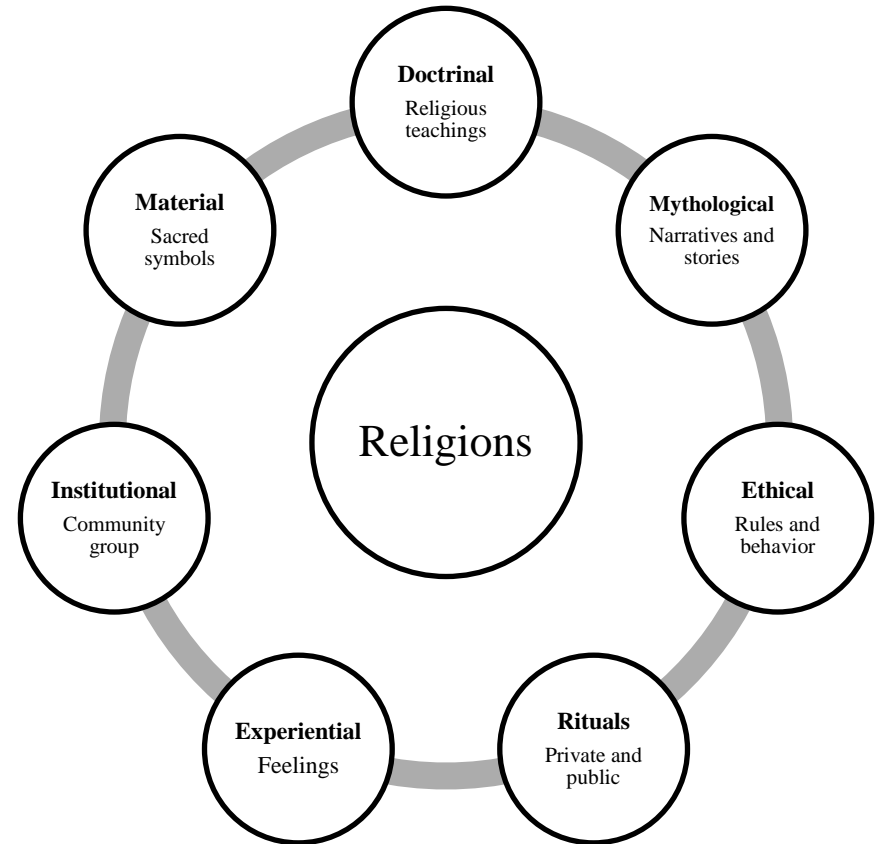


Max Müller

From definitions to characteristics



Bruce Lincoln



Ninian Smart

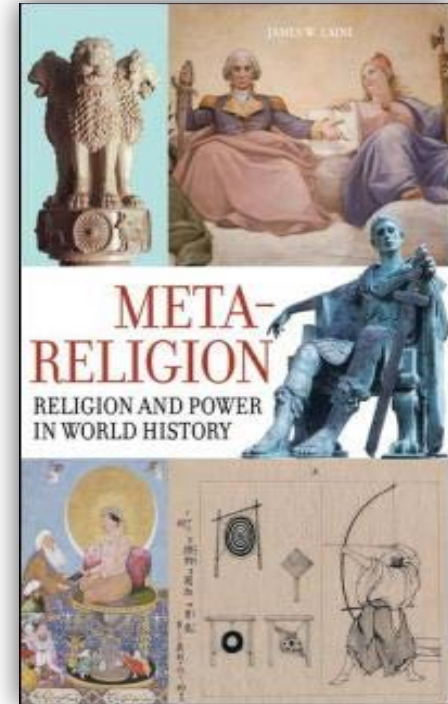
Supplemental reading – monograph and articles

Why this **monograph**?

- Gives in-depth treatment to a *specialized subject*
- Written by a *scholar* in the field
- Written mainly for an *academic audience*

What are **scholarly articles**?

- Inform and report on *original research*
- Terminology appropriate to the *discipline*
- Sources *cited*
- Peered *reviewed*



Problem

- No persuasive general theory of religion exists.
- Recent efforts have been made at establishing a general theory.
- Wishful thinking
- Symbolist
- Cognitive

Author's Method

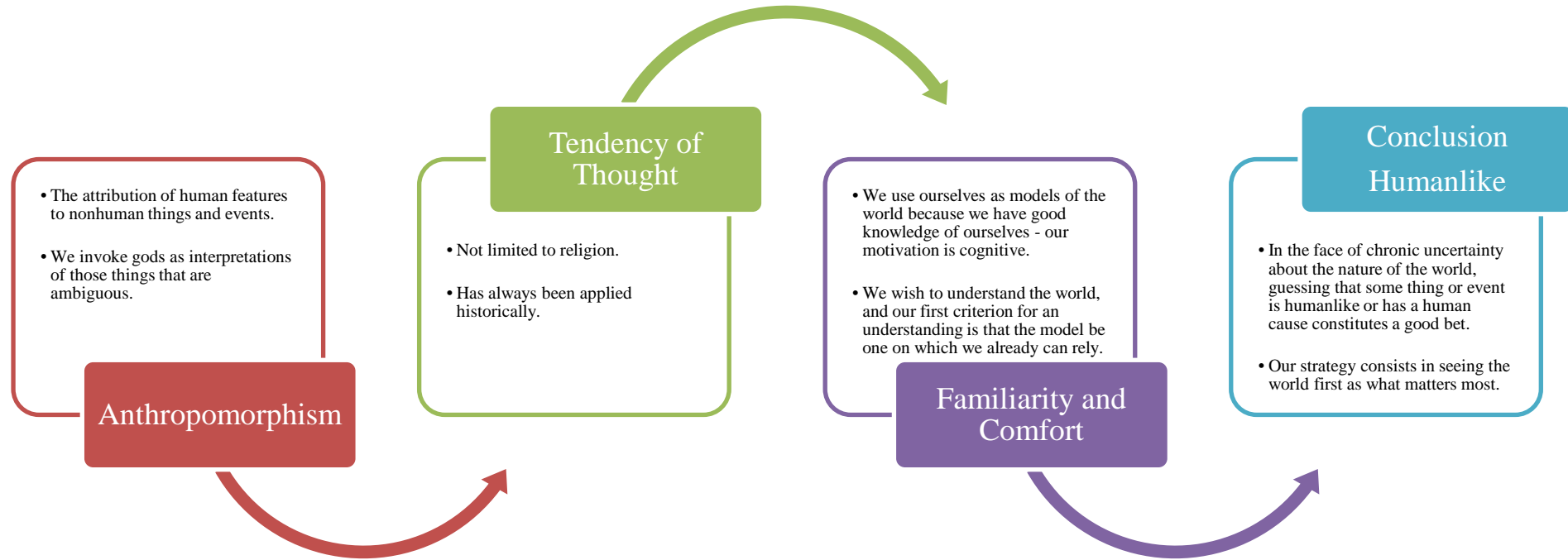
- He has a cognitive theory - mental processes of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning
- Religion is a form of anthropomorphism

Conclusion

- We see the world as more humanlike than it is.
- Anthropomorphism stems from a necessary perceptual strategy.
- Religions are systems of thought and action building in large measure upon this powerful, pervasive, and involuntary tendency.

Varying Approaches to the Question of Religion

Wishful Thinking	Symbolism	Cognitive
<p>Humans have religious beliefs because these are comforting.</p> <p>Gods “exist as hopes in the human consciousness.” They make up for the real rewards we want but cannot get.</p> <p>Religion constitutes "systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions"</p>	<p>Religion concerns not the world as a whole but only human society.</p> <p>Religious ideas and symbols are covert means of pursuing varying social purposes, specially social cohesion and order.</p>	<p>The leading motivation for religious thought and action is to interpret or explain the world on one hand and to influence or control it on the other.</p>



Questions to consider

What are the three groups that theories of religion are classified into?

What characteristics define these three theories?

What is anthropomorphism?

What is anthropomorphism's relationship to religion?

What are the characteristics that define the familiarity and comfort thesis?

What is the relationship between anthropomorphism and animism?

What is the author's conclusion and how does it relate to this topic's content?



Primary Source Analysis: Martin Luther – *An Open Letter to the German Nobility* (1520)

In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *On the Soul*, *Ethics*, which have hitherto been thought his best books, should be altogether discarded, together with all the rest of his books which boast of treating the things of nature, although nothing can be learned from the either of the things of nature or the things of the Spirit. Moreover no one has so far understood his meaning, and many souls have been burdened with profitless labor and study, at the cost of much precious time. I venture to say that any potter has more knowledge of nature than is written in these books. It grieves me to the heart that this damned, conceited, rascally heathen has with his false words deluded and made fools of so many of the best Christians. God has sent him as a plague upon us for our sins.



Martin Luther
Theologian, Monk, Reformer
c. 1483-1546

Primary Source Analysis: Thomas Aquinas – *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1264)

CHAPTER XIII--Reasons in Proof of the Existence of God

We will put first the reasons by which Aristotle proceeds to prove the existence of God from the consideration of motion as follows.

Everything that is in motion is put and kept in motion by some other thing. It is evident to sense that there are beings in motion. A thing is in motion because something else puts and keeps it in motion. That mover therefore either is itself in motion or not. If it is not in motion, our point is gained which we proposed to prove, namely, that we must posit something which moves other things without being itself in motion, and this we call God. But if the mover is itself in motion, then it is moved by some other mover. Either then we have to go on to infinity, or we must come to some mover which is motionless; but it is impossible to go on to infinity, therefore we must posit some motionless prime mover. In this argument there are two propositions to be proved: that everything which is in motion is put and kept in motion by something else; and that in the series of movers and things moved it is impossible to go on to infinity.



St. Thomas Aquinas
Theologian, Philosopher, Priest, Saint
c. 1225-1274