

WHY RELIGIONS MATTER

What are religions? Why is it important to understand them?

One answer is that religions and religious believers are extremely bad news: they are deeply involved in conflicts around the globe; they harm people of whom they disapprove; and they often seem irrational.

Another answer claims that they are in fact extremely good news: religious beliefs and practices are universal and so fundamental in human nature that they have led us to great discoveries in our explorations of the cosmos and of who we are. The sciences began as part of that religious exploration.

John Bowker demonstrates that there is truth in both answers and that we need both, in order to understand what religion is and why it matters. He draws on many disciplines – from physics, genetics and the neurosciences to art, anthropology and the history of religions – to show how they shed entirely new light on religion in the modern world.

JOHN BOWKER is an emeritus professor at Gresham College, London. He has also been a Fellow and dean of Trinity College, Cambridge, and Professor of Religious Studies at the universities of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina State. He is the author or editor of more than forty books, including *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*; *The Meanings of Death* (winner of the HarperCollins Book Prize, 1993); *Is God a Virus? Genes, Culture and Religion*; *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*; *God: A Brief History*; *Beliefs That Changed the World* and *Knowing the Unknowable: Science and Religions on God and the Universe*.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08511-4 - Why Religions Matter
John Bowker
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08511-4 - Why Religions Matter
John Bowker
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Why Religions Matter

JOHN BOWKER



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08511-4 - Why Religions Matter
John Bowker
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107448346

© John Bowker 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Bowker, John, 1935–

Why religions matter / John Bowker, Gresham College, London.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-08511-4 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-107-44834-6 (pbk.)

1. Religion – Philosophy. 2. Religions. I. Title.

BL51.B69 2014

200–dc23 2014032790

ISBN 978-1-107-08511-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-44834-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs
for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not
guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1 Introduction	1
2 The paradox of religions	9
3 Religions and sciences: I Myth and meaning: ‘The warfare between science and religion’	45
4 Religions and sciences: II Dogmatism and doubt	65
5 Religions and sciences: III The selfless gene: Genetic determinism and human freedom	105
6 Religions and sciences: IV Causes and constraints	133
7 Understanding religions: I Issues of translation and interpretation	165
8 Understanding religions: II Being religiously human: The internalisation of constraint in ethics and art	192
9 Understanding religions: III Ritual and the human imagination of death	239
10 Understanding religions: IV Religions and imagination; communities of shared exploration and discovery	273
<i>Notes</i>	309
<i>Bibliography</i>	321
<i>Index</i>	337

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08511-4 - Why Religions Matter
John Bowker
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

My days and strength have lately been much broken; and I never more felt the insufficiency of both than in preparing for the press the following desultory memoranda on a most noble subject.

John Ruskin wrote those words in 1869 (he comes into this book in Chapter 3 savouring ‘the kisses kept in amber’ of Cardinal Manning). The words apply equally well to myself, so much so that this ‘preparation for the press’ could not have been completed without the help of many people. I am immensely grateful, in particular, to Peter Barrett, David Bowker, Sarah Brunning, Chip Coakley, Quinton Deeley, Gavin Flood, Tim Hart, Gene Lemcio and Fr. Ben O’Rourke, OSA. My thanks go also to those at Cambridge University Press who helped in so many ways, and in particular to Fred Goykhman, Laura Morris, Alexandra Poreda, Siva Prakash and Elizabeth Shand.

Above all, I owe everything to Margaret, my wife, without whom this book would not exist. With my restricted eyesight, she has been my eyes, correcting, writing and rewriting so much that she is the co-author:

From you I receive all things
The reach, the reason and the purpose
And the love.

For that and for so much more, thank you.

When Ruskin published his book, he wrote that it was the result of thirty-five years of work and reflection. This book draws on an even longer period (my first article was published almost exactly fifty years ago) and it is therefore the consequence of a lifelong attempt to show what religions are and why they remain so important in human life and history. The result is, I guess, a desultory memorandum, but it is a truly noble subject. In

the United Kingdom, the academic subject of Religious Studies is being increasingly sidelined at the very moment when it is most needed if we are to succeed in living together in a multicultural society, and in a divided and contested world. I hope that this desultory memorandum will at least indicate why the study and understanding of religions are both fascinating and exciting.

TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration of words from other languages (particularly from Arabic and Sanskrit) is neither academically correct nor consistent. I have not included the diacritical marks because I can no longer see them. I have therefore settled for an approximate anglicised form. Those who know the languages will, I think, recognise the words. A few words correctly transliterated survive when they are in quoted books or texts.