

Thursdays, 10:00 – 11:30 am,  
Mar. 10 – Apr. 21 (skip 3/24)

\$46; 448 pages (2014)

*(We'll cover all of "Parts 1 & 3" and as much as we can of Part 2)*

# Housekeeping

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- Attendance
- Add to **email** list?
- **Other?**



# Covenant

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- Use **“I” statements**: *speak from your own experience.*
- **Ask permission before sharing** other participants’ stories outside the group.
- **Step-up, step-back**: be conscious of the level of participation that you bring to the conversation. Allow everyone a chance to speak before you speak again.
- You always have **permission to “pass.”**



➤ Class 1: Part I: “Prehistory, Preparation, & Perspective” (ch. 1-3)

➤ Part II: “Comparative Acts”

➤ Chapter 4: “Myth/Ritual”

➤ Chapter 5: “Nature/Science”

➤ Chapter 6: “Sex and Bodies”

➤ Chapter 7: “Charisma and Power”

➤ Chapter 8: “Imagination and Paranormal”

➤ Chapter 9: “Soul, Salvation, and the End”

➤ Part III: Putting It All Together Again (chapters 10-12)

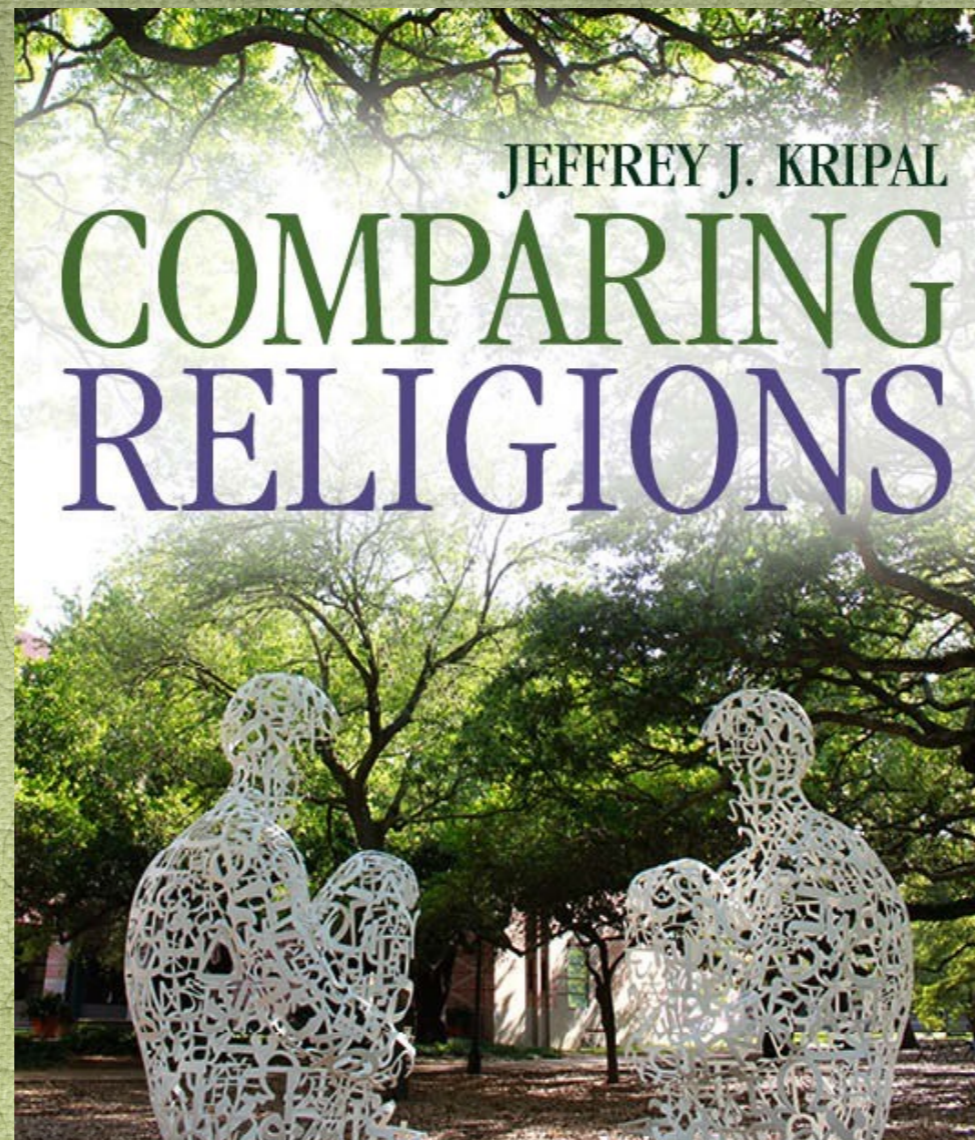
*(For details, see “Chapter Outlines” under “Browse by Resources” at [wiley.com/go/kripal](http://wiley.com/go/kripal))*



“Mirror” by Jaume Plensa

*(installed at the center of Rice’s campus in 2012)*

Two figures peacefully face each other, *mirroring* each other with *literally “open” fronts* (one can often see children playing inside them). They are also entirely open to the environment. And are constituted from letters from the world’s languages.



Bonus: “Summaries of 7 Religious Traditions”

*under “Browse by Resources” at [wiley.com/go/kripal](http://wiley.com/go/kripal)*

- **Professional Website:** [kripal.rice.edu](http://kripal.rice.edu)
- **“Religious Mystic & Rational Humanist: The Mystical Humanism of Jeffrey Kripal”:** [patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2014/03/religious-mystic-rational-humanist-the-mystical-humanism-of-jeffrey-kripal](http://patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2014/03/religious-mystic-rational-humanist-the-mystical-humanism-of-jeffrey-kripal)
- **“We Are Responsible: Reader-response Criticism, Reflexive Religion, and Ministerial Author(ity)”:** [http://hfmsg.org/sites/default/files/141104\\_-\\_authority\\_paper.pdf](http://hfmsg.org/sites/default/files/141104_-_authority_paper.pdf)



Jeffrey Kripal

(1962-)

- *Comparing Religions* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013)
- *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago, 2011)
- *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago, 2010)
- *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago, 2007)
- *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago, 2007)
- *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago, 2001)
- *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago, 1995)
- For more: [kripal.rice.edu/written](http://kripal.rice.edu/written)



Jeffrey Kripal  
Chair in Philosophy & Religious  
Thought at Rice University



- The man who popularized alien abduction & and a senior scholar who advocates for including the paranormal in religious studies
- This natural world is **immeasurably more weird, more wonderful, and probably more populated** than we have so far imagined with our current categories and cultures,
- **Change the lenses** through which we are looking at the world and the *languages* through which we are presently limiting it.

# *The* SUPER NATURAL

A NEW VISION OF  
THE UNEXPLAINED



Whitley Strieber  
*and* Jeffrey J. Kripal

2016

[kripal.rice.edu/essay](http://kripal.rice.edu/essay)

- "You are not thinking. You are merely being logical."  
—Niels Bohr to Albert Einstein
- "The universe . . . is a machine for the making of gods."  
—Henri Bergson
- "To see if you will balk against your script." —Philip K.  
Dick, *The Exegesis*

# [kripal.rice.edu/essay](http://kripal.rice.edu/essay)



- Bohr chose the Chinese Daoist (and Tantric) symbol of the yin-yang for his coat of arms as expressive of the deepest wisdom of modern quantum physics, where light can be understood as both a wave and a particle — yin and yang.
- He then put the following Latin inscription below the classic Chinese symbol: *contraria sunt complementaria*, "contraries are complements."
- Bohr had it just right. I would only add that he needed an Asian religious symbol and a Latin phrase to say it fully, that is, he needed the history of religions *and* the humanities.
- mind and matter are two sides of the same nondual coin, that all the dualities we normally think with — mind/matter, body/soul, sex/spirit, subjective/objective, self/other, east/west — are so many half-truths expressive of a single conscious material universe. [*panpsychism*]

# [kripal.rice.edu/essay](http://kripal.rice.edu/essay)

- chair of a research-oriented department of religious studies for eight years
- *from* Roman Catholicism and Benedictine monastic spirituality (to which I remain deeply and affectionately indebted),
- *through* psychoanalysis and the Hindu Tantra (to which I remain deeply and affectionately indebted),
- *into* the human potential movement, the history of American metaphysical religion, and,
- *most recently*, the paranormal and popular culture.

# Comparing Religions: *Coming to Terms*

**Histories, nuances, promises,  
and costs** of different  
comparative practices and their  
potential importance for our  
contemporary world — *not on  
the content* of the religions  
themselves.



“Red Pill” of  
*comparing religions*

# Comparing Religions: *Coming to Terms*

Morpheus [to Neo]:

“This is your last chance. After this,  
there is no turning back.

You take the *blue pill* — the story  
ends, you wake up in your bed and  
believe whatever you want to believe.

You take the *red pill* — you stay in  
Wonderland and I show you how  
deep the rabbit-hole goes.”



“Red Pill” of  
*comparing religions*

# Comparing Religions

- Religions are *not* created in a vacuum
- Religions *compare* and are themselves *products of comparison* (“sameness/difference”)
- Most orthodox traditions try to *hide their social construction*, which historical-criticism exposes



“Red Pill” of  
*comparing religions*

The professional study of religion is *incompatible* with particular types of religiosity.

*Conservative/Orthodox/Confessional* theology (tradition/hierarchy/community) vs. *Liberal/Progressive* theology (reason/experience)

When we are talking about religion deeply, we are playing with fire (Margaret Mitchell). [See: *Servetus, Doniger, etc.*]

Excite, scary, infuriate...risk...  
existential issues...really matter.

Pluralism: There are many ways to be human and none of them is obviously or necessarily superior.



'An earthy, revelatory and brilliant book.'  
WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

# THE HINDUS

*an alternative history*

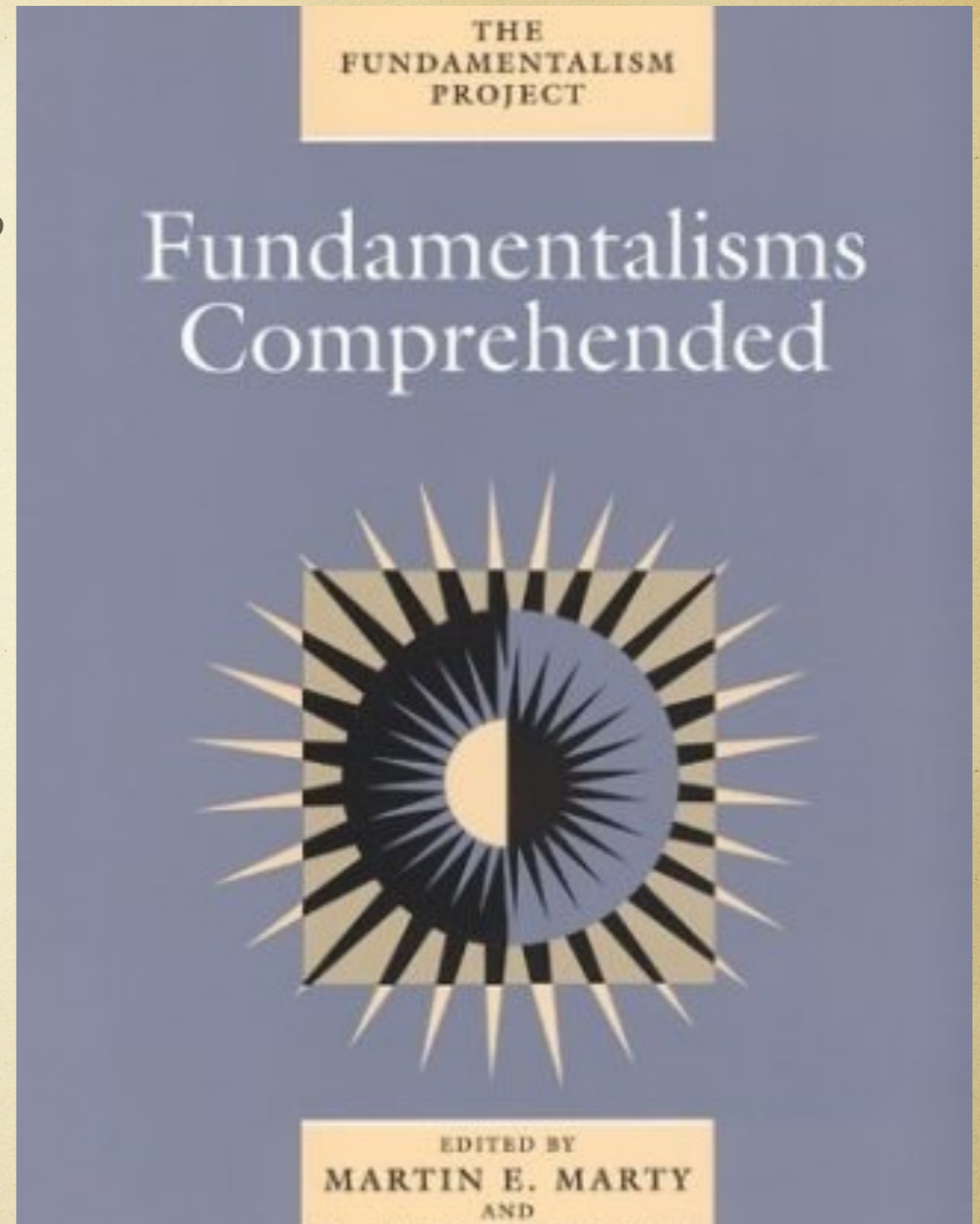
WENDY DONIGER

“Red Pill” of  
*comparing religions*



Basic logic strikingly  
similar across religions

- Return to a presumed “**golden age**” in the past
- Read the **scriptures literally**, *but also very selectively!* — ignoring the broader tradition and its commentarial nuances
- **Reject** aspects of modern **science** that contradict literalist readings
- **Demonize intellectuals** (or “the West”)
- **Resist gender equality** and human rights of sexual minorities.
- Above all, **control bodies and minds of women**



# The History of Comparing Religions

- Began in Protestant (mostly German) universities of Europe in the 19th-century.
- Many of the most generative and radical thinkers in the field have been secular (*“outsider” perspective can sometimes see more clearly*)
- Jeffrey Weiss: “Everyone’s religion seems strange from the outside.”



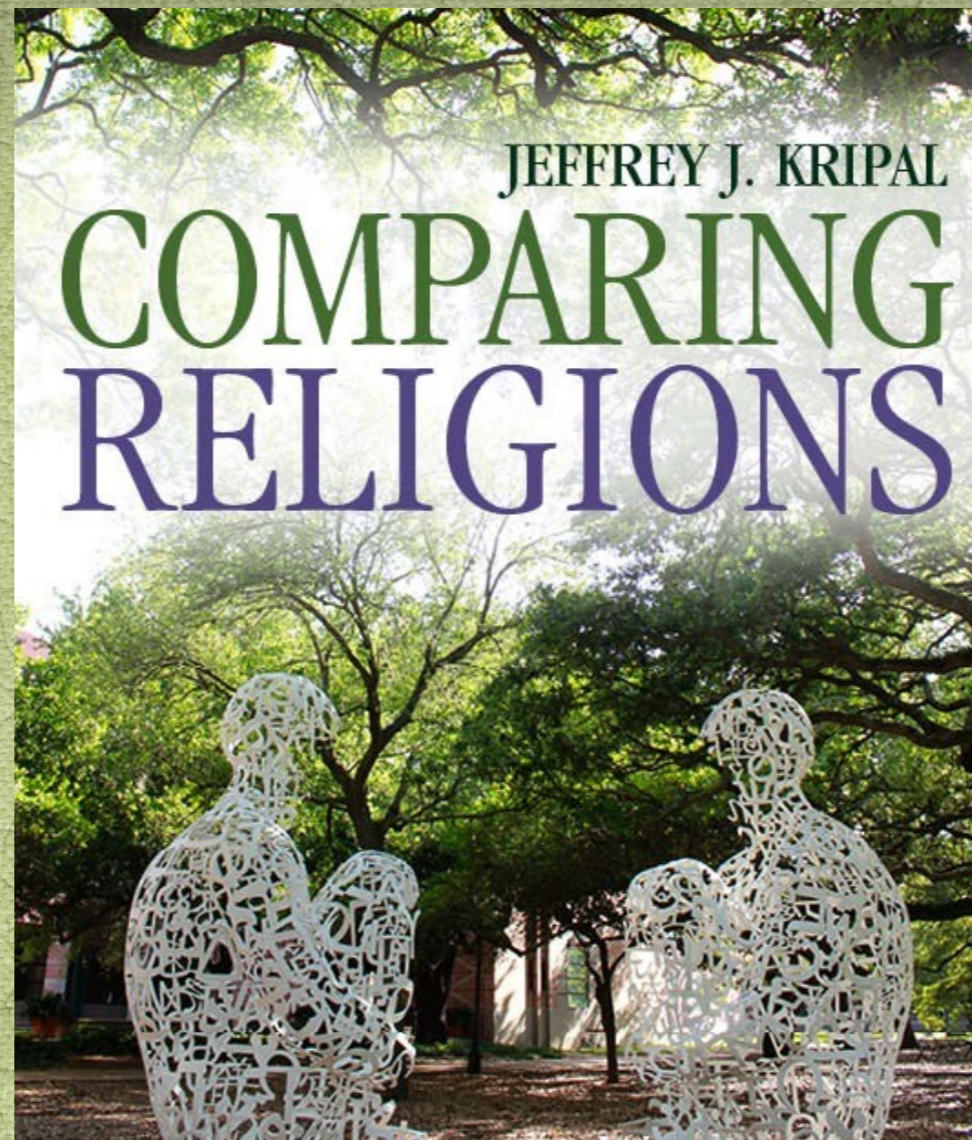
“Red Pill” of  
*comparing religions*

# The History of Comparing Religions

- “The one who knows one knows none” —Max Müller [*borrowed from linguistics*]



“Red Pill” of  
*comparing religions*



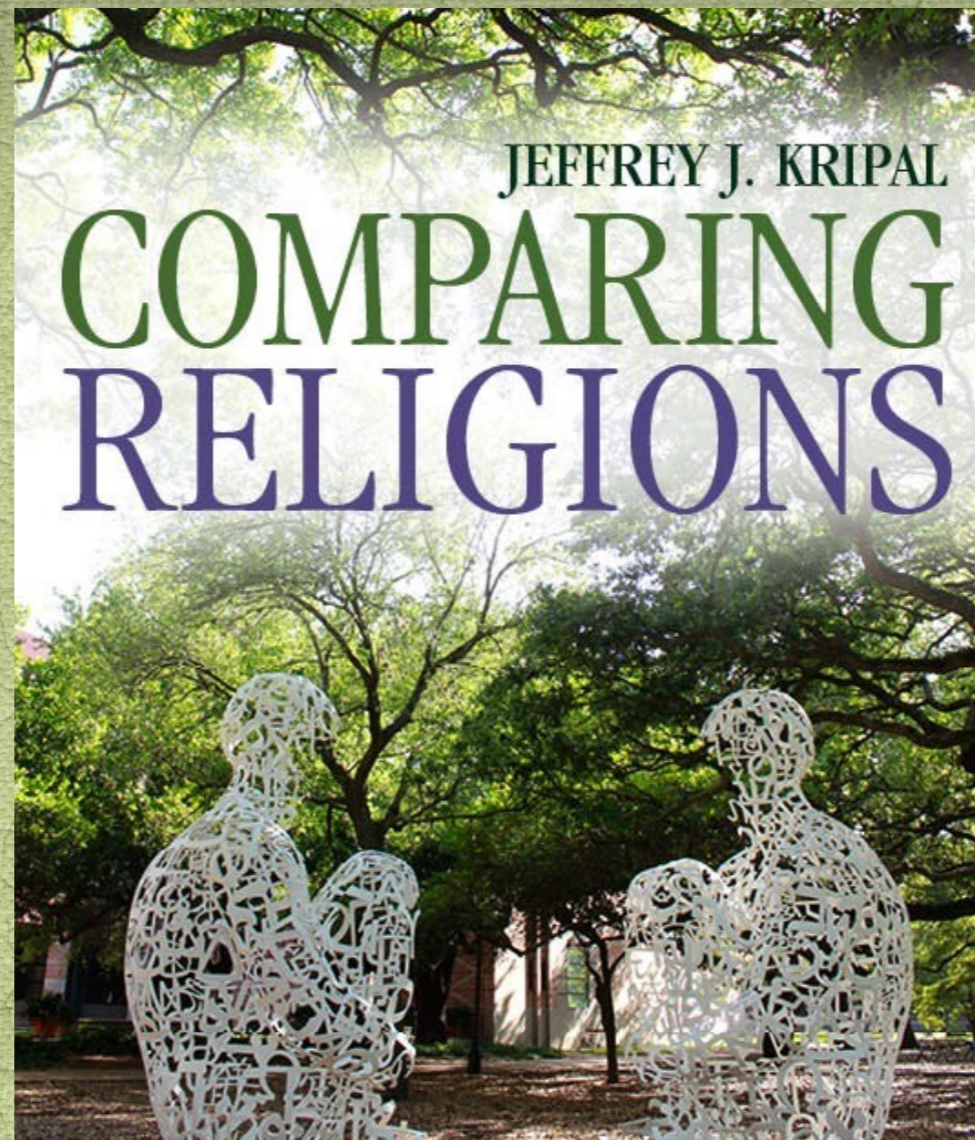
Part I (of III):

“Prehistory, Preparation, and Perspective”

Chapter 1: Comparative Practices in Global History

Chapter 2: Western Origins and History of the Modern Practice

Chapter 3: The Skills of Reflexivity & Some Key Categories

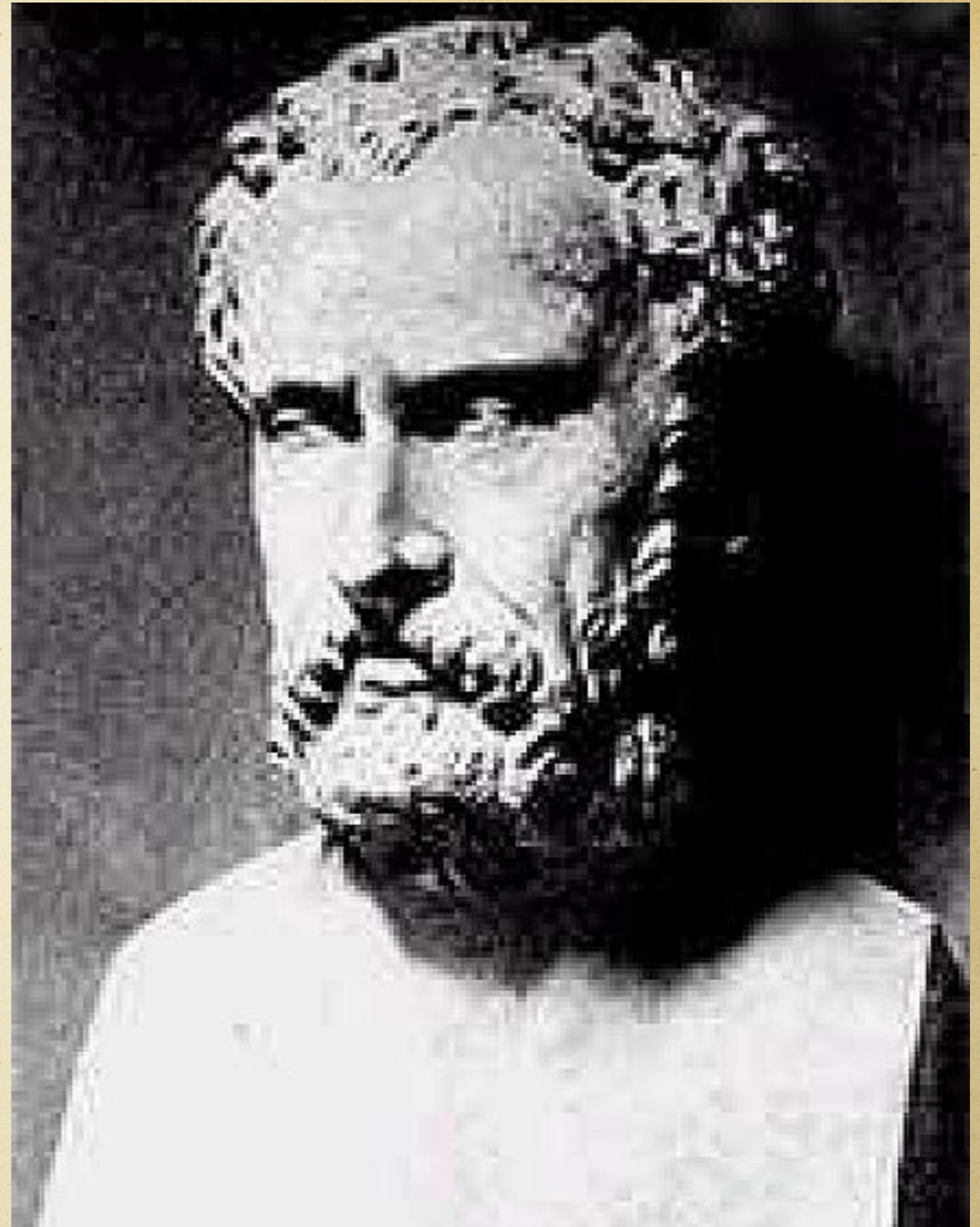


Chapter 1:  
Comparative Practices in Global History

*“If horses had hands”*

# Projection Theory

- **Anthropomorphism** (*anthropos* + *morphe*)
- It is no coincidence that, “the Ethiopians worship black gods and the Thracians worship gods with blue eyes and red hair....”
- “If oxen, horses, and lions had religion (and hands), they would no doubt paint their gods to look like oxen, horses, and lions.”
- [*Feuerbach*]



Xenophanes of Colophon  
(c. 570 - 475 BCE)  
ancient Greek writer

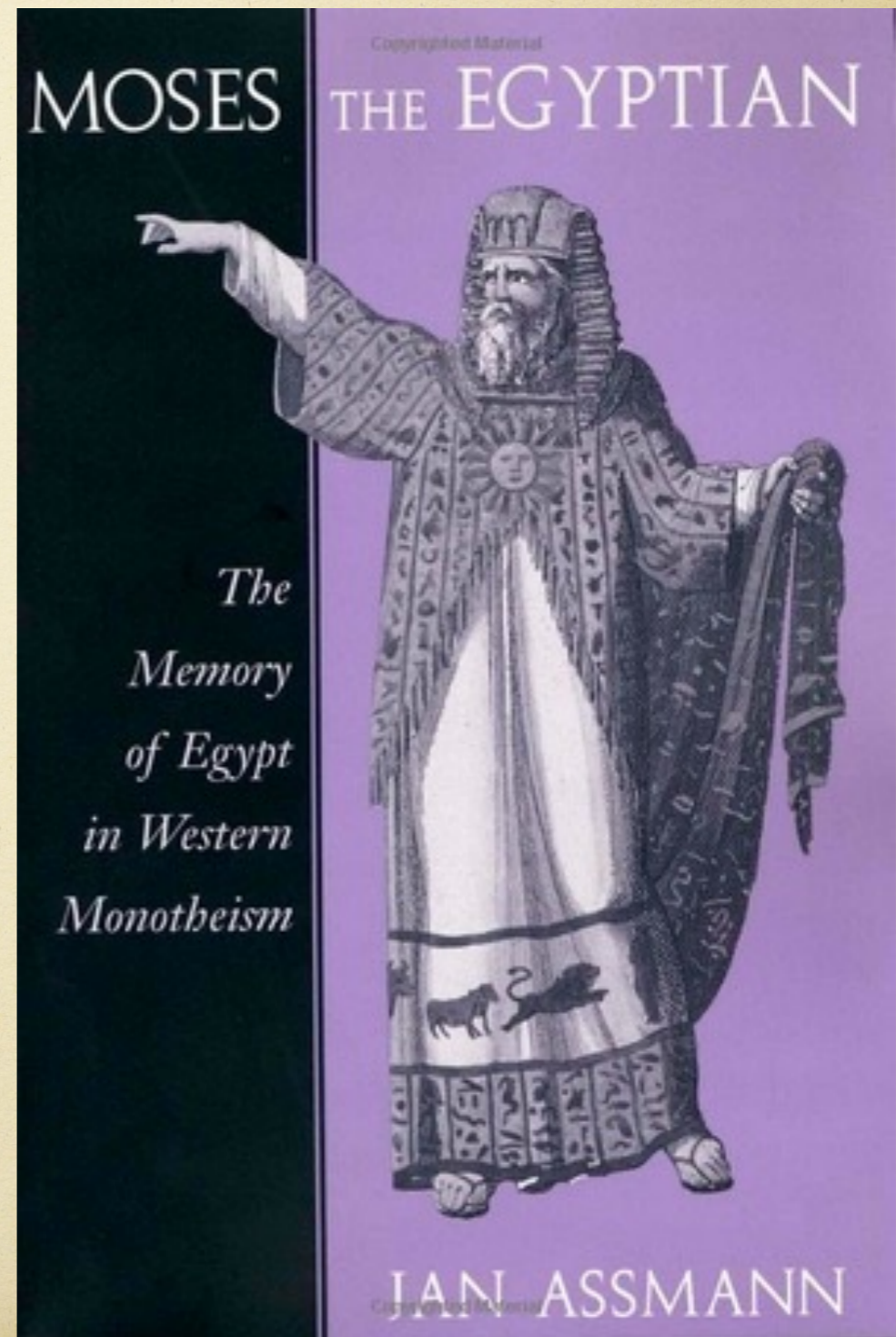
# Diffusion Theory

- Herodotus: much of Greek culture and religious practice was indebted to the earlier practices/beliefs of the Egyptians — and Greek gods has Egyptians counterparts.
- Roman authors: comparison to Greek deities: Zeus/Jupiter, Hermes/Mercury, etc.

Apollo	Apollo
Bacchus	Dionysus
Ceres	Demeter
Coelus	Uranus
Cupid	Eros
Diana	Artemis
Hercules	Heracles
Juno	Hera
Jupitar	Zeus
Latona	Leto
Mars	Ares
Mercury	Hermes
Neptune	Poseidon
Minerva	Athena
Pluto	Hades
Prosperpina	Persephone
Saturn	Cronus

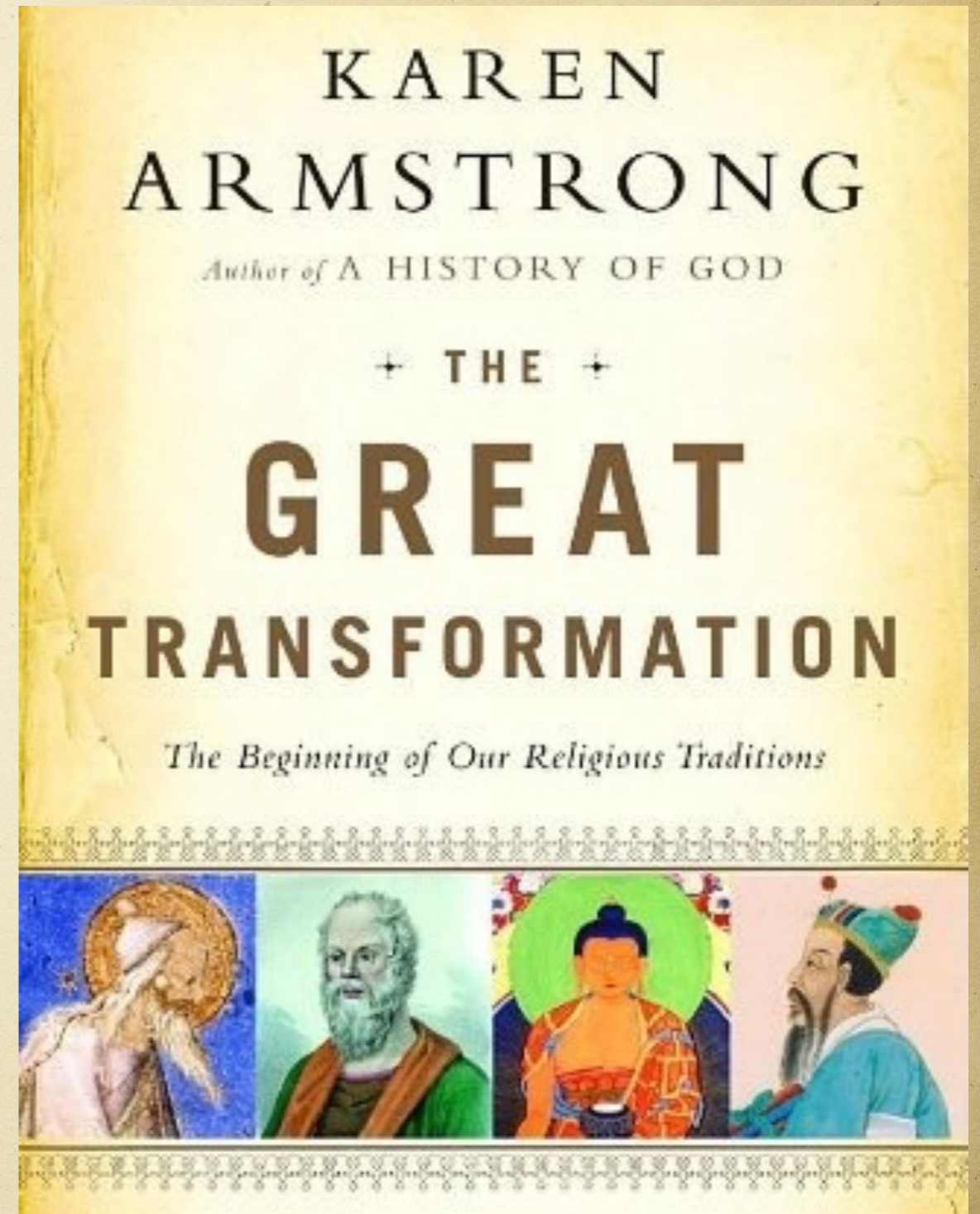
- Polytheism has an underlying assumption *within itself* that different people worship different deities.
- *(Still cross-cultural violence; less religiously motivated.)*
- **“Intercultural translatability”**: the inner-logic of polytheism allowed people to understand and even appreciate the deities and rituals of other peoples by “translating” them into their own languages and customs.  
*[pay my respects]*

# Diffusion Theory





- Polytheism of the Ancient Near East *interrupted* by monotheism (*almost always male*).
- Broke with the mythic imagination of the ancient world (cycles) and began to imagine a god acting in material history an linear time.
- The term monotheism was invented in the 19th-century; not found in Bible [*like Trinity!*]
- No capitalization in Hebrew, and one of the oldest Hebrew terms that is often translated in English as “God” or “lord” is *elohim*, which is plural (“the gods”). [*Genesis 1, etc.*]



Axial Age

First monotheism:

Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenophis IV), who enforced a monotheistic religion around the sun god Aten in the 14th-century BCE.

Well before there was a Torah or Judaism.



## Henotheism ("one god")

worship of single God while accepting the existence of other deities

- Isaiah 44:6, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; **besides me there is no god.**" *[only necessary to clarify if...not vacuum]*
- Exodus 20:2-3, "2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have **no other gods before me.**"
- Deuteronomy 32:8-9, "8 When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he **fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods;** 9 the Lord's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share."
- Joshua 24:2,15 "Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and **served other gods....**but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.""

# Monotheistic Distinction

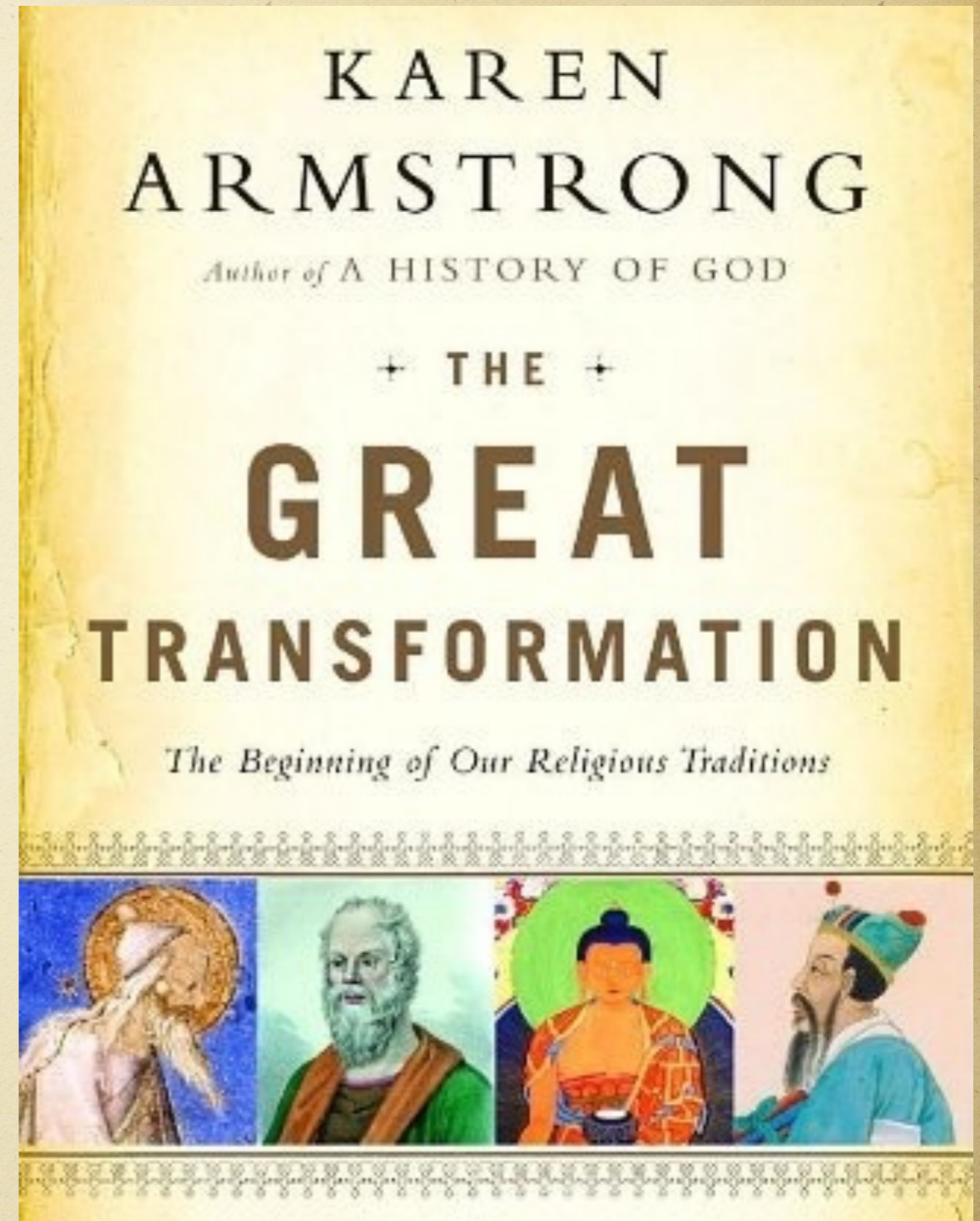
- Christianity and Islam developed explicit policies of conquest and conversion (*“missionary impulse”*)
- Lacked polytheism’s built-in tendency to translate “difference” of other people’s deities into “sameness” of one’s own schema.
- (*No longer your sun god and my sun god doing same solar work under different names and cultural shapes.*)
- Now, mutually exclusive, incommensurable “true religion” vs. “false religion.”
- Monotheism is inherently *exclusivist*. Not just another religion (“one among many”), but The One, forming a “counter-religion” poised against another competition.
- Ironically, Christianity can be “practicing dualism” regarding the Devil.

# Monotheistic Distinction

- Exodus 22:20, “Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the Lord alone, shall be **devoted to destruction.**”
- Exodus 23:24, “You shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall **utterly demolish them** and break their pillars in pieces.”
- Numbers 52-53, “You shall **drive out** all the inhabitants of the land from before you, **destroy** all their figured stones, **destroy** all their cast images, and **demolish** all their high places. You shall **take possession** of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess.” [*Native Americans, Manifest Destiny*]
- (*Complicating matters, most of the conquest texts in the Hebrew Bible are exaggerated and polemical. Joshua and a small group of Hebrews were the catalyst for the insurrection. “Israelites are Canaanites.”*)

# Comparative Practices: Early Christianity

- Pagan originally referred to inhabitants of the countryside
- Christianity was largely an *urban* phenomenon, and it was in the countryside that its reach was weakest. Hence, it was in the countryside that the traditional polytheistic practices of Roman religion survived longest.
- Pagan:Christian::Gentile:Jewish



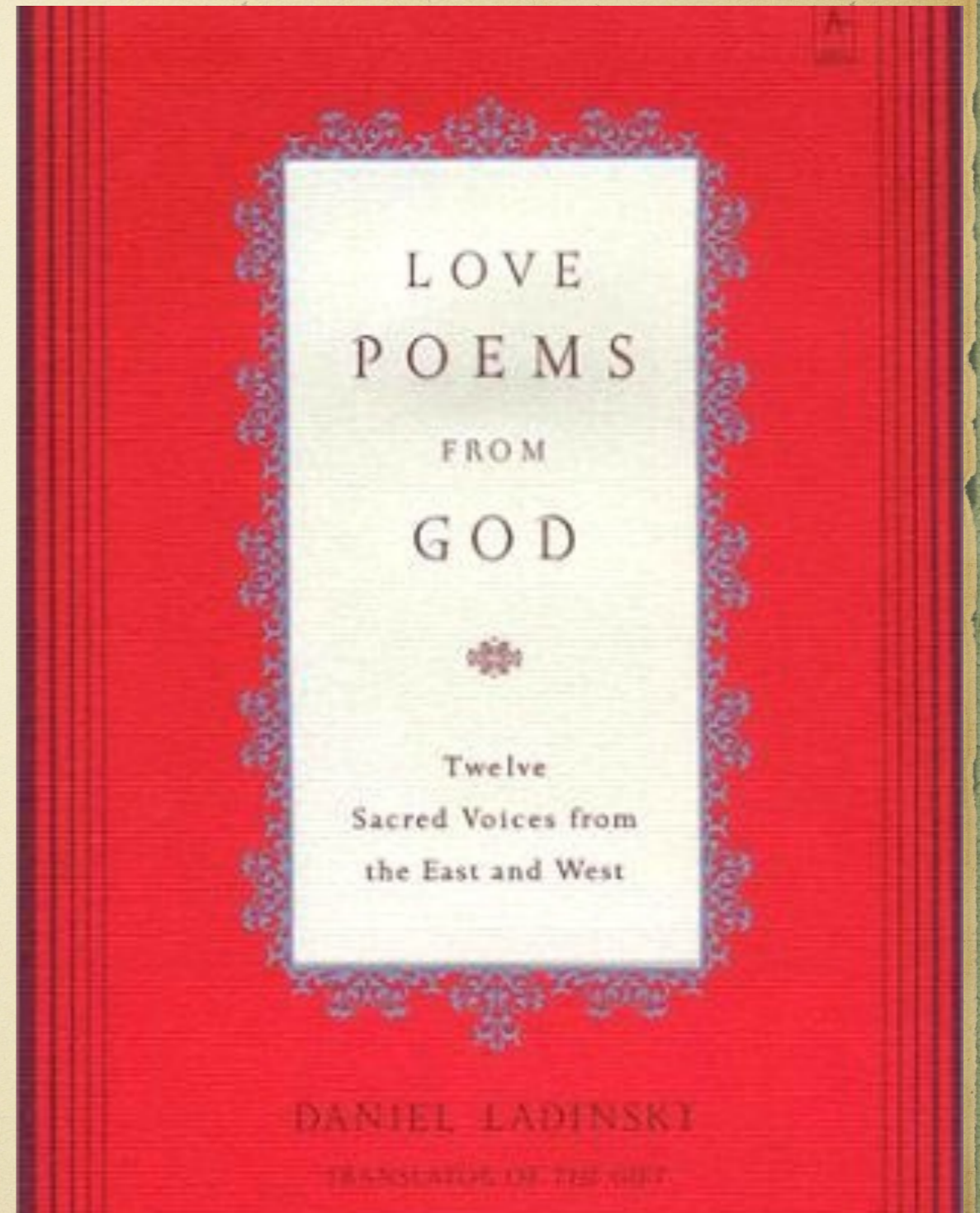
Axial Age

Mystics: often the most radical  
comparative thinkers  
*(firsthand vs. secondhand)*

Love is a church where all religions  
meet: Islam, or Christ, or Tavern, it  
is one;

Thy face of every system is the sun  
O Sun that shines in the Beloved's  
street.....

And holy living needs no holy frocks  
Time ticks not to your monastery  
clocks. Where goodness is there God  
must be as well.



Hafez (1320-1398)  
Sufi

Mystics: often the most radical  
comparative thinkers  
*(firsthand vs. secondhand)*

You slaughter living beings and call  
it religion;

Hey brother, what would irreligion  
be?

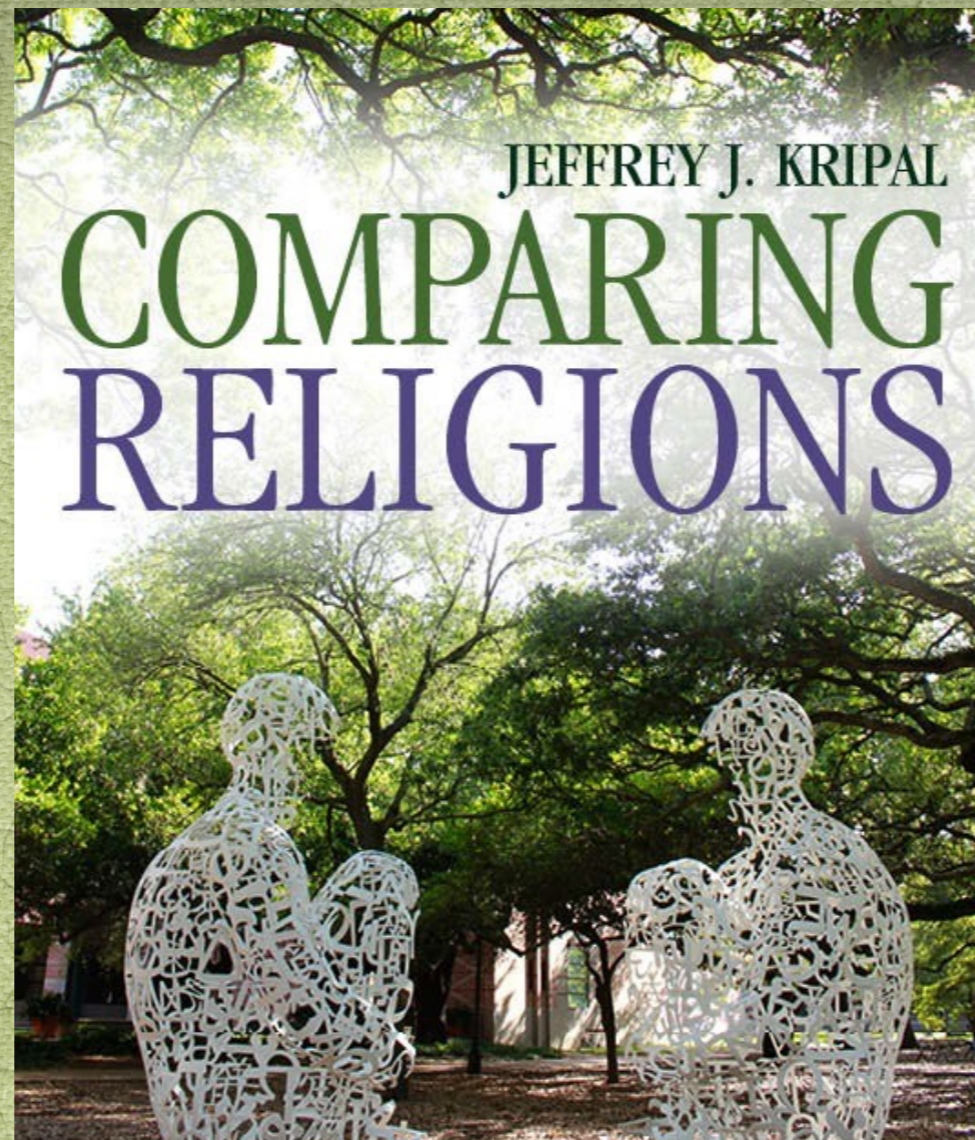
Fool, throw away that book, and  
sing of Ram (“God”).

What you’re doing has nothing to  
do with God.



Kabir (c. 1440 – c. 1518)  
India



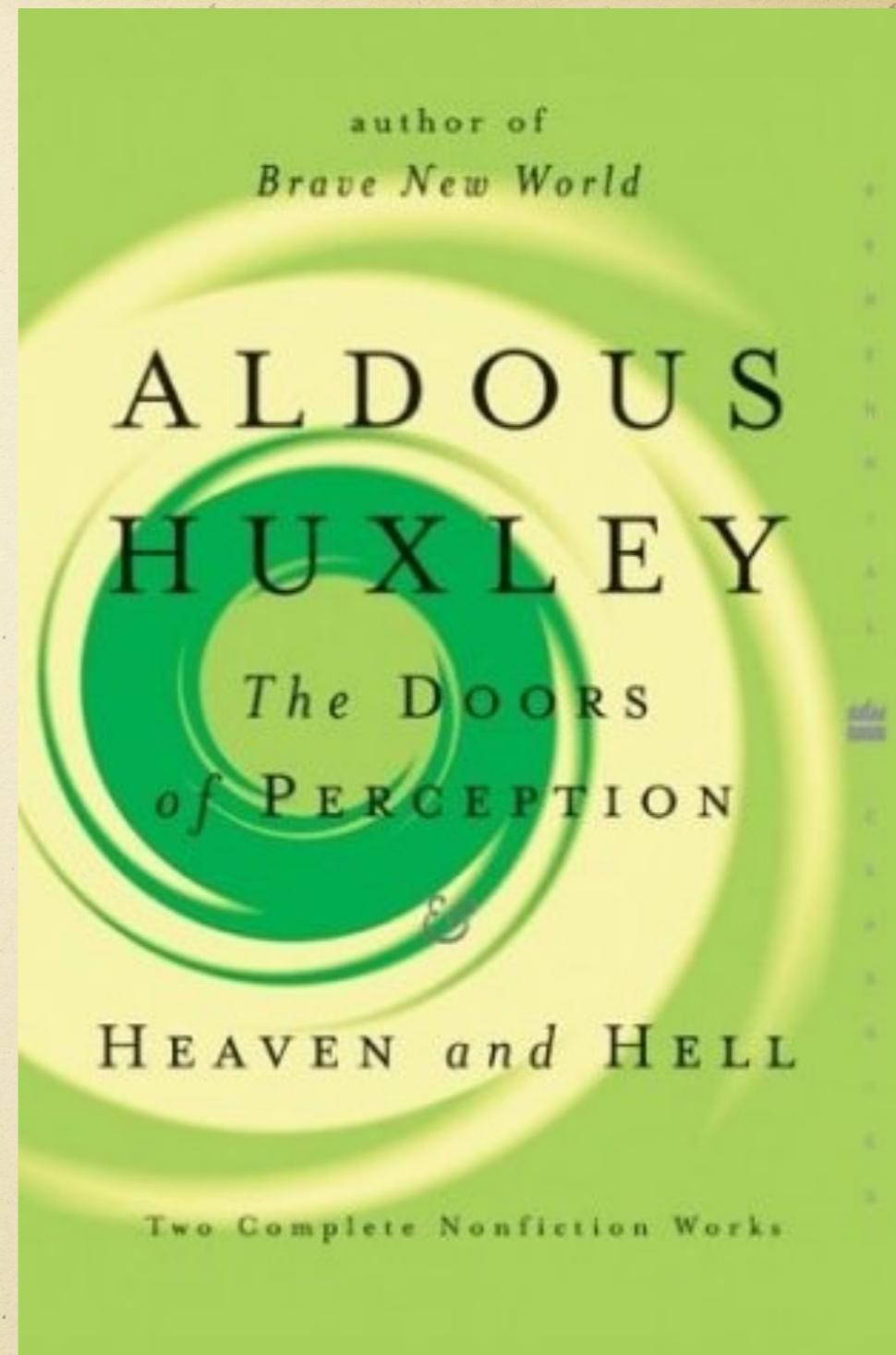


Chapter 2:  
Western Origins and History of the Modern Practice

*“from the Bible to Buddhism”*

“All great truths begin as heresy”

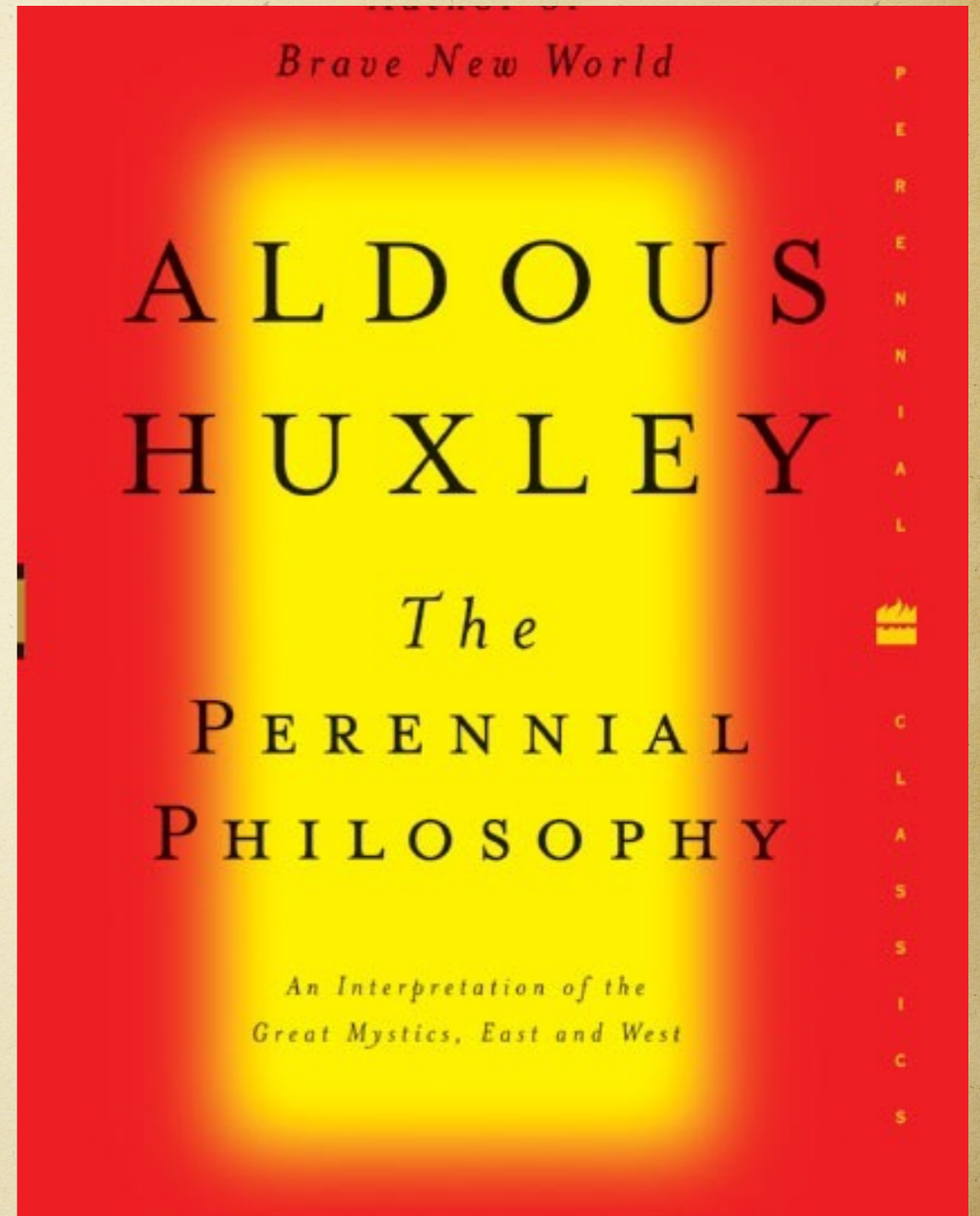
—Aldous Huxley



# Perennial Philosophy

*(philosophia perennis)*

- Wisdom is available to the gifted wise person of any age.
- Reoccurs perennially from age to age *(like a perennial flower that comes up each spring)*

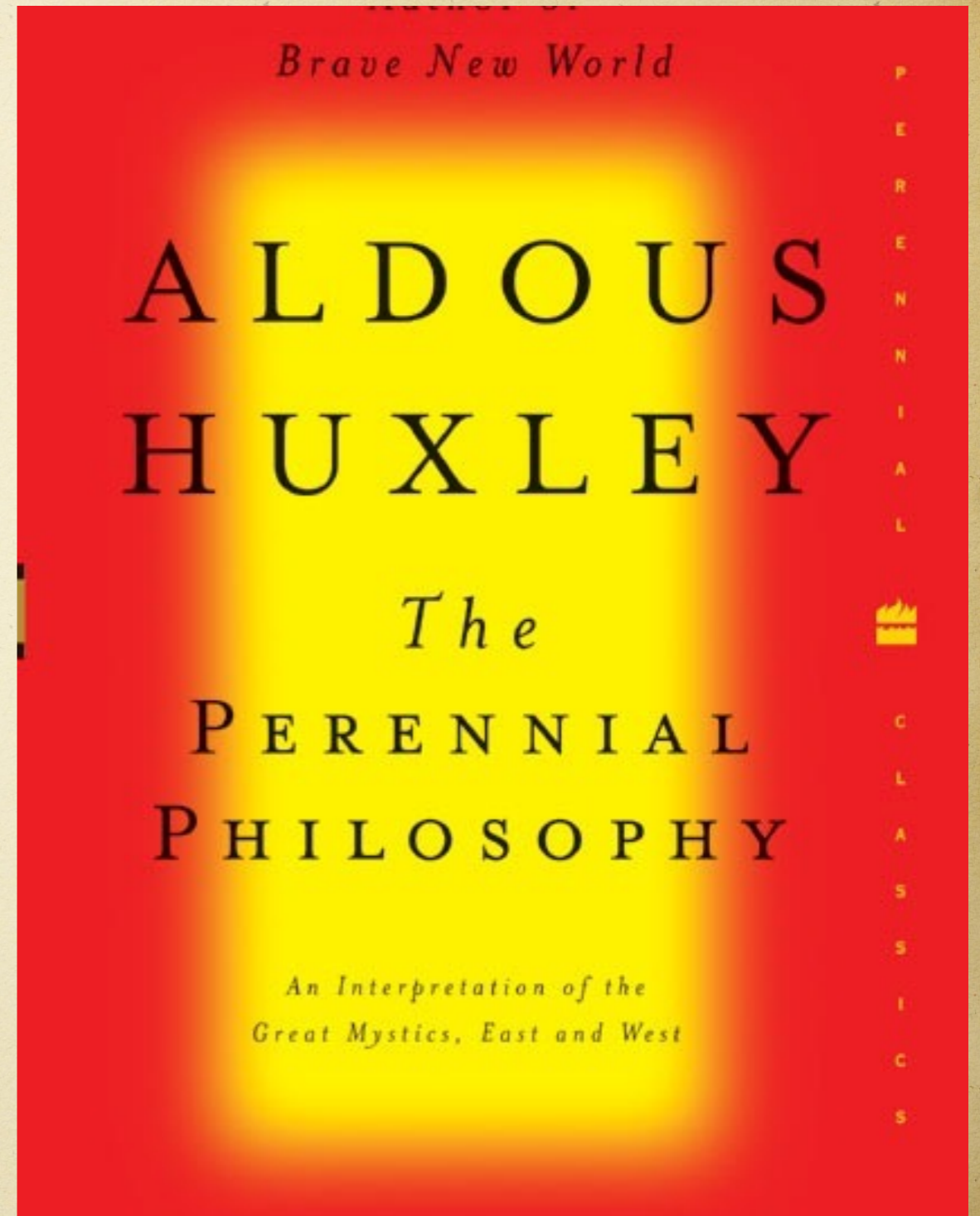


1944

# Perennial Philosophy

*(philosophia perennis)*

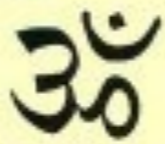
- *metaphysic* that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds;
- *psychology* that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality;
- *ethic* that places [humanity's] final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being — the thing is immemorial and universal.
- [*panpsychism: mind is a fundamental feature of the world which exists throughout the universe*]



1944

### HINDUISM

This is the sum of duty:  
do not do to others what would  
cause pain if done to you  
Makabharata 3:10:7



### BUDDHISM

Treat not others in ways  
that you yourself would  
find hurtful  
Udana-Varga 5:15



### CONFUCIANISM

One word which sums up the  
basis of all good conduct...  
loving kindness.  
Do not do to  
others what  
you do not  
want done  
to yourself  
Confucius,  
Analects 15:23



### BAHA'I FAITH

Lay not on any soul a load  
that you would not wish to  
be laid upon you, and  
desire not for  
anyone the  
things you  
would not  
desire for  
yourself  
Baha'i Writings  
Gleanings



### ISLAM

Not one of you truly believes  
until you wish for others what  
you wish for yourself  
The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith



### TAOISM

Regard your neighbour's gain  
as your own gain, and your  
neighbour's loss as your own loss  
Tai Shang Kan'ing Pien, 213-215



# THE GOLDEN RULE

### JUDAISM

What is hateful to you,  
do not do to your neighbour.  
This is the whole Torah;  
all the rest is commentary  
Hilki, Talmud, Shabbat 31a



### SIKHISM

I am a stranger to no one;  
and no one is a stranger  
to me. Indeed, I am  
a friend to all  
Guru Granth Sahib, pg. 1299



### JAINISM

One should treat all  
creatures in the world  
as one would like  
to be treated  
Mahavira, Shatvahantra



### CHRISTIANITY

In everything, do to others  
as you would have them  
do to you; for this is the  
law and the prophets  
Jesus, Matthew 7:12



### ZOROASTRIANISM

Do not do unto others  
whatever is injurious  
to yourself  
Shayast-na-Shayast 13:29



### NATIVE SPIRITUALITY

We are as much alive  
as we keep the earth alive



### UNITARIANISM

We affirm and promote respect  
for the interdependent  
web of all existence  
of which we are a part  
Unitarian principle



A Canadian Council Materials Community  
Partnership Project with the support of the  
Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario

# Source of Authority/Revelation

- Reformation: *sola scriptura*  
("scripture alone")
- Roman Catholic Church:  
Scripture in light of *tradition* and  
*church teaching*.
- Bibliolatry



Pantocrator

# Translating Scripture into Vernacular

- One of the first to try to translate the Vulgate (Latin Bible) into English.
- Also taught that the church should not hold political power and should be poor, like the early Christians.  
*(The church was easily the wealthiest landowner in Europe at this time.)*
- Three decades after his death, Pope Martin V, had Wycliffe's remains exhumed, burned, and thrown in a river to humiliate his memory and terrorize his followers.



John Wycliffe (c. 1324-1384)

# Translating Scripture into Vernacular

- Published an English translation of the New Testament (1526)
- Forced into exile, but published English version of Hebrew Bible in 1530. Then betrayed, imprisoned, tried for heresy, then strangled and burned at the stake.  
*[Who is Jesus-like in this scenario?!!]*



William Tyndale (1492 - 1536)  
“Father of the English Bible”



# Translating Scripture into Vernacular

- Unlike with the languages of the Bible, Arabic from the beginning of Islam was considered a sacred language.
- “God spoke in Arabic,” so “untranslatable.”



Qur'an

# Translating Scripture into Vernacular

- Parallel in Christianity is to imagined “golden age” of pristine and original Christianity”
- Never was any simple, single beginning of Christianity (or any other religion).
- Historical origins of a faith are **always extremely complex and conflicted.**
- There never can be a single, final reading of a scripture text — only readings (*plural!*), each performed in different historical period, by different communities of readers, and from different perspectives.





Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's mind without another's guidance. Sapere Aude! Dare to Know! Have the courage to use your own understanding is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.

(Immanuel Kant)

# Enlightenment Rationalism

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)

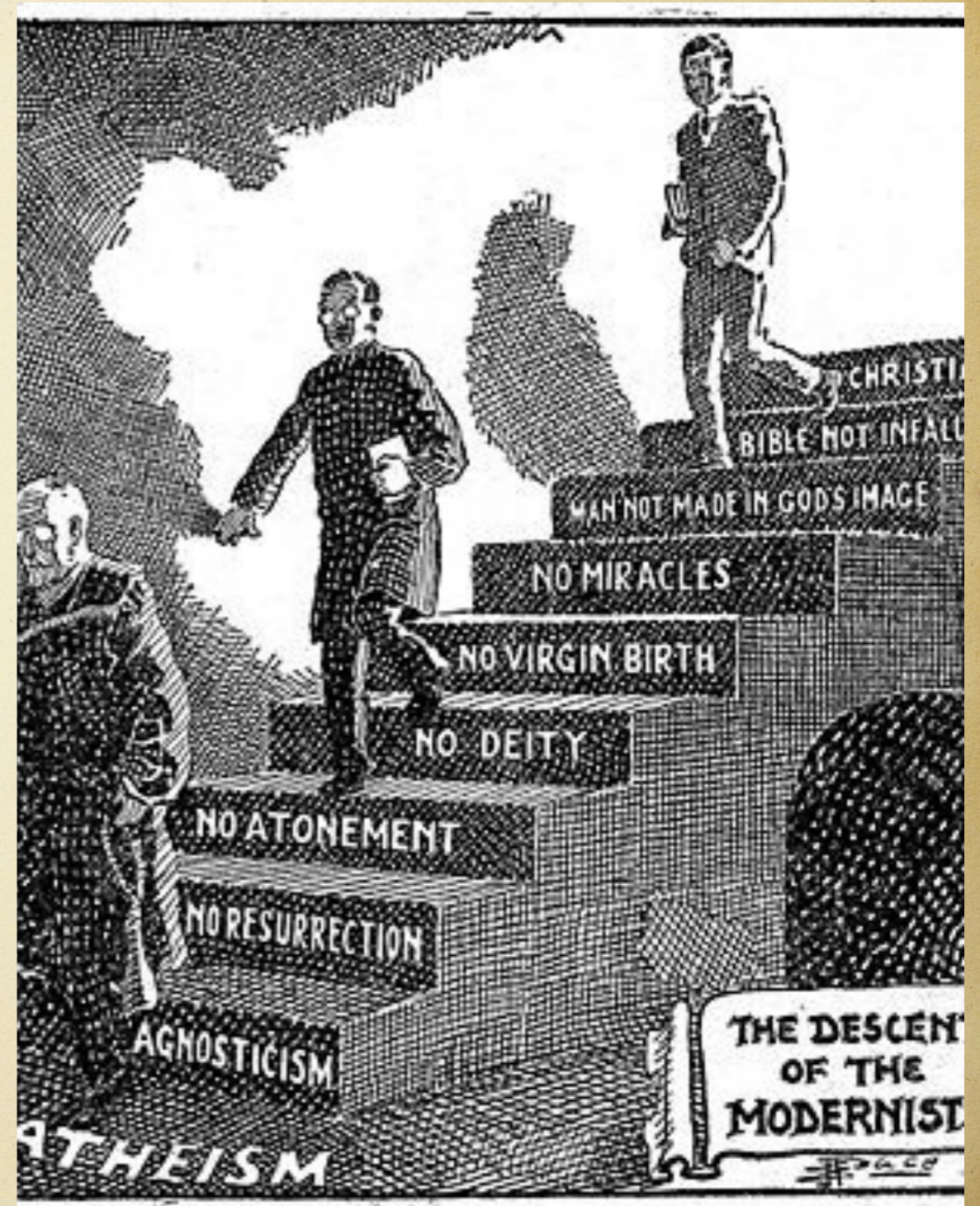
*“Was ist Erklarung?”* (What Is Enlightenment?)

nonage = immaturity

Sapere aude = “Dare to Know”

# Enlightenment Rationalism “Modernity”

- Industrialization
- Capitalism
- Faith in Science, Technology, Progress
- *Break* with the past...look to future
- Parallel: monotheism's break with all that came before it. Modernity as monotheism in a secular key.



# Applying Enlightenment Rationalism to Bible

- Scholars began to notice contradictions and doubles in the Bible.
- “To this day” (*couldn't be written by Moses*)
- Text itself didn't always make literal sense (*close reading for self*)

# WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?

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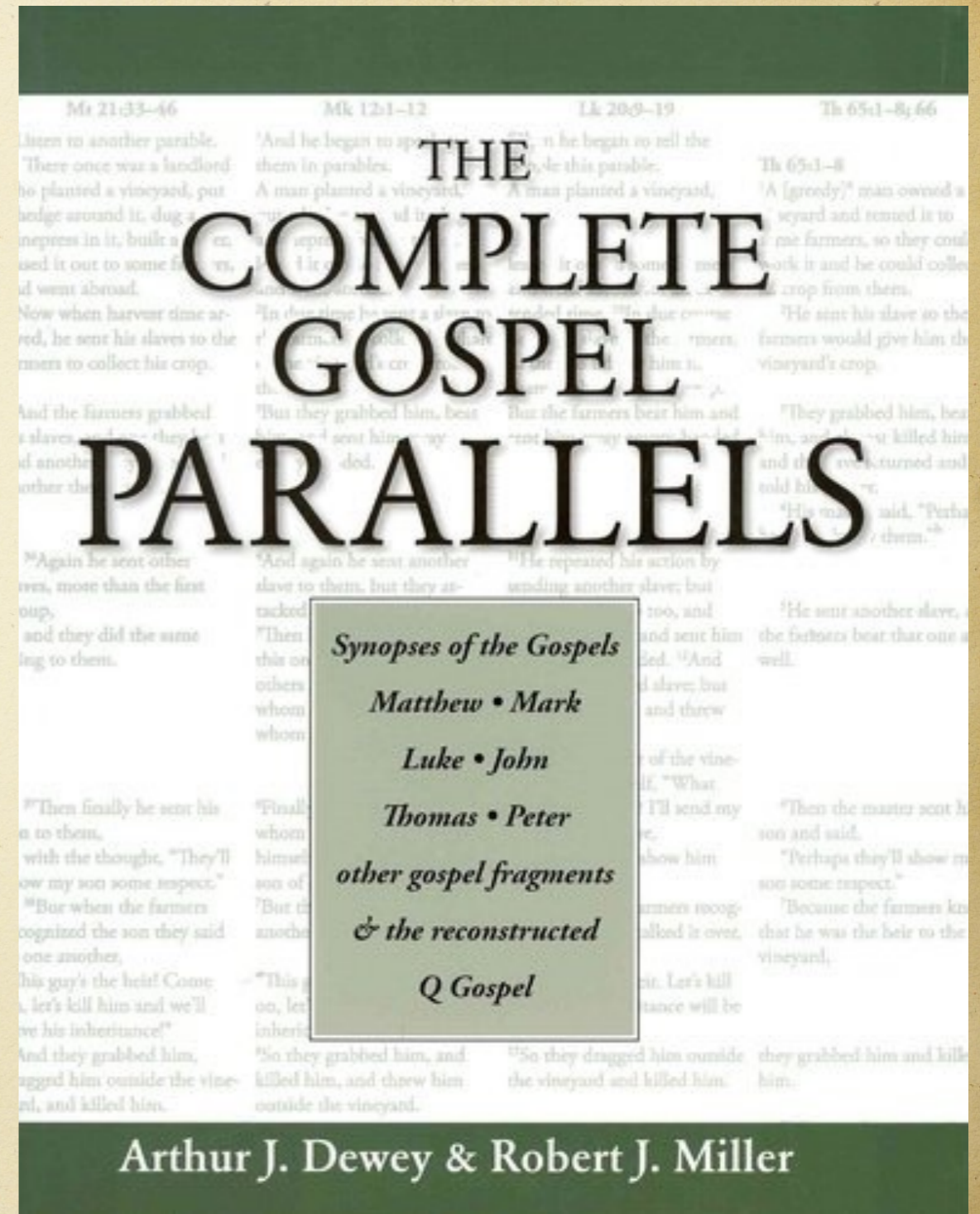
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RICHARD ELLIOTT FRIEDMAN

Author of *The Hidden Face of God*

# Applying Enlightenment Rationalism to Bible

- **David Friedrich Stauss**  
(Tübingen University, Germany),  
*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835).
- 1872: “We must acknowledge that we are no longer Christians....although we may still have a religion — the religion of cosmic evolution.”
- Jesus was Son of God is a myth, but expresses deeper truth that the whole human race is divine  
*[universalize, plural, lower-case]*



# Applying Enlightenment Rationalism to Bible

- Fired from his professorship
- Offered position in Zürich four years later, but population voted to fire him before he started work (39,225 to 1048).
- Kripal: When it comes to the study of religion, and particularly to the historical interpretation of scriptural texts, the religiously conservative public is always wrong. Really wrong.”



David Friedrich Strauss

# Jeffrey Kripal's "Tough Questions"

- If you are religious and believe in some sort of deity, does the god you worship look like you? Do you tend to think of god in human terms? [*God/Goddess, Lord/Lady*]
- Are ancient notions of religious orthodoxy and modern notions of human rights compatible?
- The way we talk matters a great deal. How would our societies differ if we abandoned the language of "religions" and adopted the language of "paths" or "ways"?



"Paranormal Reader" by Rob Beschizza



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