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**UNION**

*Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project*

# Religious Knowledge in Theory and Practice: Optional Unit for IB Theory of Knowledge

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## Abstract

This unit is designed to introduce the Optional Theme of “Knowledge and Religion” in an International Baccalaureate (IB) Theory of Knowledge (TOK) course. It is designed to follow the “Knowledge and the Knower” unit.

The PowerPoint slides below introduce the academic study of religion and the tensions between religious knowledge and the human and natural sciences. The skills embedded are scaffolding for the TOK Internal Assessment (IA). Students will also consider [case studies from Harvard University’s Pluralism Project](#) that have very debatable outcomes as objects. The students will consider explicit and implicit knowledge contained in the case studies and build the necessary connections between the studies and the IA Prompts.

Full disclosure: The PowerPoint below draws on are resources from [TheoryofKnowledge.net](#), both older and more recent, that I’ve melded with my own work over the years. I cite sources for particular slides and ideas when possible, but was unable to do so consistently. Apologies and a shout out to Michael Dunn and the whole [TOK.net](#) team.

## Student Goals and Objectives

1. Students will gain an understanding of religious knowledge in general.
2. Students will recognize and evaluate the societal and academic tensions surrounding how religion interacts as a lived tradition and how it informs or is at odds with other disciplines.
3. Students will develop skills related to choosing an object, connecting it, and evaluating it in relation to one of the IA Prompts.

## Overview of Activities – Much More Detail Below

1. The Religion Overview PowerPoint. The Knowledge Questions can be addressed in a variety of ways: small group discussion, teacher lead discussion, written reflection, etc. I have my students in table groups of about 4 and KQs are generally discussed at tables. This can be paced as quickly or as slowly as needed. I will likely take two 90-minute classes to go through slides 1-24.
2. Slides 14-19 ask students to classify various religious according to criteria defined in the PowerPoint, and (crucially) also asks them to question the validity or usefulness of these classifications. See below for student instructions and an example.
3. Slide 22 asks students to reflect on the tensions between religious and scientific knowledge. See below for student instructions and an example.
4. Slides 25-27 introduce the [Pluralism Project case studies](#). I give each table of students a different case study. I have the students discuss the merits of the case study and answer the guiding questions in order to build greater understanding and emotional connection with the case. The 2nd part is to scaffold IA skills.

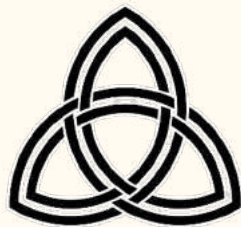
See the “Case Study Directions” below for a step-by-step process to de/contextualize the case and then make connections and justification for the connections to an IA Prompt. The end result could be on a google doc, a google jamboard, or on chart paper. See the “Case Study Exemplar” below for an example of a final product.

5. A further extension could have individual students create their own case studies following the same process. As students conduct research for case studies, awareness of bias should be discussed.

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York  
summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching  
on religious diversity, visit [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***



## Religion Overview





- Create a definition of *religion* and write it in your notes



# Religion Defined

Many definitions have the following traits in common

- Belief in Supernatural
- Moral Code of Behavior
- Prescribed Ritual Practices

***Must all of the traits be present to be called a religion?***

***What types of things beyond recognized religion might also act like religion?***

# History

- Earliest signs:
- More than 300,000 years ago
- Neolithic fertility figures
- Bodies found buried w/ flowers



Discuss: Why do you think anthropologists associate fertility figures and flowers in graves with religion?



# *Meaning/Purpose*

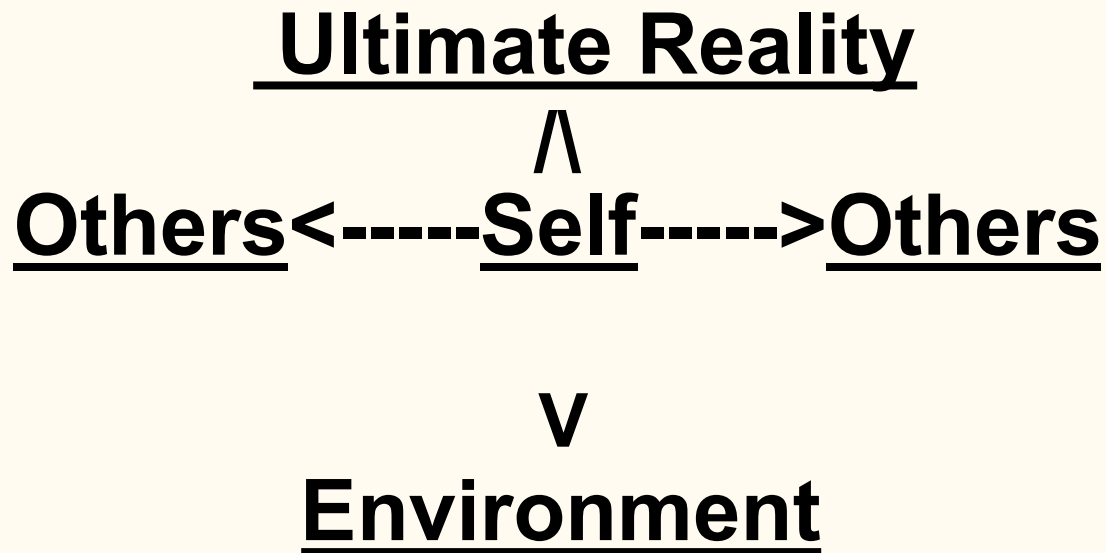
- Religion    Root of the word  
“Lig” – means to  
bind together



Religion creates relationships –

Vertical between self, god & environment

Horizontal between self & others in  
community



- Discuss: From a psycho-social (*ideas of self and connections to society*) perspective, why might early religion develop and thrive?

- Why does Weinstein say religion is literally false and metaphorically true?
- Do you support his ideas or do you find them problematic and why?
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0\\_J998UD9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0_J998UD9s)

# Common Mythologies

- Great Flood – 1<sup>st</sup> written in Epic of Gilgamesh – One flood or a common fear/ experience?
- Prehistoric Paradise
- Death & Resurrection of a supernatural figure
- World ends in good vs evil battle

**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)



**Judaism:** What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. (Hillel, 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, p. 1299)



**Hinduism:** This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. (Mahabharata 5:1517)



**Jainism:** One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated. (Mahavira, Suttrakritanga)



**Islam:** Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. (The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith)



**Buddhism:** Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. (Udana-Varga 5.18)



**Taoism:** Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain, and your neighbour's loss as your own loss. (T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, 213-218)





EGYPT - 3000 BC

**HORUS**  
BORN ON DEC. 25TH  
BORN OF A VIRGIN  
STAR IN THE EAST  
ADORNED BY 3 KINGS  
TEACHER AT 12  
BAPTIZED/MINISTRY AT 30  
12 DISCIPLES



GREECE- 1200 BC

**ATTIS**  
BORN OF A VIRGIN  
BORN ON DEC. 25TH  
CRUCIFIED  
DEAD FOR 3 DAYS  
RESURRECTED



PERSIA - 1200BC

**MITHRA**  
BORN OF A VIRGIN  
BORN ON DEC. 25TH  
12 DISCIPLES  
PERFORMED MIRACLES  
DEAD FOR 3 DAYS  
RESURRECTED



INDIA - 900 BC

**KRISHNA**  
BORN OF A VIRGIN  
STAR IN THE EAST  
PERFORMED MIRACLES  
RESURRECTED



GREECE - 500 BC

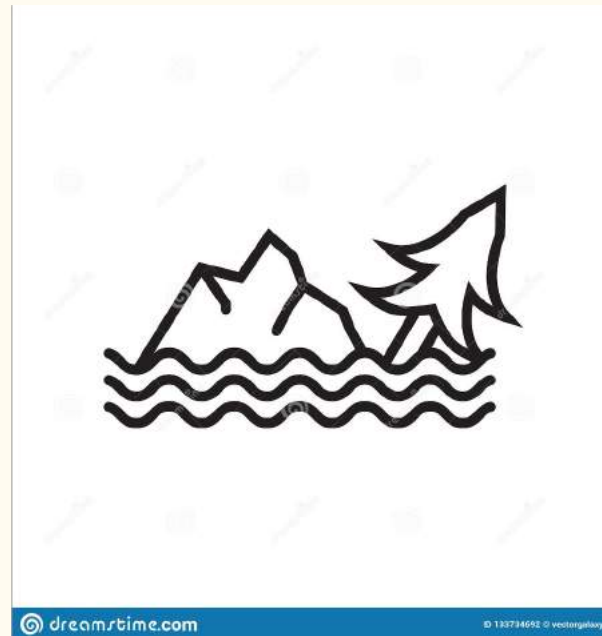
**DIONYSUS**  
BORN OF A VIRGIN  
BORN ON DEC. 25TH  
PERFORMED MIRACLES  
"KING OF KINGS"  
"ALPHA AND OMEGA"  
RESURRECTED



**JESUS CHRIST**  
BORN OF A VIRGIN  
BORN ON DEC. 25TH  
STAR IN THE EAST  
12 DISCIPLES  
PERFORMED MIRACLES  
DEAD FOR 3 DAYS  
RESURRECTED

# Religion & Ethics

- Discuss: Why do you think we find common stories, themes and ethics across the diversity of religions?



# Religion Frameworks

Consider these questions as we view the next few slides:

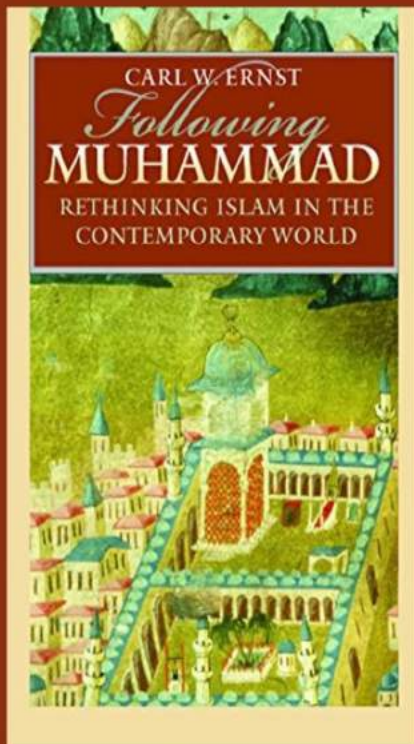
How might these classifications be problematic?

What groups might benefit and who might be marginalized from this type of classification?

What might this model imply in terms of language used, colonial, hegemonic ideas, etc.



- Primal/ Prehistoric
  - Archaic (dead) religions
  - Classic Religions
  - Modern Religions
- Native American, Aboriginal and African tribal - **oral** traditions of a people.
  - Religions of a culture - Egyptian, Greek, Inca Roman, Aztec Mesopotamia, Mayan
  - The major *living* religions from about 2500 to 500 years ago – Hinduism, Judaism, Tao, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism.
  - Variations of Classic religion and new religions, influenced by changes in society and scientific understanding since the 16th century- Protestant, Bahai, Sikh, etc



Carl Ernst,  
Professor Emeritus & William R. Kenan, Jr.,  
Distinguished Professor  
Co-Director, UNC Center for Middle East and  
Islamic Studies

— “ —  
Religion never exists in a vacuum. It is always interwoven with multiple strands of culture and history that link it to particular locations. The rhetoric of religion must be put into a context so that we know both the objectives and the opponents of particular spokespeople. (p.30)

— ” —  
Carl Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

- Ethnic
  - Of a particular people or culture (Judaism, Shinto, Hinduism)
  - Tend to be localized, do *not* actively seek converts

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- Universal
  - Sees its message as true for all people (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism)
  - Has spread throughout the world and tends to be very large in population, has actively sought converts from many cultures.

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- Theistic
  - focus on a **personal** God or gods, supernatural "person", spirit being (more common in west)

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- Non-theistic
  - Ultimate Reality or ultimate goal of the religion does *not* involve a personal god (**impersonal** Ultimate Reality) (force or energy) (more common in the east)

In your groups, classify your 2 religions based on the 3 characteristics

Time Period

Universal or Ethnic

type of Theism

Group 1- Baha'i & Judaism

Group 2- Taoism & Islam

Group 3- Sikh & Australian  
Aboriginal

Group 4- Shinto & LDS/  
Mormon

Group 5- Wicca & Eastern  
Orthodox

Group 6- Unitarian  
Universalism & Hinduism

Group 7- Hare Krishna &  
Jain



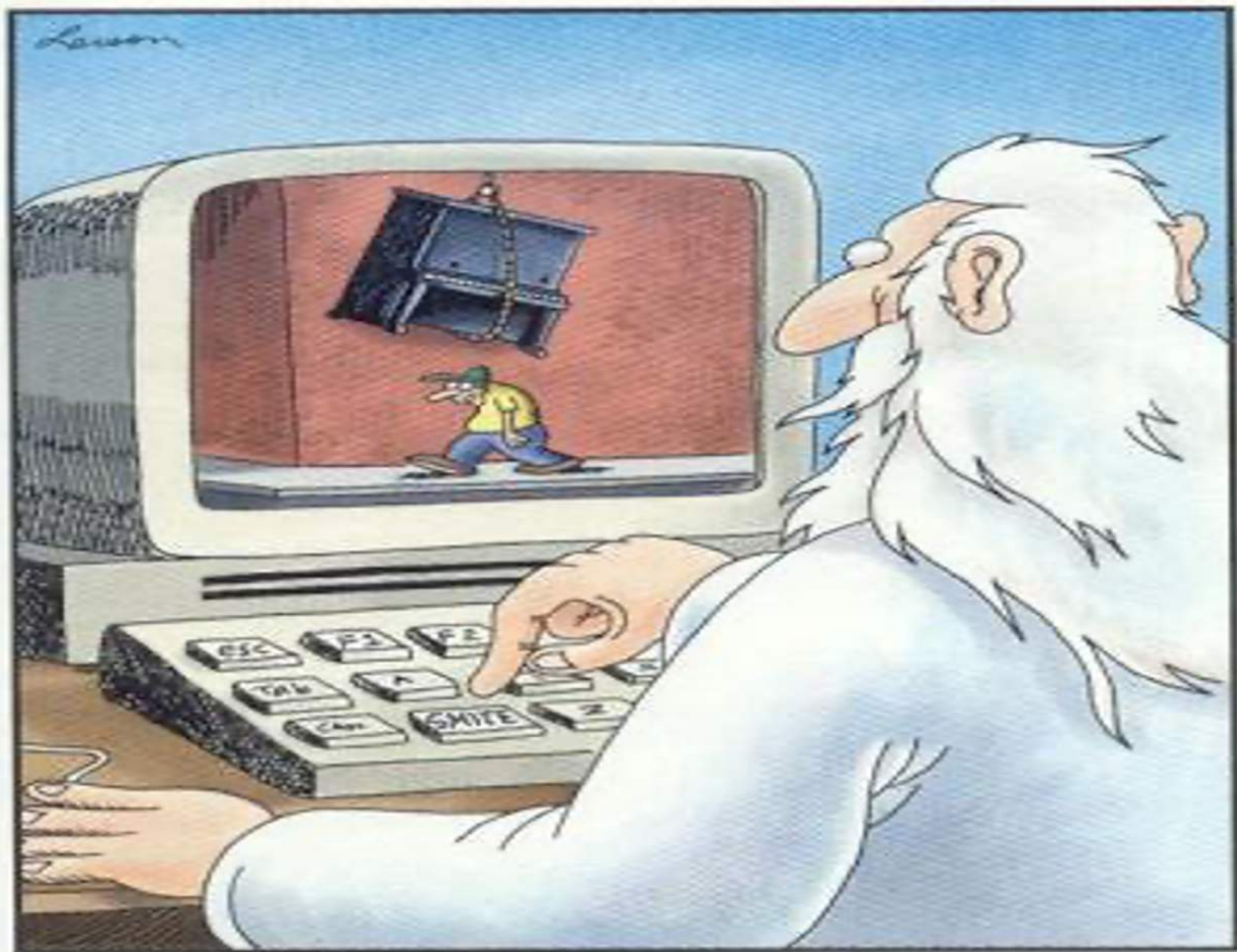
# Religion Frameworks

Discuss: How difficult was it to classify your religions?

How might these classifications be problematic in other ways?

What groups might benefit and who might be marginalized from this type of classification?

What might this model imply in terms of language used, colonial, hegemonic ideas, etc.



God at His computer

- **To what extent does language predispose one's understanding of new knowledge?**
- **The difference between a cult and a religion**
  - <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/08/24/reza-aslan-cult-explainer-orig.cnn/video/playlists/believer-with-reza-aslan/>
- **Scientology**
  - <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2017/03/17/believer-reza-aslan-scientology-orig-ff.cnn/video/playlists/believer-with-reza-aslan/>
- **Santa Muerte**
  - <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2017/03/17/believer-reza-aslan-santa-muerte-orig-ff.cnn/video/playlists/believer-with-reza-aslan/>
- **Aghori**
  - <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/02/27/believer-reza-aslan-who-are-aghori-sahdus-india-orig-ff.cnn/video/playlists/believer-with-reza-aslan/>

# Under what circumstances does religious knowledge supercede knowledge in the natural sciences?

- Scopes Trial

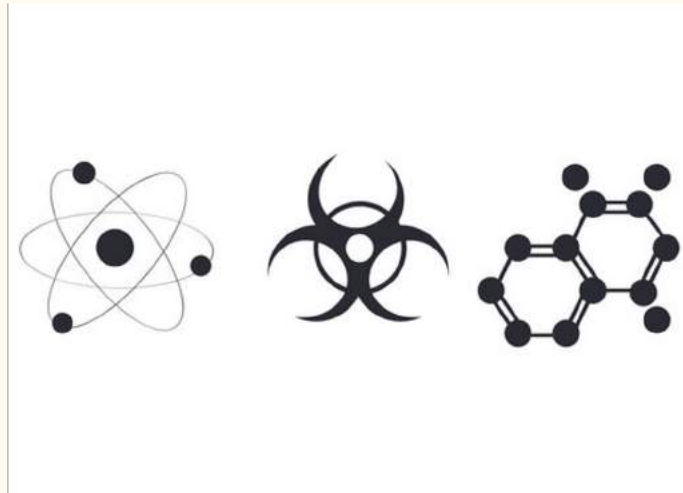
- [https://youtu.be/S\\_DQUAuNUvw](https://youtu.be/S_DQUAuNUvw)

- Pope Francis on the Big Bang Theory

- <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pope-francis-evolution-big-bang-theory-are-real-n235696>

- 12 Scientists on the possibility of god/s

- [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/12-famous-scientists-on-the-possibility-of-god\\_us\\_56afa292e4b057d7d7c7a1e5](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/12-famous-scientists-on-the-possibility-of-god_us_56afa292e4b057d7d7c7a1e5)





# Eye of god from Hubble Telescope



# Reflect: Which view point most closely matches your own and why?

- But in terms of how people live together, how we minimize the prospects of conflict and maximize the prospects of peace, the place of religion in our society today is essential.

**Tony Blair**

- Religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich.

**Napoleon Bonaparte**

- Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.

**Mahatma Gandhi**

- Religion is part of the human make-up. It's also part of our cultural and intellectual history. Religion was our first attempt at literature, the texts, our first attempt at cosmology, making sense of where we are in the universe, our first attempt at health care, believing in faith healing, our first attempt at philosophy.

**Christopher Hitchens**

- Religion creates community, community creates altruism and altruism turns us away from self and towards the common good... There is something about the tenor of relationships within a religious community that makes it the best tutorial in citizenship and good neighborliness.

**Jonathan Sacks**

- A cult is a religion with no political power.

**Tom Wolfe**

# Knowledge and Religion and the IA Exhibit

Religious Knowledge as it is applied across people's daily lives and in their communities often leads to issues and tensions between individuals and groups.

In your groups you will examine a case study from the Harvard Pluralism Project.

The case study is a real life example of how TOK manifests in the world.



# The Case Study

**The Pluralism  
Project**

HARVARD  
UNIVERSITY

1. Read your case study.
2. Consider the issue from all perspectives
3. Discuss and answer the guiding questions with your group.
4. Try to come to a consensus of the optimal way the case study should be resolved

Harvard Case Study Religion and Public Life

## The Case Study as an IA object

Transition from problem solving to considering your case study as an example of a more general issue of knowledge.

The IA object(today's case study) will need to be:

1. Examined through the TOK lens
2. Connected to one of the 35 IA Prompts
3. Justified as a valuable example with which to consider the Prompt

Classify your two religions using the designations from your notes.

Each religion must be identified by all 3 characteristics. Time period, Universal or Ethnic, and type of theism.

You need 3 pictures representing each religion

**Group 1**  
Baha'i and  
Judaism

**Group 2**  
Taoism  
and Islam

**Group 3**  
Sikh and  
Australian  
Aboriginal

**Group 4**  
Shinto and  
Mormon/LDS

**Group 5**  
Wicca and  
Eastern  
Orthodox

**Group 6**  
Unitarian  
Universalism  
and Hinduism

**Group 7**  
Hare  
Krishna  
and Jain

# Judaism

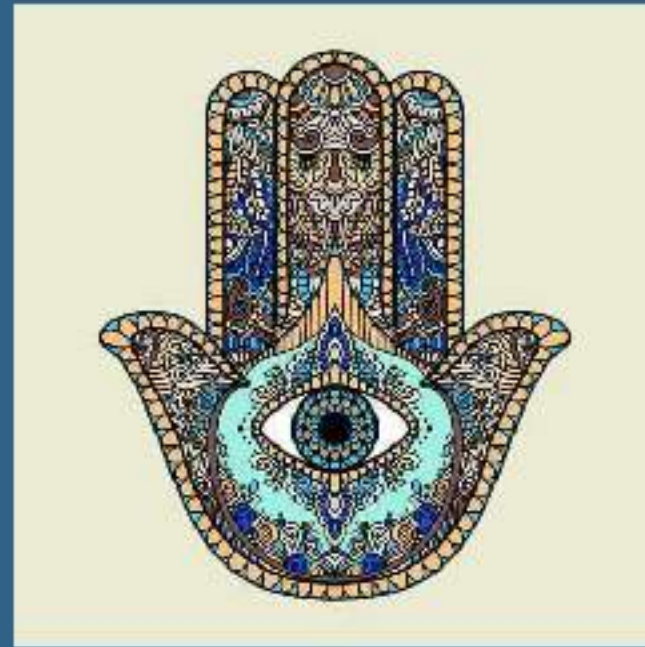
Founded around  
2000 BCE

Ethnic Religion

Monotheistic Religion



dreidel game celebrates  
the miracle of Hannukah  
and the recovery of  
Jerusalem

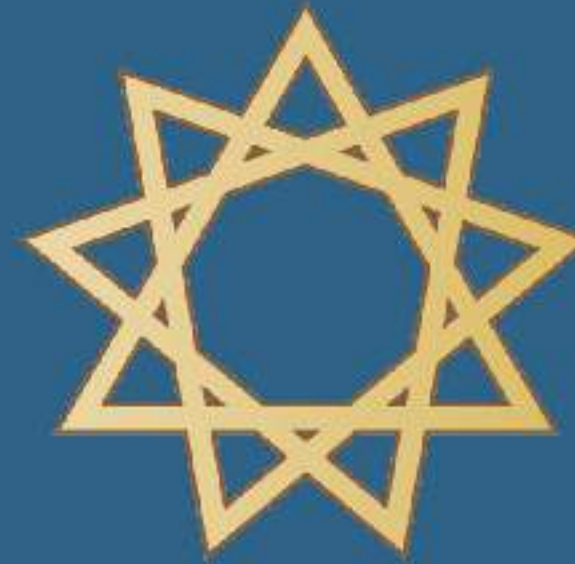


Hamsa Hand ("hand  
of God")



© 2011 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

star of David: modern  
symbol of Judaism



Baha'i nine  
pointed star



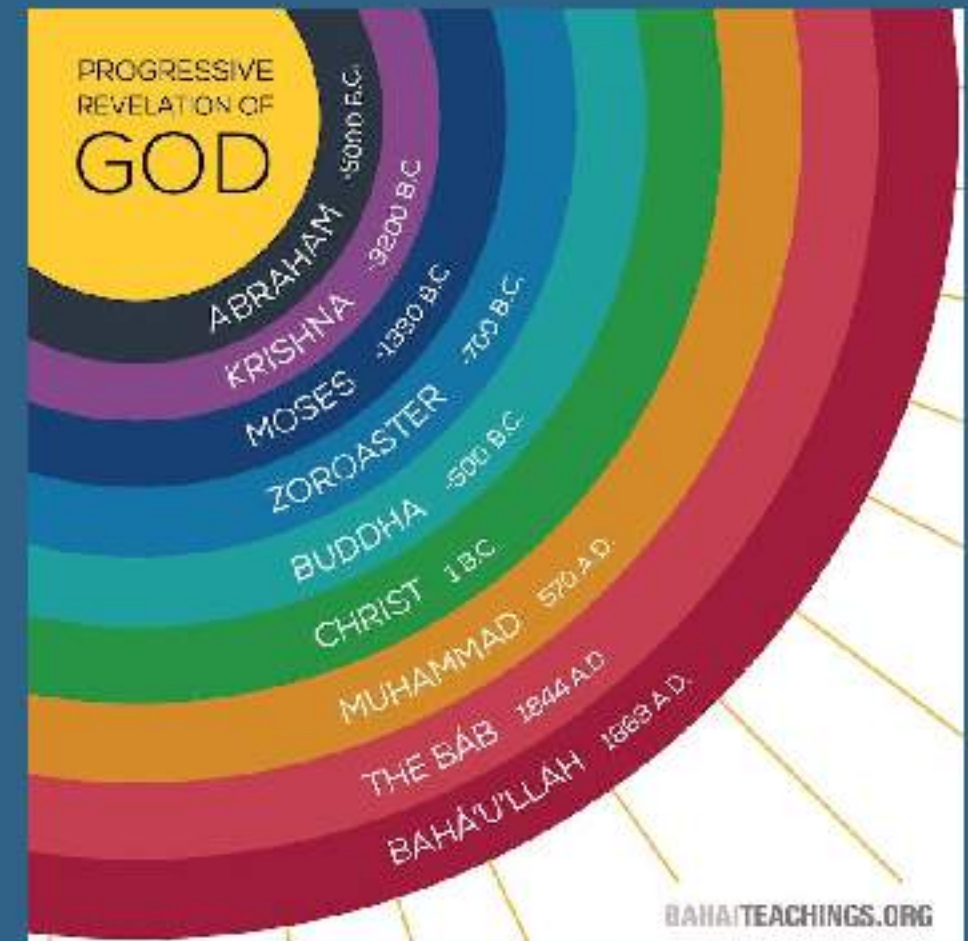
Baha'i Temple

# Baha'i

Founded in the Early  
19th Century in Iran

Universal Religion

Monotheistic Religion



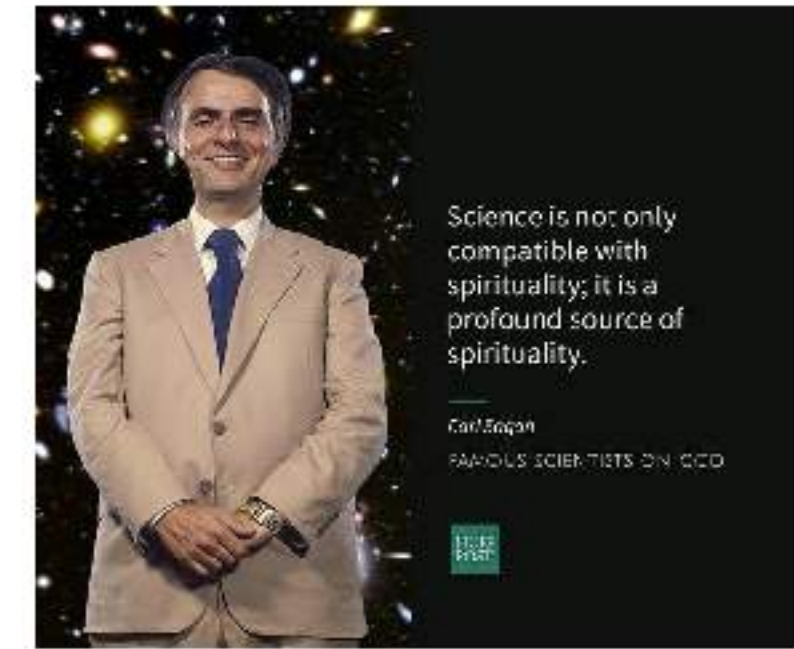
Progressive Revelation of  
God

# Under what circumstances does religious knowledge supercede knowledge in the natural sciences?

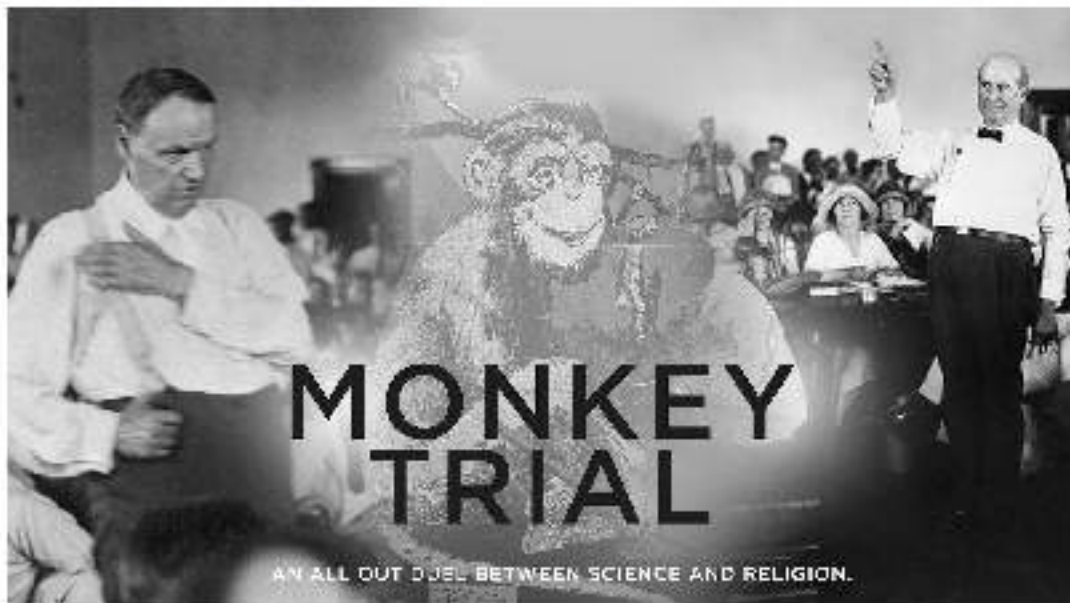
Make a claim to answer the KQ.

**Explicitly answer the claim: Under the circumstance of ?????? religious ideas supersede knowledge in the Natural Sciences.**

**The Religious Knowledge and the Nat Science knowledge should be about the same event/topic - ie; Evolution, Big Bang Theory, etc**



**Find 2 Real Life Examples that support your claim. Represent each RLS with a picture. You will verbally explain each RLS to the class when presenting**



The Big Bang, which today we hold to be the origin of the world, does not contradict the intervention of the divine creator but, rather, requires it.

— Pope Francis —

AZ QUOTES



# Under what circumstances does religious knowledge supercede knowledge in the natural science?

When the situation involves life or death situations, religious knowledge often supersedes knowledge in the natural sciences.

While there is no scientific evidence that an afterlife exists, 68% of Americans believe in Heaven and 58% of Americans believe in Hell, for example.



Many religious institutions argue when it comes to topics such as abortion, there is not a common consensus of when a fetus is considered a child.



In cases like abortion, one's religious knowledge trumps their understanding of more science based morals. Religious beliefs with always be placed before science of abortion

# Case Study Directions & the IA Prompts

## 1. Title your paper with the Case Study/Article Title

- Center justify and in a large font state your Title.

## 2. Give brief facts and real-world context of the case study

- Left justified - These facts should be bulleted and very succinctly sum up the Case Study/Article

## 3. Extract the explicit and implicit claims that are broadly about knowledge

- T chart

-Explicit claims are those that have been overtly stated or seen.

- Implicit knowledge are the underlying subtexts/issues that arise from case that are generally about knowledge and TOK ideas.

## 4. Choose 1 IA Prompt that you find interesting and that you feel connects well with your Case Study/Article

- Center justify and in a large font state your IA Prompt. Be careful not to change the question in any way.

## 5. Read through the Prompt and think about which TOK concept(s) connect the prompt to your Case Study/Article (see below)

**Interpretation, Explanation, Evidence, Objectivity, Power, Culture, Perspective, Truth, Values, Responsibility, Justification, Certainty**

- Label & write the TOK concepts below the Prompt. *Note- the Prompt can link to multiple concepts*

## 6. Consider how the Case Study/Article and the Prompt are focused on an interaction with knowledge (see below)

**Developing, Producing, Acquiring, Sharing, Accepting, Understanding, Applying, Evaluating, Assessing value or reliability, etc. of knowledge**

a. Label & write a brief statement about how the Case Study and IA Prompt are an example of an interaction with knowledge

## 7. Why is the case study a good “object” that is strongly linked with the IA Prompt, and also shows how TOK manifests in the real world?

a. Write a summative statement about how the Case Study leads one to explore the IA Prompt. (Pull together the implicit claims and TOK concepts and interactions to help create your summation)

### Helpful sentence starters:

- This case study/object explores this prompt by...
- This case study/object investigates how...
- This case study/object poses many challenges (to ... of knowledge), particularly because...
- This case study/object highlights that ...
- This case study/object makes us think about whether ...
- This case study/object is an example of ...
- This case study/object represents...
- This case study/object serves to spread knowledge about...

## Case Study Exemplar

### Satanic Temple display comes to Florida Capitol

December 22, 2014

<https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/2014/12/22/satanic-temple-display-comes-florida-capitol/20764841/>

#### Facts & Real-World Content

- The state of Florida allows religious holiday displays in public spaces
- Many religious and non-religious groups have been allowed to display their pieces including a Festivus pole and banners from the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster
- The Satanic Temple has been denied a place in the past
- A key quote is from Temple member John Progal, "We would actually prefer if none of this was here, that we wouldn't have to go through this every year," he said. "We don't want to be insulting, we just want our rights. Either the separation of church and state or our equal rights."

#### Claims

##### Explicit Claims:

- The Temple had been denied because their display was deemed "grossly offensive"
- Many groups were unhappy with the state for allowing religious depictions in public places
- Legal intervention was threatened before the state allowed the display

##### Implicit Claims

- One group has the power to pass judgment on the appropriateness of another groups artistic/religious ideas
- The majority group can willfully ignore the wishes of minority groups
- Outside authority can lend legitimacy to a claim

#### The Prompt:

**24. How might the context in which knowledge is presented influence whether it is accepted or rejected?**

#### TOK Concepts:

This prompt and the case study consider the concepts of perspective, objectivity, and values

#### Interaction with Knowledge:

The prompt and case study most strongly consider how the context in which the knowledge is presented affects the evaluation of knowledge and ultimately its acceptance.

#### **7. Summation**

- This case study is a good example of how the context of the knowledge largely shapes the evaluation and acceptance based on the perspective and ideas of those who make the decisions.
- The context of secular space being used for religious artifacts has implied legal problems which should influence the acceptance or rejection of religious knowledge to a greater extent than the ideas of the majority perspective.

# The "Christmas Tree Crisis" at Sea-Tac Airport

Yuri Tversky  
Beckett Stansell  
McKenzie Taylor  
Fiona Kambo  
A 6/7

## Facts & Real World Info:

- Sea-Tac puts up Christmas tree for holiday decoration
- Rabbi Layner called for addition of menorah for Hanukkah representation
- Sea-Tac instead took the trees down, causing public debate
- Holiday Decorations Advisory Committee has faith leaders & representatives
- Sea-Tac put the tree back up following public crises

## Claims:

### Explicit

- The airport attempted to eliminate exclusion by not including any faith
- Members of minority faith were unfairly scrutinized
- Rabbi Layner was invited to the Holiday Decoration Advisory Committee to represent his faith

### Implicit

- Authority may misinterpret the wishes of the population
- Majority groups may be offended by the inclusion of minority groups
- Individuals and minorities still can create incentive for change

The Claim: #25 How can we distinguish between knowledge belief and opinion?

Tok Concepts: This prompt and the case study consider the concepts of culture, values, & responsibility

Interaction with Knowledge: The prompt and case study most strongly consider how belief and opinion affects the acceptance of knowledge.

Summation: This case study is a good example of how cultural conflicting values can lead to majority groups feeling offended by knowledge from minority groups.

