Collected Writings

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Peter Franken

About the Cover Illustration

The starry sky on the cover visualises what the sociologist Peter Berger termed the *Sacred Canopy*. Ever since the emergence of reflective consciousness, humanity has felt the profound need for an ordered firmament to render existence bearable. From this longing arose gods, myths, religions, and later, secular ideologies.

Although these collected writings span a wide range of topics—from historical analysis and colonial history to contemporary politics and social critique—this anthropological drive for order and meaning forms the underlying thread throughout these essays, anchored by the opening essay itself, titled *Religion, Culture and Politics.*

The cosmic veil on the cover stands as a symbol for the overarching frame within which humanity continues to write its history.

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Preface

This collection brings together a decade of essays, reflections, and reviews written from a perspective of deliberate historical distance. Rather than adhering to a single, rigid thematic strain, the writings assembled in this volume trace the contours of the human attempt to impose order on an inherently unpredictable world—whether through the totalising frameworks of monotheistic religion, the administrative mechanics of empire, or the ideological dogmas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The volume opens with a comparative examination of *Religion, Culture, and Politics*. Here, religious systems are analysed not just through the lens of theological doctrine, but first and foremost as social phenomena and institutional forces. The focus rests on how sacred texts and monotheistic frameworks have historically functioned to legitimise power, enforce cohesion, and define the boundaries of cultural identity.
This broad analytical scope moves eastwards in *Japan, India, and China*, exploring three distinct civilisational traditions that approached statecraft, social harmony, and authority without relying on Western metaphysical assumptions.

The section *The Netherlands and its Colonial Empire* turns to a more specific historical laboratory: the pragmatic, highly bureaucratised exploitation of the Dutch East Indies. It dissects the mechanics of colonial governance, examining how a small merchant nation maintained authority over a vast archipelago through a meticulous balance of economic calculus, institutionalised coercion, and administrative detachment.

The central part of the book addresses the persistent shadows of modern political history. *Resurgent Fascism? A Critical Investigation* and *The Interbellum as a Mirror for the Present* resist the temptation of swollen, melodramatic historical analogies. Instead, they offer a sober comparison between the ideological collapse of the 1920s and 1930s and contemporary political friction, questioning whether current anxieties truly reflect a return of past totalitarian forms or merely a realignment of modern political power.

In *Opinion and Reflection*, the perspective becomes more essayistic and conversational, though no less analytical. Covering topics from the geopolitical realities of the Lowlands and the nature of dictatorship to the dynamics of *Volksgemeinschaft*, social Darwinism, and modern cultural debates surrounding wokeism and multiculturalism, these pieces observe the contemporary human condition with cool, unhurried irony.

Finally, the collection concludes with a selection of *Book Reviews*. Spanning the literary allegories of J.M. Coetzee, the biographical trajectory of Frida Kahlo, the musical and political legacy of Richard Wagner, and post-war opera analysis, these reviews offer concise reflections on how art and literature grapple with trauma, power, and ideology.

Throughout these essays, sensitive and heavily charged subjects such as colonialism and slavery are intentionally addressed in a direct, matter-of-fact manner. Readers seeking a comprehensive, deep-historical examination of these phenomena are referred to the dedicated analysis in Volume I of my historical tetralogy, *Christianity: History of a Civilisation*, where their structural and civilisational foundations are dissected in full.

These writings do not seek to offer grand moralising conclusions or prescribed solutions. They are published in the conviction that the past is rarely black or white, but predominantly grey—and that an affable, detached historical analysis remains the most reliable tool for navigating the present.

Rotterdam, November 2026

Peter Franken

Religion, Culture and Politics

1. Introduction

Rituals, and the presence of a small group within a community that monopolises their execution, distinguish humanity from all other living creatures on earth. The question is where the origin of this remarkable trait lies.

In Biblical terms, it is spoken of as the expulsion from Paradise on account of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Evolutionarily, this corresponds to the transformation of *homo sapiens* into *homo sapiens sapiens*. In computer terminology, it may be compared to the rollout of *homo sapiens 2.0*. The capacity to reflect upon one's own existence, brought about by a novel development of the animal nervous system, is an evolutionary leap anchored in the very hardware of man. From this point onwards, the consciously thinking human being is confronted with an unbearable void in his existence. He lives without the slightest notion of what purpose it serves, his sole certainty being that, in due course, he will die. *Homo sapiens 2.0* initially experiences himself as nothing more than a breath of wind, a meaningless phenomenon of a passing nature. It was only as *homo sapiens 2.0* gradually developed an awareness of being part of a larger whole that such a pointless existence could be rendered tolerable. He himself leads a fleeting existence on earth, yet forms part of a vastly larger world. That world is bounded by his own powers of perception. And in the search for something to cling to, concepts emerge such as 'the firmament', in which the heavenly bodies occupy a more or less fixed place, forming the extraterrestrial boundary of that world within which the new human being has assigned a place to his existence. Populating this enclosed space with celestial phenomena—from which a pantheon of gods gradually arises—stems from a mental development that likewise comes to be anchored in the hardware of *homo sapiens 2.0*. For this reason, one might just as well speak of *homo sapiens religiosus*.

Excavations in the region of the Tigris and the Euphrates have yielded much information on how, for thousands of years, religious legends played a role in the life of reflective man. Numerous clay tablets turned out to be inscribed with creation myths and tales concerning the how and why of man's origin alongside the gods, and as a peculiar phenomenon within the animal kingdom. In one of these, it is related how the god Marduk, under the supervision of the divine 'sorcerer' Ea, instructs the goddess Aruru (or Mami) to fashion man out of clay mixed with the blood of gods sacrificed for that very purpose.

The sole reason provided for this act is that man is required to serve and venerate the gods. The gods stand in need of an audience; otherwise, their existence is devoid of meaning. By this stroke, the problem of the unbearable void of human existence is conveniently shifted onto the gods. Yet man now possesses, at the very least, an answer to the question of why he is on this earth: to serve and worship the deities.

In the 1960s, the sociologist Peter Berger devised a model that builds further upon the evolutionary-anthropological development of *homo sapiens religiosus*, otherwise termed *homo sapiens reflexus*. For this comforting encasement of one's own living environment by a celestial realm, Berger coined the term *Sacred Canopy*.

Shamans subsequently set themselves up as the mediating figures tasked with securing the connection between the two worlds—the earthly and the celestial. Out of this emerges a priestly caste that employs its special pipeline to the higher realm to dominate the remainder of the community.

Within the community, the passage of centuries engenders a shared outlook on the course of things. One knows how the world is put together, how one ought to act in life, which gods are the most potent and therefore above all to be kept on good terms with; in short, a common world view prevails.

Yet human development does not stand still, and in the fullness of time it may come to pass that such an old, familiar world view no longer keeps pace with the level of perception of its participants. By way of comparison: small children may be brought to believe in the existence of Father Christmas, but that narrative contains so many incongruities that even a child raised in total isolation must, sooner or later, arrive at the conclusion that it cannot be reconciled with his knowledge of the rest of the world.

Something of the kind must also have been the case for the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. Having clung for centuries to the Romanised version of the Greek gods, they ultimately experienced this *Sacred Canopy* beginning to exhibit too many cracks to remain effective. A supreme deity who does little else than chase women, going so far as to transform himself into animals tot chase mortal woman, is no longer fit for 'grown-ups'. They have turned into comic-strip characters, those ancient gods. People feel the need for something new to obscure the emptiness of existence. Hence, interest mounts in mystery religions, which are far less modelled on a reflection of human relations and instead appeal to the human fascination with the inexplicable. Outside the Roman Empire, people had evidently been ready for this somewhat earlier, for the 'new mysteriousness' (a religious *Nouvelle*

Vague) arrives predominantly from the east and south-east. Mithras, Isis, Zoroaster, and Sol Invictus displace Jupiter, Hera, and Apollo.
Amidst this religious revolution, the as yet relatively modest movement of Christians managed, by means of *mimesis*, to secure a place on the grand stage of Roman religious currents. It remains quite open to question whether one can maintain that the aforementioned movements were absorbed into Christianity, or whether Christianity—with the figure of Jesus as its figurehead—was absorbed into the Mithras cult, with Isis later being incorporated by way of establishing the cult of Mary. Be that as it may, Christianity at a certain juncture had the religious tide in its favour. What perhaps proved decisive was the high degree of organisation within the Christian community, largely modelled on that of the state itself. Thus, Christianity could easily be converted into a component of state authority; everything dovetailed seamlessly. The added advantage was that secular authority did not merely acquire a religious patina through the deification of the emperor, but that the emperor could now indirectly dispose of the eternal life of his subjects by leaning upon the weapon of excommunication.
With the restoration of the *Sacred Canopy*, man west of the Euphrates was set for another thousand years or so. The erosion, however, set in anew during the late Middle Ages, until towards the end of the nineteenth century modern man found himself once again left to his own devices. This may offer an explanation as to why new mass movements such as Communism and National Socialism found such fertile soil. They afforded the lonely individual the opportunity to cherish the illusion of belonging to a greater whole, complete with a renewed sense of purpose, a collective march towards a new world, and a new man.
In the Western world, it is only natural that the lion's share of attention goes to Christianity—a phenomenon to be further elucidated below. There are, however, other major religions adhered to to this day by millions, or indeed billions, of people.

Anthropomorphism versus Idea

Religious man exhibits an unmistakable need to construct an image of the gods in his own likeness. Thus, the supreme deity is conveniently envisioned as a formidable figure, omnipotent and all-seeing—a kind of superman. It was Feuerbach who famously remarked that if birds were to conceive of a deity, their god would undoubtedly be equipped with enormous wings. Proceeding from this anthropomorphic ap-

proach, people then engage in 'philosophising' upon the nature and essence of this divinity, along with the ramifications for the tenets of the religion in question. A comparable phenomenon manifests itself among atheists who, while lacking an image of God, nevertheless attempt to form a conception of their place in the universe. Questions such as 'what is the meaning of life, and to what end does the universe exist?' are by no means the exclusive preserve of believers; indeed, the latter prefer not to concern themselves with such matters at all.

As no sensible answer is at hand, resort is taken to fashionable tropes that implicitly shift the role of a creative force from mere faith to empirical observation. Take, for instance, the notion that humanity is part of a game or resides within something akin to *The Matrix*. Or that all is mere illusion, and the world no more than a hologram. Once again, an appeal is made to images familiar from personal experience—the precise equivalent of anthropomorphism. The question of who devised the game and determined its rules, or where the hologram fits into a larger whole, remains just as unanswered as the query 'why, then, do we live?'

And if it is merely a game, is there any question of winning and losing in the customary sense known from our own experience? Is refusing to participate in the game perhaps precisely what is expected in order to win, simply because one has thereby seen through the setup? To picture the scene: consider *The Truman Show*, in which the protagonist, after a prolonged period, realises he is merely an actor and attempts to escape his cage. And when he ultimately succeeds, has he won because he proved cleverer than the mastermind of the show?

Man is curious and insists on knowing what lies behind the looking glass of his perceptible existence. And because such a thing is impossible, he takes to fantasising. Whereupon matters can swiftly degenerate into a schismatic dispute, such as that between adherents of String Theory and Loop Quantum Gravity. It is reminiscent of the Christological debates of the early centuries CE, which were resolved by declaring one of the two factions anathema. Ever since, the followers of Arius have been branded as heretics.

In this manner, the godless and the god-fearing possess, at the very least, something in common.

2. Religions

Hinduism

Hinduism is the designation for the socio-religious way of life of approximately one billion people, the vast majority of whom reside in the state of India. The term *religion* fails to adequately capture its essence, in part because it primarily employs the Abrahamic experience of faith as its benchmark. Alongside this way of life exists Hindu philosophy, both of which have developed almost in parallel over a period spanning several millennia. In that respect, a profound difference exists when compared to Christianity and Islam, both of which were defined within less than a century by a more or less comprehensive ideology.

The origin of Hinduism is deemed to lie in the Vedas—a collection of hymns, mantras, rituals, and incantations. These presumably arose between the 15th and 5th centuries BCE and were transmitted orally until being committed to writing around the middle of the first millennium CE.

In the Vedas, priests found the necessary incantations, hymns, formulas, and the like for religious ceremonies. In total, four priests were required during a service: the invoker, the chanter, the officiant, and the chief priest. Hence, there are four Vedas, one for each priestly function.

The four Vedas are:

The Rigveda: the Veda of verses, consisting of 1,028 hymns, each composed of verses in which supplications abound, asking for earthly matters such as long life, wealth, sons, cattle, and victories in battle. Furthermore, it treats of myths, rites, and numerous societal questions. The Rigveda forms the foundation for the other Vedas.

The Samaveda: the Rigveda in musical form, although the melodies employed are presumably older.

The Yajurveda: the Veda of rituals, largely based upon the Rigveda, but rendered as mantras and supplemented with prose describing the ritual significance of those mantras.

The Atharvaveda: the Veda of Atharvan, containing magical formulas for rituals such as the fire sacrifice.

The Vedas are composed in Sanskrit, the language of linguistically related nomadic tribes who, in all probability, migrated to the Asian subcontinent from the region north and east of the Caspian Sea. For the sake of convenience, these steppe dwellers are often referred to as

Aryans, though any evidence for an overarching Aryan tribe, or indeed a single people, is lacking. Because these nomads spent their lives more or less permanently under the open sky, they would inevitably have directed their attention more towards the celestial bodies than those leading a sedentary existence as farmers, whose primary concern lay with the weather. Certainly on the subcontinent, the arrival—or indeed the failure—of the monsoon was of paramount importance.

Philologically, Sanskrit exhibits so many affinities with languages including Greek and Latin that it is widely assumed a common ancestral language lay at its root. For this, the designation Indo-Germanic is frequently employed, although Indo-Slavic is presumably more accurate.

Although the Indus civilisation had flourished for a long period in the west of the subcontinent, by 1800 BCE not a trace of it remained to be seen. It was not until the 20th century CE that its remains were uncovered by means of archaeological investigation. Thus, after a hiatus of several centuries—quite enough for everything to sink into oblivion—the aforementioned Aryan tribes introduced a relatively advanced civilisation into a barbaric region. Not that they would have brought along so extensive a text as the Rigveda in completed form, but at the very least a corpus that served as a foundation. The actual development of the Vedas undoubtedly took place only after settlement on the subcontinent and acculturation with the sedentary peoples residing there. Of course, those peoples will have possessed their own pantheon and 'religion'—one observes that everywhere. Yet, just as elsewhere in the world around that time, it would have been rather primitive. It is important to formulate that as a premise. For in doing so, one can explain why, even after several millennia of the 'Aryanisation' of the barbaric subcontinent—and especially the south, which was the last to be drawn into this process—remnants of ancient rituals, cults, and local deities remain easily recognisable to this day. Compare it to the pre-Columbian pantheon, which has managed to maintain its footing beneath a veneer of Catholicism up to the present day. Properly considered, the Aryanisation of the subcontinent is a form of cultural colonisation in which the coloniser was ultimately assimilated into his new living environment.

The Rigveda is regarded as the oldest of the four and is to a high degree decisive for the daily practice of Hindu religious experience. Central to it, after all, is the invocation of deities to plead for specific favours, wherein one does not limit oneself merely to petitions, but simultaneously offers a relentless stream of minor sacrifices by way of meticulously detailed rituals. And that is precisely how the Hindu faith

is experienced and practiced, both in small domestic shrines and in grand public mandirs. Initiation rites are no longer in vogue, with the exception of the wedding ceremony, which marks the transition to an entirely new phase of life. Adequate time is therefore set aside for it, spread over several days.

Astrology likewise plays an important role; should it turn out that someone was born just a day earlier or later than desired, numerous rituals must be performed to smooth matters over and to offset as far as possible the adverse influence of that inauspicious moment of birth. It is particularly this excessive preoccupation with rituals and astrology that quickly prompts Westerners to dismiss it all as mere superstition. But then, one man's faith is another man's superstition.

The Vedas are viewed by Hindus as divine revelation, much like the later Upanishads. The latter are of a far later date and mark the origin from which Hindu philosophy was to develop. No longer does the emphasis rest on earthly existence—wherein virtue, success, and pleasure are primarily pursued—but rather on the spiritual world and the quest for liberation from the cycle of rebirths. The latter only after the principle of reincarnation had made its entry into Aryan culture. Rituals, and in particular those pertaining to the culture of sacrifice, now recede in importance; the acquisition of knowledge becomes paramount. Life as a permanent struggle gives way to an endeavour towards non-violence. This represents a shift that visibly keeps pace with the transition from a culture of warring nomadic tribes—in which power was equated with the size of one's herd and the number of one's horses—to a sedentary culture in which the land is tilled and every petty war is one too many.

A most extraordinary ritual that remained in vogue for a long time was the *Ashvamedha*, the 'horse sacrifice'. This was an elaborate ritual designed to confirm the position and power of the king. A horse consecrated by Brahmin priests was set free and shadowed for the duration of a year. The territory through which the horse roamed was deemed the domain of the monarch in question. If the horse was obstructed, the sovereign was obliged to annex the territory by military means. In this manner, the *Ashvamedha* determined the geographical reach of the king's *digvijaya*, or conquests. After a year, the horse was sacrificed. The chief queen of the king was then required to engage in ritual intercourse with the dead animal. Meanwhile, the other female members of the court danced around the queen and horse with untied hair, chanting hymns with highly explicit lyrics.

Horse sacrifices are described in the Rigveda, but the ritual of the *Ashvamedha* is fully detailed only in the Yajurveda. Striking about the

Ashvamedha is the combination of a horse as a sacrificial animal—a relic of nomadic life—with the notion of land grabbing that is characteristic of politicisation within a sedentary community. The ritual thus emphatically dates from the period when the Aryans had settled on the subcontinent and no longer lived as nomads.

Aside from the Vedas, which possess a presumed divine origin, several epic works are of major significance within Hinduism. In the first instance, this concerns the *Mahabharata*, a lengthy narrative detailing episodes from the lives of prominent warriors. Formed as a constituent part of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is entirely devoted to the dialogues of Arjuna with his charioteer, who gradually reveals himself to be the god Krishna. The status of the *Bhagavad Gita* may very well be compared to that of the Koran and the Bible; it is a 'Holy Book'. Arjuna stands on the verge of going into battle at the head of a vast army. The opposing army is likewise formidable and includes several of Arjuna's friends and kinsmen. Small wonder that Arjuna hesitates over whether to press ahead with the fight, or whether it might be wiser to refrain and thus default on his duty as a warrior. Krishna makes it clear to him that it is his duty to act in accordance with his station in life—to follow his *dharma*. This constitutes a novel concept, rendering it evident that the book is intended as an introduction to various principles designed to guide man on his journey through life. The question of whether Arjuna ought to engage in battle recedes into the background, revealing itself as a mere metaphor for the inner struggle to which every human being falls prey to a greater or lesser degree during his lifetime. More on this below.
The *Ramayana* is another epic that has achieved widespread popularity, chiefly as a tale of heroism. Centred upon the god Rama, who must recover his wife Sita after her abduction by an evil genius residing in Sri Lanka, the *Ramayana* features ape-like creatures, most notably Hanuman, Rama's faithful sidekick. Hanuman possesses the extraordinary gift of shape-shifting: from miniscule, in the form of a cat, to immense—so vast that in a few strides across the islets he can cross from India to Lanka. Evidently, the hymns of praise to the supernatural characteristic of the initial period now give way to—or at least face competition from—unearthly occurrences. In short: less attention devoted to transcendence and unnameable phenomena, and more scope for tall tales with a moral undertone, precisely as in myths and legends the world over. Hanuman has evolved into a deity in his own right, to whom the *Hanuman Chalisa* is dedicated. Wikipedia notes the following in this regard:

'The *Hanuman Chalisa* is a Hindu devotional hymn in praise of Hanuman, recited daily by millions of Hindus across the globe. Among Hindus, it is a popular belief that chanting the *Chalisa* invokes Hanuman's divine intervention in grave crises. It is a poem in Awadhi attributed to Tulsidas, a poet and philosopher who lived in the 16th century. The word *"chālīsā"* is derived from *"chālīs"*, which in Hindi signifies the number "forty", indicating the number of verses in the *Hanuman Chalisa* (excluding the couplets at the beginning and the end). According to Shaivism, Hanuman is an incarnation of Shiva. The *Hanuman Chalisa* extols the power and virtues of Hanuman, including his strength, courage, wisdom, celibacy, and devotion (*bhakti*) to Rama.'

Of later date than the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the Sutras, in which key concepts such as *dharma* and *vedanta* are treated. The *Manusmriti* is attributed to Manu—the Hindu equivalent of Noah from the deluge myth—and contains Hindu laws and codes of conduct. Originating from the first millennium CE are the Puranas, which focus on mythological tales surrounding kings and gods. Over time, a complete pantheon of countless deities was to emerge. This pantheon is anthropomorphic (even if Ganesha sports an elephant's head), yet a direct reflection of human behaviour is present to only a very limited extent. Compared to the Greek gods with all their mundane quirks and vices, these deities remain elusive and difficult to fathom.

Most Hindus believe in a supreme spirit, Brahman, yet direct their prayers to an entire pantheon comprising hundreds of gods, each displaying different aspects of Brahman. Within this expansive gathering, a hierarchy operates in which the trinity combines the principal deities: Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer).

Brahma, the first of the trinity, is the creator of the universe. He is depicted with four heads facing the four cardinal directions, riding upon swans or seated upon a sacred lotus flower. His consort is Saraswati, the goddess of art and education. Brahma possesses four hands, one of which is perpetually raised in blessing.

Vishnu is the preserver of the universe. He is frequently portrayed riding an eagle or sleeping upon a giant serpent. His consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of beauty and wealth.

Shiva is the destroyer of evil within the universe. He bears a trident as the symbol of destruction and carries the third eye of knowledge upon his forehead. Shiva rides a great bull named Nandi. His consort is the goddess Parvati.

Owing to a highly creative approach to incarnations, a deity such as Krishna can effortlessly manifest himself in the *Bhagavad Gita* as the supreme god. Indeed, he places himself above the aforementioned triumvirate. In various myths, Krishna dies only to reincarnate later, rendering him permanently available. The veneration of Krishna has become a specific branch within Hinduism, known in the West primarily through the Hare Krishna movement. Furthermore, thousands of other gods exist, often little more than local heroes. Depending on where one chooses to place the emphasis, Hinduism may thus be characterised as monotheistic, henotheistic, or polytheistic. Since these terms originate from an era when, further to the west, religious movements were developing in which polytheism was no longer self-evident, it remains debatable whether such a distinction can legitimately be applied to the far older Hindu tradition. Henotheism and monotheism acquire meaning only when polytheism ceases to be the norm. And by looking at Hinduism through that lens, one readily perceives it as polytheism and idol worship. The fact that Hindus worship images—often brightly coloured and playfully dressed—proved a persistent thorn in the side of the Muslims who invaded the subcontinent.

Devotion (*bhakti*) plays a central role in Hinduism. Yet the adoration of an image is by no means a one-way street. Something is asked, but something is also offered, even if it is merely a puff of warm air. Communication between human being and image presupposes the presence of the deity within the statue or depiction, which occurs only once it has been ritually consecrated. Sculptures on the exterior of a temple will, as a rule, not be consecrated; for that, one must step inside. Sacrifices of living creatures belong to a distant past; nowadays, an offering consists primarily of fruit and flowers.

A significant aspect of Hinduism is the special status of the cow, considered 'sacred' for a number of reasons:

Symbolism of the Mother Goddess: the cow is viewed as an earthly manifestation of the divine mother, representing fertility and abundance.

Practical Utility: cows yield milk (butter, yoghurt, buttermilk) and manure (fuel), and are vital to agriculture.

Ahimsa: the cow is regarded as a emblem of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and may therefore not be slaughtered.

Krishna is frequently portrayed as a cowherd, with the cow serving in many depictions as his hallmark.

As in all known cultures, there emerged within Aryan society a distinction between shamans and fighters, ultimately evolving into a

priestly caste and a warrior caste. Herein lies the origin of the *Varnas*, the social division into four groups commonly referred to as castes:
The Brahmins constitute the priestly caste.
The Kshatriyas represent the warrior and ruler caste.
The Vaishyas form the caste of merchants, artisans, and farmers.
The Shudras comprise the labourers and servants.
Individuals not born into a *varna* are considered 'outcastes' or Dalits, occupying the bottom rung of traditional hierarchy in Indian society. The four *varnas* emerged gradually during the Vedic period (1500 BCE to 500 BCE).
Bound up with this structure, the concept of *dharma* acquires its significance. It denotes something akin to a 'birth duty'—the obligation to lead one's life in conformity with the class into which one was born. For the priestly caste, this represents a timeless obligation; for the Kshatriyas, it held equal weight during the era when this class fulfilled a distinct societal role, as is so pregnant expressively captured in the *Bhagavad Gita*. For the remaining two classes, conceiving a tangible notion of this duty proves considerably more difficult. Consequently, the concept dilutes into a general obligation to live in accordance with societal rules, both in dealings with fellow humans and with the gods.
Far more relevant in practice than the *varnas* are the *jatis*, which relate to the occupations people pursue. In certain respects, *jatis* may be compared to medieval guilds. When speaking of castes, the terms *varna* and *jati* are frequently used interchangeably, though it is usually a *jati* that is meant.
Alongside *dharma*, the concept of *karma* is deployed. While the former relates to a (presumed) duty, the latter concerns the consequences of action—or indeed of inaction. Refraining from action, after all, can have pronounced consequences.
Within a system premised upon a cycle of multiple lives and reincarnation, *karma* plays a pivotal role. A less than virtuous path through life is colloquially translated into bad *karma* upon death, leading to a return in a life positioned lower on the social ladder. From there, one must work one's way up once more until reaching a level that offers liberation from this almost endless sequence of successive lives. In daily practice, people treat this notion rather loosely. Anyone committing an act at the expense of another is quickly warned that it is bad for their *karma*. It has become more of a threat than a prospect.
In contemporary society, *dharma* as a guiding principle may be understood as fulfilling the obligations required by one's social position, without the premeditated intention of personal gain. Even unpopular

measures must therefore not be shirked. If one gets 'torched' as a consequence, it does not automatically imply bad *karma*, as will be clear.
In the *Mahabharata*, the death of Krishna is commemorated. This marked the beginning of the *Kali Yuga*, also known as the Dark Age, the Age of Vice, or the Iron Age. It represents the fourth and final epoch in the cycle of ages, or *yugas*. The four ages are, in succession: *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Dvapara Yuga*, and *Kali Yuga*. According to tradition, the current *Kali Yuga* commenced at midnight on 23 January under the Gregorian calendar (or 18 February under the Julian calendar) in the year 3102 BCE. According to most interpretations of Hindu texts, the earth remains in the *Kali Yuga*, which will eventually be followed by the first period of the cycle: *Satya Yuga*. Others contend, however, that the earth stands at the dawn of *Dvapara Yuga*. In that view, the *yugas* are traversed anew, but in reverse order. Ultimately, a new cycle commences once more with the golden age of *Satya Yuga*.
Hindus believe that humanity degenerates spiritually throughout the entire cycle. In *Kali Yuga*, the nadir is reached; it is typically designated as the Dark Age because humanity then stands at its furthest remove from the divine period (*Satya Yuga*). During this final phase—ethically the lowest as well—most people are conscious solely of the physical aspects of life, with the primary emphasis resting on material survival.

Finally, a few observations regarding the Vedantas, the various philosophical schools that developed towards the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennium CE.
Central to each of them is the attempt to articulate absolute reality. Scholars and thinkers wrestled with the origin of the universe and their own place within it. In the non-dualistic variant, no distinction is drawn between the 'Self' and the universal principle (cf. Brahman). Via an intermediate form (*dvaitadvaita*), this evolved in the early Middle Ages into a dualistic system in which a distinction was made between humans and gods, affording greater scope for the *bhakti* culture that is so decisive for Hindu society. Much like Western philosophy, these systems have been superseded by the empirical knowledge of nature acquired since. As a phenomenon, however, these philosophies remain undeniably interesting, primarily owing to the objective character of their contemplations. In one instance, this leads to the conclusion that there is no place for a god or gods in the whole scheme—a downright atheistic approach. It would take many centuries before thinkers in the Western world dared to go so far.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is the work of multiple authors and consequently contains its fair share of inconsistencies and outright contradictions. Initially, the text appears to be defined primarily by the outlook of writers belonging to the non-dualistic school, but this aspect subsequently dilutes. Philosophy increasingly cedes ground to behavioral codes designed to foster a virtuous life. On the one hand, attention is paid to terminating the cycle of birth and rebirth (*Samsara*), thereby attaining *Moksha*—the state in which the soul (consciousness, Self) unites with Brahman. Human actions are, as it were, recorded in a grand ledger, and the sum total of pluses and minuses determines what will transpire after the death of the physical body. This constitutes the 'karma aspect' of the whole. On the other hand, heavy emphasis is placed upon following various 'paths of life', wherein one must first discern which path is most appropriate given one's character. Thus, a distinction is drawn between the paths of knowledge, devotion, and meditation. By these means, the individual is meant to draw as close as possible to the Almighty during life. The extent to which this influences the acquisition of 'karma bonus points' remains obscure.

The fact that Krishna ultimately manages to influence his pupil Arjuna to such a degree that the latter concludes his *dharma* dictates engaging in battle against an opponent led by his own family has been heavily criticised in later commentaries. The moral aspect of deliberately initiating and pursuing a slaughter simply because these are merely bodies and not souls—meaning nothing is lost in a cosmic sense—stands in direct opposition to the doctrine of non-violence formulated elsewhere in the book. For modern sensibility, it is unacceptable in any case. That this aspect plays such a prominent role in the Hindu bible can be explained by pointing to the era in which the narrative is set. Just as in the Hebrew Bible, the triad of god-enemy-war occupies a central position in ancient stories from the Hindu world for reasons of familiarity. That it can serve as a metaphor for an individual's inner struggle renders it less punchy and, for a broad audience, considerably less accessible. Aside from non-violence, the *Gita* also promotes vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol, and refraining from unsanctioned sexual relations such as adultery. In that respect, the book offers something for everyone, much like the Christian Bible, from which one can likewise quote selectively.

Buddhism

Buddhism is a philosophy of life that derives its name from Gautama Buddha, who lived in Northern India during the 4th century BCE. The Buddha was a man possessing a thoroughly idiosyncratic view regarding the principle of rebirth. He laid primary emphasis upon the suffering that human beings are bound to experience across recurring existences. Only by bringing this endless succession of lives to an end can man be liberated from that suffering and attain a state of bliss termed *nirvana*. Upon dying thereafter, no further rebirth in whatever guise will take place. To this end, one must tread the 'middle way'—a manner of living oriented entirely towards personal interest. The middle way implies the avoidance of extremes: neither living ascetically (detrimental to oneself) nor excessively exuberantly (which directly or indirectly comes at the expense of others). This doctrine culminates in a monastic existence and isolation from society. For concepts such as *dharma* and *karma*, no space is reserved within this philosophy of life, and the presumed existence and role of a pantheon of gods is left entirely out of account. In Western terms, Buddhism is thus a heretical interpretation or offshoot of Hinduism. An overview of the Buddha's doctrines and ideas:

The Four Noble Truths describe suffering, its origin, the possibility of liberation from it, and the path to attain this release. These truths are sometimes also formulated in terms of the presence of happiness, its cause, its absence, and the cause of that absence. The Four Noble Truths in their classical definition are:

Dukkha: there is suffering and dissatisfaction in life.

Samudaya: there is a cause for this suffering: desire.

Nirodha: a cessation of this suffering is possible.

Magga: and there exists a path leading towards it: the Noble Eightfold Path.

The concepts of 'suffering' and 'desire' possess a concrete connotation in the West. By suffering, we tend to think of matters such as disease, loss, and despair. By desire, we generally signify the craving for tangible things, such as a larger house, vast wealth, or power and prestige. In Buddhism, these concepts bear a broader and far more subtle meaning. Suffering, *dukkha*, implies that existence is inherently imperfect. This engenders *tanha*, thirst—the desire for things to be other than they are: if only certain desires were satisfied, my life would be better.

Dukkha: existence is imperfect; no matter how diligently one tries to make something of it, it remains carrying water in a basket, wherein the quality of the wickerwork, of course, plays a significant role.
Samudaya: simultaneously with the experience of *dukkha*, *tanha* arises—the longing for reality to be different from what it appears. Human beings remain entrapped in this desire by failing to perceive reality as it is, namely imperfect.
Nirodha: the longing for reality to be different than it is can be contained and bounded. The greater the insight into reality, the greater the acceptance.
Magga: that acceptance is acquired by following the 'Eightfold Path'.
The Eightfold Path consists of:

1. Right Understanding: pure comprehension of the causes of suffering and their resolution.
2. Right Intention: striving for enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings.
3. Right Speech: refraining from slander and falsehood.
4. Right Action: refraining from killing, stealing, misuse of sensory pleasures, lying, and intoxicants.
5. Right Livelihood: pursuing no occupation that harms others.
6. Right Effort: striving towards wholesome thoughts and mental states.
7. Right Mindfulness**:** *vipassana*.
8. Right Concentration: meditation.

The Eightfold Path is also frequently summarised as *prajna* (insight, wisdom), *sila* (morality, ethical conduct), and *samadhi* (meditation). It is viewed as a path toward enlightenment, yet it does not in itself generate enlightenment—much as a path may lead to a mountain peak without creating the mountain peak itself.

Liberation from the cycle of rebirth arises through insight into the workings of cause and effect, into the emergence of attachments, and into the mastery of the mind. Thereby one enters *nirvana*, the state of extinction. Whether *nirvana* is eternal and thus constitutes fundamental reality, or whether no pronouncements can be made on the matter, remains a subject of ongoing debate. Gautama Buddha himself refrained from expressing an opinion on this. Given that his views reserved no room for such a thing as the human soul, doing so was hardly possible. He compared it to the fate of a flame. When no longer fed by fuel or when shut off from the outside world, it goes out as a matter of course. It is of little utility subsequently to inquire where the flame has departed to. The conditions required to sustain the flame are no

longer met, and thus it expires. So it will be for the human being who attains *nirvana*.
From the outset, Buddhism was a proselytising philosophy. Gautama gathered disciples around him and sent them out into the wider world to disseminate his wisdoms. He explicitly aimed not merely for his own salvation, but for that of everyone. As a side effect, monasteries emerged filled with monks who devoted themselves entirely to their personal liberation. In point of fact, this ran counter to the proselytising principle, yet it proved impossible to stem. Elaborate rules were drawn up for monastic life, comparable to the situation centuries later in the Christian world. By providing for the maintenance of the monks, adherents outside the monastery could cultivate their 'merit' and thus catch a crumb from the table. A comparison may be drawn here with paying monks to pray in order to shorten one's anticipated stay in purgatory—a practice that rendered Christian monastic orders immensely wealthy.

Later, people took to 'stacking'. Down through the centuries, more and more was added under the motto that Gautama Buddha had merely expounded a simplified version of his teaching because his audience lacked the perceptive capacity for the complete story—much like a university professor who adjusts his lecture when addressing a nursery school. This cleared the way for devising whatever addition took one's fancy. The major leap occurred when it was posited that Gautama Buddha had been merely a temporary manifestation in human guise, and that 'the Buddha' is in reality a universal phenomenon, present always and everywhere, in everything and everyone. Thereby, the doctrine of Gautama Buddha transformed into a religion in which 'the Buddha' could be worshipped and favours petitioned. This, in turn, led to temples with statues to render the phenomenon tangible. A parallel may be drawn with the man Jesus and the God of whom he was purported to be the temporary manifestation.
Still later arose the concept of the *Bodhisattva*: a living individual who temporarily waives his personal quest for *nirvana*, assisting others instead to improve their *karma* and reach *nirvana*. The most prominent Bodhisattvas are Avalokiteshvara and Manjusri. The Tibetan lamas are presumed to be incarnations of the former.
In so doing, a pantheon of Bodhisattvas and multiple Buddhas gradually took shape, proceeding from the notion that our own world could hardly be the sole one blessed with a magnificent Buddha. Thus emerged a family of five Buddhas, often portrayed together in mystical diagrams termed mandalas. In these, Sakyamuni (Gautama Buddha)

occupies the centre, while the newly devised Buddhas reside in the four cardinal directions.
Furthermore, a school of thought arose maintaining that one need not traverse multiple existences to attain *nirvana*, but that lives could also be conceived as phases of life. In that view, one succeeds within a single lifetime. Properly considered, that is what Gautama claimed for himself: during his later life, he already resided in *nirvana*. His death would be definitive—even if he left open how many prior lives he had by then accumulated.
Countless temples arose across the countries of South and South-East Asia, often housing multiple Buddha statues. At times, a larger statue is encircled by a 'thousand' miniature figurines—a phenomenon observed particularly in Laos. Devotion is frequently accompanied by the offering of gifts, with the application of razor-thin sheets of gold leaf onto a statue being widespread, especially in Burma, the Buddhist country *par excellence*. So much so that the statue risks forfeiting its original contours beneath the ever-accumulating layer of gold covering it.

The current three main branches of Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.
Theravada is the oldest school, concerning itself primarily with the scriptures and the liberation of the individual; it spread predominantly to South-East Asia.
Mahayana is also known as the 'Great Vehicle' and focuses on salvation for all; it is prominent chiefly in the north, such as China and Japan.
Vajrayana is also known as the 'Diamond Vehicle' or Tantric Buddhism, constituting a branch of Mahayana. This is the most esoteric school, occurring primarily in Tibet and surrounding lands, though also found in China and Japan.
Owing in part to the arrival of Islam on the subcontinent, Buddhism gradually disappeared entirely from India. Classical Theravada Buddhism struck root primarily in Burma and Sri Lanka, where to this day it remains the dominant religion across large swathes of the country. In Japan, the Mahayana variant flourished because it dovetailed seamlessly with Shintoism, with which it ultimately almost merged. When in the 19th century it was decreed by state authority that Shintoism would henceforth serve as the state religion, this animistic tradition was purged of its Buddhist influences.

Shintoism

Shintoism, or Shinto, is the indigenous religion of Japan. The word represents a combination of two Chinese characters and signifies 'the way of the gods'. In Shintoism, so-called *kami* (nature spirits) are worshipped. Certain *kami* are local—that is to say, spirits belonging to a specific place—while others are identified with grander objects and phenomena in nature. Amaterasu, for instance, is the Sun Goddess. Shintoism is a highly developed religion of nature (animism) that is deeply embedded in Japanese society. From 1868 until shortly after the Second World War, Shintoism served as the state religion. Down through the centuries, considerable mutual influence occurred between Shintoism and Buddhism.

A central aspect is a profound love and reverence for nature. A waterfall, the moon, or merely a singularly shaped rock may be deemed a *kami*. The same holds true for charismatic individuals and for more abstract phenomena such as growth and fertility. Gradually, the original animistic features of Shintoism grew less distinct, and the *kami* assumed more anthropomorphic guises, entwined with numerous myths. Yet the *kami* are by no means transcendent deities in the Western sense of the word; though divine, they inhabit the selfsame world as we do.

Kami are venerated primarily in public shrines, though also in small private shrines, which at times consist of nothing more than a high shelf bearing a few ritual objects. Certain of these shrines, or *jinja*, are grand structures, yet the majority are modest buildings constructed in the characteristic Japanese style. Compared to, say, Christianity with its imposing cathedrals of costly materials, *jinja* are often exceedingly simple wooden structures. The physical building is secondary, serving essentially to mark out a specific locus. *Jinja* are typically erected on elevated ground, with some being rather difficult to reach. Access to the grounds is usually marked by a distinctive Japanese *torii* gate, consisting of two upright posts surmounted by two crossbeams. The structure is frequently painted a vibrant (vermilion) red. Upwards of 100,000 of these shrines remain in active use, each staffed by a small number of Shinto priests.

Kami are invoked during significant milestones such as weddings, university admissions, and the groundbreaking of buildings. Prayers are likewise frequently offered for earthly matters, such as a child, a promotion, or a happier life. During funerals, by contrast, it is predominantly the more Buddhist elements that come to the fore, much as in

China. The adoration of the *kami* intensifies during the numerous Shinto festivals.
Until shortly after the Second World War, it was believed that the Emperor descended directly from Amaterasu and was therefore himself a *kami*—namely an *ikigami*, a 'living *kami*'. Though military leaders (Shoguns) frequently held the reins of power, the Emperor was regarded as the true ruler, if only in name. Under American pressure, Emperor Hirohito renounced this divine status in 1946, yet the Imperial Family remains deeply involved in the Shinto rituals that symbolise the unity of Japan.
Shintoism exerts a major influence upon Japanese culture. Although disentangling its precise impact from that of Buddhism presents a formidable challenge, it is evident that Shintoism's emphasis on nature underpins flower arranging (*ikebana*), Japanese architecture, and garden design.
At a later juncture, Buddhism made its entry into the country, and the two traditions have since coexisted in what may almost be termed a symbiosis. Within Buddhism, the Zen sect in particular acquired a vast following in Japan, turning into what is virtually a standalone religion. Buddhism brought with it codes of conduct, a moral framework. In this connection, it is amusing to quote an observation by the 18th-century scholar Motoori Norinaga regarding the absence of ethical precepts in Shintoism: 'This is because Japanese people were so morally elevated in their daily lives that they stood in no need of a theory of morality.'

Confucianism

This philosophy of life bears the name of its founder, and to comprehend its enduring influence in China, one must search for any competing religions that were or are adhered to in this vast country. Aside from Buddhism—which was not originally a true religion but degenerated into one only later—every trace of a pantheon of gods influencing human existence is absent. In that respect, a cosmological rift exists between China and virtually the entire rest of the world, or at any rate the monotheism-focused West. Into this divine vacuum, the doctrine of Confucius was able to assert itself as a substitute for religion in the customary sense. It was as a direct consequence of Confucius attaching immense value to honouring parents and ancestors—even up to three generations following their demise—that ancestor worship in a ritual sense acquired a religious significance. This may offer an explanation for the rise of Buddhism in its later guise, when the

Buddha was effectively elevated to a god and temples arose wherein his image could be venerated. Rituals pertaining to society—which are in point of fact primarily prescriptions for proper social etiquette and ethics—invariably seem to lose out to the apparently irresistible urge innate to so many human beings to worship a god, particularly one so potent that petitioning him for favours makes sense.

Confucius lived from 551 to 479 BCE, an era in which people spoke wistfully of the bygone golden ages of Chinese civilisation. Although historiography commenced only later, it was widely assumed that the Shang Dynasty arose around 1600 BCE and endured until approximately 1045 BCE. It thus takes its place alongside the oldest civilisations in the world, such as the Egyptian, Sumerian, and Harappan cultures. The Shang were succeeded by the Zhou, a dynastic shift made possible because the final Shang emperor was, according to tradition, an immoral, hedonistic potentate who ruled as a tyrant. This rendered it relatively straightforward for a prospective ruler to topple him from the throne. For Confucius, this served as proof that only a virtuous sovereign is capable of maintaining power. That virtue is primarily a matter of moral superiority, manifesting itself in empathy, wisdom, care for subjects, and refraining from prioritising personal interest. Properly considered, Confucius extrapolated his model of a family—wherein everyone knows their place and strictly adheres to proper etiquette and rituals—onto the state, with the ruler occupying the role of the patriarch. At bottom, this is the selfsame notion of a 'national community' that was propagated in Nazi Germany, minus the exclusion of specific population groups. The next step in this reasoning is that a ruler, through exemplary conduct, can move the populace in the right direction. Every individual will, as a matter of course, behave as an exemplary member of the national community so as not to bring shame upon his ruler.

To put his ideas into practice, Confucius travelled far and wide in search of a ruler at whose court he might secure an appointment as a moral advisor—without success. In the era in which he lived, his vision stood far removed from everyday reality. His influence, however, was to prove enduring, and through two key followers—Mencius in the fourth century BCE and Xunzi in the third century BCE—a corpus of literature emerged that accorded Confucian philosophy a central place in Chinese thought. It took a few centuries more, but during the reign of Emperor Wu towards the end of the second century BCE, Confucianism was elevated to the official ideology of the state. This occurred during the Han dynasty.

Although Confucius envisioned no role for a creator deity who subsequently monitored the progress of his creation and ruled over nature, he did acknowledge the concept of Heaven as a cosmological entity that, in combination with the Earth, had to remain in balance according to the *yin* and *yang* principle. Should earthly affairs spiral out of control, as occurred towards the end of the Shang dynasty, that balance was disrupted; to restore it, a reset on Earth had to take place, as it were. A later ruler of the Zhou dynasty turned this into a brilliant piece of propaganda by introducing the principle of the Mandate of Heaven. An emperor could rule only so long as this mandate remained valid. It was granted to him conditionally, subject to the terms previously outlined by Confucius, of course. Were the Mandate revoked, scope emerged for a new emperor and the inception of a new dynasty. This construct also implied that an emperor could be deposed by his populace if he ceased to be worthy of the Mandate and the balance between Heaven and Earth became disrupted.

Mencius, and after him Xunzi, concerned themselves primarily with the question of how virtue in man could be cultivated to such a degree that he would act as a worthy member of the populace. Naturally, this applied equally to the emperor, who, after all, was also born as a blank slate. Precisely the extent to which that slate was indeed blank formed the chief point of contention between these two proponents of Confucian philosophy. Mencius posited that goodness is inherent in human nature and must be cultivated through upbringing to reach full fruition. Education and development are central to this view, and here we discern the origin of the later Chinese ‘examination system’ that was decisive for a career as a civil servant. Xunzi held a somewhat less optimistic view of human nature. He viewed man as beset by selfishness, a drive for power, and above all the urge to improve his own lot. Thereby, he remained considerably closer to reality than his predecessor. Nevertheless, according to Xunzi, something could still be made of man, and on this point both thinkers converged upon the necessity of a rigorous education. Except that in Xunzi's view, it was not a matter of gently developing a latent potential, but rather of molding in the desired direction. He deployed the image of a straight piece of wood that, by means of a frame, can be permanently bent. His form of education is thus characterized by a degree of repression; one must overcome less desirable traits before a human being can be further cultivated.
For civil servants, what mattered above all was that they had been pressed into the correct mold, and an exhaustive examination system

was erected to select the most suitable candidates for lifelong service. Generic quality came first; specific skills that might, for instance, render someone an outstanding administrator in water management followed later. That selection took place once an appointment had been secured. It may be compared to the selection of military officers, where specialization likewise occurs only in a subsequent trajectory.

For upwards of a thousand years, the interpretation of Mencius and Xunzi remained dominant, but at the dawn of the second millennium CE, a new Confucian school emerged, commonly designated 'the Learning of the Way'. The immediate impetus was the severely deteriorated social and political situation. The north of the country had been lost to the 'barbaric' Jurchen tribe, much to the horror of the Chinese elite. Had the emperor and his government acted in accordance with the principles of Confucius, this would assuredly not have occurred. Now the emperor had forfeited the Mandate, and it was to be feared that the Jurchen would lay claim to it (if only for propaganda purposes). This bred doubts regarding the relevance of Confucian philosophy in its classical form. Hardly surprising: it had been formulated fifteen centuries earlier, and the world had moved on since.

Competition arrived from an entirely different quarter with the rising popularity of Buddhism, particularly the Zen variant. Central to it was a philosophy oriented towards investigating the nature and essence of man, self-actualisation, self-knowledge, and exploring man's relationship to the cosmos. The preoccupation with 'enlightenment' in particular sparked concern; it led to individuals turning their backs on society, which stood in direct opposition to the absolute importance attached in Chinese society to moral self-elevation in service of the community and the well-being of others. To put it bluntly: Buddhism spawned anti-social individuals, and that was in the long run far more perilous than invading barbarians. Buddhists were barbarians in their own land.

The sole means of turning the tide was a renovation of Confucianism, superimposing a transcendent layer upon it. Not that Confucius himself would have possessed the slightest sympathy for such a move, but that was of lesser concern. The so-called Neo-Confucianism retroactively provided a metaphysical foundation for the master's doctrine and, on this basis, formulated a programme for self-development detailing step by step how one might become a 'sage'. In contrast to the enlightened Buddhist, the morally perfected human being remains entirely focused on serving society and generating harmony. In this manner, the 'Way' that had once been decisive within Confucianism could be revitalized. Ambitious, perhaps, but it worked. Neo-