

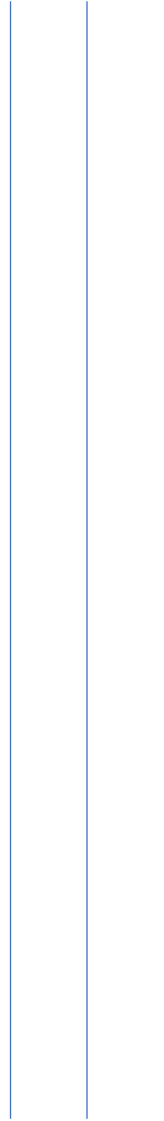
# Dictionary of Religion

Definitions for Common  
Terms in Religious Studies



By Ryan Robinson

Dictionary of Religion  
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Z

## Language and Religion

Many of these definitions are not widely accepted by scholars. However, this is often because no definition is established or the customary definition has significant flaws. There is much debate and little to no consensus for the definitions of many foundational terms in the study of religion and theology. This is true for many reasons and starts with the central term; religion.

Without shared and mutually understood definitions it is impossible to have coherent discussions about the nature and features of religion and religious belief.

The definitions presented here are presented specifically to address major problems when attempting to have discussions between faiths or in comparative religions.

***This booklet has two parts.***

***The first half is ordered to (hopefully) help a reader unfamiliar with these concepts and terms gain orientation to and understanding of the complex set of interrelated topics.***

***The second half lists terms alphabetically as a standard reference.***

This dictionary does not include terms specific to Paganism and Pagan practice.

## English and Latent Christianity

Discussing the variety of beliefs within Paganism is challenging. In part, this is because the foundational assumptions of Western religious scholarship are rooted in the specific framework of Christianity. These concepts are so deeply embedded in the English language that sometimes descriptions of other religious frameworks can only be constructed in terms of the evolution of Christianity.

In some cases this Western Christian baseline is unintentional. It is a natural result of generations of Christian dominance in Europe. During these eras the major religious conflicts among groups that could reliably communicate in English and its preceding languages were schisms internal to Christianity; Orthodox, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. While other religions were present, the most common were Judaism or Islam, related religions that were often understood and misunderstood using the fundamental features of Christianity. Other religions in this region were minorities that converted to Christianity or were subjected to genocide.

In other cases, the Christian presumption has been deliberate. Defining religion in terms of textual, organized institutions framed according to the specific practices and worldviews of Christianity allowed many cultures to be belittled, degraded, and disregarded. The refusal to acknowledge indigenous and local belief systems as “religion” allowed the displacement of these belief systems in active support of colonialism. Efforts towards Christian subjugation and dominion can be seen as early as Roman dominance of Northern Europe and, in its most explicit and graphic forms, as recently as the Indian schools in North America. Today, Christian missionaries in Africa still cause actual witch hunts; threatening, displacing, injuring, maiming, and killing practitioners of indigenous religions and uninvolved individuals alike.

Understanding the range of human religious systems, including Pagan religions, requires defining fundamental concepts in a way that acknowledges the breadth of spiritual belief and activity beyond that of Western post-Enlightenment Christianity.

independent of the material universe and beyond all known physical laws. This non-physical aspect may be dualist or immaterialist in nature.

## U

**Unverified personal gnosis (UPG)** – Sometimes called subjective personal gnosis. These are beliefs gained through personal experience or intuition that cannot be attributed or corroborated. This is contrasted with community knowledge (received tradition, agreed practice, or corroboration by others) or textual knowledge (from written accounts, artifacts, or secondary scholarship).

**Universal Religion** – Also Universalist religion. A religion not limited in ethnic or racial participation regardless of its origin.

## V

**Veneration** – An activity where a deity, aspect of the divine, or other spirit is given great respect and reverence. Some or all of the subject’s significant attributes may be specifically listed and celebrated.

## W

**World Religion** – A classification of religions used in some discussion that describes the spread of that religion. It is often measured by its influence, particularly on Western culture.

**Worship** – To regard with great respect, honor, or devotion. This is often assumed to extend to concepts like adoration, glorification, and prostration. In religion, this is typically an action directed towards one or more deities. However, “hero worship” and honoring are useful ways to frame this concept.

outside the understood laws of a materialist universe.

The term "supernatural" emerged in the Middle Ages and did not exist in the ancient world. In many cultures the term is meaningless; many dualist and animist worldviews lack an idea of existing beyond or outside nature. The term is frequently used in a derogatory and dismissive manner.

Terms like transcendent carry the same features of being related to the immaterial and separate from the physical. The terms spiritual and divine indicate being associated with the immaterial without comment on their relationship to the material.

**Supplication** – To seek aid, assistance, or favor from. To petition or request something. Specifically, to request intercession.

**Syncretism** – The practice of combining different beliefs and schools of thought, especially in theology and mythology. This practice has historically produced an inclusive approach to other faiths.

## T

**Tao** – See Dharma.

**Textual Religion** – Religion based on a written document of central importance. Sometimes described as scripture, this document may include significant mythology, ritual, and customs.

**Theism** – Belief in one or more deities.

**Theology** – The study of religious belief from a religious perspective. This discipline seeks to understand the nature of the divine and its relation to the universe.

**Transcendent** – Related to an aspect of existence that is

**Religion** – A framework that typically includes behaviors, practices, worldviews, beliefs, morals, and ethics. These may be codified through myths, places, or organizations and expressed through supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements. However, none of these aspects are universal or required.

**Philosophy** – A theory, idea, or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior. It often includes worldviews, morals, and ethics. It may incorporate beliefs, behaviors, and practices. When systems are identified as “philosophies” rather than “religions” it is generally because it is materialist or lacks a form of gnosis.

**Spiritual Fitness** – An aspect of psychological fitness that considers a subject’s beliefs, values, and practices that strengthen their sense of connection, meaning, and purpose.

**Textual Religion** – Religion based on a written document of central importance. Sometimes described as scripture, this document may include significant mythology, ritual, and customs.

**Oral Religion** – Religion based on tradition or lore passed through speech or song.

**Lived Religion** – Also called popular, traditional, or vernacular religion. These are forms and expressions of religion that are distinct from the official doctrines and practices of organized religion.

**Folk Religion** – The generally informal religious dimension of culture. Often dismissed as superstition, these systems of belief can carry significant rituals, customs, mythology, and beliefs.

**Theology** – The study of religious belief from a religious perspective. This discipline seeks to understand the nature of the divine and its relation to the universe.

**Belief** – A subjective opinion, position, or view that an idea or concept is true. The term describes statements about the world that can be either true or false.

**Faith** – Confidence or trust in a person, thing, or concept. Especially trust with strong conviction or without proof. This may include any specific belief. These beliefs may regard relationships with divinity. In some systems of belief, it is discussed regarding interpersonal relationships like those between host and guest.

**Syncretism** – The practice of combining different beliefs and schools of thought, especially in theology and mythology. This practice has historically produced an inclusive approach to other faiths.

**Proselytism** – A desire, policy, or need to convert others; changing their religious beliefs. Also, evangelistic.

**Indigenous Religion** – Religion native to a specific area.

**Ethnic Religion** – Religion associated with a particular ethnic group.

**Universal Religion** – Also Universalist religion. A religion not limited in ethnic or racial participation regardless of its origin.

**World Religion** – A classification of religions used in some discussion that describes the spread of that religion. It is often measured by its influence, particularly on Western culture.

## S

**Sacred** – Something (generally an item, place, or being) considered worthy of spiritual respect or devotion. The term is often used for things dedicated to the service or worship of the divine. Similar terms are sanctified or holy.

**Salvation** – See Soteriology.

**Secular** – Unrelated to or neutral regarding religion. Also, mundane.

**Soteriology** – A religious mythology or doctrine of salvation. The specific nature of what people must be saved from varies, as does the method of being saved.

Some religions include a savior figure. This individual may appear during an eschatological time to save a chosen people, such as the Hebrew and Christian Messiah, Hindu Kalki, and Daoist Li Hong. Others are prophets who have previously provided guidance and aid such as bodhisattva, Muhammad, or Epicurus.

**Spirit** – A being whose existence or abilities, as understood, are outside a materialist worldview. They may be non-physical entities, however this is not always a requirement. Better-known examples include ghosts, fairies, and jinn. Spirits are focuses of belief regarding some aspect of reality or experience. They may be viewed as literal, independent beings, as psychological archetypes, as a representation of external events, or in numerous other ways.

**Spiritual Fitness** – An aspect of psychological fitness that considers a subject's beliefs, values, and practices that strengthen their sense of connection, meaning, and purpose.

**Supernatural** – A term used to describe forces, events, or beings

communication with an object of worship. This is often used as a means of supplication, particularly for intercession.

The word "prayer" comes from the Latin word *precari*, meaning "to beg." Vulgate Latin used *oratio*; to speak, address, or send a message. By contrast, the Hebrew word is *tefilah*, meaning "self-analysis" or "self-evaluation," from the root *pelel*; "executing judgment" or "thinking."

**Proselytism** – A desire, policy, or need to convert others; changing their religious beliefs. Also, evangelistic.

**Prostration** – Submission.

The physical state of lying stretched out on the ground with one's face downward. Prostration involves parts of the body above the knee touching the ground, especially the hands, which distinguishes it from the lesser acts of bowing or kneeling.

Many religions describe an attitude of prostration toward a deity, the divine, or important beings such as senior religious figures or spirits when praying, even if the physical act is not required.

## Q

## R

**Ragnarök** – See Eschatology.

**Religion** – A framework that typically includes behaviors, practices, worldviews, beliefs, morals, and ethics. These may be codified through myths, places, or organizations and expressed through supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements. However, none of these aspects are universal or required.

**Materialism** – A belief that matter is the fundamental substance in nature and that all things, including mental states and consciousness, are entirely a result of physical interactions between these. This is often described as physicalism or naturalism; the idea that only natural laws and forces operate in a universe that lacks any supernatural component. It is sometimes also described as antisupernaturalism.

**Immaterialism** – Also called subjective idealism or empirical idealism. This worldview holds that only a mental or spiritual world exists and physical or material aspects are a projection, illusion, or other perception. Plato's allegory of the cave is one of the best-known Western explorations of this concept. In such a worldview, the non-material world is often considered a spiritual truth or ultimate reality.

**Dualism** – A belief that there are both physical and non-physical aspects to existence. Materialism and immaterialism present opposing concepts of a singular reality, dualism holds that both exist. The result is some relationship between the "mundane," physical world and some form of non-physical, spiritual world.

There are many ways a dualist reality has been described. These worlds may be separated and/or interconnected in different ways, and the nature of what is found within each varies.

One form of dualist existence posits that the physical world is entirely interconnected with the immaterial world. Every aspect of the material world has an immaterial counterpart and aspect. Another form of dualist existence expresses reality as a collection of multiple spiritual and/or physical worlds, each with its own natural laws and relationships to one another.

**Animism** – A belief that there is no clear separation between the spiritual and physical world, and all material phenomena may have agency. This is often expressed as a distinct spiritual essence in objects, places, creatures, or forces.

**Supernatural** – A term used to describe forces, events, or beings outside the understood laws of a materialist universe.

The term "supernatural" emerged in the Middle Ages and did not exist in the ancient world. In many cultures the term is meaningless; many dualist and animist worldviews lack an idea of existing beyond or outside nature. The term is frequently used in a derogatory and dismissive manner.

Terms like transcendent carry the same features of being related to the immaterial and separate from the physical. The terms spiritual and divine indicate being associated with the immaterial without comment on their relationship to the material.

**Spirit** – A being whose existence or abilities, as understood, are outside a materialist worldview. They may be non-physical entities, however this is not always a requirement. Better-known examples include ghosts, fairies, and jinn. Spirits are focuses of belief regarding some aspect of reality or experience. They may be viewed as literal, independent beings, as psychological archetypes, as a representation of external events, or in numerous other ways.

## P

**Pantheism** – The belief that all of reality is the divine. This deity may be expressed or conceived as a supreme entity or as an all-encompassing unity, which also relates to monism. This does *not* mean “belief in a pantheon of gods,” that is polytheism.

**Philosophy** – A theory, idea, or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior. It often includes worldviews, morals, and ethics. It may incorporate beliefs, behaviors, and practices. When systems are identified as “philosophies” rather than “religions” it is generally because it is materialist or lacks a form of gnosis.

**Praise** – See Adoration.

**Profane** – The original meaning of profane is to have secular purpose or more simply mundane. Over time, profane has taken on a sense of being destructive to that which is holy. However, this can be traced to Gnostic and Christian ideas that the material world is inherently evil.

**Prophet** – An individual believed to have received one or more mystic or ecstatic revelations providing them significant gnosis.

**Polytheism** – The belief that multiple deities exist. A major division in polytheistic practices is between “soft” polytheism and “hard” polytheism.

Soft polytheism believes that the same gods are interpreted through the lenses of different cultures. For example, believing that Odin, Zeus, and Indra are a single god interpreted by Germanic, Greek, and Indic peoples.

By contrast, hard polytheism asserts that every god is a distinct, separate, real divine being.

**Prayer** – A deliberate invocation that seeks a rapport or



intuitive knowledge or power. At its most extreme, an experience of union or direct communion with the divine in which knowledge regarding reality can be directly received through subjective experience.

**Myth** – A component or aspect of a religion. Related to folklore, folk tales, legends, and theology, these narratives capture or explain aspects of the worldview, customs, morality, institutions, and other features of a religion.

## N

**Numinous** – Mysterious or awe-inspiring, arousing spiritual or religious emotion. An irrational experience or feeling not related to the material senses that describes a presence or awareness of power or majesty.

## O

**Oblation** – See Devotion.

**Omnism** – Belief that all religions are valid and hold some fundamental truth.

**Oral Religion** – Religion based on tradition or lore passed through speech or song.

**Orthodoxy** – “Uniformity in belief,” particularly regarding worldview.

**Orthopraxy** – “Uniformity in practice,” a set of established behaviors shared within a group.

**Gnosis** – A knowledge or insight from or about subjects outside the material world. Also, divine revelation.

**Agnosticism** – A belief that the existence of an immaterial world or its contents is unknown, unknowable, or both.

**Gnosticism** – A system of belief where knowledge or insight from an immaterial world is used to free the divine spark within humanity from material existence.

**Ecstatic** – A mystic state of being beyond reason and self-control. Ecstatic experiences are often marked by out-of-body experiences, prophecy, and/or temporary madness.

**Mystic** – A state in which an individual receives direct and intuitive knowledge or power. At its most extreme, an experience of union or direct communion with the divine in which knowledge regarding reality can be directly received through subjective experience.

**Liminal** – An ambiguous or transitory state; in between one state and another. The concept was developed to describe the quality of ambiguity or disorientation in the middle stage of a rite of passage; when participants no longer have their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the rite is complete. It has expanded to include other types of disassociated states, spaces, and times expected to be short-lived and transitory.

**Secular** – Unrelated to or neutral regarding religion. Also, mundane.

**Divine** – Related to the concepts of sacredness and transcendence. Theist belief systems express or connect to the divine through one or more deities. Some theist religions assert deity is the only expression or connection to the divine. Things that come from or are closely connected with a deity become divine through that association. The divine is sometimes confused with inherent “goodness,” but many divine figures are morally ambiguous.

**Transcendent** – Related to an aspect of existence that is independent of the material universe and beyond all known physical laws. This non-physical aspect may be dualist or immaterialist in nature.

**Numinous** – Mysterious or awe-inspiring, arousing spiritual or religious emotion. An irrational experience or feeling not related to the material senses that describes a presence or awareness of power or majesty.

**Inviolable** – Something which cannot be broken, degraded, or altered. Either something that grants status as transcendent, numinous, and/or sacred while unbroken (such as certain rituals and vows) or something for which that status is inherent and cannot be lost (things that are divine). A similar term is sacrosanct.

**Sacred** – Something (generally an item, place, or being) considered worthy of spiritual respect or devotion. The term is often used for things dedicated to the service or worship of the divine. Similar terms are sanctified or holy.

**Profane** – The original meaning of profane is to have secular purpose or more simply mundane. Over time, profane has taken on a sense of being destructive to that which is holy. However, this can be traced to Gnostic and Christian ideas that the material world is inherently evil.

## M

**Maat** – See Dharma.

**Magic** – An event that is inexplicable by known scientific laws or within the framework of a materialist universe. Magic may be attributed to any number of material or immaterial forces and effects. This may include divine forces, as in a miracle.

This is sometimes stylized as “magick” to differentiate it from stage performance or illusion.

**Materialism** – A belief that matter is the fundamental substance in nature and that all things, including mental states and consciousness, are entirely a result of physical interactions between these. This is often described as physicalism or naturalism; the idea that only natural laws and forces operate in a universe that lacks any supernatural component. It is sometimes also described as antisupernaturalism.

**Miracle** – An event that is inexplicable by known scientific laws or within the framework of a materialist universe. Miracles are often attributed to divine forces. Also, magic.

**Monotheism** – Belief in a single, supreme deity, generally styled capital G - God, that denies the existence of any other gods. Other supernatural entities may exist, but their relationship to divinity is their relationship to that singular God.

**Mundane** – See Secular.

**Mystic** – A state in which an individual receives direct and

cannot be lost (things that are divine). A similar term is sacrosanct.

**Invocation** – The call, invitation, or summoning of a deity or other spirit.

## J

## K

**Khernips** – See Ceremonial Washing.

## L

**Liminal** – An ambiguous or transitory state; in between one state and another. The concept was developed to describe the quality of ambiguity or disorientation in the middle stage of a rite of passage; when participants no longer have their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the rite is complete. It has expanded to include other types of disassociated states, spaces, and times expected to be short-lived and transitory.

**Literalism** – Also called mythic or textual literalism, is an approach to religion where individuals believe that the myths are accurate descriptions of events and individuals rather than allegories or metaphors. This is far less common among Pagans than more textually based religions because of the gaps and conflicts in many records of Pagan myth cycles.

**Lived Religion** – Also called popular, traditional, or vernacular religion. These are forms and expressions of religion that are distinct from the official doctrines and practices of organized religion.

**Deity** – Also referred to as a god/goddess. A clear definition of what makes a being a god is subject to frequent debate and personal belief. One common definition is that it is a powerful form of spiritual being or superior position in spiritual hierarchies. However, what divides a deity from other forms of significant or powerful spirit is a major point of disagreement.

**Theism** – Belief in one or more deities.

**Atheism** – A lack of belief in any form of deity.

Individuals most frequently described this way in general culture often hold a position described as positive, strong, or hard atheism; a person that *firmly believes* that no form of deity exists. The type of atheism is often closely associated with materialism and humanism. However, atheism extends beyond this definition.

A second form of atheism is those who, after consideration, *lack belief* in one or more deities. Like the more familiar definition of atheist, these are both explicit atheists. However, those who *lack belief* in any deity are considered negative, weak, or soft atheists.

Other types of negative atheists are implicit atheists. They also *lack belief* in any deity. However, implicit atheists *have not* seriously considered the question while explicit atheists have. Implicit atheists include those who have never heard of the concept of deity (including the very young or isolated) and those who have been exposed to the concept but have not reached a conclusion (including those who feel they lack sufficient information and those who don't care).

Another important term is non-theism or nontheism which is often used to describe religions that, while technically atheist because they lack any explicit gods, may include other supernatural elements including other forms of spirit. These explicit negative atheists include some Buddhist, Hindu, and other Eastern traditions where spiritual and transcendent elements exist but are not elevated to the level of a god.

**Pantheism** – The belief that all of reality is the divine. This deity may be expressed or conceived as a supreme entity or as an all-encompassing unity, which also relates to monism. This does *not* mean “belief in a pantheon of gods,” that is polytheism.

**Polytheism** – The belief that multiple deities exist. A major division in polytheistic practices is between “soft” polytheism and “hard” polytheism.

Soft polytheism believes that the same gods are interpreted through the lenses of different cultures. For example, believing that Odin, Zeus, and Indra are a single god interpreted by Germanic, Greek, and Indic peoples.

By contrast, hard polytheism asserts that every god is a distinct, separate, real divine being.

**Duotheism** – Also called bitheism, ditheism, or dualism. This is a belief in two deities. One of these deities may be superior to the other and these deities may either conflict or cooperate. While the textual Christian belief is monotheistic, in practice many sects of Christianity approach it as a dualist conflict between their supreme God and an arch-nemesis. A similar relationship exists in Gnostic systems. By contrast, Wicca believes in a cooperative or harmonic dualism between the God and Goddess.

**Henotheism** – The belief that there is a supreme deity without rejecting the existence of other deities. Typically, these other deities are considered aspects of the supreme divine principle in the same way that epithets of a god indicate different aspects. Some forms of Wicca use a henotheistic dualism to describe a form of “soft polytheism,” where many gods exist as aspects and expressions of those two fundamental forces.

**Monotheism** – Belief in a single, supreme deity, generally styled capital G - God, that denies the existence of any other gods. Other supernatural entities may exist, but their relationship to divinity is their relationship to that singular God.

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**Humanism** – A belief that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives.

## I

**Immaterialism** – Also called subjective idealism or empirical idealism. This worldview holds that only a mental or spiritual world exists and physical or material aspects are a projection, illusion, or other perception. Plato’s allegory of the cave is one of the best-known Western explorations of this concept. In such a worldview, the non-material world is often considered a spiritual truth or ultimate reality.

**Indigenous Religion** – Religion native to a specific area.

**Intercession** – To act for another.

Two actions are commonly described as “intercessory prayer.” The first is a type of prayer where the individual praying addresses and petitions a spirit to carry a message to a more powerful spirit or the divine. The second is a request for a miracle. These two types are often combined, with lesser beings being asked to petition greater forces to produce a miracle.

An intercessory miracle or direct intercession is an effect by divine forces on the material world, generally in response to supplication.

**Inviolable** – Something which cannot be broken, degraded, or altered. Either something that grants status as transcendent, numinous, and/or sacred while unbroken (such as certain rituals and vows) or something for which that status is inherent and

## F

**Faith** – Confidence or trust in a person, thing, or concept. Especially trust with strong conviction or without proof. This may include any specific belief. These beliefs may regard relationships with divinity. In some systems of belief, it is discussed regarding interpersonal relationships like those between host and guest.

**Folk Religion** – The generally informal religious dimension of culture. Often dismissed as superstition, these systems of belief can carry significant rituals, customs, mythology, and beliefs.

**Free thought** – Rejection of deference to authority, tradition, revelation, or dogma. Dismisses mandates of textual or organizational institutions and prefers logic, reason, and empirical observation. Historically tied closely to deism, secularism, humanism, and anti-clericalism. This term is often associated with atheism, but could also be associated with the modern concept of “spiritual but not religious.”

## G

**Glorification** – See Adoration.

**Gnosis** – A knowledge or insight from or about subjects outside the material world. Also, divine revelation.

**Gnosticism** – A system of belief where knowledge or insight from an immaterial world is used to free the divine spark within humanity from material existence.

## H

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**Prayer** – A deliberate invocation that seeks a rapport or communication with an object of worship. This is often used as a means of supplication, particularly for intercession.

The word "prayer" comes from the Latin word *precari*, meaning "to beg." Vulgate Latin used *oratio*; to speak, address, or send a message. By contrast, the Hebrew word is *tefilah*, meaning "self-analysis" or "self-evaluation," from the root *pelel*; "executing judgment" or "thinking."

**Invocation** – The call, invitation, or summoning of a deity or other spirit.

**Supplication** – To seek aid, assistance, or favor from. To petition or request something. Specifically, to request intercession.

**Worship** – To regard with great respect, honor, or devotion. This is often assumed to extend to concepts like adoration, glorification, and prostration. In religion, this is typically an action directed towards one or more deities. However, “hero worship” and honoring are useful ways to frame this concept.

**Adoration** – To regard with deep love. A type of prayer in which a deity or aspect of the divine is given great respect and reverence. Some or all of the subject’s significant attributes may be specifically listed, admired, and celebrated. Also, adulation, veneration, praise, and glorification.

**Prostration** – Submission.

The physical state of lying stretched out on the ground with one's face downward. Prostration involves parts of the body above the knee touching the ground, especially the hands, which distinguishes it from the lesser acts of bowing or kneeling.

Many religions describe an attitude of prostration toward a deity, the divine, or important beings such as senior religious figures or spirits when praying, even if the physical act is not required.

**Veneration** – An activity where a deity, aspect of the divine, or other spirit is given great respect and reverence. Some or all of the subject’s significant attributes may be specifically listed and celebrated.

**Devotion** – Also oblation. Something done from a sense of duty. In religion, this is a type of offering. It may include performing service, saying prayers, making sacrifices, or other acts.

**Ceremonial Washing** – A process of dedication or sanctification by the use of water to perform physical cleaning. Often focused on the hands, though the face, feet, or entire body may be washed. Examples include Khernips in Hellenism, Wudu in Islam, and Ablution (not to be confused with oblation).

**Intercession** – To act for another.

Two actions are commonly described as “intercessory prayer.” The first is a type of prayer where the individual praying addresses and petitions a spirit to carry a message to a more powerful spirit or the divine. The second is a request for a miracle. These two types are often combined, with lesser beings being asked to petition greater forces to produce a miracle.

An intercessory miracle or direct intercession is an effect by divine forces on the material world, generally in response to supplication.

**Miracle** – An event that is inexplicable by known scientific laws or within the framework of a materialist universe. Miracles are often attributed to divine forces. Also, magic.

**Magic** – An event that is inexplicable by known scientific laws or within the framework of a materialist universe. Magic may be attributed to any number of material or immaterial forces and effects. This may include divine forces, as in a miracle.

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**Duotheism** – Also called bitheism, ditheism, or dualism. This is a belief in two deities. One of these deities may be superior to the other and these deities may either conflict or cooperate. While the textual Christian belief is monotheistic, in practice many sects of Christianity approach it as a dualist conflict between their supreme God and an arch-nemesis. A similar relationship exists in Gnostic systems. By contrast, Wicca believes in a cooperative or harmonic dualism between the God and Goddess.

## E

**Ecstatic** – A mystic state of being beyond reason and self-control. Ecstatic experiences are often marked by out-of-body experiences, prophecy, and/or temporary madness.

**End Times** – See Eschatology.

**Eschatology** – A religious mythology or doctrine of an “end time” or “end of the world.” Depending on the worldview this may be a cyclical destruction followed by rebirth or a linear termination for some aspect of existence.

**Ethnic Religion** – Religion associated with a particular ethnic group.

personal belief. One common definition is that it is a powerful form of spiritual being or superior position in spiritual hierarchies. However, what divides a deity from other forms of significant or powerful spirit is a major point of disagreement.

**Devotion** – Also oblation. Something done from a sense of duty. In religion, this is a type of offering. It may include performing service, saying prayers, making sacrifices, or other acts.

**Dharma** – A religious concept of behavior being in harmony with the universe. It focuses on behaviors and practices and their relationship to morals and ethics, specifically as a method of sustaining order and life through virtue. Compare to the Egyptian concept of Maat or Chinese Tao/Dao.

**Ditheism** – See Duotheism.

**Divine** – Related to the concepts of sacredness and transcendence. Theist belief systems express or connect to the divine through one or more deities. Some theist religions assert deity is the only expression or connection to the divine. Things that come from or are closely connected with a deity become divine through that association. The divine is sometimes confused with inherent “goodness,” but many divine figures are morally ambiguous.

**Divine revelation** – See Gnosis.

**Dualism** – A belief that there are both physical and non-physical aspects to existence. Materialism and immaterialism present opposing concepts of a singular reality, dualism holds that both exist. The result is some relationship between the “mundane,” physical world and some form of non-physical, spiritual world.

There are many ways a dualist reality has been described. These worlds may be separated and/or interconnected in

**Prophet** – An individual believed to have received one or more mystic or ecstatic revelations providing them significant gnosis.

**Soteriology** – A religious mythology or doctrine of salvation. The specific nature of what people must be saved from varies, as does the method of being saved.

Some religions include a savior figure. This individual may appear during an eschatological time to save a chosen people, such as the Hebrew and Christian Messiah, Hindu Kalki, and Daoist Li Hong. Others are prophets who have previously provided guidance and aid such as bodhisattva, Muhammad, or Epicurus.

**Eschatology** – A religious mythology or doctrine of an “end time” or “end of the world.” Depending on the worldview this may be a cyclical destruction followed by rebirth or a linear termination for some aspect of existence.

**Dharma** – A religious concept of behavior being in harmony with the universe. It focuses on behaviors and practices and their relationship to morals and ethics, specifically as a method of sustaining order and life through virtue. Compare to the Egyptian concept of Maat or Chinese Tao/Dao.

**Orthodoxy** – “Uniformity in belief,” particularly regarding worldview.

**Orthopraxy** – “Uniformity in practice,” a set of established behaviors shared within a group.

**Omnism** – Belief that all religions are valid and hold some fundamental truth.

**Free thought** – Rejection of deference to authority, tradition, revelation, or dogma. Dismisses mandates of textual or organizational institutions and prefers logic, reason, and empirical observation. Historically tied closely to deism, secularism, humanism, and anti-clericalism. This term is often associated with atheism, but could also be associated with the modern concept of “spiritual but not religious.”

**Humanism** – A belief that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives.

**Literalism** – Also called mythic or textual literalism, is an approach to religion where individuals believe that the myths are accurate descriptions of events and individuals rather than allegories or metaphors. This is far less common among Pagans than more textually based religions because of the gaps and conflicts in many records of Pagan myth cycles.

**Myth** – A component or aspect of a religion. Related to folklore, folk tales, legends, and theology, these narratives capture or explain aspects of the worldview, customs, morality, institutions, and other features of a religion.

**Unverified personal gnosis (UPG)** – Sometimes called subjective personal gnosis. These are beliefs gained through personal experience or intuition that cannot be attributed or corroborated. This is contrasted with community knowledge (received tradition, agreed practice, or corroboration by others) or textual knowledge (from written accounts, artifacts, or secondary scholarship).

seriously considered the question while explicit atheists have. Implicit atheists include those who have never heard of the concept of deity (including the very young or isolated) and those who have been exposed to the concept but have not reached a conclusion (including those who feel they lack sufficient information and those who don't care).

Another important term is non-theism or nontheism which is often used to describe religions that, while technically atheist because they lack any explicit gods, may include other supernatural elements including other forms of spirit. These explicit negative atheists include some Buddhist, Hindu, and other Eastern traditions where spiritual and transcendent elements exist but are not elevated to the level of a god.

## **B**

**Belief** – A subjective opinion, position, or view that an idea or concept is true. The term describes statements about the world that can be either true or false.

**Bitheism** – See Duotheism.

## **C**

**Ceremonial Washing** – A process of dedication or sanctification by the use of water to perform physical cleaning. Often focused on the hands, though the face, feet, or entire body may be washed. Examples include Khernips in Hellenism, Wudu in Islam, and Ablution (not to be confused with oblation).

## **D**

**Dao** – See Dharma.

**Deity** – Also referred to as a god/goddess. A clear definition of what makes a being a god is subject to frequent debate and



# A

**Ablution** – See Ceremonial Washing.

**Adoration** – To regard with deep love. A type of prayer in which a deity or aspect of the divine is given great respect and reverence. Some or all of the subject's significant attributes may be specifically listed, admired, and celebrated.

**Adulation** – See Adoration.

**Agnosticism** – A belief that the existence of an immaterial world or its contents is unknown, unknowable, or both.

**Animism** – A belief that there is no clear separation between the spiritual and physical world, and all material phenomena may have agency. This is often expressed as a distinct spiritual essence in objects, places, creatures, or forces.

**Antisupernaturalism** – See Materialism

**Atheism** – A lack of belief in any form of deity.

Individuals most frequently described this way in general culture often hold a position described as positive, strong, or hard atheism; a person that *firmly believes* that no form of deity exists. The type of atheism is often closely associated with materialism and humanism. However, atheism extends beyond this definition.

A second form of atheism is those who, after consideration, *lack belief* in one or more deities. Like the more familiar definition of atheist, these are both explicit atheists. However, those who *lack belief* in any deity are considered negative, weak, or soft atheists.

Other types of negative atheists are implicit atheists. They also *lack belief* in any deity. However, implicit atheists *have not*

**ALPHABETICAL LISTING**

