

# Religion and Origins

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

One of the major mysteries of life is the origin of life itself. Science can chart the development of life and the histories of the species, but what about questions of the ultimate origins of life? For this, religion steps in with stories, poems, prayers, ritual demonstrations, and celebrations to guide human souls through the maze of life's questions and queries. This lesson shows how religion offers stories about human origins, purpose, and destination. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Origin](#)
2. [The Here and Now](#)

## 1. Origin

Religion, as an organized, collective search for meaning and purpose, offers a response to the plaguing question that hits almost everybody at some point in their life. Where did I come from? Because humans are social creatures, constructing identity according to the groups of which they are a part, a broader question emerges: Where did WE come from?

Nearly all religions are rich with **narratives** and even legends that help us grasp the question of origin.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Paradise is one place from which humanity emerged, according to the Jewish and Christian tradition.

They also provide stories that mark the history of the religion itself. In Christianity, the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth were often in the form of short, simple stories often referring to everyday life but also referring to some kind of religious truth. These stories are called parables. There was an important moral lesson and religious truth within each story, many of them pointing to God as the origin and the final resting place.

Similarly, in Islam, the Hadith offers short sayings and actions. These are stories of the prophet Muhammad's life that have the effect of transmitting the truth of Allah and the tradition of Islam. This originated with the prophet Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an. Sacred texts carry with them rich imagery, analogy, poetry, and metaphor. They contain all manner of narrative that is fiery, sweet, and full of love and deceit.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Narrative

A story; an approach that uses storytelling to make larger points.

## 2. The Here and Now

To give another perspective, Buddhism gives a different answer when looking at origin. There is a story that Buddha told that goes something like this: A man was shot with a poisoned arrow, but the foolish man would not allow anyone to pull out the arrow until it was revealed who shot the arrow. He wanted to know the man's name, what village he was from, and his social caste. This poisoned man wanted to know everything. The Buddha pointed out that the man would be dead by the time he knew all that.

The lesson is: stop wasting time on unanswerable questions and get on with the work of enlightenment in the here and now. From a modern voice, the English analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell (1927) gives a similar message. He is quoted as having said, "There is no reason to suppose that the world had the beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our thoughts."

Religions and schools of philosophy also lay out a purposeful path. In addition to the origin narratives, myths, or parables, it lays out a path of purpose for life. Many religions carry a strong message of love. In Christianity, in particular, it's through the stories of the life, teachings, death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Judaism, one of the stories lays out purpose in terms of returning to and inhabiting the promised land, or **Canaan**. Purpose also lies in fulfilling the covenants and agreements with God, therefore solidifying this bond.

These stores are clearly filled with real-life significance and repercussions for many people. The Promised Land has historically been the site of a lot of confusion, dispute, and violence. Today, the story is much the same. Maybe it's like Russell said, it has something to do with the poverty of our thoughts.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Canaan

An ancient land in the eastern Mediterranean, roughly corresponding to present-day Israel and Palestine; the land promised by God to Abraham in the Hebrew Scriptures.



## SUMMARY

Many religions have **origin** stories, narratives, parables, myths, and legends that tell the story of where humans may have come from as a species and where we might be going, and intertwined with these origin stories are messages, morals, and ways and codes of behavior for **the here and now**.

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## REFERENCES

Russell, B. (1927). *Why I am Not a Christian*. The Bertrand Russell Society.  
<https://users.drew.edu/~jlrenz/whynot.html>



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### **Canaan**

An ancient land in the eastern Mediterranean, roughly corresponding to present-day Israel and Palestine; the land promised by God to Abraham in the Hebrew Scriptures.

#### **Narrative**

A story; an approach that uses storytelling to make larger points.