



Altruism in World Religions

Jacob Neusner

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In 1830 philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term altruism to provide a general definition for the act of selflessly caring for others. But does this modern conception of sacrificing one's own interests for the well-being of others apply to the charitable behaviors encouraged by all world religions? In *Altruism in World Religions* prominent scholars from an array of religious perspectives probe the definition of altruism to determine whether it is a category that serves to advance the study of religion.

Exploring a range of philosophical and religious thought from Greco-Roman *philia* to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, from Hinduism in India to Buddhism and the religions of China and Japan, the authors find that altruism becomes problematic when applied to religious studies because it is, in fact, a concept absent from religion. Chapters on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reveal that followers of these religions cannot genuinely perform self-sacrificing acts because God has promised to reward every good deed. Moreover, the separation between the self and the other that self-sacrifice necessarily implies, runs counter to Buddhist thought, which makes no such distinction.

By challenging our assumptions about the act of self-sacrifice as it relates to religious teachings, the authors have shown altruism to be more of a secular than religious notion. At the same time, their findings highlight how charitable acts operate with the values and structures of the religions studied.

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