

Religion (from the Latin Religio, meaning 'restraint,' or Relegere, according to Cicero, meaning 'to repeat, to read again,' or, most likely, Religionem, 'to show respect for what is sacred') is an organized system of beliefs and practices revolving around, or leading to, a transcendent spiritual experience. Religion, then and now, concerns itself with the spiritual aspect of the human condition, gods and goddesses (or a single personal god or goddess), the creation of the world, a human being's place in the world, life and death, eternity, and how to escape from suffering in this world or in the next; and every nation has created its own god in its own image and resemblance. In ancient times, religion was indistinguishable from what is known as 'mythology' in the present day and consisted of regular rituals based on a belief in higher supernatural entities who created and continued to maintain the world and surrounding cosmos. These entities were anthropomorphic and behaved in ways which mirrored the values of the culture closely (as in Egypt) or sometimes engaged in acts antithetical to those values (as one sees with the gods of Greece). The Greek philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570–478 BCE) once wrote: Mortals suppose that the gods are born and have clothes and voices and shapes like their own. The Ethiopians consider the gods flat-nosed and black; the Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired. But if oxen, horses and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and fashion works as men do, horses would paint horse-like images of gods and oxen oxen-like ones, and each would fashion bodies like their own. There is no culture recorded in human history which has not practiced some form of religion.