

# Lesson 1

## Introduction

### WHAT IS RELIGION?

*Starry Night over the Rhine* depicts a sky full of luminous stars. Painted near the end of its creator's life, the work summarizes the vision of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). As was his father, Van Gogh was an intensely religious man who had planned to be an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. However, he struggled with his studies and fell out with Church authorities. He lived as a lay preacher, working with poor miners in Belgium. When he was 27, his art dealer brother Theo encouraged him to paint. Despite this new career in painting, van Gogh continued to think of himself as a minister. If he could not preach in words, he would preach in pictures. His subjects were the simple things of life: trees, sunflowers, a wicker chair, a bridge, his postman, a farmer sowing seeds, peasants eating a meal, and workers bringing in the harvest. His paintings express quiet awe before the wonder he sensed in everyday objects and ordinary people. It was his unique sense of the sacredness he saw all around him that he wanted to share. Almost as a reminder, in *Starry Night over the Rhine*, van Gogh placed the town below the night sky but with his attention upward to the stars. The heavenly realm illuminates van Gogh's vision of the sacred character of the entire world.

### Key Characteristics of Religion

When people begin to study religions, they often bring ideas from the faith in which they were raised or from the predominant religion of their society.

They may assume, for example, that every religion has a sacred book, worships a divine being, or has a set of commandments. Indeed, many religions do share all these characteristics, but some do not. Shinto, for example, does not have a bunch of commandments or preach a moral code; Zen Buddhism does not worship a divine being; and many tribal religions have no written sacred scripture. Nevertheless, we call them all religions. What, if not a standard set of elements, must be present for something to be called a religion? An obvious starting point for many scholars is to examine linguistic clues: What are the linguistic roots of the term *religion*? Intriguingly, the word's Latin roots are *re-*, meaning "again," and *lig*, meaning "join" or "connect" (as in the phrase *ligament*). Thus, the standard translation of *religion* is "to join again," "to reconnect. If this derivation is correct, then the word *religion* suggests joining our natural, human world to the sacred earth. In classical Latin, *religio* meant awe for the gods and concern for proper ritual. We must recognize, though, that the term *religion* arose in Western culture and may only be appropriate when applied across cultures. *Spiritual path*, for example, might be a more fitting designation to refer to other religious systems. We will remember these things when we use the long-established term *religion*. People have constantly tried to define religion, and thus, there have been many notable attempts. These definitions may emphasize a dependence on a higher power, awareness of life's passing nature, symbolism and ritual use, the structuring of time, or the acceptance of moral rules. However, reading these definitions makes one aware of their limitations. The reports must often be revised and time-bound, the product of a particular culture, period, or discipline. For now, it is better to be open to many possible definitions without embracing any single one. After studying the major world religions, we will undoubtedly come closer to our definition of religion.

The problem of how to define religion continues to plague scholars who love definition. A

definition may apply well to some religions but not to others. A definition may apply to religions of the past but may not be suitable for a religion of the future.

Traditional dictionary definitions of *religion* read something like this: a system of belief that involves worship of a God or gods, prayer, ritual, and a moral code. However, so many exceptions exist to that definition that it needs to be more comprehensive and accurate. So, instead of saying that a religion *must* have specific characteristics, it is more beneficial to list a series of features found in what are commonly accepted religions. Scholars note that what we ordinarily call religions manifest to some degree the following eight elements:

1. *Belief system* Several beliefs fit together into a relatively complete and systematic interpretation of the universe and the human being's place in it; this is also called a *worldview*.
2. *Community* The belief system is shared, and a group practices its ideals.
3. *Central myths are stories that express the religious beliefs of a group, which* are retold and often reenacted. Examples of major myths include the significant events in the life of the Hindu god Krishna, the enlightenment experience of the Buddha, the exodus of the Israelites from oppression in Egypt, the death and resurrection of Jesus, or Muhammad's escape from Mecca to Medina. Scholars call such central stories *myths*. Scholars use the term "myth" as a specialized term. It does not mean (as in widespread usage) that the stories are historically untrue, but only that they are central to the religion.
4. *Ritual* Beliefs are enacted and made real through ceremonies.
5. *Ethics* Rules about human behavior are established. These are often viewed as being revealed from a supernatural realm but can also be considered socially generated guidelines.
6. *Characteristic emotional experiences* Among the emotional experiences typically associated with religions are dread, guilt, awe, mystery, devotion, conversion, "rebirth," liberation, ecstasy, bliss, and inner peace.
7. *Material expression* Religions use an astonishing variety of physical elements: statues, paintings, musical compositions, musical instruments, ritual objects, flowers, incense, clothing, architecture, and specific locations.
8. *Sacredness* A distinction is made between the sacred and the ordinary; ceremonies often emphasize this distinction using different language, clothing, and architecture. Particular objects, actions, people, and places may share in or express sacredness.

Each of the traditions you will study in the pages will exhibit most of these characteristics. However, the religious traditions, like the people who practice them, will manifest the elements differently and at other times.

## The Sacred

All religions are concerned with the deepest level of reality, and for most beliefs, the core or origin of everything is sacred and mysterious. This sense of a mysterious, originating holiness is called by many names: Brahman, Dao, Great Mother, Divine Parent, Great Spirit, Ground of Being, Great Mysterious, the Ultimate, the Absolute, the Divine, and the Holy. However, people experience and explain sacred reality differently in the following chapters.

One familiar term for the sacred reality, particularly in the Western world, is *God*, and **monotheism** means a belief in one God. In some systems, *God* often carries the notion of a Cosmic Person, a divine being with will and intelligence that is just, compassionate, and infinite in virtues. God is also called *omnipotent* (having total power over the universe). Although God may be said to have personal aspects, all monotheistic religions agree that the reality of God is beyond all categories: God is said to be a pure spirit, not fully definable in words. This notion of a mighty God, distinct from the universe, describes a sacredness that is active in the world and different from it. God is **transcendent** and unlimited in the world and all ordinary reality.

In some religions, however, the sacred reality is not viewed as having personal attributes but is more like an energy or mysterious power. The holy is frequently spoken of as something inherent within the universe. In some religions, there is a tendency to talk about the universe not just as having been created but also as a manifestation of the sacred nature itself, in which nothing is separate from the holy. This view, called **pantheism** (Greek: “all divine”), sees the holy as being discoverable within the physical world and its processes. In other words, nature itself is sacred.

Some religions worship the sacred reality in the form of many coexisting gods, a view called **polytheism**. The multiple gods may be separate entities, each in charge of an aspect of reality (such as nature gods) or manifestations of the same fundamental sacred reality.

In recent centuries, other views have become prominent. There can be a tendency to deny the existence of any God or gods (**atheism**), to argue that the existence of God cannot be proven (**agnosticism**), or to take no position (**nontheism**). (Such tendencies are not strictly modern; they can also be found in some ancient systems, such as Jainism.) However, if one sees religion broadly as a “spiritual path,” even systems based on these three views, mainly if they show other typical characteristics, can also be called religions.

## Religious Symbolism

Religions present views of reality, and most speak of the sacred. Nevertheless, because religions are so varied in their teachings and because the teachings of some religions, when taken at face value, conflict with those of others, it is expected to assert that religions express truth *symbolically*. A symbol is something reasonably concrete, ordinary, and universal that can represent and help human beings intensely experience something of greater complexity. For example, water can represent spiritual cleansing, the sun, health, a mountain, strength, a circle, and eternity. Deliberate and unconscious symbolism is common in religious art and ritual.

Many scholars and religious leaders recognize the importance of symbolic interpretation, and they say that the use of religious symbols may point to some structure that underlies all religions. Undoubtedly, many of the same suggestive images and actions appear repeatedly in religions worldwide. Water, for instance, is used in all sorts of religious rituals: Hindus bathe in the Ganges River; Christians use water for baptisms; Jews use water for ritual purification; and Muslims and followers of Shinto wash before prayer. Ashes also have widespread use among religious traditions to suggest death and the spirit world: ashes are used by tribal religions in

dance ceremonies, by Hindu ascetics to represent self-discipline and detachment, and by some Christians, whose foreheads are marked by ashes in observance of Ash Wednesday. Likewise, religious buildings are placed on hills or are raised on mounds and reached by stairs, all suggesting the symbol of the holy mountain, where the sacred can be encountered.

We also see in various religions the recurrence of a symbolic story of transformation: a state of original purity degenerates into pollution or disorder, or a battle to fight disease culminates in a sacrificial death that results in a renewed sense of innocence and order. Scholars point out, too, that religions frequently symbolically use words; for example, the divine is often described as existing “up above,” insight can be “awakened,” and a person can feel “reborn.”

When viewed this way, religious symbols, myths, and terminology sometimes suggest a universal symbolic “language” that all religions speak. Those interested in religious symbolism hope that understanding the “language” of symbols will help uncover what is universally important in all religions.

### **Speculations on the Sources of Religion**

Why does religion exist? The most evident answer is that it serves many human needs. One of our primary needs is to have a means to deal with our mortality. Because we and our loved ones must die, we have to face the pain of death and the inevitable questions it brings about whether there is any soul, afterlife, or rebirth. People often look to religion for the answers. Religion can help us cope with death, and religious rituals offer comfort.

Human beings also desire good health, a regular supply of food, and the conditions (such as suitable weather) necessary to ensure these things. Before the development of modern science, human beings looked to religion to bring about these practical benefits, and they often still do.

Human beings are also social by nature, and religion offers companionship and the fulfillment that can come from belonging to a group. Moreover, religion often provides a structure for caring for those in need.

Human beings need to seek out and create artistic forms of expression. Religion stimulates art, music, and dance and has inspired some of the world's most imaginative buildings. It not only uses multiple arts but also integrates them into a living, often beautiful whole.

The most basic function of religion is to respond to our natural wonder about ourselves and the cosmos, our musings on a starry night. Religion helps us relate to the unknown universe by answering the fundamental questions of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

The German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) argued in his book *The Idea of the Holy* that religions emerge when people experience the aspect of reality that is essentially mysterious. He called it the “mystery that causes trembling and fascination.” We take our existence for granted and live with little wonder. Occasionally, though, something disturbs our ordinary view of reality. For example, a strong manifestation of nature, such as lightning or a violent thunderstorm, may startle us. It is a frightening aspect of reality, forcing us to tremble. However, it also brings a feeling of fascination. The emotional result is what Otto called *numinous awe*. He pointed out how often religious art depicts terrifying things, such as Durga, a powerful Hindu goddess.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), an early disciple of Freud, broke with his mentor because of fundamental differences in interpretation, particularly about religion. In his books *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, *Psychology and Alchemy*, and *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung described religion as something that grew out of the individual's need to arrive at personal

fulfillment, which Jung called *individuation*. According to Jung, many religious insignia can be seen as symbols of personal integration and human wholeness: the circle is an unending line, the cross is made of lines that join at the center, and the sacred diagram of the mandala is often a circle within or enclosing a square. Jung called such signs “the path to the center, to individuation.” He pointed out that as people age, they can make healthy use of religion to understand their place in the universe and use it to prepare for death. For Jung, religion is a noble human response to the complexity and depth of reality.

Karl Marx's (1818-1883) skeptical view of religion is often mentioned. However, it may have been gentler than the Russian and Chinese forms of Marxism that emerged from it. While many types of Marxism have been strongly atheistic, Marx himself was not so militant. He indeed called religion an opiate of the masses. However, religion had both a bad and a good side for him. He thought religion emerged naturally because people felt poor, powerless, and alienated from their work.

On the other hand, Marx also thought that religion gave great consolation, for it spoke of a suffering-free life after death. For Marx, religion was a symptom of the poverty and inadequacy of modern society. The need for religion, he thought, would dissolve when society improved.

Some recent theories need to look specifically at something other than religion. However, their wide-ranging insights are applied in studying the origin of religions and in many different fields. Among these theoretical approaches are structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction techniques. You will look at some of these ideas and applications later.

Various scholars have attempted to identify “stages” in the development of religions. Austrian ethnographer and philologist Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) argued that all humankind once believed in a single High God and that later beliefs in lesser gods and spirits were added to this simple monotheism. The reverse has also been suggested, namely, that polytheism led to **monotheism**. Influenced by evolution, some people have speculated that religions “evolve” naturally from **animism** (a worldview that sees all elements of nature as being filled with spirit or spirits) to polytheism and monotheism. Critics of this view feel it is biased in favor of **monotheism**, partly because it was initially suggested by Christian scholars, who presented their belief system as the most advanced.

Scholars today hesitate to speak of any “evolution” from one form of religion to another. To apply the biological notion of evolution to human belief systems seems biased, oversimplified, and speculative. Even more important, such a point of view leads to subjective judgments that one religion is more “highly evolved than another, shortsightedness that has kept many people from appreciating every religion’s unique insight and contribution. Consequently, the focus of religious studies has moved from the study of religion in general to the study of individual faiths. This field assumes that all religions are equally worthy of study.

## **PATTERNS AMONG RELIGIONS**

When we study religions in a comparative and historical sense, we are not looking to validate, disprove, or enhance our beliefs or practices as we might if we were studying our religious tradition. Instead, we want to comprehend the particular religions as thoroughly as possible and understand the people's experiences within each religion. Part of that process of understanding leads us to see patterns of similarity and difference among religions.

Although we look for patterns, we must recognize that these patterns are not conceptual straitjackets. Religions are usually quite complex, especially those with long histories and extensive followings. Furthermore, religions are not permanent theoretical constructs. Instead,

they are constantly changing and influenced by religious leaders, governments, historical events, changing technology, and the shifting values of the cultures in which they exist.

### **First Pattern: Views of the World and Life**

Religions must provide answers to the great questions that people ask. How did the universe come into existence? Does it have a purpose, and will it end? What is time, and how should we make use of it? What should our relationship with the world of nature be? Why do human beings exist? How do we reach fulfillment, transformation, or salvation? Why is there suffering in the world, and how should we deal with it? What happens when we die? What should we hold as sacred? The questions do not vary, but the answers do.

Given the great variety in their worldviews, religions, not surprisingly, define the nature of sacred reality differently: the universe, the natural world, time, and human purpose. Religions also differ in their attitudes toward the role of words in expressing the sacred and in their relations to other religious traditions. By examining different views on these concepts, we will have further bases for comparison that will lead us to a more complete understanding of the world's religions.

- 1) *The nature of sacred reality*--Some religions, as you have seen, speak of the holy as transcendent, existing primarily in a realm beyond the everyday world. In other religions, though, sacred reality is considered inherent; it is within nature and human beings and can be experienced as energy or holiness. Sometimes, the holy is viewed as having personal attributes, while elsewhere, it is seen as an impersonal entity. Moreover, it is hard to point to a sacred reality in particular religious traditions, particularly in some forms of Buddhism. Such facts raise the question of whether "the sacred" exists outside ourselves or if it is better to speak of the holy simply as "what people hold to be sacred."
- 2) *The nature of the universe*--Some religions see the universe as having been begun by an intelligent, personal Creator who continues to guide the universe according to a cosmic plan. Other religions view the universe as eternal, with no beginning or end. The implications of these two positions are crucial to what is central in religion and how human beings act regarding this central belief. Suppose the universe is created, especially by a transcendent deity. In that case, the center of sacredness is the creator rather than the universe, but humans imitate the creator by changing and perfecting the world. If the universe is eternal, the material universe itself is sacred and perfect and requires no change.
- 3) *The human attitude toward nature*--At one end of the spectrum, some religions or religious schools see nature as the realm of evil forces that must be overcome. For them, nature is gross and contaminating, existing in opposition to the nonmaterial world of the spirit, a view known as **dualism**, held by some forms of Christianity, Jainism, and Hinduism. At the other end of the spectrum, as in Daoism and Shinto, nature is considered sacred and needs no change. Different religions, such as Judaism and Islam, take a middle ground, holding that the natural world originated from a divine action but that human beings are called upon to continue to shape the world.
- 4) *Time*--Religions that emphasize a creation, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, tend to see time as being linear, moving from the beginning of the universe to its end. Time is limited and unrepeatable, but it is essential. However, time is cyclical in some other religions, such as Buddhism. The universe moves through endless changes, which repeat themselves over grand periods. In such a religion, time is not as crucial or "real" because, ultimately, the universe is not moving to some final point. Consequently, appreciating the present may be

more critical than being oriented to the future.

- 5) *Human purpose*--In some religions, human beings are part of a great divine plan, and although each person is unique, individual meaning comes also from the cosmic plan. The cosmic plan may be viewed as a struggle between forces of good and evil, with human beings at the center of the stage and the details of good and evil at work within them. Because human actions are so necessary, they must be guided by a prescribed moral code meant to be internalized by the individual. This view is significant in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In contrast, other religions do not see human life similarly dramatically, and the individual is only part of much larger realities. In Daoism and Shinto, a human being is a small part of the natural universe; in Confucianism, an individual is part of the family and society. Such religions place less emphasis on individual rights and more on how the individual can maintain harmony with the whole. Actions are not guided by an internalized moral system but by society, tradition, and a sense of mutual obligation.
- 6) *Words and scriptures*--In some religions, the sacred is to be found in written and spoken words, and for those religions that use writing and create scriptures, what is important is the reading, copying, and using of sacred words in ceremony, music, and art. You see the importance of words in indigenous religions, which primarily pass on their traditions orally. You also see it in Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Other religions, such as Daoism and Zen Buddhism, show a certain mistrust of words. They instead value silence and wordless meditation. Although Zen and Daoism utilize language in their practices and have produced significant literature, each religion finds language limited in expressing the richness or totality of reality.
- 7) *Exclusiveness and inclusiveness*--Some religions emphasize that the sacred is distinct from the world and that order must be imposed by separating good from evil, true from false. In that view, to share in sacredness means separation, for example, withdrawal from certain foods, places, people, practices, or beliefs. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are generally exclusive religions, making it impossible to simultaneously belong to more than one religion. In contrast, other religions have stressed inclusiveness. Frequently, such religions also have emphasized social harmony, the inadequacy of language, or the relativity of truth, and they have accepted belief in many deities. Their inclusiveness has led them to admit many beliefs and practices into their religions, to the point that an individual can belong to several religions, such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, all at the same time. Such inclusiveness has sometimes led to misunderstanding, as in the case of a Christian missionary having “converted” a Japanese follower only to find the new convert still visiting a Shinto shrine.

## **Second Pattern: Focus on Beliefs and Practices**

Realizing the limitations of generalizing, you might gain some perspective by examining the orientations exhibited by individual religions. When you look at the world’s dominant religions, you see three basic orientations in their conception and location of the sacred.

1. *Sacramental orientation* The sacramental orientation emphasizes carrying out rituals and ceremonies regularly and correctly as the path to salvation. In some religions, correct rituals are even believed to influence the processes of nature. All religions have some degree of ritual, but the ceremonial tendency is predominant, for example, in most indigenous religions, such as Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Vedic Hinduism, and Vajrayana Buddhism. For example, the Catholic sign of the cross is done

in a certain way: only with the right hand, beginning with a touch on the forehead, then on one's chest, and finally on each shoulder.

2. *Prophetic orientation*: The prophetic orientation stresses that proper belief and adherence to moral rules ensure contact with the sacred.
3. This orientation also implies that a human being may be an essential intermediary between the believer and the sacred. For example, a prophet may speak to believers on behalf of the holy. Prophetic orientation is a prominent aspect of Judaism, Protestant Christianity, and Islam, which all see the sacred as transcendent but personal. The television crusades of evangelistic ministers are good examples of the prophetic orientation in action.
4. *Mystical orientation*: The mystical orientation seeks union with a reality greater than oneself, such as God, the process of nature, the universe, or reality. Techniques such as seated meditation are often used to lessen the sense of one's identity.
5. These techniques help the individual to experience a greater unity. The mystical orientation is a prominent aspect of Upanishadic Hinduism, Daoism, and some schools of Buddhism. Although the mystical direction is more common in religions that stress the immanence of the sacred or that are nontheistic, it is also an important but less prominent tendency in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Any of these three orientations may be dominant in a religion. Nevertheless, the other two orientations could be found in the same religion to a lesser extent and be subsumed into a different purpose. For example, a ceremony can help induce mystical experience, as in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, Japanese Shingon Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, and even Zen Buddhism, which is intensely ritualistic.

### **Third Pattern: Views of Male and Female**

Because gender is such an essential part of human life, religions have had much to say about the roles of men and women, both on earth and in the divine spheres. The differences in how religions view these differences constitute another underlying pattern we can investigate when studying religions. Thus, conceptions of what is male and what is female provide another basis for comparing religions.

In many influential religions today, male imagery and control dominate. The sacred is considered male in them, and the full-time religious specialists are frequently male. Nevertheless, this may only have been the case sometimes. Tantalizing evidence suggests that female divinities once played an essential role in many cultures and religions. The most significant female deity was particularly associated with fertility and motherhood and has been known by many names, such as Astarte, Asherah, Aphrodite, and Freia (the origin of the word *Friday*). Statues of a Mother-Goddess have been found throughout Europe, as well as in the Middle East.

Is it possible that female images of the divine were once more common and that female religious leadership once played a more critical role? It has been argued that male dominance in religion became more common due to the growth of city-states, which needed organized defense. In this argument, city-states elevated the status of men because of their fighting ability. In Israel, worship of a female deity was stamped out by prophets who preached exclusive worship of the male God Yahweh and by kings who wanted loyalty paid to them and their offspring. We read passages like this in the Hebrew scriptures: "They abandoned the Lord and worshipped Baal and the Astartes. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel." (Judg. 2:13-14). The Christian New Testament contains words that sometimes have been interpreted to mean that women



should not play a prominent role in public worship: “I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men; they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first, and then Eve.

Moreover, it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and broke God’s law” (1 Tim. 2:12-14). In Asia, Confucianism has been distrustful of women in general and has ordinarily refused them leadership roles. In Buddhism, despite the recognition in scripture that women can be enlightened, most leaders have been men in practice.

A century ago, significant people worldwide needed more experience of other regions' different beliefs and practices. However, radio, television, the Internet, cell phones, and other technologies have changed this. Thus, it is no surprise that long-established customs regarding gender should now be challenged and changed.

Such changes may take work. In some religious traditions, the possibility of changes can produce a rift. This is happening today, for example, in the Christian Anglican Communion and several other Christian denominations. You can expect similar disruptions in other religious traditions as technological changes bring knowledge of different cultures.

Knowledge of other cultures will continue to grow, and studying other religions will contribute to this process. Such a study will open people’s eyes not only to the gender expectations in religions of the past but also to today’s evolving practices. This is nudging several religious traditions to accept women in areas where, in earlier centuries, they were not expected to have a role. There are many resultant tensions. Those in Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are currently receiving publicity. However, you can expect that women will be widely successful in obtaining full acceptance in leadership roles.

## **MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

Religion has influenced so many areas of human life that it is a subject of religious studies and other disciplines. As you have seen, the social sciences have long studied religion. More recently, linguistics, literary theory, and cultural studies have offered new ways of seeing and interpreting religion.

There are other approaches, too. You can focus your study on one religion or look at several religions simultaneously. Believers may opt to explore their religion “from the inside.” On the other hand, nonbelievers may want to concentrate on the answers that several religions have given to a single question, such as the purpose of human life. Following is a list of some common approaches to religion:

- 1) *Psychology*--Psychology (Greek: “soul study”) deals with human mental states, emotions, and behaviors. Despite being a relatively young discipline, psychology has closely examined religion because it offers such a rich human “material” to explore. A few areas of study include religious influences on child rearing, human behavior, gender expectations, and self-identity; group dynamics in religion; trance states; and comparative mystical experiences.
- 2) *Mythology*—The study of religious tales, texts, and art has uncovered universal patterns. Mythology is full of the recurrent images and themes found in religions, such as the Tree of Knowledge, the ladder to Heaven, the fountain of life, the labyrinth, the secret garden, the holy mountain, the newborn child, the suffering hero, initiation, rebirth, the cosmic battle, the female spirit guide, and the aged teacher of wisdom.
- 3) *Philosophy*--Philosophy (Greek: “love of wisdom”), in some ways, originated from a struggle with religion. Although both arenas pose many of the same questions, philosophy does not automatically accept the answers given by any religion to the great questions. Instead, philosophy seeks answers independently. Following reason rather than religious

authority, it tries to fit its solutions into a rational, systematic whole. Some questions philosophy asks are as follows: Does human life have any purpose? Is there an afterlife? How should we live? Philosophy is essentially the work of individuals, while religion is a community experience; philosophy tries to avoid emotion, while religion often nurtures it; philosophy is carried on without ritual, while religion naturally expresses itself in ceremony.

- 4) *Theology*—Theology (Greek: “study of the divine”) studies topics related to one particular religious tradition. A theologian is an individual who usually examines his or her belief system. For example, a person training to become a Christian minister might study Christian theology.
- 5) *The arts*--Comparing patterns in religious art makes an intriguing study. For example, religious architecture often uses symmetry, height, and archaic styles to suggest the sacred. Religious music employs a slow pace and repeated rhythms, which induce tranquility. Religious art often incorporates gold, haloes, equilateral designs, and circles, which suggest otherworldliness and perfection.
- 6) *Anthropology*--Anthropology (Greek: “study of human beings”) has been interested in how religions influence how different cultures deal with issues such as family interaction, individual roles, property rights, marriage, child-rearing, social hierarchies, and division of labor.
- 7) *Archeology*--Archeology (Greek: “study of origins”) explores the remains of earlier civilizations. In its work, it often uncovers the remains of religious buildings from ancient cultures. When possible, archeologists translate writings left by these earlier people, much of which can be spiritual. Archeology occasionally sheds light on how one religion has influenced another. For example, excavating a cuneiform library at Nineveh revealed a similar story (in the Epic of Gilgamesh) and may have influenced the biblical story of Noah and the flood. Archeology can also tell religious material, enabling scholars to decipher an entire writing system. For example, the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in the early nineteenth century, because it contained the same inscription in three different scripts, helped researchers unlock the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics.
- 8) *Linguistics and literary theory*--The study of linguistics has sometimes involved a search for patterns that may underlie all languages. Linguistics has also suggested general patterns and structures that may underlie something broader than language: human consciousness. This interest in underlying patterns has brought new attention to the possible facilities behind religious tales, rituals, and other expressions of religious beliefs and attitudes. Linguistics has also examined religious language for its implications and often hidden values. (Consider, for example, the consequences of the spiritual words *sin* and *sacred*.)
- 9) On the other hand, literary theory has studied the written texts of religions as reflections of the cultural assumptions and values that produced the texts. Literary theory, for example, has pointed out how religions have treated women and minorities differently from more dominant groups. Literary theory has also shown that non-written material such as religious statues, paintings, songs, television shows, and films can be viewed as forms of communication and that they can be studied in many ways as written texts are studied.

The use of theory for the study of religion is wider than the fields of linguistics and literature. Many academic disciplines study religions as part of the human search for understanding. Thus, an art scholar may see and interpret religions as art forms. Specialists in psychology may interpret religions primarily as expressions of individual human needs. Sociologists may see religions as shaping groups and promoting and maintaining group identity. Scholars of religion

can also adopt the viewpoints of these and other disciplines as keys to understanding the complexities of religions.

### **The Study of Religion**

Originally, religions were studied primarily within their religious traditions. The goal of this approach was that faith and devotion would be illuminated by intellectual search. Although this approach continues in denominational schools, the study of religion began to take a new form two centuries ago.

There were several causes for the change. First, the early scientific movement accepted belief in a creator-god, but it rejected belief in miracles, and it demanded scientific proof for beliefs. The emerging scientific movement thus forced people to revise some of their traditional religious beliefs. Second, because of the growth of historical studies, academic experts began to question the literal truth of some statements and stories presented in the scriptures. (For example, did the story of Noah and the Ark happen, or was it meant mainly to be a teaching parable whose real purpose was moral?) Third, because of the growth of trade and travel, even faraway cultures were becoming known. Their religions proved to be not only colorful but also wise. The morality taught by Buddhism, the sense of duty found in Confucianism, and the love of nature taught in Shinto all seemed admirable. However, what did this mean for other religions? This question intensified in the next two centuries as more information became available through history, anthropology, and sociology. Scriptures and ritual texts were translated, and anthropologists began to have direct experience of even small and rare religions.

In the university world, the study of religion was at first fragmented. The great questions of religion were studied in philosophy departments. Other aspects of religion could be found in history, psychology, anthropology, and art departments. Religious studies departments still need to unite these interests.

The fragmented academic approach changed in the middle of the twentieth century, as religious studies departments were formed and became a regular part of academic life. At first, it was still being determined if these religious departments would survive. However, the popularity of some courses in religion, particularly those in world religions, death and dying, and the psychology of religion, demonstrated the worth of having separate, permanent religious studies departments.

The study of religion has further expanded, and in the present century, we can examine religions from additional and sometimes unexpected points of view. For example, one of the most provocative new perspectives is neurology. Are religious beliefs and practices a part of our genetic makeup, or are they manufactured by cultures and learned by people? Is spiritual experience the intrusion of a sacred being on individual consciousness, or is it the activity of a particular chemical in the brain? Similar questions may be asked about morality. Are moral demands a part of our physical constitution, or are they rules taught by society? As academic disciplines expand and additional fields emerge, new aspects of religion will be discovered.

### **Recent Theories**

Anthropologists' and other behavioral scientists' field studies have influenced recent thinking about religion, and archeology has also contributed much to newer reviews.

At one time, it was thought religions were best traced to a "great founder," such as Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad. This is no longer the standard approach. Instead, sociologists have pointed out how religions emerge from tribes and peoples. One of the first thinkers to speak

of this was the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). He noted how religions reinforce the values of groups, and his approach was empirically based on research. Later, French thinkers, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, continued his approach.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) did fieldwork in Brazil, where he studied the mythology of tribal groups. There, he began to see significant similarities in the myths of indigenous peoples. This led him to see substantial structural similarities among kinship patterns, languages, and social relations. He theorized that structures in the human mind formed these similarities. His thought, called structuralism, has influenced the study of religion, particularly regarding taboos, marriage, and laws about food purity.

A countermovement, called post-structuralism, soon emerged. It emphasized the individuality of each experience and argued that belief in grand structures may keep investigators from appreciating that individuality. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is considered its primary exponent. His work primarily focused on those marginalized by society, prisoners, medical patients, and the insane.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) began with a structuralist approach but moved from grand theories to focus on language, meaning, and interpretation. He is known for going beyond the ordinary understanding of texts to discover new cultural meanings. This method is known as deconstruction. It can be effective in the area of religion. For example, traditional religious texts can be viewed from many new perspectives.

For example, you can examine scriptural passages to investigate underlying attitudes toward treating women, enslaved people, indigenous people, children, and the elderly. Deconstructive principles can also be used to investigate religious art, architecture, and music.

Increasingly, religious investigation relies on anthropologists who have lived with native peoples and learned their languages. One researcher of this type was E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), who lived among the Azande and Nuer people in Africa. Another esteemed anthropologist was Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), who lived in Indonesia and Morocco and wrote about practices there. Geertz championed a *thick description* of the appearances of rituals and religious objects and their meaning for the practitioners.

The so-called phenomenological approach to religious studies has been very popular. This approach emphasizes direct experiential research to gather data. It seeks to understand religious acts and objects from the consciousness of the believers, and it tries to avoid projecting the researcher's beliefs and expectations into the data. Specialists of this type have sometimes focused on one religion. Contemporary examples are Wendy Doniger (O'Flaherty, b. 1940) and Diana Eck (b. 1945). Both have specialized in Hinduism, but their writings and works have incorporated other world religions.

## **WHY STUDY THE MAJOR RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD?**

Because religions are so wide-ranging and influential, studying them helps round out a person's education. It also enriches your experience of many other related subjects. Let us now consider some additional pleasures and rewards of studying religions.

- 1) *Insight into religious traditions* Each religion is fascinating in its own right as a complex system of values, relationships, personalities, and human creativity.
- 2) *Insight into what religions share* The study of religions requires sympathy and objectivity. While it is true that being a believer in a particular religion brings a unique insight that an outsider cannot have, an outsider can also appreciate things that are not always obvious to the insider. This is particularly true of shared imagery, belief, and practice patterns.

- 3) *Insight into people* Understanding a person's religious background tells you more about that person's attitudes and values. Such understanding is valuable for successful human relations in both public life and private life.
- 4) *Tolerance and appreciation of differences* Because human beings are emotional creatures, their religions sometimes allow inflamed feelings to override common decency. As we see daily, religions can be employed to justify immense cruelty. Examining the world's significant faiths helps you develop tolerance toward people of varying religious traditions. In a multicultural world, tolerance of differences is valuable, but enjoyment of differences is even better. Variety is a fact of nature, and the person who can enjoy variety in religion and elsewhere is a person who will never be tired of life.
- 5) *Intellectual questioning* Religions make claims about truth, yet some of their views are not easy to reconcile. For example, does the theory of reincarnation of the soul, as found in Hinduism, not conflict with the teaching of several other religions that a soul has only one lifetime on earth? Furthermore, how can the notion of an immortal soul be reconciled with the Buddhist teaching that nothing has a permanent soul or essence? We must also ask questions about tolerance itself. Must we be tolerant of intolerance, even if a religion preaches it? Questions such as these arise naturally when we study religions side by side. Such study sharpens our perception of the claims of religions and invites us to examine critical intellectual questions more closely.
- 6) *Insight into everyday life* Religious influences can be found everywhere in modern culture, not just within religious buildings. Politicians use religious images, for example, when they speak of the "new covenant" with voters. Specific religions and religious denominations take public positions on moral issues, such as abortion and war. Our weekly routines are regulated by the original Jewish practice of a six-day workweek followed by a day of rest, and the European-American school calendar is generally divided into two by the original Christian Christmas holidays. Even comic strips use religious imagery: animals crowded onto a wooden boat, a man holding two tablets, angels on clouds, and a person meditating on a mountaintop. Religion studies are valuable for helping us recognize and appreciate religious influences everywhere.
- 7) *Appreciation for Art*: If you are attracted to painting, sculpture, music, or architecture, you will be drawn to studying religions. Numerous religious traditions have been among the most significant patrons of art, and their study provides a gateway to discovering and appreciating these rich works.
- 8) *Enriched experience of travel* Study of religion allows you to see cultural forms in new ways. One of the great gifts of our age is the ability to travel. Visiting the temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia or a Mayan pyramid in Mexico differs from just reading about them. Studying world religions gives you the background necessary to enjoy the many beautiful places you can experience.
- 9) *Insight into family traditions* Religions have influenced many cultures so strongly that their effects are readily identifiable in the values of one's parents and grandparents, even if they are not actively religious individuals. These values include attitudes toward education, individual rights, gender roles, time, money, food, and leisure.
- 10) *Help in one's religious quest*. Not everyone is destined to become an artist, a musician, or a poet, yet each one of us has some ability to appreciate visual arts, music, and poetry. In the same way, although some people may not be explicitly religious, they may have a sense of the sacred and a desire to seek ways to feel at home in the universe. Those who belong to

religion will have their beliefs and practices enriched by studying the world's religions because they will learn about their religion's history, significant figures, scriptures, and influences from new points of view. Others who have little interest in traditional religions but have a strong interest in spirituality may view their lives as a spiritual quest. Studying various religions is beneficial for anyone involved in a spiritual search. Stories of others' spiritual pursuits provide insights we may draw on for our spiritual journey.