**Chapter 1 RELIGIOUS RESPONSES**

**Chapter Overview**

The sense that there is something or someone, some truth beyond our everyday experience of reality, seems to be common to all cultures throughout history. How people worship or respond to this universal presence, deity, or ultimate reality, sometimes termed “the sacred,” varies greatly throughout the world.

Pictured as a tapestry, religion illustrates that many diverse forms of expression or threads can be distinguished in the fabric underneath the surface of life. The word “religion,” (which probably comes from the Latin *religio* meaning “to tie again” or “to tie back”) suggests a connecting or a tying back to ultimate meanings and purposes. Humankind’s yearnings to engage a greater reality have taken, and continue to take, a plurality of expressions. Many religions have some or all of the following dimensions: 1) ritual 2) narrative and mythic 3) experiential and emotional 4) social and institutional 5) ethical and legal 6) doctrinal and philosophical 7) material. Despite common elements, religions are complex systems of belief and culture that often stand outside institutional expression, making “religion” itself difficult to define, nevertheless, all religions seem to share a common aim: connecting people back to something greater which lies behind the surface of life, or invisibly permeates the tangible world of our five senses.

Fisher notes the controversies concerning the term “religion” and its applicability, as well as the limitations of applying names or labels to religions. Fisher points out that not all religious behavior takes place within an institutional context; it would be useful to ask students to think of examples of behavior and experiences which might seem religious (or “spiritual” in current parlance) despite not occurring within the framework of one of the major religions.

This chapter is foundational to the entire book. It may be helpful to students to outline the chapter and think through how each section in the chapter relates to the chapter title and the other sections in the chapter. Students may consider questions such as: Why are there religions? How have various thinkers sought to explain the origin and continuation of religion throughout human history? How do the different examples of explanations of religion help us understand and refine our own approach to the study of religion?

Additionally, students should be prompted to pay attention to key terms and names as they work through each section. Fisher has interwoven significant terminology and identifications of important figures that appear in later chapters in this first fundamental chapter. Thus, Chapter One introduces the reader to emphases that will appear throughout the work.

Students should find several sections particularly interesting. Fisher provides examples of different ways of understanding the relationships between religion and science. Students may wish to discuss their own views in the context of the perspectives presented here; this issue also provides the basis for a discussion of how the academic study of religion is different from the study of science.

Often forgotten feminine approaches to the sacred, which have been buried under centuries of patriarchal interpretations not only in the West but in much of the East as well, are discussed in the section “Women in Religions.” Students may find it useful to discuss the roles of men and women in their own experiences.

Another neglected topic in the study of religion is also explored, the negative side of organized religion. That aspect of the religious response may be difficult to examine but must be addressed in any honest effort at interpreting the impact of religions on cultures. Most students will have some awareness of the lives that have been lost through witch-­burnings, inquisitions, crusades, terrorist acts, and international wars conducted in the name of religion. While many of these unfortunate incidents were fought over issues of power and domination, religion has often carried the banner for the cause. Students might here dialogue about the challenging aspects of: religious charisma, guilt, escapism, political applications of faith, and falsehoods.

Subsequent chapters study specific characteristics of particular religions. This chapter lays the foundation for the rest of the text.

**Attempts to define religion**

This section briefly introduces the difficulty we encounter in naming religions, which may fall outside institutional definition. This section also discusses “spirituality” and the complex, elusive nature of religious belief systems.

**Why are there religions?**

This section briefly introduces a range of theories of religion in three broad groupings, which are not mutually exclusive. First, the materialistic perspective asserts that humans invented religion. **For scientific materialists**, the supernatural is imaginary; only the material world exists. Feuerbach argued that deities are projections of human qualities. Karl Marx saw religion as derived from economics and the longings of the oppressed, and argued that religion could be used as a tool of oppression.

Some approaches to religion seek to assess religion’s benefits to people without necessarily evaluating the truth claims religions make. The **functional perspective** holds that religion is useful for individuals and society. Durkheim, for example, saw religion as a glue which holds human societies together. John Bowker has argued that religion serves a biological purpose in protecting gene replication and the nurturing of children. Various studies of prayer and other forms of religious practice demonstrate that faith may have positive physiological effects. Similarly, psychologists have argued that religion is beneficial to psychological well­being. People who find security in specific answers may find dogma and absolute faith comforting.

Finally, the **faith perspective** is that some form of ultimate reality exists. Some religious people accept belief in a sacred reality on the basis of holy books; others come to their own conclusions. There are two basic ways of apprehending reality: rational thought or reason and non-­rational modes of knowing; religious practitioners may use both methods.

The experience of direct perception of truth, beyond the senses, may be called **mysticism**. **Enlightenment**, **realization**, **awakening**, and **gnosis** are some of the terms used for encounters with the supreme, unseen, or ultimate reality; many religions have techniques to bring about such encounters. In ordinary experience, people perceive themselves as separate from the material world, but mystical experience may challenge this typical **dualistic** form of experience so that the practitioner’s sense of ultimate reality and his or her awareness of it are one. Otto defined this experience of being grasped by reality, or **numinous**, as the basis of religion; Wach argued that religious experience followed predictable patterns.

**Understandings of sacred reality**

That which has been experienced as the sacred has many faces. Eliade helped develop comparative religion which compares religious patterns found throughout the world. Eliade used the terms **sacred** and **profane**; however, not all cultures make a clear distinction between the two.

A vocabulary exists in the study of religions to help us understand the different ways, culturally and historically, in which ultimate reality has been approached and defined.

Sacred reality can be envisioned as **immanent**, which means present in the world. Reality can also be conceived as **transcendent**, that is, as existing above and outside the material world. Religions that understand the sacred to be a personal reality and which are based on one’s relationship to the personal sacred are called **theistic**. In these religions, if ultimate reality is worshiped as a single being, the religion is called **monotheistic**. On the other hand, if a religion maintains that there are multiple attributes and forms of the divine, then it is designated **polytheistic**. Religions which maintain that behind the plurality of apparent forms there is one underlying substance are termed **monistic. Nontheistic** views assert a sacred reality that is not in the form of a personal God. Some religions believe that sacred reality can be manifested in human form or events called **incarnations**.

**Exclusivist** religious authorities claim that they worship the only true deity and that all others are pagans or nonbelievers. In contrast, **universalism** is the view that it is possible different religions are talking about the same thing in different languages, or referring to different aspects of the same unknowable whole.

**Atheism** is the belief that there is no deity. “New Atheism,” promoted by thinkers such as Richard Dawkins, argues that religious faith is not just wrong, but evil, because it can be used to support violence. **Agnosticism** is the view that it is impossible for humans to know with certainty about the existence of the sacred. It is important to emphasize to students that these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Religions that conceive of a personal sacred reality may think of that reality as simultaneously immanent and transcendent. It is also possible that at times some of these distinctions may blur. Finally, **secularism** describes the manner in which people go about their daily lives with reference to any religion. Here the emphasis is exclusively on material life.

**Ritual, symbol, and myth**

Worship seeks to express reverence and may also be used to request help with problems. Rituals, sacraments, prayers, and spiritual practices are used to create a sacred atmosphere or state of consciousness, to bring some human control to situations normally not under human power, to mark key life stages, and provide spiritual instruction. Predictable and repeated worshipful actions are known as **rituals**. Students should be encouraged to think about their own impressions of rituals and the functions they serve. High school graduation is a helpful example of a ritual that students most likely will have already experienced themselves, and it may be fruitfully compared to life stage religious rituals.

**Symbols** are images borrowed from the material world that are similar to ineffable spiritual experiences. There are many similarities among symbols used in different cultures. Jung posited a collective unconscious, which contains a store of archetypal symbols.

Also relevant are allegories, narratives which use concrete symbols to convey abstract ideas.

A set of symbols together may become the basis for **myths**, symbolic stories that explain the universe and people’s place within it. Myths may explain how things came to be, perhaps incorporating historical truth, but are treated as sacred reality. Joseph Campbell suggested that myths serve mystical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological functions and are thus not simply falsehoods or the work of primitive imaginations.

**Absolutist and liberal responses to modernity**

Traditional religious understandings are under increasing pressure due to the phenomenon of **globalization**. Each religious community has different ways of interpreting its traditions. Particular labels for these modes of interpretation have arisen. Four of these labels are the subjects of this section: **orthodox, absolutist, fundamentalist,** and **liberal**. Orthodox refers to those who stand by a historical form of their religion, strictly following established practices, laws, and creeds. Absolutist refers to those who reject contemporary influences on their religion The term fundamentalism is often applied to a selective insistence on parts of a religious tradition, but the term frequently carries misleading and negative connotations. Liberal refers to those who take a more flexible approach to their religious tradition.

Non-faith-based research treats scriptures as literary collections from particular cultural and historical contexts rather than as the absolute word of God. Such research has sought to identify the earliest forms of scriptures, the historical aspects of scriptures in comparison to other historical data, the intended audience of scriptures, the language and meaning of the words, the literary form of scriptures, **redaction** or the editing and organization of scripture, as well as the contemporary relevance of scripture. Such **historical-critical** studies are often at odds with the views of those who consider their scripture to be the product of divine revelation rather than human composition. Historical-critical studies neither accepts nor rejects the particular truth-claims of any religion and may be seen as offensive and/or false by orthodox believers. Additionally, scriptures serve different purposes in different traditions, and those differences should be understood.

**The encounter between science and religion**

Science, like religion, searches for universal principles to explain reality as we experience it. Since ancient times, the two have often gone hand-in-hand. While some of the ancient Greek nature philosophers sought to understand the world through their own perception, Plato argued that the testimony of the senses differs from that which is determined through reason. Plato considered the soul superior to the body, and reason superior to the senses, a judgment which has had profound influence on Western thought.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment placed greater respect on rational knowledge than religious knowledge. In the nineteenth century, Darwin’s theory of evolution challenged the biblical view of creation. As evolutionary biology has continued to develop since Darwin, more is known about the role of genetics in natural selection. Also, studies are revealing more and more evidence of gradual changes in organisms from fossil records and the genetic records encoded in DNA.

More recently, however, some scientists have sought to understand religious belief without necessarily rejecting it outright, and have also questioned the nature of science itself. Scientists studying the cosmos have encountered virtually insurmountable complexity and have also acknowledged the complicating factor of our own role as observers. Some physicists have proposed models of the universe that have certain affinities with some religious models, to the extent that their work may be seen as approaching **metaphysics** or philosophy based on theories of subtle realities that transcend the physical world.

More dynamic biological models are emerging, as science moves beyond earlier mechanical models. James Lovelock has proposed the **Gaia Theory** of the earth as a complex, self-regulating organism instead of the work of a Grand Planner.

The conflict between science and religion is exemplified in the opposing views of **creationism** — religious concepts of intentional divine creation of all life forms, and **Darwin’s** scientific concept of a universe evolving mechanistically. The **intelligent design** movement holds that scientific discoveries may be seen as proving the existence of an Intelligent Designer. Some scientists have also argued that there appears to be some evidence of purpose or intention in the development of the universe, again revealing a potential affinity with religious views of creation. Finally, some scientists find scientific discovery itself an experience that may deepen their own religious faith.

There are four general positions in the current dialogue between science and religion: the conflict model, the view that science and religion deal with separate realms, a position of dialogue in which scientists and religious believers find common ground in interpreting religious propositions as metaphors, and an integrationist position which sees an overlap between religion and science.

**Women in religions**

A central but often understudied dimension of religion is the exclusion of women and the feminine; most institutionalized religions are **patriarchal**, i.e. having male leaders who are like father figures. Women may hold only supporting roles in religious organizations, and in some instances may be considered incapable of spiritual realization and/or a danger to male spiritual progress. While the founders of religions may have challenged dominant cultural patterns that rendered women inferior, institutional forms of religion have typically not actively challenged gender imbalance.

Throughout the world, people are challenging the inferior roles to which women have been relegated in various religious traditions. Scholars are attempting to learn more about women’s roles in religion throughout history, and feminists are challenging the patriarchal structures of their own religions, including rules excluding women from full participation in religious life, gender-exclusive language in religious texts. Many female religious believers are also advocating an active engagement between religion and social problems.

As students work through the book, they should be alert to the roles of women in each religion and each religion’s view of the feminine. Are women of equal status to males in these religions? Are changes taking place in regard to women in religions?

**Negative aspects of organized religions**

Fisher indicates some key problem areas to which the reader should pay close attention:

* Religions may split rather than unify humanity.
* Religions may devote more energy to preserving the outer, institutional form of the religion than its inner spirit (Weber’s “routinization of **charisma**”).
* Those in religious power have the ability to dominate and manipulate the faithful; people may put their faith in unethical or misguided spiritual leaders.
* Religion may lead to an exaggeration of guilt in people with perfectionist or paranoid tendencies; religion may become a form of escapism; religion may be psychologically harmful to some.
* Religion is a potential center for political power, and may be used as a rallying point for wars against other peoples or nations.

**Lenses for studying religions**

Scholars use different lenses for studying religions, including: history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, theology, politics, economics, feminist studies, and **phenomenology** – a special field devoted specifically to the study of religions. Phenomenology studies religion from the perspective of the believer or practitioner. Others approach the study of religion through **hermeneutics** – the study of the theory and practice of interpretation. This study involves an awareness of the intersubjective dimension of how people internalize and transform what we learn.

**Key Terms**

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| Absolutist | Immanent | Redaction |
| Agnosticism | Incarnation | Religion |
| Allegory | Intelligent design | Ritual |
| Atheism | Liberal | Sacred |
| Awakening | Metaphysics | Scientific materialism |
| Charisma | Monotheism | Secularism |
| Comparative religion | Mysticism | Spirituality |
| Creationism | Myth | Symbol |
| Dogma | Orthodox | Theism |
| Enlightenment | Phenomenology | Transcendent |
| Exclusivism | Polytheism | Universalism |
| Fundamentalism | Profane |  |
| Gnosis | Realization |  |

**Class Activities/Assignments**

1. Assess the religion section in your local newspaper. What issues are covered, and which religious traditions are addressed?
2. Look up Religious Organizations and Churches in the online yellow pages or on church websites. How many of the living religions in the table of contents of the book are represented in your community? Investigate other ways of finding out (such as Internet searches) how many living religions are in your area.
3. The religious response is expressed in a multiplicity of ways. Collect different examples of this from newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books, websites, etc. Discuss what these depictions express about specific responses to the perceived Sacred. What is emphasized?
4. Ask students to visit a religious place of worship with which they are not familiar. Have them examine the architecture, the layout, artwork if present, hymnals, reading material, and the like. How can they connect what they see with what they have learned about the history of the religion practiced at the site? Have them compare and contrast their findings with one another. Can any credible conclusions be reached about the nature of the religions being investigated based upon the students’ findings? If so, what are they?
5. Ask students to write a dictionary-style definition of religion; compare it with actual dictionary definitions and other students’ definitions.
6. Divide the class into small groups. Assign different groups the task of investigating very positive contributions that some religions have made to human affairs, and assign other groups the job of discovering some of the horrors that people have perpetrated upon each other in the name of religion. Each group should record its findings and present them to the class.
7. Science and religion are sometimes interrelated and other times in conflict. Discuss what role science can play in religious beliefs and vice versa.

**Recommended Films**

“*Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth, with Bill Moyers*." 1988. (DVD released by Mystic Fire Video, 2001). Six hours of interviews in total; selections that may be useful for class discussion include discussions of the hero’s adventure and the message of the myth, as well as clips from “Star Wars” and an interview with George Lucas.

“*Women Serving Religion*.” Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1995. 29 minutes. Addresses the roles of women in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

**Review questions**

1. In what ways has the term “religion” been defined?
2. What are some of the different perspectives for understanding religion?
3. Describe absolutist and liberal interpretations of religious traditions, how they relate to globalization and modernity, and how each might react to historical-critical studies of religious texts.
4. What are the major positions that have emerged in the dialogue between science and religion?

**Discussion questions**

1. To what extent do you find materialistic arguments rejecting the reality posited by religion and spirituality useful in understanding religion
2. What relationship does spirituality have to institutional religions?
3. In what ways is the patriarchal nature of institutional religions changing?
4. What factors do you believe contribute to the negative aspects or organized religions?
5. Discuss possible benefits and disadvantages to using different lenses for the study of religion.

**Additional Class Discussion/Essay Questions**

1. How is the study of religion different from the study of subjects such as mathematics or other sciences? How best can we approach our study when religions make claims with which we may or may not agree?
2. Explain what a myth is, and describe some of the different ways that the function of myth has been explained.
3. Give two examples of scientific materialist explanations of religion. To what extent are such explanations useful in understanding religion? What aspects of religion might they miss?
4. What is involved in the historical-critical study of scriptures? How does this approach differ from an absolutist approach?
5. In trying to understand the negative side of organized religion, some people have argued that religious violence is carried out when people misuse or misinterpret their religion. Others, however, argue that the widespread nature of religious violence suggests that religion itself may be the problem. Which view do you find more convincing? Why?