1. THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

Chapter Overview

It has been said that man is *incurably religious*. Throughout the world there seems to be a universal intuitive sense within humanity that there is something beyond us, there is a God or an Ultimate Reality, transcending our own natural world. How people worship or respond to this universal presence, the Sacred or Holy One of the universe, varies greatly throughout the world. However, the sense that there is something or someone to worship seems to be common to all cultures throughout the history of the world.

Imaged as a tapestry, religion illustrates that many diverse forms of expression or threads can be distinguished in the fabric underneath the surface of life. Our word religion, (which probably comes from the Latin *religion* 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. Nevertheless, all religions 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.

This chapter is foundational to the entire book. It could prove useful to students if they were instructed to outline the chapter in terms of bold-faced sections and the corresponding subsections such as the following example.

I. The Religious Response

A. Why are there religions?
   1. Materialistic perspective: humans invented religion
   2. Functional Perspective: Religion is useful
   3. Faith perspective: Ultimate Reality exists

B. Modes of encountering Ultimate Reality

D. Understandings of Ultimate Reality

F. Worship, symbol, and myth

E. Absolutist and liberal interpretations

G. The encounter between science and religion

H. Women and the feminine in religions

I. The negative side of organized religion

Students should then be asked to think through how each section in the chapter relates to the chapter title and the other sections in the chapter. Students could be alerted that the dominant section in this chapter is the first one? Why are there religions? Why is that section so important for this chapter, and subsequently the whole book?

Additionally, students could be prompted to pay attention to key terms and names as they work through each section. Fisher has masterfully 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, which will appear throughout the work.
Students should find two sections particularly interesting. 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 Women and the Feminine in Religions. Another neglected topic in the study of religion is also explored, namely, the negative side of organized religion. That aspect of the religious response is less pleasant to examine but must be addressed in any honest effort at interpreting the impact of religions on cultures. Most beginning students probably will have a cursory awareness of the lives that have been lost through witch-burnings, inquisitions, crusades, 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.

Chapter 1 has the following goals:
1. To develop a generic understanding of religion
2. To explore why religions exist
3. To examine the encounter of religion with modern science
4. To describe the general forms religion takes

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

Why are there religions?

One set of explanations called the materialistic perspective maintains that the supernatural exists only in our imaginations. Only the physical world really exists. Religion is therefore essentially bad for people because it deludes us and detracts our attention away from dealing with the only material world we have. This explanation goes on to assert that humans created religion and not for the highest of motives.

According to the famous nineteenth-century philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, we project our own deepest fears and desires and turn these into gods, which we then worship. The renowned twentieth-century psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, considered religion as a universal neurosis. For Freud, religion is almost a mental illness. In a different vein the nineteenth-century socialist philosopher, Karl Marx, argued that religion emerged from economic frameworks as a means for oppressing people and maintaining an unjust economic system. In his view, religion is an opiate for the masses to keep them submissive and unquestioning about their lot in life.

In stark contrast to the previous perspective is the conclusion of some psychologists that religion can indeed be good for people. This is the growth perspective. It is good because religion is thought to fulfill deep individual needs of humanity. Adherents of this view maintain that religion can enhance one’s mental health and aid in the development of maturity. Eric Fromm suggests the people have a normal need for stability and humanistic religions (as opposed to authoritarian ones) can fulfill that need. Moreover, other psychological needs cannot be met by the world alone such as the quest for some assurance that we survive death. All religions help discover meaning in the midst of the ordinary. This may be one of the deepest felt needs within human life, to have a sense of higher purpose and direction.

Another way of making the same point, using the language of Mircea Eliade, is to say that all religions help one seek out the sacred amidst the profane. Here the sacred refers to the extraordinary, the supernatural, the source of the universe and values, significance. The idea of profane refers to what is mundane, ordinary, the everyday. Using these categories we can say that religions help believers find the extraordinary within the ordinary.

Among the many needs that religion can fulfill is the desire for perfection or to gain inner strength, to change one’s way of thinking about life, to be appreciative for creation, to be relieved of anxieties, and to outgrow one’s defects, limits. Finally, religion can be a source of comfort, a way of answering the discomforting even terrifying sense of isolation, of being alone in the universe.
A third perspective is treated in the chapter; namely, the faith perspective. This view asserts that Ultimate Reality is real, that there is a transcendent or supernatural sphere co-existing with the physical universe. This belief is frequently grounded in some kind of mystical experience, the overwhelming awareness that one has been touched by a reality that far transcends ordinary life.

Those claiming mystical experience often find it hard to express and explain. There is an ineffable dimension to such experiences. Ineffable simply means that you have an experience which you know to be real; however, you can only describe, express, and explain it partially to others. An aspect of the real experience eludes the power of language to articulate it fully. e.g., Ask the class if anyone drives a stick shift car or truck, If so, ask them if they remember when they learned to hold the vehicle steady on a steep hill, If so, ask them why it would be difficult for them to fully explain to a novice how to do the same thing, they know how to do it. They know that doing so is real. However, to convey the experience of holding a car on a steep incline with a stick shift to the uninitiated is virtually impossible. That is an example, one of many, of an ineffable experience.

These encounters with transcendent reality are given different names in different religious traditions: coming home, ecstatic communion, gnosis, self-knowledge, awakening, kensho, illumination, enlightenment, for example. These may arise spontaneously or by measures of inducement. However encountered and however described, mystical experiences are part of the universal phenomenon of religion.

Modes of Encountering Ultimate Reality

This section discusses two basic modes of understanding reality: rational thought or reason and non-rational modes of knowing. Reason begins with senses and then establishes general abstract categories, formulating seemingly logical ideas about reality. This is one path to encounters with Ultimate Reality. Non-rational ways of knowing include arriving at convictions indirectly based on the example of great religious leaders, or the development of personal faith, or intuition which begins with the sense but bypasses logic, moving directly to the conclusion of truth. It uses an internal form of wisdom often called mysticism to form perceptions about reality.

Understandings of Ultimate Reality

That which has been experienced as the sacred has many faces. 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.

Ultimate Reality can be envisioned as **immanent**, which means present in the world. The same Reality can also be conceived as **transcendent**, that is, as existing above and outside the world. Religions that understand the Sacred to be a personal reality and 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 Ultimate Realities then it is designated **polytheistic**. Some religions believe that Sacred Reality can be manifested in human form or events called **incarnations**. Religions, which maintain that behind the plurality of apparent forms there is one undergirding substance, are termed **monistic**.

**Atheism** is a term that means disbelief in any deity. However, even though atheism makes negative claims about deity, it is also an expression of belief just the same. **Agnosticism** does not deny the existence of the divine but states that it is impossible or unnecessary for humans to know with certainty about the existence of the Sacred. Finally, Ultimate Reality may be understood in **non-theistic** terms. That means that there is ultimacy to the universe but it is expressed without relationship to a sacred reality beyond our world.
It is important to emphasize to students that these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Religions, which conceive of a Personal Sacred Reality, can think of that Reality as simultaneously immanent and transcendent. It is also possible that at times some of these distinctions may blur. For example, a Hindu may be a polytheist and believe in the existence of many gods but may be somewhat monotheistic in practice when she or he places one god at the top of the pantheon.

Worship, symbol, and myth

Concisely stated, worship is a dramatic gesture which attempts to express in outward form the reverence and awe which one experiences in response to Ultimate Reality, e.g., rituals, sacraments, prayers, and spiritual practices. A symbol is an object, a place, a person, or an action which allows worshipper to enter a sacred state of communion with Ultimate Reality, e.g., the sharing of food, the use of fire or candles, water purification, uses of flowers or fragrances.

It would be good to sensitize students to the fact that the idea of symbol does not denote illusion, or empty representation. The phrase, that is just a symbol, expresses that negative notion. Quite to the contrary, in terms of religions, symbols are understood as realities, which express, and offer a mode of participation in, the Ultimate Reality, which they signify. Symbols are intended to be experienced not to be explained. Moreover, different people can experience the same symbol in the same religion in a multiplicity of ways, even at the same time. Symbols are multi-layered realities with many levels of meaning and significance. Myths are stories founded on symbols. They attempt to express infinite reality and meaning using finite means. Moreover, a major purpose of religious myths is to constitute models of human behavior.

It is usual now to understand symbols and myths metaphorically rather than literally. They both signify deep realities, which transcend them. In other words, symbols and myths are not simply identical to what they signify (e.g., a warm hug is not identical to the underlying emotions which it expresses and makes apparent).

Absolutist and liberal interpretations

Each religious community has different ways of interpreting its traditions. Particular labels for these modes of interpretation have arisen. Six of these labels are the subjects of this section: orthodox, absolutists, fundamentalists, liberals, heretics, and mystics.

Unfortunately, these descriptive categories are often loaded with negative value judgments. Those identified as orthodox may be stereotyped as rigid, narrow minded, and vindictive in their religious thinking; whereas others designated as liberals may be seen as wide-eyed extremists eager to change centuries of teachings and traditions in favor of contemporary fads. Students ought to be signaled that these terms are meant to be neutral and descriptive, not judgmental. In other words, to label someone with one of these terms means that he or she fits a profile of beliefs and characteristics which define the term and places her or him in that category (e.g., mystic rather than fundamentalist). These terms are not intended to pass judgment on other peoples intelligence, character, or motives.

An interesting exercise could be for students to identify past heretics in one or more of the religions studied and then investigate whether the teachings of these individuals are still considered false today, e.g., In the late 4th and early 5th centuries C.E. a Christian monk named Jovinian was eventually identified as a heretic for teaching what was then considered a very controversial doctrine which was contrary to the established orthodoxy of his day; specifically, Jovinian taught that the married Christian life was equal in terms of its spiritual value to the celibate life. He was condemned for that position. How many contemporary Christians would denounce him today? (Tongue in cheek, the category heretic could also be defined as an identification of someone who lost an important fight with religious authorities!).
Scientific understanding of reality

Briefly stated, our contemporary understanding is that science and religion are not necessarily exclusive of one another. In fact, both the accomplishments and limitations of scientific knowing are now readily acknowledged. It is further acknowledged today that both religion and science explore vital aspects of the human condition and together they illuminate human existence more fully than ever before. Indeed, it is now recognized that science, like religion, searches for universal principles to explain reality as we experience it.

Often the alleged controversy between science and religion is due to confusion over areas of focus. Science works in the arena of the natural world. Incredible research and development from the scientific community has brought about wonderful changes and medical advancements into our world. However, the domain of science is the natural world, not the supernatural world in which religion generally finds its roots. To challenge science to prove or disprove the existence of God is an exercise in futility. To ask religious leaders to explain or dispute scientific discovery is also folly. Science and religion must not be perceived as contradictory but rather as complementing each other.

Albert Einstein beautifully illustrates the essence of the chapter on page thirty-six with his quotation. Students should be asked to examine it closely and to explain why this quotation exemplifies a complementary relationship between science and religion. This is further supported by the statement of physicist Stephen Hawking at the very end of the section. What does Hawking mean when he talks about the source, which breathes a fire into equations and makes a universe for them to describe? In sum, it is no longer considered unscientific to entertain the idea that there is an Ultimate Reality transcending our empirical experiences.

Women and the feminine in religions

Recent archaeological findings suggest that the reverence for a high goddess appears in many cultures: Danu or Diti in ancient India, Great Mother Nu Kwa of China, Cobra Goddess Ua Zit of Egypt, Creator Goddess Gaia of the Greeks, Arinna Sun Goddess of Turkey, Mother of the Aztec deities Coatlique, Queen Mother Freyja of the Scandinavians, the Pueblos Great Spider Woman, the all-powerful creator of the Dahomy, Mawu, and Ishtar supreme deity of the Babylonians. As the last example indicates, other cultures may have placed a goddess at the top of the hierarchy of gods.

Temples and images of such goddesses have been found in almost every archaeological site in Europe and in the Near and Middle East. She is frequently represented by or associated with water, serpents, birds, eggs, spirals, the moon, the womb, vulva, psychic powers, and the magnetic currents of the earth. She is also connected with the creation and renewal of life; therefore, in goddess religions, sexuality is sometimes interpreted as a means of accessing spirituality. What happened to these goddesses?

This section discusses possible theories; however, more to the point, it outlines the clear consequences of the banishment of the feminine in religions. The spiritual participation of women in religion was suppressed; in some patriarchal societies women were devalued, in other words, seen as property, not persons; and aspects of religion labeled as feminine such as receptivity, intuition, and ecstatic mystical communion, may also have been ostracized. There is strong evidence indicating that fears of women were involved in witch-hunts and subsequent executions of women.

As readers work through the book it would be very good to be alert to the roles of women in each religion, what their position is, how the feminine is regarded. Questions should be asked and discussed such as, are women of equal status to males in these religions and are important changes taking place in regard to women in religions?

This is a time in history when the feminist movement is currently challenging the widespread patriarchy of many religions. The exclusion of women from full participation in ministry is being
challenged. Gender-exclusive language in holy writings and images of the divine are being questioned.
The negative side of organized religion

No religion is free of distortion. That keen insight is the thesis of this section. Unfortunate but true, a realistic assessment of living religions must include an examination of the actual and potential harms which religious faiths can and might inflict on believers and others. Fisher does an admirable job of indicating major problem areas to which the reader should pay close attention. They are:

* Religions may split rather than unify humanity
* Those in religious power have the ability to dominate and manipulate the faithful
* One may put their faith in unethical or misguided spiritual leaders
* Religious authorities may mistake their own ideas for the voice and will of the Ultimate
* Some may surrender their ego to an unworthy leader
* Religions can play on peoples fear of punishment after death
* Religious morality and the development of conscience may drive perfectionists or those with paranoid tendencies into literal neurosis
* Religion may be used as a means of escaping the realities of everyday life
* Religions are potential centers for the misuse of political power
* If a church and a state are one, the belief that the dominant national religion is the one true faith can be used to oppress those of different faiths
* Religions have been rallying hubs for wars against other nations
* More energy may go into maintaining the outer forms of religious traditions, rather than into preserving their inner spirits

Despite the negative realities and potentials of religion, the chapter affirms this optimistic and accurate thought; to keep religion alive requires a genuine connection with the unseen, scrupulous honesty, and pure heartedness. As we survey the various contemporary manifestations of the religious impulse, we will find people and groups who are keeping the spark of the divine alive today.
### Key Terms

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