Chapter 1

Studying Western Religions

About

Religion

Chapter Overview

In the introductory chapter of your textbook, Roy C. Amore and Amir Hussain explore the (near-) universal characteristics of primordial human religions, present a broad outline of the evolutionary and developmental processes that have enabled these early traditions to flower into the myriad forms of religiosity that can be seen in the world today, and discuss the various reasons for studying religion in the twenty-first century (as well as some of the methodological and practical challenges that inform such study). Through this overview, you will be introduced to various key concepts in the study of religion, as well as the specific approach adopted by this text. On the second point, it is important to note that *World Religions: Western Traditions* builds upon the pluralistic convictions of the late Willard G. Oxtoby, arguing that a sufficient understanding of the human quest for meaning can only be obtained through an open and honest exploration of the diversity found within the world’s religions—each of which share “patterns” of similarity, while also evincing considerable differences in their approaches to truth, ethics, and the relationship between humanity and the sacred.

The chapter begins by evoking an image of Stonehenge, a world-renowned sacred site whose immense standing stones symbolize the power of religion to motivate tremendous outpourings of human effort. Using this well-known sacred space as a guide, the authors proceed to describe the beliefs/practices that likely characterized life for members of the Stonehenge community, drawing on both archeological evidence and the anthropological record of various other ancient religious traditions. Building from this overview of early human religious expression, the authors then outline how we can observe patterns of similarities shared by most religious traditions across human cultures and throughout history. The authors break these patterns down into broad categories which will help us to embark upon our study of western religions:

1. Shamanism
2. Connecting to the Cosmos
3. Temple Religion
4. Prophetic Religion
5. The Energy God
6. Purity and Monasticism
7. Mystery Religion
8. The Avatar, God on Earth
9. Scriptural Religion

The existence of these patterns of similarities that connect different, sometimes antagonistic, religious traditions helps to add nuance and complexity to our understanding of the development, spread, and practice of religion amongst human cultures. This presentation is notable because it stands in direct contrast to the more simplistic understanding of religion put forward by many earlier scholars (such as E.B. Tylor), who argued that all religious traditions can be placed in a simple evolutionary series, thus implying that Western European Christianity (or, in some cases, scientific materialism) represented the highest attainment of human spirituality. Given the pluralistic focus of the text, it is obvious why this perspective can be considered deeply problematic.

The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the many motivations for studying religion, two of which are ubiquity and continued relevance of religious traditions in modern societies, and the more personal motive of attempting to understand one’s own tradition (or the traditions of others) more clearly. These conclusions lead us to some important questions for reflection: What is *your* motivation for studying religion? What questions do you hope to answer through your study? Why are these questions important for you?

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* think about religions in general and the general patterns shared by religions around the world and throughout history;
  + see that all human cultures have religious dimensions and that concern with religious ideas is part of what it means to be human;
  + see the necessity of understanding religion both from an insider’s perspective and from an outsider’s perspective;
  + learn to approach religious traditions in a scholarly fashion, maintaining a critical ethos regarding truth claims, and guarding against relativistic judgements; and
  + begin to develop a familiarity with the specialized vocabulary of terminology pertinent to the study of religion.

Key Terms

All Saints DayA Christian festival honouring all the departed saints; held in the West on 1 November. (p. 6)

avatarThe “descent” or “coming down” of a god into human form. (p. 16)

*axis mundi*A location or structure thought to represent a symbolic connection between the human realm and the realm of the divine (often the sky). (p. 9)

Day of the DeadA Mexican festival honouring the dead. (p. 6)

the Indo-EuropeansA linguistic and cultural group whose influence once extended from India to Europe. The major features of their culture include a stratified society, an elaborate pantheon (and a sacrificial system to accommodate these various deities), the practice of honouring a high warrior god (usually associated with storms/lightning), and a cultural focus on the practice and technologies of war and conquest. (p. 10)

Hallowe’enNow a popular secular holiday, held on 31 October; originally celebrated as the “Eve” of All Saints Day. (p. 6)

high placesSacred areas located on a hill- or mountain-tops; such places existed throughout the ancient Near East. (p. 5)

*naga*A mythical cobra living in the underworld, often associated with water and fertility in Indian religions. (p. 5)

ObonA Japanese festival honouring ancestors. (p. 6)

sacredPlaces, objects, or practices that are “set apart” from the mundane activities of daily life and thus granted special significance. (p. 5)

shamanA type of priest, widespread among hunter-gatherer societies, who communicates with the spirit world on behalf of their community. (p. 7)

StonehengeOne of several ancient rock structures thought to have been constructed for ritual purposes. (p. 7)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. Why is the division between East and West in the study of religion problematic?
2. How were religious rituals intricately linked to early hunting societies’ survival strategies?
3. What are some of the strategies used to cope with unfriendly spirits in shamanistic traditions?
4. How is the concept of an avatar god different from that of a god, such as Zeus, assuming human form?

Reflection Questions

1. How is the use of a broad descriptive term such as “religion” both helpful and unhelpful for learning about and discussing the traditions with which our text is concerned?
2. How do your own experiences shape the way you approach the study of religious traditions?
3. Is the study of religion a “useful” endeavour? Does it matter?
4. Do you think it is possible for new religious traditions to arise today? Or does a religious tradition require a historical pedigree to be considered legitimate?
5. In what ways does change factor into any discussion of religion?

Research Paper Topics

1. Amore and Hussain choose the site at Stonehenge to begin our study of world religions. How can the historical and cultural dimensions of this particular site be employed to discern broader patterns of religious activity across different human cultures?
2. Describe and contrast the “three worlds” concept introduced in your text as it is manifested across three different religious traditions.
3. Sacred, as “set aside,” is now a widely-used term in Western discourses. Describe and analyze some of the ways in which the use of the term “sacred” has shifted in the West from religious usage to more popular connotations.
4. The notion of an afterlife constitutes a wide-spread pattern of similarity across many different religious traditions. Select two different religious traditions and explore the similarities and differences between their respective understandings of death and the afterlife. Pay close attention to the ritual aspects of dying, death, and burial.
5. The role of the ritual specialist is found in many different religious traditions (e.g., shaman, priest, monk, etc.). Select a category of ritual specialist and analyze its respective place an importance within two different religious traditions.
6. In this chapter of your text gender is in terms of changes and power dynamics with religious traditions. Cite and analyze the various ways in which gender roles play out in a specific religious tradition.
7. Choose two sacred sites from different religious traditions. Analyze and compare the facets of how and why each site is considered sacred to its particular devotees, and what physical or conceptual elements they share between them.
8. The development of temple religion has been described as the institutionalization of religious practice, often twined with a powerful polity. Select one example of temple religion and analyze how it institutionalizes religious practice within the tradition from which it developed.
9. Describe and analyze the effects of the cultural model on subjugated societies by Indo-European conquerors has had for the religious traditions that have developed amongst these groups as a result.
10. How does the term “prophetic religion” relate to the “Abrahamic faiths”? Describe and analyze the place of the prophetic figure in each of the Abrahamic faith traditions, and how they relate to one another.

Additional Resources

***The Long Search*** is a 13-part BBC documentary program in which the host Ronald Eyre investigates world religions—Protestant Christianity in the United States; Hinduism in India; Buddhism in Sri Lanka; Islam, Zen, and Pure Land Buddhism in Japan; and so on. The programs are generally attractive and visually interesting; the background research is well done. Each program is 52 minutes. See <http://www.documentary-video.com/items.cfm?id=869>.

The Concept of a World Religion

Anyone involved in a world religions course should be aware of the background debate about the very concept of a “world religion.” Wilfred Cantwell Smith opened this debate by arguing that the concept of “religion” has only recently been created and depends on a European model, which does not necessarily apply to non-Western religions. (Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* [Fortress Press, 1962/1991]).

There is now considerable scholarship on this issue. See:

**Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions:* *Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.**

On the concept of a “world religion,” see:

**Young, Katherine K. 1992, “World Religions: A Category in the Making?” Pp. 111–130 in Michel Despland and Gérard Vallée, ed. *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.**

The *New York Times* covers a wide array of topics associated with religion and belief; for articles and op-eds, see <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/r/religion_and_belief/>

Also see:

**Henricks, Robert G. 2000. *Lao Tzu’s* Tao Te Ching*: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*. New York: Columbia University Press.**

**Allan, Sarah and Crispin Williams, ed. 2000. *The Guodian Laozi*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies.**

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. Amore and Hussain concede that although the division between east and west is a common and helpful device, it is ultimately an arbitrary conceit used by scholars and others to simplify the discussion of religious traditions and cultures. They point out that all of the religious traditions dubbed “Western” are rooted in the geographical area we now call the Middle East. Likewise, the authors acknowledge that the “Eastern” religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are now widely practised in the West. (p. 22)
2. The authors suggest that archeological evidence such as cave paintings provide the ground for a theorization of a crucial link between the proper performance of religious rituals (e.g., dances) and the success of the hunt in the worldview of early hunting societies. Amore and Hussain highlight the danger involved in hunting and the perceived protection that could be derived through a ritual interaction with animals on the spiritual plane. Furthermore, the authors assert that food supply would likely have been a constant concern and rituals of appeasement toward prey animals would have provided some sense of continuity and kinship between the hunters and their prey. Thus, ensuring the return of the prey to be hunted season after season. (pp. 7-8)
3. The authors suggest that the main strategies for coping with unfriendly spirits in religious traditions are modelled on how humans deal with conflict between themselves. Amore and Hussain identify two main tacks: placation or confrontation. In either case it falls to the shaman to deal with the spirit whether through interpreting its demands, or exorcising it and driving it away. (pp. 8-9)
4. In the case of ancient gods, such as Zeus, taking on human form so as to interact with mortals, the god only temporarily takes on the guise of a human—much like a costume. The concept of an avatar god is centred on the actual corporeal incarnation of a god as a human being. Avatar gods, such as Jesus or Krishna, are born human, live as human, and die as human. (pp. 16-17)