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## Studying religion

### Introduction

This course will give you an opportunity to think about some of the key concepts and methods of the discipline of religious studies. You will meet examples of different forms of religious practice and belief, mostly from Britain and India, and will compare the ways in which boundaries are drawn (or not drawn) between what is held to be 'religious' and 'non-religious' in two different societies.

The aim of this course is to explore three key questions:

1. Why study religion?
2. What is religion?
3. How should religion be studied?

The course begins with a series of video clips on religion in Liverpool.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

### Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- discuss some of the ways in which the concept of 'religion' has been and is used in the study of religion
- understand some examples of religious activity in Britain and India on 'special days' and have some practical experience in the study of these examples
- identify and evaluate critically the motives, concerns and methods that typically distinguish the academic study of religion known as religious studies from other approaches to religious belief and practice.

## 1 What is religion: video

### 1.1 The videos: religion in Liverpool

The following clips take a look at religion in Liverpool. You will hear people with different beliefs speaking for themselves. This will provide you with the 'raw data' of religion as lived.

The clips are intended to provoke reflection and discussion, including disagreement, about the topic of religion.

At its simplest level the video clips provide descriptive insights into the beliefs and practices of a range of communities in the city of Liverpool. It thus provides a visual accompaniment to the general descriptions – of a range of contemporary British beliefs and practices. The video, however, poses the question ‘What is religion?’ and, although it covers a number of groups that are conventionally labelled ‘religions’, it also refers throughout to Transcendental Meditation which insists it is not a form of religion. By exploring similarities and differences between the groups represented in the video, including Transcendental Meditation, the video indicates the starting point for a definition of religion.

As you watch the programme, do bear in mind that the coverage of forms of religion found in Liverpool and divisions within religions is limited and inevitably selective. For example, Judaism is seen from the perspective of an Orthodox community, although Reform Judaism is also practised in Liverpool, and no coverage is given to Afro-Caribbean religions, Chinese religions, and Sikhism, although all these contribute to the religious life of the city. On the other hand, you may note that a greater prominence has been given to Christianity, although here too Non-Conformism is not included. Liverpool, however, is distinguished by the completion of two cathedrals in the post-war period, one Anglican and the other [Roman Catholic](#). It seemed important to reflect this in the programme, alongside a sequence in a more intimate parish [church](#), partly as an evocation of Liverpool today and partly because the programme ends with a brief reflection upon the inroads of secularisation in the late twentieth century. This is addressed from a Christian stance because the preservation of Sunday on religious grounds is, of course, a Christian concern. Whether, rather than ceasing to preserve the status of Sunday, equal provision should be given to the special days of other religions is a no less important question and one which is touched on indirectly through the testimony of Jews and Muslims who comment on the implications of observing their special days in a society which still attaches something of a privileged position to Sundays.

In the programme you will hear Sunder Chopra referring to [Krishna](#) and Rama in his account of Hinduism. [Krishna](#) and Rama are believed to be human forms taken by the Hindu deity, [Vishnu](#), who is believed to be the lord and sustainer of the world. It is the custom for Hindus to worship [Vishnu](#) through the forms [Vishnu](#) took at different times to restore righteousness in society; and, of these forms, [Krishna](#) and Rama are the most popular. Stories about them are found in many of the best-loved Hindu scriptures, and [Krishna](#) and Rama are frequently depicted with their respective consorts, [Radha](#) and Sita. You will also hear a reference to Maharishi (pronounced ‘Maharshi’) in the description of Transcendental Meditation; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an Indian teacher, founded the Transcendental Meditation movement.

## 1.2 Preparing for the video clips

Read the extract ‘I live by faith: the religions described’ by clicking the link below.

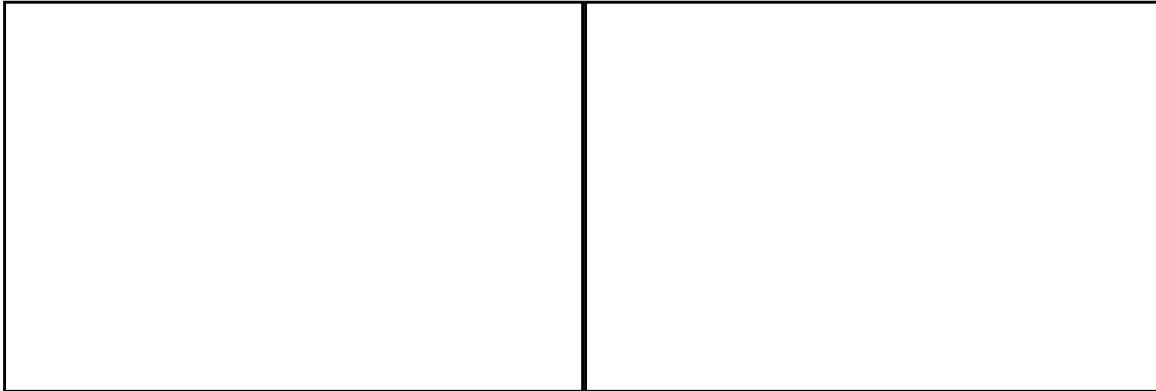
A3: this extract is from *Worlds of Faith*, pp.24–48, by John Bowker, 1983, with the permission of BBC Worldwide Limited. Reading A3: John Bowker, *[‘I live by faith: the religions described’](#)*

### 1.2.1 Background information

The city of Liverpool has seen the growth of a variety of religious and ethnic communities since the latter half of the nineteenth century. The north-west of England has had a strong tradition of [Roman Catholicism](#), and the [Roman Catholic](#) presence in Liverpool was increased as a result of Irish migration. Two Christian cathedrals, one Anglican and the other [Roman Catholic](#), have been completed in the city during the latter half of the twentieth century, and these two very different buildings now dominate the Liverpool skyline. As a port, Liverpool has attracted ex-seamen from Africa, the Arab Gulf and parts of Asia, who have chosen to settle in the city. Consequently, a range of ethnic and religious communities play an important part in the life of the city today. In the post-war period, some of Liverpool's population has moved out to new towns, and it is in Skelmersdale New Town, fifteen to twenty miles north of the city, that the Transcendental Meditation organisation has established a small community centred upon a meditation hall.

### 1.3 The video clips

Now watch the clips below, making notes in your [Learning Journal](#).



### 1.4 Video follow-up

Did the programme add to your factual knowledge? You might like to pursue the question of whether Sunday should be preserved on religious grounds or as a day of common rest for purely social and recreational reasons, or whether provision should be made both to preserve

Sunday as a Christian day of worship and to allow members of other faiths rights to take time off work or school on other days of the week to perform worship and to celebrate their own festivals. You might want to test your response to this question on other people.

### 1.4.1 Sources

This programme was filmed in Liverpool at:

Shree [Radha Krishna Temple](#);

Al Rahma [Mosque](#), Toxteth;

Childwall Hebrew Congregation [Synagogue](#);

[Roman Catholic](#) Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King;

Liverpool Anglican Cathedral;

Parish [Church](#) of Our Lady and St Nicholas;

Maharishi European Sidhaland, Skelmersdale;

Roseman's Delicatessen;

Stanley Dock Market;

The Olive Tree.

## 2 That special day

It's that special day in the week again. People begin to gather, set apart by their passionate convictions and the symbols that bind them together. Some stand by and scoff but the like-minded take strength from each other and stride proudly on, indifferent to those who do not share their commitment. For those caught up since birth (the less sympathetic might say 'indoctrinated') by their elders' commitment and enthusiasm, this is the climax of their week.

How can an observer convey in words the feelings of those who gather at this special place at this special time? The chanting and singing lift those present out of the work-a-day world. Truly, to be here does raise the spirits and charge the batteries for the week ahead. To be sitting in the same row and conscious of familiar faces, possibly among generations of the same family, gives a sense of belonging that others can hardly imagine. This is something of value to be passed from generation to generation. But enough of this; those who will officiate have taken up their positions. It is time for minds and hearts to focus, for the moment has come. The whistle blows, the ball is passed, the match has begun.

My account of 'that special day' deliberately encourages you to assume that I was beginning this study of religion with a description of a religious gathering at a place of worship. After all, for many people the word 'religion' conjures up just such a picture of gatherings on days held to be special by different groups in the community; for example, at a Jewish [synagogue](#) on Saturday, an Islamic [mosque](#) on a Friday (Islam is professed by Muslims) and a Christian

**church** on a Sunday. Whether or not you think of yourself as religious, the celebration of these special days and the marking of events such as marriage and death in places like **churches** or **mosques** are hard to avoid. Regardless of our personal attitudes towards religion, these associations give rise to a measure of shared understanding of what we mean by 'religion'. It's something we take for granted. You might anticipate, therefore, that mapping the limits of 'religion' should be straightforward – a matter of common sense, for we all know what we mean by 'religion'. But is it as straightforward as that?

One prominent football manager declared: 'Some people say that football is a matter of life and death. It isn't. It's much more important than that' (Bill Shankly, when manager of Liverpool Football Club). In speaking about his personal commitment to football, I am sure that Bill Shankly was not intentionally seeking to cast it as some sort of 'religion'. Yet, the language he used is reminiscent of a characteristic associated with 'religion': namely, that 'religion' claims to offer its followers meaning and a way through life which leads them to attach greater importance to it than anything else. If we take Bill Shankly seriously, establishing a clear boundary between religion and other kinds of commitment may prove less easy than we might have imagined.

### Exercise 1

Can you suggest some parallels between following a football club and following a religion?

Hide discussion

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### Discussion

Both football and religion can arouse deep passions, even to the point of violence, and their respective followers will often make considerable sacrifices. Both groups are inclined to mark themselves out with exclusive codes of dress and forms of ritual behaviour. Both have their own songs. There is individual experience but also a powerful sense of belonging to a community with its own code, which is reinforced by sharing in pilgrimage – whether to a place of worship or to a football stadium. Both religion and football produce their heroes, their ordinary followers and their fanatics.

So, am I suggesting that the activity of a religious person at a place of worship can be adequately described in much the same way as, for example, the passionate support of a football fan at the local stadium? Not exactly, but I do want you to consider that the meaning of the familiar term 'religion' may be less clear-cut than it seems. Although many people rush to pronounce judgements on whether religion is 'true' or 'false' or whether it is a 'good' thing or a 'bad' thing, few pause long enough to ask, 'what is religion – how do we recognise it when we encounter it?'



Photo: Popperfoto

Figure 1 Football supporters show their colours

## 3 Religion in the landscape

### 3.1 Everyday perceptions

So, how do we recognise 'religion' when we encounter it? You can answer this from your own experience.

#### Exercise 2

Imagine walking through a town or village centre that you know well and think about the signs of religion that you would see. Simply take your own understanding of the term 'religion' (however vague) as your starting point.

1. What sort of things would catch your attention?
2. Why would you consider these things as having to do with 'religion'?
3. Would you expect anyone to disagree with what you see as signs of 'religion'?

Use your [Learning Journal](#) to sketch out your answers to these questions with plenty of specific examples.

Hide discussion

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#### Discussion

1. If this walk took place in Britain, [churches](#) would be likely to catch your eye, possibly the symbolism of the Christian cross, maybe reference on a sign to the name of a group that you associate with religion. (If you are not resident in Britain, try to apply the general points to your examples.) Some street names and pub signs have Christian associations. You might meet somebody whose dress carries what you

recognise as religious symbolism (for example, the collar worn by a member of the Christian clergy), see decoration, hear music or even catch a scent you associate with religion. I am sure that you will have found many more examples, and not just war memorials! I have started with Christian symbolism on the assumption that our imaginary walk is taking place in Britain where Christianity has been the dominant tradition for many centuries. It is quite difficult to find inhabited areas where there is not a **church** tower or steeple somewhere on the skyline ([Figure 2](#)). But if you have been thinking about a larger town, you may well have come up with far more varied list: different expressions of Christianity such as a Quaker meeting house or a Salvation Army citadel, possibly a Jewish **synagogue**, an Islamic **mosque** ([Figure 3](#)), or centres of Buddhist, Sikh or Hindu activity ([Figure 4](#)). You may have listed foodshops, such as a **kosher** delicatessen providing food prepared according to Jewish dietary law, or charity shops connected to organisations such as Christian Aid. At different times of the year, other shops may be selling seasonal items like Easter eggs or festival cards. Styles of dress, such as the turbans worn by male Sikhs, also may bring religious practice to mind. All these examples are part of Britain's contemporary urban landscape.



Photo: Anthony Coulson

**Figure 2** Parish church – Haddenham

1. Familiarity is probably the short answer to this question. All of us are attuned to look for signs of the familiar. In this case, it would be forms of religion that you recognise in your society, whether you believe in them personally or not.
2. Others may not agree with how the concept of 'religion' should be defined. Some people, for example, hold strong religious convictions and may not admit that other forms of belief and practice could be placed in the same category as their own. Others may simply not be familiar with some of the examples listed above and would not recognise them. For example, imagine an old school building that had been converted into a Sikh *gurdwara*. This is a place of worship that houses the sacred book of the Sikhs. Although it may not be recognisable as such to someone unfamiliar with the Sikh tradition, it is likely that most people would accept the converted school as a sign of 'religion' once they understood its new purpose. Similarly, someone unfamiliar with the signs of Christianity might assume that the use of a green cross over a chemist's shop carried the same significance as the cross found outside a Christian mission hall. An explanation of the difference between the two symbols would probably move the chemist's shop off any list of 'religious' buildings.





Photo: Carlos Reyes-Manzo/Andes Press Agency

Figure 3 The purpose-built East London Mosque, Whitechapel



Photo: Carlos Reyes-Manzo/Andes Press Agency

Figure 4 Hindu temple, Greenwich

### 3.2 Assumptions

We are beginning to see that many of the assumptions we hold about the characteristics of 'religion' are given to us by the society we live in or by our immediate community, which for some people may be a religious community. Don't lose sight of your assumptions about religion. At this point, it may be that you have not thought much about them before, or you may be personally hostile to religion, or be approaching this course from the standpoint of a very specific, personal religious conviction. Later in the course I am going to argue that the study of religion should not be coloured either by personal religious conviction, or lack of it. To argue in this way, however, is not to deny that we all bring assumptions – individual, social and cultural – to any study we undertake. This is an important point that we shall discuss when we examine how to study religion in [Section 7](#). For the moment, I want to continue looking at the way in which the word 'religion' is commonly used and understood.

When dealing with the signs of religion, there would probably be general agreement that Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism – all of which have many followers in Britain – are religions, if for no other reason than because this is how they are conventionally described. (Note that we have slid from talking about 'religion' in general to specific 'religions'; we will come back to this in [Section 5](#).) However, if you had imagined walking into a 'New Age' bookshop, you might have found yourself juggling with words like 'cult', 'mysticism', 'magic', 'superstition' as well as 'religion'. You might have found yourself pondering whether

yoga is more akin to 'religion' than aerobics (Figure 5), or whether the TM (Transcendental Meditation) classes, which are being advertised at the local college, are an expression of a particular lifestyle or philosophy, a leisure activity, or part of a distinctively religious outlook and practice.



Photo: Popperfoto

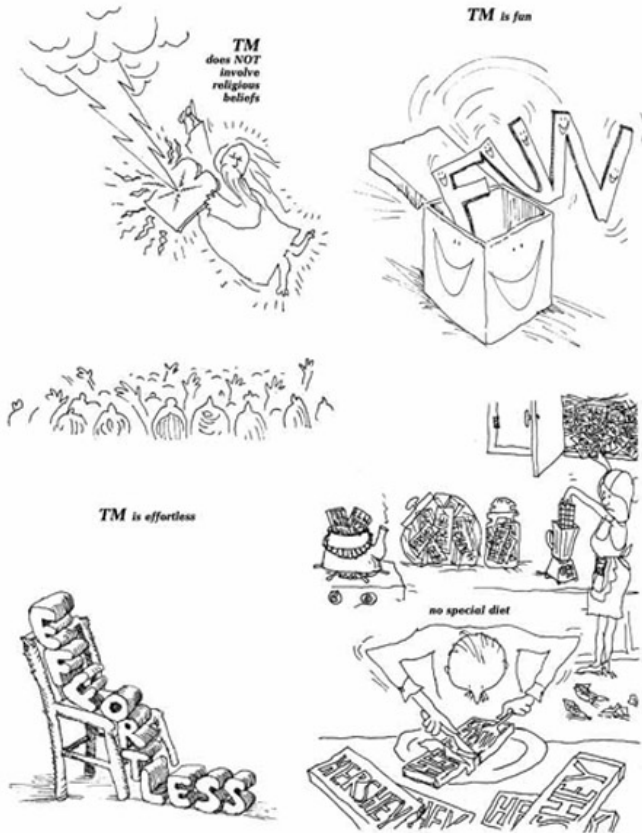
Figure 5 Yoga relaxation class

### Exercise 3

Please read Eileen Barker's brief account of TM by clicking the link below. It includes a few references to the Hindu religious tradition: a **guru** is a spiritual teacher and this title is given to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of TM; **siddhi** is, roughly speaking, a power or heightened ability, and Vedic relates to the **Veda**, the unidentified Hindu scripture referred to at the beginning of the description. Reading A1: Eileen Barker, '[Transcendental Meditation \(TM\)](#)'

Then click the link below to read the extracts from a book published from within the TM movement. Look also at [Figure 6](#), which is reproduced from the same book. When you have done that, compare these two viewpoints on the status of TM. Simply on the basis of what these readings present to you, do you think TM is a religion?

A2: Denniston, D. and McWilliams, P. (1975) 'What TM is Not', *The TM Book: How To Enjoy The Rest Of Your Life*, Verse monger Press. Reading A2: Denise Denniston and Peter McWilliams, [What TM is](#)



View larger image

Reproduced from D. Denniston and P. McWilliams, *The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life*, 1975, Michigan, Versemonger Press, pp. 14, 20, 44, 48

Figure 6 TM illustrations by Barry Geller

As you think about this question, consider carefully the basis upon which you intend to make your judgement. For example, will you rely upon your own assumptions? Or will you be guided more by what TM has to say about itself? What weight will you give to the opinion of Eileen Barker, an expert on new religious movements but not writing from within TM? After answering the question, please write down the factors which most affected your decision about whether TM is a religion in your [Learning Journal](#).

Hide discussion

## Discussion

In tackling this exercise, it is unlikely that you were able to draw upon a broadly agreed view of the status of TM. If TM was unfamiliar, you may well have asked if it was anything like a religion that you were familiar with. For Barker, it would seem that the status of TM is clear; for her it is a religious movement. Its founder studied under a [guru](#), who derived the meditation technique from the ancient Hindu tradition. For the TM writers, however, TM is not a religion and certainly not a Westernised form of the Hindu religion. Its connection with India is merely historical. It can be practised by anyone – people of different religions and atheists alike.

Could you resolve this difference in interpretation? You might have felt that the associations with the Hindu religion were too strong to be ignored, but you might also have noticed the statement from the TM leaflet, included by Barker, that says, 'TM requires no belief or any great commitment'. I do not want to press a particular conclusion on you because the exercise is designed to make you aware of *the way* in which *you* tried to reach a conclusion. Do note, however, that TM members themselves have views on this matter. As students of religion, to what extent should we be guided by the views of those we study? Eileen Barker has set aside the opinion held within TM. Can we similarly set aside the view of Jews? Or the views of those labelled 'religious' when we analyse the use of the term 'religion'? This is an important question that we shall discuss more fully in [Section 7](#). For now, let's consider some views of other people who are described as having a 'religion'.

#### Exercise 4

I would like you now to read three extracts from John Bowker's book about religion in Britain – 'I live by faith: the religions described': (A) Hinduism, (D) Judaism and (F) Islam. Please make thorough notes in your [Learning Journal](#) as you go, writing down the major features of the beliefs and practices described and any major points of similarity and difference that strike you. (Note: The videos you have watched covered these religions within the city of Liverpool. Try to integrate the notes you made on the video with your notes on this exercise.)

What do you learn from Bowker's account about the way in which some Hindus, Jews and Muslims react to the use of the term 'religion' when it is applied to their beliefs and practices?

A3: this extract is from *Worlds of Faith*, pp.24–48, by John Bowker, 1983, with the permission of BBC Worldwide Limited. Reading A3: John Bowker, 'I live by faith: the religions described' Extracts A, D and F

Hide discussion

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#### Discussion

One Hindu interviewed by Bowker questioned whether the term 'religion' adequately described his faith, explaining that 'Hinduism is a way of life rather than a religion'. Another claimed that 'Hinduism is not a religion, in the same sense in which Christianity is a religion'. A Muslim explained that Muslims do not refer to Islam as a 'religion' but as a 'way of life'. Bowker suggests that this view would be shared by many Jews when speaking of Judaism.

The videos you have watched show others who were not happy about the unqualified use of the word 'religion' to describe their own beliefs and practices. Some of the speakers preferred 'way of life' or 'faith' rather than 'religion'. A Muslim pointed out that the sacred book of Islam, the **Qur'an**, used the Arabic *din* to refer to Islam which, he stated, was far better translated into English as a 'way of life'. In the minds of some, 'religion' was equated too narrowly with ritual, for others with worship and/or with belief in God. It was because of these sorts of associations that the spokesperson for TM was adamant that it is not a 'religion'. It seems, then, that the use of the familiar term 'religion' is not only problematic in relation to more recent styles of belief and practice (such as TM). It may be disputed even when applied to long-standing beliefs and practices that I am sure most people in Britain would unhesitatingly think of as 'religion'.

### 3.3 Religions in Britain

I would like you to continue your reading of the extracts from John Bowker's account of religions in Britain as it is important that you build up your general knowledge of those beliefs and practices commonly labelled as 'religion'.

#### Exercise 5

Please read the remainder of 'I live by faith: the religions described': (B) Buddhism, (C) Sikhism and (E) Christianity. Again, I suggest that you make notes on the major features of the beliefs and practices described, and also jot down any major points of similarity and difference that strike you.

A3: this extract is from *Worlds of Faith*, pp.24–48, by John Bowker, 1983, with the permission of BBC Worldwide Limited. Reading A3: John Bowker, 'I live by faith: the religions described' Extracts B, C and E

Hide discussion

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#### Discussion

All the traditions covered by Bowker and the videos are referred to as 'religions'. I am sure that you will find both similarities – for example, all of them encourage communal practices such as worship in a special place – and also differences. You might feel that some of these differences are quite minor – merely differences in detail. For example, Sikhs adhere to the visible symbolism of the '**Five Ks**', including uncut hair and the wearing of a steel bangle and symbolic dagger; Jews have a dietary practice; and Muslims a pattern of daily prayer at set times.

These practices make a person's religious identity immediately apparent and mark the followers of these religions apart from each other. It is much harder to spot a Christian simply on the basis of outward behaviour and dress. But are these differences in belief simply differences in detail – variations on the same underlying theme?

## Exercise 6

I would like you now to look more closely at two of the 'religions' discussed by Bowker and consider whether there are points of difference so great as to make you question how these examples could both be categorised as 'religion'. Refer to sections (B) and (F) by clicking the link below and then compare and contrast the summaries of Buddhist and Islamic beliefs.

A3: this extract is from *Worlds of Faith*, pp.24–48, by John Bowker, 1983, with the permission of BBC Worldwide Limited. Reading A3: John Bowker, 'I live by faith: the religions described' Extracts B and F'

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## Discussion

Islam anticipates the final divine judgement of the individual. Buddhism regards belief in a personal soul as something to be eradicated. Existence, according to the Buddhist, is a process controlled by strict laws and not presided over by a God upon whom humans depend for their 'salvation'. This seems like a profound difference and not simply a difference in detail.

If Bowker's treatment of both Buddhism and Islam as 'religions' is justified, it also challenges another assumption about religion that is popularly made, at least by many in Europe. This is that all religions, in spite of their differences, share a belief in a God or gods. As you have seen, the Buddhist tradition, which has been influential throughout much of south-east and east Asia, has often been described as 'atheistic' (lacking belief in the existence of an eternal God) and has appealed to many people in Britain and elsewhere for precisely this reason.

Once again we see that the popular conventional use of the term 'religion' is far from straightforward. It refers to a widely differing range of beliefs held by people in Britain. Its popular use implies that there is sufficient in common between Islam and Buddhism to place them within this same overall category of 'religion'. Yet, Islam speaks uncompromisingly about the divine will of **Allah** (God), the creator of all, and Buddhism certainly does not speak of all things coming into being as a result of acts of creation. The popular use of 'religion' nevertheless implies that there is more in common between them than, say, between Christianity and Marxism. We shall have more to say about this in [Section 5](#) when we examine some of the ways in which scholars have responded to the question, 'what is religion?'

Remember that at the beginning of this course I challenged the view that establishing a boundary line around 'religion' would be straightforward. Anybody can express a view about what kind of a thing religion is, whether they like it or not, and about the extent to which they believe that religion is true. People do this in reacting to news stories, whether about



pronouncements from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the veiling of Muslim women, or some little-known sect. One of the purposes of this course is to introduce you to skills that will enable you to test judgements passed by others and encourage you to become aware of the way in which you arrive at your own judgements. I would call the kind of study that made use of such skills a 'critical study'. This doesn't mean approaching a subject in a negative and destructive spirit. Rather, critical students are those who are led by a spirit of free enquiry and who seek to test their own conclusions, and the claims made by others, in the light of reliable evidence and sound argument. You have already done this in the exercise on TM.

Life is short and yet academics still seem to find the time to take a commonplace term or assumption and turn it into a 'problem'! Why should you want to take on board another 'problem' – that of the use of the term 'religion'? Why study religion in the first place?

## 4 Why study religion?

### 4.1 The cart before the horse?

At this point you may be wondering whether you blinked and missed something, or whether I have omitted a crucial step. So far, I have been pressing you to agree that the term 'religion' is crying out for more careful, critical definition. Now I am asking why you should wish to study something that has boundaries you can, apparently, no longer take for granted. Surely, we need to know what the thing is before we can say why we might wish to study it? Yet, when we decide to study something, we often begin with little more than an everyday understanding of the subject. In fact, with a topic such as religion it is almost impossible to separate the definition of the subject from the reasons why one might be interested in studying it.

Yet there is a further complication in the relationship between the questions 'what is a religion?' and 'why study religion?'. This is that people are inclined to take up the study of religion (or steer well clear of it!) on the basis of personal assumptions, not simply about the value of religion but about its truth or falsity. Such people 'know' what religion is, and this is why they study it or ignore it. Even those who do not begin from a fixed view about the truth of religion but take up the study of religion because of its visible effects upon society may well put the question 'what is religion?' on hold; they too at least know why they are studying it and that is a sufficient starting point. However, once you get into the study of religion you tend to realise that the everyday and popular understanding of religion, which was certainly good enough to get you started, needs refining and so you then return to the question 'what is religion?' at a different level – from a critical standpoint. This is what we are doing in this course. Let's look now at possible reasons for studying religion before we return in [Section 5](#) to the question 'what is religion?' from a different angle – that of critical study.

### 4.2 Reasons for studying religion

#### Exercise 7

Identify and jot down reasons that you think might prompt someone to make a study of religion.

Hide discussion

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## Discussion

Here are some reasons in no special order why people might choose to study religion. You may well have thought of others.

1. In order to understand the influence of religion upon art, drama, music and literature.
2. Because of the impact of religion upon global politics.
3. Because religions claim to convey truths by which human beings should live.
4. In order to find a religion to live by or for other reasons relating to personal religious self-fulfilment; for example, to deepen an existing religious commitment, to resolve religious doubt, to find a religion in which to believe.

I expect we would agree that there is a value in studying religion to understand the past and the world in which we live now. Think, for example, about the extent to which works of literature, art, drama and music have drawn upon religious symbolism or have been inspired by religious devotion. Again, particularly since 1979 when the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran, discussion of 'resurgent Islam' and 'Islamic fundamentalism' has been a part of commentaries on international politics. Some time will have lapsed between my writing this course and you reading it, and you will probably be able to identify more timely and topical examples of the often volatile relationship between religion and politics than my reference to Islam. In our everyday lives, an understanding of religion also helps to foster good relations between communities and individuals. Employers need to understand the conventions that govern the lives of their employees; teachers need to understand the customs observed by their students. Requests for leave to celebrate festivals and for special dietary provisions can only be anticipated and provided where understanding exists.

But if you look carefully at the list of possible reasons outlined in the discussion to Exercise 7 above, I think you will see that they fall broadly into two categories. The first category includes reasons for studying religion in order to understand better the society in which we live, the culture we inherit and the wider world of which we are a part (see 1 and 2 above). The second category includes reasons for studying religion that are bound up with the individual's personal quest for religious self-fulfilment (see 3 and 4 above). We might reasonably expect these two sets of motives for studying religion to result in two rather different kinds of approach to that study. We will pick up this point when we draw some conclusions about how to study religion in [Section 7](#).

According to the first category, one reason why we might want to study religion would be to reach a better understanding of contemporary Britain.

### 4.3 The changing face of belief

The religious life of post-war Britain has become more varied, although Christianity in different forms remains the most influential religion. Yet, the influence of Christianity over British institutions has declined greatly over the last century and a half, although both England and Scotland still retain Established Churches (national churches that have formal links with the monarch and are recognised as the state church). In the post-war period religions other than Christianity, as well as other expressions of Christianity, have made their presence felt. Religious belief and behaviour have become more varied and experimental, with the result that the hold of any one religion has weakened. The range of British 'religious activity' has increased and its boundaries have become less distinct. These considerations bring us back again to the issue of what we mean by 'religion'. This question also bears on judgements about the overall place of religion within society. Until we are able to reach a broadly agreed understanding of what constitutes 'religion', determining the extent of the influence of religion in society will remain hedged with problems. Yet, debates in Britain about controversial matters such as blasphemy laws, religious broadcasting, the religious education of children and Sunday trading have all been peppered with assertions about the extent to which the population is religious and therefore wishes to protect the place of religion in national life. In these debates, everyday and popular understandings of what is meant by 'religion' were very much to the fore. Many have argued that the hold of religion over society is in decline as a result of **secularisation** – a historical process through which religious beliefs and institutions lose their social significance. To chart the course of such a process and to test claims that religion is facing an irreversible decline, however, again requires that we begin from an agreed understanding of what 'religion' is, the forms it may take, and crucially the extent to which it may change while remaining 'religion'. Without this, how can we determine whether it has declined in importance?

### 4.4 Religion and social policy

Understanding religious beliefs and practices and what we mean by 'religion' is not merely of academic interest. It is often bound up with social policy and so relates to the rights and privileges of individuals. In Britain, for example, the Church of Scientology has not been allowed to register its centre as a place of worship – the closest an organisation can get under British law to being recognised as a 'religion' – and thus it has been refused the tax exemptions granted to religious groups as charitable organisations. Between 1968 and 1980, foreign Scientologists were not allowed to enter Britain if their declared purpose was to further the cause of Scientology.

The Church of Scientology has been a highly controversial movement. I will briefly explain why, but I want to use this controversy primarily as an example of the way in which societies determine what is and what is not 'religion'. The theory of Scientology came from the American

science-fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard, who, in 1950, outlined his theory of **'dianetics'**. **Dianetics** is a form of therapy designed to purge the individual of **'engrams'** – the accumulated imprints of past unpleasant experiences that disturb the reincarnated spirits (or **'thetans'**), dwelling within human beings. Scientology claims to help the individual by using a therapeutic method developed by Hubbard. The **Church** of Scientology was created in 1954 in the United States, according to one view, so that Scientology could take advantage of the freedom of religion guaranteed under the American Constitution. Scientologists meet on Sundays at services led by recognised ministers in which taped lectures by L. Ron Hubbard are widely used and take the place of prayers and worship. It is on account of this change from therapeutic system to **'church'** that Scientology is often counted as a 'new religious movement'.

For almost two decades in Britain, however, accusations have been levelled against Scientology that it is a commercial rather than a religious concern, that its therapeutic system is based on fraud. In 1968 the then Minister of Health described it as a 'pseudo-philosophical cult' and as 'socially harmful'. It has been accused of being an oppressive and intimidating organisation that insists its members separate (or 'disconnect') themselves from family and friends who express hostility towards the movement. In ruling that the custody of children should be granted to an ex-Scientologist mother, rather than to their father who remained within Scientology, a British High Court judge described Scientology in 1984 as 'corrupt, sinister and dangerous' and as a 'cult' (quoted in Beckford, 1985, p. 68). Since the 1950s Scientology has developed a global following. Popular Hollywood film stars (Tom Cruise and John Travolta) are known to be members of the **Church** of Scientology. In spite of the high profile of some of its members, as I write, Scientology continues to be regarded with deep suspicion by governments in Britain, France and Germany where it is held not to be an authentic expression of 'religion'.

Under Australian law, however, Scientology has been registered as a 'religion'. Two of the Australian justices who ruled on the status of Scientology identified two characteristics of 'religion' – belief in a supernatural being, thing or principle and a pattern of behaviour that expressed that belief. On this basis, because of its belief in **thetans**, reincarnation and its goal to release **thetans**, Scientology was judged to be a religion. A third judge asserted that there was no single characteristic that could be used in law to identify 'religion' but he too felt that a belief in the supernatural was an important indicator (Beckford, 1985, p. 133).

Take the case of TM again. In the United States a legal suit was filed against TM in 1976 to test whether it was, as it claimed, merely a meditation technique and not a religion. At stake was the question of whether, under the secular constitution of the United States, TM could be taught in public high schools and so receive grants of public money. The court's verdict was that TM was a religion, and it pointed to similarities between concepts used by TM and other religious, and specifically Hindu, concepts.

Before you seize on this judgement as a way to resolve the problem posed in the **Exercise 3**, look at the way the court justified its refusal of the defendants' request that the court define 'religion':

Owing to the variety of form and substance which religions may take, the courts have avoided the establishment of explicit criteria, the possession of which indelibly identifies an activity as religious.

(quoted in Baird, 1982, p. 404)

The differences in the responses to movements like TM and Scientology in Britain, Australia and the United States result in part from legal and constitutional differences between these countries. They also hint at the same underlying problems we encountered when reflecting on the characteristics of 'religion' in [Section 3](#). It would seem that convention, custom and practice tell us what counts as 'religion'. But what if new movements emerge that claim to be 'religious', or if the demands of social policy – as in the case of TM in the United States and Scientology in Britain – require that judgements be made about what is and what is not 'religion'?

As we have seen, there are a number of compelling reasons why we should find out what we mean by religion. We can get to one of these by continuing with Eileen Barker's discussion of 'new religious movements'.

### Exercise 8

Please now read the extract from Eileen Barker's *New Religious Movements* and then answer the following three questions:

1. Why does Barker think that we need consider the question 'what do we mean by religion?'
2. What problems does Barker meet when she tackles this question?
3. In what ways, if any, does Barker help you to answer this question?

(Note: follow the main lines of Barker's argument; you are not expected to be familiar with or to memorise the details relating to the many groups referred to in the extract.)

A4: Barker, E. (1989) Appendix II, 'New religious movements: definitions, variety and numbers', pp.145–8, 149–150, © Crown Copyright. Reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Reading A4: Eileen Barker, '[New religious movements: definitions, variety and numbers](#)'

Hide discussion

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### Discussion

1. For Barker, it is the 'wave of new religious movements', which have taken shape in the post-war period, that causes her to reflect on the question 'what do we mean by religion?'

2. She points to difficulties in giving a ready answer to this question: some definitions are too narrow, some too broad, and some scholars who have listed characteristics of religion have admitted that not all these characteristics need to be evident for a movement to qualify as a religion. Barker also acknowledges that prejudice and vested interests often cloud the issue.
3. As to whether Barker helps us to answer the question 'what do we mean by religion?', beyond pointing to problems in arriving at satisfactory answers, I personally doubt it. To state that most of the movements to which she refers 'are *religious* in the sense that either they offer a religious or philosophical worldview' hardly clarifies the underlying meaning of the term 'religious'.

It is becoming evident that the question 'what is religion?' is fundamental to the study of religion. As we have seen, answers to this question can have significant practical implications for society. This does not mean that everybody who confronts this question will pursue it critically. Some individuals may go no further than their own religious beliefs for an answer, while some who dismiss religion as a waste of time, in effect, similarly base their very different response on their own beliefs. Creating the mental space in which to pause and to examine rationally and systematically that which we know as 'religion', in a way that does not merely reflect our own personal judgements on the truth and value of religion, is the beginning of the critical study of religion.

## 5 What is religion?

### 5.1 'Religion' and 'the religions': two new notions

I want to begin our closer discussion of the question 'what is religion?' by looking briefly at the history of the use and meaning of the term. You may be surprised to find how recently the word 'religion' has taken on the meanings attached to it today.

Contemporary scholars of religion emphasise not merely the cultural breadth but also the antiquity of religious activity. Yet, the term 'religion' as we understand it today is very much a Western concept.

there are today and have been in the past relatively few languages into which one can translate the word 'religion' – and particularly its plural, 'religions' – outside Western civilization.

(*Smith, 1963, p. 18*)

We also need to appreciate that the concepts 'religion' and 'the religions' took on new meanings from the period in the eighteenth century known as the Enlightenment. Prior to that time, European scholars paid relatively little attention to religions other than Christianity except, for example, when dismissing Judaism and Islam as false or devilish. When they spoke of

Christianity, they tended to use terms like 'faith' or 'church'. The emphasis of Enlightenment thinking was on the individual applying the tests of reason in all branches of enquiry. This resulted in a questioning of religious authority and provoked stringent criticisms of Christian institutions and profoundly affected the ways in which Christianity, in particular, and ultimately 'religion' in general were considered. It was argued that Christian references to a god and the miraculous should be treated no differently from those found in other cultural traditions. In other words, Christianity was placed alongside other traditions that were thought to be in some way comparable. 'Religion' was seen increasingly as a widespread, if not universal, human activity, of which the 'religions' – including Christianity – were examples. Added to this, of course, European traders, colonists and missionaries were beginning to travel more widely. Information about the beliefs, practices and social organisations of other peoples flowed back into Europe.

A consequence of the expansion of Europe was the naming of several religions found beyond the continent. Previously, European writers had referred to many of these indirectly as 'the religion of' a given people; for example, 'the religion of the Chinese'. The names given to religious traditions found in Asia, such as 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', 'Confucianism' and 'Taoism', are all European inventions and date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They are labels applied for the convenience of Europeans and not translations of concepts found within these traditions. In the case of Islam, a designation taken from the Qur'an, the Arabic word *islam* (meaning 'the state of accepting the will of God'), was brushed aside by Europeans and, following earlier Christian practice, replaced by 'Mohammedanism'. This term implies that Islam centres upon the person of the Prophet Muhammad rather than Allah (God). Such a substitution is, in fact, blasphemy for a Muslim, which is why the continuing use of the term 'Mohammedanism' by some non-Muslims causes offence.

So really, it is only since the eighteenth century that the term 'religion' has come to be used as a broad category within which are placed particular expressions of religion, such as Christianity or Judaism. Because the term 'religion' is used to include many different kinds of beliefs and practices across cultures and down through time, establishing the boundary of 'religion' will prove to be difficult. We shall also have to determine what it is that these different beliefs and practices have in common that allows them all to be categorised as 'religion'.

I suggested earlier that a 'critical' study of religion is what this course is about. Now we are going to look at three ways in which we might try to answer the question 'what is religion?' from the standpoint of a critical study of religion. We will look in turn at:

1. the kind of answer you might find in a general dictionary;
2. the kind of definitions that scholars of religion offer;
3. a 'dimensional' model of religion.

Before we look at any definitions of religion, we need some sort of checklist that will enable us to test their strengths and weaknesses. The last thing I want to do is to saddle you with a single definition of 'religion'; to do that would be to run the risk of making you less critical in your

future studies of religion. But I do want to suggest a way in which you can evaluate the usefulness of *different* definitions of 'religion' and the respective merits of different *types* of definition. The following checklist should help you.

A definition should be:

- *specific* – its criteria should be clear and distinctive;
- *flexible* – it should not be so narrow as to be exclusive;
- *free from prejudice* – it should not merely reflect personal dogmatism or unthinking cultural assumptions.

## 5.2 The 'answer' in your dictionary

### Exercise 9

Please now look at the definition of 'religion' given in a dictionary. We have used the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition for this exercise.

1. Do you think that the definition is going to help you when deciding what is or is not religion? Please give your reasons, using the definitions checklist.
2. Would it have helped you to determine the status of TM, for example? Again, please note down the reasons for your answer.

Hide discussion

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### Discussion

Dictionary definitions are likely to differ in phrasing and length, if not in substance, so you will have to apply the following discussion of the definition I found to that in your own dictionary. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* says in summary that 'religion' is:

- a. monastic conditions, being a monk or nun;
  - b. the practice of sacred rites;
  - c. one of the prevalent systems of faith and worship;
  - d. human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God;
  - e. action that one is bound to do.
1. What strikes me is the extent to which this definition reveals the influence of a Christian heritage in that all of these characteristics are to be found within Christianity but less so in other religions – see a, c and d. The potentially broadest definition, d, is



closed down with its tail-end reference to a 'personal God'. Definition b, on the other hand, although not narrowly applicable to a particular religion, is narrow in another way, stressing as it does ritual practice. So, to use our checklist, we might say that these definitions at their most specific are *not flexible* and *not free from prejudice* in the sense that they are tied to one set of cultural assumptions.

2. My conclusion is that this kind of definition is unlikely to help us to characterise 'religion' when it is understood as a varied and worldwide activity. To my mind, therefore, it would have provided a very narrow basis upon which to make a judgement about the status of TM, one way or the other. This is why, when I set the earlier exercise, I did not advise you to look in your dictionary.

The purpose of a general dictionary of the kind we have just consulted is to provide the correct meaning of the word established in terms of its origins and usage. The outcome of the previous exercise suggests that the kind of definition required in a specialised enquiry may need to achieve a different level of precision – although the result may not be so concise!

### 5.3 Scholarly definitions of religion

Scholars offer us many different definitions of religion, but these definitions tend to be of two types. The first *type* is known as a *substantive definition*: that is, a definition that tells us what kind of thing religion is by pointing to its distinguishing characteristic – usually its beliefs and/or practices. We can find an example of a substantive definition of religion in my summary of the definitions found in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Think again about d. According to this definition, religion is the 'human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God'.

This particular example, which we have already found to be narrow, illustrates the major problem scholars find with many substantive definitions that attempt to describe religion in terms of *one* distinguishing characteristic. This substantive definition refers to a superhuman power or personal God; others have portrayed religion primarily in terms of the inner experience of the individual or in terms of the social and organisational aspect of religious life.

The selection of a defining characteristic, upon which a substantive definition of religion depends, often reveals prejudice – perhaps a personal religious (even a denominational) bias or a broad cultural bias. Trying to define religion in terms of *one* kind of belief – for example, the belief in one god – may be understandable within the context of Western Europe, which has been dominated historically by Christianity, but is narrow and inflexible when considering religion as a global phenomenon – Buddhism is a case in point. To define religion in terms of one characteristic practice – for example, prayer – appears equally inflexible once religion is treated as a label for a type of activity found across cultures and since the dawn of human history.

In order to avoid being too narrow and too rigid, many scholars prefer a different type of definition known as a *functional definition*. A functional definition concentrates not on what religion *is* (its beliefs and practices, for example) but on what these beliefs and practices *do* for the individual and the social group – on the needs they fulfil (for example, in providing or contributing to bonding, identity, comfort, and security). One well-known example of this kind of definition refers to religion as ‘a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life’ (Yinger, 1970, p. 7).

Here you see that the focus of the definition is not on the substance of the beliefs and practices but on what they *do* for people. Religion, as a means by which human beings struggle with ‘the ultimate problems of human life’, distinctively responds to questions of meaning and purpose raised most sharply, for example, through our encounters with suffering and death. Other functional definitions speak of religion as providing meaning, as a source of fulfilment, as a means of personal transformation, and as a force for social cohesiveness. The advantage of functional definitions is their flexibility. Their disadvantage is that they are not so helpful in determining where religion ends and something else begins.

This fuzzy, blurring tendency in functional definitions is heightened by references such as the one in our example to ‘ultimate problems’ – other definitions refer to matters of ‘ultimate importance’. In other words, according to these definitions, religion distinctively deals with those things in a person's life that are of such importance that everything else is secondary. This is certainly flexible and inclusive but is it sufficiently specific? Aren't we back to the problem we met in [Section 2](#) when I asked you to consider the difference between following religion and following football? You might say that football hardly offers answers to the ‘ultimate problems of life’ (if you follow Yinger's definition). But following football does appear to make everything else secondary in the lives of some of its fans. Both these things can be the most important thing in people's lives. It seems that, when we come to definitions of religion, we are likely to face a difficult choice between the specific but narrow, and the flexible but vague. Is there a way around this problem?

## 5.4 A dimensional model of religion

Given the problems of devising a succinct definition of religion, some contemporary scholars have produced broader profiles of religion without claiming to identify one distinguishing characteristic. One example of this kind of approach is the seven-dimensional model of religion proposed by Ninian Smart, a specialist in the study of world religions. Smart argues that, if his model is adequate, ‘then we do not need to worry greatly about further definition of religion’ (Smart, 1989, p. 21). This sounds promising. Let's see whether Smart's model can help us with the problem of answering the question ‘what is religion?’.

### Exercise 10

Please read ‘The nature of a religion’ by Ninian Smart attached below. Make sure that you gain a clear understanding of Smart's model of religion by listing its seven dimensions and by reading carefully his description of each one. When you have done that, you should read

the next section of Smart's argument, 'The nature of secular worldviews'. Then you will be able to work through the following questions.

1. What do *you* think are the strengths of Smart's approach? When making your assessment remember our checklist: a definition should be specific, flexible, and free from prejudice.
2. Does Smart help us to distinguish between something that passes the seven-dimensional test and something that just looks a bit like a religion?

A5: Smart, N. (1989) *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, pp.10–25, Cambridge University Press. Reading A5: Ninian Smart, 'The nature of a religion and the nature of secular worldviews'

Hide discussion

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## Discussion

1. Smart is sensitive to diversity (his model is flexible) and does not attempt to define 'religion' in terms of one characteristic belief and/or practice. His model is designed to be specific, to tell us where religion stops and something other than religion begins.
2. Smart does acknowledge that there would be religions in which one or some of his dimensions are either 'weak' or 'virtually non-existent'. (This is an example of a problem that Eileen Barker mentioned: namely, that some scholars who list the characteristics of religion concede that not all have to be visible in every form of religion. It is consistent with such a conclusion that he views both religions and secular ideologies as 'worldviews', and he urges that they can and should be studied in similar ways because they 'play in the same league'. However, once we get into the realm of 'it looks like but finally isn't', it becomes difficult to see how to apply the seven-dimensional model in the confidence that others using this model would come to the same conclusion. Perhaps one way to resolve this would be to insist upon the primacy of one 'dimension' or characteristic, but this would take us back into the problem touched on when examining substantive definitions of religion.

For all its positive advantages, Smart's model leaves us with the problem of where to draw our line around religion. He teases us with the question of the relationship between religions and secular ideologies in the same way as I trailed the question earlier about the relationship between attendance at a place of worship and at a football match. Smart speaks of the 'likeness' between religions and secular ideologies, of the 'religious-type function' of secular ideologies – which may be helpful ideas, but we are left with the problem of deciding what weight to give to these factors.

We are now in a position, however, to refine our response to the problem posed by the seeming similarities between devotees at a place of worship and passionate fans at a football match. In terms of *function*, we might wish to argue that a fan's passionate attendance at a football match may be *like* that of a religious devotee at a religious event and that it may fulfil the same social and psychological *functions* (bonding, identity, comfort, security, etc.). We still have to determine whether this makes it a *religious* activity.

## 5.5 Common sense and analysis

Faced with the choice between narrow *substantive* definitions and broad *functional* definitions, we should require any definition to 'fit with broad common-sense reflection' and 'encompass what ordinary people mean when they talk of religion' (Bruce, 1995, p. ix). The definition must also assist in the analysis and explanation of what is being studied. For these reasons, Steve Bruce, who is a leading sociologist of religion, opts for the following *substantive* definition:

Religion, then, consists of beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose.

(Bruce, 1995, p. ix)

In referring to common sense and ordinary meanings, Bruce is clearly not saying that a scholarly definition does not offer a considerable refinement of 'common-sense' reflection. But if his definition of religion is rooted in the common-sense meanings shared by ordinary people, this suggests that he is likely to be working with an understanding of religion found in English-speaking European culture. Moreover, he handles these meanings as a scholar standing in the European intellectual tradition. Yet, religion – as we keep noting – takes different forms across cultures. It will be important to ensure that Bruce's definition avoids narrowness and does not reflect cultural assumptions unthinkingly. Bruce sets out to avoid these dangers through a reference to beliefs, actions and institutions that points to the multi-dimensional nature of religion and takes us way beyond the narrowness of the substantive definition I derived from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. His definition is specific in referring to a characteristic belief in supernatural entities and impersonal powers, although here too he allows for difference. Certainly, using Bruce's definition, I think we could draw a line between following a football team and attending a **church** service. Similarly, his reference to 'impersonal powers or processes *possessed of a moral purpose*' would enable us to keep Buddhism within the frame while still being able to draw a line between it and, say, Marxism. Although Marxism looks to the evolution of a better social and economic order, this is to be achieved through historical and economic forces which are not in themselves possessed of moral purpose.

Without taking back what I said earlier about not wanting to force any one definition upon you, in conclusion I should say that I think Bruce is right when he points to the advantages of a carefully constructed *substantive* definition of religion. On the other hand, I would not reject the usefulness of dimensional models of religion as a way of expanding upon an initial definition

such as that offered by Bruce. Contrary to Ninian Smart, I tend to the view that a dimensional model of religion is likely to prove inadequate when taken by itself. When used in combination, however, a substantive definition and a dimensional model of religion are likely to be far more helpful than broader *functional* definitions when it comes to testing for a boundary between religion and other things that are said to resemble religion: for example, Scientology, football, TM or secular ideologies.

Let me illustrate the usefulness of working with both a substantive definition and a dimensional model of religion in the next section by considering briefly some examples of 'religious' beliefs and practices found in contemporary Britain. I will refer largely to Christian, Jewish and Muslim beliefs so you should reread or check your notes on the accounts of these religions in Bowker's 'I live by faith: the religions described'. (You will also find it helpful to relate the next section to the video clips.)

## 6 Religion in context: Special days in Britain

### 6.1 Introduction

Whatever else they may be, religions grow in historical and social settings. The present form of a religion has its roots in the past. Religion can exercise a strong influence upon society and the cultural forms of a society, but religion itself is no less affected by changes and pressures within society. Religion gives meaning to a pattern of living and may even be responsible for establishing a certain lifestyle or distinctive social organisation or institution. At the same time, religion often works upon symbolism, customs and ideas already to be found in society. In short, a religion exists within a context and can no more be understood adequately apart from that context than can a single line of verse ripped out of a sonnet. Clearly, some of the differences we find between religions, and in the same religion viewed over a period of time, are a result of their development within different historical and social contexts.

In looking at special days in Britain, we will undertake the first of two studies of religion. In this first study, the context I wish to examine is the place of these special days within their immediate religious setting rather than in the wider context of British society. In the second study (in [Section 8](#)) I will look more closely at the relationship between expressions of religion and their social context in the city of Calcutta.

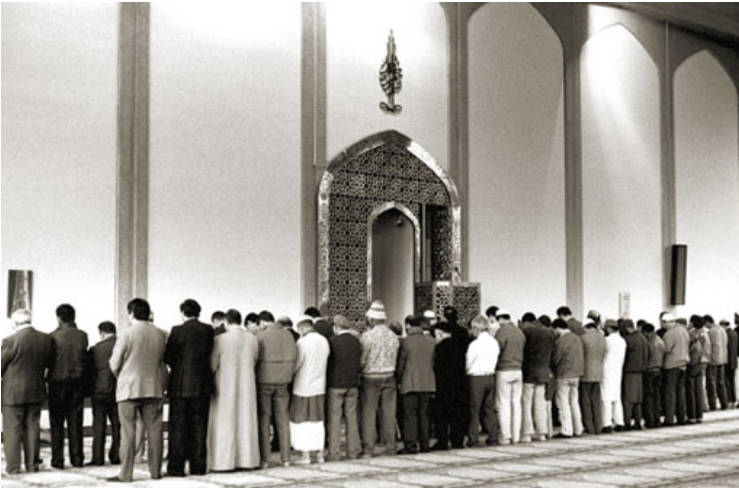
Many religions follow weekly and annual cycles of celebration. The official British calendar is marked by both Christian and secular celebrations. In some cases, days that were once Christian celebrations have become secular public holidays; Whitsun is now the Spring Bank Holiday. The celebration of Christmas has become overlaid with customs that have grown in popularity since the Victorian period, so today Christmas trees and the figure of Father Christmas are inseparably linked in the minds of many with the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Attitudes to Sunday, once reserved by Christians as a day of rest and worship, have also changed.

Religions in Britain other than Christianity have their own cycles of celebration, although their days have no place within the list of official British holidays. The Christian day of rest has its roots in the Jewish **Shabbat** (the Sabbath day), the seventh day on which, according to the **Bible**, God rested from the labours of creation. Jews, however, celebrate **Shabbat** from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Muslims are obliged to carry out a cycle of five daily prayers of which the midday prayer on Friday is of particular communal importance to men. Some communities, such as Hindus and Sikhs, are not bound to a weekly pattern of communal worship on a particular day and so have tended to adopt Sunday in Britain. These patterns of celebration are examples of Ninian Smart's *social and institutional dimension*. As you read, try to find further examples of Smart's seven dimensions in addition to those I have highlighted.

## 6.2 Days and time

The separating out of a special day or time in the week runs in parallel with the marking out of a space that is set aside for worship, ritual and communal activity (*material dimension*). The place where a religious community gathers speaks powerfully about the convictions shared by its members.

This is nowhere more evident than in the **mosque** where Muslims form orderly lines at the set times of prayer facing a **mihrab** (Figure 7), an empty niche indicating the direction of the city of Mecca to which all Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage at least once in their life, if they have the health and means to do so. Prayer is led by an **imam** ('leader') who stands facing the **mihrab** and who may also give an address during the Friday midday prayer. A typical **mosque** is singularly lacking in adornment, apart from Arabic calligraphy, and no human figure is portrayed as it is believed that it is blasphemous to attempt to reduce God (**Allah**) to human form. Muslims believe that the line of prophets recognised by Jews and Christians included Jesus and culminated in the life of Muhammad. Strict Muslim belief insists upon the humanity of these prophets including Muhammad, the greatest of them, to whom was revealed the Qur'an. The Qur'an and the religious laws derived from it provide comprehensive 'guidance' which, if followed, will enable the devout Muslim to meet the test of the Day of Judgement. Individuals who perform the physical ritual of **prostration** that accompanies prayer symbolise an intent to conform their will to the will of **Allah** expressed in the Qur'an (*practical and ritual dimension*). The word '**mosque**', in fact, comes from the Arabic meaning 'a place of **prostration**'.



[View larger image](#)

Photo: Carlos Reyes-Manzo/Andes Press Agency

**Figure 7** Interior of mosque in Regent's Park, London, showing Muslims at prayer facing the mihrab

If the eye is drawn to the *mihrab* in a *mosque*, in a Jewish *synagogue* it is drawn to the ark which contains the scroll of **Torah** ('teaching') on which is written what Jews accept as the revelation granted to the patriarch, Moses. (The same scriptural record is to be found in the first five books of the Christian Old Testament.) An ark may be no more than a bare cupboard but the ark in a *synagogue* is often decorated (**Figure 8**). In front of the ark burns the eternal flame. A *synagogue* (literally, a gathering place) is not a consecrated area. Its primary function is as a place in which to study and receive teaching about the meaning of **Torah**, and it is the primary duty of a **rabbi**, a qualified teacher of Jewish law, to provide this instruction. Contained within **Torah** are the ten commandments that insist upon the existence of one God and prohibit any attempt to represent this God in the form of an image (*ethical and legal dimension*). The decoration of a *synagogue* scrupulously follows this prohibition. For the Jew, to live in accord with the teachings of **Torah** is to keep faith with a view of history founded upon a belief in a relationship between God and the people of Israel. It anticipates the coming of the **Messiah** (the 'Anointed One' of God) and the inauguration of an age of universal peace. The past sufferings of the Jews have frequently been interpreted within the framework of belief in this relationship with God and in the ultimate realisation of the Messianic Age (*narrative or mythic dimension*). The keeping of **Shabbat** is but one example of living a life designed to fulfil the requirements of **Torah** and so hasten the coming of the Messianic Age. As is made plain in the video clips, the home and not the *synagogue* is the most important location for celebrating and observing **Shabbat**.



Photo: Jewish Telegraph Group of Newspapers, Manchester

### Figure 8 Interior of Whitefield synagogue, Manchester, showing the ark

In a Christian place of worship, the style and level of decoration will vary considerably according to the denomination. But whether through the symbolism of a bare cross or an ornate crucifix, with the figure of Jesus hanging from the cross, or through stained glass windows, those present will be directed to the central Christian belief that God took human form in the person of Jesus (Figure 9). The cross is outlined in the ground-plan of many churches, and other architectural features, such as spires pointing to the heavens, make theological statements of their own. The self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross provides a model for daily conduct, and the reading of the Bible brings this constantly to mind. In some Protestant churches, a prominent place is given to the pulpit, from where the meaning of the Bible is expounded (*doctrinal and philosophical dimension*). In many Christian denominations, the significance of Jesus' death is brought home to believers through the sharing of bread and wine in a manner commended in the Christian New Testament but understood and carried out in different ways across the denominations. The frequency and importance given to this celebration at the altar also affects the ordering of space within a church, and you will see this if you visit a Roman Catholic church where the altar occupies a prominent position and the sharing of bread and wine (the mass) is celebrated daily. If you then go to a nonconformist church or chapel, for example a United Reform Church, there you will probably find that a plain table has replaced an altar, that there is a prominent pulpit, and that the sharing of bread and wine – here referred to as Holy Communion – may take place no more than once a month. The sharing of bread and wine in the name of Jesus is variously believed to stand as a remembrance of his sacrifice (as found widely in Protestantism) or as a mystery through which the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus (as in Roman Catholicism).





Photo: Carlos Reyes-Manzo/Andes Press Agency

**Figure 9** Interior of St Anselm's Church, Southall, where the symbolism of the cross is prominent in the mass being celebrated

Solid objects, whether a cross, an ark or a *mihrab*, can point to something beyond themselves: to a reality which the believer holds to be ever-present yet which cannot be apprehended in the same way as we can hear the chanting of *Torah* in a *synagogue*, touch the bread and wine consumed by Christians, and see a Muslim community gather for prayer (*experiential and emotional dimension*). The existence of this reality cannot be established through reference to factors other than the testimony of those who claim to have experienced it. It is for this reason that religion is rejected by some with as much passion as that displayed by its most devout followers. Yet, so compelling is the sense of this reality that it directs and gives meaning to the daily lives of believers.

This brief summary of Muslim, Jewish and Christian practices provides many concrete examples (as I hope you found) of Smart's 'dimensions' or 'aspects' of religion. They also match Bruce's substantive definition in that they are beliefs, actions and institutions that assume the existence of a supernatural entity. The marking out or setting apart evident in these practices is a common feature in many religions.

### Exercise 11

Note down some simple physical actions performed by people who enter a *church*, *synagogue* or *mosque* that illustrate this 'marking out' or 'setting apart'. (Your video notes will be helpful for this Exercise.)

Hide discussion

### Discussion

Many religions insist that those entering their respective places of worship follow certain codes of dress and/or perform rituals relating to hygiene. For example, although attitudes have become more relaxed of late, many Christians attending a **church** still choose to wear their best clothes, and women in some denominations prefer to cover their heads while men are expected to remove any head covering. In contrast, Jewish men are careful to cover their heads in a **synagogue**, whereas Muslims remove their shoes and complete a simple ritual of washing before entering a **mosque**, and women cover their heads, arms and legs. The practices differ but the underlying intention is the same: to conduct oneself appropriately or respectfully in a place set apart for a distinct purpose. Placing these customs in context enables us to see the underlying purpose. For example, a British Jew who covers his head does so as a mark of humility – the cap is a constant reminder that there is a greater being above humanity. A British Christian who removes his hat before entering **church** stands in a different tradition in which uncovering the head is a mark of respect and humility.

### 6.3 Setting things apart

The tendency within religious behaviour to set things apart from the everyday does not just apply to time and place but also to ideas of authority (leaders and texts), to beliefs more generally, to institutions and to aspects of behaviour as, for example, in dress and diet. In fact, the concept of 'religion/religious' is often set over and against the concept of the 'temporal' and the 'secular', which both suggest an outlook that is concerned solely with this world, the here and now. Yet, religions too are clearly concerned with this world. A religious attitude, however, tends to view this world in relationship to a reality that is not confined by time and space. Some people, as Bruce states, view this reality as a supernatural entity or being (God) whilst others speak of impersonal powers or processes. Both groups work out their daily behaviour in the light of their beliefs about this unseen reality.

The practice of 'setting apart' or 'marking out' is one consequence of acknowledging the existence of a reality that can in some way be experienced in the here and now and yet goes beyond the here and now. Whatever is particularly associated with this reality, however portrayed, takes on an additional quality. It becomes 'holy' or 'sacred' and is regarded and treated differently from the everyday.

The term 'holy' has commonly been used to describe God, the attributes of God and persons or things associated with God, and carries with it rather narrowly Christian overtones. To speak of something as 'holy' also tends to imply a personal affirmation on the part of the speaker. The term 'sacred' can be used more flexibly. The distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' originally referred to the difference between what took place within the restricted area of a Roman temple (that which was walled off or set apart) and that which was open to all in the area in front of the temple. Today, 'sacred' is normally applied to respected or venerated objects. It describes the attitudes of human beings to these objects rather than making a claim about the reality to which these objects point: for example, sacred beliefs, sacred books,

sacred places and, indeed, sacred days. To revert to Bruce, a thing may be 'sacred' because it is associated with a supernatural entity (or entities) or because it is associated with impersonal powers and processes (1995, p. ix).

But if devotees insist that the religious life is to be practised at all times and in all places, then what is the purpose of special gatherings in sacred places? This question was discussed by Christians, Jews and Muslims in the video clips. Some stated simply that it is a requirement of their faith that they mark the week in a certain way. For Muslim men this entailed attending midday Friday prayer at the [mosque](#), for Jews the observance of [Shabbat](#), and for Christians Sunday worship. A fuller answer included the idea that this special event in the week helps the individual to concentrate on the underlying reality of their faith amidst the bustle of the working week. Both Jews and Muslims suggested that men, in particular, were liable to distraction and thus in need of the routine of communal prayer to bring their minds back to God. It was also made plain that the attitudes fostered during this special time in the week should guide the individual for the whole of the week.

To conclude, our brief description of religious practices in Britain reminds us that, if we wish to understand religion, we have to bear in mind the nature of the underlying reality to which religion in its various forms points. Participating in special days, such as the ones we have considered, is held to bring the believer into closer relationship with this reality.

## 7 How should we study religion?

### 7.1 Some basic principles of religious studies

Remember that in [Section 4](#) I suggested that possible reasons for studying religion could be clustered together under two broad headings:

1. to understand the society in which we live, the culture we inherit and the wider world of which we are a part;
2. as part of a personal quest for religious self-fulfilment.

I also suggested that these different reasons might lead to different approaches to the study of religion.

To a great extent, the meanings now attached to the terms 'religion' and 'religions' have tended to promote the study of religion in order to understand the world in which we live rather than as part of a desire for personal religious self-fulfilment. In fact, the assumptions contained within this 'modern' use of 'religion' and 'religions' in themselves indicate something of the approach we must follow. Awareness of the breadth and variety of 'religion' suggests a need:

1. for care when looking for the boundaries of religion;
2. for openness to the variety of possible religious expressions;
3. to place forms of religion in their social and historical context;

4. to avoid premature judgements when dealing with questions about the truth and value of particular religions.

If we are studying religion to make sense of social customs and political events, we can do that without having to make assumptions about the nature of religion, its origins, whether it is a 'good' or 'bad' thing and, whether it is true or false. It is sufficient that people speak about religion as a factor that affects their lives. We can choose to approach these aspects of religion in a neutral manner – that is, without intending to offer any judgement on their truth or falsity. In practice, of course, it is not possible to achieve a position of complete neutrality, but the conscious desire to minimise distortion and bias as far as possible has been a principle adopted in many branches of scholarship. You will already be familiar with this in the reporting and analysis of politics. Certain journalists and commentators evidently strive to be 'disinterested' ('impartial' as distinct from 'uninterested') and not to base their judgements on their own political convictions. Even so, at times their impartiality is called into question, particularly by the major political parties in the run-up to an election! Nevertheless, we know that these reporters are attempting to offer a different kind of judgement from those newspaper columnists who make no secret of their political sympathies and write opinion columns that trumpet their convictions. Similarly, the position of the impartial political commentator is significantly different from that of those senior, often retired, politicians who are invited to comment as a result of their vast experience and knowledge of the political process. Retirement may make for greater freedom in criticising one's own party, but, as viewers, listeners or readers, we know that these figures still speak as 'insiders' and that there are likely to be limits to the extent of their impartiality.

In the study of religion there is a comparable divide. There are those whose style of approach and methods are closely bound up with their own religious convictions or with a personal search for religious self-fulfilment. There are others who, regardless of whether they are religious or not, strive for an impartial approach not shaped by their own beliefs. This latter approach to the study of religion, sometimes known as Religious Studies, has developed in step with the understanding of the terms 'religion' and 'religions' that we have inherited from the late eighteenth century. It is still a relatively new way of studying religion and, in fact, only gained a foothold in European universities in the latter half of the nineteenth century, where it offered an alternative to theology. It is also very much the product of the European and North American intellectual traditions.

## 7.2 Religious Studies as a discipline

Until the late nineteenth century, theology had provided the main academic discipline in European universities for the study of religion. Theology (from the Greek, 'discourse about God') is concerned with questions relating to the relationship between God (or gods) and humanity. A theologian may begin from what is held to be a divine revelation taken, say, from a sacred book or religious teacher, about the nature of God and the relationship of God to humanity. In this form, theology is concerned with the interpretation of the substance and

implications of a particular revelation. Some styles of theology have relied upon rational reflection upon experience, including observation of nature, in order to formulate beliefs about the nature of God and the relationship between God, the world and human beings. Theological enquiry may be conducted in a highly scholarly manner, and some contemporary theologians argue that its starting point requires nothing more than a willingness to consider the possibility of the existence of God. More typically, however, theology has been practised within the framework of a given religious position. Much of what has gone under the heading of theological training has been shaped by the interests of religious faith and designed to be put to the service of that faith. Historically in Europe it has largely taken the form of Christian theology.

I would certainly agree with you if you reacted to the notion of 'neutral' or disinterested study of religion by arguing that it would be pretty pointless to approach religion in a way that cuts out those parts that might challenge you directly. When you study religion, you do place yourself in a position in which your personal views *may* be changed. Yet, in this respect, the study of religion is no different from other branches of study that examine human ideas and actions, although religious claims are different from those made, say, by political theories. However, a study of religion that *sets out* to deepen an individual's faith, resolve personal religious doubts, or satisfy a need for religious belief is surely a religious quest *in itself*. It could all too easily slide into something entirely directed by that individual's interests: a study within fixed horizons. Even when not restricted to one religious tradition, it is likely to begin with built-in assumptions about the value of religion – for example, that religion in some way provides insights that we have to understand and live by in order to experience a fulfilled existence. Theology has been criticised for fixing the horizons of the study of religion in just this sort of way.

Unlike theology, the interests and methods of Religious Studies are not rooted within the framework of a particular religion. In separating the study of religion from the student's personal religious faith, or lack of faith, Religious Studies has justified its existence on the grounds that religion is a sufficiently distinctive and widespread aspect of human activity as to warrant its own form of enquiry; it does not depend upon assumptions made about either the truth or falsity of religion.

Models of religion, such as that outlined by Ninian Smart, display the many-sidedness and varied nature of religion. Religious Studies draws upon methods from both the humanities and the social sciences in exploring the complex phenomenon of religion – its history, its art, its ideas, its distinctive social institutions and the states of mind to which it can give rise. Archaeology, comparative methods, history, linguistic studies, psychology and sociology are all employed within Religious Studies. Religious Studies, therefore, is not founded upon the use of one characteristic method of enquiry but uses a range of different methods to explore a particular area of interest, namely, religion.

Approaching religion as a distinctive and widespread form of human activity implies that we can study religion on broadly the same basis as other human activities. It suggests that, drawing upon common human experiences and our imagination, we can gain insights into what

we have not experienced directly. These capacities are used in the same way by historians to help them to reconstruct times past, by anthropologists in the study of societies different from their own, or by actors when they take on a role. There are, however, problems lurking beneath the surface of this brief summary of the broad principles of Religious Studies. The first of these relates to the claim that students of religion can achieve an understanding of religions of which they have no personal experience.

### 7.3 'Insiders' and 'outsiders'

The claim that it is possible to study religion adequately from a disinterested position has been hotly debated. Can the understanding of the observer achieve the same level of insight and authority as the participant in a religion? No serious student of religion can avoid confronting this question.

The 'outsider' cannot escape depending to an extent upon insights from 'insiders' when studying a particular religion. An 'outsider' who has never been through a particular ritual, for example, can only give an account based upon observation and third-party testimony. Observers may be more inclined to rely upon abstractions and generalisations, possibly from sacred books, in the absence of direct experience of the religion as practised. Such questions as 'What does it feel like?' or 'Why did you?' can only be answered by 'insiders' because they call for answers based on personal experience or ask for details that may have to do with a local or even family custom. Yet, 'insiders' are fallible and may have their own reasons for describing their experience in a particular way. 'Insiders' will not necessarily agree with each other.

There is also the further issue of whether the experience of one religion contributes to understanding other forms of religion. For example, does personal experience of the practice of prayer in one religion make a student more sensitive when studying prayer or a practice like meditation in a different religion? Is a Muslim who prays better qualified to understand a Buddhist who meditates and vice versa, than, say, a humanist who does neither? Or should students who are not members of the religion being considered simply be regarded as 'outsiders', whether they are agnostics or members of a different religious faith? Would someone standing outside all religions, but interested in their study, bring an openness and sympathy that a person with a particular religious commitment would find hard to match? If you decide that we should not generalise and that it will depend upon the skill and sensitivity of each student, then you are tacitly accepting that being religious in itself is not a necessary qualification for a student of religion.

In fact, as we have seen, that is one of the principles involved in the approach of Religious Studies. Fervent followers of religion and militant atheists both have the capacity to become insightful students of religion – as long as they are willing to exercise the self-discipline necessary to ensure that their own beliefs do not distort their treatment of the beliefs of others. If I did not accept this possibility, introducing you to Religious Studies would be tantamount to

assuming either that you are religious or that you will need to 'get religious quick' to complete this course! Yet, the argument that it is possible to study religion effectively without drawing upon personal religious experience has been challenged.

The counter-argument is that 'religion' refers to a totally distinct and unique category of human experience which is beyond the comprehension of those who have not shared this experience. A technical way of referring to this is to speak of religion as being **autonomous** (subject to its own laws) or as being *sui generis* (Latin for 'of its own kind' or unique and pronounced as 'soo-ee g[hard 'g' as in gun]en-er-is'). The implications of this view for the student have been spelled out in no uncertain terms:

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no further; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who can recollect the emotions of his adolescence, the discomforts of indigestion, or, say, social feelings, but cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings.

(Otto, 1970, p. 8)

According to this view there are severe limits to the extent to which religion can be understood by the 'outsider' who has not known 'intrinsically religious feelings'. This would seem to rule out, for example, Ninian Smart's argument that both religions and secular ideologies should be studied as 'worldviews'. For if religion is different in kind from a secular **ideology**, then it cannot be understood on the same terms as other 'worldviews', but only on its own terms by those who have known some sort of religious experience of their own.

Is acceptance of the claim that religion is **autonomous** or *sui generis* consistent with the broad principles of Religious Studies?

We might wish to investigate the claim that religion is **autonomous** or *sui generis* as part of our study of religion. To base our method of study on the acceptance of such a claim without first testing the arguments that support it, however, would be to begin from an assumption that is very different from the characteristic but more modest starting point of Religious Studies: namely, the observable importance of religion in peoples' lives. Yet, we should be aware of the implications of rejecting the *sui generis* argument. In so doing we *have* made a statement about the nature of religion: that, for the purposes of study, we are assuming that it is possible to study religion in much the same way as we study other aspects of human experience. On the other hand, those who view religion as *sui generis* face the problems of identifying what makes it so (which, given the varied forms of religion, is not easy), and also of convincing us that a person who has experienced one form of religion may apply this experience in the analysis of another.

The difference of opinion between those who hold to the *sui generis* view of religion and those who share the position adopted by Ninian Smart is profound. The fact that the debate continues leads us into another problem in the study of religion in response to which Religious Studies has adopted a characteristic position in terms of method. This is the problem of determining the truth of religion.

## 7.4 Religion: true or false?

I noted earlier that differences between the truth claims made by religions has led those who practise Religious Studies to avoid premature judgements when dealing with questions relating to the truth and value of particular religions. By seeming to by-pass truth claims, you may feel that what I have been describing as Religious Studies avoids what many would regard as the purpose of religion – to deal in truths. This is a difficult area to cover briefly, but let me at least try to explain why Religious Studies takes the line that it does.

Different societies tolerate different codes of morality. Religions, which typically claim to reveal truths, often make different claims and promote different codes of behaviour. Can we just assume that these variations are due to the differences in the social and historical contexts in which these religions are found? Some people have argued that *all* religions contain a measure of certain universal truths, but have taken different outward forms because of the needs of different human temperaments and different social conditions. In [Section 8](#) we shall see that some contemporary Hindus are wedded to this idea. There is even an old Indian story used to illustrate it. Wearied by the conflicting opinions of his court philosophers and their mutual intolerance, a king made them watch blind men approach an elephant from different angles and, using their sense of touch, attempt to identify what creature they were being presented with. Not surprisingly, the blind man who grabbed the tail arrived at a different conclusion from the one who embraced a leg. At one level this story serves to encourage humility when asserting one's opinions, but the story has also been used to suggest something about the relationship between religions that could guide the way we study them.

### Exercise 12

Think about the Indian story I have just related:

1. What appears to be its message about conflicting religious and philosophical beliefs?
2. Does the message of the story provide guidelines that we might adopt in our role as critical students of religion?

Hide discussion

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## Discussion



1. The story implies that nobody has a monopoly on truth. Humans are like the blind men – we have a limited perception of the universe. But the story also suggests that while the blind men did not grasp the complete picture, they all had some insight. The story invites us to understand the reasons for their failure and not to judge them intolerantly as the court philosophers had judged each other.
2. The plea for tolerance and respect may sound attractive, but it does not take us much further forward in deciding how to deal with questions of truth. In the terms of this story, all religions are true in their own way and are thus to be respected for meeting different needs. But this is where we do hit a problem. The story presupposes that the elephant *was* there and that, even when wrong in their conclusions, the blind men had grasped something of the larger picture. Put the pieces together, learn from each other and you will have the right answer. Transferring this to the study of religion would imply that students assume *for the purposes of their method* that all religions are true in some measure. This may make for tolerance and respect, but it is as much a judgement on the truth claims of religion as are the assumptions that one religion is true or that none are true. For this reason, I feel that the story makes us think harder about how to study religion rather than providing us with a model answer.

The problem is that, in the study of religion, there is no human arbiter comparable to that of the sighted in the story of the blind men and the elephant. Truth claims – for example, about the existence of God – are made within particular religions, and it is between religions that the differences lie. Religions start, however, from different assumptions and appeal to different authorities. Finding a way that will enable us to judge the respective merits of their truth claims is, therefore, extremely difficult. For example, religious traditions often appeal to a sacred book whose authority is not recognised either by people of other faiths or by people of no religious faith. Those who accept the authority of a sacred book are unlikely to accept the judgements of those who deny its authority.

Religious conviction, even when it appeals to reason and logic, more often than not assigns a greater importance to acts of faith, to personal experience and/or to the authority of a religious teacher or sacred book. A person whose conviction rests on foundations such as these may well turn round and argue that an outsider who attempts to judge the truth of a particular religion without such an experience simply does not understand the religion and is thus simply not qualified to judge its truth claims. I remember well talking with a Muslim who has generously given of his time over several years to answer my questions about Islam. On one occasion when we were outside the [mosque](#) talking about understanding Islam, he turned to me and said simply, 'If you understood Islam, you would come into the [mosque](#) with me now and make your profession of faith'.

Trying to resolve the problem of how to test religious truth claims continues to vex scholars and religious devotees alike. Those who practise Religious Studies recognise the full importance of this problem, but do not believe that all study of religion should be suspended until it is solved.

We continue in the meantime to learn more about religion, but refrain from making premature judgements about matters of truth. In view of the amount of biased and inaccurate reporting of religions which has taken place and continues to take place both in the media and in scholarly work, a measure of caution about premature judgements may be no bad thing. To an extent, this also offers a check when applying the assumptions, principles and methods of Religious Studies, a discipline that evolved in post-Enlightenment Europe, in a global, cross-cultural study of beliefs and practices. But does this mean we can offer only bland descriptions of religion and no evaluative comment? Doesn't religion on occasion actually do damage?

## 7.5 Religion: a 'good' thing or a 'bad' thing?

In considering the value of religions, we can begin by saying that one of the first tasks of the critical student should certainly be to test the basis of judgements offered by other commentators. We saw earlier that the **Church** of Scientology has had problems gaining official recognition as a 'religion' in a number of countries and that these judgements have been tied up with official views that Scientology is 'socially harmful'.

Dramatic events like those surrounding the mass suicide of a religious group or an armed stand-off between a religious group and a government agency need to be understood and explained. To this end, students of religion use methods of historical, psychological and sociological investigation. Sociological and psychological analysis may also help us to understand why individuals are drawn into religious movements and the effects of joining upon both them and their families. This is a particularly pressing question for those who have seen a relative or friend become part of a religious community that closes its members off from those who do not share the same beliefs.

Similarly, claims made about the effects of different techniques of meditation are open to a degree of clinical testing. Many clinical tests have been carried out to measure the effects of different meditative techniques upon rhythms in the brain and upon blood-pressure. In examining this kind of evidence as critical students, we may be acting little differently from someone who is considering taking up a meditation practice but who first wants to know whether it can bring benefits.

To argue, as I have done, that Religious Studies stresses the need to understand beliefs and practices in their context is not to say that the student may offer no judgement upon these. As we have seen, many of the practical consequences of religious codes of conduct are open to observation and investigation, and the justifications for different codes can be tested for coherence. The judgements we pass, however, should be informed by understanding this behaviour within its historical and social context, and not simply exercised on the assumption that our own moral code provides a universal standard against which all else may be judged. Think, for example, about the way in which monogamy and polygamy have been regarded as the norm in different societies. Similarly, the age at which it is thought appropriate for young

people to enter into full sexual relationships varies considerably. So, although one society might seek to promote or even enforce one standard, as critical students we have to recognise that such standards do vary, and often for good reason, between societies.

### Exercise 13

In the light of what has just been said, are there claims made or issues relating to the lifestyles described in the video clips that you would want to subject to more searching, critical enquiry? Please identify at least one issue in the clips and list two or three questions you would want to pursue.

Hide discussion

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### Discussion

There are many issues that you might have listed. This is one example that caught my attention because it surfaced a number of times. The religions that figured in the videos appeared to offer women a more restricted role in the life of the community. In certain instances, communal worship was largely if not exclusively centred upon the needs of men and key roles seemed to be reserved for men. This was evident in the roles played by men as priests in Christian churches, even though women are now ordained in some denominations. While it was claimed that women were more innately religious than men, often in practice they seemed to be confined to subordinate roles whether in the home or elsewhere. Jews and Muslims downplayed the need for women to attend communal worship and prayer. The domestic role undertaken by Hindu women has been likened to a service offered up to the deities. What part does religion play in the social construction of the roles assigned to the two sexes? What effects has this had upon the lives of men and women and their respective places within society? Is this influence different from social convention more generally, or does religion play a major hand in creating and maintaining social conventions? These are the sorts of question that we should be asking as critical students. I think I would also want to ask further questions about the meaning and value that religious people assign to these roles as a prelude to attempting to answer my other questions.

Religious Studies, then, is not simply a mix of bland and evocative description, but is concerned to understand and analyse the part that religion plays in the lives of people. Our current inability to resolve which religions, if any, are true is a source of frustration but it also vitalises the discipline. After all, if we knew the answer to this question, we would probably be at the end of our need to study religion and some of us would be out of a job. This limitation should make for humility but not paralysis. Religious Studies is not the only discipline you will meet where questions of truth remain to be resolved.

Now that we have a clearer view of the concerns of Religious Studies and some of the problems associated with using the term 'religion', I want to move beyond the confines of British society and shift our attention to India and the religious tradition widely known as 'Hinduism'. We are taking this as our next example because Hinduism historically has taken many different forms, and thus defining Hinduism as a 'religion' poses particular problems. Taking the different contexts of India and Britain should also make us less inclined to slip into an unthinking acceptance of the assumptions made about religion in one culture and about how to study it. I realise that some of you may know Hindu India well, but my discussion assumes that this will be unfamiliar territory for the majority of you. During this more extended study of religion in context, you will have the opportunity to get a fuller flavour of studying religion and to practise some of the skills you have developed up to this point.

## 8 Religion in context: Hinduism in Calcutta

### 8.1 Hinduism as a 'religion'

India's population includes followers of many religions and many people who have rejected religion in any form. The modern Republic of India has a secular constitution (one which guarantees the religious freedom of all but does not give a privileged position to any one religion) but a population which overwhelmingly identifies itself as Hindu. More than eighty per cent of India's population are Hindus, practitioners of what is now widely referred to as the religion of Hinduism. Historically, Hinduism has taken many different forms but has not organised itself around centralised authorities as have, for example, many Christian churches in Britain. Consequently, defining Hinduism as a 'religion' – its characteristics and boundaries – poses particular problems.

The term 'Hindu' was derived from the name of the river, now known as the Indus, that flows through the north-west of the Indian subcontinent. It was applied first to people living in the region around the Indus, and then to the inhabitants of the subcontinent of India as a whole. The English term 'Hinduism' was coined by Europeans. They used it to refer to the religion of the mass of the people who were neither Muslims nor followers of some other identifiable faith such as Buddhism or Sikhism.

#### Exercise 14

Knowing what you do about the origins of the term 'Hinduism', jot down any considerations you feel should govern our use of this term. Remember what you have discovered about the use of the term 'religion' and labels like 'Hinduism' in [Section 5](#), and put into practice the critical approach outlined in [Section 7](#). Be cautious before accepting labels and think about Hinduism in context.

Hide discussion

## Discussion

You may well have suggested that the term 'Hinduism' should be used with care precisely because it is a *European* term which has been invented to categorise, or even 're-package', *Indian* assumptions and practices. Moreover, a label ending with an 'ism' can lead us to expect coherence and uniformity where there is none. Its use, especially when coupled with the term 'religion', may encourage the unthinking retention of European assumptions about what a religious system should look like. These are important considerations. They make us think more carefully about how we are to approach 'Hinduism', and about the adequacy of the concept of 'religion' as a tool for exploring different cultural contexts. It is indeed, therefore, a matter of looking at Indian Hinduism in its context. If you suggested that we should consult the opinion of Hindus before using these terms, this would seem to be a wise move. We shall do that now.

Many Hindus have adopted the conventional use of the terms 'Hinduism' and 'religion' while knowing that these do not translate underlying Hindu concepts. When you read John Bowker's brief account of Hinduism in Britain, you may have been surprised that one of the Hindus he interviewed declared that, 'Hinduism is not a religion, in the same sense in which Christianity is a religion, Islam is a religion and even Buddhism is a religion' (Bowker, 1983, p. 27).

In 1944 Jawaharlal Nehru, who would soon be India's first post-independence prime minister, was one of many Indian leaders imprisoned by the British because of his support for the nationalist cause. Trapped in gaol, he had time to reflect on his Indian heritage. He was personally inclined towards secularism and, at times, was an outspoken critic of religion, but this did not prevent him from trying to understand its place in Indian society. This is what he had to say about the nature of Hinduism:

Hinduism, as a faith, is vague, amorphous, many sided, all things to all men. It is hardly possible to define it, or indeed to say whether it is a religion or not, in the usual sense of the word.

(Nehru, 1960, p. 63)

Other Hindus have been well aware that the popular sense of the English term 'religion' ('its usual sense') conveys narrow and predominantly Christian overtones. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), the figurehead of the Hindu wing of the Indian independence movement who was given the title of 'Mahatma' ('the great soul'), preferred to speak of religion in its broadest sense, 'meaning thereby self-realization or knowledge of the self' (Gandhi, 1982, p. 45). It is not enough, however, simply to adopt a definition of religion that is sufficiently broad to avoid being limited by the religious assumptions and norms of one culture. As we now know, a definition of religion must also be specific.

Some Hindus rely upon the concept of *dharma*, in preference to the debated concept of 'religion', when explaining the nature of Hinduism. *Dharma* is a term taken from the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit in which many of Hinduism's sacred books were written. A limited number of Sanskrit terms will be introduced in the course of our discussion. Each term will be explained in the text and also, for quick reference, in the glossary.

[*Dharma* can mean] 'religion', 'righteousness', 'duty', or 'innate nature'. According to Hinduism, man's innate nature is determined by a yearning for a restoration to its state of perfection. *Dharma* is the process by which the awareness of the realizable nature of perfection is enkindled in the heart of man.

(Mukerji, 1988, p. 4)

Within the Hindu tradition, the obligations of *dharma* fall under two broad headings: universal obligations and obligations specific to groups defined by age, sex and caste – a caste is a distinct social grouping with a traditional range of occupations that normally insists upon its members marrying within it. Caste has been a characteristic feature of Hindu life and social organisation. Caste status is hereditary, and Hindu society has been organised historically around caste groups ranked in order of status according to traditional notions of ritual purity. Caste identity, therefore, indicates social status but also brings with it ritual responsibilities and social and economic implications. It also defines religious identity for, traditionally, only a person born to Hindu parents and thus into a caste has been counted as a Hindu. What we might wish to label as Hindu 'religious' activity, therefore, is inseparable from a complex socio-economic system in which family life and caste membership have their place.

One possibility open to us would be to identify as 'Hindu religion' or 'Hinduism' those beliefs and practices referred to by Hindus under the heading of *dharma*. But the central Hindu concept of *dharma*, although it can refer to social and ethical obligations and 'sacred law', embraces a view of life that does not distinguish between, for example, religion and politics, and religion and social custom in a manner commonly found in secular theories. If we begin with the Hindu concept of *dharma* and allow this to shape our understanding of the concept of 'Hinduism', we see that Hinduism refers to an entire way of life. Elements relating to 'sacred law' are all-pervasive and therefore not separable into a distinct compartment which we might label 'religion'.

Other religions allow us to turn to an authoritative prophet or founder figure, or to a sacred book, to tell us exactly what that religion is about. Hinduism, however, brings together many different traditions and does not trace its beginnings back to one reputed founder or event. Hindu society is hierarchical, but Hinduism is not regulated by one centralised authority recognised by the majority of Hindus. Today it largely falls to India's *secular* courts to define the boundaries of Hinduism within the framework of the Indian Constitution. Harking back to 'Religion and social policy' (Section 4.4), the definition of Hinduism as a religion has not been simply a matter of academic interest but has had far-reaching social and political implications for the Republic of India.

## 8.2 The diversity of Hinduism

The complex tradition now known as Hinduism has emerged largely from the coming together of four main elements:

1. The traditions of the original inhabitants of India, some of which may still continue in the cultures of India's more remote tribal peoples.
2. The influences of the Indus Valley civilisation that flourished in northwest India until approximately the middle of the second millennium BCE.
3. The very old and highly developed culture inherited by the Tamil-speaking people of south India.
4. The religion brought into north-western India during the middle of the second millennium BCE by Indo-European settlers who called themselves 'aryans' (*arya* or 'noble ones'). Their traditions have been perpetuated in the sacred text of the *Veda* (hence 'Vedic religion') and transmitted primarily by the **brahmin** caste, held to be the most ritually pure group in Hindu society and positioned at the top of the **hierarchy** of the Hindu caste structure.

(adapted from Klostermaier, 1989, p. 31)

We know that the way in which religion is lived out by real people is often very different from the standards found in sacred books. Interviews on the streets of my local market would soon show that Christianity *as popularly practised* looks different from that found in the *Bible* and in creeds. I don't mean that people fail to live up to their beliefs (a different question), but simply that popular belief and practice rarely correspond to the 'official version' of any religion. 'Hinduism' certainly cannot be understood narrowly in terms of its most important sacred book, the *Veda*, and the practice of the caste entrusted with preserving it.

If you are beginning to despair about getting a clear picture of Hinduism, then you are on the right lines! This shows that you are beginning to get into the way of trying to see religion in context and not to make it conform to your expectations. For, as I explained earlier, the reason for taking Hinduism as an example in this course is because it will *not* be pressed into neat and tidy boxes. Thinking critically about the boundaries of Hinduism will help you to reflect further on the use of the concept 'religion' and the wider question of how to go about studying forms of religion.

### Exercise 15

Hindus themselves are well aware that Hinduism tolerates a degree of variety that often confuses outsiders. This is how Sarvepalli **Radhakrishnan** (1888–1975), a notable Hindu philosopher and Indian statesman, summed up the differences within Hinduism:

In practical religion, Hinduism recognizes that there are those who wish to see God face to face, others who delight in the endeavour to know the truth of it all. Some find peace in action, others in non-action.

*(Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 89)*

I would like you now to consider these three questions:

1. What does this statement indicate about the nature of Hindu religious belief and practice?
2. What does it imply will be the likely outcome of concentrating upon just one form of Hindu belief and practice?
3. Relating this statement about Hinduism to our ongoing concern with the way in which we study religion in general, to what extent, if at all, could Steve Bruce's definition of religion ([Section 5.5](#)) and Ninian Smart's seven-dimensional model ([Section 5.4](#)) cope with the differences that are all part of Hinduism?

Hide discussion

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## Discussion

1. Hinduism does not seem to require its followers to accept one view about the nature of ultimate reality. Some aim to 'see God face to face', which implies belief in a personal god. Others aim 'to know the truth of it all': a quest to realise the truth about the nature of reality that may not involve a commitment to a personal god. The distinction between preferences for 'action' and 'non-action' suggests that Hindus do not express their beliefs in one set form of practice.
2. It surely implies that concentrating on one form of Hindu belief and practice to the exclusion of the others would not do justice to the variety that is so characteristic of Hinduism.
3. Having tested Steve Bruce's definition of religion in Britain, I think we can now see that it could also cope with the variety of Hindu beliefs and practices. Remember, for example, his inclusion of supernatural entities and impersonal powers or processes. I think that this would embrace both those Hindus 'who wish to see God face to face' and those 'who delight in the endeavour to know the truth of it all'. Smart's seven-dimensional model is also sufficiently flexible to accommodate Hinduism, and taking each dimension in turn could provide a basis on which to bring together different examples of Hindu belief and practice. I will show you what I mean when we explore Hinduism in Calcutta.



Let's now relate **Radhakrishnan's** general statement about the 'practical religion' of Hinduism to the specific examples. Hindus often speak about their *ishtadeva* (chosen deity – I am going to use 'deity' to avoid the Christian overtones of God and because we will be talking about 'gods' and 'goddesses'). The *ishtadeva* of one Hindu may be the deity **Shiva** whereas another Hindu may revere **Kali**, the Mother Goddess (**Figure 10**). We might say that these Hindus wish to 'see God face to face'. In fact, Hindus speak of receiving the *darshan* (sight or vision) of their chosen deity, and the hope of receiving this provides a motive for going to a temple or maybe on pilgrimage. Yet, although many Hindus focus their devotions on a particular deity – for example, **Kali** – there has long been a tendency within Hinduism to view all the different deities as aspects of one supreme being. This vision of unity underlies the rich and varied religious symbolism that surrounds the actual practice of worship offered to many deities. Hindus typically become attached to one deity through family tradition or individual temperament rather than as a result of rejecting other deities. Devotion to an *ishtadeva* would not prevent respect being shown to other deities nor would it rule out participation in the rituals and festivals offered to them.



Photo: Sharma Picture Publications

### Figure 10 Popular image of Kali

The path of worship and devotion is not of the same importance for all Hindus. Some Hindus speak of a non-personal reality, *brahman* (not to be confused with the caste), when explaining the nature of existence, and seek to experience a state of identity with this reality rather than a personal relationship with a deity. Worship and devotion are not rejected but are viewed as a starting point or aid to a more meditative path. This may lead some in time to a more solitary and ascetic lifestyle away from the ties of family and daily employment. Such people, I think, are those described by Radhakrishnan as endeavouring ‘to know the truth of it all’.

Behind Radhakrishnan's reference to seeing God, knowing the truth of it all and paths of action and non-action is a well established distinction in Hinduism between the ‘way of devotion’ (worship), ‘the way of wisdom’ (meditation) and ‘the way of action’ (the responsibilities of ritual and *dharmā*). All of these paths have value but none are obligatory. This helps to explain why, although temples may be thronged with devotees, Hindus will insist that nothing requires their attendance at temples. Attendance is merely one of a number of spiritually beneficial practices.

### Exercise 16

This is a good point to pause and consolidate the background information provided so far about the broad features of Hinduism. Please read 'Introduction: Benares' by David R. Kinsley (attached below), which will give you an overview of Hinduism.

A6: Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective by D.R. Kinsley © 1993. Reprinted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ. Reading A6: David R. Kinsley, '[Introduction: Benares](#)'

### 8.3 Worship in temples and street shrines

Apart from being intensely visible, participation in devotional practice at temples and festivals is extremely widespread within popular Hinduism. If we make allowance for regional and sectarian variations, we can gain some truly representative insights into a central preoccupation of living Hinduism. As in [Section 6](#), I would like you to look for examples of Smart's seven dimensions and again I will prompt you in the text from time to time.

If we are prepared to accept that expressions of reverence and respect for higher beings and powers are characteristics of 'religion', then signs of religion are not difficult to find in India. If you walked the streets of Calcutta as alertly as you walked the streets of Britain in our earlier exercise, you would see garlanded pictures and images of these higher beings and powers even on the dashboards of taxis and buses. The routine greeting of *namaskar*, when hands are raised with palms pressed together, is a gesture that has its place in Hindu worship. In the centre of cities as in the smallest villages, temples and shrines draw individuals into moments of intense contact with the chosen focus of their worship (*experiential and emotional dimension*). Conches, horns and cymbals are sounded in the larger temples. The evening air is alive with the scents and sounds of worship. It may seem as if religion is everywhere and that no one is apart from it.

A Hindu temple is a three-dimensional sacred space into which the devotee enters to receive the sight or vision (*darshan*) of the deity, for the purpose of the temple is to house the image (*murti*) of the deity (*material dimension*). The temple is the house of the deity and not the centre for congregational worship as found in some other religious traditions. Hindus generally go to a temple in India to fit in with the daily 'routine' of the deity and not on a special day in the week, unlike Hindus in Britain who now tend to concentrate their communal worship on Sundays simply for convenience. The main activity that takes place in a Hindu temple whether in India or Britain is worship (*puja*). It may take the form of an act of private devotion, a family ritual or a communal performance, and it has been described as 'the core ritual of popular theistic Hinduism' (Fuller, 1992, p. 57). Thus *puja* can refer to an offering or prayer made by a solitary devotee or a complex ritual conducted on behalf of devotees by a temple attendant. It can even refer to the protracted worship that takes place during a festival over several days and thus means much the same as the English word 'festival'.

The symbolism of the divine encountered during the 'pilgrimage' of worship may include the aniconic (not shaped in human and animal form) in which the divine is represented, for example, by trees or stones shaped by nature alone. The divine is also portrayed in immensely varied human and animal figures. **Ganesh**, one of the most popular Hindu deities, is depicted as pot-bellied with the head of an elephant (**Figure 11**). According to Hindu mythology, **Ganesh** is the son of **Shiva** and dramatic stories are told about how he came to have the head of an elephant at the hands of his divine father. By way of compensation, **Shiva** made **Ganesh** the remover of obstacles and the maker of auspicious occasions. For this reason, **Ganesh** is frequently worshipped at the start of *puja* or when undertaking any important or momentous activity. Shrines to **Ganesh** are often found just within the entrance to a temple compound.



Photo: Sharma Picture Publications

Figure 11 Popular image of Ganesh

Wayside shrines and household shrines serve much the same purpose as the temple (Figure 12). All of them are inclusive in their acceptance of these varied symbols of the divine. In dealing with forms of belief and practice that are so varied and yet all have their place within Hinduism, you are probably beginning to apply instinctively the broad principles of Religious Studies: namely, trying to understand what lies before you on its own terms and in context.



Photo: Gwilym Beckerlegge

**Figure 12** Street shrine of Shiva, Gol Park, Calcutta

Now that you have some understanding of the characteristic patterns of Hindu worship, we shall take a closer look at examples of living Hinduism in eastern India and more particularly in the city of Calcutta in the state of West Bengal.

## 8.4 Hinduism in eastern India: religion in Calcutta

The Hinduism of Bengal, as in other regions of India with their own languages and distinctive historical traditions, has absorbed and retained many local elements which make it peculiarly the Hinduism of Bengal. The city of Calcutta has exerted its own considerable influence upon the surrounding region. Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal, was founded in 1690 originally as a British trading post on the Hugli, a stretch of the Ganges (or Ganga), a river sacred to Hindus (see [Figure 13](#)).



From C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, p.xvii. Copyright c. 1992 by Princeton University Press, reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press

**Figure 13 Major Hindu religious sites in India and Nepal**

During the following century, Calcutta became the administrative capital of the British Presidency of Bengal and in 1858 became the capital of British India, a status it was to lose to New Delhi once Indian nationalism intensified in Bengal during the first decade of the twentieth century. Calcutta, therefore, is not an ancient Hindu city like Benares (or Varanasi), which developed partly as a centre of pilgrimage.

Calcutta began life and continues as a cosmopolitan trading city. It is home to a substantial Muslim population and followers of other religions. It thrives as an artistic centre for writers and film-makers. The name of the city, however, harks back to its antecedents. 'Calcutta' is believed to come either from the name of an earlier village absorbed by the growth of the city or from 'Kalikshetra', meaning the 'field' or place of the Mother Goddess, **Kali**. This is an allusion to the temple of **Kalighat** which existed prior to the growth of the city, although on a different site, and continues as a place of pilgrimage in Calcutta today. **Kali** (The 'Dark One') is

another form of the Mother Goddess (or **devi**) who is frequently depicted in Hindu myths as the consort of **Shiva**, one of the most widely known and worshipped Hindu deities. The Mother Goddess is also worshipped under the name of **Durga** (The 'Unfathomable One') in Bengal and particularly during the great festival of **Durga Puja** in Calcutta.

As a centre of traditional **Kali** worship, Calcutta draws pilgrims to its temples and festivals dedicated to the Mother Goddess. Temples and other religious sites in Calcutta on the banks of or close to the Hugli are particularly likely to attract pilgrims. Contact with British and European thought during the time of British rule and the city's role as a cosmopolitan centre have also made it open to foreign ideas. The openness of Calcutta to novel and alien ideas has challenged Hindu intellectuals from the city to lead the way in shaping Hindu responses to new ideas, as we will discover later when we consider Hinduism as a 'world religion' (*doctrinal and philosophical dimension*). If you look at the map in **Figure 13**, you will see that Calcutta dominates the north-eastern quarter of India. As a state capital and commercial centre, Calcutta pulls many workers from India's professional and administrative élite. The city has also acted as a magnet to the poor, who have been drawn by the allure of finding new opportunities. Many of these migrants have brought with them their own styles of Hinduism and have added to the variety already found within Bengal.

A variety of deities are worshipped under the umbrella of 'Hinduism' in this city. The most obvious starting point is the worship of **Kali** in two of Calcutta's most well-known temples, **Kalighat** and Dakshineswar. Here devotees also pay their respects to other deities, like **Krishna**, who are housed in the same temple compound.

## 8.5 Looking for Hinduism in Calcutta

*Academic consultant: Gwilym Beckerlegge;*

*produced and narrated by G.D. Jayalakshmi*

*Contributors:*

*Supradipta Dhar (student)*

*L.K. Jha (electrician)*

*B. Panda (priest)*

*Dr Dhar (heart specialist)*

*Brij Mohan Kumar Puri (company director)*

*Keshab Chandra Sarkar (information officer of the Ramakrishna Mission)*

### The programme

The following clip will provide you with an insight into the particular forms that Hinduism takes in the Indian city of Calcutta. It also continues the line of inquiry pursued in the earlier parts of this course, into the use and meaning of the term 'religion', within another urban context - this



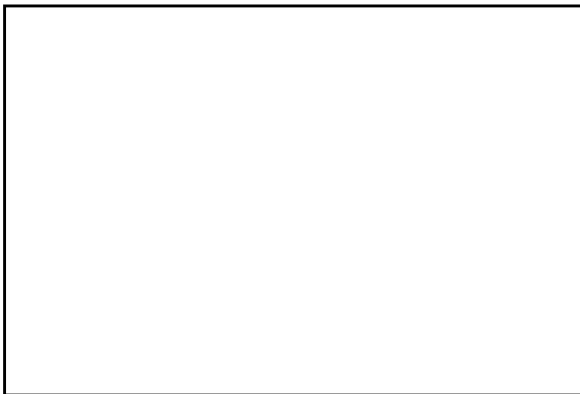
time in India. In this clip you will not hear academics analysing Hinduism, but a number of practising Hindus talking about the part that Hinduism plays in their lives. Those you will hear are from different socio-economic groups, including individuals who have come to Calcutta as migrants bringing other forms of Hinduism with them. This final section of this course continues to raise underlying questions about how the term 'religion' is used and the legitimacy of applying this Western concept to the realities of other cultures.

### **Preparing for the programme**

Before watching the programme, you should look at Section 7 of 'How should we study religion?' in this course, if you have not already done so. You will find it useful to keep the glossary at the end of this free course (Section 9) to hand while you watch the programme. Also, in sequences of Calcutta's civic buildings built during the period of British rule, look out for architectural examples of the classical legacy. In fact, many of the buildings in the hearts of both Liverpool, which you saw in the earlier clips, and Calcutta incorporate classical motifs, although used in vividly different cultural and social settings.

### *Background information*

The city of Calcutta is the capital of the Indian state of West Bengal. It has a population of well over 15 million and a floating street population. The city has been particularly associated with a style of Hinduism centred upon worship of the Mother Goddess, known variously as **Kali** or **Durga**, which is most evident during the festival of **Durga Puja** at the end of the monsoon season. The nature of Hinduism in Calcutta is greatly affected by the city's cosmopolitan character and its status as a commercial, industrial and artistic centre. Inward migration and socio-economic differences have left their mark upon the style of popular religion practised in the city.



### **After the programme**

#### **Exercise 17**

It was suggested in the clip that, from the cultural perspective of Hinduism, it makes more sense to describe Hinduism as a 'way of life' than as a 'religion'. Do you think that we should adopt this suggestion?

Hide discussion

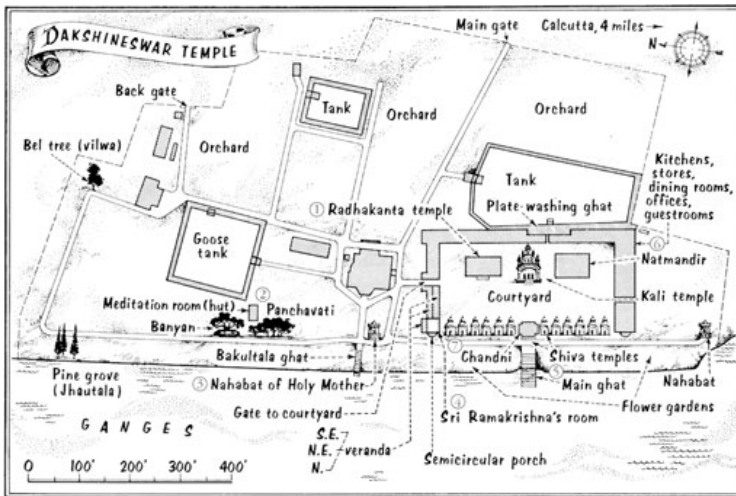
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## Discussion

Let's start by considering why some Hindus prefer to speak of Hinduism as 'a way of life'. I think there are two main reasons. The first is that, to date, what we call Hinduism has been associated with an all-encompassing pattern of behaviour, regulating matters such as bathing, diet and occupation. Second, Hinduism tolerates varied beliefs and is mostly clearly visible as an entity in what people do, although much of that takes place in the home and in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, 'way of life' is such a blanket term that one is tempted to try to identify the *religious* aspects of this 'way of life' as distinct from, say, the political. To attempt to distinguish a separate religious strand within Hinduism is not just a reflection of a different cultural perspective; this is also how Hinduism increasingly presents itself today in urban contexts such as Calcutta.

## 8.6 The Dakshineswar temple

I want you now to follow a worshipper on a 'pilgrimage in miniature' around Dakshineswar temple on the outskirts of Calcutta. Before you read further, please study carefully the plan of Dakshineswar temple in [Figure 14](#).



- 1 Radhakanta is a form of Krishna  
 2 Panchavati is a meditation grove  
 3 Nahabat is a music house. The Holy Mother was the wife of Ramakrishna  
 4 Ramakrishna was a 19th-century mystic  
 5 Ghat is an access point to water in a river or pond  
 6 Natmandir is a covered area for dance, music, drama and debate  
 7 Chandni is a portico

From Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and his Disciples*, 1965, Methuen, p. 216. Reproduced by permission of the Vedanta Society of Southern California

Figure 14 Plan of Dakshineswar temple

Dakshineswar temple is ringed by a number of tanks and *ghats* (steps or platforms) that provide access to water. Bathing plays an important part in the preparations for Hindu worship because, in washing themselves, the devotees achieve not just a state of physical cleanliness but also undergo a purification before participating in the rituals of worship (*practical and ritual dimension*). For some, a ritual bathe at the temple would precede worship. Having bought flowers from the stalls outside, devotees leave their shoes (closely guarded) at the entrance as they enter the main temple compound. This is a large flagged area flanked by small temples in honour of different deities but overlooked by the imposing temple of **Kali**, the deity to whom the whole complex is dedicated (the 'presiding deity'). It would be natural for worship to be offered here first of all. Beneath the mass of the **Kali** temple lies the 'womb-room' – the small inmost chamber where the image of the deity resides. Devotees make offerings of flowers and coins at the door and in the sight of the image but do not go inside. This is where the difference between Hindu temple worship and the types of 'congregational' worship commonly found in Britain, for example, begins to hit you. You have to set aside assumptions about 'congregational' worship, if this is what you know best, in order to understand what goes on in a Hindu temple. Think of **Kali** holding court. At certain times of the day, there is a public audience when the priests act like courtiers and present the offerings that devotees bring to the goddess.

To walk around the **Kali** temple is part of the 'pilgrimage'. The compound also contains temples to **Shiva**, the consort of **Kali**, and to **Krishna** who with his consort, **Radha**, is worshipped the length and breadth of India. The devotees go to each in turn. Before they leave they also pay their respects in the room set aside in memory of **Ramakrishna**, a popular Hindu teacher who was a temple attendant at Dakshineswar in the last century. Hindu temples often provide doles

of food for the poor so, on leaving the temple, worshippers might make a donation for this purpose or give alms to the needy who often gather around popular temples (*ethical and legal dimension*).

Many of the migrants to Calcutta adopt the worship of **Kali**, the Mother Goddess, because it is so widespread in Bengal, but others 'bring their gods with them'. Workers from the nearby Indian state of Orissa now live in the heart of the city on and around the Armenian **Ghat** on the banks of the Hugli. The Orissans living at the **Ghat** have erected a shrine dedicated to Lord **Jagannatha**, a name given to the deity **Vishnu** symbolised in a highly distinctive form that is particularly associated with the **Jagannatha** temple in the city of Puri, Orissa (**Figure 15**). **Vishnu** is worshipped throughout India but is commonly addressed either by the names found in accounts of his appearances on earth, such as **Krishna**, or by titles such as **Jagannatha** (meaning 'Lord of the World').



Photo: L. Dhawan Brothers, Gaya

### Figure 15 Popular image of Jagannath (right-hand figure)

Although Hindus in Calcutta may originally have come from different parts of India and have brought their own styles of Hinduism with them, this will not prevent them from sharing wholeheartedly in the great religious festival that Calcutta has made its own – [Durga Puja](#), the worship of the Mother Goddess. This festival takes over the life of the city and indeed comes close to stopping the traffic at the end of the rainy season.

## 8.7 The festival of Durga Puja in Calcutta

Although Hindus are not required to attend temples on set days in the week, the Hindu year is punctuated by days dictated by the lunar calendar during which [puja](#) (worship) should be offered to a particular deity or deities. Hindu festivals often combine the marking of the changing of the seasons and the honouring of deities. The emphasis given to specific festivals and to aspects of the same festival will vary from region to region. Individuals attend festivals for many reasons: to honour the deity, as an opportunity to seek guidance and practical help from the deity, to share in what is after all a performance, and to be part of a family and community gathering.

In a temple-based festival or one held to honour a deity revered as the protector of the town or village, the climax of the festival is likely to be a public procession bearing the *murti* (image) of the deity through the streets. The reason for moving the deity will vary according to local myths and legends (*narrative or mythic dimension*). If the festival is not temple-based but still centres upon *puja*, celebrations begin when preparations are made to receive and install the *murti* of the appropriate deity in the home or on the street. Communal worship is by no means confined to temples. For some time prior to the festival, local craftsmen will have devoted considerable time to the manufacture of the *murti* of the deity or deities to be honoured (Figure 16). These craftsmen normally belong to particular castes and are likely to live and work in close proximity to one another. Much of their livelihood for the year may depend upon supplying the *murti* necessary to celebrate the most popular festival in their region. Nowadays, many of these craftsmen also service the tourist industry. There can't be many tourists who have visited India and not come away with an image of a Hindu deity. Hindus who wish to purchase a *murti* often collaborate in family, caste, occupational and neighbourhood groups to buy a suitable image. The collaborative purchase of festival *murti* is an opportunity for competition between groups determined to display the most elaborate image and build the best decorated *pandal*, the platform which bears and screens the image of the deity (*social and institutional dimension*).



Photo: Gwilym Beckerlegge

Figure 16 Urban craftsman painting image of a deity, Gol Park, Calcutta

During the course of the festival, *puja* is offered to the appropriate deities, and there may be rituals carried out separately according to the age and sex of the participants. At the end of the festival, the *murti* is carried in a carnival-like procession through the streets before being returned to the water from where the clay out of which it was made was taken. The celebration is likely to involve some serious music-making, the throwing of coloured powder over friends and passers-by for good luck, and dancing by men and boys. The side of a village pond, the seashore or the banks of one of India's great rivers is the place from which the celebrants return home and so to everyday life.

**Durga Puja** is one name for a festival that is celebrated under different names, **Navratri** and **Dasshera** being the most common, and with different shades of meaning across India. In contemporary India popular festivals are often marked by state holidays. In Bengal the great festival of **Durga Puja**, which falls at the end of the monsoon season, is one such occasion for a vast public celebration. Although some families in the city take advantage of the festival holiday in order to visit family homes in the countryside, for many it would be unthinkable to leave Calcutta and miss the vast, public celebration of this festival. The growth of urban centres like Calcutta has provided new arenas for public worship, and has stimulated the traditional crafts involved in supplying the images and other materials necessary for the celebration of the festival.

### Exercise 18

Please read the account of '**Durga Puja** in Calcutta' by Jaya Chaliha and Bunny Gupta, attached below. It refers to locations in Calcutta that are likely to be unfamiliar to you, but you will find that most of the references to Bengali Hindu culture are explained. Use the reading to get some sense and feel of the occasion of the festival. Then from this account of **Durga Puja** and from this course, identify examples of the way in which the celebration of **Durga Puja** defies being placed in one separate category that might be labelled 'religion'.

A7: Chaudhuri, S. (ed.) (1990) *Calcutta: The Living City, Volume II: The Present and The Future*, pp.331–3, 335–6, Oxford University Press, New Delhi. Reading A7: Jaya Chaliha and Bunny Gupta, ‘[Durga Puja in Calcutta](#)’”

Hide discussion

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## Discussion

The festival has been transformed from being a festival in honour of [Durga](#), which originally was celebrated privately within the confines of a few wealthy families, to being a popular festival of the masses widely celebrated as a public holiday. In the process [Durga Puja](#) has picked up overtones and elements that have as little to do with its original form, as has Father Christmas with the Christian celebration of Christmas, but which would now be equally difficult to dislodge. It is a heavily commercialised event with shops advertising their [Durga Puja](#) sales, and its celebration draws in both Indian popular music and Indian cinema. The festival has been a vehicle for the expression of nationalist and other political sentiments and for many is a symbol of their citizenship of Calcutta. The construction of [pandals](#) and the purchase of [murti](#) are very much linked with community pride and status. The festival thus illustrates the workings of the Hindu social system. This is evident in the roles performed by those who organise the celebration of the festival and the functions performed by castes whose traditional livelihoods are partly dependent upon preparing for the festival and carrying out the necessary rituals. Commerce, politics, citizenship are as much a part of [Durga Puja](#) as is worship of the Mother Goddess, [Durga](#).

Our brief exposure to Hinduism in Calcutta has revealed a number of things about the nature of Hinduism that have implications for the use of the term ‘religion’. Working with the title of Hinduism and accepting it as a ‘religion’, we have discovered a tradition whose followers are created by birth. Membership of Hinduism, the ‘religion’, and of Hindu society are one and the same. We have also seen that the artificial mould of ‘Hinduism’ contains such a variety of beliefs and practices that it makes defining Hinduism in terms of universally accepted beliefs and practices virtually impossible. Even the most visible and popular practices and beliefs tied to [puja](#) are immensely varied, directed to different deities, and are not common to all Hindus. For some Hindus, however, their sense of living in a world of many ‘religions’ has led them to set out the principles of Hinduism in a more systematic way.

## 8.8 Hinduism as ‘a world religion’: a more recent understanding

Traditionally, as we have seen, a Hindu was someone born to Hindu parents and into a caste with its appropriate [dharma](#). The link between religious practice and a whole way of life bound the individual into a community from birth. Regional factors, parentage and caste affiliation largely determined the particular style of religious belief and practice adopted by individual Hindus. It has proved difficult, because of this, for individuals to detach a religious dimension



that could be changed without sacrificing membership of their community. The assumption that birth provides the entry point into a religious identity is by no means confined to Hinduism. Orthodox Jewish identity, for example, is generally established through the mother. Although Orthodox Jewish communities admit converts, Orthodox Jews historically have not set out to seek them, unlike, for example, Christianity and Islam.

During the last two centuries, some Hindu thinkers have developed a rather different understanding of the Hindu tradition. They have encouraged its redefinition not just as 'a religion' but as a 'world religion' and as something distinct from Hindu culture in its broadest sense. During the nineteenth century several prominent Hindu religious leaders and intellectuals travelled to the West, where they defended their religious heritage in response to criticisms by Christian missionaries. They were also able to talk about the nature of Hinduism with interested audiences. These Hindus, largely from Bengal and exposed to Western influence in Calcutta, found that 'What is Hinduism?' was a question that non-Hindu audiences wanted to have answered in a way that would be intelligible in terms of Western, and thus largely Christian, notions of 'religion'.

It has been claimed that it was [Swami Vivekananda](#), a nineteenth-century Bengali religious teacher, who presented 'Hinduism for the first time to the world as a universal faith' and so 'raised Hinduism to the status of a world religion in the outside world' (Weightman, 1984, p. 231). Vivekananda (*svamin* or '[Swami](#)' is a religious title) was responsible for creating an organisation called the [Ramakrishna Math and Mission](#). [Ramakrishna](#) was Vivekananda's spiritual teacher and, you may remember, the temple at Dakshineswar is visited by worshippers today partly because [Ramakrishna](#) spent much of his life there ([Section 8.5](#)). The [Ramakrishna Math and Mission](#) is committed to the promotion of practical service to humanity and a philosophy of a universal religion. The Math is its monastic wing and the Mission is made up of lay supporters. The Movement today has more than 120 branches worldwide, including one in Britain, although the greatest number are to be found in India. Its headquarters, Belur Math, established in 1898, lies across the Ganges from the city of Calcutta. Vivekananda recognised the seeds of a universal religion in all religions but believed that the signs of this were most apparent in certain strands within Hinduism. The impact of presenting Hinduism in this way is evident today. It comes through in the way in which British Hindus interviewed by John Bowker speak of 'all religions blending into one' and of the same basic elements in all religions.

The architectural style and the symbolism from a number of religions have been incorporated into the design of the temple at Belur Math, the headquarters of the [Ramakrishna Math and Mission](#), as a way of conveying the 'universal faith' in which the movement believes. This is a prime example of the importance of the *material dimension* of religion. The main entrance of the temple, which was dedicated in 1938, has a façade influenced by Buddhist architectural style. The structure which rises over the entrance is modelled on the Hindu temples of south India with their lofty towers. The windows and balconies inside the temple draw upon the Rajput (Hindu) and Mughal (Islamic) styles of north India. The central dome is derived from

European architecture of the Renaissance period, while the ground plan of the interior gives the impression of a Christian cross. The differences between the design of Belur Math and the more typical Hindu temples at [Kalighat](#) and Dakshineswar and the symbols they use are deliberate and tell us a lot about what kind of Hinduism they represent.

Vivekananda spent four years in the United States and Western Europe touring and lecturing. By the time he created the Ramakrishna Math and Mission on his return to India in 1897, his message had already been widely heard. Most of those who heard him speak were not Hindus by birth, but many were dissatisfied with the Christianity of the [churches](#). They still clung to the hope of finding a religion that would satisfy them. During two visits to the West before his death in 1902, Vivekananda founded a number of societies dedicated to the study of Hindu religious philosophy, and accepted Americans and Europeans into both the lay and monastic wings of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. From this time on, at least certain aspects of Hinduism would no longer be open only to those born as Hindus and into membership of a caste.

The growth in the number of Hindu groups that define their 'membership' very differently from earlier Hindu notions of a way of life resulting from birth into a caste has been a feature of the development of Hinduism during the last century. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission is one Hindu group with this wider 'membership'. Another internationally known example is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON – popularly known as the 'Hare Krishnas'), which has adopted a more active missionary strategy in the attempt to make converts from those not born into Hindu families. ISKCON has been active in Britain since the late 1960s. Its members, sometimes dressed in saffron robes, might have approached you on the streets. Whether the 'converts' gathered by such movements can really be counted as Hindus has been questioned both by other Hindus outside these organisations and by some scholars who continue to emphasise the earlier notion of Hindu identity being conferred through birth.

Having to explain the nature of their beliefs on a world stage has unquestionably affected the way in which many prominent Hindu teachers and scholars have defined their understanding of Hinduism. This relatively recent way of explaining Hinduism shows an awareness of what the English-speaking world understands by 'religion' and a tendency to explain Hinduism in these terms. This has become more pronounced in the writings of many twentieth-century Hindu thinkers and Indian philosophers, in the way in which practising Hindus talk about their beliefs, and in the novel acceptance of an expanded global 'membership' by certain Hindu groups. These tendencies should not overshadow the greater part of the vibrant, living Hindu tradition which lacks such clearly defined boundaries.

## 9 Conclusion

I hope that this more extended study of religion in context has been interesting in itself and that you have glimpsed something of the richness of Hinduism. We have made this brief study of Hinduism also to put to work some of the principles in the study of religion that we met earlier

in this course. I want finally to draw some threads together by considering more generally the problems and pitfalls of using the concept of 'religion' in a cross-cultural study.

Applying what we had discovered in [Section 5](#) about the term 'religion', we tried to avoid plunging into our study of Hinduism assuming that we knew what a 'religion' should look like. We began by noting that the concept of 'Hinduism' is a European invention and that its use creates its own complications. Turning to what Hindus say about their own beliefs, we found that some Hindu thinkers have identified the Sanskrit concept of *dharmā* as one sharing the general sense of the English use of 'religion'. These thinkers have maintained, however, that *dharmā*, due to its social and moral overtones, is the broader concept. This understanding of *dharmā* would appear to imply that 'religion' is not a distinct compartment in the total package of an individual's beliefs and practices. We heard some Hindus say that Hinduism is not so much a 'religion' as 'a way of life'.

We need to look more closely at the distinction between 'religion' and 'way of life' because few people who identify themselves as religious would be satisfied with the suggestion that religion was anything less than a whole way of life. In the video a Muslim speaking from the perspective of a faith very different from Hinduism, also rejected the label 'religion' as a satisfactory way of explaining the nature of Islam. He referred instead to the Arabic *dīn*, a 'way of life'. No doubt Christians would also reject any suggestion that their religion was less than a 'way of life'.

In drawing their distinctions between 'religion' and 'way of life', it is possible that those who reject 'religion' in favour of 'way of life' have in mind the manner in which religion in Europe (and in other parts of the world, for that matter) has become increasingly a matter of private belief and morality seen most obviously and distinctively in the public sphere only on set occasions. I think we would recognise this as an accurate description of the place of religion in mainstream, contemporary British society. When addressing Western audiences, Hindu thinkers who have spoken of Hinduism as a 'way of life' rather than as a 'religion' may also have in mind the Christian emphasis upon 'right belief' – orthodoxy – and the resulting tendency to see religion as a matter of belief. Even from our limited survey of Hinduism and its rich variety, we can appreciate that what has come to be known as Hinduism is characterised not by 'orthodoxy' in the details of belief, but rather by broadly shared assumptions and practices bound together in a distinctive social organisation.

Given the new notions that became progressively attached to the terms 'religion' and 'the religions' in European thought from the eighteenth century onwards, we can push our analysis of the problems encountered when using these terms a stage further. These new notions, you will remember, were themselves shaped under the influence of rationalist and secularising tendencies. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that we meet particular problems when applying these terms in cultural contexts where what we seek to define as 'religion' runs through all aspects of life and through social organisations and institutions, rather than standing apart as a separate, visible element as religion tends to do in surroundings that are more generally

secular. It is true that India has a secular constitution but, to date, the obligations of Hindu *dharma* continue to be discharged on a daily basis by millions of individuals in all aspects of their lives – for example, in the way in which they wash and in their occupations.

So, should we abandon the term 'religion'? I would not draw this conclusion, partly because this would probably signal the hunt for a concept to replace 'religion' which would lead us back to exactly the same problems. Terms like 'faith', 'tradition', 'worldview', 'meaning-system', 'moral community' and 'symbolic community' are all to be found in scholarly writing, but it is difficult to see how these will help us any better to achieve the right balance between being specific and yet flexible when dealing with different cultural contexts. As I tried to show you when we looked at Hindu worship, I think what we need to do is to find definitions and models of 'religion' that can pass the test of working in the study of different cultures. So, I would say, let's keep the term 'religion', but make sure that we use it with care and with particular sensitivity when studying societies that have not had a hand in shaping the definition of this peculiarly European concept. If you disagree with this conclusion, you might like to make out a case for using a different concept. You now have a grounding in the skills and knowledge you will need to do that – to do Religious Studies.

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