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Religion today: Themes and issues

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Introduction

There is a widespread perception in the West that we live in a secular age, an age in which religion is at best an optional extra, if not a false delusion completely out of place. However, religion still arouses passion and causes controversy; it controls and transforms lives. An informed understanding of the contemporary world thus requires an appreciation of the role of religion in shaping ideas, world-views and actions that have an impact on the social as well as on the personal life of the individual. This course gives you a glimpse into this fascinating area.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- show an awareness of the key themes and debates in the field of religious studies

- understand that religions have different, and sometimes contrasting, ways to present their beliefs and practices, and that the beliefs and practices of one religion are represented differently by others

- understand that different media are used to represent and present religions.

1 Considering the issues

1.1 What are the issues?

Some themes recur when we start to think about religion. These include issues of continuity and change, representation, differing perspectives, authority, community and identity. In this course we start to consider some of them in detail.

The full list of themes and issues considered in this section are:

- Continuity and change

- Representation

- The Victoria and Albert Museum 'Sacred Spaces' exhibition of 2000

- Differing perspectives

- Sources of authority

- Language

- Religion and spririituality

- Community and identity

- Religion and the individual

1.2 Continuity and change

Religions generally go to a great deal of trouble to stress how consistent, how changeless, how solid they are, but change is, in fact, an observable and constant factor in religion. At a personal level, for example, older Catholics who grew up having to eat fish on Friday and 'knowing' that cremation was forbidden to them are aware of that. Such 'unchanging certainties' have changed a great deal over the years. It is therefore useful to look both at how a religion develops over time and/or in different milieus. We can learn a lot by seeing what remains constant and what changes over time, what it is thought necessary to maintain in a new situation, and what can be compromised upon. What works when a religion is the dominant force in society (as, for example, in Christian or Islamic theocracies) has to be reappraised in the context of religious pluralism, communism or civil society.

Continuity is often stressed or implied by an appeal to 'tradition', but tradition is not the unambiguous edifice it is frequently made to appear, and is not constant. Indeed, we repeatedly have to ask: what tradition, whose tradition, when and where was this tradition established? In the realm of *sharia* or Islamic law, for example, despite certain guiding principles, different schools of law and interpretation have developed in different places, at different times. There is thus not one monolithic, universally applicable set of rules – there is no single tradition. Writing of contemporary conservative Jews, the religious studies scholar Paul Morris notes that 'the calls for a return to the timeless ways of traditional Judaism usually require a return to the early or mid-nineteenth century' (Morris, 1996, p.225). Tradition is thus a flexible concept that can be pressed into service to

legitimize any number of ideas, practices and lifestyles. As the American folklorist Henry Glassie cautions, 'tradition is the creation of the future out of the past', and history 'is an artful assembly of materials from the past, designed for usefulness in the future' (Glassie, 1995, p.395). Nevertheless, the concept of tradition as constant and changeless (which some take to mean *unchangeable*) is of great importance to many believers, and raises many complex issues when religion is faced with change, either internally or externally.

1.3 Representation

Representation is a complex idea, or set of ideas, but it is extremely important in relation to studying religion. Representing religion might mean being an official delegate of a religion, or it might mean trying to explain a religion to someone unfamiliar with it. Representation in the religious context might mean the use of an image to portray a divine figure or religious ideas, or it could refer to how a religion is characterized by either insiders or outsiders. Therefore, the sorts of question we need to be asking in relation to representation in the context of religion today are:

- What is being represented?

- What means (texts, web sites, film, symbols, rhetoric) are being used?

- Who is doing the representing and who is being represented?

- Are they insiders or outsiders, scholars or co-religionists, authority figures or ordinary members?

- How representative is this characterization?

- Is a majority view necessarily more representative than a minority one?

- What message is sent by a particular representation?

- What consequences do representations of religion have, both positively and negatively, in religious terms and in the broader context of society and politics?

In considering representation, we need to bear in mind the fact of diversity *within* religions as well as *between* religions. Diversity within particular religions can be so great that different groups within the same faith tradition would represent it in extremely different ways. Catholic and Protestant Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists, each have very different perspectives on their traditions from their theoretical co-religionists, for example. Moreover, members of one religious group frequently represent or characterize other groups, religions, traditions or cultures in a partial or actively misleading way. The way that a religion represents itself to its own members and to the outside world need not be the same.

It need hardly be pointed out that issues of representation can have extremely serious consequences. The representation of Jews as 'Christ-killers', or the outrageous 'blood libel legend' which emerged in twelfth-century Europe that Jews murder Christian children and use the blood for ritual purposes, have persisted with disastrous anti-Semitic consequences. History is littered with tragic examples of conflicts in which groups representing themselves as agents of the divine justify extreme violence and acts of inhumanity against those characterized as enemies of the divine. Immensely varied new religious movements are often all demonized as 'brain-washing cults' by the anti-cult movement (ACM), and Muslims (regardless of their actual theological and geographical diversity) are regularly characterized in some sectors of the western media as uniformly dangerous, violent fundamentalists.

Representations of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana* on Indian television in the 1980s, for instance, had a profound effect, not simply on popular devotion but on the rise of right-wing Hindu political organizations. Material culture (e.g. pictures, costume, food, buildings, symbols, artefacts) has an important role in expressing and maintaining faith traditions and also provides a variety of representations. However, the extent to which the richness and complexity of a belief system can be represented or grasped through religious artefacts is something that is considered later in this course, when we examine some of the issues and controversies raised by the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art. You will see footage of this museum later in the course.

1.4 The Victoria and Albert Museum's 'Sacred Spaces' exhibition

Some of these issues of representation were addressed indirectly by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2000, when an exhibition called 'Sacred Spaces' was mounted in conjunction with religious communities. The idea was to invite groups from different faith traditions to relate artefacts in the museum to their contemporary religious life. In practice, this had various unforeseen consequences.

The Jewish group photographed some of the objects in the museum, and then photographed similar objects being used in their synagogue. One of the Christian groups to participate was a flourishing Pentecostal Apostolic congregation, which provided photographic scenes of their vibrant church life, including worship (indicating the importance of music in this), a total immersion adult baptism and a wedding. However, for this group the Christian artefacts held by the museum – largely medieval western Catholic art and images – had no particular resonance and could not be directly related to its lived experience of Christianity. Meanwhile, after a group of Chinese Buddhists pulled out, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), a group founded in 1968 with the specific aim of making Buddhism meaningful for a western population and keen to promote its teachings, offered to represent Buddhism. The exhibition organizer received complaints about the appropriateness of the form of Buddhism being represented by this group, and there were claims that the FWBO was a cult and should therefore not be given publicity.

Very much in the spirit of the original project, the FWBO group interacted creatively with an artefact in the museum context by setting up a richly decorated three-tiered altar in front of a display case containing a twelfth-century Chinese painted wooden statue of Guan Yin, *Bodhisattva* of Compassion (Figure 1).(Guan Yin is also known by the name of Kuan Yin.)

This both restored the statue's original function and demonstrated how such images are still treated in a devotional manner. On the top shelf of the altar was an empty wooden bowl between two gold candles, while on the bottom shelf there was another wooden bowl containing paper flowers. A sign invited visitors who wished 'to make an offering to this shrine' to place in the top bowl a flower taken from the bottom bowl. Some of the curatorial staff were unhappy about the setting up of the altar, considering the museum an inappropriate context for this, despite being aware of the statue's original devotional purpose. This can be contrasted with the situation in some Indian museums, where statues of the Buddha and deities that are exhibits are nevertheless treated with great devotion, and flowers are left in front of them by visitors. To state the obvious, then, ideas of appropriate behaviour in relation to devotional objects vary according to context, and what is being represented by and to whom.

Figure 1 The installation of a shrine to Guan Yin in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: Eithne Nightingale.

1.5 Differing perspectives

Closely related to representation of religion is the recurring issue of differing perspectives. In talking about perspectives here, we are thinking about *how* we look at something. We rarely approach anything neutrally – either consciously or subconsciously we tend to adopt a particular perspective – and how we look at something affects what we see. Whenever we make assumptions, we impose them on events, phenomena and other people. This is as true for scholars examining religion as for individuals encountering it personally.

Religion provides a world-view, a way of seeing the world and interacting with it. How you see the world – as God's everlasting creation, as an illusion, as inherently sacred, as a finite resource for humanity's use – will naturally affect how you treat it. How you see your role in the world – to honour the earth as goddess, to establish God's kingdom, to attain personal enrichment, to achieve enlightenment – will affect how you act. What you perceive will happen after you die, what you believe happened before you were born, will colour how you conduct yourself and interpret events in this life. One of the strongest arguments for the study of contemporary religion is that it helps us to understand how different people see the world and why they act accordingly.

Think of what perspectives would affect the way you or others might see something, or would make people seeing the same thing have different impressions of what is going on. What a religious person might regard as a miraculous cure from cancer, an atheist might simply call spontaneous remission; whatever you call it, there may be no obvious explanation, but different perspectives will dictate different analyses. Gender is one obvious factor that influences how religion is both presented and perceived. For example, one of the Ten Commandments in the Judaeo-Christian tradition admonishes 'Do not covet your neighbour's household: you must not covet your neighbour's wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his donkey or anything that belongs to him' (Exodus 20:16, Revised English Bible, Oxford: Oxford University Press/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). What are women to make of this? If this commandment does not apply to them, what about the others? The feminist call for women's experience and points of view to provide a different lens through which the past and contemporary practice of religion might be viewed is also worth considering.

If you belong to a minority group, your perspective might well differ from mainstream society – for example, native Americans tend not to view Columbus Day (US public holiday that celebrates the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the New World) celebrations in the same way as many Americans of European ancestry. What is deemed appropriate can vary according to cultural perspective. In the Japanese context, the Good Samaritan described in the Christian Bible was extremely thoughtless, for by helping anonymously he left the man he helped with a huge debt of obligation which the latter was unable to discharge. One of the most difficult aspects of studying religion is the extent to which it is possible to disentangle cultural tradition, and its concomitant rules of appropriate behaviour, from religion. This is all the more difficult in situations of cultural and religious pluralism, where a variety of cultural and religious norms are operating in the same context. A common human trait is to assume that one's own perspective is self-evidently right or normative. Thus, principles that some deem universal, such as gender equality or human rights, can from a different perspective be regarded as culturally or religiously construed and contestable.

1.6 Sources of authority

A very useful way of gaining insight into a religion and seeing how it works is to examine its sources of authority: for example, whether authority is vested in scriptures, in religious specialists, in tradition, in personal experience or a combination of these. Even in traditions where there is some agreement on what counts as an authoritative text, there are still contested issues of how that text is to be interpreted, by whom, with what degree of literalness and in what context. Similarly, even where traditions have authoritative leaders or revered lineages of teachers, personal inclinations, experiences and circumstances will temper individual behaviour. What counts as authoritative might change over time or in different settings, as in the case of Buddhism in the West or of Christianity under different political regimes, as, for example, in the contexts of Poland and East Germany.

1.7 Language

Language is frequently a knotty problem in religion. As religions and religious ideas move from their place of origin to other cultures, either the new recipients have to learn the language of origin (Hebrew, Japanese, Sanskrit) or it has to be translated, in the course of which new interpretations, nuances or simply mistakes creep in. The majority of the new audience are thus at the mercy of the translators and interpreters, being unable to read or understand the original for themselves. This is true for western adherents of different forms of Buddhism or Hindu-derived groups, but is also of significance in Celtic spirituality. Sometimes it is decided that a term, a name or a phrase just cannot be translated and must remain in the original language; this can lead to its having high status, but also to individuals arriving at their own culture-specific interpretation of precisely what is meant. Exclusive or excluding language can affect religious perceptions and practices, as we see, for example, in relation to the predominantly male-oriented language of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Language can also pose problems in the *study* of religion, as the same term turns up in various contexts with subtly, or indeed considerably, different meanings. Polysemy - the existence of several meanings in a single word – is something of an occupational hazard in religious studies, particularly in this pluralistic age. The western 'New Age' understanding of *karma* is one such example. *Karma* is based on the idea that every action has a reaction, and is linked with the idea of reincarnation. Thus, it is believed that what a person does in one life may influence what happens in another life. However, its everyday use does not always accord with centuries of Indian philosophical speculation; 'magic' is also used and understood in a variety of ways. A term like 'evangelical', which has a 'technical', theological meaning, can also be used by a particular Christian group as a means of self-identification, and is now also being employed generally in a third and much looser sense in connection with *any* type of proselytizing group, such as the Soka Gakkai Buddhist group. Similarly, 'charisma' is a term with multiple meanings. In Christianity, charisma is the gift of grace, which is said to possess certain people under particular circumstances (such as when a priest performs eucharistic rituals). In sociology, charisma refers to the kind of authority claimed by someone who is religiously gifted and who may challenge traditional forms of religion. A more common dictionary definition of the term, however, and the more popular understanding, is that charisma is the ability to inspire others with devotion or enthusiasm. Context is the key to identifying polysemy and understanding what is meant on a particular occasion.

1.8 Religion and spirituality

A good example of polysemy can be found in the different ways in which people regard the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality', and this is the subject of the first exercise below.

Exercise

Give some thought for a moment to the words 'religion' and 'spirituality'. What do you understand by these terms? Is there any difference between them? If so, in what way are they different and why? How much depends on your *perception* of religion (positive or negative) and your *perception* of spirituality (positive or negative)?

In the latter part of the twentieth century some people came to prefer the term 'spirituality' to religion, and started to use spirituality to denote a particular understanding of religious and spiritual matters. For many people in the West, 'religion' became a term with negative connotations – institutionalized, hierarchical, patriarchal, oppressive, 'out of touch', worldly – that is to say, whatever they disliked or disapproved of in their experience or perception of 'conventional' religion. Spirituality, by comparison, became a positive term, perceived as a personal, intuitive, experiential involvement with the divine or supernatural. So, spirituality is thought of by some people as 'purer' than religion. Increasingly, people voice such sentiments as 'you can be religious without being spiritual, and spiritual without being religious', or 'religion is about boundaries; spirituality is about lack of boundaries'. Spirituality has thus become a word with a number of meanings, appropriated both by those who are within or on the peripheries of an identifiable religion (such as Christianity) and those who, although non-aligned (i.e. not formally attached to any particular religious group), perceive themselves to be 'spiritual' or involved in spiritual activity by virtue of their world-views and lifestyles.

There are, of course, a great many people for whom religion continues to have very positive connotations, and who would regard the idea of spirituality divorced from religion as puzzling, if not absurd. You simply need to be aware of the different uses and understandings of these terms, and how they are employed in particular contexts.

1.9 Community and identity

In an Italian exhibition of cartoons on the theme of globalization (reported in the *Financial Times* (Lloyd, 2000)), one depicted two women sitting on a couch. The first woman explains enthusiastically 'Thanks to globalisation, we know immediately what's happening all over the planet!'; the other, crying, says 'I just want the gossip from next door!' This was interpreted as a longing for a previous era of emotionally and physically closer communities. The reality of such 'good old days' might be questioned, but it is a powerful image. As Paul Morris comments: 'Everyone, but everyone, is for community. Our politicians, of the old and the new, Left and Right; our political philosophers; our religious leaders; our modern and postmodern theorists appear to share little but their pious promotion of 'community' (Morris, 1996, p.223).

Religion has traditionally formed and sustained communities in a variety of ways, providing groups of people with common vision and values, purpose and precepts. In addition, religious organizations often sustain community life in a practical manner,

through the provision of food, medical care and education as well as overtly 'spiritual' services. However, just as religion can be a divisive as well as a cohesive force in society, being part of a religious community can bring problems as well as advantages, as conflicts in the Balkans and elsewhere have so vividly demonstrated. Community involves ideas of being part of a group, but that also means there are others who do not belong, insiders and outsiders, us and them. Nevertheless, one of the great attractions of religion, now as in the past, is that it provides a person with a community, and enables someone to belong.

As religion in the West has become very much a matter of personal decision, with a huge variety of choice, people becoming Buddhists, Wiccans or Druids are forming new communities. In so doing, they are exercising 'elective affinity' – choosing the community to which they belong. The idea of community (and by extension the religious community) has often had connotations of physical proximity – the extended family, the neighbour-hood, the tribe, the village, the town – although it can emanate out to the nation in either a geographical or ethnic sense. In the world of global religion, moreover, the religious community can be multinational or, in the case of religion on the Internet, supranational. A co-religionist in another country can be part of a person's community, while a neighbour is not. The relationship between religion and community is therefore complex and varies considerably according to context.

Morris proposes two different models of community, drawn from the Christian and Jewish tradition: 'communities of assent' and 'communities of descent' (Morris, 1996, pp.238–45). In communities of descent, the individual belongs to a community by virtue of being born into it, as in Judaism or Hinduism. Morris claims that 'descent communities are inherently pluralistic as identity does not depend on ideology but is vouchsafed by descent' (Morris, 1996, p.238). By contrast, communities of assent are voluntary associations, and missionary in outlook:

> Such communities are by their very nature cross-cultural and assent is neatly packaged (Christian doctrines, dogmas and creeds; the Five Pillars of Islam; the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path) to facilitate expansion into different cultural contexts. The communities of assent replace familial relations with metaphorical brothers, mothers, sisters and fathers. … Most importantly, identity *is* dependent on assent to the foundational truths and/or doctrines. This focus on assent renders this model of community fanatically anti-pluralistic and intolerant of heretics.
>
> (Morris, 1996, p.239)

Communities of assent are being formed all over the world, in very different ways. However, Morris cautions, 'new communities of descent are always being formed' (Morris, 1996, p.245). Thus, although Christianity and Islam started out as communities of assent, in many places they became, to all intents and purposes, communities of descent. The idea of a 'Christian country' or a 'Muslim state' is at odds with elective affinity and with assent. However, over time, being Russian became synonymous with being Orthodox, being Polish became synonymous with being Catholic; being Saudi with being Muslim, being Swedish with being Lutheran, and so on.

Personal, national and religious identity are in many cases intertwined. Through religion one can gain, assert, reinforce and indeed change identity. Self-identification as a Christian, a witch, a Buddhist or a practitioner of Celtic spirituality can not only be a personally empowering experience, but also give someone a new history and a new community.

1.10 Religion and the individual

How formal or informal, how personal or impersonal, how loose or how tight, how casual or demanding the religious community is will depend on the form of religion, the extent to which it is enforced and the level of the individual's commitment to it. It is worth remembering that just as people have certain expectations of religion, religions tend to have certain expectations of adherents. The sociologists Rodney Stark and Charles Glock (1968) have argued that although religious organizations differ, they all expect adherents to display some commitment in the following ways: belief, practice, experience, knowledge and consequences (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, pp.9–10). Briefly, the belief dimension of commitment consists of the expectation that the religious person will accept certain doctrines as true, while the practice dimension includes acts of worship and devotion directed towards the supernatural/object of belief. Practice is subdivided into ritual practices (formal ceremonies, rites etc., often done in public) and devotional practices (informal, often spontaneous, frequently done in private). The experience dimension involves contact with, or experience of, the supernatural/object of belief, while the knowledge dimension indicates that people are expected to know and understand central elements of their religious culture. The final category here relates to the consequences of commitment, the way in which religious commitment must affect and be expressed in everyday life, or even, we might say, the demand that the whole of everyday life is lived in a particular way as a consequence of religious commitment.

I have lost count of how many times converts or adherents to such varied belief systems as Paganism, Islam, Buddhism and Jehovah's Witnesses have said to me, 'It isn't a religion, it's a way of life.' That speaks volumes about a previously very impoverished understanding of religion – but a very common, modern western one – which regarded religion purely as an added extra, something somehow divorced from 'real life'. It is perfectly natural (many believers would say necessary) for religion to permeate every aspect of the individual's life, as religion can have an impact on what people eat, how they dress, with whom they socialize, what is owned and how resources are used, how the individual acts in and interacts with the world. Although these dimensions may apply more easily to more traditional, 'pre-packaged' forms of religion, as opposed to the looser, 'pick your own' varieties, it is worth bearing them in mind as you watch the upcoming video. This course is very much concerned with individuals as well as institutions, and we trust you will get a feel for the impact that religion has on the lives of adherents, while remembering that individuals shape religion as well as being shaped by it.

Let us now turn to consider practical examples of differing perspectives on religion.

2 Engaging with the issues

2.1 New perspectives

The purpose of studying religion is to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange.

People come to the study of religion for many reasons, most of which are so obvious as to not require explication. What I want to draw to your attention is the idea of *altered perception* implicit in the quote at the top of this page. One of the primary goals in the scholarly study of religion is to encourage you to view the subject from perspectives not your own, and to study religions that are less familiar to you, in cultural and social contexts that you may not have lived in or experienced. We feel sure that you will find this a rewarding, if at tiles challenging, exercise. Ninian Smart, a well-known figure in the field of Religious Studies, has put the same idea well, in the narrower context of Christianity: 'The beginning of understanding it is noticing its strangeness' (Smart, 1979, p.312).

2.2 Insider/outsider perspectives

Social historians have long argued that we must study history 'from the underside', if we want to thoroughly understand a society. In other words, it is not sufficient to have a top-down knowledge of a society's institutions and politics. We need also to examine how ordinary, 'unimportant' people operate within a culture: what influences them and what they can (and cannot) influence; how they see their role in society and how others see it. The outsider view is the view from the outside: the perspective of the (theoretically) dispassionate observer whose observation does not influence the observed. This can be called the academic view. In the academic discipline of Religious Studies, it is sometimes called the *etic* perspective. The insider view is that of the practitioners, the people who are engaged in and more or less committed to the group or society in which they move. In Religious Studies, the view from the inside, the perspective of the practitioners, is called the *emic* perspective. This is a central distinction in the study of religion. The Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith goes so far as to say that no statement made about religion can be considered valid unless an insider would agree with it.

Exercise

At this point, please click on 'View document' below to read 'Body ritual among the Nacirema' by Horace Miner.

View document

Please make sure that you read the text and think about the questions below before reading on in this course, because I don't want to give away the plot! (As with all the exercises, I want to stress that you may read a text quite differently from members of the course team, and that alternative responses are possible, and perfectly feasible.)

1   Ask yourself what this text contributes to your understanding of the insider/ outsider dynamic.

2   Why might practitioners of this ritual feel misrepresented and misunderstood, and are their objections valid?

3   Can you think of another example of the outsider view making the familiar seem very strange indeed?

At some point in your reading, it probably became obvious to you that this was a spoof, a parody of American personal hygiene, with certain key words spelled backwards or slightly distorted to make recognition less immediate.

1   My answer would be that the example chosen in this text makes immediate the problems inherent in studying religion. The outsider, who in this example sees the bathroom shrines and has the activities carried out therein described to him, is never actually present when they are performed. He tries to put together a coherent and all-encompassing set of explanatory devices, but we as readers see that his scheme is fatally flawed, because he is so much of an outsider that he cannot understand that the motivation for these activities is not ritual propitiation of the gods, but a concern (some might say obsession) with bodily hygiene and outward appearance. In a very real sense, the outsider is never where the action is, because that is with the participants. The insiders he describes are silent. We never hear their explanations for their behaviour, or their probably indignant rebuttal of his views. On the other hand, we who share many of these ritual behaviours with the Nacirema, may have been jolted out of our complacency by some of Miner's remarks. The insider may know exactly why he is carrying out a certain practice, but may not realize how profoundly difficult it is to distance oneself from activities or beliefs that one is personally committed to. I expect that most readers identified to a certain extent with the discomfort experienced by practitioners when 'studied' by an outsider who clearly lacks sympathy with their world-view. Is it that the outsider cannot really understand? Or are we insiders stranger than we realize?

2   One response would be that the outsider, in his attempt to describe what he does not fully understand or have any sympathy with, unintentionally distorts it in line with his own interests. This fictional anthropologist is clearly interested in ritual actions; another anthropologist, who was interested in (for example) explanatory devices or myths of origin, might have painted a picture of the same group that made them appear completely different. As to validity, there are arguments in both directions: the practitioners presumably understand their practice better than he observer, but they may be operating in a mode sometimes called 'world-taken-for-granted', where they have never really thought about or examined their beliefs and actions. In addition, insiders may unconsciously or deliberately misrepresent their beliefs and practices in order to make them more acceptable to scrutiny.

3   I hope you tried to think up your own example. Here is one from David Lodge's novel, *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965), where a frustrated Roman Catholic husband is thinking etically about his experiences with the rhythm method of birth control: 'he mentally composed a short article, '*Catholicism, Roman*', for a Martian enyclopaedia compiled after life on earth had been destroyed by atomic warfare'.

Roman Catholicism was, according to archaeological evidence, distributed fairly widely over the planet Earth in the twentieth century. As far as the Western Hemisphere is concerned, it appears to have been characterized by a complex system of sexual taboos and rituals. Intercourse between married partners was restricted to certain limited periods determined by the calendar and the body-temperature of the female. Martian archaeologists have learned to identify the domiciles of Roman Catholics by the presence of large numbers

of complicated graphs, calendars, small booklets full of figures, and quantities of broken thermometers, evidence of the great importance attached to this code. Some scholars have argued that it was merely a method of limiting the number of offspring; but as it has been conclusively proved that the Roman Catholics produced more children on the average than any other section of the community, this seems untenable. Other doctrines of the Roman Catholics included a belief in a Divine Redeemer and a life after death.

(Lodge, 1981 edn, pp.11–12)

While Lodge is pushing one aspect of Catholic custom to an extreme in order to make a humorous point, the dispassionate language of the text is a voice that is probably familiar to you. Academic religious studies scholars have traditionally adopted the outsider perspective.

Exercise

Please read and consider the following quotation. Is it the view of an insider or an outsider? How can you tell?

> As we all know, fools proffer definitions of religion. We, in our superior wisdom, do not even try to; but we describe and analyze religious phenomena and their functions, no doubt on the basis of some preceding [understanding …]. And though I believe that the origin and beginnings of religion (with or without a capital 'R') are not fit subjects for scientific discourse, I think I can venture to locate the beginning of religion: it begins wherever human beings do more to a corpse than is strictly necessary for its disposal; which is another way of saying that religion itself is an act of interpretation – of interpreting ourselves, the world in which we find ourselves, our uncertainties and anxieties, the horizon that bounds our world – and our capacity to conceive the notion that, if there is a horizon, there may be a 'beyond' that horizon which will always remain 'beyond' no matter how hard we run toward that constantly receding horizon.
>
> (Zwi Werblowsky, 1992, p.6)

I think that this quotation displays both emic and etic qualities. The outsider view is strong at the outset, where the superior tone is that of the detached scholar who does not waste his or her time on the really big question, but studies what can be studied. But by the end of the passage, the scholar, like all of humanity, is anxiously scrutinizing the horizon for clues to the mystery of life. This suggests that when studying religion, which can be an academic pursuit, or even a job, scholars cannot avoid noticing that the thing studied claims to reveal the truth about issues which are important to all human beings, and from which scholars cannot dissociate themselves. I base my judgement on whether this is insider/outsider on 'tone of voice' as well as on content.

While there are many definitions of religion, and some would not agree with the idea of its beginnings as given above, the idea that 'religion itself is an act of interpretation' is important. To give you a simple example of this, let us consider for a moment the historical phenomenon of 'fasting girls' in Britain (Vandereycken and van Deth, 1994). These were women and girls who denied themselves food and drink for periods that seemed to last far

longer than human biological needs would permit. For centuries, such fasting girls were considered to be manifesting a special sign of God's favour and grace, and were viewed as an asset to the community in which they lived. By the eighteenth century, however, suspicions of fraud and of making false claims of fasting for financial gain or self-promotion had become a prevalent way of responding to such phenomena, and it became commonplace by the early nineteenth century to set watchers around such fasting girls, to test whether they were really living without sustenance. In the late nineteenth century, the term 'anorexia nervosa' was coined, and with it the idea that refusal of food was a psychological disorder. So, in this simple example, we see the movement of the interpretative pendulum away from religious explanations, through economic ones, to psychological interpretation, but at all times the behaviour being explained was identical. The same three explanations given above for fasting girls are offered simultaneously, by friends and foes of the practice.

However, fasting (more or less extended) is still commonly accepted practice in many religious traditions. Others might argue that today's obsession with 'detoxing' (a modified form of fasting) is, ultimately, a spiritual phenomenon, as well as an example of our current obsession with the health of our bodies. I have no doubt that the pendulum will swing back again, as it appears to be doing with the Breatharians, a contemporary movement, which actively recruits people of both sexes, and which has attracted considerable controversy with claims that people can live on 'spiritual energy' alone. (For more information on the Breatharians, you can visit the Breatharian Institute of America website [accessed 13 March 2006]).

You will see another, more extended example of the variety of interpretation in religion in 'Rose of Lima: some thoughts on purity and penance' by Sara Maitland. The patron saint of the Americas, Rose (1586–1617) practised extreme forms of bodily mortification, or, to use more 'modern' terminology, self-mutilation. Please read the instructions in the following exercise, and then turn to the text and read it.

Exercise

Click on 'View document' below to read 'Rose of Lima: some thoughts on purity and penance'.

View document

1   When reading this text, please note down the varieties of ways in which Rose's behaviour has been viewed over time, and see if you can suggest some explanations for the interpretative shifts that are evident.

2   Can you distinguish between what might be emic and etic views of her case?

1   One of the very interesting points made by Maitland is that we have no idea of how Rose viewed her own behaviour: she – a rarity among 'modern' saints – left no writings whatsoever. So her sainthood, we must conclude, is based on what she did, and not on what she wrote. And what she did is profoundly disquieting to the modern reader, and may have disgusted or dismayed you as you read this account in the twenty-first century. Moving backwards in time, her nineteenth-century biographers exalted her piety and presented a pretty and infantilized image of Rose, but preferred to gloss over her actual actions. This infantilization extended to pictorial images of Rose. Earlier accounts seem to have accepted the idea that suffering is in itself meritorious, and that the suffering of the innocent can redeem the sins of the guilty. So, is Rose a parallel to Jesus, who many Christians

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believe died sinless to atone for the sins of others? Or is it that Christianity (viewed from another point of view as a religion based on the story of a man who was tortured to death for political reasons in first-century Palestine) skews human nature to seek what it would otherwise avoid – suffering? There are lots of other ways of interpreting Rose's story, but as you continue to reflect on it, remember that how we understand it, and how it was understood in the past, can be profoundly different. Even in the space of a few years, Maitland has seen her own understanding of Rose's actions and their meaning shift quite significantly. How much more do such understandings change over centuries?

2   On the emic/etic question, I think it is quite possible to make a case for both! On one level, we cannot attain an insider view of Rose: we cannot get into her head or live in her time; she left no writings for us to read, and in her case 'the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (Hartley, 1953, p.9) is indubitably true. On the other hand, those who concentrate on the elements of Rose as a person on the margins, as a woman in a society where women were not highly valued, and as someone who concerned herself with the dispossessed, could argue that it is possible to view Rose's situation at least partially and imperfectly from an emic perspective.

Before we move on, I want to tell you a brief cautionary tale, recounted to me by a former missionary who was teaching at an Open University summer school. When he was a very young man and had just gone to a remote mission station for the first time, he wanted to discover why the people among whom he lived had carried out a certain ritual practice. While they were no longer doing this, in living memory there had been a ceremony where each family disinterred the bones of their ancestors (buried in a large pot) once a year, and held a feast in their presence. My friend decided to question some of the members of the tribe about this practice. He asked one man, 'Why did you do this? Was it to propitiate your ancestors, so that they would not return and haunt you as ghosts?' His informant said yes. Not long afterwards, the practice came up again in conversation with another member of the group, and the missionary asked, 'Did you do this to honour your ancestors and show them that you have not forgotten them?' His informant said yes. He later asked a third person if it was a way of ensuring that the dead had food in the afterlife, and this was confirmed. I could continue with this anecdote, but the point has been made. (Thanks to Dr Jim Pottinger for this story.)The questions we formulate, either verbally or in our own minds, can skew the answers we 'find': it would be naive to assume that we can observe (or participate in) religious behaviour and then, with some kind of scholarly omnipotence, always interpret it correctly. It would also be naive to assume that explanations for any behaviour, let alone religious behaviour and beliefs, are normally mono-causal: multi-causal explanations, although less neat, are much more typical. (Thanks to Dr Jim Pottinger for this story.)

2.3 Is religion a museum piece?

We have used the video sequence below to highlight the emic/etic problem and we would like you to carry out a short exercise using it to consolidate your understanding of these terms.

The video introduces St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, which has been described as the first public museum of religion in the world. Do note, however, that

the Museum of Religions at the University of Marburg, Germany was founded in 1927 by Rudolf Otto. It contains a considerable number of artefacts and iconographic materials drawn from religions across the world (information provided by Professor Michael Pye, University of Marburg). There is also the Lenin Museum of Religion and Atheism in Moscow, but that institution makes no attempt to present religion in either an objective or comparative fashion. Of course, no museum can be described as value-free; none are objective or exist outside their social, political and funding contexts. The St Mungo Museum was not a planned museum: the building was constructed as a visitor's centre for Glasgow Cathedral, with which it shares a site, but the Cathedral abandoned the project owing to financial difficulties. This left the city council with a functionless, half-completed building in an area of Glasgow visited by many tourists. Finally, it was decided to use the already existing resources in the Glasgow Museums' collections to open a specialist centre around the theme of religion.

The Museum is divided into three parts: one houses a collection of religious art from various traditions (Figure 2), another is devoted to the human lifecycle as it is understood/celebrated across a range of religious traditions, and the third concentrates on the history of religion in Scotland. While you may initially see the museum depicted in the video as a tranquil, typical and uncontested example of public education, in reality it has been the centre of heated debate since it opened. Especially soon after its opening, the Museum has generated considerable controversy, ranging from complaints about perceived unequal treatment of traditions, to actual physical attacks on exhibits.
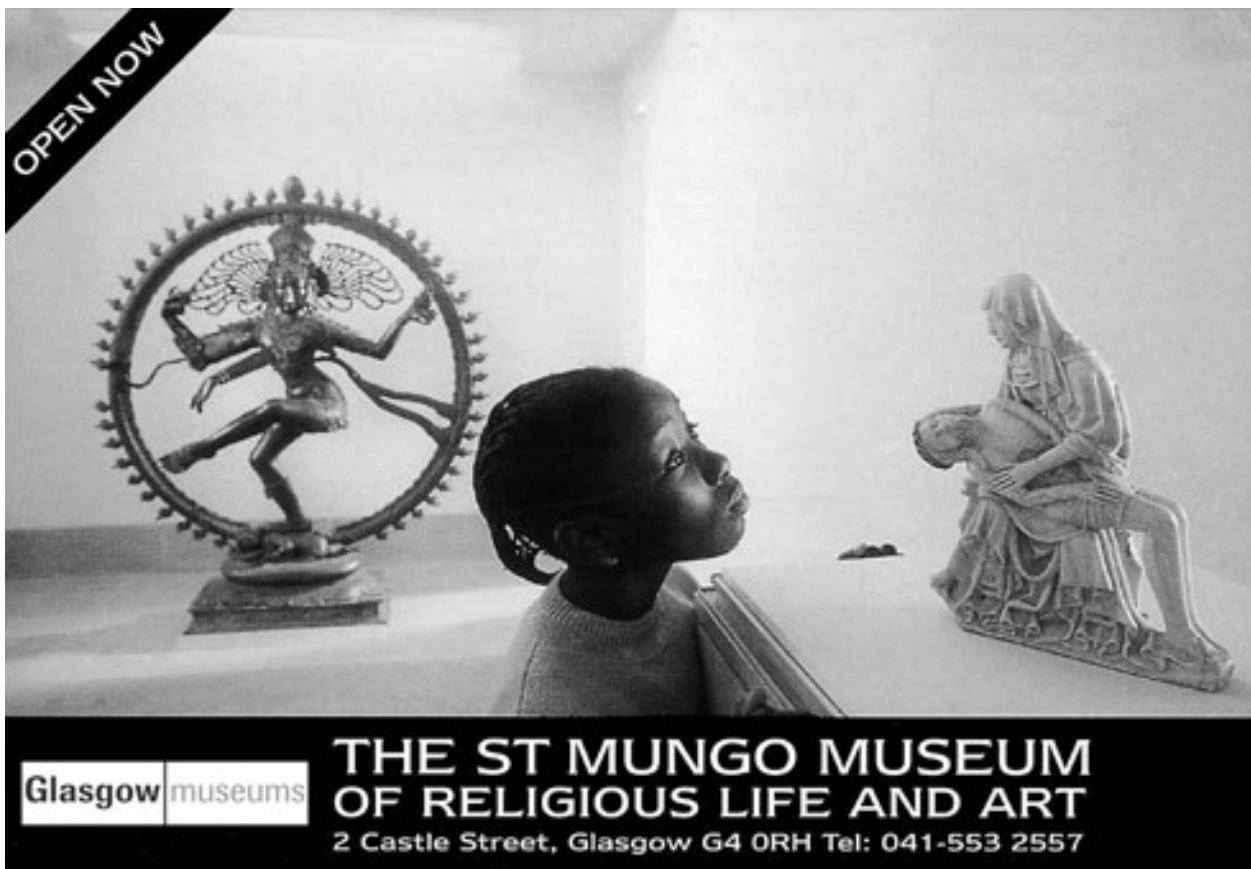

Figure 2 Publicity material for the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art. Glasgow Museums: The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art.

Some members of particular traditions have complained about being included in a comparative display with other religions that they consider to be 'false', while other members of the same groups have felt that their traditions were under-represented in the displays. An interesting feature of each room is the bulletin boards, where visitors are actively encouraged to respond to the exhibits. The notes make it clear that religion and how it is represented is still capable of rousing passionate feelings in many. One offended visitor in 1993 wrote, 'St. Mungo's; where Satan is free to run rampant'. However, the majority of comments are positive.

As the senior curator of Glasgow Museums explained, the St Mungo Museum set out to do something different, something contentious:

> If the aim was to communicate something of the meaning of the objects, we had to reverse the usual process in museums of draining them of their dangerous meanings to render them safely aesthetic, historical or anthropological. In the case of religion 'meaning' has an emotional and spiritual dimension that can be described much more powerfully by those who experience it than those who have simply studied it.
>
> (O'Neill, 1994, p.28)

As a result of this approach, the Museum decided to interview 'ordinary' believers and incorporate their comments into the displays, rather than relying on the views of priests, religious professionals or scholars. The Museum wanted to portray the traditions sympathetically, yet retain the right to criticize: this has proved a difficult balance to achieve. For example, the owners of material that had once belonged to the missionary and explorer David Livingstone threatened to withdraw it unless the Museum altered the text of a caption that expressed the view that missionary work had damaged indigenous cultures. Others have shown offence at photographs of the face of a girl undergoing ritual circumcision; still others have physically attacked non-Christian artefacts, damaging an important bronze image of the Hindu god Shiva (Figure 3). Some cathedrals have signs reminding visitors that they are places of worship, not museums. In contrast, St Mungo's is a museum where, as with the Victoria and Albert example shown in Figure 1, some people interact with the exhibits in a devotional manner. The museum's stated goal, however, is a more neutral one (or is it?): 'to reflect the central importance of religion in human life' (Arthur, 1993, p.232).

Figure 3 *Shiva Nataraja*, *c*.1800, bronze. Glasgow Museums: The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art.

Exercise

Please watch the video now. After you have watched it, think about the questions below. Don't try to answer them all; choose one or two that you find interesting, and spend a few minutes thinking about them. Then try to think about your chosen questions again from the point of view of someone whose perspective on religion is very different from your own.

Click below to view the video.

Video content is not available in this format.

Religion Today

- Is the museum an example of an insider or an outsider perspective? Is there another way of categorizing its interpretative stance?

- Is a 'museum' of religion appropriate? Do religious objects/ ideas retain their meaning in a museum setting? Doesn't putting religion in a museum suggest that it is no longer relevant?

- Do the curators have a duty to represent traditions as they wish to be represented, or as they are understood by outside experts?

- To what extent should such a museum bow to pressure from traditions, either to change emphasis, or to increase their representation? Are judgements about 'balance' really covert judgements about value or importance?

- What drives people to attack religious artefacts? (Both the painting *Christ of St John of the Cross* by Salvador Dali and the eighteenth-century sculpture of Shiva have been damaged by visitors who violently objected to them. Other objections have come from an aesthetic position: the Museum displays not only world-class works of art, but also devotional items that to some might seem tacky, but which have meaning for their users.)

- To what extent should we study only the 'best' of a tradition, whether that be in its devotional writing, its art or its styles of worship?

Scholarly writings on religion normally suggest some kind of 'answer' to the questions asked, or at least provide a response. I don't want to in this case, as the whole purpose of the exercise is to get you to think about the depiction and portrayal of religion in a more self-conscious way than usual. Thus, there are not any answers as such, but if you have reflected more deeply on an issue that could easily be taken for granted, then you have succeeded, and the purpose of the exercise has been fulfilled.

2.4 Theological, reductionist and phenomenological perspectives 1

2.4.1 The theological persepective

If we are thinking about individual perspectives on religion, there are three very common and useful terms we can employ: theism, atheism and agnosticism. In everyday parlance, 'theism' denotes a belief in God (or, more broadly, a belief in divine or spiritual realities); 'atheism' denotes a conviction that there is no God (or divine or spiritual realities); and 'agnosticism' indicates a lack of certainty or knowledge (gnosis) one way or the other. Very broadly speaking, these perspectives have been replicated methodologically in three different approaches to the study of religion: theology (dealt with in this section), reductionism and phenomonology (dealt with in succeeding sections).

There was a time when, in the universities of Europe, theology was known as 'the queen of sciences', in the context of general belief in and adherence to Christianity. *Scientia* (science) was understood as knowledge, and there were different branches of knowledge; theology was sacred science, ultimate knowledge. Before the eighteenth-century movement known as the Enlightenment (a movement advocating belief in reason and human progres, with a resulting contesting of tradition and authority), the European experience had been that Christianity pervaded all aspects of life, shaping how people thought about the world (that is, as God's creation, at the centre of the cosmos), about the purpose of life, about morality and about how society should be ordered. The idea of time and the age of the earth was biblically conditioned – early geologists had immense problems convincing people of the timescale indicated by their discoveries. In the nineteenth century, there were objections to the use of pain relief for women in childbirth by those who thought women *should* suffer, in accordance with God's decree after the biblical Fall from grace brought about by Adam and Eve, as described in the Book of Genesis. The continued influence of Creationism (a literal belief in the biblical account of the Creation and rejection of the theory of evolution) in the USA is an example of the extent to which the theological perspective can still have an impact on society, knowledge and belief generally. Until comparatively recently in the West, the theological viewpoint had an effect on all aspects of life, and there are still societies that are to all intents and purposes theocracies: that is, societies in which religion determines how they are organized and run.

However, we need to remember the distinction between theology as an academic discipline and theology as a way of life. The theological perspective starts by assuming that the divine, however defined, is real and that religion is a response or approach to spiritual realities. At the very least, the theological perspective is willing to entertain the possibility of the existence of God. Crudely put, from a theological perspective, there is the working assumption that, when a believer prays, a divine being hears; when a believer performs a good action, this will have implications for a future existence. The material on which theological studies tend to draw consists largely in authoritative texts and tradition – what might be characterized as 'insider' literature and reflection. Theology (Christian, Jewish, Islamic), Buddhology and similar studies aim to deepen understanding of religious truth and its implications for individuals and society. There is the assumption that (at least one) religion is true. The theological approach to the study of religion has therefore been called by some scholars methodological theism.

2.5 Theological, reductionist and phenomenological perspectives 2

2.5.1 The reductionist perspective

Although theology had been thought of as ultimate knowledge, in post-Enlightenment thought, religion came to be seen by many in the West as a hindrance to progress and the advancement of human knowledge. Some came to believe that a rational and scientific way of looking at the world, unconstrained by religious belief and 'superstition', would lead to religion becoming redundant.

In the nineteenth century, this idea was boosted by Darwinian theories of evolution. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and before the end of the nineteenth century 'evolution, from being a theory, had become an atmosphere' (Sharpe,

1986, p.89). Scholars were thinking in terms not just of biological evolution but also of cultural evolution. There was a definite view of progress, which affected not only biology and technology but also ideas, including specifically religious ideas. It was assumed that there would be a universal and predictable progression in culture, regardless of time and space, from irrationality to rationality, from 'primitive religion' to ethical monotheism and, many thought, beyond that to scientifically informed atheism.

Reductionism emerged as the focus shifted from the ultimate truth of religion to attempts to understand the origins of religion, and to explain religion in terms of its significance and function in society. For example, the neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) concluded that religion could be explained in terms of 'universal obsessional neurosis' (Freud, 1995 edn, p.43), and was confident that human society could ultimately mature and grow out of religion. Sociologists were interested in religion's role in society; by understanding religion's *function*, they felt they would have the key to religion. The social and economic theorist Karl Marx (1818–83) famously regarded religion as 'the opium of the people' (Marx, 1970 edn, p.131), but went on to argue that in the state of human suffering caused by capitalism such an alleviation of pain was vitally necessary. The sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) saw religion as having a very important social function as a sort of social cement, with shared rituals and beliefs producing 'effervescence' (a powerful group religious experience) and binding people together. He therefore considered that religion (regardless of the focus of devotion) was an important force for integration in society; it conferred authority on the institutions of society, a process known as legitimation. (For a sociological introduction to approaches to religion, See Thompson and Woodward, 2000.)

Reductionism was originally very influenced by cultural evolution, and the idea that just as the Age of Magic gave way to the Age of Religion, so the Age of Religion would give way to the Age of Reason or the Age of Science, in which religion would be rendered redundant. The understanding of science shifted from the view of science as knowledge, to the post-Enlightenment view of science as observation plus hypothesis, with the non-empirical regarded as inadmissible evidence. Thus, sociology of religion, emerging from this milieu, has tended to favour empirical observation, and largely quantitative data.

Very much in the Enlightenment spirit, then, the early reductionists' approach was to explain religion 'scientifically' (as they saw it). Because reductionism has tended to explain or describe religion in non-religious terms (such as those of psychology or social function), it is sometimes described as methodological atheism. Some reductionists conflated (and continue to conflate) atheism with objectivity and science; that someone could be both scientific and religious makes no sense from this perspective, a common viewpoint in some of western society's attitude to religion.

However, we must again remember the distinction between atheism as personal belief and methodological atheism. In his article 'In defense of reductionism', Robert Segal argues the practical point that, 'Whether or not reductionist interpretations themselves refute the reality of God, nonbelievers, as long as they are nonbelievers, can use only them' (Segal, 1999, p.158). Or as the sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge comment:

> Science is completely helpless in the face of claims made on behalf of a being, world, or force beyond the natural world. ... It is not our intent to suggest anything about the truth of religion. We seek only to discover its visible aspects – the social forms it takes in the world we all can see.
>
> Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, p. 14

Most contemporary sociologists of religion are careful to avoid reductionist questions and tendencies, such as those relating to the origins or causes of religion.

2.6 Theological, reductionist and phenomenological perspectives 3

2.6.1 The phenomenological perspective

The term 'phenomenology' is a good example of polysemy, as it has different meanings according to the academic context in which it is found. There are scientific phenomenology and philosophical phenomenology, for example, and the sociologists Ken Thompson and Kath Woodward describe phenomenology as, 'The development in sociology of a philosophical approach which focuses on people's consciousness of their experiences and how they interpret the world; the meaning it has for them' (Thompson and Woodward, 2000, p.51).

In talking about phenomenology here, however, I am using the term particularly in connection with the approach taken by Ninian Smart at Lancaster University, when a Religious Studies department was established there in 1967 (for a good accound of the early development of Religious Studies, see Sharpe, 1986). This developed out of the field of history of religions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it is an approach that accepts religion as an enduring human phenomenon, which can be studied and appreciated as a phenomenon, on its own terms, but without making a judgement as to whether it is true or false. Thus, from the phenomenological perspective, when a believer prays, what matters is that the believer *believes* a divine being hears; when a believer performs a good action, he or she *believes* that it has implications for a future existence. As Smart puts it, 'God is real for Christians whether or not he exists' (Smart, 1973, p.54).

To appreciate the power and significance of religious belief for the participant, Smart claimed, the student needs empathy, which he described thus:

> It is a kind of warm distance. For instance I have a love of Buddhism and I feel sometimes I can understand parts of it, and enter into its meanings through people. But I am not thereby a Buddhist (actually I am an Episcopalian). Distance is perhaps especially difficult for Westerners with regard to Christianity. Paradoxically, their closeness may prevent a good understanding of the religion in its diversity. I know people who, believing Christianity to be false, think it is unimportant; and others who, believing it to be true, identify it with their image of it. Both reactions, naturally enough, are short on empathy and a sense of proportion.
>
> (Smart, 1979, p.8)

Thus, individuals are asked, when studying religion, to 'bracket off' their own belief or disbelief (a process known as 'epoche') and concentrate on what is happening for the believer. Smart called for 'empathetic objectivity' and 'neutralist subjectivity'; he spoke of phenomenology as a 'warm science', a science that requires a sensitive and artistic heart. In trying to steer this middle course between methodological theism and atheism, phenomenology has been characterized as methodological agnosticism.

The phenomenological perspective developed in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of increasing religious and cultural pluralism in the West, when there was a need for ways of talking about, teaching about and thinking about religion in a non-competitive, nonjudgemental manner. Attention is paid to what believers consider to be the authoritative texts and traditions, and to their accounts of their religious life and experiences; qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation have frequently been employed. This seemed the only logical way forward in an increasingly relativistic and pluralistic milieu, and phenomenology was claiming that this, rather than reductionism, was an 'objective' or non-biased way of looking at religion.

In presenting these three very roughly characterized approaches, I am simply signalling that there are a variety of ways of looking at religion and that what seems a logical approach to one person may well appear deficient to another.

Exercise

Having outlined three broad methodological approaches to the study of religion, however imperfect, it would be a useful exercise to consider their relative advantages and disadvantages. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of the theological, the reductionist and the phenomenological approaches? You might like to write down some ideas at this point.

1   Theological approach. Some would argue that as theologians are normally practitioners of the religions they are examining, they know the traditions from the inside and therefore understand them better and can represent them better to others than outsiders. As theologians are generally concerned with deepening understanding of particular traditions, they are not distracted by competing truth claims and have nothing to prove, and as believers are better able to understand and empathize with other believers. Also, as they are studying the process of belief and trying to understand not only *what* but *why* people believe, havingsome sort of faith will be an advantage. Alternatively, it could be argued that, as theologians are working from within particular traditions, they will be incapable of seeing them clearly and might have a tendency to dismiss not only other religions but also other branches of the *same* traditions, thus giving a biased, incomplete account of them.

2   Reductionist approach. One advantage of this approach might be that it is good for gaining critical distance, to identify important social or psychological factors that would not be recognized by insiders. As disinterested observers, reductionists are not hampered by sectarian interests, or the competing truth claims of different religions, and can therefore provide objective accounts of what is going on. As they deal purely with what can be studied – empirical evidence – they are less likely to be sidetracked into fruitless speculation and can both comment on and predict social trends and conditions on the basis of their research. Alternatively, if reductionists start with the view that religion is not what believers think it is, it might be argued that they will be incapable of understanding what is happening to or for the believer and of representing that religion fairly or accurately.

3   Phenomenological approach. The advantage often claimed for phenomenology is that it does not engage in or become distracted by competing, non-provable truth claims. As it does not try to explain religion and accepts religions on their own terms, it is believer-centred and fair. Conversely, it can be argued that

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phenomenology is merely descriptive, and that only a believer can truly understand what is happening in any religion. Furthermore, it is generally recognized that it is impossible to be impartial, for no matter how hard researchers try to 'bracket off' their own beliefs and opinions, they bring their own perspectives and agendas to the phenomenon. It could also be said that as phenomenology is relativistic, it is itself reductionistic, seeing religion only in terms of its meaning for the believer.

2.7 Conclusion

Having asked you to think about these perspectives on religion and approaches to its study, I must again emphasize that this is a very crude way of characterizing a very complex area of research. These perspectives are not watertight compartments into which all study of religion fits – life is not that simple! Some religious standpoints are themselves reductionist: for example, Anglicans in the 'Sea of Faith' movement regard themselves as Christians, while considering belief in the supernatural deluded. Let me stress again that methodological standpoints are not the same as personal perspectives: some theologians are not personally religious, some reductionists are, while phenom-enologists range from atheists to committed believers. In terms of information gathering, there is considerable cross-over. Qualitative and quantitative methods can be seen as complementary rather than incompatible, and theologians currently employ a wide range of sources, not simply 'insider' literature.

There are great problems with *any* methodology that claims objectivity, for we can question both the basis of that objectivity (as in reductionism) and people's ability to keep themselves out of the picture when studying religion (as in phenomenology). So, treat these categories and characteristics as rough guides only, while nevertheless trying to discern the perspectives from which different authors you encounter in your studies are writing.

These various perspectives emerged from particular contexts, and there are three aspects of religion and context. First, religion exists in a context – how it fits into, reacts against or is regarded by any given society at any given time. Second, religion *provides* a context – social mores, the law, science and so on can be formed and judged by the standards of a particular religion if it is a sufficiently strong force in society. Third, religion is *studied* in context – that is, how religion is studied will depend on the attitude of society and/or of scholars towards religion. You will encounter examples of religion in different contexts and of religion providing social context at many points in the course. In this course, we concentrate on how religion has been and continues to be studied in different social and academic contexts.

In all aspects of scholarship we need to be aware of the difference between *what* is being studied and *how* we study it. The past is different from history, for history is a way of seeing, analysing and presenting the past. It is not a neutral activity: 'History is what *we* think, say and write about the evidence of the past' (James, 1999, p.33). Likewise, the religious perspective is different from the Religious Studies perspective. As Religious Studies scholars, we are *studying* religion, rather than *doing* it. (This is not to say that one cannot both study and 'do' religion, but it must be recognized that they are different activities.) Studying religion assuredly is not a neutral activity, for few people (if any) approach religion neutrally.

One person's objectivity may be another person's subjectivity, or just a failure to understand what is happening. One person may claim 'science' is the ultimate authority, for example, while another would say all human activity, including science, is under the authority of some sort of divine power. Moreover, because science is an ongoing activity, some aspects of 'scientific knowledge' are transitory; yesterday's science can be today's discredited theory. It is important to remember that both knowledge and belief are not fixed – they change over time and in reaction to a huge variety of circumstances. That is one reason why we have to keep examining the basis of claims that different people, different interest groups (including religious communities and scientific communities) and different academic disciplines make for themselves.

It is only natural that, as religion changes, new approaches to studying it will have to develop, as ever more varied and individualized forms of religiosity emerge. Quantitative data, such as membership numbers or attendance at church/mosque/temple, simply cannot be collected for forms of religion that have no membership lists and no buildings. Just as religion changes, so the study of religion has to change. In *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (1999), for example, Gavin Flood has made a number of suggestions for the future of the subject, such as drawing attention to the need for Religious Studies to learn from feminist and post-colonial theory, to engage in genuine dialogue with the people whose beliefs are being studied, and to be aware of the assumptions that the individual scholar brings to and imposes on what is being studied.

Our job as scholars and students of religion is to be aware of change in religion and of the necessity for change in how we study and regard religion, for religion is a dynamic phenomenon in constant interaction with its setting.

Conclusion

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