

# What is Religion?

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Religion is a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of life and the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a supernatural agency. <sup>1</sup>

Religion, which is central to the lives of almost every society as a system involving beliefs, behavior, organizational structure and symbols, is difficult to define. It has been described by scholars in a variety of ways: some hold it to a *“belief in a divine or a super human power or powers to be obeyed and worshipped as the creator[s] and ruler[s] of the Universe.”* Others describe it as *“Any specific system of belief and worship, involving a code of ethics, practices and philosophy.”*

Friedrich Schleiermacher defined religion as *“a feeling of absolute dependence.”* <sup>2</sup>

Rudolf Otto defines religion as *“the essence of religious awareness of awe, that is, a unique blend of fear and fascination before the divine.”* <sup>3</sup>

David V. Barret defines religion as *“a social contrast encompassing beliefs and practices which enable people, individually and collectively, to make some sense of the Great Questions of life and death.”* <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Unabridged Dictionary*, Random House, Inc., Definition of "Religion"

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher: *The Christian Faith*, 1822

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Otto: *The Idea of the Holy*, Translated by John W Harvey

<sup>4</sup> David V. Barrett: *The New Believers: Sects, 'Cults' and Alternative Religions*, 2001, p 25

Dorothy Nelkin defines religion as: “a belief system that includes the idea of the existence of ‘an external principle... that has created the world that governs it, that controls its destinies or that intervenes in the natural course of its history?’” <sup>5</sup>

## ETYMOLOGY OF RELIGION

Many attempts have been made to define the word religion. The English word ‘religion’ clearly derives from the Latin word ‘religio’. This is commonly linked to one or two Latin verbs, ‘religare’ (*to bind or fasten*) or ‘relegere’ (*to collect again, to go over again*).

According to the German Catholic theologian Ernst Feil, the core meaning of ‘religio’ in antiquity was ‘careful, scrupulous observation, full of awe’.

In other words, religion devoted a set of moral actions or a species of justice – specifically, proper behavior in the matter of actions directed to the gods or God.

During the European Middle Ages, a more specific version of this definition became important. *Religio* designated not something that everyone had or did, but a particular mode of life oriented to the service of God.

James George Frazer describes religion as, “a belief in powers higher than man, and an attempt to propitiate or please them.” <sup>6</sup>

Emile Durkheim, the brilliant sociologist offered this definition after his careful study of primitive societies:

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Nelkin: *Rose, H and Rose, S: Alas, Poor Darwin*, 2000, pp 14

<sup>6</sup> Sir James George Frazer: *The Golden Bough*, 1922

“The real characteristic of religious phenomena is that they always suppose a bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes which embrace all that exists, but which radically exclude each other. Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other, or with profane things.”<sup>7</sup>

Paul Tillich, the Theologian defines religion thus:

*“Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life. Therefore, this concern is unconditionally serious and shows a willingness to sacrifice only finite concern which is in conflict with it.”*<sup>8</sup>

Dan S. Markham and Christy Lohr, after studying various definitions of Religion, have come up with their own. They say:

*“Religion, for us, is a way of life (one which embraces a total world view, certain ethical demands and certain social practices) that refuses to accept the secular view that sees human life as nothing more than complex bundles of atoms in an ultimately meaningless universe.”*<sup>9</sup>

According to EB Taylor, “Religion is the belief in spiritual beings.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Emile Durkheim: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich: *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, Columbia University Press, New York

<sup>9</sup> *A World Religions Reader* edited by Ian Markham, 2009

<sup>10</sup> EB Taylor: *Religions in Primitive Culture*, 1958, Harper

W Newton Clarke says, "Religion is the life of God in the soul of man." According to Dr Syed Abid Hussain, "Religion is a spiritual consciousness."

Emile Durkheim, the brilliant Sociologist wrote in *Elementary Forms*, " A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them." <sup>11</sup>

Summarizing from these, we can say that, in brief, Religion is the belief in the existence of a God or gods, especially the belief that God created the Universe and gave human beings a spiritual nature. Although these various definitions attempt to explain religion; but they are inadequate in explaining the whole meaning of religion.

#### ORIGIN OF RELIGION

The way religion came into being, or evolved in the initial stages is not accurately known to mankind. However many Historians and Scholars widely assume that the need to worship and belief in a God or Being must have originated in the mind of our early ancestors due to the feeling of fear.

Man had no knowledge of the world around him. Every natural phenomenon was regarded as something to be terrified of; an unknown force, something un-explainable and beyond understanding, and attributed to the work of this unseen and unknown force. So, for the early human beings, the need to please or propitiate the unknown powerful Being must have arisen.

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<sup>11</sup> Emile Durkheim: *Elementary Forms*

Religion must have been created to give oneself the feeling of security in an insecure world. Giving a form to this unknown power by different ways, like the form of animals, some obscure forms, trees that appear unnatural, the earth itself etc, gave man a feeling of control over his environment.

The earliest evidence of religion in the life of the earliest inhabitants of the earth can be found in the excavations of burial sites. The human burial remains indicate a sort of ritual burial, which represented an awareness of life and death, and a possible belief in the after-life. Philip Lieberman states that “burials with grave goods clearly signify religious practices and concern for the dead that transcends daily life.”<sup>12</sup>

Such early evidences can be seen from Atapuerca in Spain where bones of around 30 humans have been found in a pit. Neanderthals are also believed to have buried their dead. Corpses were found in shallow graves with stone tools and animal bones which Historians believe, points out the fact that that may have had an emotional connection with the deceased and possibly a belief in the afterlife. The earliest known burial of modern humans is found in a cave in Israel in a place called Qafzeh. They have been dated to 100,000 years ago. A variety of goods were also found at the burial site.<sup>13</sup>

Symbols are used to indicate or represent something. And they have been used in religion since ancient times. Archaeologist Steven Muthen<sup>14</sup> contends that it is common for religious practices to involve the creation of images, and symbols represent supernatural Beings and Ideas. Some of the earliest evidence of symbolic behaviour is associated with the Middle Stone Age sites in Africa. Due to the association of art and

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip Lieberman: *Uniquely Human*, Harvard University Press, 1993

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pg 163.

<sup>14</sup> S. J. Muthen: *The Singing Neanderthals: the Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2005

religion, evidence of symbolism in the fossil record is indicative of a mind capable of religious thought. <sup>15</sup>

Organized forms of religion are believed to have begun around 11000 years ago in the Near East. At the same time it is also not ruled out that religion may have existed independently in several other places around the world. Man's transition from a food gatherer traveling from place to place in search of better food and pastures, to a cultivator leading a settled life has transformed him in a significant way. This settled lifestyle developed forms of religion as a means of providing stable social and economic life.

The history of religion began with the invention of writing around 3000 BCE in the Near East. A 19<sup>th</sup> century German School of Thought depicts religion as evolving with human culture, from primitive Polytheism to ethical monotheism. Writing is believed to have been first invented in either Sumeria or Ancient Egypt. The Pyramid Texts from ancient Egypt are one of the oldest known religious texts dating to between 2400-2300 BCE. <sup>16</sup> In ancient religious societies religious traditions and beliefs were transmitted orally. But with the advent of writing, religious teachings or rituals could be recorded and stored. Writing therefore enabled religions to develop coherent and comprehensive doctrinal system that remained independent of time and place. <sup>17</sup>

## CLASSIFICATION OF RELIGION

Religion then came to be classified into 3 basic categories: polytheistic, pantheistic and Monotheistic. The origin of religion can thus generally be

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<sup>15</sup> Wentzel VanHuyssteen: *Human Uniqueness and Symbolism*

<sup>16</sup> Budge, Wallis: *An Introduction to Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Mineola, NY. Dover Publications, 1997, pp9.

<sup>17</sup> Pyysiainen, Ilkka: *Holy Book: The Invention of Writing and Religious Recognition: Magic, Miracles & Religion. A Scientist's Perspective*. Walnut Creek, CA. Almira Press, 2004

traced to the ancient Near East. Let us look at the three categories of religion briefly in the next sections.

### **Polytheism**

Polytheism is belief in many gods. It is believed to have originated from Hinduism in about 2500 B.C. The religion of Hinduism has been an evolving religion, going through a constant process of change, absorbing and reacting to a tremendous array of influence. It is believed by most Historians and scholars that Hinduism or the Vedic religion originated with the coming of the Aryan race to India thousands of years before Christ. The Aryans were semi-nomadic Nordic fair-skinned people believed to have been originally located on the steppes of southern Russia and Central Asia. The Rig Veda, the religious scripture of the Hindus mentions how the fair-skinned Aryans subjugated the people of the Indus Valley. Over time, the different cultures inter-mingled, Sanskrit became the spoken language and the ideal choice for recording the scriptures. The four Vedas were thus compiled, and the worship of female deities became prevalent, while honour was given to deities like Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Nasatyas, Surya, Agni and other supernatural beings.<sup>18</sup>

Ancient cultures like Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece and Rome also believed in polytheism.

The ancient polytheistic belief systems viewed gods as being in control of all natural events such as rainfall, harvests, and fertility. Polytheistic cultures generally believed in sacrifices to appease the gods.

A widespread phenomenon in religions is the identification of natural forces and objects as divinities. For convenience it is classified as celestial, atmospheric and earthly. This classification is explicitly

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<sup>18</sup> RC Majumdar and Others: *An Advanced History of India*, Macmillan, 1978

recognized in Indo-Aryan religion:-*Surya* the sun god is celestial; *Indra* the god is associated with storms, rain and battles, and is atmospheric; *Agni* the fire god operates at the earthly level. Sky-gods tend to take on atmospheric roles.

Heavenly divinities have also been influential in the development of astrology, which assigns a special significance to stars and planets. In Indian culture it came to be deeply woven into the fabric of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Astrology was influential in the Greco-Roman world as well as in Central America (Aztec religion).

Gods of the sky became powerful when they took on an atmospheric guise. The association of gods like Zeus and Indra with storm makes their connection with warfare fairly natural. Indra is the most perfect example of an Indo-Aryan god.

Earth, besides being considered the divine mother out of whose womb plant life has its birth, has a host of divinities connected with agricultural and pastoral life. Thus, sacred mountains such as Olympus in Greece have their resident deities, called Olympians; and even a river such as the Ganges may be divinized.

In a number of cultures, trees are seen as a primordial form of vegetation and have a symbolic connection both with heaven and earth. Sometimes they are held to contain spirits, as the Yaksas of Indian tradition. Trees like the papal are also held in special veneration.

Just as plants are seen as divine forces, so are many types or species of animals. For instance, the cult of snakes is widespread and important in Indian tradition. The serpent is also seen as vile in the Old Testament's story of Adam and Eve. The cult of the monkey is also important in India, having its essence in the figure of Hanuman, the half monkey and half man.

The human model has been assisted by the representation of the gods in art; for a statue is not just a symbolic representation of a god, but often his place of presence and influence. Thus in a number of cultures, the images are treated as replete with divinity. Men can be conceived as divine, either by becoming identified with deities (e.g. through descent), or by displaying appropriate power. Thus divine kinship was a common feature of the ancient Middle East. It was also found in the Roman world where the Emperors were divinized. In Japan and China, the Emperor was regarded the son of heaven. In India, Rama was regarded as the descendent of the Surya, i.e. the Sun god, and also the 7<sup>th</sup> incarnation of Vishnu the Supreme God, while Krishna is regarded as another form of Vishnu, or the Supreme God Himself.

### Pantheism

Pantheism is the belief that God is in everything. This prevailed in numerous ancient cultures. Generally, pantheism is the principle that god is everything, and everything is god. Therefore nature is also a part of god. One should be in harmony with nature. The belief in Pantheism, the belief that God is in everything prevailed in numerous ancient cultures. Various New Age movements such as the Church of Scientology, Theosophical Society etc adhere to pantheistic beliefs.

“Pan” comes from the Greek word “Pas” which means “all”. It stresses the all-inclusiveness of God. Pantheism stresses the theme of immanence of the indwelling presence of God.

### *Immanence or Transcendence*

Immanence or transcendence is the poetic sense of the divine within and around mankind as widely expressed in religious life, is frequently treated in literature. It is present in the Platonic Romanticism of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson and Emerson. Such immanence

encourages man's sense of individual participation in the divine life without the necessity of meditation by any institution.

One form of pantheism present in the early stages of Greek philosophy held that the divine is one of the elements in the world whose function is to animate the other elements that constitute the world.

### *Time or Eternity*

Most forms of pantheism understand the eternal God to be in intimate juxtaposition with the world and thus minimizes time, or makes it illusionary. Some hold that eternity is in God and time is in the world. But since God is eternal, what is going on in the world is made complete in God. <sup>19</sup>

*God as absolute or relative:* God is absolute insofar as he is eternal, the cause, activity, the creator; he is relative insofar as he is temporal, effect, passive and effected by the world. For Pantheism, God is absolute and relative, cause and effect, actual and potential, active and passive.

### *Forms of Pantheism*

Essentially there are seven forms of Pantheism. They are as follows:

1. *Hylozoistic Pantheism:* the divine is immanent and is the basic element that is responsible for movement and change.
2. *Immanentistic Pantheism:* God is a part of the world. Though only a part, his power extends throughout its totality.
3. *Absolutistic Monistic Pantheism:* God is absolute and identical with the world. The world therefore, is changeless.

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Hartshorne & W.L.Reese: *Philosophers Speak of God*, University of Chicago Press, 1953

4. *Relativistic Monistic Pantheism*: the world is real and changing, and is within god. But god remains absolute and is not affected by the world.
5. *Acosmic Pantheism*: the absolute god makes up the total reality. The world is an appearance and ultimately unreal.
6. *Identity of Opposites Pantheism*: God and his relation with the world are described in terms that are formally contradictory. Reality is not subject to rational description.
7. *Neoplatonic Pantheism*: God is absolute in all respects. God's absoluteness is preserved, while a bridge to the world is provided as well. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, the foremost Neoplatonist, the Nous, a realm of ideas or Platonic forms serves as the intermediary between god and the world.

#### *Pantheism in Hindu Doctrines*

The gods of the Vedas represented the natural forces. In the 10<sup>th</sup> book of the Rig Veda *Prajapati* (Lord of the universe) had become a lordly monotheistic figure, a creator deity transcending the world. In the later period of the sacred writings of the Brahmanas (7<sup>th</sup> century BC), he moved into a central position. He was later eclipsed by *Purusa* (Supreme being or Soul of the universe).

The Upanishads (600-300BC) which is one of the most important of the ancient scriptures of India, contain philosophic speculations concerning the relation between the individual and the divine. In the later Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, the divine was held to be identical with the inner self of each man.

#### **Monotheism**

**Monotheism is a belief in one God. Monotheists believe that God alone is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe including human beings. He is the only possessor of all powers. He is Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Omnipresent. That is, He knows everything; He sees everything and is present everywhere, although invisible to the naked eye.**

**The Judeo-Christian-Muslim line of religion is founded on Monotheism, according to which God created all mankind and selected certain individuals from among them called prophets to communicate His message to mankind. Adam was the first man, as well as the first prophet created by God. From the time of the Prophet Abraham in about 2000 B.C., God began revealing His message to the world through the Israelites. During a period of about 1500 years, God revealed what became the Old Testament of the Bible, relating the history of Israel with the character and laws of God.**

**During the period of the Roman Empire, Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem as the long-awaited Messiah. The ministry of Jesus ended in about 32 AD with His crucifixion and Resurrection. After the ascension of Jesus, the Christian Church was founded, and grew, and the New Testament was compiled.**

**About 600 years later, Muhammad began preaching in Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad believed that he was the last prophet of God. His teachings became the tenets of Islam, and the revelations of God to the prophet were recorded and compiled in the Quran.**

### *Basic Monotheistic View*

**The God of monotheism is the one real God that is believed to exist, or is acknowledged as such.<sup>20</sup> His essence and character are believed to be**

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<sup>20</sup> R Stark: *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*, Princeton Press

unique and fundamentally different from all other beings that can be considered more or less comparable.

God in monotheism is conceived of as the creator of the world and man. He has not abandoned his creation but continues to lead it through His power and wisdom. Therefore, according to this, history is a manifestation of divine will. God has not only created the natural world and the order of things, but also the ethical world in which man ought to conform. Everything is in the hands of God. God is supreme and unique in being and worth. <sup>21</sup>

The God of monotheism, as exemplified by the great monotheistic religions-Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is a personal god. Its belief system, value system and its action system are all determined in a significant way by the conception of God as one unique and personal being.

Essentially in monotheism, God is regarded as the one and only Creator, Lord, King or Father.

## MONOTHEISM IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

The extant monotheistic religions of the world are Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

### Monotheism in the Religion of Israel and Judaism

The Old Testament does not speak exclusively of one Almighty God, but of other gods as well. But utmost importance is given to Yahweh, the one true God of Israel. Deuteronomy 6:4 says: *Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, one Lord.*” It is important to note that the whole life of the people is seen as dominated by Yahweh and by Yahweh alone. In Israel, the ethical aspect was as important as the exclusiveness of their one god. The prophets stressed the ethical elements of an essentially exclusive

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<sup>21</sup> Farida Khanam: *A Simple Guide to Islam*, Goodword Books

God. The God of Israel was a jealous God who forbade His believers to worship other gods.

### **Monotheism in Christianity**

Among the three great monotheistic religions, Christianity has a place apart because of the Trinity creed of this religion. The Christian Bible has no Trinitarian statements, but triadic liturgical formulae invoking God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. According to Christian theology, this recognition is not recognition of three gods, but that these three persons are essentially one.

### **Monotheism in Islam**

No religion has interpreted monotheism in a more consequential and literal way than Islam. Monotheism is referred to as *tawheed* in Arabic. The profession of Faith, the first of the Five-Pillars of Islam clearly states that “There is no god but Allah.”<sup>22</sup> In accordance with this principle, Islam knows no greater sin than the attribution of partners to Allah.

*Tawheed* is the essence of Islam. *Tawheed* is an Arabic term which means ‘oneness’ and ‘unity.’ In Islamic terminology it means the oneness of Allah. It is a fundamental doctrine of Islam referring to the oneness of Allah in all its meanings. Thus the declaration that ‘there is no God but Allah’ is called *Tawheed*. Allah has no partner (*sharik*), He exists by Himself. Nothing can rival Him as a source of power or love. There is no one worthy of worship other than Allah. He is not an abstract concept. He is always near us; He cares for us and we owe our existence to Him alone.<sup>23</sup>

Islam established a close and direct relationship between the Creator and His creation. In Islam no mediating power of any kind exists between the

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<sup>22</sup> Quran: Chapter 37, Verse 35

<sup>23</sup> Farida Khanam: *A Simple Guide to Islam*, Goodword Books

Creator and His creation. God's absolute unity is reflected in the unity of His creation in which each individual part is in harmonious order with the remainder. There is nothing remotely like Him.

The essence of monotheism in Islam can be seen in the following verse of the Qura'n: *"Say He, Allah is One. Allah the eternal. Neither has he begotten, nor is he begotten. And no one is his equal."* <sup>24</sup>

## PERSPECTIVE OF THE HISTORIC RELIGIONS

According to the Semitic religions, God made the first man and woman on this earth. And they acknowledged the existence of the Creator. Yet, scientific evidence shows that religious rites were practised in early pre-historic times. From this it can be inferred that, from the very beginning of existence, man must have been imbued with a sense of the sacred. Archaeological records would appear to indicate that the Neanderthals of some 150,000 years ago practised the ritual burial of the dead. This would suggest that they believed in a kind of after-life or an indestructible world.

Circa 4000-3000 BC, urban civilization began to evolve in the Middle East, and with the settled agricultural life this offered, cities began to be established. This led to religion taking an organized form with orders of priests, temples, etc. Writing was developed, which facilitated the better preservation of the oral traditions. Great centres of culture, religion and civilization were established in Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley.

During 800-500 BC, the great religions of the world took definite shape, and two spiritual leaders, the Mahavira or the Jina or Conqueror and the Buddha (The Enlightened One) rose to prominence. They both lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. and their

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<sup>24</sup> Quran: Chapter 112

teachings have lived on in the hearts of their followers till today. Their religions are known respectively as Jainism and Buddhism.

Zoroastrianism and Judaism developed and flourished in the Middle East between 1200 - 1000 BC; while Buddhism and Hinduism developed in India. During this time, between 800-500 BC, there were similar developments in China, where the early traditions, which needed reform and clarification, were systematized by Confucius to produce a coherent social and religious system. Then came a legendary contemporary, Lao-Tse, whose mystical and contemplative teachings are summed up in *Tao-Te-ching* (The classic of the Tao and its power). This became the source of a religion which had a profound influence upon Chinese life.

Around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, in the Western and Middle Eastern world, the prophet Zoroaster preached an ethical monotheism based on the principle that there is a cosmic struggle between the Good Spirit (Ahura Mazda) and the Bad Spirit (Angra Mainyu). In the West, the Hebrews, the first of the Semitic people, strove to attain true monotheism.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire and subsequently spread throughout the Middle East and the Greco-Roman world, Europe and North Africa.

The Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 AD. In his fortieth year, 610 AD he started receiving revelations from God through the Archangel Gabriel which were to form the basis of the religion of Islam as written in the Quran. The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad passed away in 632 A.D.

Although Islam is the youngest of the world's great religions, Muslims do not view it as a new religion. Muslims believe that it is the same faith taught by the prophets, Abraham, David, Moses and Jesus. The role of Muhammad as the last prophet was to formalize and clarify the faith and

purify it by removing ideas which were added in error in the form of the preserved Quran. Islam spread towards the north into the lands of the Persian Empire, to the north west (Syria, Egypt, the coast of northern Africa and finally Spain) and to the north east into the provinces of northern India. This was accomplished during the reign of the Pious Caliphs (632-665), who have followed by the Umayyads (665-750) and the Abbasids (750-1258).

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion founded in the fifteenth century Punjab on the teachings of Guru Nanak and ten successive Sikh Gurus, the last one being the sacred text Guru Granth Sahib.

#### **IMPORTANT DATES IN THE ORIGIN OF MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS**

**4000–2500 BC: Early Development of Hinduism**

**2000 BC: Time of Abraham, Patriarch of Israel**

**1200 BC: Time of Moses, Hebrew leader of the Exodus**

**1000 BC: Assumed time of Zoroaster**

**1100 BC–500 BC: Hindus compile the Vedas, their holy book.**

**563 BC–483 BC: Time of Buddha**

**599 - 527 BC: Time of Mahavira**

**551 BC–479 BC: Time of Confucius**

**500+ BC: Time of Shinto**

**604 B.C Time of Lao-Tse**

**200 BC: The Hindu holy book Bhagavad Gita is written**

**2-4 BC–32 AD: Time of Jesus Christ**

**32 AD: The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

40–90 AD: New Testament written by the followers of Jesus Christ

570–632 AD: Time of Muhammad, who records the Quran as the basis of Islam

1469–1538 AD: Time of Guru Nanak

#### NEED FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

From the earliest days of civilization to the modern technological and scientific world, religion has always expressed the deepest longings and questions of mankind. Religion has taken central place in the lives of virtually all cultures and civilizations. Technology and Science may have changed the way we look at our world or understand various phenomena, but religion still persists, and holds an important place in the lives of its adherents.

Religion is everywhere; in towns, cities, villages, and in the context of global as well as cultural issues. Religion cannot be ignored. It is powerful and persistent, and cannot be done without. For most of us, religion is the guiding force and the meaning of our lives, and existence in this world. Therefore, the study of religion is as vital as other forms of learning.

The history of man and his earliest cultures have shown that religion has been a vital and pervasive feature of human life. The study of religions is important because it enables people across the entire spectrum of religions, caste, creed, regions, colour, etc., to develop an understanding of others' beliefs and cultures, and to learn to live in mutual peace and harmony. An adequate knowledge of other religions is necessary, so that we may make sense of the diversity of religious traditions in the world and in our own environment. To do this, we need to appreciate the nature and extent of that diversity, and, in the process, also learn to appreciate our own culture and religion.

The study of religion involves the attempt to understand its significance, its origin and its myriad forms. Broadly speaking, the study of religion comprehends two aspects: Assembling information and Interpreting systematically the material gathered in order to elicit its meaning.

The first aspect of assembling information involves the psychological and historical study of religious life and must be supplemented by auxiliary disciplines like Archaeology, Ethnology, Philology, Literary History and other similar disciplines.

Religion is manifested externally through places of worship, ceremonies, art, etc. but their real significance can be approached through the inner life of those who use these externals. When the external and internal manifestations are fused together in the life of a religious person, only then can the true significance of the impact of religion be seen.

That is why, the history of religions must be more than the chronicling of events; it must be an attempt to enter into the meaning of those events.

Religion is a rich and complex phenomenon. It holds together its outer and inner aspects, and exists in a variety of forms of Faith. One cannot speculate about religious truths without proper knowledge of the facts and feelings of religion. Therefore, the description of religion and its history could be likened to a scientific undertaking; for it is necessary to look at the facts dispassionately and objectively. The study of religions then is a Science which requires a sensitive and artistic heart.

## STUDY OF RELIGION

The study of different religions is like interpreting an abstract work of art. One observer's summing up of its significance can seldom be exactly identical to that of another. Therefore, though in comparing religions, we strive to have a clear cut idea of the structures of religious experiences, we must always bear in mind the basic

necessity of appreciating each religion as such in its own right. Moreover, religions must be studied in the perspective of world history.

The study of Religion can be undertaken in many different approaches and methods like Anthropological, Feminist, Phenomenological, Philosophical, Sociological, Theological Approaches etc. The study of Religion was crystallized as a discipline in itself in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Religious Studies is the academic field of multi-disciplinary, secular study of religious beliefs, behaviours and institutions.

Religious studies originated when scholarly and historical analysis of the Bible had flourished, and Hindu and Buddhist texts were first being translated into European languages.

Early influential scholars included Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900) and Cornelius P Tiele. Max Muller was a German philologist and Orientalist, and one of the founders of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies. He wrote *The Sacred Books of the East*. Cornelius P Tiele was a prominent Professor of the Science of Religion, in the University of Leyden from 1877. He authored books like *Outlines of History of Religion*, *History of the Religion of Ancient Times*, *Elements of the Science of Religion in India*, and *Comparative History of Egyptian and Mesopotamian Divine Worship*. He was also one of the founders of the Study of Comparative Religion.

#### APPROACHES FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Of the various approaches to the Study of Religion, we shall expound upon five basic approaches. They are:

1. The Historical Comparative Method
2. The Phenomenological Method
3. The Confessional Approach
4. The Empathic Approach, And

## 5. The Sociological Approach

Objectivity is at the heart of the first two approaches; it is often seen as the central academic virtue. Teachers have influence over their students. It would be wrong to abuse that influence by attempting to persuade a person to a particular viewpoint. Therefore, one should not admit affinity with any particular tradition. Instead, one should teach or study each tradition dispassionately and accurately.

One of the hopes that often lie behind religious studies as an academic discipline is the creation of a liberal and understanding culture. As people come to understand other cultures and religions they tolerate each other's point of view. Liberalism in this way celebrates the right of each individual to affirm his or her own traditions, provided that this affirmation does not exclude others from affirming their traditions. There is also the hope that knowledge of other religious traditions will convey an appropriate sense of humility and mutual respect. Along with this, the quest for accuracy is a wholly appropriate academic virtue.

However, these two approaches are not far from imperfections. They have the tendency to overlook the very claims to offer an objective survey of the diverse traditions, and can easily create a completely misleading impression. The impression given by such cold, uninvolved accounts can give an uncommon character of religion.

Let us understand these methods of the study of religion in brief.

### 1. The Historical Comparative Method

The Historical Comparative Method of the study of religion delves into of the study of religions, and their history. Each tradition is studied and compared. It seeks to find historical connections and differences, and also identify the independent occurrences of similar phenomena so that one can understand and explain one of the mightiest factors in the

history of mankind. This will make us understand why and how Religion formed, as well as torn asunder nations, united as well as divided Empires, sanctioned the most atrocious and barbarous deeds, but has also inspired admirable acts of heroism, self-renunciation and devotion in the lives of its followers.

Religion, like living organisms have a history, and delving into their history will tell us how they rose and spread, grew and faded away. However, like every genuine scientific study, historical investigations must be comparative, if they are to be studied in a proper manner. Every religion has two prominent constituent elements: *theological* and *practical*. Theology means Religious ideas and practical means the Religious acts. We should remember that the basis of the comparative historical study of religions must be a patient and critical examination of the sources from which the knowledge of the various religions of the world is to be drawn. Namely, Written documents and traditions, monuments and works of art, sacred writings and heretical books, and even evidence brought by travelers and settlers from different parts of the world.

## 2. The Phenomenological Method

The phenomenological method of the study of religion pertains to the effects of religious experience. Phenomenological comes from 'phenomenon' which literally means 'appearance'. Its task is to interpret the various ways in which the sacred appears to human beings in the world, the ways in which humans understand and care for that which is revealed to them. Thus most phenomenologists' try to systematize and classify the phenomenology of religion - the things that 'appear' to mankind. Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950) was among the most distinguished of Phenomenologist's of Religion.

Among the numerous schools using the phenomenological method, the following features are deduced:-

- The study of religion should be Empirical, so that one studies religion free from any prior assumptions.
- The study should be descriptive and historical, so that one can understand these traditions objectively.
- It should be anti-reductionist, i.e. opposed to any attempt to turn religion into a branch of Psychology or Sociology. It should accept religion as a distinctive Phenomenon in its own right.
- The phenomenological approach is similar with the historical-comparative method in that it stresses on the need for objectivity when studying religion.

### 3. The Confessional Approach

The third approach to the study of religion is a strong and total reaction to the dangers in 'objectivity'. This is the confessional approach. It assumes the truth or worth of one tradition, and then may offer an analysis and evaluation of the others. Similarities can be affirmed, but differences must also be confronted. Muslims disagree with Christians over the significance and status of Jesus. This is a disagreement about truth. Therefore, both cannot be right—there is a significant issue to be considered. The confessional approach is not afraid to acknowledge this; and is willing to try to resolve disagreements from the vintage point of a certain tradition.

The difficulty with this approach is clear. By assuming the truth of a tradition, one can easily distort and misrepresent its rivals. For example, consider a Christian teacher offering judgements on Islam from the Christian perspective. Judging another tradition by the standards internal to one's own will easily lead to its distortion.

Every person comes to the study of religion with a particular perspective. Neutrality and objectivity are not his options. However, this does not mean that we are bound to distort and misrepresent each other. We can find all sorts of ways to understand each other. It is often in listening to the other person that we find ourselves empathizing. Human beings have a remarkable tendency to use the imagination in order to understand someone else's views and beliefs. This imagination is vital in the study of religion.

A confessional approach or a faith-based approach takes the methodology of applying what is said or written, and this eventually this becomes the truth. The problem with confessional approach is that it could give way to historical inaccuracies. This approach practices what is known as Hermeneutics, which is the studying of scriptures in the light of all other scriptures. A confessional approach can conflict with a historian in the sense that the historian will have no idea of the thoughts, emotions or spiritual aspects of the writer. But they can share each other's approach and therefore gain a deeper understanding of religions.

#### 4. The Emphatic Approach

The Emphatic approach means to make a definite approach to the study of religion. It suggests *three stages* in the study of other religions.

*Stage 1* To understand where one comes from, the traditions that influences one's upbringing.

*Stage 2* To make an attempt to understand other traditions like one's own.

*Stage 3* To make decisions in the light of the first two stages. This involves either an act of clarification or modification.

The emphatic approach does not start from any of the earlier perspectives, though it may touch on all of them. A person does not organize his tradition from these different perspectives. Faith touches every part of a person's life and presents itself as a whole. Religion touches both the things one believes in, and the way one behaves.

## 5. The Sociological Approach

The Sociological Approach of Religion focuses on the interaction between Religion and the Society. Sociologists examine religious practices for evidence of inter-relationship with religious institutions, structures, ideologies, class and group distinctions in which societies are constituted. The sociological approach to religion does not bother with questions pertaining to the evidence of the existence of God. They are concerned with the features of religious beliefs or rituals that sustain a particular way of life. They try to study and understand the relationship between particular personal circumstances, or the social context of religion, or the sociological beliefs pertaining to God or gods.

Peter Connolly in his book 'Approaches to the Study of Religion' says *"The sociological study of Religion had drawn attention not only to the dependence of religious beliefs and communities on social forces and processes, but also to the generative power of religious organizations and doctrine in the social world, and to the distinctive shape and characteristics of life worlds which religious communities represent in later primitive and modern societies."*

The founding fathers of sociology like Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber make frequent reference to theological discourses or to studies of religious behavior and belief systems. Emile Durkheim offered an evolutionary account of human societies from tribal to republican and from magical to rational. In his work 'The Elementary Form of the Religious Life', he provided rich analyses of the social functions of

religion. He also said that religion unites the members of a society around a common symbolic account of their place in the cosmos, their history and purpose in the order of things. Religion is therefore a source of social and moral order, binding the members of society to a common social project, a set of shared values and social goals. <sup>25</sup>

## THE DIMENSIONS TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

There are various dimensions to the study of Religion. In order to understand the length and measure of the Study of Religion, we need to analyze the various dimensions of religion. And in order to do so, we need to look into the various dimensions as explained by Roderick Ninian Smart (1927-2001) pioneer in the field of Secular Religious Studies and the President of the American Academy of Religion in 2000. He has given and segregated the study of religion into seven dimensions, in his book "The World's Religions". <sup>26</sup>

The dimensions of the study of religion are as follows:

*The Ritual/Practical Dimension*

*The Mythological/Narrative Dimension*

*The Doctrinal/Philosophical Dimension*

*The Ethical/Legal Dimension*

*The Social/Institutional Dimension*

*The Experiential/Emotional Dimension*

*The Material Dimension*

**The Ritual/Practical Dimension**

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<sup>25</sup> Emile Durkheim: *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Tr by Joseph Swain. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London. George Allen & Unwins, 1976

<sup>26</sup> Ninian Smart: *World Religions*. Cambridge University Press, 1989

The ritual or practical dimension of religion is taken to be the ground from which religious conceptions are formed. It also denotes the performances of the variances of formal acts and utterances of the performer. <sup>27</sup>

Religion expresses itself through rituals - worship, prayers, offerings, etc. These can be called the ritual dimension of religion. Even the simplest form of religious service involves ritual, which coordinates the inner intention with the invisible one (like closing one's eyes in prayer, to the unseen God).

Rituals involve both an inner and an outer aspect. It can therefore degenerate into a mechanical or conventional process. If people go through the motions of religious observance without accompanying it with the intensions and sentiments which give it meaning, ritual is merely an empty shell. Due to this reason, some religious activities are condemned as 'ritualistic'.

The meaning of ritual cannot be understood without reference to the environment of belief in which it is performed. Prayer in most rituals is directed towards a divine being.

### The Mythological/Narrative Dimension

Theology and comparative study of religion uses the term "myth" or "mythology" <sup>28</sup> in relation to religious phenomena which is neutral to the truth or falsity of the story enshrined in the myth. The term 'myth' <sup>29</sup> originally means "story", and in calling something a story we are not saying that it is true or false, but just reporting what is being said. The mythological dimension of religion is thus the story-side of religion, which includes written tradition as well as the tales which have been

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<sup>27</sup> Roy A Rappaport: *Ritual & Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999

<sup>28</sup> *Mythology*, OED, 2007

<sup>29</sup> Myth: Merriam. *Webster Online Dictionary*, 2007

passed down orally. They may also include teachings as well as predictions. Christian apologist C.S.Lewis made a clear distinction between myth and falsehood when he referred to the life of Christ as a myth as well as a fact. <sup>30</sup>

It is also used to include the historical events of religious significance in a tradition. For example, the Passover ritual in Judaism re-enacts a highly important event that once occurred to the children of Israel: their delivery from bondage in Egypt. The historical event functions as a myth. English Professor Howard Schwartz does not attempt to determine if biblical or the narratives are true or false. It is just accepted. <sup>31</sup>

### **The Doctrinal/Philosophical Dimension**

The doctrinal dimension is the official or formal teachings which explain the real essence of a particular religion. Doctrines are an attempt to give system, clarity and intellectual power to what is revealed through the mythological and symbolical language of religious faith and ritual. Theology makes use of these symbols and myths.

In Christian Tradition, the story of the life of Jesus and the ritual communion service led to attempts to provide an analysis of the nature of the Divine Being, which would explain the idea of incarnation, as well as the belief in one God. It thus became necessary to elaborate the doctrine of Christianity.

Doctrines thus came to play an important role in all the major religions, as they are adapted to the social realities; and mankind seeks intellectual understanding even on matters of faith. <sup>32</sup>

### **The Ethical/Legal Dimension**

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<sup>30</sup> Lewis: *God in the Dock*, p66

<sup>31</sup> Howard Schwartz: *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*, p 78.

<sup>32</sup> Ninian Smart on World Religion, *Traditions & Challenges of Modernity*, Edited by John J Shephard, 2009, England

The Ethical Dimension of religion covers all aspects of how we live our lives, how we conduct ourselves to our neighbours or to our communities. It deals with how we behave in all aspects of life and our inter-relationships. It deals with the code of Ethics and ethical standards and ideals by which we live, both personal, and social. <sup>33</sup>

Religions usually incorporate a code of ethics. Ethics concern the behaviour of the individual. Men do not always live up to the standards they profess. For example in Buddhism, there are virtues and regulations that control the lives of the monks and nuns. In Judaism, there are rules apart from the Ten Commandments. Similarly, the Shariah in Islam is responsible for shaping the society both as a religion and as a political society. <sup>34</sup>

There is no doubt that religions have been influential in moulding the ethical attitudes of the societies in which man is a part of. Therefore it is important to distinguish between the moral teaching incorporated in the doctrines and mythology of a religion and the social facts concerning those who adhere to the faith in question.

### The Social/Institutional Dimension

Religions are not just systems of belief: they are also organizations, or parts of organizations. The social dimension consists of formal organizations such as the Church, Mosque, Temple, or Sangha. It also includes other institutions which are the direct or the indirect off-shoots of religious institutions like the Salvation Army or the Hamas. These have a communal and social significance. This social shape of religion is to some extent determined by the religious and ethical ideals and practices it harbours. These religious and ethical ideals are usually adapted to existing social conditions and attitudes. They indicate the way

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<sup>33</sup> Lectures by Rev Bruce A Bode/Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Oct 2007

<sup>34</sup> Seth D Kunin and Jonathan Miles-Watson, *Theories of Religion: A Reader*, Rutgers University Press, NJ 2006.

in which men's lives are in fact shaped, and the way in which religious institutions operate.

### The Experiential/Emotional Dimension

Personal religion involves what we call 'Experiential dimension.' Experiential dimension includes experiences such as visions, revelations, enlightenment, religious ecstasy etc. Man hopes to have contact with, and participate in the invisible world through rituals. Personal religion involves the hope of, or the realization of that world. The Buddhist Monk hopes for Nirvana, while the Christian prays for a personal relationship with God.

Religious experience is even more crucial when we consider the events and the human lives from which the great religions have stemmed. The Buddha achieved Enlightenment as he sat in meditation beneath the Bodhi Tree. After his enlightenment he believed that he had the secret of the cure for the sufferings and dissatisfactions of life in this world. There are records of visions of the Old Testament Prophets, which prompted them to preach to the people. It was also through such experiences that the Prophet Muhammad also began to preach the unity of Allah. The reading of the Upanishads, one of the sources of Hindu doctrines enables the reader to experience the foundations of its teachings.

However, there is a difficulty in undertaking the description of a religious experience. We have to rely on the testimony of those who have this experience, and these reports have to be written down or orally transmitted. Most times, accounts of prophetic or mystical experiences of religious leaders have been preserved by oral tradition through many generations before being written down. The Buddha preached about the thoughts of his times, but taught in such a manner that it addressed the problems of his time, as well as of the times to come. The Old Testament Prophets also adhered to

the Scriptures, but at the same time changes were made so that people could understand it with the changing of their times. In this manner, the doctrines of the respective faiths, as well as the experiences taken together will bring to light the full essence of religion.

### **The Material Dimension**

The Material dimensions of religion covers all aspects that are material. These may include the tangible items connected with religion like buildings, art, instruments used for rituals, furniture, utensils etc. They may also include natural features like sacred mountains, sacred sites etc. Ninian Smart says, "The material expressions of religion are far more often elaborate, moving and highly important for believers in their approach to the divine." He also goes on to explain the significance and importance these materials in the form of elaborate paintings, stained glass art work, icons etc to the Eastern Orthodox Christian, as well as the various forms of idols to a Hindu. <sup>35</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

Religion is multi-dimensional. It is a composite of doctrines, myths, ethical teachings, rituals and social institutions, whose significance is heightened by different religious experiences. In order to understand religion better, one has to study the pattern of religious life directed towards the attainment of salvation or nirvana; one has to fathom what it means to be in union with the Almighty Creator, to serve Him and fulfill the purpose of man's existence on this earth. This simple yet complex relationship between the Creator and the created deserves to be studied exhaustively.

God (or gods), whether or not He is regarded as the Creator, is the principal focus of worship, adulation and rituals. The understanding of God and a particular religion therefore requires a careful examination of man's religious life, and external rituals of worship must necessarily be understood with reference to man's inner convictions and religious experience.

Comparisons between religions must be made in the most circumspect manner. Each religion has its own particular strengths which are uniquely expressed, its own driving force, and its own special significance. Each religion has to be understood in terms of the interconnectedness of its own different areas of functioning and influence and those of other religions.

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