Chapter 1: Studying Religions

Chapter Overview

In this introductory chapter, Roy C. Amore and Amir Hussain discuss broadly what we know about religion. While the nature of religious belief and practices has changed throughout the centuries, virtually all human cultures share concepts that are particular to what we understand as religion, including belief in “powerful gods, sacred places, a life of some kind after death, and the presence in the physical world of spirits and deities that interact with humans in various ways.” Amore and Hussain outline a range of concepts that are “so old and widespread that no one can say where or when they first emerged,” which are the three worlds paradigm, sacred places, and death and burial.

To help us understand the development of central ideas, patterns of concern, and practices in the history of human religiosity, the Amore and Hussain divided this introduction around the following themes:

1. Shamanism
2. Connecting to the Cosmos
3. Temple Religion
4. Prophets and Sages
5. First Principle and/or Energy God
6. Mystery Religion
7. Avatar: God on Earth
8. Scriptural Religion

These aforementioned patterns of historical development not only provide us with an introduction to several features and ideas of the religious traditions that we will examine in *A Concise Introduction to World Religions*, but they also invite us to reflect on what it means to study religious traditions comparatively. These aforementioned patterns are meant to assist in our analyzing of the common and diverse aspects within, throughout and across the religious traditions.

Moreover, Amore and Hussain’s questions also call our attention to the various methods by which religious traditions are studied (including historical, political, and textual), the advantages in understanding the significance of religious diversity, and the challenges of the insider versus outsider perspectives. Rather than religious traditions basically all being the same, this opening chapter suggests there are commonalities and great differences that separate them. The religious diversity we encounter within this textbook and throughout the world need not necessarily be seen as insurmountable or undesirable part of the shared human experience. Understanding both the insider’s and outsider’s perspective of religion as well as appreciating the complex connections that have undergirded the development of religions from the beginning up to the present day has increasingly become a valuable practice in many facets of our everyday lives.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Summarizes the basic characteristics of religion, specialized terminology, and identifies and relates the general patterns shared across the world religions.
2. Outline and describe some of the underlying reasons for studying religion.
3. Recognizes and delineates some of the approach to the academic study of religious traditions that maintains a critical ethos regarding truth claims, and guarding against relativistic judgements.
4. Compare and contrast the two valid and needed ways of understanding religion, that is, from both an insider’s perspective and from an outsider’s perspective.
5. Classify the varied ways that all human cultures have religious dimensions and that a concern with religious ideas is part of what it means to be human.

Study Questions

1. From the five overarching assertions provided by scholars in the field of religious studies on what entails a religious studies approach, what are two of them? Explain their relevance.
2. The pattern of the Three Worlds divides the world into the sky, the earth, and the underworld. With what are these three levels associated?
3. The word “prophet” has two related meanings. What are these two meanings and why are these meanings problematic?
4. Avatar stories differ from stories of deities coming down to earth in two main respects. What are these two differences?
5. What is Scripturalism? When did it emerge and could you identify one or two religious traditions that engage in this practice?

Study Questions: Answers

1. The five assertions are as follows (1) there is a difference between devotional expression and studying devotional expression; this relates to the difference between an insider and outsider perspective; (2) religions are internally diverse; for instance, there are numerous amount of ways to identify with and practice the Christian faith; (3) religions are always evolving and changing; this means it is important to recognize the social and historical context in which the various manifestations of religion take their shape; (4) religions are enmeshed in in virtually all dimensions of human agency and expression; in part, this means to study religion one should look outside of the institutions and sacred spaces into the everyday lives of people; (5) religions are historically embedded; this means that religious traditions cannot be removed from the historical communities and circumstances to which they belong. (p. 5)
2. In the pattern of the Three Worlds, the sky is associated with the home of the deities, the earth is associated with the home of the humans, and the underworld is associated with monsters and dark or evil places. (p. 6)
3. The first meaning of the word “prophet” is one who speaks on behalf of a deity. The second meaning of “prophet” is one who foresees or predicts the future. These two meanings are problematic because they are often conflated, that is, joined together for one meaning: the prophet warns people on behalf of the deity that if the deity is not obeyed, disasters will follow. (p. 15)
4. The first main difference is that the avatar is a god in human form, that is, both human and divine. The second main difference is that the avatar is a saviour figure, as the avatar either saves the world from evil, or saves humans by securing for them a place in heaven. (pp. 19–20)
5. Scripturalism is this shift within some religious traditions wherein there this insistence upon recognizing their particular scriptures as the literal words of God and therefore, these scriptures should be the focal point for adherents within that given religion. Briefly, this practice emerged in Rabbinic Judaism following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), and within Christianity and Islam, scripturalism is a prominent feature (p. 21).

Research Questions

1. Sacred spaces are found all over the world. Are there any commonalities in terms of how these sacred spaces are structured, used in terms of rituals, ceremonies, and other events?
2. Avatar biographies generally follow similiar patterns. Compare the biographies of at least two avatars from different traditions. Are there any differences within these patterns? What do these differences tell us about the religions involved?
3. What are some of the similar and distinctive ways that rituals of sacrifice have been enacted, interpreted across two or more religious traditions?
4. Recognizing that the concept of the Three Worlds is applicable to several religious traditions, compare and contrast two traditions therein explain the differences and similarities across them both.
5. What role has astrology played in the decision-making process of religions? What does this tell us about how these religions understand the cosmos?
6. How are the functions of the priesthood in the Temple Religions similar to those of the shamans and the hunting rituals? How are these functions different?
7. What are some of the similarities and differences pertaining to the idea of an Energy God as applied and understood in Chinese Daoism, the Upanishads, and pre-Socratic philosophy?
8. Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that we can trace “religion in the singular” by studying historical developments of religion. How does this study help us to understand the broader perspective that we need for the study of religion? What is another theory that can be used for this broader perspective?
9. Many scholars suggest that Christianity was influenced by the Mystery Religions of Late Antiquity? How could we analyze the argument that Christianity was influenced by these components?
10. Scripture plays a significant role in several of the world religions. Compare the use of scripture in the three Abrahamic traditions. What are the similarities and differences in their respective uses of scripture?

Reflection Questions

1. How does the insider-versus-outsider question affect the study of religion? It is too facile to claim one is a completely subjective perspective (that is the insider) whereas the other offers an objective perspective (that is the outsider)?
2. Do you think that all religions are equal and/or the same? Why or why not? What are some of the underlying issues and concerns that come to mind when one insists on the sameness of all religious traditions?
3. Do you think that all religions have the same features? Which features do you think are the most common? Why would or could it be important for insiders of any given tradition to assert the unique and distinctive features of their religion? Conversely, why would or could it be important for insiders of any given tradition to assert the sameness and continuities with other religions?
4. Do you think that it is important to study religious traditions (rather than theological studies)? What are some of the benefits received from engaging in the discipline of religious studies?
5. Do you think that a woman’s experience of religion is different from a man’s? Beyond sex and gender, what other embodied, historical and underlying cultural factors may shape the ways by which one experiences religion, faith and the like?

Additional Resources

This list of books and websites provides a range of useful places to start how religion has been and is currently studied, framed and transmitted, which could lead to a lifetime of study and research.

1. Religion News Service (RNS). <https://religionnews.com/>

For over 80 years, Religion News Service has strived to be “the largest single source of news about religion, spirituality and ideas,” and to “illuminate and inspire public discourse on matters relating to belief and convictions.” This is an excellent resource with balanced reporting on a wide range of developments across the spectrum of religious and spiritual traditions, which could be used in the classroom to foster dialogue and debate on current events.

1. Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. University of Chicago Press, 2005. Rather than only being a descriptive term, Masuzawa argues that the very concept of “world religions” is itself part of a particular agenda and ideology, which informs the patterns of categorizing and the academic knowing of traditions.
2. Mark C. Taylor, ed. 1998. *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Taylor’s introduction, albeit written at the graduate student level, is an excellent summary of the historical developments, questions and approaches, related to religious studies. Additionally, there are twenty-two chapters each devoted to a particular theme that cuts across religious traditions, such as, Jonathan Z. Smith on “Religion, Religions, Religious,” Catherine Bell on “Performance,” and Tomoko Masuzawa on “Culture.”
3. *Bill Moyers on Faith and Reason*. 2006. <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/index.html>

This seven-part PBS series, first shown in 2006, explores tensions between belief and disbelief.

1. *The New York Times*’ “Religion and Belief,” site.

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/r/religion_and_belief/index.html>

This site offers a collection of news about religion and belief including commentary and archival articles published in *The New York Times*. Similar to the Religion News Service, this New York Times site could be used to encourage discussion and debate on current issues related to religion, spirituality and culture.

1. Northey, Margot, Bradford A. Anderson and Joel N. Lohr. *Making Sense in Religious Studies*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2015.
2. Smith, Huston. The World’s Religions. *HarperOne*, 2009.
3. Anderson, Leona M. and Pamela Dickey Young. *Women and Religious Traditions*. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, 2014.
4. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001.
5. Flood, Gavin. *The Importance of Religion: Meaning and Action in a Strange World*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For Indigenous sacred sites and rituals, these rules usually mean that legs and shoulders should be covered for both men and women. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.
5. Due to notions about the power of life and the need for certain ceremonies, menstruating women may be asked to refrain from participating in some ceremonies as they do not need to participate during this powerful time. Please be respectful of these ideas and needs.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.