

## CHAPTER 11

# Religion and Society

When paleoanthropologists are trying to decide whether some remains they have discovered are human or not, they look for evidence of religious practice. This is because from time immemorial human beings have buried their dead, a sign that they believed in life after death. Such evidence includes the existence and nature of burial sites. Even Neanderthal man buried his dead, often ceremonially and with gifts such as flint weapons, ornaments and even food, suggesting a belief in a life after death.

During the 19th Century, paintings done between 25,000 and 10,000 BC were discovered in extremely inaccessible caves in France and Spain. Most of the paintings are of animals that were hunted, but there are also pictures of magicians or sorcerers.

These discoveries indicate that the earliest known human beings held a belief in the mysterious nature of life and a sense of the sacred.

We obviously cannot know what such people believed or what rituals they performed. However, in primitive societies existing today in which the lifestyle resembles that of extinct primitive societies, anthropologists find the people are very religious. In fact, there has never been a society that was not religious. Despite the sacrificial lifestyle it demands, the persecution it sometimes invites, and the recent secular emphasis in society, religion has persisted. Even so-called atheistic societies have been religious in a distorted way with their symbols, ruling ideology and personality cults.

What is religion? Many people have asked this question, and many different answers have been given. Religion is so pervasive that it is actually difficult to give a completely satisfactory definition of it. The word itself comes from the Latin word *religere* meaning "to re-bind," implying that although man is



connected to God by creation, he has to bind himself back to God by his own choice. Although most people think that religion always has something to do with God, Buddhism is a religion that does not believe in God. Here are some definitions of religion:

*"Religion is the acknowledgment of a dependence on a superhuman being expressed through acts of cult."*

— Christopher Dawson, 20<sup>th</sup> century English religious philosopher

*"Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness."*

— Alfred North Whitehead, British philosopher and mathematician

*"Religion is the opium of the people."*

— Karl Marx

*"True religion is the cult of the ancestors, the cult of all the fathers as one father inseparable from the Triune God, yet not merged with Him."*

— N.F. Fedorov

*"Religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis."*

— Sigmund Freud

*"Religion is a community of individuals living a life pursuing and in accordance with internal truth through a relationship with the transcendent Being."*

— Nicholas Zernov, Russian author

## Why study about religion?

If you do not feel religious, you may wonder why you should learn about religion. There are several good educational reasons.

- ✗ Studying different religions gives us the opportunity to look at the world through someone else's eyes, to develop the skill of empathy.
- ✗ Historically a large proportion of the world's population has been religious. Therefore, to understand one dimension of what it means to be human, we should understand the phenomenon of religion.
- ✗ Religion is playing an increasingly important part in world affairs. There is a religious dimension to many of the world's conflicts. To have a proper understanding of what is taking place and why, it is important to understand the religious convictions and practices of the people involved.
- ✗ It is impossible to understand a nation's history and culture and the motivations of historical figures without understanding something about their religion.
- ✗ Religion has been one of the most important repositories of human wisdom and experience. This inheritance belongs to everyone. As Goethe said, "He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth."

## What is the origin of religion?

Although when we are born we cannot speak a language, within a couple of years each of us learns how to communicate. Every person is born with a natural ability and predisposition for learning languages. Since religion is also so widespread, it would appear to be something natural, something very deeply connected to what it means to be human.

Although religion is a many faceted and complex phenomenon, it can be seen as a response to:

- ✗ man's quest for answers to ultimate questions such as the meaning of life, suffering, and life after death
- ✗ the desire for standards by which to live one's life
- ✗ the desire for community

The satisfaction of these human needs has been fulfilled through three important dimensions of every religion, which we will now discuss:

## Religion and culture

Every religion has a particular understanding of the world, a belief that there are one or more gods who desire a certain conduct on our part. Primarily, people believe that these gods desire to be worshiped. Thus religion is more than just belief in God or gods; it also involves various rituals and prayers done to please Him or them. In ancient times the gods were thought to be pleased through the offering of gifts or sacrifices, often of animals, either in recognition of a blessing received, such as the birth of a child, or to induce a gift from the gods, such as a good harvest. This latter motive often degenerated into magic and superstition. In the major world religions today, animal sacrifice has been replaced by spiritual sacrifice through self-denial, prayer and good deeds. It is generally believed that God is more concerned about people being good than about being given burnt offerings.

A wide variety of rituals have been developed by which people worship God. Through ritual, religious people make time and space sacred. It is a way to sanctify and remember certain events of one's life or the history of one's people. Some rituals are personal, while others are communal. Often these rituals are very elaborate. Some examples are the Christian Eucharist, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Jewish holy days. Many of the rites of passage in human life, such as birth, the attainment of adulthood, marriage and death, have associated religious rituals that imbue the event with meaning and significance.



The religious worldview, and accompanying rituals, have been a primary root of cultures all over the world. A religion's view of the world is often expressed in the form of myths which are not mere fairy tales but embody profound truths. One cannot understand European culture without being deeply impressed by the overwhelming influence of Christianity, which has been the inspiration for some of the greatest music, architecture, literature and art. Some of the greatest music was composed for religious events, and religion has been one of the most common inspirations for art. Michelangelo, the greatest of the

Renaissance painters, was deeply religious and drew on religious themes for his best paintings. Many of the most beautiful buildings are religious sanctuaries, such as churches and temples. Drama, too, has grown out of religious rituals and is often concerned with religious themes. While Christianity has profoundly influenced Europe culture, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism have similarly contributed to the culture of the Far East; Hinduism to India; and Islam to the Middle East.

The earliest, most formative and often most respected literature of every culture has been religious. The Koran, for example, is universally regarded as the best literature in the Arabic language.

For many Christians, their written language and history began with the translation of the Bible into their native tongue. For instance, if we look at Russian history, we see that the first Christian missionaries, Cyril and Methodius, devised the Slavonic script. They translated the Bible for their Christian converts because they wanted them to be able not only to listen to the biblical parables but also to read them in their native language. If we remember now what we know about the history and



culture of medieval Russia, we can see that it was directly or indirectly connected with the history of Christianity. The authors of most of the historical chronicles were monks. The monuments of culture which have survived until today are mostly churches, due to the simple fact that they were the only stone buildings in Russia at that time, and they contained the frescoes and icons created by such great artists as Andrei Rublev and Feofan the Greek. In the Middle Ages there was no secular literature, and apart from the historical chronicles, only religious books have survived. Although made for churches, they were sometimes

so exquisitely designed that they are treated as works of art and are now kept in museums. And as for music, the oldest Russia has are the ancient canticles.

This knowledge gives us a deeper understanding of the soul of a nation, its complicated development, its hopes and sufferings. Although Russia, Germany and England, for example, are historically all Christian countries, Christianity has different characteristics in each. It is people, who have traditionally channeled their deepest feelings and resources into religious creations, who finally shape the expression of religion in a nation's culture.

### *Religion and morality*

Religion is associated with a way of behaving and feeling that is regarded as right or good for us. Although the basis of society and its moral values is the family, religions all support the values that are necessary for the development and maintenance of the family, and thus of civilization. Some of these values are honesty, sexual propriety, and respect for ownership. Religion reinforces and invests meaning and significance in these values and shows how they are to be attained. One of the goals of religion is individual and communal spiritual perfection, although that may be defined differently by each religion.

Each religion charts out a course through which a person can achieve salvation. In the major religions, this course involves becoming self-disciplined and unselfish. In these religions no one can please God through ritual and sacrifice while ignoring his fellow man. Spiritual growth comes through self-denial and self-sacrifice rather than through ritual or magic. As we shall see, these religions have much in common in their ethical precepts, even if their beliefs are very different.

Though it is possible to construct an ethical system without a religious basis, in practice religion has been the main support for personal and family morality as well as social ethics. The primary source for religious ethics is God's revelation through nature, religious scripture and the lives of the founders of religions. For example, Christians regard Jesus Christ as the standard for their own lives. His life is the model for Christians to follow and emulate. Reason is used to reflect on and develop ethical

principles from these primary sources. Of course, there have been individuals who have lived moral lives without being religious, but there has never been a civilized society that endured without religion.

## Religion and community

Religion is seldom just a personal affair. Although it is very personal, it always involves a community or association of people who share the same beliefs. Thus, religion provides not merely a belief system but also community, and emotional and spiritual support for its members. Many religions, such as Judaism and Hinduism, are family-oriented and many of the ceremonies take place in the home. It is through the family that the religion, its traditions and its attitudes are passed on.

Beyond the family there is also a community of believers — in Islam called the *Ummah*, in Buddhism the *Sangha*, and in Christianity the *Church*. There are usually leaders of the local and larger communities. Sometimes, though not in all religions, religious leaders play some mediating role between ordinary believers and God. Religious buildings also provide a focal point for the community: in Islam the mosque, in Buddhism the temple, in Christianity the church, and in Judaism the synagogue. Regular rituals of worship and many religious ceremonies and celebrations take place in these buildings.

## The dark side of religion

In general, one could say that religion has been a force for goodness in society. Even today, most of the non-governmental, humanitarian projects around the world have a religious origin and are staffed by religious people.

However, one cannot ignore the dark side of religion. As well as light, life, joy and peace, religion is sometimes associated with:

- ✗ **intolerance:** the hatred and persecution of people of different beliefs, even to the point of killing them
- ✗ **obscurantism:** opposing intellectual, artistic and scientific advances
- ✗ **authoritarianism:** opposing intellectual, artistic, social and political freedom
- ✗ **dogmatism:** arrogant, stubborn assertion that what one believes is true
- ✗ **narrowness:** the view that only the members of a particular group will be saved while the rest of humanity is damned
- ✗ **hypocrisy:** preaching ethics while behaving in an antithetical manner.



It is often said that religion has been the cause of many wars. A closer look at such conflicts would show that there are usually other political forces at work, harnessing the power of religion for their own ends. Some religions are pacifist, but even those that are not have clear rules about when violence or war is justified and how it can be conducted in the most moral way. Revenge, aggression and unnecessary violence are always condemned, and peace, reconciliation and justice advocated. In fact, some of the main causes of recent wars have been tribalism, nationalism and expansionist atheistic ideologies. These

have rarely expressed a morality other than that the end justifies the means. Religion has tried to temper these aggressive impulses and bring reconciliation, but such teaching often has been swept aside when it stood in the way of human aggression.

When conflicts involve religion, it is because of the opposition of different beliefs and customs. Within a community in which everyone believes the same things and shares the same values, religion is not a source of conflict. Clashes may occur when different religions meet. Each side thinks its own beliefs and customs are right and superior to the other's. Such conflicts are especially intense when the religion is closely identified with nationality. In this case the problem is the lack of universal values that would enable people to respect each other despite their differences and to be able to live in peace together.

The "dark side" of religion exists because human beings themselves have a dark side. Although religious ideals and ethical norms appeal to the good side of human nature, the dark side of human nature easily subverts religion for its own ends. One should check to see if unethical activities of a religion are advocated or justified by the religion's teachings. They are probably not.

### *Belief and diversity*

The founder of each religion discovered similar yet different insights and answers, thus forming a variety of forms in ritual and religious organization. Each religion, while having universal elements, is an expression of the individual founder's or believers' perceptions and the particular environment and historical context in which he lived. It is also important to remember that specific cultural and linguistic backgrounds influenced the way these insights were expressed. Just as each individual's thoughts and perceptions are unique, clusters of belief systems are also unique. The problem comes when a particular community claims that it has sole authority based on its necessarily limited insights. This sense of authority can lead one religion to disclaim and disapprove of the practices and beliefs of others in an inappropriate and often unethical manner.

One does not need to prove that one way of salvation is valid by attacking and denigrating other religions. This is more often than not an expression of insecurity, not conviction. For a person secure in his religious identity, other beliefs and customs can be enriching instead of threatening.

If we follow the historical development of religions, we see how gradually each has expanded from a belief shared by only one tribe to one embraced by whole nations and spread around the world. As these religions have developed, they have overcome national, language, racial and cultural barriers.

Especially during this century, religious leaders have recognized the many blemishes on the record of religious history. There has been an increasing movement toward dialogue between different religions. Within Christianity, the ecumenical movement has sought to bridge the gaps that divide Christians and are the source of conflict. Ecumenism searches for the underlying values that can transcend the historical differences and works toward unity in diversity. Different religions, too, have begun to engage in dialogue based on mutual respect for one another's journey of faith.

## Universal Principles

It is evident in our world today that standards of morality differ from one society or culture to another. So you may wonder if all cultures or religions around the world hold any principles in common – or if there is no universal agreement on any principles.

We can find consensus on many values and principles among the most enduring of the world's religions.

Because these religions speak for so many of the earth's people and have stood the test of centuries, we can trust that when these religions all share a similar principle, that principle is considered universal.

Note, for example, the Golden Rule as expressed by the following six world religions:



**Buddhism:** For a state that is not pleasant or delightful to me must also be to him; and a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?

— Samyutta Nikaya v. 353

**Hinduism:** One should not behave toward others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself.

— Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8



**Judaism:** What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.

— Talmud, Shabbat 31a

**Taoism:** Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

— Tao Te Ching



**Islam:** Not one of you is a believer until you desire for your brother that which you desire for yourself.

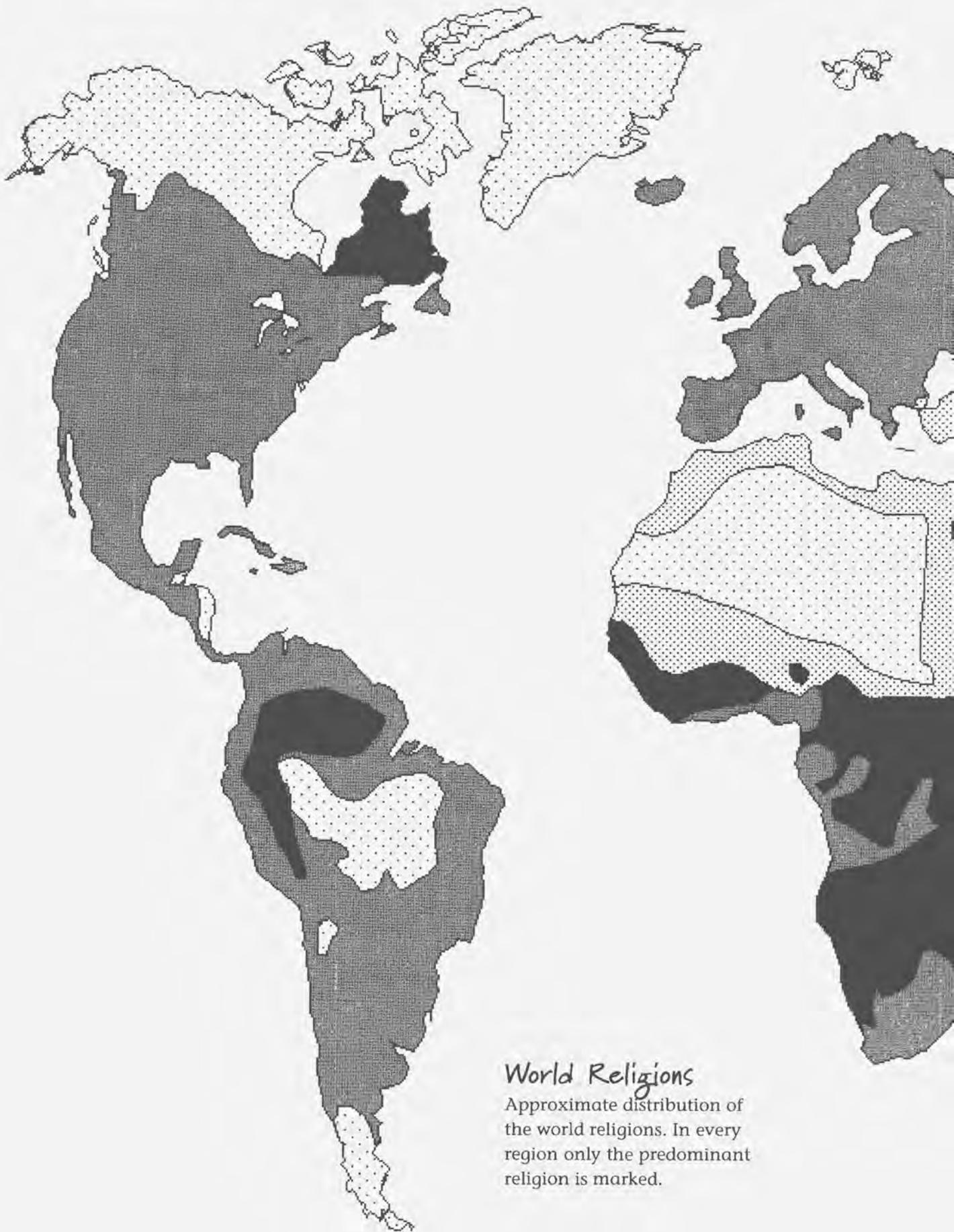
— Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 13

**Christianity:** Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.

— Matt. 7:12



The universal principles that most of the world's people believe in do exist. These principles speak a deep truth about what it means to be human, and they transcend all cultures and religions. How they are applied to everyday life varies, of course, but there is a remarkable agreement on the principles themselves around the world.



### *World Religions*

Approximate distribution of the world religions. In every region only the predominant religion is marked.

