

Lecture 1:

# WHAT IS “RELIGION?”

How do we define “religion”?  
How do know what is “religious” and what is not?



# What is religion?

- While we can easily identify religious behavior, “religion” proves very difficult to define.
- For example, many of believe that to be religious means possessing a belief in God. However, this is not true for all religions. In fact, among certain forms of Buddhism, God is unimportant.

## For example:

- Zen Buddhism considers focusing on definitions of gods, spirits, and supernatural are hindrances to enlightenment .
- Yet, there seems to be an intuitive realization and perhaps meaningful distinction between what we call “religion” and other endeavors. For example, it doesn't seem right to say that Mack is very religious because he works so hard at playing football.

## W. S. LaSor writes:

- “Religion may be defined as a relationship to the holy. To one who has been influenced by the Judeo-Christian belief system, religion is specifically the relationship of the human being to the God of the Bible: The Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible and the God and Father of Jesus Christ in the NT. But there are polytheistic religions with many gods, and there are atheistic religions with no god (e.g., Buddhism—although the intrusion of Hindu thought into Buddhism often creates the impression that Buddhists worship many gods). Animistic religions likewise are difficult to categorize, since everything in nature is seen as the manifestation-or perhaps the actual presence-of deity”

~ ISBE, Rev. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:79.

# Etymology helpful?


- Derivative of Latin “religare” which means to “bind,” thus referring to the beliefs, actions, and emotions that bind one to one’s god (s).
- Some suggested a derivation from Latin “relegere” means to “read again”, which stresses the repetition of prayers, hymns, & scriptures.
- Is this helpful?

## But consider...


- If religion is defined to include one's belief about God and His revelation to humanity, one's ways and means of worshipping God, and one's moral and ethical behavior as derived from that faith, then near eastern world religions can be certainly described as religions but not all forms of Eastern Religions (e.g., educated forms of buddhism).

## Complicated by Evolutionary interpretation of religion:

- Interpreting religion from an evolutionary starting point complicates the definition.
  1. animism [nature has a soul, e.g., tree] to polytheism [multiple gods];
  2. polytheism to henotheism [worshipping one god while acknowledging the existence of other gods];
  3. henotheism to monotheism [Infinite-personal God who is infinite and personal].



Do the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, & sociology add to the bewilderment?

- Psychoanalytical account?
  - Sociological account?
  - Anthropological account (e.g., postulating a certain religious system of people living in the Paleolithic age from drawings on a cave wall).
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Consider Sociologist Émile Durkheim's (1858-1917) definition of religion:

“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.”



~ *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915, fifth impression, 1964), 47.

# Philosopher Immanuel Kant:

- “the recognition of all duties as divine commands.”

~ *Critique of Practical Reason*, tran. Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), 134.

## David S. Noss:

- "...religion is a product of the earliest attempt of the human mind to achieve a sense of security in the world."

~ *A History of the World Religions*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 3.

# Closer look:

Let us take a closer look at the 16 factors that Ross believes accounts for “primal religions”:



In his discussion of the characteristics of religion in primal cultures, Ross contends:

1. **Awe before the Sacred** (people regard anything sacred or holy with ambivalent feelings of fear and attraction (e.g., child before a big fire);
2. **Expression of anxiety in ritual** (e.g., "Will this action please the gods?")
3. **Ritual & Expectancy** ... causal efficacy:
  - a. regular ritual performed to bring about something such as productivity of the soil;
  - b. celebration of annual events such as harvest festival;
  - c. other events such as change in leadership or certain status achieved among people-group (e.g., marriage).

## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a primal religion:

- 4. **Myth and ritual:** Myths are necessary to answer ultimate questions (e.g., what are we; where did we come from?) and perhaps alleviate “boredom”:
  - “The variety of religious beliefs and practices is almost infinite, yet the system developed by each society appears to meet all of its needs. Some groups have developed elaborate creeds. It seems that man enjoys playing with both his mind and his muscles... the human capacity for being bored, rather than social or natural needs, lies at the root of man’s cultural advance.” ~ Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man* (Appleton Century, 1936), 89.

## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a primal religion:

- 5. **Types of magic** (magic is defined by Ross as “an endeavor through an utterance of set words, or the performance of set acts, or both, to control or bend the powers of the world to one’s will. It cannot be wholly divorced from religion...it is discernibly present when an emphasis is placed on forcing things to happen rather than asking that they do.”)
- Different types of magic:
  - Sympathetic magic: It imitates the looks and actions of a person or an animal (e.g., a bear);
  - Productive magic (e.g., saying a certain set of words to bring a rainstorm);
  - Aversive or destructive magic (e.g., voodoo dolls);
  - Contagious magic (e.g., taking someone’s hair or fingernails from one’s body and using it in a potion to control or hurt them).

## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a primal religion:

- 6. **Prayer**;
- 7. **Divination** (e.g., using a Shaman to make contact with the spirits of the dead);

## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a primal religion:

- 8. **Belief in *Mana*** [a Melanesian term used by anthropologists]:

a “convenient designation for the widespread belief in an occult force or indwelling supernatural power... experienced presence of a powerful but silent force in things or persons, especially any occult force believed to act of itself, as an addition to the forces naturally or usually present... vitally significant or extraordinary in quality, as distinguished from the ordinary, the usual, or the normal in quality. The extraordinary in quality-whether in events or in the character of some forceful human being or powerful beast-by its very nature draws attention to itself” (pg. 13).

## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a primal religion:

9. **Animism**: (different animate & inanimate objects possessing souls or spirits):

E. B. Tyler once stated, "all nature is possessed, pervaded, crowded with spiritual beings."

## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a primal religion:

### 10. Veneration and Worship of Powers:

“It has been said truly that man has worshiped everything he could think of beneath the earth, everything between earth and heaven, and everything in the heavens above. Sometimes it is the object itself that is worshiped as living and active, heavily charged with mana. Sometimes, the object is not worshipped for itself but for the spirit or soul lodged or inhering in it. In a third mode, the object is not worshiped at all; it becomes a symbol of the reality which is worshiped and which it visibly and tangibly represents. All three modes of worship may at times occur simultaneously...” (pg. 13).

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## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a Primal Religion:

### 11. Recognition of a Supreme Being:

"This is the natural place to raise the disputed question as to whether primal peoples have been widely given to religious relationships with a Supreme Being. It is common to find among many of them a recognition of the existence of a deity far up in the sky or at great remove, who has made everything-man, woman, earth, sea, and sky-and who at a distance sees all that goes on among them, and sometimes disapproves but does not often interfere.

A dispute has arisen among anthropologists as to whether this high deity has the religious significance of the nearer spirit powers of the earth. In most tribal communities with animistic beliefs, individuals have not had to be concerned on a daily basis about the high deity. The high deity is supreme and uncreated, existing from the beginning, but other spirits are much more active as determiners of destiny down on the earth.

Probably, the idea of a great Originator who has little to do with humanity in the ordinary course of life arose very naturally when an answer was attempted to such questions as 'where did our rituals come from' or 'Who began everything?' or 'Who as the First Mother?' Unable to think that any of the local powers with which they had daily dealings could have originated all things, they hit upon a rather speculative monotheistic explanation. But because the being they inferred seldom entered their lives, he or she was in most instances a deistic postulate rather than an ever-present religious reality" (pg. 15).

## Ross: Basic Characteristics of a Primal Religion:

12. **Taboo** (prohibitions or “hands-off warnings applied to all sorts of objects, persons, and/or actions because they are considered sacred, dangerous, or socially forbidden) (Ibid., 15).
13. **Purification rites;**
14. **Sacrifices and Gifts;**
15. **Attitudes Toward the Dead;**
16. **Totemism:** Recognition of a special relationship between a human group or an individual and a class or species of animals, plants, or inanimate objects (e.g., taking a name from some animal, bird, or object) (pg. 35).

## Max Müller's (1823-1900) of religion:

- Noted as the “true founder” of religious studies, offers this two-fold definition of religion (historian-linguist notion):

“a body of doctrines handed down by tradition, or in canonical books, and containing all that constitutes the faith of a Jew, Christian, or Hindu”  
and as “a faculty of faith... which distinguishes man from animals.”



~ *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Green, 1873), 16-17.

Ninian Smart, founder of the first religious studies dept. in Britain, believed that we need to:

- Abandon the quest for a clear definition of religion, and
- Advocate a “workable model” or “guide” which will allow one to identify a religion as it is observed in daily life.
- See chart for a visual taxonomy.



Ninian Smart contends that we are in the presence of religion when:

“A set of institutionalized rituals [repetitive behavior fixed by tradition], identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus [expressing certain commitment to spiritual values and the effects of creating or evoking a sense of sacred which is directed toward the divine or something beyond the divine] seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment [totality of human social life] and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines’ [doctrines and stories that function in society, whether historical or unhistorical, fact or fiction; they answer ultimate question and are comprehensive].

~ “Towards a Definition of Religion,” unpublished paper, Lancaster University, 1970, Cf. Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 10-21.

# Objections to Smart's view:

- Definition is at best descriptive.
- It does little to help us theorize about religion.
- How does it account for nominal members of a religion?  
In other words, how does it distinguish between genuine commitment and mere conformity?
- What about those who are part of a religion but react against religious institutions?
- Does it displace individuals while focusing on societal manifestations of religion?
- Does this definition work for all religions?

Ontological Understanding of Religion: Whatever one makes the most important thing in one's life expresses one's religious faith.

- Fred Welbourn and Paul Tillich characterize "religion" as "Ultimate concern" or "one's entire way of life." In other words, we should examine people's implicit ontological commitments.
- Why? The essence of religion involves the totality of personal existence.
- Thus, we must examine both institutional forms of piety and ontological commitments.
- Implicit and explicit expressions of religion must be examined.

# Consider Winfried Corduan's comments:

- In his work, *Neighboring Faiths*, Winfried Corduan states:  
Religion (1) unified our existence by providing the core values from which we derive meaning and goals and (2) directs us beyond the mundane routine of everyday existence. Many religions invoke gods, spirits, or an afterlife to accomplish this. Other traditions take more subtle approach. Zen Buddhism... recognizes no positive role for supernatural entities. Its goal is the acceptance of life, and the road to such acceptance leads through an intuitive flash of awareness that is not part of everyday life [pg. 21].

# Winfried Corduan:

- Dr. Corduan goes on to say:

“The feature of religion that directs us beyond the mundane is called ‘transcendence.’ Transcendence can come to us in many different ways, through supernatural agencies or through metaphysical principles (for example, the greatest good or the first cause), an ideal, a place or an awareness, to mention just some of the possibilities. Thus devotion to Elvis Presley—even the resurrected Elvis of the supermarket tabloids—lacks transcendence, and so it is probably not a genuine religion.

The following basic definition of religion can get us started:

*A religion is a system of beliefs and practices that provides value to give life meaning and coherence by directing a person toward transcendence” [Ibid., 21].*

# Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977):

- Religion is “the innate impulse of human selfhood to direct itself toward the true or toward a pretended absolute Origin of all temporal diversity of meaning which it finds focused concentrically in itself.”
- “As the absolutely central sphere of human existence, religion transcends all modal aspects of temporal reality, the aspect of faith included... religion is absolute self-surrender.”
- ~ *A New Critique of Theoretical Insight* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1953), 57-58.



## Dooyeward's Integrated Approach: Smart + ontological commitment:

- Emphasizes importance of institutional analysis;
- Academic study of religious movements & institutions;
- Ontological commitment that is distinct from religious movements and institutions.
  - Recognition of religion in the integration of one's personality (even though we can never fully grasp the essence of religion on a personal level)
  - While we cannot fully grasp one's ontological commitment, we can identify concerns that are historically and socially expressed by people groups living in community (the spirit of the community).
  - Thus, he integrates Smart's insights along with Tillich.

## Irving Hexham's insights into Dooyeward is helpful:

- “These insights led Dooyeward to argue that the ultimate ontological commitments of individuals find expression historically and socially in various religious or faith communities that can be studied. Having recognized this, he argues, we must also recognize that because individuals are often born and raised in a faith community and die in it, the commitments expressed in the community are capable of molding both individual members and the community as a whole. By studying these communities, then, it is possible to study the ontological commitments of their members. In this way, Dooyeward appears to combine the institutional and ontological definitions of religion while seeking to overcome common objects to both.”
- ~ Irving Hexham, *Understanding World Religions: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 24.

# An Operational Definition of Religion:

- An institutional Definition:
  - Rejecting ontological definitions in view of empirical research, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge contend that religion is distinguished from other forms of social life. Their definition of religion is as follows:
    - “Systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” [Stark & Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religions* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 39].
    - By studying the following five dimensions of social institutions and movements, people are able to measure and examine religion from a variety of perspectives:
      - Five dimensions of “religiousness”:
        - Belief;
        - Practice;
        - Experience;
        - Knowledge;
        - Consequences.

## Consider the Aesthetic Dimension:

“Nothing in human life, least of all in religion, is ever right until it is beautiful.” ~ Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Commitment to artistic excellence;

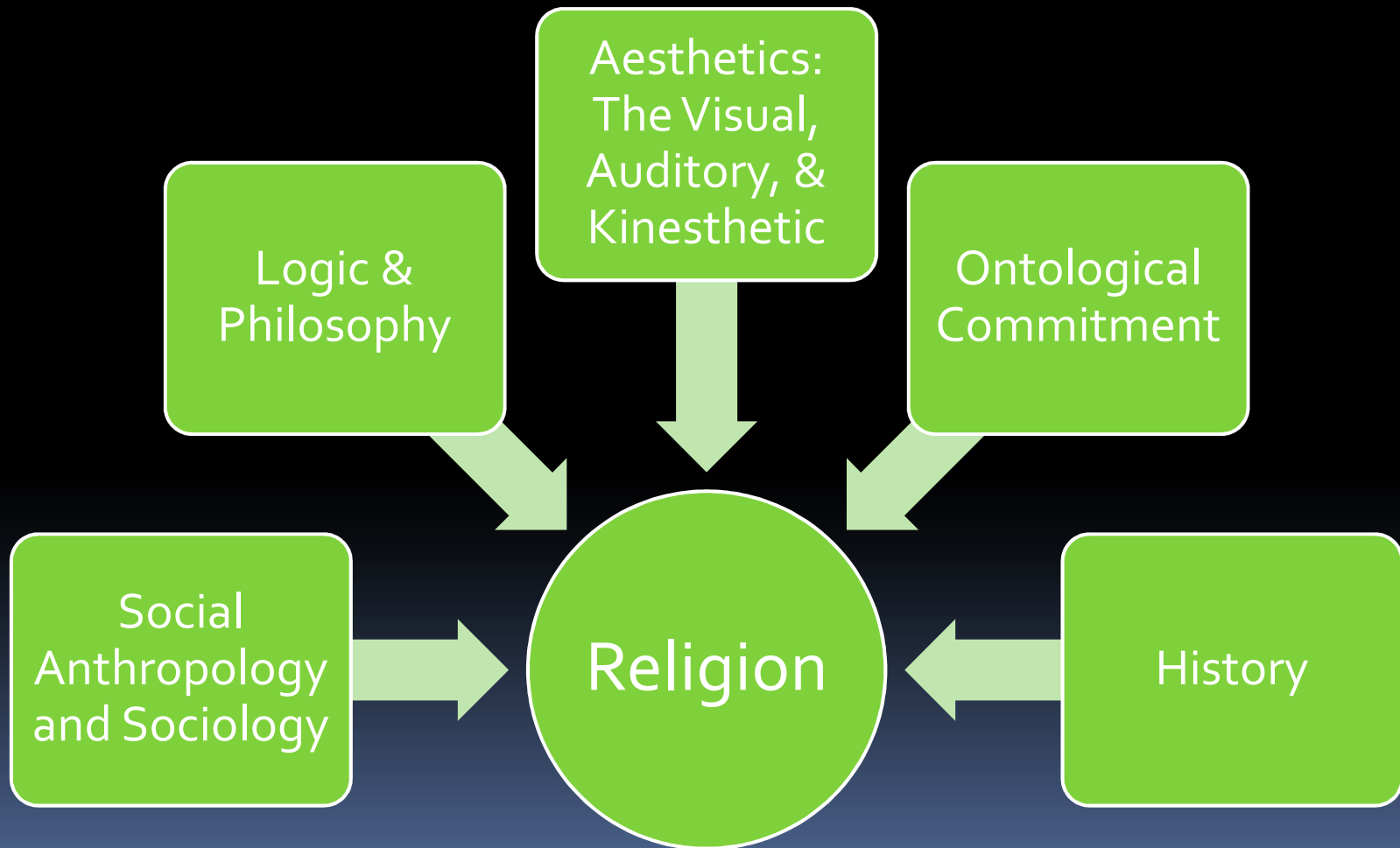
The visual (seeing);

The auditory (listening);

The kinesthetic (doing).

All within contextual understanding of the relationship between personhood and situational and social environment (bi-relational).

# How Should We study Religion?



# Bibliography:

- Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).
- Irving Hexham, *Understanding World Religions: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).
- *David S. Noss, History of the World Religions*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999).