ANATOMY OF THE SACRED

An Introduction to Religion

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JAMES C. LIVINGSTON

The College of William & Mary

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NEW JERSEY 07458

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What Is Religion?

OVERVIEW

We begin our exploration of the anatomy of religion with the observation that religion is a universal and abiding dimension of human experience. This is followed, however, by a rather embarrassing admission, for when we attempt to define this phenomenon, we immediately run into difficulties. We look, then, at the problems connected with some of the influential definitions of religion. We will see that, while none of them is fully adequate, they do give us valuable insight into some essential aspects of religion.

The clue to the religious dimension of human life is likely to be found in those characteristics that set us apart from other living species. This leads us to a second question—"Why are we religious?"—and an attempt to answer the question by looking at some unique features of human self-consciousness, what is sometimes called our capacity for "self-transcendence" and what that means.

A further preliminary question explored in this opening chapter is why we should study religion, and why it is an important subject of study at this particular time in history. No doubt you will be able to come up with some additional reasons of your own.

This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of how we go about the study of religion, in this case, by looking at the question of whether a student of religion can or, indeed, should be a devout believer, a nonbeliever, or a neutral observer. The answer to this question may be more complex than we imagine. At any rate, it is a matter that we ought to think about as we begin our study of religion.

Defining Religion

Few aspects of experience reveal the wealth, variety, and complexity that we encounter in a study of the religions of humankind. The playwright George Bernard Shaw once remarked, "There is only one religion, though there are hundreds of versions of it." We wonder, however, what Shaw had in mind when he spoke of *one* religion cloaked in a hundred forms. St. Augustine was closer to the mark when he observed, "If you do not ask me what time is, I know; if you ask me, I do not know." Religion, like time, is something we take for granted. We never doubt that we know what it is—until, of course, we start thinking about it. Then we encounter some uncertainties. There are, however, some things about which we are certain. One is that religion is as old as humankind. The evidence of **Neanderthal*** and **Cro-Magnon** life—representing the earliest members of our own species *Homo sapiens*—is clear. From as long as 100,000 to 25,000 years ago, these humans practiced burial rites that indicate a belief in an afterlife. They also apparently practiced rites of ***propitiation***, that is, made efforts to appease or conciliate spirits or powers. All cultures and societies about which we possess reliable information clearly reveal some form of this behavior. There do not appear to be any modern *societies* without religious beliefs and practices; however, there are individuals in modern societies who do not exhibit conventional religious activity. Nevertheless, anthropologists would agree that religion is a universal human phenomenon—a pervasive and, as we shall see, permanent reality. A human being is rightly called *Homo religiosus*, a religious animal.

If I speak so assuredly of the fact that humanity has practiced religion everywhere and at all times, we would expect that I should be able to identify the meaning of the term or at least to describe the range of phenomena to which the word *religion* applies. But here the difficulties already begin to appear. It is a strange quandary: Unless we can define religion—that is, unless we can indicate its reference range—it does not seem possible that we can begin to inquire into its nature or history. It is the definition that designates or delimits the type of phenomenon to be investigated. If we do not know what constitute observations of *religious* phenomena as opposed to

* Words in boldface type are defined in the Glossary.
** Words in boldface italics are key words.

other phenomena—say, kinship, politics, or medicine—how can we begin our study?

Religion has been studied extensively, but those studies, by and large, have been based on rather intuitive and conventional notions of what defines religion. To indicate something of the problem, we can look at several influential definitions or descriptions of religion. We will begin with two that assume some form of *theism* or belief in God or gods, but we will see that, in light of other definitions, these are not capable of serving as inclusive definitions. Here are our examples:

A. *Religion is the belief in an ever-living God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the Universe and holding moral relations with mankind.*

—James Martineau

B. *Religion is an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.*

—Melford E. Spiro

C. *The essence of religion consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence.*

—Friedrich Schleiermacher

D. *Religion is that which grows out of, and gives expression to, experience of the holy in its various aspects.*

—Rudolf Otto

E. *Religion is what an individual does with his solitariness.*

—Alfred North Whitehead

F. *Religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands.*

—Immanuel Kant

G. *The religious is any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of its general and enduring value.*

—John Dewey

H. *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.*

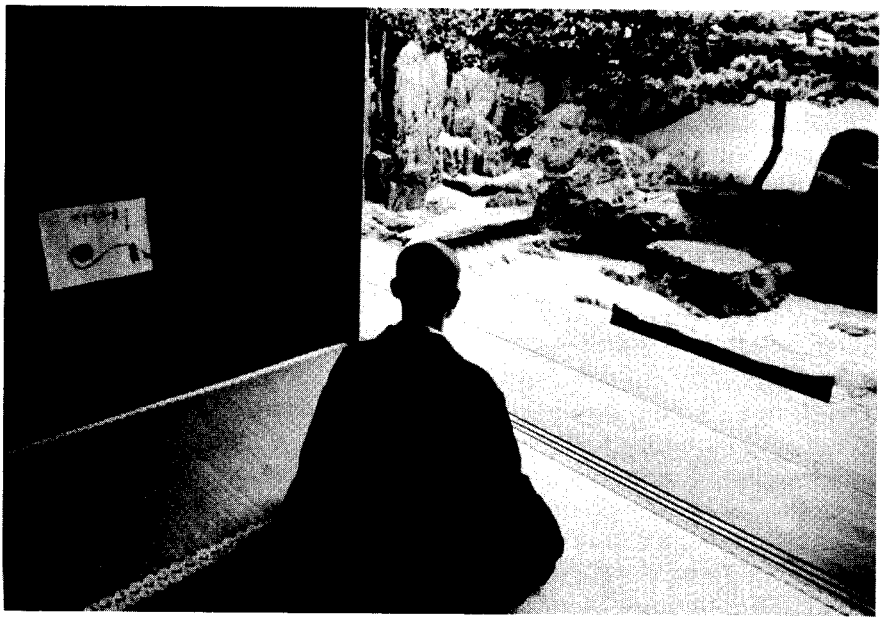
—Paul Tillich

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

—Sigmund Freud

J. *Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature. . . . It is the opium of the people. . . . Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.*

—Karl Marx



A Japanese monk, sitting in silent meditation, reflects the often-solitary dimension of the religious quest. (*Source*: Courtesy of Magnum Photos, Inc.)

Each of these definitions or descriptions of religion is informative and each has been influential. However, not one of them strikes us as fully adequate. Obviously, they are not all compatible; some appear to be too *limited* in terms of what we know about the variety of historical expressions of religion. Certainly, James Martineau would limit religion to ***monotheism*** and thus would exclude the ***polytheism*** of much Greek and Roman religion, and popular Hinduism, as well as Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism, which are nontheistic. This is hardly an adequate definition. The anthropologist Melford Spiro is careful to avoid such a narrow conception by appropriating E. B. Tylor's classic definition of religion as "belief in Spiritual Beings." Spiro associates religion with belief in "superhuman beings," but note that he does not equate such beings with the supernatural. That is, religions may believe in ancestor spirits, powers, and processes that transcend the human, but that does not mean that these occupy a world beyond this natural one. That is an important corrective. But Spiro's definition may not capture some important characteristics of religion.

The definitions of Schleiermacher and Otto focus on the *affective*, or emotional and feeling, dimension of religious experience that is so important. They point especially to the profoundly real and pervasive human experiences of finitude and dependence, awe, fear, and mystery as essential

to religious life. They appear correct in what they affirm but again narrow in what they leave out. The critical place of belief and the ritually and ethically active dimensions of religion are left in the shade. In their different ways, the definitions of Whitehead and Kant also are too narrow in scope. Kant perceives the profound moral dimension of religion, but he essentially reduces religion to the function of moral regulation; thus he leaves out important affective, aesthetic, social, and ritualistic dimensions of religious life. Whitehead's definition, like Kant's, appears too individualistic; furthermore, it is so vague as not to be very helpful.

The difficulty that we encounter in the valuable but problematic definitions of Dewey and Tillich is that they may be *too* inclusive. Dewey says that "the religious" is a *quality* of experience, a quality that may be found in aesthetic, scientific, or political activity. For Tillich, the research scientist or the political zealot whose commitment represents a "state of being grasped by an ultimate concern" is, by his definition, religious. It was said of Dewey—not entirely in jest—that, for him, everything can be religious except religion! It does appear, however, that for Dewey and Tillich almost everything and anything is capable of being religious. But if everything human is religious, then it would seem to be synonymous with politics or artistic endeavor and not a very informative concept.

The definitions—or, rather, theories—of Freud and Marx suffer from different limitations. They are explanatory in intent; that is, they claim to explain why or how religion came into being or why it persists—in these instances, as a neurosis or as an illusory happiness. They are essentially reductive in that they seek to reduce religion to either psychological processes or socioeconomic factors. Such an approach can be guilty of the ***genetic fallacy***, the confusing of the essence, value, or truth of religion with an explanation of its origin. They may also, of course, be considered prejudicial because they regard religion as something infantile and illusory that must be overcome.

This brief survey of influential definitions of religion has made us aware that any one definition will likely have its difficulties and that there are certain definitional characteristics that should be avoided. An adequate definition should, for example, avoid *narrowness*, that is, not overlook or dismiss features that are characteristic of religious traditions. *Vagueness*, a problem encountered with Whitehead's definition, is also to be avoided. An adequate definition should include both *distinctiveness* and *generality*; it should be distinctive enough for us to be able to distinguish religious phenomena from other forms of cultural life and expression, and yet it should be general enough to avoid being provincial, that is, relevant to only one religion or to religious life in one cultural setting or one time period. Monotheism would be an example of a definition that lacks appropriate generality. It is also important that a definition of the nature or essence of religion not be confused with a *causal explanation* of why humans are religious, as we saw

The ceremonial Jewish seder, focal point of the festival of Passover, reveals the important familial and ritual dimensions of religion. (*Source*: Courtesy of Merrim, Monkmeyer Press Photo Service, Inc.)

with the descriptions of Marx and Freud. Finally, it should be evident that an adequate definition of religion should avoid being *reductive* or *prejudicial*.

It has been said that defining religion is reminiscent of the fable of the blind men attempting to describe an elephant. "One touches its trunk and describes it as a snake; another touches its ear and describes it as a winnowing fan; another touches its leg and describes it as a tree; another its tail and describes it as a broom."[1] Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that we should give up the effort to define "religion." Why, after all, should we think that the many religions of the world have some "essence" in common? There are legions of particular religions, but perhaps no such thing as "religion." This sounds plausible, but there are two good reasons to pursue the quest for a working definition.

First, many scholars in the field will argue that the various religions do share certain characteristics, structures, and analogies that set them apart as "religion," that is, as distinct from other human activities. Following the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's influential discussion of language-games, it has been suggested that while the religions may not share a discernible substantive essence they, like languages or games, share a family resemblance or certain structural similarities. For instance, John Hick draws the analogy between "games" and religions and points out that each game or religion is similar in important respects to some others in the family, though not in all respects. What they share is a network of overlapping similarities. In other words, "there are no characteristics that every member must have; but nevertheless there are characteristics . . . which together distinguish [religion] from a different family."[2] In the following chapters, numerous exam-

ples will be cited of the structural features or "family resemblance" shared by otherwise seemingly quite different religions.

A second reason to pursue a more adequate definition of religion is, quite simply, to avoid confusion and bias in an important field of study. If we are to study religion, we must have some sense of its defining features and boundaries. A scholar reminds us that definitions are simply "tools for bringing order to linguistic (and therefore conceptual) behavior," and that we should recognize that because "a tool may one day become obsolete or worn out is no ground for giving up the tool-making process."[3] Definitions, like hypotheses or working models, need not claim immutability or perfect universality.

Because our definitions must always seek greater precision, comprehensiveness, and adequacy, no definition can claim permanence. But that does not argue for falling back on conventional, unreflective, often inconsistent and biased, usage. The importance of the attempt to define *religion*—or science or art for that matter—is to bring some order, consistency, and clarity out of a chaos of unreflective confusion on a subject of great human significance.

We have argued the need for an adequate definition and have pointed out above the inadequacies of some influential definitions. At this point, the reader deserves some suggestions as to what might constitute an adequate working definition of religion before we turn to more particular forms of religious experience, behavior, and belief in the chapters that follow. Since there are some definitions that are currently attractive, we can begin by testing their appropriateness; then I will suggest a brief working definition of my own.

Students of religion often distinguish between "***substantive***" and "***functional" definitions***. An example of the former is E. B. Tylor's definition of religion as "belief in Spiritual Beings." We have already seen the difficulty involved in attempting to specify the singular essence or objective reference of religious activity and belief. This has persuaded many contemporary scholars to forgo the effort to define what religion *is* and to focus rather on its function, on what religion *does*. An excellent example of a widely cited functional definition is that proposed by the sociologist Milton Yinger. "Religion," Yinger writes, "can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life."[4]

Yinger, you will note, avoids any reference to the "sacred," the "divine," the "transcendental," or the "supernatural." A secular faith in science would fulfill, in Yinger's definition, the functions of a religion. It would appear that for Yinger every individual has, implicitly or explicitly, a set of beliefs and values that claim that person's intense faith and loyalty and by means of which he or she is able to struggle and to cope with the ultimate problems of life. Since everyone has some faith or center of value and loyalty, human beings are by nature religious. Here religion is indistinguishable

from, say, a devout patriotism, or a faith in free-market capitalism, or an abiding loyalty to any cause.

I would propose that a functional definition, such as Yinger's, is deficient and therefore unsatisfactory, for the following reason. Religious persons explicitly affirm, or they tacitly assume, the independent reality of the object of their belief and behavior. That is, religions make claims about the Real, the Ultimate, the Ideal; they assume "beliefs about" some objective standard or independent reality and are not merely engaged in describing how belief functions subjectively for the individual or community. Functional definitions describe what religion does psychologically and sociologically independent of the truth or reality of its objective reference. I would insist that a definition that reduces a religion's beliefs exclusively to, say, sociological phenomena does not do justice to the full reality of religion as understood by its practitioners. A truly adequate *definition* must then take account of the language used by believers. This does not preclude the scholar from proceeding—indeed, it is his or her responsibility to proceed—beyond *description* to attempt to *explain* the belief and behavior of an individual or a religious group, explanations that may be neither apparent nor acceptable to the individual or group itself. We will discuss these issues further in Chapter 2.

A currently influential and rather more satisfactory definition of religion is one proposed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. It is primarily a functionalist definition, but one that also attempts to recognize the "realistic" character of the objects of religious experience without attempting to speculate about their status or nature. Geertz offers the following rich, manifold definition:

> Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[5]

This definition includes a number of noteworthy features. First, a religion is a holistic system, a many-faceted model or envisionment of the world and human life. Second, such a system of symbols profoundly influences the moral ethos, that is, human action, both in terms of the intensity of moral feeling and the direction of human behavior. Third, religion creates not only deep-felt moral dispositions and behavior but also a ***cosmology***, that is, a set of rather simple beliefs or more developed conceptions of a general order of nature and society that satisfies our human need for explanation. Finally, a religion clothes its system of symbols in "an aura of factuality" that gives to the symbols their "realism" or quality of pointing to an objective order or reality outside of and independent of the subjective experience of the religious community. As a social scientist, Geertz naturally remains within the interpretive sphere of the human symbol system and does not philosophize

about the symbol's transhuman nature or reality. But he recognizes this "aura of factuality" as crucial to any religious ethos.

A working definition of religion must then include some reference to its substantive reality, to what religion *is*. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that the reputed suprahuman reality to which the religions point and appeal as the ground, power, and goal of existence is extraordinarily diverse. The Ultimate, the Divine, the Real, the One, the Supreme, the Ideal not only go by different names—Brahman, Tao, mana, Samadhi, Allah, Zeus, Nirvana, Shiva, Grand Harmony, Father, to name a very few—but also symbolize often unique and incomparable realities. Any definition that includes reference to the object of religion, to its substantive reality, must take care to select a term that is of sufficient generality to take account of this diversity of religious objects. Scholars have used terms such as *God*, *the Divine*, *the Supernatural*, *the Eternal*, *the Transcendent*, and *the Sacred*. None of these are unproblematic or avoid some ambiguity, but the word *Sacred* strikes many as the most encompassing and workable term. It was given classic expression in Emile Durkheim's definition of religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices *relative to sacred things*" (emphasis added).[6] That is, the religious object contrasts fundamentally with what individuals and communities associate with the common, everyday, and profane. This contrast between the sacred, or holy, and the profane is, as we will see, also the defining characteristic of the religious in the work of numerous scholars. This text adopts *the Sacred* as the term that best conveys, in the most general way, that objective reference or ultimate reality about which the religions speak or to which their symbols point. The working definition of religion that I then propose is the following: "Religion is that system of activities and beliefs directed toward that which is perceived to be of sacred value and transforming power."

Our exercise should have made it clear that defining religion is not a simple undertaking. I hope, however, that we are not left in quite the difficulty faced by St. Augustine when he was asked, "What is time?" At the least, we can offer several definitions that, taken together, may complement and supplement one another by pointing to several essential features of the phenomenon that we call religion. You may even venture, as I have done, the riskier task of attempting a single working definition.

Why Are Humans Religious?

If we are correct that religion is both universally common and unique to our species, then we might expect to find the clue to why human beings are religious in those characteristics that distinguish us from other species. Through the centuries, thinkers have attempted to suggest what is unique about humankind. We are called *Homo sapiens*, a Latin term indicating that we

humans are essentially sapiential, that is, possessed of wisdom or rationality. Others have spoken of *Homo faber*, human beings as makers or creators; *Homo ludens*, human beings as players or actors; or *Homo viator*, humans as those beings who hope.

All these terms imply that we humans possess a distinct form of self-consciousness. The human self is unique in that it can be an object to itself. We are not only conscious, like other animals, but also self-conscious. We can stand clear of ourselves, of our immediate environment, even of our entire world—and look at ourselves, our environs, and the cosmos and make judgments about them. We can contemplate and reflect not only about means but also about ends, about the meaning, value, and purpose of life. We can look about us and say, for example, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity"; or we can come to a very different conclusion and rejoice, "God's in His Heaven and all's right with the world."

It is from this fact of self-consciousness, or ***self-transcendence***, that the pressing questions of life come flooding in on us: "Why am I here?" "Why do righteous people suffer?" "To whom or what do I owe my ultimate loyalty and devotion?" "Is death the end?" These are what philosophers call the existential questions of life; they are universal and perennial; they are part of what it means to be human. To deny such questions concerned with life's meaning—moral obligation, guilt, injustice, finitude, and what endures—is to be less than human. That is why much recent talk about secularization or the widespread rejection of religious belief and institutions is, at a fundamental level, merely superficial.

We as human beings need sets of coherent answers to our existential questions as well as **archetypal** patterns of behavior and frames of reference because our lives, unlike those of other animal species, are not definable solely in terms of the satisfaction of the basic biological needs of food, shelter, and sex. While a fully human life obviously includes the satisfaction of these drives, they are not sufficient to satisfy such a life. We have other moral, aesthetic, and religious needs that, strangely, have no limits and cannot easily be satisfied. We are a union of nature and spirit and our consciousness of the tension between our spiritual or religious aspirations and our finitude and creatureliness—that we are both free of nature and yet bound by nature—leads to our existential anxiety but also to our spiritual quests.

As humans, we are all too conscious of those things that challenge and threaten to destroy our deepest commitments and values—things such as moral failure, tragedy, inexplicable evil, and death itself. These realities can fill us with dread and terror, in part because they lie outside our ability to control. The sociologist Thomas O'Dea has spoken of religion as a response to three fundamental features of human existence: uncertainty, powerlessness, and scarcity. Religion is rooted, certainly, in a wider range of human experience and emotion than these, including such positive experiences as wonder, trust, love, and joy. But O'Dea is correct as far as he goes. The brute

facts of our existence do bring us face to face with questions about which our normal practical techniques and scientific know-how are powerless to provide answers or solutions.

Unless these questions receive adequate answers—unless these "limit situations" of finitude, uncertainty, suffering, guilt, and failure are capable of being seen in some larger system of meaning or transcendent perspective—then morale may founder and cynicism and despair may begin to eat away at trust and hope. Religions are the vindicators of a holy and moral order in the face of the world's chaos and evil. If we ask, then, "Why are human beings religious?" the answer is that humans want to be delivered from the loss of meaning, from moral guilt, and from the threat of finitude and fatedness. Humans want to experience the joy and the moral animation accompanying the trust that we live in a spiritual world of moral meaning whose current leads not to death but to life and hope.

Why Study Religion?

We began this chapter by asking "What is religion?" We found that the question does not lend itself to a simple answer and that it may be wiser for us first to describe a rather wide range of religious belief and practice before we try to say definitively what constitutes the essentials of religion. Why human beings are religious, we found, is more readily answerable, in view of our unique capacity for self-transcendence, which provokes those urgent and perennial existential questions about life, death, evil, and obligation.

Before we examine some of the classic forms of religious belief and expression as exhibited in diverse traditions, there are two additional questions that are important to consider. The first is *why* we should study religion and the second is *how* we should undertake the study of such a rich and manifold phenomenon. We will discuss the first question here and will explore the second both at the end of this chapter and more extensively in Chapter 2.

There are some very good reasons why it is especially important, even crucial, to study religion at the present time.

1. *To understand* Homo religiosus. First, religion should be studied because we are *Homines religiosi*. As we have seen, part of what it means to be human is reflected in our capacity for spiritual self-transcendence. We ought, therefore, to study humans as religious beings just as we study humans as a biological species, as political creatures, or as beings possessed of aesthetic sensibility—if we are to understand human life in its fullness.
2. *To overcome our ignorance.* Despite the rather high standard of education in Europe and North America, most of us remain surprisingly ignorant of the history and current beliefs and practices of the world's great religious traditions—even of our own. In high school or in college, we may have done advanced work in mathematics or chemistry, English literature or American history, but most students have not been exposed to a rigorous study of religion in its

various manifestations. If we have grown up in a religious tradition, we may have attended Sunday school or have taken instruction for our **bar mitzvah**, but very often this proved too elementary and did not progress beyond our early teen years—and, of course, had little to do with religious traditions other than our own. We often have a narrow, **ethnocentric** view because we naturally tend to identify religion with experience of our own tradition or with those conventional forms of religious behavior that we observe in our own communities. We are reminded of Parson Thwackum in Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*: "When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England." Needless to say, this can result in uninformed or poorly informed views, or, worse, in dangerously parochial or prejudicial attitudes.

3. *To comprehend our culture.* A third good reason for studying religion is to understand better our own history and culture as well as those of others. The American experience is not fully comprehensible without understanding, for example, the effect of Puritanism on the early history of the nation, the spread of the **evangelical** "Protestant ethic" westward in the nineteenth century, or the role of the Bible in shaping the life and character of the American South. Similarly, it is not possible to comprehend European or South Asian culture without appreciating how, in each instance, Christian or Buddhist ideas have informed cultural beliefs about nature, self, family, government, and work. We can easily forget that it is only in recent times, and outside the Third World, that there has been a conscious effort to distinguish between a society's religion and its culture. Religious beliefs nevertheless continue, largely unconsciously, to shape the values and institutions of a society that may no longer hold a common religion or maintain an established church. We may be fairly certain that the complex yet ordered fabric of any culture is woven from the loom of fundamental religious assumptions, loyalties, and hopes.
4. *To achieve a global perspective.* Due to the modern scientific and technological revolution—particularly in mass communication and transportation—we find ourselves today living in a rapidly shrinking world. Space exploration has made us acutely conscious of the fact that we are traveling on a small globe called Earth and that we humans may be endangering life itself on this remarkable planet. Technology certainly has proved ambiguous. The knowledge explosion can liberate human lives, but it can also create resentment, distrust, and fear. Nuclear power can warm our homes, and it can destroy civilization as we know it. Technology has made us more conscious of our human interdependence, but that can be threatening. If we are to maintain peace and establish a stable world order among the nations, it is imperative that we achieve a knowledge and understanding of and an empathy for beliefs and ways of life that we now find very foreign to our own. We cannot possibly understand another people or culture without a thorough knowledge and appreciation of the role of religion in its life. The failure of the U.S. government to grasp fully the religious dimensions of the conflicts in Southeast Asia and Iran explains, in part, our serious miscalculations and errors of judgment in those regions in recent history. Many of the tragic conflicts in the world today are rooted in long-standing religious differences and animosities. We need only think of the conflicts between Arab and Israeli, Indian and Pakistani, and Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland.

   It is paradoxical that our growing awareness of our proximity to, and dependence on, other peoples and nations has fueled disputes and wars at the same

time that it has made us conscious that we are now living in a genuinely ecumenical, that is, worldwide or global, age. For the first time in history, there is a real opportunity for contact and dialogue among the great religious traditions of the world. True dialogue, however, demands a thorough knowledge of the other party and genuine willingness to be open and receptive to what that party is saying. It requires that all those engaged in dialogue seek real understanding. The effort to achieve such interreligious communication and a more global perspective on world affairs is not a mere luxury of a liberal-arts education. It is critically necessary to maintain world peace and to ensure human survival in the years ahead.

5. *To help us formulate our own religious belief or philosophy of life.* A final reason that can be suggested (this list is not exhaustive) for studying religion is that it can help us to reflect more systematically on some of the ultimate questions of life and death, and thereby it can help us to formulate our own religious beliefs or philosophy of life. Socrates was right in saying that "the unexamined life is not worth living," although Woody Allen pointed out that the examined life is not a bed of roses either. As persons who claim to be educated, we should make every effort to see that our fundamental beliefs and convictions about life are brought to consciousness, are made explicit, and then are carefully examined and critically tested.

It is not easy to be reflective about our own beliefs since these beliefs are often so basic as to be taken for granted. What is required is to step back and to see ourselves from a different perspective—to see ourselves, perhaps, as others see us. Unless we look at our beliefs from a fresh and different perspective, we may not even notice them. They remain unconscious and uncritical guides and energizers of our actions. We can learn a great deal about the strengths and deficiencies of our own religious beliefs and behavior by looking at them from other points of view, especially those of an honest and friendly critic. The Protestant can learn much about his own religion from a Catholic, as can a Catholic from the experience of a Protestant. The Buddhist, for example, can awaken Christians to the rich resources of meditation in their own tradition.

We are often hesitant to look at other faiths or to examine our own critically because we feel that, in so doing, we are being disloyal to our own deeply felt convictions. That is a natural and healthy reaction. And yet our beliefs are not worth very much if they cannot stand up to any scrutiny. Also, without examining our beliefs, without looking at them from new and different perspectives and possibilities, we cannot expect our minds and spirits to grow, or to move on to deeper levels of insight, understanding, and sympathy. It would be foolhardy in any other field of human endeavor to think that our knowledge and understanding should remain frozen at a particular stage or level of maturity. It is, in fact, rather presumptuous to think that we have already plumbed the depths of even our own religious tradition.

To be self-conscious and reflective about our beliefs does not mean, of course, that we become so open that our minds begin to resemble the proverbial sieve that cannot retain anything and through which all beliefs pass as

though equally true and valuable. That is spiritual promiscuity. Our temptation today appears to be to fall into either an uncritical and slothful relativism or an uncritical and slothful dogmatism. To remain both committed and yet open, to hold a *critical* faith, takes real courage.

The honest exploration of others' beliefs usually will lead to a deepening and broadening of our own, but this is not a foregone conclusion. Honest exploration of a variety of religious beliefs and practices not only may cause us to reconceive our own religion in new ways, but also *may* force us to a painful reevaluation of long-held and deeply felt convictions and perhaps to a change of allegiance. It is a risk, but it is the risk of being educated and of living in a dynamic world of competing beliefs and values. The philosopher Nietzsche was correct when he said that real courage is not the courage of our convictions but the courage to examine our convictions.