

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Rev. Dr. Paul O. Myhre

Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Preface

What is religion? Some argue that religion is best understood as a construction of Western European scholars who sought to categorize the beliefs and practices of the peoples they encountered during the colonization period of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Others contend religion is a system of culturally conditioned lived practices. Still others say it is a human construct rooted in a longing to extend life beyond death. And some maintain religion is a gift from deities or spirits for the well-being of humans. Whatever the answer, no simple, single definition will suffice. It might be helpful to hold a group of definitions loosely so as to begin to sense this diversity.

It is part of our human experience to engage in religious ideas and practices that change in subtle and significant ways over time. This chapter aims to disturb the calm waters of settled opinions on religion and to explore basic ideas about what religion is and is not from different vantage points and to offer alternatives for the study of religion.

Chapter Goals

- To promote critical reflection on religion and religious practices
- To introduce alternate definitions for and ways of understanding religion
- To examine personal perceptions and assumptions about religion and religious practices

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, people have performed actions and held beliefs that are considered religious. Although the term *religion* is relatively recent, it has been used to describe time-honored actions and beliefs that are aimed at connecting people with what could be identified as most true,

real, sacred, or divine. Religion has also been identified with beliefs and behaviors that connect us with what is most worth knowing or that steer us toward self-negation and material detachment. It is difficult, if not impossible, to read a newspaper, watch a television program, or surf the Internet without finding some direct or indirect reference to religion. Whatever the reasons, religion has

been and continues to be one of the most pervasive and influential forces in people's lives.

From ancient times, people have created monuments and artifacts testifying to the human propensity toward religious belief and practice. Often religion is rooted in rational aspirations, linked with emotional attachments, inspired by some external idea or force, and connected with what people believe represents their cultural, communal, and individual truth. Consider the following examples:

- Pyramids constructed in Cairo/Giza in Egypt more than three thousand years ago served to orient people toward the mystery of death and what follows it.
- Kiva pits, dug by the Anasazi in the southwestern United States more than one thousand years ago, were meant to connect Anasazi with their ancestors and their emergence stories.
- Remnants of a temple in Jerusalem built more than two thousand years ago recall a structure raised for the right worship of one God above all others.
- Burial and ceremonial mound-complexes in North America associated with Hopewell and Mississippian cultures, now more than ten centuries old, testify to a fabric of life connected with the spirits of the sun, moon, and other forces in nature.
- Small-, medium-, and megasized Christian churches in the United States revolve around the worship of a Triune God; these worship centers also serve as pedagogical posts for preaching the Christian gospel.
- Islamic mosques, scattered across the globe, serve as centers for Muslim communal prayer five times each day. Those who gather face toward Mecca—the focal place for worship of Allah—and recite the Qur'an, which serves as a

means of worship and a pedagogical tool to inscribe the words of Allah on hearts and minds.

Hindu temples, Nazca lines, European and North American rock circles, Kiribati manyaba, Fijian Bure, Mayan pyramids—all of these constructions suggest that their architects were concerned with more than day-to-day existence. Each place, each structure, each artifact associated with these larger architectural monuments proclaims the depth and breadth of religious practice and belief. Each suggests ideas considered so fundamental that people devoted enormous amounts of time, effort, and resources to their creation. Some would defend these locations as places not to be defiled; others would regard these architectural spaces as sacred or special, claiming that here alone people might find security, safety, solace, and peace.

In some cases, new worship spaces were built on or near prior sites of worship for local inhabitants. The reasons for supplanting an old worship space with a new one were many, yet there was something about the geographical location that inclined the newer inhabitants to regard it as important and therefore to use it for their own purposes. Time and again this has been documented. For example, many early Christian churches in Europe were erected over sites already regarded by the locals as bearing religious significance, such as the Novgorod church (dedicated to Saint Sophia) in Novgorod, Russia, which was erected over the site of a non-Christian temple in 989 CE.

It seems that a disposition toward religion is somehow infused or encoded in our genetic makeup. Consider the history of any people and you will find numerous examples of religious beliefs and practices playing a part in wars, leadership succession, human relationships, purity codes, legal documents, social and environmental ethics, and so on.

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Art documents well this connection. Some art historians maintain that 75 to 85 percent of all art has some type of religious connection or connotation. The art of native North and South America, of African and South Pacific cultures, of Byzantine Christianity, and so on is infused with religious symbols and meaning. It would be impossible to separate religion from art. The structures, histories, and artifacts of human creation are testimonials to the practice of religion. If religious belief and practice has had such a pervasive influence, it strongly suggests the study of religion might better our understanding of human history and human existence itself.

The beginning student of religion can easily become overwhelmed. The plethora of sacred texts, the complexity and diversity of languages and religious practices, and the multifaceted religious nomenclatures are daunting. The history and current systems of religion cannot all be studied even in a lifetime. So how might one be able to say anything about any religious belief or practice given this diversity and complexity?

Religions emerge out of specific cultures, geographies, and historical periods and thus represent myriad thought-worlds. Our own religious, social, and cultural context directly and indirectly affects how we understand religious commitments, ideas, and practices. How people construct knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews is often so culturally rooted that it is difficult for those outside the culture to discern the main contours of a religious belief or practice, let alone its subtler dimensions associated with that culture.

Western European students with Christian backgrounds often have difficulty understanding Eastern Asian Buddhism or Native American religions. Christian students often attempt to grasp these other religions by comparing them with their own only to end up frustrated, as Christian ideas do not mesh easily with Buddhist or Native American religious beliefs. Each of these religions developed within a unique

cultural context, and each traces its founders and practices to distinct stories, circumstances, and events.

For example, complex Navajo chantway rituals involve sandpainting, prayers, chants, songs, and a host of people bearing specific roles; each ritual is part of an elaborate matrix of prescribed ceremonies passed down to practitioners through time. Chantway rituals are oriented toward healing and restoring balance to individuals and the Navajo community. The interrelationship and proper performance of each part of the ritual at each level is crucial for the efficacy of each chantway. Improper treatment of any aspect of the ceremony would cause imbalance and create disharmony in the Navajo cultural fabric and is to be avoided. For students who regard religion as a compartmentalized part of life, the idea of an integrated religious reality involving personal and communal practices, visible and invisible forces, and environmental elements may be difficult to comprehend.

Given the complexity of religious belief and practice and its intimate connection with an immense cultural variety, students of religion might well be baffled as to how to proceed. Perhaps students would do well to become hyperattentive to any opportunity to learn about religion and to cultivate a degree of self-awareness about their own assumptions and biases regarding religion and its study. Creating a chart or diagram of a personal understanding of what religion is or is not could aid students as they approach the study of religious belief and practice.

The study of religion is deeply rooted in a curiosity that is bolstered by acute observation, critical reflection, analytical investigation, and a willingness to ask the who, what, where, when, and why of a particular religion. But this study is not about knowing all of the answers. Instead, it involves a willingness to live with the ambiguities generated by diligent investigation and considerate thought. It is about closely observing the

religious practices of others and trying to discern their importance and meaning. It is about reserving judgment of religious beliefs and practices that may seem strange, different, or odd because they are so different from our own. Those who reflect on the subject of religion will find themselves asking challenging questions that may require settling on tentative answers rather than quick solutions or resolutions. The study of religion also may cause students to rethink their own cherished practices and beliefs.

For example, I am currently working with an undergraduate student on a research project mapping geographical arrangements of Native American Mississippian mound-complexes in relation to movements of the sun, moon, and stars. After researching the ancient culture and religious beliefs and practices suggested by the archaeological record, early historical accounts, and stories from remnant tribes, we have developed a set of challenging questions. We wonder if we can discern something about this people even though the Native Americans left no written records. Their religious ideas and beliefs were probably passed down to contemporary Osage and Natchez tribes through oral stories and need to be more closely examined. So far we have discovered a correlation between the movements of the sun (summer and winter solstice, spring and fall equinox) and the location of mound structures. It may be that the mounds are directly aligned with the movements of the moon and constellations. And there may be a connection between Mississippian ritual practices and the Skiri Pawnee morning star sacrificial practice. The relationship of astrological and mound geographical alignments to particular religious practices is an open question.

Some students may want to throw this book against the wall at this point because it is not oriented toward correct answers about what religion is and how it ought to be studied. Others may think the study of religion should be largely

catechetical, focused on learning what is True and what is False. Some may think they have already reflected on and studied religion enough and see its academic study as a waste of time. Instead, this text is oriented toward encouraging students to tour historic and current religious beliefs, practices, and thought; to explore a range of methods and disciplines for the study of religion; and to reflect on their own assumptions, opinions, and beliefs and the impact they may have on the world.

It may help to reflect that since religious practice is so common and takes on such varied expressions, studying it might serve people in everyday living. Nearly every job in North America intersects some facet of religious belief and practice. Every sporting event, concert, or political occasion contains elements of religious thought and practice. Student athletes pray before games, spectators pray during games, concertgoers give religious interpretations to songs and stage performances, politicians claim or deny that religious connections inform their decision-making, and religious beliefs and practices are interwoven with economic, social, and environmental issues.

The U.S. legal system is riddled with laws protecting religious beliefs and practices and preventing their proscription. The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives open their sessions with prayer and yet rule against compulsory prayer in public schools. U.S. currency proclaims, "IN GOD WE TRUST," while monuments that cite the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments are barred from courthouse property. While forbidding imposition of one religious viewpoint on their constituents, lawmakers often model and enforce others. Laws pertaining to what is or is not permissible for the American public are often rooted in Judeo-Christian perspectives of right and wrong. For example, marriage laws are often bound up in the New Testament notion that only one man

and one woman may be joined together as husband and wife. Hence, same-sex marriage is barred in most states and other practices such as polygamy—observed in many places throughout the world—are not permitted. With such a variety of thinking about what religion is and how it should be interpreted, it is striking that there isn't more civil unrest about how religion ought to be practiced—if at all.

In nearly every age, there are those who claim that religion and its study are dead or near death. People such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and others regarded the very idea of religion as dangerous for humans and human relationships. To the skeptic or cynic, religion might be considered a means to enslave or corrupt minds, or simply a false hope and empty promise to those desiring a better life. For many, all one can count on is death; life after death is an illusion and the idea of a personal or impersonal God is false. The only religion worth having is none at all or one founded solely in oneself.

Likewise, there are those in every age for whom religion is alive and well; those who are adamant that religion should be more pervasive, at least in their part of the world—Mahatma Gandhi, Sathya Sai Baba, Billy Graham, Gautama the

Buddha, the Apostle Paul, Benny Hinn, Mother Teresa, Pope Benedict, Emperor Hirohito, Osama bin Laden, and others. Each has made or is making claims about what religion is and ought to be and how it should be practiced.

Anyone reading this book carries a host of assumptions about what religion means and how it ought to be practiced. Some will identify with Roman Catholic Christian backgrounds, where the sacraments figure prominently in devotional and religious life. Others will identify with Protestant Christian backgrounds, where baptism and the Lord's Supper may be cornerstones for a life of faith. Or possibly, faith, justice, peacemaking, and personal ethics may be regarded as most relevant. For those from a Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Native American, Wiccan, or other religious perspective, assumptions about religious beliefs and how people encounter what is most true, sacred, holy, or divine will vary greatly. This chapter and book take seriously the different assumptions, perspectives, beliefs, and cultural worldviews the reader brings to the subject of religion, with the hope that active engagement with one's own assumptions will enable the reader to reflect on their merits, to critique and analyze them, and perhaps to build on them.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What is your religion or religious tradition? If you have none, then what are your core values?
- From your experience, is the practice of religion dead or dying? Explain.
- What contemporary ideas are currently touted as the most religiously valid or invalid?
- What laws do you think are religiously motivated and why?
- Describe your own experience of religion.
- In what ways have you observed religious beliefs or practices conveyed through video, print, radio, Internet, or other media?
- Who are the major religious people in your life and what makes them religious?

DEFINING RELIGION

As we stated in the preface, no simple, single definition of religion holds for all. There is such diversity it seems part of being human is to engage in religious ideas and practices. These ideas and practices do not remain absolutely constant over time; they change in subtle and significant ways. And there is no seamless whole or commonality that binds together this complexity. Religious ideas and practices are ephemeral, defy simple explanation, and yet are held by most people in the world.

Given the propensity of humans to hold something called "religion," an introductory book on the subject can serve to enumerate approaches to religion, unmask hidden assumptions about what religion is or is not, engage one's imagination about historical and contemporary religious ideas and practices, and so on.

Definitions for religion abound. Huston Smith, an eminent twentieth-century scholar of religion, claims,

Religion . . . confronts the individual with the most momentous option life can present. It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake, a proposed journey across the jungles, peaks, and deserts of the human spirit. The call is to confront reality, to master the self. Those who dare to hear and follow that secret call will soon learn the dangers and difficulties of its lonely journey . . . [and] we shall never quite understand the religions that are not our own.¹

Influenced by the writings of William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and others, Smith in part defines religion as the means by which human beings come to terms with what is most real in themselves and their world. Smith further

argues for two things: first, a "need to see their [other religions'] adherents as men and women [and children] who faced problems much like our own. And second, . . . [a need to] rid our minds of all preconceptions that could dull our sensitivity or alertness to fresh insights [that might be gained through the study of other religions]."²

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the late-eighteenth-century theologian and founder of liberal Protestantism, argued that religion is largely a matter of emotion or feeling. In *Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, he contends that religion is basically a "feeling of ultimate dependence" on something that is immediately present and at the same time infinite and beyond apprehension.³ The affective human experience is one that makes religion universally desired and intuitively understood; it is rooted in a self-conscious relationship to God. For Schleiermacher, religion is best understood through an experiential knowing, not simply through rational means.

People who study religion disagree over what it is and how it should be studied. Even the terms used lack universal definitions. The word *religion* is sometimes regarded as synonymous with *spirituality*. But are we talking about the same thing? Some regard spirituality as the lived experience of religion rather than the belief system itself. Others contend that spirituality is about connection with spirit entities or powers. Yet not all religions hold that spirits exist or that spirituality is a proper term for their religious beliefs and practices. Some try to distinguish between the two terms by using *religion* as a more general term for activities and beliefs that give meaning to life and connect people with truth, and *spirituality* for specific practices aimed at improving one's spiritual awareness. Others contend that religion concerns the eternal while

1. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 9, 11.

2. *Ibid.*, 11.

3. John Lyden, *Enduring Issues in Religion* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1995), 19.

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spirituality concerns the inner life of individuals in relation to that permanent truth. Again, no single answer will suffice.

John (Fire) Lame Deer, a Lakota Sioux holy man, offers a Native American definition for religion that does not fit easily into European constructs. For him, religion is not something to be defined apart from other things, but rather an infusion of *wakan* or sacredness in everything.

For Lame Deer religion is found in multi-layered spiritual environments where people and creation intertwine. Religion can involve “numbers, names, stones, plants, animals, people, etc.”⁴

Religion for him is bound up in relationships with all that can be observed and experienced in the natural world. It is breath, wind, movement, affective experience, intellectual assent, and as simple as grains of sand, buds on flowers, ravens calling, dew on grass, a rattle’s sound, or an ant’s movement.

Lame Deer claims, “We Sioux spend a lot of time thinking about everyday things, which in our mind are mixed up with the spiritual. We see in the world around us many symbols that teach us the meaning of life. . . . We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and commonplace are one.”⁵

The Lakota (Sioux) people have a long history of religious practice that is intimately tied with the movement of seasons, the stages of life, notions of *wakan*, sacred directions, and a Great Spirit figure, “*Wakan Tanka*.”⁶

In *Imagining Religion*, theologian Jonathan Z. Smith argues persuasively for a new approach to defining religion.

While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his [or her] imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his [or her] primary expertise, his [or her] foremost object of study.⁷

Smith seems not so much concerned with finding some universal definition for religion as with the scholars’ and students’ personal quests to understand established categories for the study of religion. According to Russell McCutcheon, Smith is saying that the study of religion is about increasing our understanding of the diverse human practices that are lumped under the category of religion.⁸

Definitions of religion will vary depending on your starting point. If you start with an anthropological perspective, it is likely your definition will be science-based. If you begin with a christocentric perspective, your definition will likely be filtered through that lens. Likewise, whether your orientation is psychological, social, or political, it follows that how religion is defined and therefore studied will be determined by your starting point and assumptions.

4. John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), cited in John Lyden, *Enduring Issues in Religion* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1995), 154.

5. Ibid.

6. For a fuller description of Lakota culture and religion, see: Stephen E. Feraca, *Wakinyan: Lakota Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), and Joseph E. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

7. Cited in Russell T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (London: Equinox, 2007), 68–69.

8. Ibid.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What does the word *religion* mean to you?
- How does your definition of religion compare to the definitions of your peers?
- What are your particular questions about religion?
- If you had been raised without any religious belief or practice, do you think you would begin to practice some form of religion? Why or why not?
- Would you ever consider changing your religion? Why or why not?
- How do you define spirituality? How does your definition compare with various definitions for religion?
- What might be encouraging or rewarding about the practice or study of religion?
- How would you design an introductory course on the study of religion?

CORE VALUES

One way to approach the study of religion is to consider your core values. What are they? Why do you hold them? Where did they come from? How might they change depending on circumstance? What would happen if they disappeared? While religion and core values are not the same (an atheist would profess no religion but would still have core values), core values are often linked to foundational truths that stem from religious convictions. For example, the core value of not killing is for Christians a basic truth derived from God's commandment to Moses ("You shall not kill," Ex 20:13). Yet Christians do not always interpret this command the same way. Some would maintain there are circumstances in which it is permissible to kill.

Trying to clarify what religion is can be difficult. A personal definition might be a good

start. However, a clarification of your own perspective will necessarily be limited and will resonate only within your sphere of like-minded acquaintances and others who are similarly disposed. Cultural background, economic stratification, gender, age, and so on affect how you identify your core values. And core values can change. A core value I held at age 18 might not be a core value I hold today. And while I might still hold particular core values since I remain a Christian, for example, I am now also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and have studied and practiced religion in locations around the world. I have continued to reflect on what religion means and how a person might most effectively practice it. My beliefs and perspectives concerning religion continue to evolve, to change.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Create a list of everything you value and why you value each item mentioned.
- What values do you hold that you think others do not? Why do you hold these values?
- Which values are you willing to compromise and which will you retain no matter what the cost?
- Are there values that others hold that you find offensive? Explain.
- Where did your values come from?
- Are there values that are held by a religious community with which you affiliate that you do not hold? Explain.

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THE STUDY OF RELIGION IS DANGEROUS

Those who choose to study religion be forewarned: it is dangerous work. When you begin to unravel the fabric of another's religious belief system and look more deeply at its practices, you risk doing likewise with your own. Some students claim the study of religion has eroded their faith or caused them to cease believing in what they

once cherished as unassailable truths. Others say the study of religion has convinced them that all religions are really the same: if you study one you know them all. Regardless of how you approach the study of religion, the risks are real.

So how do people maintain their religious practices and beliefs when the study of religion causes them to question their faith? What if my religion discourages or even forbids the study of other beliefs? Is my salvation

RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

| Religion | Date of Origin (Roughly) | Place of Origin | Sacred Texts | Founder(s) |
|--------------|--------------------------|--|--|---|
| Buddhism | 520 BCE | India | Tripitaka, Mahayana sutras, and so on | Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha |
| Christianity | 30 CE | Israel, Middle East, Western Asia, and the shores of the Mediterranean Sea | Bible: Old and New Testaments | Triune God via Jesus the Christ and the Apostles |
| Hinduism | 1500 BCE | India | Rig Veda, Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita, Puranas, Tantras, and so on | Brahman via priests and people of India |
| Islam | 622 CE | Saudi Arabia | Qur'an | Allah via Muhammad the prophet |
| Judaism | 1500 BCE | Israel | Torah, Talmud | Yahweh (The name of God is considered too sacred to speak. Hence, when reading Hebrew the people refer to God as Adonai.) |

in jeopardy if I study or attend religious rituals other than my own?

Could the study of a religion by an outsider even harm that religion or religious practice? Although it has been widely used to good effect, comparative theology is laced with dangers and may lead students to oversimplify what religion is and how it ought to be practiced. Learning the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, the Five Pillars of Islam, the Christology of Christianity, the laws of Judaism, and so on doesn't qualify as solid knowledge of those religions. Compiling an essential-characteristics list for a religion may provide an instructive outline, but the risks are manifold. Religion, religious teaching, and religious practice are complex and not readily reduced to simple facts, formulas, and categories. Knowing the name of a founder or a core creation story tells us little about a religion and its practice. Crafting a simple chart does not permit me to conclude that I have plumbed the essence of every religion ever practiced.

Which leads me to the chart on page 11 that provides an overview of several major religions—"major" because of the number of their adherents. The chart notes each religion's founders, dates of origin, and other relevant details usually covered in a comparative world religions textbook. This comparative method also carries with it the risk of missing or distorting much of each religion by virtue of what is included or left

out. For example, when discussing the Christian Sacrament or Ordinance or Observance of the Lord's Supper, some authors prefer to focus on what members of different denominations believe as they partake of the bread and wine. They may discuss Roman Catholic transubstantiation, Lutheran consubstantiation, Presbyterian communion, Baptist commemoration, and so on. Even though this may highlight some of the salient differences among Christian doctrines, it does not begin to tell the whole story of the Christian practice of the Lord's Supper. In addition to the risk of oversimplifying a religion or religious practice, the comparative method is also prone to exoticizing religions and practices that are unfamiliar to the student. Although memorizing essential facts may introduce students to a religion, it cannot do much more than that. In addition, the chart on page 11 represents a Western European method for understanding world religions that counts such things as founders, sacred texts, places and dates of origin as pivotal and telling details.

For a good overview of world religions, students may wish to consult Robert S. Ellwood's *Many People, Many Faiths*; Huston Smith's *The Illustrated World's Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions*; or a similar text. A summary chart of facts about world religions can also be found on the Web at http://www.religionfacts.com/big_religion_chart.htm.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Other than the comparative method, how might religion be studied?
- What is your greatest fear regarding the study of religion?
- Is the practice of religion ever dangerous? Explain.
- Is the study of religion ever dangerous? Explain.
- What is your greatest hope regarding the study of religion?

CONCLUSION

One of the main arguments in this chapter is the notion that how you define religion will directly influence how you study it. For this reason, a single definition of religion is neither offered nor encouraged in this book. Instead, the variety of definitions of and approaches to studying religion presented by our contributing authors represent individual responses to religion, rooted in their respective disciplines. Questions to prompt reflection and discussion are offered throughout. We hope these will fuel your imagination and prompt a degree of excitement in your study of religion.

Any study of religion should raise questions about how culture, social and economic location, gender, lifestyle, ethics, and so on affect definitions for religion, as well as the beliefs and concepts within particular religious traditions. The practices of those following a particular religion will vary widely depending on the age, gender, location, and so on of the practitioner. Hence, the practices of children engaging in prayer within Judaism or Islam will vary widely from region to region and between male and female children. Some religions provide specific rules for how males and females should engage in religious activity. For example,

Coptic Christians separate males from females during worship services. In addition, only males may perform certain portions of the rituals and only men may serve as priests.

Hence, the study of religion requires maintaining an open mind toward the many alternatives that exist. Native American, South Pacific, and South Asian religions as well as the monotheistic traditions—Muslim, Jewish, and a variety of Christian denominations—will be examined to provide students with a more textured range of responses to questions such as “What is religion?” and “How might religion be studied?” As an ideological framework that merges directly with lived experience, religion is a complicated subject. Faith, belief, and lived practices are nurtured and expressed through particular texts, works of art, music, dance, physical adornments, artifacts (cups, furniture, masks, etc.), foods, ethical and moral codes, laws that govern human behavior, and more.

The aim of this first chapter has been to disturb the calm waters of settled opinion about religion and its study. In the ensuing chapters, we will navigate new waters in exploring some of the myriad faces and facets of religious practice and belief.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What were the most difficult sections of this chapter for you to understand?
- What would you like to learn more about?
- Was it disturbing not to receive one simple definition for religion or one simple method for its study? If not why not? If it was disturbing, what did you want the definition and method of study to be?
- What do you think will be the most difficult task in the study of religion?
- How do you think religion might best be studied?