

## Lecture 1: Religion, Science, Faith, and Knowledge

Welcome again to “Comparative Religion”. I say “again” because, if you’re reading these words, you will have probably already watched my “Welcome” video and listened to/watched my YouTube “Introduction”. As I explained in the introduction, this course is going to approach the topic of religion from two different angles: we shall be discussing both “religions-in-the-plural” and “religion-in-the-singular”. With the term “religions”, I’m referring to *particular sets of beliefs and practices which are intended to bring human beings into union with the supreme spiritual Reality*—what people from western religious backgrounds would simply call “God”. My aim in this course is to introduce you to several such sets of beliefs and practices, and with this in mind, I’ll be taking you on a sort of world tour, looking at various religions from around the globe. We’re going to be studying (in order) the essential teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Islam, and the Sun Dance Religion of the American Plains Indians. As I’ve noted elsewhere, we’ll *not* be looking directly or specifically at Christianity in this course. I have found—not surprisingly, given the demographics of the American South—that the great majority of USC students who take this course are Christians or come from Christian backgrounds, and my hope is to offer them something new and different. On the other hand, Christianity will certainly not go unmentioned. I’ll be referring to Christian beliefs and practices throughout the course for purposes of comparison. In this sense our “world tour” will also include Christianity, though somewhat indirectly.

So much for “religions-in-the-plural”. At the same time, we’re also going to be engaged in what I called the “philosophy of religion-in-the-singular”. In its singular form, as defined it in the opening session, scholars often use the word “religion” to mean *the relationship between human beings and what they believe to be the most important thing in life*, a relationship that can be studied from a number of scholarly viewpoints, including the psychological, the sociological, and the philosophical. Understood in this way, religion-in-the-singular is obviously a very broad category and can include various secular or material goals, like money and success, as well as teachings and practices that are focused by contrast on a sacred, spiritual, or transcendent goal. Even the hedonist or pleasure-seeker has a kind of religion: his creed is happiness, and his god is himself. In any case, as we look at the teachings of specific religions this term, I want for us to be asking the

question, the *philosophical* question, of why exactly the merely material is not enough. For that in fact is the claim of *all* the world's major religions: namely, that the world of matter—this visible, physical world; this region of time and space—is only a tiny fragment of a vast Reality extending into spiritual dimensions far beyond our imagination. Despite certain external differences, all the religions agree that man's destiny is not confined to this terrestrial plane, that in the final analysis we can never be fully satisfied with a purely secular life, and that we therefore sell ourselves short if we attempt to neglect our relation with God. But *why* do they say this? What are their *reasons*? Is there any *proof* of their claim? I'll try to help you answer these questions as the course unfolds.

I want to begin the process right away today by focusing on something that's extremely important for any contemporary person who is trying to understand the world's religions. What I have in mind is *the relationship between religion and science*. I'm sure that each of you has wrestled at least a bit with this issue. It's something that often comes up, for example, in discussions concerning human origins. Did we evolve from lower species of animals, as most scientists maintain, or were we created by God, as religious people claim? *Or* could it be that both sides in this debate are at least partly right? Is there some way to reconcile the opponents in this conflict? The tension between religion and science can also be seen when we consider many of the moral dilemmas of our day. Current debates over such things as abortion, euthanasia, reproductive technologies, and stem-cell research are often really debates, at a more fundamental level, about religion and science. What is the proper role of each in our life? Is there a boundary between them, and if so, exactly where should we draw the line?

Before going any further, I think a definition is needed. I've defined the words "religion" and "religions"—religion-in-the-singular and religions-in-the-plural—and the same thing needs to be done now for "science". In case you haven't noticed, far too much of our time is spent in fruitless discussions with people who are using the same words that we are, but in very different (sometimes even opposite) ways! So let's try to save ourselves some time by being clear at the start.

In its widest sense, as perhaps you know, the word "science" has to do with any kind of *knowledge*. It comes from a Latin verb, *scire*, which simply means "to know". Therefore, any teaching or doctrine or theory that offers us knowledge about some aspect of reality is a form of science. Of course, when we hear the word "science" today, we ordinarily think of things like biology, which is the science of life, or astronomy, which is the science of the planets and stars;

but it would also be perfectly appropriate, in terms of the word's etymology, to talk about theology and angelology as sciences—the sciences, respectively, of God and the angels.

As I just noted, however, in the modern world the meaning of “science” has taken on a far more restricted definition. It no longer refers to knowledge in general; it has to do instead with a particular way of knowing and with a particular set of things to be known. If you think about all the classes you have taken in the sciences or (more broadly) about what our culture in general means by science and scientific investigation, the special meaning the word has today should be obvious. I would put it this way: *Science*—as we understand it in our present culture—*is an empirical means of knowing the material world*. The word “empirical” is a philosophical term that simply refers to our five natural senses. The way in which scientists go about knowing things is by means of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling. Of course they have many very sophisticated and very expensive pieces of equipment that help to increase the power and sensitivity of those senses, especially their seeing and hearing. But scientists still have to look at and listen to their equipment with the same eyes and ears that the rest of us use. As for *what* they see and hear when they do so, the objects of their knowledge are all of a single kind. Despite their great variety in size, from distant galaxies to tiny, sub-atomic particles, they're all made out of matter. (Scientists of course talk about “energy”, too, but it's not something they really know empirically or can test directly; they know it only indirectly through its effects upon matter.) In any case, to repeat my suggested definition, “science”—as the word is used in our day—is an *empirical* means of knowing the *material* world. The only legitimate method of knowing is by using your physical senses, and the only things you can therefore know are physical things.

If you've been following me carefully, you'll have begun to see just where the familiar tensions between religion and science come from. What did I say about the world's religions? They all agree, I said, that “matter is not enough”, that the physical world is only a tiny fragment of a much larger reality, which alone can satisfy man's deepest desires. But it's precisely this tiny physical fragment, the purely material world bounded by time and space, which is the sole domain of modern science; the scientific method, which we all study beginning in elementary school, requires that a person deliberately limit himself to what he can know empirically about physical things, with the result that nothing else “counts” except what can be *counted* or quantified. Unless something can be subjected to a controlled experimental procedure, and then recorded, measured, weighed, and graphed, it *can't* be scientifically verified. And what this means, of course, is that

things like moral values and aesthetic judgments lie completely beyond the scope and competence of science. How can you measure the beauty of Bach or a sunset? How can you weigh or graph a mother's love for her child? The answer, obviously, is that you *can't*.

Now, if this were the whole story, there wouldn't necessarily be a problem. In order to focus our attention on one particular thing, we're not obliged to deny the existence of everything else; in order to see the world through my glasses, I don't have to suppose that you can't see it through yours, or for that matter that you can't see it without using glasses at all. Similarly, just because we can't quantify love or calculate degrees of beauty doesn't mean that love and beauty don't exist. And yet, for some reason, this is precisely the conclusion many people seem to have drawn in the modern world, dominated as it is by the assumptions of science. Many people, and not just scientists, have begun to act as though the *only way* to know *anything* truly is by using our physical senses, and therefore that the *only thing* we can really know is matter: visible, tangible, solid, physical stuff. Notice this, though: If these people are right, then no one could ever know the difference between right and wrong since moral values are obviously not made out of matter. And nobody could ever know that Leonardo da Vinci was a better painter than some two-year-old kid, since beauty isn't something to be judged by computers. Furthermore, and *here's the main point for us*: If these modern people are right, there would be no way to prove or verify the claims of the world's religions. For obviously, such things as the soul, and God, and heaven, and angels, even if they *do* really exist, can never be subjected to a scientific test. Since they're not made out of matter and don't occupy any physical space, they can't be seen, heard, tasted, touched, or smelled in any ordinary, experimental way. What I've called "the supreme spiritual Reality" is going to be completely off the empirical screen.

This is where the first article I've asked you to read—from the introductory section of *A Book of Saints*—comes in. The author is C. S. Lewis, a widely influential twentieth-century Christian writer and the author (among many other books) of the popular Narnia Chronicles. The article is called "Meditation in a Toolshed". Take note in particular of Lewis's distinction between two ways of looking: one of which is *at* things, and the other *along* them.

Lewis touches here on something that is very important for the new student of religion to understand, and this is the fact that religious studies itself, as an academic discipline, has been *deeply infected by the assumptions and expectations of the modern scientific method*. Says Lewis, "It has been assumed without discussion that if you want the true account of religion, you must go,

not to religious people, but to anthropologists.” He might well have added that you’re often invited to go as well to psychologists, sociologists, and historians—in other words, to all the many sorts of scholars who are experts in *looking at* things, things they can empirically verify, scholars who are prepared to explain religion in terms of behavior, culture, economics, and politics.

In my experience, there are actually *three* sorts of such scholars, and I want to dwell on this point for a moment or two so as to help you better understand my own approach to our subject of comparative religion. The *looking-at people*, when it comes to religion, come in three basic types, which I’ll call the *primitivists*, the *functionalists*, and the *fideists*.

The first group, the primitivists, is dominated by skeptics and atheists, people who believe that religions are basically bunk and perhaps even dangerous; from their point of view, the scientific way is the only way to know, and the material world is the only world that exists. Religion they see as a sort of cultural residue of man’s primitive, pre-scientific past. Two well-known examples of their view of religion can be found in the writings of Marx and Freud. According to Karl Marx, author of *The Communist Manifesto*, believing in God is like taking a drug: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature,” he wrote, “the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.” Some people do drugs to escape from the harsh realities of daily life, while other people “do God”; in both cases it’s simply a coping device. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychoanalysis, had much the same opinion. In a book about religion called *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud explained that “religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior forces of nature”. Religious faith actually gets its start, he contended, at the point of toilet training, when we’re first required to resist our desires; we naturally begin resenting the people around us, especially our parents, and begin to imagine a heavenly father figure who is much nicer than mommy and daddy, and who will one day give us all we want. Religious faith is therefore simply “wish-fulfillment”, Freud says, a kind of illusion, which the modern, scientifically educated person has outgrown and no longer needs. Two fairly recent books that further exemplify the primitivist point of view are *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, by Daniel Dennett.

Then there’s a second group of looking-at people, which I’ve called the functionalists. These scholars take a somewhat more positive view of their subject. Religion for them is not necessarily a childish affair, fit only for primitive and superstitious peoples of the past or for

emotional misfits in the present. The functionalists are willing instead to concede that religious belief and practice can serve a very useful purpose or function in society. Faith, they say, may help to give meaning to individuals' lives while at the same time serving an important social purpose by encouraging justice and honesty and other virtues essential to the cohesion of the body politic. Like the skeptics and atheists in the first group, the functionalists assume that the material world is the only reality, but they don't disparage or debunk people's belief in a spiritual world—or not at least to their faces! Of course, as I hope you can see, their attitude toward religion is, inevitably, rather patronizing and condescending; the believer in such and such a religion may *think* that his worship brings him into contact with a truly spiritual Reality, but the functionalist scholar knows better. He knows that such worship really serves very different social and psychological purposes—that it brings likeminded people together and helps to reinforce their group identity. (Many anthropologists who study religion adopt the functionalist standpoint; note again what C. S. Lewis has to say about them.) Among contemporary scholars, a good example of this way of thinking about religion can be found in the work of the Harvard socio-biologist E. O. Wilson, who regards religious belief as an evolutionary adaptation, one that favors survival by encouraging cooperation.

Finally, in surveying current academic approaches to religious studies, one notices yet a third group of looking-at scholars. Unlike those in the first two categories, these are people who do *not* assume that the material world is the only reality, and they certainly don't scorn the importance of religious faith. In fact, many of them are believers themselves, and even those in this group who are *not* religious are usually willing to leave open the whole question of the existence of God. Nonetheless, open-minded though they are in one sense, people in this third category are exactly like scholars in the first two groups in that they deliberately limit their professional studies to the empirical methods of modern science. Religion, they say, is based upon faith alone, and this is why I've called them "fideists", from the Latin word *fides* = "faith". The fideist is the person who insists that no one can ever know with certainty that God exists, in the same way that we *can* know (let's say) that there are stars in the sky; religious people must instead take a kind of leap in the dark, reaching out blindly to a God they can only *hope* may be there. When it comes to their teaching and professional writing, however, these fideistic religious studies scholars tend to set all such hoping aside, and they confine their attention to things that can be established empirically: things like the lives of the founders of religious traditions, the historical

transmission of sacred texts, archeological evidence gathered from ancient religious sites, the political and social impact of new religions, and people's religious behavior as measured by surveys and interviews.

Well, in case it's not clear to you yet, let me be very explicit: *none* of these three approaches is especially appealing to your professor in this course. On the contrary, it's always seemed to me that *neither* the primitivists *nor* the functionalists *nor* the fideists are able to get at the real meaning of religion. Why? Because their approach is far too external—too much a case (in C. S. Lewis's terms) of “looking at”. Of course, considering the matter from their point of view, if these scholars were given a chance to defend their methods of teaching and writing, what they would tell you is that the academic study of a subject—*any* subject, from biochemistry to history to religion—demands objectivity and impartiality on the part of both professor and students. Belief and faith, they would say, are far too subjective and personal for the college classroom, especially in a state university like USC, and the honest scholar must therefore put all such commitments aside and remain detached in his work, talking only about “facts” that can be verified in terms understandable to an impartial researcher. Now I would certainly be the first to agree that *if* the teachings and practices of the world's religions *were* simply a matter of belief and faith—please take note of my italics—a purely empirical approach would be a professional necessity. But notice this also, please: In making this argument on behalf of “objectivity”, the primitivists, the functionalists, and the fideists are all simply *assuming* that modern science has a monopoly on knowledge. The only way we can know is by using our senses, they think, and the only things we can know are material facts. But is this really true? Can modern science rightfully claim this monopoly?

As I've already indicated, I myself find this empiricist claim completely unwarranted, especially given the unanimous witness of the world's religions to the contrary; however much they may differ, all of the world's religions are alike in teaching that *it's possible for human beings to come to know God directly*, and that while faith in the as-yet-unknown may be necessary at the start of our spiritual journey, we nonetheless have an innate capacity or potential for absolute certainty about God and the spiritual worlds. In the interest, therefore, of being open to the claims of the religions themselves, I prefer to side on this matter with C. S. Lewis. I fully agree (in other words) with the main point of his article: that *looking at* something is *not* the only way of knowing it. It seems to me that if you really want to understand something, to grasp its true meaning and significance, you must at some point enter fully into it, even as Lewis stepped into the bright light

of the sunbeam. And in the case of the world's religions, this means taking seriously their unanimous claim that the material world is *not* the only world, that beyond it there exists a far larger spiritual realm, and (most importantly) that it's possible for us, even now, by looking *along* religious doctrines and engaging in their practices, to become united with that higher Reality through a genuine knowledge. If we're to realize that possibility, however, we must endeavor to put ourselves into the shoes of the people we study, and to imagine (above all) what it might be like to emulate their great sages and saints, those among them who have most fully lived the inward vision of their religion.

Having referred to the saints, I should mention in closing that I'm going to be directing your attention in the YouTube lecture that accompanies this reading assignment to a little chart I've put together called "Levels of Participation". As we all know, when it comes to anything—even something as commonplace as a campus club or a sports team—it's possible to be more or less involved, that is, to participate in the activity to different degrees. Maybe you've been only once or twice to the monthly meeting of some organization; maybe you go all the time; maybe you're actually an officer; and so forth. These are what I mean by levels of participation. One finds something similar, not surprisingly, in the case of religions. Here too there are levels of "involvement" among the followers of any given tradition—and as it turns out, the *belief* and *faith* that I've been talking about so far are only the very beginning of religious "participation", just the tip of the iceberg of the spiritual life as it's understood by the world's great religions. They mark the place that everyone, including the saints, must begin, but sanctity itself is immeasurably more. I'll try to give you some sense of the deeper, more hidden, and ultimately more important levels when I speak with you further about this important matter of participation.