

Chapter 1

Why study religions?

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Introduction

Are the study of theology and religious studies only for religious people? If you are religious, should you not get on and practice your religion rather than study it? If you are studying religions, should you not get on with that – studying them – rather than discussing abstract theories and debates on methods? The answer to each of these questions is 'no'. Obviously many people do wish to study religion if they are religious, because they want to know more about their own religion, or be able to see their religion in the context of others. Some people find studying religion helps to develop their own spiritual journey, be they Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Zoroastrian or whatever. Students in most fields object to starting a subject by lectures on theory and method. But it is necessary to be aware of the different disciplinary perspectives used, and to be alert to some of the key issues that affect basic presuppositions.

But why study religions if you are not religious and/or do not want to become religious? As a Professor of the comparative study of religion, the first question I am commonly asked when meeting people is – 'which religion do you belong to?'. Those who know me to be an atheist, often ask why I spend most of my life studying something I believe to be wrong? Indeed one might go further. I incline to the view that religions are dangerous because more people have been tortured and killed for religious reasons than for any other motive. Persecution, the torture and killing of heretics and people of other religions have been major themes running through much of world history. At a personal level a religion can be helpful, supportive and even joyous for many people. But equally many are tortured by feelings of guilt or shame because they cannot live according to the ideals of their religion, or cannot in conscience accept doctrines they are expected to hold.

Of course one does not have to agree with something in order to study it. Students of the Holocaust do not have to agree with Hitler and his followers. One can learn something about history, about oneself, from studying even evil forces. But why have whole departments of theology and religious studies? Why have such financial and human resources been invested in the subject if it is harmful or marginal, and for which one has no attachment? Increasingly sociology, psychology, history, philosophy departments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have moved religious studies towards the margins of their subject. One does not have to be ill to become a doctor but one does have to want to care for and aid the sick to be a doctor – why study religions if one does not wish to encourage people to be religious? Some universities have it

in their constitution that they shall not teach or research religion – University College London and Liverpool are two examples in Britain.

Despite my own non-religious position, however, I want to argue that the study of religions is vital and not only for 'the Hitler principle' that one should never ignore forces for destruction (nor is it because religions have sometimes been forces for good), but because of the massive power that religions have wielded, something that no one can deny. I question whether one can understand any culture and history – political or social – without understanding the relevant religions. This is true not only of 'the Holy Roman Empire' or the Islamic conquest of Iran, i.e. in past history; it is true in the twenty-first century as well. Although the situation in Northern Ireland is complex it cannot be denied that there are strong religious motives involved in the conflict there; there is sectarian hatred. Christian Serbians were killing Muslims in the former Yugoslavia; Muslims in many countries believe that the West is anti-Muslim and many fear that if there is another World War it will be between Islam and the Christian world.

Originally my intention had been to write a standard survey of academic arguments for and against such studies. Obviously one only writes an Introduction to a book when all the material is in. Having read all the chapters it is clear that there are several scholarly and well-written articles in this book surveying the field. So I concluded that this should be a personal piece based on forty years of university teaching, also to make explicit my motive in producing the book and why it is structured with certain emphases. It means that most examples will be taken from my specialist field – the Parsis and their religion Zoroastrianism. There is no single argument for why and how one studies religions. Many readers will reject my arguments completely and that is perfectly reasonable; maybe where this book is used for a course an early seminar discussion on the subject may be 'why study religions?' The basic question to be addressed is: why should an atheist want to study religions? First, it is necessary at the start of a book of this nature to discuss what one means by the term 'religion'.

Defining religion

There have been endless discussions of the definition of 'religion'. Indeed recently some scholars have argued for avoiding the word 'religion' as meaningless and have argued instead for the term 'culture'. This introduction is not a place for extensive debate, but rather as a place for explaining where I am 'coming from' as editor of this book, but it would be a mistake not to indicate my position on this primary issue of saying what is meant by the word 'religion'. In my opinion there is no such thing as 'religion', there are only the religions, i.e. those people who identify themselves as members of a religious group, Christians, Muslims, etc. An act or thought is religious when the person concerned thinks they are practising their 'religion'. Organizations are religious when the people involved think they are functioning religiously. In some societies in East Asia a person may have, say, a Christian initiation, a Buddhist wedding and a Chinese funeral, in my understanding at the moment they are acting, say, in a Christian way then at that moment they are a Christian. Of course the boundaries of those groups are fluid – so some people who claim to be, say, Muslims are not accepted by the majority of that religion as being 'true' Muslims.

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My general position in discussing religions is that people are what they believe they are. I am cautious about replacing 'religion' with 'culture' (Fitzgerald 2000, see also McCutcheon 2001) partly because that simply moves the debate on to the question of what is meant by 'culture'. But many others see culture as something that includes religion, but that also has much wider connotations. The Parsis, for example, have what they see as their culture in addition to their religion. The equivalent term is *Parsi panu* (Parsi-ness), and it includes non-religious dress (e.g. the Parsi style of a sari in contrast to the religious garments the sacred shirt and cord, *sudre* and *kusti*), drama (*nataks* – in Gujarati, rather bawdy but huge fun – and never on religious themes) and their own highly distinctive way of cooking *dhansak*. All these are Parsi favourites, common not only in the old country but also in the diaspora. They would interpret such items as parts of Parsi culture but not part of their Zoroastrian religion. Parsis who say they are not Zoroastrians (either because they are not religious or if they have converted to, say, Christianity) are still likely to enjoy *Parsi panu*. Some of my colleagues disagree with the use of the phrase 'the religious dimension' of a situation or event. I do not wish to imply that there is any 'thing' out there that is religious. But events, like people, are complex, and can have both religious and secular dimensions; having one does not exclude the other. An act is a religious act when the person involved believes it to be associated with their religion. A religious thought is a thought which the thinker thinks is Zoroastrian (Christian, etc.). Of course I recognize that the situation is far from clear-cut. What of 'cultures' that have no word for 'religion', as in Sanskrit, and where the term for a religion is anachronistic, for example the term 'Hinduism', which is a modern West-imposed label for a plethora of different groups, beliefs and practices across a large continent with some purely local phenomena. 'Hinduism' exists in the diaspora communities because of compliance with use of Western categories, e.g. to obtain charitable status. Ninian Smart's use of the term 'world views' has some merits, but prioritizes the belief aspect of religion that is inappropriate elsewhere, e.g. Parsis for whom 'religion' is to do with individual identity; it is something in the blood or genes, to do with community boundaries and associated practices but with little or no reference to beliefs. In the case of Zoroastrianism 'religion' is appropriate since there is a term (*den*) that it is reasonable to translate as 'religion'. All 'labels' have limitations and these must be accepted, so 'religion' is a useful but potentially misleading term.

Religions and politics

The former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, once argued strongly that religion was a private matter of belief (therefore bishops should not get involved in political debates as they were doing). But I believe that in this assertion she was completely wrong. Religions and religious leaders, have rarely been outside politics, be they Jesus, Muhammad or Gandhi. Christianity was a driving force in Spanish, Portuguese and British empire-building. With the first two there was a powerful urge for converts as well as fortunes. The British came to stress 'the white man's burden' of 'civilizing the natives' (though fortunes and converts were also welcome!).

Partition in South Asia in 1947 sought to create separate Muslim and Hindu nations. These countries have been to war, or on the brink of it, many times in the following decades (though, now that there are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan,

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the religious divisions no longer follow the original policy). The showing and sales of videos of the two Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* stoked (probably unwittingly) the fires of Indian nationalism and the radical BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) party came to power. A touchstone was the Hindu claim to the site of the mosque at Ayodhya, which they claimed was built over an important Hindu temple (Van der Veer). Many looked on in horror at the Hindu attacks on Muslims, the mob violence and the torching of Muslim homes in Bombay and Gujarat by Hindu militants in the early 1990s. The sorry tale of religious violence extends over all continents.

In the contemporary world the various religions seem to be even more prominent: the Israeli conviction that the land of Israel is God's gift to them and has led to attempts to eject or impose themselves over the Palestinians (who respond with suicide missions). The reason why it is thought American governments ignore Israel's breaking of UN resolutions is due to the powerful Jewish lobby in the US; rightly or wrongly many Muslims believe it be an anti-Islam stance. The Shah was overthrown in 1979 for various reasons, but a major factor was the popular uprising led by Ayatollah Khomeini on the grounds that American influence had become more important to the government than Islam. It is difficult to believe that the invasion of Iraq in 2003/4 is legitimately explained simply by the terrible massacre of thousands in the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11. It is not only that there is little evidence of Iraqi Government involvement in al Qaeda activity; it is highly unlikely because Saddam Hussein was not a particular ally of a movement that opposed his secularizing tendencies. President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, both of whom have made public their Christian religious position, sought 'regime change' through invasion or 'a crusade' as Bush called it. For Muslims in many countries this was seen as a Christian assault on Islam and the consequences will almost certainly be with us for many years and may well have brought al Qaeda's ideology into Iraq and provoked more militant Muslims in many countries. Many fear it might bring nearer a war between the Christian 'West' and Islam.

Some writers suggest such acts are not the outcome of 'real' or 'true' Christianity/Islam, etc., rather they suggest this is people using a religion to justify their violence; it is not, they say, that religion is the cause of the problems. Even the fighting in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants is often put down to other causes. Doubtless there are a variety of factors in most conflicts, but religions are often potent factors in the explosions of violence. Of course religions can also be at the forefront of movements for peace and justice; for example Gandhi's non-violent campaign; Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa; the Reverend Martin Luther King with his dream in America; and the bishops' stand taken against the corrupt dictators in South America with 'Liberation theology'. How can anyone doubt the importance of studying religions when they are such potent forces?

Religion and culture

Is it possible to understand another culture without looking at the appropriate religion practiced there, be that in ancient Egypt or modern America? (It should be noted that the term 'culture' is a contested one, see Masuzawa in Taylor 1998: 70–93.) It is often difficult to say which came first, the religion or the values and ideals – but basically it does not matter; they are now part of an intricate network. In pre-modern times most

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artwork was produced for use in the relevant religion. How can one study the art without understanding its use and context? Whether the student/teacher/writer is religious or not, one cannot – should not – fail to study the religion of the culture. A study of the history of Gothic churches or of artefacts from Primal societies in North America or Africa or the Pacific without setting them in their religious context is inevitably going to fail to understand their importance and ‘meaning’. The artist may or may not have been inspired by the religion of his region but it is important to know something of the culture in which the object was produced and used, and religions are commonly an important part of that culture.

In the contemporary world, interaction with other cultures is inevitable, with trade, in the news, when travelling or just watching television; meeting a different cultural tradition is inevitable for most people. To understand a religion, it is essential to have an awareness of the different sets of values and ideals, customs and ethical values. Even if the people one meets from the ‘other’ culture are not religious, nevertheless their principles, values and ideals will commonly have been formed by the religion of their culture. Although an atheist, I have no doubt that my value system has been formed by Christianity, specifically Anglican Christianity. My attitudes to gender relations, prioritizing one set of values over another, what I consider to be ‘good and bad’, have all been affected by my general background of which Christianity was a major part.

Racial and religious prejudices are major issues in the contemporary world. They are often interwoven so it is not clear whether someone is discriminated against for being, say, from Pakistan or because of prejudice against Islam, and either can be the excuse for violence. In the 1980s and 1990s I undertook a survey questionnaire among Zoroastrians in America, Australia, Britain, Canada, China, East Africa, Pakistan, and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Zoroastrians in France and Germany. Many respondents believed that they had faced prejudice, especially in Canada, but there they said they had faced it mainly in obtaining a first job. Once you had shown that you were good at your work, they said, you were accepted. In America one-third of my respondents said that they had experienced discrimination, but what they feared even more was the threat of the ‘melting pot’ eroding their identity. Some scholars describe the ‘melting pot’ as a myth, and there have been different terms used, e.g. a ‘salad bowl’ of cultures. American respondents and informants thought that the ‘melting pot’ was a threatening reality. The countries in which most people said that they frequently faced discrimination were Germany and Britain – especially in schooling (Hinnells 2005). One major motive for me in pursuing the comparative study of religions (usually abbreviated, conveniently if unfortunately, to comparative religion) is to encourage knowledge and understanding between religions and cultures, based on the assumption that prejudice will be overcome if each knows more about the other. The media and many sections of society have stereotypical images of ‘the other’. I hope that knowledge will result in understanding, and thereby better relations between peoples. Above all my ‘quest’ as a teacher is to enable students to ‘see through the spectacles’ of another culture. I do not believe that there is a block of knowledge that has to be conveyed. If someone can develop an empathetic understanding of one other culture, the result will be that they are more ready to empathize with other cultures as well. But am I wrong? Is it necessarily the case that the more you know about the other religion, the more you will think positively about people from that religion? Some might be alienated

from it. Would people respect Hitler more if they knew more about him? Maybe my motives are 'woolly liberalism'. If I thought that, then I would feel I had wasted much of my academic life.

Some common presuppositions

Writers have a tendency to think that 'real' Islam is found in the Middle East and in Arabic texts; or 'real' Hinduism is found in Sanskrit texts. R. C. Zaehner, for example, wrote his widely used book *Hinduism*, without ever having been to India (when he went there he did not like it!). What resources he thought he needed to write about Hinduism were his books in his study and in the Bodleian library in Oxford. His methodological assumptions were shared by many of his contemporaries. Of course textual studies are important, both the 'sacred' texts but also their hermeneutical interpretation by later generations. One problem, however, is that these texts are commonly the domain of the intellectuals and the literary few – widespread literacy is a modern phenomena, and still not present in many countries. Archaeology can yield important information, but by definition most of the artefacts unearthed tend to be those which were most durable, costly and therefore often came from the domain of the wealthy and powerful, not from the wider population. That is one reason why in this chapter I have stressed the importance of studying various art forms both 'pop' and 'high' art. Meeting people from the religion studied can be very important (where possible) even if a student is studying ancient texts. It changes one's attitude when seeing how the religious literature is used. The study of religions needs to be 'polymethodic'.

There is a common tendency in religious studies to think of religions as monolithic wholes. It is now quite common to question if there is any such thing as Hinduism, but the same is less true of the study of other religions. For example, is there any such 'thing' as Christianity, or are there are many Christianities? Are Primitive Welsh Methodists a part of the same religion as the Russian Orthodox? Where does one draw the boundary of Christianity – does it include the Mormons or 'The Children of God' (now known as 'The Family'), a group which sought to express the love of God and Jesus through the practice of 'flirty fishing' following the Biblical injunction to become fishers of men (that practice has ceased but the movement remains active and somewhat 'unconventional' – see Van Zandt). Some American tele-evangelists seem to be from a very different religion from that practised in St Peters in Rome – the Northern Ireland politician and preacher, the Reverend Ian Paisley, thinks so, judging by his tirades against the Pope. If a religious movement calls itself 'Christian' should it not be treated as part of Christianity – or one of the Christianities?

The new growth in religion: some key questions

In the 1960s many of us forecast that religions would gradually decline, especially, but not only, in the West – we were wrong! In studying religions it is important to ask why things happen and to understand why change comes about.

- In many Western cities, especially in America and the Middle East, but also in the new Russia, in Korea, in Mumbai, religious groups have become more prominent. Why?

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- As far as Christianity is concerned, growth is pre-eminently among evangelicals and charismatic groups. Why?
- Whereas secularization was the theme of the 1960s and 1970s, there has been an increase in the number of New Religious Movements (NRMs). It is impossible to estimate the number of people involved, because many of the movements are small, and dual membership also happens. But the number of movements has increased. Why?
- The broad pattern of recruits to NRMs are middle aged, middle class, generally well educated – and often people who had sought but not found religious fulfilment in established religious groups. Why?
- The aspect of various religions that have become more prominent is what is labelled as 'fundamentalism'. Why?

In the 1970s and 1980s sociologists wrote from an entirely secular perspective about migration and diaspora groups in the West. The religion of the migrants and subsequent generations was ignored; they were simply labelled as Hindus, Muslims etc., but there was rarely any discussion of patterns of religious change and continuity, nothing about how Hinduism/Islam etc. have been shaped in the diaspora. Because the scholars were not themselves religious, they tended to look past the religion of the subjects they were writing about. The discussions were about prejudice, housing, working patterns – all, of course, issues of great importance, but writers ignored that which meant most for many migrants – religion.

There was another factor. Writing as someone involved in an aspect of government policy relating to migration in the 1960 and 1970s, frankly it was assumed that migrant's religions would fade over the years and generations as they assimilated. It was assumed that they had left their religion behind back in the old country. These ideas were completely wrong. Studies of transnational or diaspora communities at the turn of the millennium commonly found that migrants tend to be more religious after migration than they were before, because their religion gives them a stake of continuity in a sea of change. Further, recent studies are finding that what might be called the second generation's 'secular ethnicity' – their Pakistani/Indian/Bangladeshi, etc. culture is not as meaningful to the young, who prefer to see themselves as Muslims/Hindus/Zoroastrians, etc. (see for example Williams 2000; Hinnells 2005). Religion is becoming the marker that many young people are taking up. Further, there was an assumption that migrants and their youngsters would be more liberal than the orthodox people back in the old country. This is not necessarily so. The religions of people in South Asia move on (I am less familiar with the literature on South East and East Asians in America); their religions are dynamic and change or 'evolve'. There the changes are often greater than among people in the diaspora, for, in the latter, continuity matters in individual or group identity. An example of this would be the militancy among Sikhs in Britain, and especially in Canada, which was stronger than it was in India following the attack on the Golden Temple. The diaspora impacts on the old country. Since the 1970s the biggest source of income for Pakistan was money sent 'home' by families working overseas.

One common question in many religions is that of authority. To use a Parsi example again: in 1906 in a test case in the Bombay High Court it was decided that the

offspring of a Parsi male married out of the community could be initiated, but not the offspring of an intermarried woman because Parsi society was a patrilineal one (there were also some caste-like debates). That judgement continues to be followed by most Parsis in post-colonial, independent India – and by many Parsis in the diaspora. Technically the authority of the High Priests (*Dasturs*) in India is within the walls of their temples (*Atash Bahrams*). But among the traditional/orthodox members in the diaspora their judgements carry considerable weight. These issues came to a head in the 1980s over an initiation in New York of a person neither of whose parents were Zoroastrians. When the furore erupted, opinions in America were evenly divided over whether the authority of a 1906 Bombay High Court judgement in the days of the British Raj, and of the priests 'back' in India, was binding over groups in the West in the third millennium. Lines of authority become complex as religious people adapt to new social, legal and cultural settings.

There is another vitally important factor in the study of religions in their diasporas, namely the implications of religious beliefs and practices of transnational groups for public policy in their new western homes. Some obvious examples are the implications for healthcare. Since attitudes to pain and suffering are different in different religions or cultures it can be essential that doctors and nurses are sensitive to, and are therefore knowledgeable about, values, and the priorities of their patients (Hinnells and Porter 1999; Helman 1994). The problems are even more acute in the case of psychiatric illness because what might seem 'abnormal' behaviour in one society may not in another (Rack 1982; Bhugra 1996; Littlewood and Lipsedge 1997; Honwana 1999 on the damage which 'Western' psychological practice can inflict on – in this case – African peoples who had experienced the trauma of the massacres in Mozambique). Perhaps the instance where informed sensitivity relating to religious/cultural values is of greatest need surrounds death and bereavement. Having 'a good death', the 'proper' treatment of the body and support for the bereaved all matter hugely to people of any culture. 'Doing the right thing' is emotionally vital and that commonly involves religious beliefs and practices even for those who do not consider themselves religious. (Spiro *et al.* 1996; Howarth and Jupp 1996; Irish *et al.* 1993, the last of these is particularly good on a wide range of minority groups in America, e.g. Native Americans.)

The presence of a huge range of religious groups be that in Australia, Britain, Canada or the USA and elsewhere has serious implications for social policy and national laws, problems both for the minorities and for governments because many religious traditions evolved outside a Western legal orbit (and others which have not, e.g. the Mormons and polygamy). The obvious example is concerning gender issues where some traditions are in conflict with Western concepts of human rights (Nesbitt 2001; Hawley 1994; Sahgal and Yuval Davis 1992; Gustafson and Juviler 1999). Policymakers concerned with schools and educational policy, crime and punishment all have a need to pay serious attention to the religions in their midst, the values, priorities and principles (see Haddad and Lummis 1987) especially at times such as the start of the twenty-first century, when Muslim feelings run high and where governments all too readily stigmatize minorities; when there is violence, invasion and wars; when there is a breakdown in aspects of human rights, for example the rights of prisoners. Ignoring religious issues and feelings can be exceedingly dangerous.

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Change in the New World

Not only do religions change, so too do the countries to which people migrate. Perhaps the country which has changed the most is the USA. Prior to the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 migration was only from Northern Europe and was mostly of English speakers. Gradually South and East Europeans were allowed in, but from the 1970s Asians were admitted, providing they fitted the criteria of US interests, admitting in particular the highly educated, especially scientists and people in the medical profession. There have long been migrants, many illegal, from Mexico to undertake menial tasks, but with the arrival of educated Asians, perceptions of 'the other' began to change. Black settlers from the days of slavery became accepted in a way hardly imaginable in the early 1960s; so that 'People of Color' can occupy places of high office. Attitudes to Asian cultures had changed briefly in the 1890s with the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago and in particular the teaching 'missions' of Swami Vivekananda. But it was mainly from the 1960s that interest in Asian religions began, with Rajneesh, the Maharishi, Reverend Moon and the work of the Krishna Consciousness movement. Many American cities have their China towns. In California there are 'villages' of nationalities, for example the Iranians settled near Los Angeles (in an area popularly known as 'Iranglees'). Refugees are not always the poor; many Iranians, for example, after the fall of the Shah brought their substantial wealth with them (see Naficy 1991). In the 1990s interest in 'Native' American religions grew. Hindu temples were built following the designs and bearing the images crafted by skilled traditional artists from India. The religious landscape of the US changed dramatically in some forty years (Eck 2000, 2002; Haddad 1991, 2000; Williams 1988, 2000; Warner and Wittner 1998).

In countries where there is substantial religious pluralism, inter-faith activity has been important. What has yet to be adequately studied is the impact of these activities. There are of course many benefits in developing active communications between groups, but I fear there may be problems not yet identified. On the Christian side it tends to be the Protestant churches who are involved, less so the Catholics who are numerically the biggest Christian denomination in the world. From the minority groups' side it tends to involve not necessarily the typical Hindu, Muslim, Zoroastrian, etc., rather those leaders whose linguistic and social skills enable them to interact with the 'outside world'. These 'gatekeepers' of the communities often emphasize the aspects of their religion that will find the most ready acceptance in the outside world, so with Zoroastrians they will emphasize the ancient (indeed the prophet Zoroaster's) emphasis on 'Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds' rather than, say, the purity laws. In time this sanitized version of the religion may impact back into the community. I read in one book of minutes from a Canadian Zoroastrian Group where the managing committee made a conscious decision to change the translation of an Avestan (roughly 'scriptural') text so that it would not offend Muslim guests. This is an issue which merits further study.

What of theology?

So far this chapter has focused on religious studies and comparative religion because this book is likely to be used mostly in the study of religions. For a member of any religion, its theology is important – the word is usually applied just to Christian

thought, but there is comparable activity in most religions, certainly in Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism for example. (The late Ninian Smart often referred to Buddhology – and that may not be inappropriate.) ‘Theologizing’ is particularly important in many mystical groups, not least in Islam in the West (see Hinnells and Malik 2006). The Mullahs in Iraq and Iran have been prominent in recent times, exercising considerable influence over national politics with their teachings. For the billions of active religious people in the world, working out the implications of their crucial religious teachings for their daily life is of vital importance. Geography is far more important in the study of religions than is generally appreciated. Religious beliefs and ideas, symbols and practice, are naturally affected by social and geographical conditions in which the theology is elaborated. Religion in central New York is bound to have different symbols or images to cater for the different needs from those in a remote village in northern Scotland, which is in turn different in the deserts of Saudi Arabia or in India and Korea. I am fascinated by the differences between urban and rural patterns of religion. It is inevitable that if a theology is to be meaningful to a person, if it is ‘to speak to that person’, as many Christians would say, then it has to be different from that in a different environment. Such issues have probably been pursued more in the study of Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam than they have with Christianity (a notable exception is Ford 1997).

Can an atheist see the point in studying theology? Its value is that it addresses the big questions which many people want to ask – Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why do the innocent suffer? What non-theologians often overlook with theology is the wide range of subjects involved – textual studies and languages, archaeology, philosophy, ethical issues, history and through applied theology there is an engagement with local communities. If theology was restricted to theological colleges and madressas etc. the consequence would almost certainly be an increase in sectarian prejudice. But of course many people are religious, though they do not belong to a formal church yet they believe in a God. A lot of people outside the churches, the mosques, temples, etc. yearn for a ‘spiritual’ life and to them the study of theology and religious studies can be fulfilling. Secularism may be strong in Britain, but in many other countries religion is alive and well, not least in America.

The comparative study of religions

I am convinced by Max Müller’s dictum: ‘He who knows one knows none’, that is if you only study one religion, you are not studying religion, but just, say, Christianity (or Zoroastrianism, or Islam, etc.). It is only through some element of comparison that we appreciate just what is, and is not, characteristic of religions generally and what is specific to that religion. The term ‘comparative study of religion’ is widely suspected, because it was used by particular Western academics, mainly in the nineteenth century, who were trying to prove that Christianity was superior to other religions. Some huge theories about ‘religion’ were constructed by writers who ranged widely across different religions – from the comfort of their armchairs and without the necessary first-hand knowledge of texts in the original language or without knowing people from that religion. The term ‘comparative religion’ has also been associated with superficiality because you cannot ‘really’ know much about a range of religions. But if comparative linguistics and comparative law, etc. are valid subjects

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then so, surely, 'the comparative study of religion' can be too. Of course I reject any idea of trying to compare to show the superiority of any one religion. When one is comparing it is essential to compare what is comparable, so should we compare the whole of one religion with the whole of another? In my study of the Parsi diaspora, it was helpful to compare the Parsi experience with that of Jews, or Hindus or Sikhs, etc. in that same context, which usually, but not necessarily, means in the same city or region. It has also been helpful to compare Parsis in different countries e.g. Britain, Canada and the US, or their experience in different cities in the US (e.g. Houston and Chicago). My theoretical question was 'how different is it being a religious Parsi, say, in Los Angeles or in London, or in Sydney or Hong Kong?' (Hinnells 2005). It is regrettable that there are not more comparative studies of diaspora religions in different countries so that we might discover what is, or are, the American (British/Australian/Canadian) experience(s). It can also be helpful to compare the theology of different religions, e.g. on issues of attitudes to the body partly for doctors and nurses, or for the understanding of social groups (Law).

Obviously the comparative study of religion should not be concerned only with the modern world. Earlier in my career I was passionately interested in the Roman cult of Mithras (first to fourth centuries CE). In order to understand what was significant about Mithraism it was important to learn about contemporary religious beliefs and practices in the Roman Empire. There was such a rich diversity of religious cults; Mithraism shared features with some (e.g. early Christianity) and not with others. In fact the key breakthrough in the study of Mithraism came when Gordon and Beck began to look at the contemporary Roman ideas on astrology (Beck). By taking a blinkered look at just one cult, it would have been impossible to interpret the archaeological finds of temples and statues (especially difficult because there are virtually no Mithraic texts, only inscriptions and the comments of outsiders). One of the things which disturbs me about some work in New Testament studies and in research on Christianity's early developments is that so much of the evidence is looked at only through the lens of the Judaeo-Christian traditions. Can one really understand the development of the liturgy of the Mass/Eucharist/Lord's Supper without looking at the role of sacred meals in the contemporary Roman religions? Nothing exists in a vacuum. It seems odd that so many books and courses on the philosophy of religion look at key figures such as Hume and Kant without looking at their contemporary world; or studying the Biblical work of Bultmann without looking at the anti-Semitic culture in which he lived and worked and which many would say coloured his account of Judaism. Taking the context seriously, comparing other related phenomena, is crucial.

Bias

What of the theme of insider/outside? Can a person outside the religion really understand what it is like to be a Zoroastrian – or whatever? Even after thirty-five years of living with and studying Zoroastrians I think it is impossible for me to understand them and their religion fully. I may get close to it, but as an outsider my instincts, my basic thoughts and aspirations, etc. are, for better or worse, English. Ultimately we cannot change our basic conditioning; we cannot step outside our identity. We may – should – seek to go as far as possible in empathy and with understanding but we are all products of our own history.

It is vital that students and scholars should be conscious of their own motivations or biases – because we all have them. It is the ones we are not aware of that are the most dangerous: to illustrate the point with a story against myself. I am currently writing a book about the Parsis of Bombay in the days of the Raj. The book's structure seemed clear: defining key periods, important individual and social groupings; having worked on the history of temples, doctrinal changes, visited India many times over thirty years, and having worked with a high priest and each of us having the other as a house guest, I felt close to the community. Then a book came out which collected the oral histories of a broad spectrum of Parsis; some highly educated some not, some famous others not, about their personal private religious feelings (Kreyenbroek with Munshi 2001). It made me realize that with my atheistic attitude, despite my contacts with many Parsis, I had completely failed to look at the widespread belief in the miraculous powers of prayer; the importance of mantras to preserve people from misfortune and to bless and aid them in a project, i.e. the reality of miracles for many people. I had failed to look for what I don't believe in.

There is, of course, the alternative danger of being biased in favour of your subject. One can normally tell the denomination of a Church historian, or a theologian, from his/her writings. Authors rarely draw conclusions at variance with the teaching in their denomination. The same can be true of internal accounts of other religions, for example Orthodox and Liberal accounts of Judaism. There is often an honourable desire when making a university teaching appointment to look for someone who knows the tradition from the inside, be (s)he Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, etc. Of course they can have a depth of insight that is beyond the outsider. But, as with Christianity, in principle the appointment should be solely on academic grounds. Many of those grounds, e.g. linguistic facility, may well make an insider the right appointment. But in recent years there have been difficult cases where such an appointee has been summoned to their religious council of elders and reprimanded for not teaching a particular perspective. There have been cases where an insider from one section of a religion has denied the others were true believers, but were heretics. This has happened in Christianity also when in recent years some theologians had papal support withdrawn and were not allowed to teach in a Catholic institution because they had 'deviated' from authorized Church teaching. There can be difficulties with insiders, as well as with outsiders.

Some time ago a publisher asked me to write a book on Zoroastrianism and the Parsis for English schools. It began to be used by Parsis in their Sunday schools and in some adult education classes. When the English edition lapsed, the Parsis in Bombay reprinted it and still sell it there and in some other centres around the world. At first it seemed to be the greatest possible compliment. Gradually however I began to worry. When I visited some communities my own words were coming back at me. With plant photography one must take great care never to break or destroy anything that is being photographed. How much greater care should one take with a living religion (especially one that is declining numerically at a great rate)? Should you affect the people you study? Can you get too close to your 'field'? Is it fanciful to think that you can avoid having an impact? What is the impact of a group of students going to a mosque or temple? Does it change an act of worship if there is an 'audience' of outsiders watching?

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Using the right words

There are numerous debates about the meaning of key terms such as 'religion', 'culture', 'race', etc. This section is not about these important terms (a useful book for that is Taylor 1998), but rather it is concerned with terms that raise religious issues.

The first is to do with translations for key religious concepts. An obvious one is: should one write 'Allah', or 'God'? My vocabulary changes according to the audience. With Zoroastrians and students I use 'Ahura Mazda' (Pahlavi: Ohrmazd) rather than 'God'. The danger is of unconsciously importing Christian notions into the concept of the ultimate. However, if talking to the general public or perhaps in a lecture that is not essentially about theology the word 'God' may be appropriate, otherwise there are so many technical words that the listener (or reader) will switch off. But there are some technical words that it is essential to use because their obvious equivalent Western term would give a misleading impression. For example the terms 'spirit and flesh' are inappropriate for the Zoroastrian concepts of *menog* and *getig*. The *menog* is the invisible, intangible, the realm of the soul, *getig* is the visible and tangible world, but the *getig* world is not a subordinate or 'lower' world; it is almost the fulfillment of the *menog* – it is its manifestation. There is nothing of the Hellenistic 'spirit and flesh' dualism. A Zoroastrian could never make the connection 'the world, the flesh and the devil' for the *getig* world is the Good Creation of Ohrmazd. Misery, disease and death are the assault of the evil force, Ahriman, on the Good Creation; human duty is to fight evil and protect the Good Creation so that at the renovation *menog* and *getig* will come together to form the best of all possible worlds. Zoroastrians do not use the term 'the end of the world' for that would be Ohrmazd's defeat; instead they refer to the 'renovation', the time when all will be restored or refreshed and again becomes perfect as it was before the assault of evil. 'Spirit and flesh' therefore involve a different cosmology from *menog* and *getig*.

Sometimes scholars use Christian terms for concepts or practices in order to help the reader but it can lead to misrepresentation. For example, Zaehner uses the word 'sacrament' to describe one of the higher Zoroastrian ceremonies, the *Yasna* in which the *haoma* (*soma* in Hinduism) plant is pounded with pestle and mortar. The ceremony is led by two priests and can be performed at a time of death or for blessings. Laity may attend but rarely do so for the priests offer it on their behalf. This is Zaehner's description of the rite:

The Haoma . . . is not only a plant . . . it is also a god, and the son of Ahura Mazda. In the ritual the plant-god is ceremonially pounded in a mortar; the god, that is to say is sacrificed and offered up to his heavenly Father. Ideally Haoma is both priest and victim – the Son of God, then offering himself up to his heavenly Father. After the offering priest and faithful partake of the heavenly drink, and by partaking of it they are made to share in the immortality of the god. The sacrament is the earnest of everlasting life which all men will inherit in soul and body in the last days. The conception is strikingly similar to that of the Catholic Mass.

(Zaehner 1959: 213)

Of course the Catholic convert, Zaehner, intended this as a very respectful account of the rite. But it bears no resemblance whatever to the Zoroastrian understanding

of the ritual. There is a huge danger in failing to see the religion through the insider's spectacles.

An earlier writer, J. H. Moulton, is another good example of well-intentioned scholarly misrepresentation of another religion. Moulton was a Professor of New Testament Studies but took a keen interest in Zoroastrianism. He was also a Methodist Minister. In his Hibbert Lectures in 1912, he applied contemporary Protestant methods of Biblical scholarship to the study of Zoroastrianism. He applied the contemporary assumption that religions are divided between the priestly or prophetic forms; the former being associated with superstition and the latter with visionary, personal religious experience. He argued that since Zoroaster was clearly a prophet he could not have been a priest, so when Zoroaster refers to himself as a priest (which he explicitly did) then Moulton concluded he must have been speaking metaphorically. He concluded:

That Zarathushtra is teacher and prophet is written large over every page of the Gathas [the poetic passages deriving from Zoroaster himself]. He is perpetually striving to persuade men of the truth of a great message, obedience to which will bring them everlasting life . . . He has a revelation . . . There is no room for sacerdotal functions as a really integral part of such a man's gospel; and of ritual or spells we hear as little as we expect to hear . . .

(p. 118)

A traditional Zoroastrian (or a Catholic Christian for that matter) would not make such a distinction between priestly and prophetic religion. These are but two examples of a widespread trend to impose Western ways of thinking, or methods of analysis, on non-Western phenomena. Misrepresentation does not arise only from prejudice against a religion, but can come equally from the well-intentioned scholar. Many scholars find it helpful to draw a typology of religions and these can be useful in classifying data, but they can also result in trying to fit data into a false dichotomy; it has to be 'either this, or that or that', etc. It rarely allows for 'this and that' – in Moulton's case either a prophet or a priest, but Zoroaster could be described as 'both . . . and'.

Some of the most common words used in writing about religion are inappropriate or at least demand substantial clarification. 'Praying' and 'prayers' are words used in many religions, for example, in Christianity and Zoroastrianism. But the activities they refer to are somewhat different. In Western Christianity, prayers are in the vernacular and it is thought important to know what the words mean. Be the prayers intercessions or thanksgiving, there is an element of conversation with God. Prayers in Zoroastrianism are rather different. They should be in the ancient 'scriptural' Avestan language in which it is believed Zoroaster prayed to Ohrmazd. It does not matter if the worshipper does not understand them, indeed orthodox Parsi priests in India argue that it is unhelpful to understand the words, for if you do then you think about what they mean and thereby limit yourself to mere human conceptual thought. By praying in Avestan one seeks to share something of the visionary experience of the prophet, the purpose of prayer is to achieve direct experience of Ohrmazd in a trance-like state.

There are numerous terms in common usage which have presuppositions that merit questioning. The term 'faith community' implies that 'faith', i.e. a set of beliefs, is

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what defines a community and that is a Christian and intellectual understanding of the 'other'. For Jews and Parsis religion is to do with identity, a question of community boundaries, it is to do with who or what you are, something that is in the blood, the genes. For Parsis in particular, identity, far more than any set of beliefs, is what matters. For Muslims also it is a questionable term, since 'just' believing is inadequate, Islam is a way of life.

Another term in common usage which can cause religious offence is 'Old Testament'. Orthodox Jews object to it for it implies old, redundant, replaced. Most say that they have become accustomed to this Christian abuse of their scripture. Their preferred term though is 'Hebrew Bible'. The usual Christian reaction is to point out that a part (but only a very small part) is in Aramaic. But should students of religion use terms and phrases that can cause religious offence? The question becomes sharper when the word is used in the naming of university departments, of academic societies and books.

Conclusion

Whether one is religious or not, the study of religions is a key to understanding other cultures; religions have been powerful forces throughout history in any country, sometimes working for good and sometimes working to destroy. They have inspired some of the greatest and most noble of acts; equally they have inspired some of the most ruthless brutality. They have been the patrons – and the destroyers – of arts and cultures. But they are central to much social and political history. Scholars who have left religions out of their pictures when writing about various societies, be they Hindus in Britain or Muslims in America, are excluding a key element from their study. It is essential to know the values, ideals and priorities of those from another culture or religion with whom one comes into contact. Globalization makes such contact with 'the other' common. Religions might be compared to diamonds; they have many facets; they can be seen from many angles, but the pictures are too complex for any one writer to see the whole. This book looks at a range of approaches to these diamonds.

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