

# Chapter 1

## What is Religion?

All religions and religious theories are created by human intelligence. To understand what religion is, we have to begin by analyzing the reasons behind the emergence of religion. To achieve this, we must understand why religions exist.

To what extent, if at all, do modern humans share anything with our primitive ancestors in terms of mindset? It is reasonable to believe that we share with our primitive ancestors an instinctual capacity that naturally distinguishes right from wrong, which inclines us to avoid committing mistakes. This common disposition shared by moderns and ancients is what we call 'conscience'.

Notions about right and wrong perhaps differ in various periods and in different places. These differences have evolved from our thinking, which is influenced and constituted by our cultural legacies.

When we grew up, our contact with people who took care of us, parents in particular, influence and mold our notions and standards of truth and falsehood. Take the institution of marriage for example. Most countries nowadays practice monogamy, which inherently regards extramarital relationship as immoral. And yet, the conduct of early humans should hardly be held to this moral standard. Tracing back history, slavery was once legal, and prohibitions about incestuous relations are far

from universal.

Ancients and moderns share common interests and desires. Both are aware of the limitations of life and have thoughts and expectations about the length and extension of life as well as conditions after death. I believe that everyone is curious about answers to these questions.

At some historical stage, people began to conceptualize thoughts about the afterlife and to imagine possible experiences after death and to reflect on what behaviors during life might affect conditions in the afterlife. Out of this same impulse, religious and philosophical concepts began to be formulated around these ideas of afterlife.

Ancient people sometimes would have been terrified by natural phenomena, such as lightning and thunder, which they experienced but did not understand. They would imagine legendary stories to explain such phenomena. For some, there must be a creator at work. This can be a logical theory, as nothing in this material world exists without a creative process. People who adhere to this logic believe in God, a Creator, or a multitude of deities as creators. They further surmise that God naturally controls whatever He creates. For example, He expresses his discontent toward human beings through lightning and thunder or any manner of natural disasters.

Our knowledge system constantly evolves. Having mastered scientific knowledge, humans tend to negate previous beliefs and discard banal notions that are in conflict with science. However, the idea of God creating Heaven, Earth, and the

myriad things is deeply ingrained in Western thinking. Many Westerners believe that we all have to accept this perspective; according to their view, recognizing that there is a God who is the Creator is fundamental to our thinking. In other words, we must always remind ourselves that God created the Universe and He has been watching our practices.

That being said, we still have some room for adopting other ways of thinking. Whenever we talk about the process of creating something, our conventional mindset might feel the need to imagine a Creator putting raw materials together to assemble an object. We also hear Catholics say that “God can do whatever He wishes”.

Nevertheless, we shall not ignore the possibility that some deity might have set out a fair and perfect institution or system to regulate the formation and evolution of myriad things in the world. Under this flawless system, everything can come to life, and there is no need for gods to create anything and watch things individually, including the daily lives of humans. Perhaps all of us, as well as other forms of life, live within this grand, impeccable system. I boldly claim that this is exactly what Buddhism defines.

## Questioning the Definition of Religion

According to *The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (OALD thereafter), religion is:

1. The belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader.
2. One of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader.

Similar to other Western scholarly connotations of religion, this definition is built upon the premise that there exists a god-like creator who governs the universe and everything within it. The theological circles of Christianity generally adopt this definition without question. For example, in his introductory book to Buddhism, Damien Keown asserts that “Most people would say that religion has something to do with belief in God. God, in turn, is understood as a Supreme Being who created the world and the creatures in it”.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhists cannot possibly accept this definition, which does not acknowledge Buddhism as a religion. Buddhist followers do not believe in the existence of creator, nor are they convinced by the hypothesis that a supernatural power controls everything. In order to view Buddhism as one kind of religion, we must revise the dominant Western definition or use another approach to interpret religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

The prominent scholar Ninian Smart articulates seven dimensions to measure whether one school of thought constitutes as religion. The seven dimensions are:

1. forms and orders of ceremonies;
2. experiential and emotional;
3. narrative and mythic;
4. social and Institutional;
5. ethical and legal;
6. doctrinal and philosophical;
7. material.

If we apply the above measurements to evaluate a school of thought, it becomes clear that Buddhism is a religion (as is Confucianism). What is lacking in Professor Smart's definition of religion is discourse about afterlife. Consequently, I consider that the state of being after one's death is an essential prerequisite to define religion.

Through examining the term 'religion', we get to see how Chinese understand it. The Chinese translation of the English term is 宗教 (*zong jiao*); 宗 (*zong*) means origin, while 教 (*jiao*) connotes teaching. Therefore, 宗教 (*zong jiao*) [religion] is a teaching that describes the origins of human existence.

Religions originated with differing reasons around the world. Whereas some were derived from fear, others evolved out of curiosity. Our curiosity and superstition about natural phenomena generated hope or fear, which in turn initiated religions. However, acknowledging the existence of a creator is not a common characteristic shared by all religions, nor does it constitute a set of beliefs as religion. This point seemingly

reveals the distinctive understanding of religion that distinguishes the views of Eastern and Western cultures.

*OALD* considers Buddhism as one of the major world religions. As a result, many Westerners reckon that Buddhist practitioners also worship some god, or many gods (e.g. Buddha and Bodhisattvas). But this is simply not true, as no creator or master of the universe can be found in Buddhist scriptures.

Because of this, Buddhism is not a religion in the traditional sense. If we would like to understand Buddhism as a religion, we must seek a religious definition that incorporates Buddhism.

### **Religion and Philosophy**

In order to locate the true connotations of religion, we ought to study the distinctions between religion and philosophy. *OALD* defines 'philosophy' as: 1) the study of ideas about the nature and the meaning of existence; 2) a particular system of thought based on such study. In the imagination, humans could have three different spiritual levels:

- 1) We do not believe in the existence of a soul, and thereupon the knowledge of good and evil. Conscience is not a concern. A person after death is ashes to ashes, and thus does not exist in any form of afterlife. In this concept, different people have different behavioral norms; humans are governed by an animal or brutish nature.
  
- 2) People know how to distinguish good from bad, and understand what to do and what not to do. This mindset tallies with Confucian philosophy.

- 3) People believe that the human spirit is unremitting, even after bodily death. Under such notion, religious beliefs provide a behavioral norm in society.

The second level can be enunciated through the Confucian teaching of the eight virtues: Filial Piety, Sibling Harmony, Loyalty, Trustworthiness, Propriety, Sacrifice, Integrity, and Sense of Shame. As the basis of Chinese culture, the eight virtues receive great admiration and praise from other religious groups. Nonetheless, Confucianism makes no mention of the state of being after death. We learn these virtues not because they are attached to or promoted by any specific religion.

Atheism is located in between the first and second levels. Scientists wonder, without religious teachings, would our morals rapidly decay and not be able to discern right from wrong? People who have grown up in a Chinese society enriched with cultural traditions generally do not raise such a question. It is fundamental for every child in the society to recite the Three-Character Classic that begins with “people at birth, are naturally good”.

Religion indicates the third spiritual level, asserting the existence of souls after death. As a type of philosophical thought, religion outlines how best to act in the world and live a good life; and, presumably, how doing so will aid the person in attaining a happy destination after death.

Here we are able to see the distinction between religion and philosophy: religion considers what is going to happen after the

termination of this life, whereas philosophy does not. Aside from providing an understanding about human experiences after death, religion teaches us about how to behave. Philosophy also offers a guide to how to behave in society, but its guidance is not concerned with the next life.

### **A New Definition of Religion**

Can we provide a fairly objective account for religion? Let us take a look at the one below:

Religion is a philosophy or teaching developed from the belief that the spiritual nature of a person continues to exist after the death of the body and a reward or a punishment is accorded depending on his or her behavior; and through which philosophy or teaching, there are certain guidelines devised for people to follow.

Many who have grown up in Western society might be unfamiliar with this definition. But only this definition could accommodate Buddhism in the array of religions, including Daoism, Hinduism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Judaism, and Islam.

With the new definition of religion provided above, we see that there are only two forms of religious beliefs in the world: the first stresses the last judgment by God; the second does not believe in God's judgment, but maintains that humans are entrapped in a chain of causes and effects. The first type encompasses Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam. The second type includes Buddhism, Daoism, and Hinduism.



This definition does not include Confucianism (some call it the Cult of Confucius). This is because Confucianism is not concerned with the afterlife. Neither the Chinese government nor the public sees Confucianism as a religion. In contemporary China, the State Administration for Religious Affairs under the State Council oversees religious affairs and issues for the People's Republic of China. It recognizes five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Confucianism is not recognized as a religion. If we ask any student with some understanding of traditional Chinese culture, he or she would agree that Confucianism is not a religion. But the difference between philosophy and religion has never been seriously discussed. Without a clear definition of religion, we would hardly be able to decide whether to take Confucianism as a religion or not.

The fresh definition of religion I have outlined is probably strange to many living in Western societies. However, it will help solve some important questions, one of which is useful in determining whether a set of religious doctrines belongs to a cult, philosophy, or authentic religion. We have to evaluate whether Buddhism is a religion, otherwise we could not begin discussing the religious value of Buddhism.

The correct and concrete definition of 'religion' is extremely crucial and pressing. Only when it is perfectly justifiable can religion be widely discussed and applied to our ordinary lives.

In Western societies, the law describes religious affairs as charitable activities. But if we adopt the OALD definition, then

Buddhism is not a religion. In such a case, the law would not allow any charitable donations to promote and develop Buddhism in the West or in Hong Kong.

In their writing, some Western scholars mention that many people feel bitterly disappointed about religion, and try to avoid it. Other scholars sense that religions are being challenged because a suitable definition of religion has yet to be found. If we accept the new definition of religion that I propose here, I suggest that religion as one branch of philosophy can be studied by people around the globe. Even though some people may feel the urge to disaffiliate from a particular religion, I am confident that I can provide a clear statement about religion that is not biased toward any perspective. We shall not have to cut ourselves off from religion; rather we can actively study the positive and negative influences of religion.

How should we view religion in this twenty-first century with highly developed information technology? Everyone has the absolute freedom to believe or negate the existence of a 'creator'. But no matter whether a person believes in a creator or not, religion unquestionably offers a manual of conduct, regardless of its truthfulness. I would like to stress again that it is only when we understand the authentic meanings of 'religion' that we can study it with objectivity. I hope readers will solidly comprehend the new definition of religion in this book, but that they will also feel confident to voice their own opinions.

According to the new definition of religion, all religions share the same purpose that they teach people about how to attain

an ideal destiny or new life. When followers of various religions realize that each and every religion pursues the same object, they will understand that religions are not mutually exclusive to each other, which will lead to a harmonious world. If my new definition of religion is espoused, there will be the amazing result!

### **Recognize the significance of the definition of religion**

This book has provided the following definition of “religion”:

“Religion is a philosophy or teaching developed from the belief that the spiritual nature of a person continues to exist after the death of the body and a reward or a punishment is accorded depending on his or her behavior; and through which philosophy or teaching, there are certain guidelines devised for people to follow.”

(Definition 1)

But there are some who see the definition of religion as the following:

“Religion is a belief in an eternal state. For example, the existence of a creator. The creator creates the universe and rules and punishment. The purpose of establishing a religion is to protect this belief and guard the interests of the fellow worshippers, and their freedom to believe, enabling them to further spread this belief.” (Definition 2)

Definition 1 is able to promote world peace, as it does not involve the element of self-interest (to protect) and therefore does not cause conflicts.

Although the latter definition, Definition 2 is strictly speaking also correct, it is not advised to be adopted, (as self interests exist in this definition). It is only reasonable that religious individuals would seek to protect the interest of his or her religious group. If the latter definition is adopted, conflicts among different religions would be unavoidable. In this world nowadays, the cause for chaos in many places arises from the need to protect certain interests.