

LESSON 1

INCURABLY RELIGIOUS

Introduction

It has been said that mankind is incurably religious. The religious practices of mankind predate Christianity thousands of years. Evidence exists of religious practices as long as 100,000 years ago. The later stone-age (around 25,000 years ago) gives additional evidence of the religious nature of humans. In the famous Trois Frères cave in southern France a strange figure is painted on the wall. This figure is arrayed in reindeer antlers, bear's ears, and the tail of a horse. The figure represents either a shaman of some prehistoric cult or a divine figure — possibly a reindeer god. Other paintings also adorn the wall of this cave. David M. Stowe wrote concerning them: "Over all the magnificent, warming vitality of animal life depicted in these paintings, there broods an unmistakable air of reverence and celebration. It is the mystical and supernatural potency of the living world that is being portrayed and worshiped."¹

Religion was highly developed by the time Jesus Christ arrived on the scene. Jesus Christ appeared in a world of "many 'gods' and many 'lords'" (1 Cor. 8:5) and among people who were "very religious" (Acts 17:22).

The Complexity of Religion

What is religion? Most people think they can answer this question until they attempt it. Religion is complex and very difficult to define. Definitions vary widely and often reflect the prejudices and beliefs of those defining it. In one popular textbook on world religions, twenty different definitions of religion are listed.²

Definitions emphasize different elements of religion based upon the interest of the person constructing the definition. For example, some definitions stress the emotional element, others the ethical element, others emphasize worship, and still others make other characteristics most important. One scholar wrote:

Religion consists of elements. It makes a demand on the whole of man's life, intellect, emotion and will; it is both individual and social; it is worship, yet it is more than worship; it is all the values which give worth and meaning to human life. But at its core religion is always a relationship, a conscious relation of human beings and God or higher powers, however they may be conceived.³

Evidence of human religious practices can be found as long as _____ years ago.

(100,000)

By the time Jesus arrived, religion was highly _____.

(developed)

Religion is _____ and very _____ to define.

(complex, difficult)

Restate Soper's definition of religion in your own words.

(your own response)

¹ David M. Stowe, *When Faith Meets Faith* (New York: Friendship Press, 1967), p. 7.

² Edmund Davison Soper, *The Religions of Mankind*, 3d. ed., rev. (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), pp. 13-20.

³ Soper, p. 19.

However, E. Luther Copeland criticizes Soper's definition. He feels that Soper's definition reflects too much of Soper's Christian experience and viewpoint. Copeland states that this definition is more ideal than real. Copeland further stresses that not all religions conserve "all the values which give worth and meaning to human life."⁴

Viewed from the Christian standpoint, religion involves the knowledge of God by Divine revelation. The Christian knows God as the self-existent Source and Sustainer of all existence. He knows God as the only perfect Being, the personal Lord who makes an absolute claim upon man while giving Himself to man in Jesus Christ, the Holy Companion who dwells within man, and the loving Father who unites men in one family.

It is doubtful, however, whether even Christians usually experience religion in this much holiness. And it is certain, at least to Christians who know something of the history of religion, that this Christian understanding of religion represents a high-water mark of religion in revelation, which judges rather than describes religion as generally known.

How, then, can religion best be defined? How can one describe religion as common to all people? For this purpose it is difficult to improve upon the definition of William Newton Clark: "Religion is the life of man in his super-human relationships...."⁵ Or the statement of John B. Noss that "The basic feeling in all religion" is man's dependence upon something outside himself.⁶

The Universality of Religion

Mankind is uniquely and incurably religious. But humans are also universally religious. Of course, this does not mean that every person is religious, but that all peoples have a religion or religions. Archeology and history tell us that as far back as we have substantial traces of ancient man we also find evidences of this religion.

Some popular movements today deny religious faith — for example, Communism. However, it can be argued that Communism itself is a kind of substitute religion. It needs to be pointed out that where Communism has been dominant for a number of years or decades — which is especially true of Russia — it has been unable to eliminate religion. A prominent psychologist has stated it in a different way. The "religious sentiments of mankind — whatever the fate of institutional religion may be — are very much alive and will perhaps always remain alive, for the roots are many and deep."⁷

⁴ E. Luther Copeland, *Christianity and World Religions* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1963), p. 2.

⁵ William Newton Clark, *An Outline of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 1.

⁶ John B. Noss, *Man's Religion*, rev. ed. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1956), p. 3.

⁷ Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971), p. 3.

What is Copeland's criticism of Soper's definition?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

State the meaning of religion from the Christian standpoint.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Is the following statement true or false?

It is doubtful if Christians usually experience religion with this much holiness. _____

(true)

State the definitions of religion given by Clark and Noss.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

This does not mean that every person is _____, but that all peoples have a _____ or _____.

(religious, religion, religions)

The Origin of Religion

Many theories have been set forth as to how religion began. These theories can be grouped into two categories.

Evolutionary theories

Most theories on the origin of religion are based upon the idea of evolution. These theories presuppose that for a time after man developed into what was truly human he had no religion, or that his religion was most simple and undeveloped. Man's religion only reached the level of monotheism after a very long time. Some scholars have challenged the theories of the evolutionary development of religion. These scholars have found what they believe to be evidences of remnants of monotheism among modern primitives. Some primitive tribes have the concept of the "high-god" who is creator and source of the world. This recognition has led some scholars to conclude that religion began in the recognition of the one God. But because of the fall of man it degenerated into polytheism, the belief in many gods, and other degrading forms of belief.

Critics of this "primitive monotheism" theory point out that the "high-god" is usually remote from the life of the people. Other gods are closer to the people, serving their immediate needs and receiving their worship and devotion. It could be answered, of course, that because of man's fall, and alienation from the one God, one might expect that where there is some remembrance of Him, there would be also a sense of remoteness and separation.

It should be remembered, however, that today's "primitives" are still modern men with unknown ages of human history behind them. One may theorize if he wishes, and it is interesting and possibly helpful to do so. But the truth remains that, from the standpoint of history and science, no one can prove how religion began.

The biblical standpoint

From the standpoint of biblical faith, man is religious because God created him for fellowship with Him as His child. Man's religious consciousness is a part of the Divine Image in which man is created. Because of this image and his religious awareness, man can comprehend the revelation of God as it has been disclosed in nature, society and the inner life of man. But being itself distorted by sin, man's religious consciousness perverts the truth of God's revelation. Hence, the fallen nature of man has shaped the many religions in the world. Religion then is a product both of Divine revelation and human perversion (see Rom. 1:18-25). This is true of religion as such whenever it may have begun, and it is true of man's various religions, whenever they develop. Thus one may expect to meet with elements both of the Divine and the demonic in religion. Man's religion will have both truth and error.

Many theories on the religion are based upon the idea of _____.

(evolution)

The theories of the evolutionary development of religion have been _____ by _____.

(challenged, scholars)

Is the following statement true or false?

The origin of human religion can be traced to the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. _____

(false)

Give the biblical viewpoint of man's religion.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Man is Still Religious

Though some have denied the validity of religion and in our day many have said "God is dead," the practice of religion among modern mankind still persists. Religion is still an important and vital part of mankind's life. Allport states that "the persistence of religion in the modern world appears as an embarrassment to the scholars of today."⁸ Albert Einstein, the famous Jewish scientist, observed the importance of religion during the days preceding World War II. He wrote:

Being a lover of freedom, when a revolution came in Germany I looked to the universities to defend it, knowing that they had always boasted of their devotion to the cause of truth; but no, the universities immediately were silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers whose flaming editorials in days gone by had proclaimed their love of freedom; but they, like the universities, were silenced in a few short weeks.... Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing truth.⁹

Religion in Today's World

Mankind's religious development has become increasingly complex. There are many religions and many substitutes for religion in the modern world. Some observers feel that the present is a time of religious ferment unexcelled in human history.

Secularism

Secularism is a way of living or an interpretation of life that includes only the natural order of things. God is not considered essential for life or thought. The secular person simply does not take God into account, though he does not necessarily deny the existence of God. The person with this outlook on life may actually seek to use God and religion for human ends. Secularism at its worst is a concern for material things only. At its best, it seeks good for man — but it ignores God. The secular person tends to deny God and truth as ultimate values. Instead, it makes absolute relative values such as education, government and science.

Secularism is worldwide. It affects all religions. Religious nations, such as India, are permeated by secularism. Some of the new nationalisms are secularistic faiths that substitute the state for God. Communism is a secularistic religion. While denying God and religion, it demands for itself the kind of unconditional commitment that only religion can require.

Secularism is diverse and subtle. It is a many-sided paganism. It includes Communism, but it also includes the vague materialism of Western society. A person may conform to religion, but actually be unaffected by vital

⁸ Allport, p. 1.

⁹ Quoted by David M. Stowe, *When Faith Meets Faith*, p. 9.

The practice of religion _____.

(persists)

Describe secularism.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Secularism is _____. It affects all _____.

(worldwide, religions)

Is the following statement true or false?

Many religious people consciously give themselves to secular values. _____

(true)

faith and conviction, unconsciously giving himself to secular values.

Scientism is another form of secularism. This aspect of secularism sees science as mankind's messiah that has outmoded religion. There is no need for sentimentality in religion because science can unlock all secrets and answer all questions.

Non-Christian religions

Our day is seeing a revival of the non-Christian religions. There was a time when it was thought that the non-Christian religions were dying out. But no one thinks that anymore. The great world religions — particularly Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism — are reviving.

Nationalism and cultural revival have incited revival of these non-Christian religions. With independence, a new self-consciousness and awareness of themselves has come to the new nations. They have a new appreciation of their history, their unique cultural heritages and national traditions. As a result, their own religions are being revived as a part of the national character.

Another reason for the revival of the non-Christian religions is that they are reacting against the West and against Christianity. These religions are attempting to counteract the influence of Christian missions. This determination is in part responsible for the aggressive missionary activities by these religions. The missionary efforts of these religions are due more to Christian influence than to any inherent missionary convictions. They are in fact a resistance to Christian missions in non-Christian lands.

The student must not be naive to think that the revival of these religions is due solely to the secondary or negative motives of nationalism and anti-Christian reaction. They also have their own positive religious dynamic, even though this is difficult to separate from the non-religious impulses. Luther Copeland summarizes their thinking in the following way:

Our religion has stood face to face with the West for a long time. We have heard the preaching of Christianity and have observed its missionaries that work among us for a century or more. We have studied Western history and philosophy in our schools, and we have seen science and technology and the various ideologies of Europe and America flooding into our country.

We have felt the tremendous impact of modern thought upon our ancient culture and religion. But our religion has not surrendered. It has found ways of adjustment, and will continue to do so. Its real nature has not been destroyed or significantly altered. So we stand with new confidence as members of a mature religion which has a message not only for our country but for the world.¹⁰

Scientism sees religion as _____.

(outmoded)

A revival of _____-Christian religions is taking place today.

(non)

Revival of non-Christian religions has been stimulated by a new emphasis on _____ and _____.

(nationalism, culture)

These non-Christian religions are reacting against the _____ and _____ Christianity.

(West, against)

They also have their own _____ religious _____.

(positive, dynamic)

Give examples that support Copeland's analysis of the thinking of non-Christian religions in today's world.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

¹⁰ Copeland, p. 8.

The new meeting

The planet on which we live is no longer large and foreboding. Modern travel and communication has brought about an intermingling of cultures, customs, languages, religions. This intermingling along with the new missionary activity of the non-Christian religion is producing a new meeting of Christianity with other religions.

Part of this new meeting between Christianity and other religions has been brought about by the establishment of Christian churches in almost every nation by modern missions. In addition, there has been a flow of non-Christian missions to the West.

Secular faiths, as well as bona-fide religions, are competing for the loyalty and devotion of the world's people. Their voices demand the commitment of men and women to something less than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and their voices are loud and constant.

The Christian challenge

These loud and constant voices present a challenge to Christianity. Christians must be sure that their unconditional loyalty and commitment are given to Jesus Christ. This is no time for half-hearted commitment. There are flaming faiths in the world today with devotees fanatically convinced that what they believe is right. Any religion that does not believe in its own unique worth and the necessity of its propagation cannot hope to survive, much less accomplish a world mission.

It is also imperative that Christians study the non-Christian religions. It is especially essential that Christian workers have a deep understanding of these systems of faith and life. And it is also important for all Christians who are concerned with the propagation of the gospel to know something about non-Christian religions. This book will help you in your study of these religions.

Is the following statement true or false?

The voices of the reviving world religions call men and women to a commitment to something less than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. _____

(true)

Christians must be sure to give _____ loyalty and commitment to _____

(unconditional, Jesus, Christ)

State reasons why Christians need to study non-Christian religions.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading the study guide, answer the following questions.

1. Define religion in your own words.

2. Why does Copeland criticize Soper's definition of religion?

3. What does the author mean by the “universality of religion”?

4. How did religion begin?

5. What evidence can you give that modern day humans are still religious?

6. What is meant by secularism?

7. What effect can secularism have on one’s religious values?

8. What is scientism?

9. Give two reasons for the revival of non-Christian religions.

10. According to Copeland, what is the thinking of reviving non-Christian religions in today’s world?

11. Name two challenges faced by Christians as they confront the resurgence of non-Christian religions.

12. Explain what is meant by the title of this lesson.

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 9-22 in *Understanding World Religions* by George W. Braswell, Jr. Answer the following questions.

1. Give four reasons why a study of world religions is necessary.
2. Why is religion important to people?
3. What does the author mean when he writes about religious pluralism? Why is this important for Christians in the modern world?
4. What is the best way to understand world religions?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*). The following activities are all based on the study guide.

1. Prepare a questionnaire that you can use to help determine people's thoughts and feelings about religion in general. Use your questionnaire to interview five people about their thoughts on religion. Do three of these interviews with people who are not active in any religion.
2. Write an essay on this topic: "Evidence That Humans Are Incurably Religious."

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the theme: "Humans are incurably religious." What challenge does this present to Christianity? (Advanced students can share information from their essays here.)
2. Discuss secularism. To what extent does it exist in your part of the world? What influence can secularism have on one's religion?
3. Discuss the revival of non-Christian religions in your part of the world. How can Christians face up to this challenge?