SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY

MODULE 1 – LECTURE 1.1

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: RELIGION – A WORLDVIEW AND A WAY OF LIFE

What is in a name like "religion?" Defining the word can be both frustrating and fascinating! Thousands of scholars attend each annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in the United States, and similar meetings around the world. In addition, thousands of scholars, activists, clergy, and other sorts of leaders participate in each convening of the Parliament of the World's Religions held around the world every two to three years. If we ask many of them: what is this thing "*religion*" about which they gather. You'll receive many unique answers and definitions. Religious literacy begins when we acknowledge many possible definitions, so our guiding values will be curiosity and respect, as we learn. In this lecture, you will hear about several useful ways to think about what "religion" is.

Depending upon where you were raised, it may have been long fashionable to be dismissive of the word "religion" in both community and society. Maybe you've thought it simply means just "showing up at a church, synagogue or temple," or "performing certain rituals." Maybe you have heard people argue about whether some system of belief is in fact to be considered "a religion" at all! One textbook asserts that Buddhism is a religion, but Confucianism is not. (It's a philosophy, it says). Another textbook says that … of course Confucianism is a religion! In another example, one scholar may declare that Christianity is indeed "a religion," but Hinduism is not, calling Hindu identity instead "a way of life."

None of this would surprise you or me at all, say historians of religion, if we knew more about the *long* history of the word "religion." Scholar Jonathan Z. Smith points out that many of the ways in which the term "religion" was used before the 16th century is *quite different* from its present usage. We could keep Smith's point in mind when reading a pre-modern source about "religion". Smith tells us that, as it became commonplace over the centuries to speak of religion in the plural ("*religions*"), an important new question emerged: is there such a thing as generic

"religion"—of which there are diverse species? It makes sense, doesn't it? There are numerous kinds of horses, or turtles, so can we think of species of belief like "religions" within a broad understanding of the category of religion?

To that question, historian H. Byron Earhart would answer "*yes*"! In his comprehensive textbook, *Religious Traditions of the World*, Earhart defines *religion* as a distinctive set of rituals, beliefs, doctrines, institutions, and practices that enables members of that tradition to establish, maintain, and celebrate a meaningful worldview. Now, this definition of a "meaningful world" or "worldview" is especially useful for us, because of its breadth: one's means of establishing, maintaining, and celebrating a meaningful world need not be theistic (by theistic, we mean a belief centered on a particular deity). That may be difficult for some of us to imagine, somewhat like having a "worldview" without a sun around which that world orbits.

And yet, rich non-theistic traditions like Jainism, Confucianism, and Humanism indeed are within an accepted understanding of "religion" today! Now, even though religions need not be theistic, many religions *are theistic*, invoking a belief in a particular deity—and adherents of *those* religious traditions will appreciate your learning that they have names for their theistic worldview, for God or the Sacred. In this case, the Sacred is a special designation for the source of life *beyond which nothing greater can be imagined*.

Whether a religious tradition is theistic or non-theistic, all traditions do include and involve a specific community. In fact, the modern word's ancient Latin root for "religion" has to do with *being bound or held together, which you can hear in the words "religion" and "ligament."*

We don't have to find one definition for "religion" after all. This is our second take-away for religious literacy: we can remain open to the richness of truth available in many definitions rather than only one.

The great 20th-century scholar, Ninian Smart, makes the point that, at best, religions share a "family resemblance" in the world rather than a rigid set of criteria. According to Smart, religious worldviews tend to have six features or ligaments, that hold them together. These six ligaments or features are: 1) doctrinal and philosophical coherence around truth: 2) guiding stories within written or oral texts; 3) clear ethical and moral guidelines; 4) regular ritual practices; 5) agreement on the social and political good of religion for the world; and 6) a commitment to community. These features are prioritized differently from one religious worldview to the next. This is to be

expected. *After all*, the world is a complex and varied space of geography, culture, story and people, and can be envisioned in many ways.

Consider the six features within *your* worldview that frame *your* identity. If we consider the six above, these will include your unique understanding … of the human being, of the stories that guide your life, of the ethical value of kindness, of the rituals that help you deal with loss of a loved one, and of the importance of family, friends or community every day … all six areas shape your daily life. In light of these six ligaments, a third take-away for us in religious literacy is to seek to familiarize ourselves with own worldview: Could you identify the ligaments that bind or hold together your worldview at this time in your life? If so, what might they be? In order to respond, let's think together about each of these six ligaments or features.

When we focus on the second ligament, or guiding stories, we find that, for some worldviews, written literature is hugely important; for others, the oral or spoken tradition is paramount. For yet another, the written *and* the oral are equally important. In addition, for some religions, a single book or collection of texts is of tremendous importance. Islam's *Qur'an*, Sikhism's *Guru Granth Sahib*, and Judaism's *Torah* (which is used in worship in the form of a handwritten scroll) are all examples of the importance of written *and* oral sources of central importance. By contrast, in Hinduism and Buddhism, sacred scripture is not a single book or scroll, but a huge library. And yet, religions with a central scripture often have even more additional sacred literature that is nearly as important. For Islam, the *Hadith* is a vast collection of authoritative records of what the Prophet Muhammad said and did. For Judaism, the *Nevi'im* and *Kethuvim* are collections of ancient literature known as "the Prophets" and "the Writings". Furthermore, within religions with a huge library of sacred literature, there may yet exist a stream, sect, or denomination that *gives singular attention* to a particular text (or set of texts). So, for instance, Theravada Buddhists look to the entirety of the *Tipitaka* (or Three Baskets), which is an enormous collection of the Buddha's teachings, for guidance. Whereas for Nichiren Buddhists, the *Lotus Sutra,* a single volume of that extensive library, is their principal focus.

Our brief note about the variation among streams of Buddhism regarding which texts are authoritative brings us to another point to bear in mind when studying religious worldviews. It may help to think of each broad religious worldview as an umbrella. An enormous amount of diversity resides underneath each religious worldview umbrella. Under each umbrella, you will find degrees of family resemblance, but you will also find serious diversity in how the six

ligaments of a specific religious worldview's doctrines, narratives, ethical codes, practices, and institutions are understood, prioritized, practiced, and maintained. For example, Muslims are far from monolithic—as Shahab Ahmed explains in his 2016 award-winning book, *What* Is *Islam?*. In addition, in large North American cities, such as Los Angeles and New York, many distinct streams of Buddhism flourish side by side—but may differ as to when the Buddha's birthday should be celebrated.

Turning then to the Christian umbrella, we could say that, for each of its hundreds of branches, denominations, and sects, Jesus is in the picture. However, there are important differences between Orthodox, Quaker, Baptist, and Lutheran Christians (to mention but four of the possibilities).

You may find it helpful to be aware that, in the vast study of religion, it is also common to create specific umbrellas for *groups* of religions. Accordingly, Dharmic teaching is a specific umbrella under which to consider Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism as forms of teaching. Afro-Atlantic includes Chango, Lùkùmì, Candomblé, Vodou, and Rastafarianism (among others). Abrahamic refers to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam collectively. It may be helpful to speak of Indigenous or First Peoples traditions (religions original to a specific geographic location) collectively, as this can create more visibility and public capacity for shared voice on facing shared challenges.

And yet, with all that we have said, can you also see challenges with ways of categorizing religion? This is our fourth take-away for religious literacy: When we categorize we will tend to over-emphasize some limited commonality while also minimizing (or even ignoring) significant differences of belief, practice, history and culture. That's always a risk! It means we must remain attentive to how communities and people describe their own stories so that we are using these six features or ligaments of a religious worldview thoughtfully.

As we do so, remember to ask about how other additional religions also fit into what you've learned. For instance, depending upon your upbringing, you might have an opinion about how Sikh followers would react if Sikhism were placed under the "Dharmic Religions" umbrella. Or, would the Bahá'í faith desire to qualify as "Abrahamic" Should Shinto, which comes from Japan, be thought of as an Indigenous religion?

If religions are indeed the rich constellations of beliefs, practices, and cultures by which people make the world meaningful, then perhaps we are wise to keep in mind that many religious worldviews will not be easily labeled and sorted. Humility is a guide to wisdom.

Now, continue on the course page by reading and listening more. You will then be asked to reflect on your own as well. Let the course guide you as you continue to the second lecture, where we will explore further the meaning of a religious worldview, as we continue our journey together.