SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY

MODULE 1 – LECTURE 1.2

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: RELIGION – WORLDVIEW, THE SACRED, AND MYTH

Greetings and welcome to our second lecture in this module -- In our time together we will unpack a few of the main points aligned to the first lecture – these being: a religious worldview, and then two of its features or ligaments, these being: guiding stories and ethical guidelines.

First, let's be clear at the outset. A religious worldview is not the same thing as a system of beliefs or more formally, a specific doctrine. In our first lecture we mentioned historian Byron Earhart, who wrote helpfully that "religion" stands for "how people make sense of the world." It was the great 20th-century scholar, Ninian Smart, who equated "religion" with "worldview," which is an idea we are drawing upon here.

A worldview is a way of looking at the world, which is the sum total of all of the things I sense to be true in the universe, everything … from whether God exists to daily facts such as whether, why and how I choose to act ethically toward others around me. In short, our worldviews tell us what the world is like, how to navigate the world, and it provides us with meaning and guidance, somewhat like a built-in cosmological GPS. But this doesn't mean that our worldviews always serve us well or are particularly accurate or coherent. In fact, a worldview may be thick or thin, well worked-out or incoherent, critically reflective, or naïve – and as we become aware of ourselves and the stories of others, we may witness inconsistencies or internal conflicts which can lead to difficulty for us when our worldviews hold opposing positions, such as holding one standard of kindness for some and quite a different standard for others, or more.

And yet, we know that worldviews are messy. For instance, a religious worldview is not necessarily a precise description curated by religious specialists or those endowed with authority, though it often contains that kind of content. Our worldviews also include our personal lived

experiences, our common sense accrued over years, our confidence about how the world works, our faith in others, our adherence to stories that shape our moral compass every day.

In terms of a take-away for religious literacy, a religious worldview refers in some way to a fuller reality and source of value, which many have called the Sacred. The term – sacred – is a very elastic term, so if there are times when you feel like a word is too slippery, or too pliable, don't lose heart. A principle of religious literacy is to pay attention to when we are confused because confusion affirms there is more to learn, such as with this word – sacred.

In the history of religions, the sacred is not only referred to as a single "ultimate" or transcendent reality such as God; reference to the sacred includes other entities, diverse beings less than the Ultimate but greater than humanity, which religious adherents look upon as sources of life and well-being and which help to order the world in the right way. Across cultures, some diverse beings – such as angels or spirits of ancestors - are understood to both reside in other dimensions and to be entities in this visible world having special presence and power. A sacred mountain or river is a specific example of the visible world infused with special power or capacity. Whether beings in other dimensions or places in the visible world, the worldview of a religion will teach its adherents who or what the Sacred is for them and how to relate to the Sacred. Religions accomplish this task in many unique ways through learning.

We have already discussed the ligament or feature of guiding stories in a religious worldview, and we'll say more now here. Religious literature accomplishes the work of supporting its community through telling something we've learned since childhood … stories. Across cultures, human beings are connected by story. Guiding stories are evident in large bodies of oral and written literature with different kinds of authority to help communities to interpret the world around them.

Think of how a story works in your life. It instructs, affirms, acknowledges and illuminates. Now … a special kind of story that defines the rich and essential elements of a worldview, a core vision of life and its meaning, can be called a myth. Now, I don't mean myth in the popular like a fairytale. Instead, myth within a religious worldview is evident in every specific story of that religion. the whole collection of integrated stories are like stars in the sky, and myth is what connects all of the stories together, that shine together and clarify your place in the universe.

Here is an example of how a myth works in a religious worldview: Very often, one essential myth of a religious worldview is how the world came into existence, often called a "creation story," or a "cosmogony" (to use a fancier term). This story not only answers the question "Where did everything come from?" but how, through stages, everything came to be. Such myths are found in cultures all over the world and, wouldn't you know, they all have certain features in common. These include: heaven and earth being separated, the beginning of light and darkness or space and time. Sometimes myths include images of infinite expanses of water, and a state before time where there was only – something – all alone by Itself. Sometimes the something is called God (such as in Genesis 1), or The One (as in the Rig Veda 10.129) or the Dao (as in Lao Tzu 25, 42) or by many other names. This primordial something is seen as sacred, as the source of all existence and life itself.

In big myths of this order, the story of how the world we now see came to be displays living beings and humans in relation to one another, often tells how a community came to find a home in that world, and how human beings acquired food, crafts, developed ethical standards, and established practices for community life. For instance, rich myth forms within Chinese culture are traditionally believed to have been created by godlike Sage Kings who knew the order of the cosmos, which they had helped to create, understanding in their wisdom its ultimate principles. The Sage Kings not only provided humans with the skills of life such as fire, building and agriculture, but they also provided humans with music, writing and the beautiful diversities of required ceremonies that express and maintain harmony within the numerous patterns of the universe.

Myths are diverse across religions and cultures. If every story is a star within a galaxy or worldview, then myth is the guiding light itself that emanates truth in that galaxy. Let's try another way of saying this: If a story is like a drop of water, and a guiding myth is the ocean, then there is myth in every drop of water too. Yes, there are specific myths that are stories. And yet we are now talking about the big, guiding myths – such as the truth of showing love toward others – that is intended to be true and guiding somehow in every story, at the same time, like the ocean in every drop of water.

Now, none of this discussion on story or myth makes sense if we don't consider the religious worldview, and the ligament of ethical guidelines, which we'll do now.

Let's talk about you, and me: A human being is an embodied and living example of a worldview in action every day. You believe certain things. You are informed by certain stories. You assume certain truths. And you also have certain concepts of right and wrong, or better or worse behavior, or good and evil. No religious worldview is without a set of ethical values. These ethical values are not only articulated in a moral code such as the Hebrew Ten Commandments or the Five Precepts of Buddhism, but they are like hardwood floors in the temple of life, answering the question of "How should we live?" and these ethical values convey to us an understanding of what counts for a good life, what is a good person, and which stories have indispensable, mythic quality that are imperative for our lives.

Across cultures and religions, we will find ethical values upheld by exemplary figures – heroes, saints, and prophets – as well as by those who are less good and may even resist the good. Members of a religious community learn from earliest childhood about what is good and about what is bad. Stories show how people act in varied situations, how they display character -- through examples of ethical virtues and their opposites.

Examples of these ethical guidelines in narratives are found in the Hindu epic the Ramayana, in the Exodus story of the Jewish people, and in the life of the Buddha along with stories of his previous births as a Bodhisattva, known as Jātaka stories, only to name a few; ethical guidelines are also found in the countless biographies of the lives of saints, sages and heroes, peppered across the arc of religious stories and cultures. As we walk these paths of greater religious literacy, we can remember this take-away: seek for ethical guidelines within the stories. Look for it in how communities recount their specific history, cultural memory and events, whether legendary or historically verifiable. Also, look for different or contesting perspectives.

We can also remember as we gain religious literacy that nothing is static or unchanging. Members of a religious community may think of teachings as unvarying, as always true in the same precise way, since they are viewed as coming from a sacred Source, but this is not the same as saying that worldview is static and dull. In fact, the worldview, ethical guidelines and practices of a religious community can and do change through time, as the study of the history of religion demonstrates from evidence.

This historical change and development of a religion can sometimes be a difficult subject for some, because it opens the possibility for numerous interpretations of sacred stories and guiding myths. Today, advances in natural science, the challenges and opportunities of globalization, and the way we understand human beings in particular, are part of a larger public discussion. Religious communities participate in these discussions, and knowing how to think of story, myth, and ethical guidelines, are all important parts of making sense of that discussion.

At this time, continue to follow the prompts to the next steps on the page and in the module. Participate in the discussion and read instructions for beginning the next module.