SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY

MODULE 2 – LECTURE 2.1

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: THE SACRED, THE COSMIC, AND REVERENCE

We've learned so far together that religion, as a general category of human phenomena, is a modern concept and is still evolving every day. But even as the definition of religion is debated, somehow the idea of religion is familiar to each of us, carrying with it a sense of … "I know it when I see it." This is perhaps especially true when we consider one of our stated features, or ligaments, of religion – the practice of ritual.

As theologian John Haught wrote: "I doubt I would be using the word 'religion,' or that the reader would have any idea what I am talking about, unless we had tacitly agreed that that there is indeed something distinct about the phenomena to which the word 'religion' seems to be pointing."

Haught notes that rituals are religious practices that are set apart from everyday behavior and are deliberately created in time, taking place in a specially devised way and context by human beings. Haught gives us examples of what he means by the specialness of time "set apart." For instance, consider a specific tribe of people in Europe 35,000 years ago who buried their child with special ornaments and pigments; or envision in your mind a Hindu ascetic meditating in a cave; or think of a Hebrew prophet proclaiming, "The Day of The Lord."[1] These are all ways in which religion is evident through practice across people, across culture, and across time. For each of these, the feature of religious practice ligaments or connects to a worldview, helping make sense of the universe around us.

Now, it should interest us that even though religion is primarily about practice, we often associate religion almost singularly with beliefs that are "institutionalized" and "organized." We

can say that religions are organized in that they provide a community practices, rituals, and sacred texts, along with "belief." But a belief in what or in whom? Often, religion will focus our attention upon what, in a popular way, is called a "higher power" or "something greater." "God," "Lord" or "that which nothing greater can be imagined" is the "what" or "in whom" – by various names in different traditions – that, as one Reality, gives existence, order, and a portion of coherence to everything else in the universe. The "what" or "in whom" of belief is often understood as "transcendent" – that is, beyond the visible and manifested world – yet may also in some way be "immanent" – or present in the world around us. Altogether, belief is often in an immanent or transcendent higher power, who may be beyond and yet also very near. It is a question for religious literacy to ask yourself: What are your thoughts around religion as a practice? Do you have a ritual that is practiced regularly around belief? And finally, if you do have a "what" or "in whom" of your belief, then how do you describe what is transcendent or immanent?

But wait … there's more for us to consider: Many religions also connect their adherents to "higher powers" in the plural. These higher powers are beings that are "below" the supreme Being and may be that Being's delegates, so to speak. For example, consider traditions around the world that mention "gods" or deities, angels, saints, and the spirits of one's ancestors. These powers are regarded with reverence and may receive prayer, veneration, and worship.[2] They are higher or greater than ordinary humans, they may be called "spiritual" to distinguish them from the "material" or physical, and they may reside in other "worlds" or dimensions.

Here's a fun-fact: You may be surprised to learn that today, in some parts of the world, Humanists and Atheists are also calling for recognition as "religions" as they seek inclusion in local interfaith programs. In fact, some legal systems do already recognize Humanism and Atheism as religions. In addition, some university chaplaincy ministries provide Atheist and Humanist ministries, and local municipalities that make space for philanthropic organizations that are not religion-based. This desire for inclusion may seem strange if we think of Humanist or Atheist belief systems as denying not only belief in God but also the truth of "mainstream" institutionalized or organized religion. However, where religious organizations impact the societal common good, and where values align for responding to social ills – as in combatting poverty, homelessness, or food insecurity – then Atheists, Humanists, Hindus, and Lutherans (and member of any other religion) will find good reason to be working together, to be "co-religionists" in the practice of

their moral center in the world. It is also true, like anything humans do, that Humanism and Atheism can be organized into institutions and defined by worldviews which affirm a set of moral values and community practices such that they resemble a secular organized "religion."

Okay, returning to our reflection on the Sacred – that is, on ultimate Reality, God, "the gods" and other holy beings – let us now go step-by-step through a cross-cultural exploration together.

While we identified a few moments ago how "religion" is a special kind of human creation or activity, we do not know how or when religion began. This is a thrilling point to tuck away in your approach to religious literacy, because it means that religions have evolved with us. And, as this is true, we must show respect and take great care not to assume that the religions of, say, contemporary Indigenous peoples are the same as the religions of humans in the earlier ages of our species.[3] What we do know, however, is that much earlier forms of religion, of which we have historical knowledge, represented sacred meaning by using symbols and mythic language – language which is still used today alongside other modes that explain how practice and belief have emerged over time. Other modes include oral and written literature as noted in Module 1, as well as philosophical abstraction, theological interpretation, personal testimony or confession of faith, and much more.

In the oral and written literature of the world's religions, we noted in Module 1 how a common feature found therein is a "mythic" narrative of how the world – that is, the whole universe – came into existence.

Remember that we referred to "mythic" story as bearing truth within it. We can say now that the truths of myths are deeply and richly present because they clarify purpose, order and coherence.

Let's look at a few of these mythic narratives of how the world came to be. In many traditional creation myths, before heaven and earth, time and space, darkness and light, there was a single Supreme Being, as has been mentioned above. In this module you will be asked to reflect upon some of these stories, in the Reflect - Upon What You've Learned section under Lesson One. In that section, we are providing you four selections from sacred texts of different traditions in the

Middle East, India, China, and North America, noting that these narratives about the creation or emergence of the world are not the only creation stories in each of these traditions.

In the passages just noted,, a first original Being is described in a variety of ways: God within the Bible, or "That One," in the Rig Veta. Lao Tzu says he does not know Its name but calls It the Tao, or Way, and "Mother of the universe;" in China it is also called "Lord on High," "Heaven" and the "Great Ultimate." The Lakota Indigenous people speak of the "Great Mystery" and the "Rock," as aspects of one another.

Creation narratives, in their respective traditions, go on to tell how the world's many entities came to be, including primal powers of nature and various kinds of living things, and how the cosmic order was established. In these cosmologies, this includes the Sacred array of holy beings "after" the original Deity who may be in a special relationship to the Supreme Being. Think for example of Mary in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity or Ganesha in Hinduism. We might also refer to the Orishas of the Yoruba religion, who are subsidiary to the supreme Deity Oludumaré, or the Bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism, which does not accept creation by a supreme Deity but does speak of the formless and inconceivable Dharmakāya or "Dharma Body" of the Buddha as well as Buddhas in different Buddha-worlds.

Although difficult to do, part of religious literacy is learning not to assume that all religions are "just referring to the same supreme deity in the end anyway." Learning about religion, culture, community, and truth, requires being aware of our own "confirmation bias," to turn the world into what we want to see, rather than accepting that there are complexities and nuances that will take more than a single lifetime to fully appreciate and comprehend. (all of the orange below is not read. Megan: It needs to go into a separate page for the reflection section.)

> Passage 1: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. And God said "Let there be light"; and there was light." (Genesis 1:1-3, NRSV)

Passage 2: There was neither existence nor non-existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night or of day. That One breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than That there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, That One arose through the power of heat….

…the gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe…(Rig Veda 10:129, 1-3, 6, translated Wendy Doniger, The Rig Veda, Penguin Classics 1981)

Passage 3:

Something unformed and complete,

Before heaven and earth were born,

Solitary and silent,

Stands alone and unchanging,

Pervading all things without limits,

It is like the mother of all under heaven,

But I don't know its name –

Better call it TAO.

Better call it Great.

TAO engenders One,

One engenders Two,

Two engenders Three,

Three engenders the ten thousand things.

Tao te Ching, Ch. 25, 42, translated Stephen Adiss and Stanley Lombardo, Hackett Publishing, 1993)

Passage 4:

In the time before motion, before anything had a meaning, there was only the Rock and the surrounding Darkness. The Rock had no beginning, for It was when nothing else was. Its form was soft and shapeless like a cloud; It had all powers and was everywhere. The Spirit of the Rock was Wakantanka, the Supreme Sacredness.

The Rock did not want to be alone, so the It created out of Itself by putting forth Its power. Its power was in Its blood, which was blue. It opened Its veins and poured forth Its blue blood, and the vast disk of Earth covered with water was created. In creating, the Rock had used up Its power and became small and hard. But the Earth is really part of the Rock.

The powers of the Rock that could not live in the waters separated from the waters and became the blue dome of the sky. The Spirit of the Sky is Skan, who – unmoving – is the movement of everything that moves. Skan is the source of energy.

Lakota creation story, compiled from: Marla N. Powers, Oglala Women, 1986, and James R. Walker, edited by Elaine A. Jahner, Lakota Myth, 1983.

Across religious traditions, when the supreme divine Reality is understood as "personal," or as a conscious subject, this is referred to as "theism." The unpronounceable Name in Hebrew 'YHWH', Lord, or Allah, is an example of referencing a theistic deity.

And yet, even in theistic traditions, the deity is most often still beyond human experience and comprehension, since humans are limited by being finite and God is often interpreted as

unlimited and infinite. Given the sense of divine transcendence, many traditions will specify what cannot be said about God by stating how divine reality is beyond words and ideas – "not this, not that" – or, as noted in the Upanishads - beyond speech and mind. Lao Tzu famously says that the Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao (Lao Tzu 1). Yet the formless Absolute can indeed also assume a personal form.

When you engage the reflection exercise, you will be asked to read four passages. As you do, ask yourself: What features do you notice about references to a source or deity? Take the time to identify these as well as consider how the physical cosmos is described amid the ordering of beings or objects. Is there is a relationship to the universe that the passage assumes of the reader or listener? You can also ask yourself where you recognize reverence; where you find reverence you will often find religious ritual, which is another take away for religious literacy. And finally, as you consider these stories and your own worldview, identify how reverence also appears in your ritual practices and in your beliefs.

Our journey continues as you reflect upon what you are learning. Continue through the other offerings provided, and then take time to reflect on the question offered to you in the Reflection Section. After that, continue through the module. Thank you.

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