SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY

MODULE 2 – LECTURE 2.2

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: THE HUMAN BEING—FOUR RELEVANT QUESTIONS

As we journey together in seeking greater religious literacy, we move now to the feature or ligament of religious community, which we first identified in lecture one of module one. We can always ask at least four questions when we consider the nature of a religious community, these being: First, "How are we welcomed?" Second, "What marks our arrival at adulthood?" Third, "What happens when we die?" Fourth, "What is our purpose within community?" Because community is essential to the nature of religion, each of these questions applies to who we are together, as well as individually. As individuals we ask: How do I feel welcomed in the world? How do I know when I've reached maturity? Where do I go when I die? What is my purpose? Even here, these four questions about our individuality can be preceded by a simple question – What is a human being? Let's consider a number of responses:

A human being, a Sikh might say, is a being occupying a God-given body containing jiva (a divine spark). For a Taoist, a human is composed of a yang dimension (heavenly; having to do with spirit and intellect) that intersects with a yin dimension (earthly, having to do with physical vitality). For practitioners of Afro-Atlantic traditions, a human is a being that has received personhood from their ancestors. For Zoroastrians, humans are beings possessing individuality, divine essence, and physicality. For Cherokee (Keetoowah), humans are two-legged animals, the last-created aspect of Great Life, and thus the least important.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that humans are soul—something that progresses through myriad spiritual worlds. Jewish tradition, however, says that a human being is composed of body and soul and that a person has perception, knowledge, and memories. For Islam, a human being is a soul in a body, into which God's ruh (spirit) has been breathed. Christianity may also say that a human being is a body into which God has breathed, however, it also states the body and soul are inextricably intertwined.

Some Hindus talk about the human being as an amalgam of the panchamahabhutas (Five Elements): earth, fire, water, air, and ether. They and their Jain neighbors may see a human as a stable atman (self) in a body that changes constantly and disintegrates ultimately. Contrarily, Buddhism teaches that there is no atman (self or soul). It may be best, therefore, to describe a human being as a body-mind continuum in Buddhist self-understanding.

In short, most religions teach that a human is a physical body with something else. They differ on the details, but they all agree that humans are mortal—physically at the least.

We can now move back to our first question: "How are human beings welcomed into a religious community?" Some religions have formal rituals or ceremonies for recognizing a human being's entry into community-life and for transitioning from one stage of life to the next. For example, Zuni, one of North America's indigenous peoples, show a newborn the sun for the first time on the eighth day after birth.

To be Jewish is to be a member of a covenant community. A Jewish boy baby joins it and receives his name at a Brit Milah—a naming ceremony that includes circumcision. If health permits, this takes place when the infant is eight days old. A Jewish girl baby, traditionally, receives her name officially when the mi sheberakh (naming prayer) is offered for her at a regular synagogue service during which the Torah is read. However, in recent decades, newly formulated ceremonies for welcoming Jewish girl infants are used by some families. Brit ha-Bat (covenant of the daughter) is one such ceremony.

The rite of baptism—a ritual with water—is the means of entry into the Body of Christ. Orthodox, Catholic, and several other large streams of Christianity baptize infants and young children. Christian denominations that eschew infant baptism often offer a ceremony of dedication, in which the parents name the child and vow to raise it in the faith.

When a baby is born to Muslim parents, the adhan (call to prayer)—or adhan plus the shahada (testimony)—is whispered in its ears. When the Muslim newborn is seven days old, the 'Aqiqah is performed: a tuft of hair is clipped or its entire head is shaved. If the family has the means, sheep or goats are to be slaughtered—their meat then shared with family, friends, and the poor. The requirement of male circumcision comes from the Prophet Muhammad's example, not the Qur'an. In the US, while most Muslims have circumcision performed in the hospital within a day or two of the boy's birth, some do so at a later age as a rite of passage.

According to the Sikh Code of Conduct, the Mool Mantra (the declaration of God's Oneness that opens the Sikh holy book) is to be whispered in the newborn's ear and a drop of honey placed on its tongue. Whenever the family is ready, the newborn is taken to the Gurdwara (a Sikh house of worship) for its naming ceremony. A portion of the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh Holy Scriptures) is read and the first letter of that passage is announced. That letter becomes the first letter of the child's name—which the parents choose.

Hindus may perform a samskara (ritual) that blesses the unborn child. The newborn receives its name during another samskara, called Namakarana. The ceremony may include chanting, invocation of the family's deities, waving an oil lamp, or use of scented water. The baby's name is whispered in its ear—presumably for the first time. A dot of red powder might be placed on its forehead. Some parents have the naming ritual performed at home; others hold it in a temple when the infant is forty days old.

A baby's first shrine visit is an important occasion for Shinto-followers. Typically, this ceremony, officiated by a priest, is held when the child is at least 30 days old—up to 100 days after birth.

For Buddhists, baby-welcoming is shaped by many cultural factors. Followers of Tibetan forms of Buddhism may invite a lama (scholar) or a monk to say prayers over the newborn. Holy water may be sprinkled. Then or later, a lama may give the baby its name. However, followers of Chinese forms of Buddhism may invite family and friends to a ceremonial dinner marking the infant's first full month of life. Traditionally, the child is dressed in red—the color of joy

Whether a religion-community welcomes infants formally or simply nurtures them, the rite or act must convey to this new addition the religious community's worldview as a unique constellation of beliefs, practices, modes of worship, sacred texts or narratives, and more that enable it to maintain and celebrate a meaningful world.

To our next question: "What marks arrival at adulthood within religious communities?". In some religious communities the child is fully invested in the religion from birth, which means that full ritual participation is always allowed. Even so, responsibility is accepted gradually as a child matures. In other communities, the child bears religious identity from birth (or by virtue of a ritual shortly thereafter) but is not deemed ready for full participation in ritual life until puberty (or at least, later childhood). Readiness is acknowledged ritually in some religions. In others, there is a

clearly delineated moment and method by which the child chooses membership and responsibility. The gradual arrival into maturity is accompanied by ritual rites of passage.

Indigenous communities each have their own unique ways of marking passage into adulthood. Most have ceremonies marking a girl's first menstrual period, ritually signifying that she is now an adult woman with creative power—to heal and to give life. As the boy becomes fluent in specific skills or takes on new responsibilities, his accomplishments are celebrated with feasting, or a name-change, or the right to go on his first Vision Quest.

Shinto understands the transition from childhood to adulthood as gradual, with many markers along the way. The Shichigosan ("Seven-Five-Three") ceremony is a ritual blessing conducted every autumn for children who have reached the age of seven, five, or three during the past year.

It is traditional for Theravada Buddhist boys to undergo temporary ordination as bhikkus (monks). There is no fixed age at which a boy must do this, or fixed length of time he is expected to stay. He may do it once, as a transition to manhood, or he may return to the monastery for short periods (such as a month, a year) throughout his life.

Simply by becoming thirteen years old, a Jewish boy becomes eligible to participate fully in Jewish ritual life and is also now responsible for doing so. He is a Bar Mitzvah—a "son of the commandment."~~,~~ That said, most American Jews feel it such an important moment of transition that it merits careful preparation and celebration. Jewish girls become Bat Mizvah (daughter of the covenant) when they turn twelve years old. While Haredi (ultra-observant) Jews simply note this change of status, modern Orthodox celebrate the occasion. In other denominations, Bat Mizvah parallels Bar Mizvah in every way.

In the Bahá'í Faith, children are considered Bahá'í from birth, and begin spiritual education classes when they are four or five years old. When children reach fifteen years of age, they have—according to Bahá'í teachings—reached the age of discretion and maturity. Just as being Bahá'í is meant to be a matter of intention more than birth, so it ought to be with Zoroastrianism. Zarathustra's intention was that one was to accept the faith according to one's own conviction. Over time, however, Zoroastrianism took on attributes of a religion into which one is born. The child, who should be old enough to understand that she or he is accepting the Good Religion by personal conviction, prepares for a beautiful ceremony called a Navjote, after which they are responsible for their own actions.

For Sikhs, there are several rites of passage. Among them is the first time a young boy's formal turban is tied. The Sikh rite of full initiation into membership in the Khalsa (the Community of Pure Ones) is known as "taking amrit". The ceremony involves anointing with sweetened water and is available to Sikh women as well as men. Initiates wear the five articles of faith and take on a discipline of daily prayer. In fact, most Sikhs would not accept amrit unless they had been practicing these disciplines for some time already.

With full involvement in the religion-community's practices having been duly granted or acknowledged, human beings now play their role with varying levels of commitment. Whatever the degree to which they embrace and maintain its beliefs, practices, and institutions, people of every religious tradition are fully aware that the human body is impermanent. We are finite. On that they can agree. Where they differ is in their thinking about what happens when life in one's present body is over. Here are four common religion-informed positions on our last question: "What happens when we die?"

Billions of human beings, living and passed on, have believed that death is part of a circular (or spiral) process in which we live multiple earthly lives—although there is also a way out of this cycle. The spiral may be spoken of as "transmigration of the soul," "reincarnation," "rebirth," or "taking birth (again)." Other religious communities profess that, after we live this one earthly life, we then go to an "intermediate state." Eventually, we will undergo bodily resurrection, and with that, God's judgment; some traditions that teach resurrection after death will have quite detailed explanations of the nature of resurrected life. Still others believe that, upon death, we become some sort of non-material being; that is, our soul has "a biography" and it goes on to another special existence in the cosmic realm, but it is never re-embodied. Then there is the "full stop" position—the belief that we live this one earthly life and that's it.

Interestingly, a single religious community may offer more than one of these answers, supported by that religion's sacred texts and traditions. As we noted earlier in this module, religions have been with us a very long time, longer than we can say with certainty, and they evolved different theories, stories, and meanings over the long arch of that time as oral and written traditions continued to grow too. You may be surprised to learn that, among Jews, we can find all four of these answers to life after death that I just noted. Among Buddhists, we may discover two or three of these responses.

When it comes to disposing of remains, some religions mandate burial while others mandate cremation. Some leave the matter to the family's discretion. Less well known is a third practice, which the Ojibwe tradition and Tibetan Buddhism calls sky burial. The body is laid out reverently and is given over to scavenger birds and the elements. Traditionally, Zoroastrians would use a Tower of Silence for this purpose. In whatever manner a religious community conceives of "What's next" and what to do with human remains, most religions have practices by which they mark the end of a particular human life and sustain those human beings who are left behind.

These are at least four relevant questions about the ligament of religious community as we journey in religious literacy. There are many, many more questions and much more to say in response to the four questions we've asked. This lecture provided a start, and you'll notice that we did not jump into a comparative analysis. We simply identified unique ways of practicing religious community, without entertaining comparative rightness, or giving in to our own confirmation bias about what practices seem "better" than others. When we begin by simply naming in this way, we invite curiosity, respect, wonder, and awe. These, in turn, heighten awareness, leading us toward fuller understanding. We are demonstrating together a method for religious literacy and how we learn about those around us.

Now, please proceed to the other content made available to you, and then to the discussion section before moving forward into the next module. We continue our journey together. Thank you.