SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY

MODULE 3 – LECTURE 3.1

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY – THE LEADER AND THE TEXT

In this lecture we are going to discuss religious authority, and the connection of authority to religion. We will begin by talking about authority in religious leadership, and then discuss authority within sacred text or scripture.

Every day each of us must deal with authority in a number of ways. A police officer gives us a ticket for speeding, a doctor writes us a prescription and a pharmacist fills it, a judge makes a decision that determines how existing law will be applied, and in churches or temples a person in authority offers interpretations of current issues or performs a wedding ceremony or some other ritual of practice. In these examples there are sets of rules that give permission or license to someone to do something – to make a decision, to give a directive, to take an official action, and so on. There are different kinds of authority in society, each with their own domains, such as legal authority, moral authority, and religious authority. Very often these authorities overlap and intersect. Authority is not the same thing as use of force or an exertion of power, although authority may give power to others.

Authority is granted to someone or some entity always within a larger worldview or system of meaning that is accepted by a particular community or social group as true. We could say that our everyday relationship to authority is part of a social contract we have within society and this social contract is defined in terms of an overarching worldview. We live in a time where we see competing worldviews, don't we? This means that a unified social contract is less clear today, isn't it? It also tells us that we're questioning who has the authority to authorize our lives.

Authorities within society are traditional gatekeepers; they grant (or in some cases revoke) permission. But permission to do what? Well, consider the examples above: In the case of the police officer, doctor, pharmacist, and religious leader, each of these must be qualified and trusted in order to be accepted as legitimate within society, and they also must be endorsed by – well, by another authority – one that precedes and is above them. A doctor is authorized to perform an examination because they have attended medical school and have a license; the license gives them authority. The license is also authorized by a regulatory agency, and the government authorizes the regulatory agency, and so on. In this example we see layers of authority. The doctor, in this case, has acquired (through study, training, and experience) a body knowledge, a set of skills, and has been taught the moral values that accompany this occupation. Their "license" or authorization is bestowed by the recognized authorities of that occupation, and this is endorsed or ratified by law.

We can readily see how all this applies to religious traditions. We characterize religious traditions as worldviews, and these include of course ethical codes and sets of practices as we discussed in module two. In a religious community, what individual or group is authorized to tell its members what to think and what to do? Many people will immediately mention certain leading roles as having "authority" in a religious context. This includes, but is not limited to, rabbis, imams, swamis, lamas, gurus, venerables, reverends, and elders – those who specialize in their religion's scriptures, sacred texts, and the encompassing system of traditional culture and custom, the things that together constitute the religious worldview.

Around the world, religious specialists, like other specialists, are given "authority" by their mastery of a body of knowledge and through their practice and a moral code that is at the center of the tradition's identity. These specialists have been taught and certified by other specialists in their community who are senior to them; in other words, within religious communities in particular, authority is built up, tested, and then transmitted from one generation to another through the ages. The person in preparation to lead is expected to lead a life of virtue and to be dedicated to religious observance in accord with the moral norms and spiritual ideals of the faith. Therefore, religious authority must include some degree of moral authority and personal piety. The leader-to-be is often formally established in this role by a public ceremony, ritual, or an "ordination."

There are a variety of authority-bearing roles in religious communities. A priest is a person qualified to perform rituals. For example, puja in Hinduism or the Eucharist in Catholic, Orthodox, and certain other Christian churches, are rites or rituals performed by a specialist. A monk or nun is a vowed renouncer so to speak – renouncing earthly attachments – and need not have any ritual qualifications. In addition, the role of a renouncer or monastic is often associated with contemplative practice, revered in religious communities because contemplation can lead to wisdom or "enlightenment" as well as exceptional holiness. A pastor or "shepherd" of a congregation is one in charge of the well-being and good order of the flock and need not be a priest or a renouncer.

In Judaism the qualification to be a rabbi has traditionally been to be a scholar who has learning in scripture, Talmud, and Jewish law, whereas the historical priesthood of Judaism was suspended when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 ACE. Often religious specialists are part of large institutions and hierarchical systems where greater authority is given to those of higher rank. In some communities, leaders embrace egalitarianism and strive to give equal authority to all members, sometimes in reaction to the historical scale and weight of large structures of authority and power. In all cases, religious authorities are expected to be the memories of a worldview, the holders of culture, and accountable to their tradition – yet they also may be the ones who re-create or reform tradition as well.

Now, when we turn to consider the authority of sacred texts or scripture, we encounter a complex array of nuances and internal debates. Questions like: What gives a text sacred authority? How do you know a text provides true knowledge about what is morally upright practice? Who wrote the scripture and who is authorized to say for certain? Do we know where the text came from if it is thousands of years old? In addition, within a sacred text specific words may be given by God to a Prophet such as Moses or Muhammad. They may be words of a person of exalted divine stature such as Jesus, Krishna, or the Buddha, or the text may be composed by illumined or inspired individuals. The Torah and the Qur'an, both spoken directly by God according to traditional belief, have the highest degree of authority in Judaism and Islam.

Many Christians believe that those who wrote the words of the Bible were guided by the Holy Spirit, or "inspired" – although beliefs differ as to whether this inspiration formed the thoughts of the author in a general way or actually determined every written word. In Islam, many

Hadiths or Traditions relate the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad and form a body of sacred literature second in authority only to the Qur'an.

In Hinduism, the body of scripture with primary authority is the Veda or "knowledge," which is not dictated by a supreme God but composed by illumined poets known as the Rishi-s or "seers," articulating their vision into spiritual truth and the structure of the cosmos. The teaching of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita is authoritative to the highest degree for those holding him to be an Avatar or divine Incarnation. In Buddhism, the authority of primary scripture or "the word of the Buddha" is founded on his "unsurpassed and supreme enlightenment," and the authority of the Enlightened One.

The earliest text of Mahayana Buddhism, the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses, opens by stating that, "… whatever the Buddha has taught, the Guide to the Dharma, His pupils, if genuine, have well been trained in it, from direct experience, derived from their training, they teach it, their teaching stems but from the might of the Buddha, and not their own power." With this justification of "inspired" composition, Mahayana scriptures present themselves as the Buddha's own words. And yet, while authoritative for Mahayana Buddhists, these scriptures are not accepted by Theravada Buddhists, who prize their scriptures as the historical Buddha's actual utterances, viewing others as fabrications. This is an important instance of contending canons or collections of texts in which authority is given to some texts but not to others.

So, we return to our question: What makes a text sacred? There are so many unique differences in approach. Each of these is important to respect and learn from wherever possible. As further instances, in China, the process of canonization of classic texts is formal and explicit, and intentionally bestows primary authority on certain ancient works. In the Sikh religion, the Guru Granth Sahib is a large collection of texts – not only by Sikh authors – compiled by Gurus in the Sikh lineage of ten paramount teachers. It is thus an important example of authority bestowed by a pre-existing authority. Guru Gobind, the tenth and final Guru of the Sikh religion, declared that, as the line of human Gurus would not continue after him, the Scripture would henceforth have supreme authority, as it does for Sikhs today.

In Indigenous religions, oral tradition is often primary. It is learned through years of training directly from an Elder who holds the tradition and gives instruction in how it is to be memorized, spoken aloud to others, and commented upon.

In this time together, we discussed the authority of a religious leader and the authority of sacred scripture, and we can see that authority is granted in unique ways. For leaders there are levels of authority that are required to achieve degrees of religious understanding and wisdom. Texts, which are much older and more enduring than leaders, are authorities in another way: They travel with communities through generations, often authorizing and correcting one another through time and developing authority through the voices of millions over the ages.

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