SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY

MODULE 4 – LECTURE 4.2

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? RELIGION AND TRUTH

All along our journey together, we have learned that a religious worldview includes a constellation of beliefs, doctrines, practices, community, and more that enable us to make meaning of the world. This set of features conveys "truths" or how we understand our place in the cosmos. There is something particular about how we communicate truths as human beings; we initiate and respond in ways that showcase truth in beauty, art, prose, and action, both in individual and collective devotional practices. Human beings respond individually and together – in prayer, silent meditation, or through arms outstretched on a hill. And every religion includes individual and collective responses as a form of engagement with the sources and sustaining presence of life.

Most religions convey a sense of the Ultimate as "that beyond which nothing greater can be imagined." The Ultimate may be fascinating or frightening—or both. How then to approach it? In many religions, assistance comes from devotional objects. They are "beautiful" in that they make a claim on the devotee. They are not the focus of the devotee's attention, but rather, a conduit for their attention. That is, they function iconographically.

In religious studies discourse, "icon" (Greek for "image") most often refers to stylized flat paintings of holy people used by Orthodox and some other Christians in private devotion and public worship. The colors used in these portraits and the symbols incorporated into them unite to convey a message. Such portraits point beyond themselves, reminding the faith-filled viewer of this religion's meta-narrative (its overarching story; that is, the truth it declares).

Devotional objects also function in this way: pointing beyond themselves, directing the devotee's attention toward "that beyond which nothing greater can be imagined," toward truth as a particular religion expresses it. Examples abound in the European Christian heritage of paintings, murals, and stained glass. Calligraphy becomes iconography when it is fully experienced. For

example, the Arabic word “Allah” or “Muhammad” written in beautiful Arabic script as a medallion functions in this way. So can a religion’s symbols: the nine-pointed star of the Bahá’í Faith; the Ik Onkar of Sikhi; Judaism’s Magen David; Islam’s crescent; Christianity’s cross; Jainism’s lokapurusha; Hinduism’s AUM; Zoroastrianism’s fravohar. So, too, do the statues used devotionally by Catholic Christians, some Hindus, some Buddhists, and some Jains point beyond themselves, serving as a window to truth. All too frequently, they are pejoratively called “idols.” In the Hindu and Jain traditions, the proper term for these objects is murti or pratima.

The act of creating these devotional objects is itself an act of worship or of scriptural exegesis (an interpretation of a sacred text). Calligraphers who specialize in scribing sacred texts often mention their sense of being “written through.” Painters may make profound theological statements in their artworks. See, for example, “Adoration of the Kings” by Pieter Breugel the Elder, or “Epiphany” by Janet McKenzie.

Indeed, religions are lifeways (or life-stances). Most of them provide daily meaning-making practices through which the devout respond to truth, practices by which they center themselves or through which they maintain relationship with the Ultimate. A religion’s obligatory daily devotional ritual—its pattern of praise, thanksgiving, remembrance, and supplication—includes specific things to do and say at very specific intervals during the day. Some religions may require the practitioner to put on specific articles of clothing or to use ritual objects. Among others, the outward forms of these practices—the elements, objects, postures, and actions—may seem quite similar. However, the intent behind these activities will most often differ from one tradition to another.

Take prayer, for example. Prayer usually means a direct address to “that beyond which nothing greater can be imagined.” It can include any or all of the elements of praise, confession, petition (requests for oneself), intercession (requests for others), and thanksgiving. Christians use the word prayer to name a range of things: calling upon God extemporaneously; reciting a set text such as the Lord’s Prayer; engaging in “centering” activity; reciting a meditative litany (and if that litany be the Rosary, then beads will be involved).

In other religions, the word “prayer” has a narrower meaning. Many Muslims use the English term “prayer” only for the Arabic term salat. Salat is a specific ritual in praise of God that involves standing, bending, sitting, and prostrating, while reciting (in Arabic) a set script. Muslims

and others may distinguish carefully between prayer and supplication, between prayer and meditation, and between worship and practice. They may make such distinctions because these words translate terms that are not interchangeable in their religion's home language.

Judaism calls for three-times daily formal prayers (morning, midday, and evening). These are specific opportunities for ritual connection to God. There are also many times during the day when a Jew might say the formula, "Blessed be God, King of the Universe: for you…"—the sentence being completed will mention whatever one is thankful for. The Bahá'í Faith also specifies three-times-daily obligatory prayer. Members may choose the Long, Medium, or Short version—each of which comes with a prescribed text, postures, and number of repetitions. Zoroastrians practice five-times daily ritual prayer. Sikhs practice nitnem—literally, the daily routine. It includes daily reading or recitation of prayers revealed by the Gurus (the inspired leaders during the early centuries of the religion).

Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs use the Sanskrit term mantra to name the chanting of a sound, a single word, a phrase, or a complete thought—sometimes thought to be of divine origin—as an act of praise, or to evoke the vibration of an aspect of creation, or to focus their meditation. They may do this every morning or evening.

Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains practice puja (respect-paying) every morning. Puja are rituals of offering in which a murti (image) is treated as an honored guest. This is often a morning activity, but it can happen at other times of the day as well. Jains and Hindus may perform arthi, a daily ritual offering of light, each evening.

Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism provide daily practices involving meditative breathing exercises with postures. Shinto provides a daily ritual of purification called misogi, which involves immersing oneself in living water: a waterfall, a spring-fed lake, or the ocean.

Like individual prayers, the collective response to truth in prayer may take place daily, weekly, monthly, every two weeks, every nineteen days, annually, or seasonally. Indeed, every religion has its way of thinking about clocks and calendars. Almost all of the daily practices mentioned above that are performed by a lone devotee are also communal practices. Adherents of a tradition come together to maintain and celebrate a meaningful world through rituals that give special meaning to ordinary things: bread, fruit, water and other liquids, fire.

Communal religious practices often make ritual use of food and drink. For members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the very act of meal preparation is a form of prayer. The Christian sacred meal—variously called the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass, and Divine Liturgy—involves the sharing of bread and wine (or grape juice). This may done to recall Jesus' last meal with his friends or it may be done to make Jesus somehow physically present—or both!

In a Shinto wedding ceremony, sipping sake is part of the script. For Jews, challah (braided bread) and wine are elements of the weekly welcoming of Shabbat, or Sabbath.

The Sanskrit term prashad refers to blessed food. For Hindus, prashad is the fruit or other substances that have been returned to a devotee. When one consumes such a food item, a Hindu might explain, "one is taking God inside oneself." Sikhs conclude formal communal worship with the distribution of Karhah Prashad: a sweet doughy pudding.

Communal worship or veneration may use fire or an offering of light. Or ceremonies may open with a ritual of candle lighting and close with a ritual of extinguishing the candle. In addition, water is used widely in religious practices, from the Shinto practice of misogi, a purification ritual that involves washing the whole body, to the Sikh practice of amrit, the sprinkling of sweetened water in a ceremony of initiation.

In each of these cases, the individual and communal prayers and rituals are all treasured and long-enduring processes of responding and sharing. They acknowledge relationships to one another, mystery, and the divine, and affirm the presence of truth as it is understood by a community in its faith, practice, and worldview.