



## CHAPTER 1

# OUR QUEST FOR GOD

## Religion and Religions

*Mostly we live day to day, keeping to our routine, not thinking too much about “the big picture.” We find fleeting pleasure in our families, our work, our games, our favorite TV shows, and our time with friends. But perhaps one starry night we gaze at the heavens and marvel at the grandeur and expanse of the universe. Perhaps the birth of a child or the death of a loved one causes us to pause and wonder. Perhaps a news report of suffering in the world, if we let it touch us, leads us to ask larger questions. Perhaps a religious ceremony or holy day, a particularly meaningful movie, or song lyrics hint that there is a loving presence in life and the message seeps into our consciousness.*

*During these times, moments hidden behind our everyday reality, we enter into the realm of religion. The religions of the world represent a record of what human beings in different places and at different times have said about these deeper experiences such as we have when we feel more alive, more attentive, and more in touch with a reality that we may seldom even know exists. A study of the world’s religions takes us on a journey both around the world and into the depths of human consciousness. Spiritual guides await us. Through such a study we learn about others; but also, since we share a common spirit with all of humanity, we will learn about ourselves as well.*

## Overview

- Religion begins with our experience of ultimate mystery.
- In the Catholic perspective, every valid religion offers a ray of truth, found in its fullness in Jesus Christ.
- Different religions emerged in different parts of the world.
- Learning about other religions can help us know ourselves and our world more deeply.
- How to use this book.

*Throughout this book, you will be invited to write your thoughts and reactions, to discuss ideas, perhaps even to draw pictures. These exercises are your chance to respond to the various concepts related to some aspect of a religion or a particular religious tradition. By doing a number of them you will in a sense engage the various religions in conversation, hearing from them and offering your own perspective on topics.*

### ACTIVITY

#### **Before we begin...**

1. First, write down three scientific questions.
2. Then, write down three religious questions.
3. Describe how the two sets of questions are different.
4. Based on the differences, compose a definition of religion.

# I. Religion

## *Our Response to Ultimate Mystery*

*A cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life? These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. (Pope John Paul II, Fides et ratio [on the relationship between faith and reason], number 1)*

### **Religion versus Science**

We human beings are creatures who wonder. Indeed, a case could be made that, when our capacity to wonder is diminished, so too is our humanity. Wondering serves no apparent practical purpose. Unlike scientific knowledge, which provides answers, wonder leads us into the realm of mystery. From the beginning of the human enterprise we have been on a quest for meaning in the face of the great mystery that envelops us. Modern science has not quenched our thirsting after meaning and purpose. Our science helps us grasp and make sense of the finite. The search for meaning knocks at the door to the infinite. Science can solve the problem of how to build a nuclear bomb. We need to rely on more than science to determine whether or not to use one. Science can detail every stage in our physical development, and yet we still wonder: Why are we here? Were we made under the gaze of a loving creator or merely by chance? Has creation been a blessing or a curse? Science provides us with partial truths, and yet we long for ultimate truth.

Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved. This saying has become a cliché. Nonetheless, living the statement is still terrifying. Can we trust that, ultimately, we are not alone in the universe and that our brief life-

time has meaning? Do the actions we take actually make a difference? Is there anything that sustains us, gives us hope, clears up the muddied glass through which we can look into the depths of things?

Religions address these overwhelming questions. The world's religions are a composite of the insights into ultimate mystery that people who struggled with these lofty questions have gained. Each religion proposes its own basis for fundamental trust, a belief that life has meaning. Religion, then, is our response to ultimate mystery. Put another way, religion is ultimate mystery's breaking through into human consciousness. Religious giants have come before us. We are not alone in our own search for meaning and hope.

*Each of the great religious traditions affirms that as well as the social and natural world of our ordinary human experience there is a limitless greater and higher Reality beyond or within us, in relation to which or to whom is our highest good. (John Hick, The World's Religious Traditions, edited by Frank Whaling [New York: Crossroad, 1986], pages 158-59)*

**A. Think about a time when you experienced wonder.**

If you have never experienced wonder, what do you think might bring about such a response from you?

**B. Explain the difference between “problems” and “mystery.”**

Give examples of each.

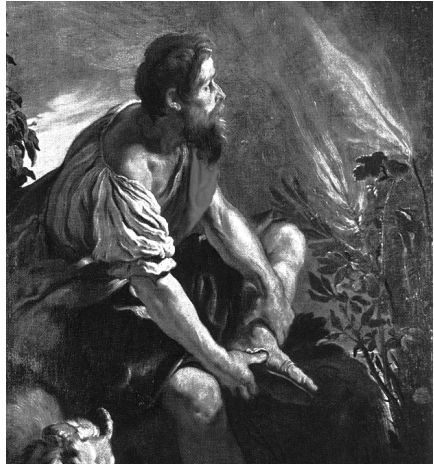
**C. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

1. I can't imagine making it through life without religion.
2. I look to my religion to help me make sense out of life.
3. Religion is more for older people than for young people.
4. Because of scientific advances, religion is now outmoded.
5. Science asks more important questions than religion does.

## Catholicism and the Religious Quest

*But I through the greatness of your love  
have access to your house.  
I bow down before your holy temple,  
filled with awe. (Psalm 5:8, Grail translation.)*

In the Hebrew Bible's Book of Exodus, Moses notices a burning bush. Thinking that God may be present in the bush, Moses immediately takes off his shoes as a sign of reverence. In our journey into the mystery of life, we need to cultivate a spirit of reverence. In studying the world's religions, we are stepping onto holy ground. We will be discovering where and how people encounter the sacred according to their particular tradition. Therefore,



Moses before the burning bush

we need to “take off our shoes” in reverence and awe as we study the beliefs and practices of each religion. Such an attitude does not mean that there aren't flaws and shortcomings in the religions we will study. One set of beliefs is not as good as any other. In recent years, popes and other Catholic leaders have warned against relativism (“No absolute truth exists; it's all a matter of perspective.”) and religious indifferentism (“Religion isn't important and, besides, one religion is as good as any other.”).

During the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) the world's Catholic bishops laid out a balanced approach toward other religions when they examined the Church and its place in the modern world. The council produced its “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” In it the bishops point out that, “Humanity forms but one community” and that today “people are drawing more closely together” (no. 1). Therefore, “We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people as other than sisters and brothers, for all are created in God's image” (no. 5). The bishops propose that:

*The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and con-*

*duct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women. (no. 2)*

The council also “proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 1:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (see 2 Corinthians 5:18–19), people find the fullness of their religious life” (no. 2). In other words, we encounter the fullness of the ultimate mystery that all human beings seek in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, Christ is at work in the world wherever people honestly seek meaning and truth. The bishops call upon Catholics to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians” even while “witnessing to their own faith and way of life” (no. 2).

One author describes the Catholic perspective on the centrality of Christ for Catholics and non-Catholics alike in these words:

*Does the Catholic Church teach that God wishes the salvation of all? Yes. Does the Catholic Church teach that salvation was made possible for the world through the cross of Jesus Christ? Yes. Does the Catholic Church believe that there is salvation for those who do not know Christ? Yes. Does the Catholic Church believe that the salvation of those who do not know Christ is somehow made possible by Christ, whether or not those saved have ever heard of him? Yes. Does the Catholic Church believe that this puts all those saved in some relationship to the Catholic Church? Yes. (George Weigel, The Truth of Catholicism [New York: HarperCollins, 2001], pages 144-45)*

- A. Describe in your own words the perspective on other religions currently advocated by the leaders of your religion.
- B. How do you view other religions?
- C. What are relativism and indifferentism in regard to religion? How common are these positions in the world today? Do these positions help or hinder an appreciation for the world's religions?

**Vatican Council II had much to say about the relationship between Catholicism and other religions. You might look at the following passages to gain a sense of the spirit of dialogue and respect for others advocated by the Council.**

- The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, paragraphs 8 and 15–16
- The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, paragraph 3
- The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, paragraph 1
- The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, paragraphs 1–3, 11, 23–24, 28–29, 40, and 59
- The Decree on Ecumenism, paragraphs 3, 4, 11–12, and 14
- The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, paragraphs 1–2 and 4–5
- The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, paragraphs 1–12

## Elements of Religions

*In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a religious being:*

*From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:26–28). (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #28)*

There does appear to be among human beings a universal religious quest—a “groping for God,” in the words of the Acts of the Apostles. However, we need to be cautious about fitting religions into a set pattern. For instance, not all religions place a high value on scriptures. Not all religions believe in a god. Some religions emphasize spoken prayers more than rituals acted out, while others emphasize quiet meditation. Nonetheless, to varying degrees religions tend to share certain elements in common. Identifying these common elements can help us better under-

## Myth—A Word with Many Meanings

“Myth” plays an important role in all religions. However, in popular usage it has a variety of meanings. Three common uses of the term are the following:

- a popularly accepted falsehood (“It’s a myth that the moon is made of green cheese.”)
- a collective name for a variety of stories that have a longstanding tradition in a particular culture (“Legends, fairy tales, and parables are all examples of myth.”)
- stories of profound religious significance for a religion or culture—the way the term is defined in this book. (“The Exodus story is the central myth describing the Jewish understanding of God, liberation, and the relationship between God and the Jewish people.”)

stand the religions we will read about in this book, even when a particular religion doesn’t clearly exhibit one or another characteristic.

**Religious Experience.** People are religious insofar as they are open to the possibility that there is more to life than what is observable by the senses. Religions begin with some kind of breakthrough, an awareness of a spiritual reality that can be overlooked while we go about our daily business. Religious experience is an encounter, a relationship rather than a strictly intellectual pursuit. Religion entails saying “yes” to something (or someone) greater than our minds can normally comprehend. In contrast to the Hollywood version of what such an experience is usually like, read 1 Kings 19:11–12 in the Bible. In this brief but telling scene, the prophet Elijah searches in vain for God in a hurricane, an earthquake, and fire. Instead he meets God in “a sound of sheer silence” or as sometimes translated, “a still, small voice.” Every religion would agree: the world of the spirit is always there, whispering in our ear, if we would listen.

**Sacred Stories.** Among certain Native American groups, some dreams are not just private affairs but contain a message for the entire tribe. Similarly, in every religious tradition some stories are so revealing of a community’s place in the universe that they are

considered sacred. Sacred stories symbolically portray people’s origins and destinies, their values and duties, as well as their relationship to what they consider to be the ultimate, all-encompassing reality. A term for stories that describe the fundamental beliefs and worldview of a particular religion or culture is **myth**.

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This painting of the Holy Grail, by Dante Rossetti, depicts a popular Christian myth

**Creed.** Especially for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, formulating a statement of exact beliefs became an important dimension of their religious tradition. You may be surprised to discover that clarifying and listing a set of beliefs are not considered essential to many religions. However, all religions do possess basic beliefs and teachings that we can examine.

**Rituals and Symbols.** People tend to act out their beliefs symbolically rather than express their beliefs verbally. Ceremonies and celebrations help people enter into the shared experience of their religion. Religious rituals, such as a Jewish Sabbath meal or Muslim daily prayer, create sacred time and space, a way of being in the world that is out of the ordinary. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, religious rituals are so important in every culture and in every historical era that we can say that human beings are religious by nature.

**Ethical Behavior.** Religions do have an impact on how people live their lives. Religious beliefs provide direction about how to treat others and about what behaviors are valued or shunned. When Moses and the Israelites encountered God in the desert they received a set of commandments spelling out attitudes and values that were consistent with belief in their God. People’s religion is too important to be tucked away and brought out only on special occasions. Rather, a religion provides the guiding principles for how to live life.

**Community.** You have probably either said or heard the following comment sometime in your life: “I’m spiritual but not religious.” The statement contrasts spirituality with organized, structured religion. A religious person goes to a mosque, temple, or church; a spiritual person strolls alone along the beach or communes with nature during walks in the woods. “Religion” sounds confining; “spirituality” sounds freeing. In fact, religious experience begs to be shared. People who have profound religious insights want to share them with family, friends, and anyone else they meet. It’s hard to hold onto spirituality. Trying to go it alone is particularly difficult and can even be problematic in many ways. There’s a great difference, for instance, in praying “My Father” rather than “Our Father.” Religious communities can be very messy, but they also sustain and support their members. Being part of a religion connects people to a larger group—past, present, and future.

- A. Look up the word “myth” in a dictionary.** Describe the various meanings it has. Explain the role myths play in religion.
- B. Give examples of the six elements of religion.** Are some elements more or less emphasized in your own religious tradition?
- C. Would you question or eliminate any of these characteristics of religion or add other ones?**
- D. Do you believe that human beings are “religious by nature”?**

### Vocabulary

*myths:* Stories that describe the fundamental beliefs and worldview of a particular religion or culture.