Jackson WarmingtonTheology 227  
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Final Reflection

Before taking Theology 227, I expected to receive a general overview of the world religions, just a normal theology course that would be covering major religions/traditions, like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, with a focus on the history of the religion and their theological facts. I mostly assumed that we would look into just the key beliefs, founders, rituals, and specific dates that align with the respective religion, without going too deep into how these religions truly operate. I did not expect to be analyzing how these religions shape the lives of people and influence subjects of justice, peace, and ethical responsibility. What I did not expect was how immersive this class got. This class did not just teach religion in a simple manner, it felt like it brought life to the learning. The class asked us to see religions as a lived experience, by hosting an interview with someone, living through their experiences. Targeting the individual identity and social structures of religion.

Through our course materials, such as videos, discussions, and in depth focuses on specific religions, I came to realize how different religions shape perspectives on suffering, ethics, and their communities. One of the most impactful assignments was my exploration of Theravada Buddhism. Using Ninian Smart’s “Seven Dimensions of Religion”, I found that Buddhism offers a comprehensive ethical and philosophical system centered on reducing suffering, though not through divine intervention, but through personal transformations. As the text states, “Buddhists believe can take the place of experience: one’s own, and for some Buddhists that of a guide or guru who has already achieved enlightenment” (Smith and Burr 84). This challenged my ideologies about religion as something that is centered around belief in a deity. Instead, Theravada Buddhism focuses on mindfulness, ethical action, and compassion as the keys to peace.

Another key unit in my study of religion was Hinduism, which I was able to engage more deeply through my interview with my friend Sampreeth. While I have known him casually through the classes we have taken together, I had never really asked about his religious life. Through our conversation, I learned how Hinduism is both intensely philosophical and personal. Sampreeth described Brahman as, “formless and beyond our comprehension and is essentially the source of everything that exists”, a deity definition that changed how I think about divinity itself. The interview also showed me how Hinduism is not just a belief system, but a way of living, shaped by rituals, scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita, and a commitment to values like family, devotion, and community. I think what surprised me was how open Hinduism is to other traditions. Sampreeth mentioned that he finds value in Buddhist texts like the Dhammapada. This made me realize that religions are not always in competition with each other, they can exist with one another, even within the same person.

The third unit that really had an impact on me was Islam, particularly within the sections of daily prayer and submission to God, Allah. Although I did not write a formal paper on Islam, I still have the opportunity to learn about Islam through our university. Whether it is talking with Muslim classmates, partaking in events during Ramadan, or just learning events that are hosted at St. Thomas. I am always curious to learn about the structure of Muslim devotion, particularly the five daily prayers, which allow for believers to be in divine presence throughout the day. I began to see how far ritual can go, as it can create discipline and mindfulness. This ritual is beyond routine. It reminded me of what Sampreeth shared about his morning chants. It seems that religions incorporate these regular practices to help garner spiritual focus. I also felt like I was spoken to when I read about the five pillars, “Shahada is the profession of Islamic faith… Salat is prayer… Zakat (‘that which purifies’) is almsgiving… Saum, or sawm, is fasting during daylight hours of the month of Ramadan… Hajj is pilgrimage to Mecca, required at least once in a lifetime.” (Smith and Burr 212). These aspects made me consider how religion can form ways of life beyond spiritual practices.

Despite everything we have covered and I have learned, I still have questions. I would love the opportunity to interview people who say they have seen “the light”. As someone who has not had that kind of experience, I find these stories deeply compelling. I recently read about a man who was a Muslim at the time, he described waking up one day unable to see anything except a bright light shining down on him. He heard a voice calling him, and later realized it was Jesus Christ. That moment became his turning point, leading him to become a follower of Christ. Stories like these fuel my religious curiosity. It is not about a religion over another, rather I want to understand what it feels like to see “the light”. I also wonder how major religions evolve to keep up with modern times, how do they stay relevant in a time when modern social and scientific challenges exist. I also wonder how globalization and digital life are reshaping religious identities, especially for younger generations. Sampreeth, for example, talked about how his online access to religious texts and access to online seminars during COVID-19 allowed him to deepen and continue his faith. I am curious to know how religious practices will adapt with digitization.

I think there were several things that surprised me throughout the course. One was just how varied and flexible religious traditions can be. Before taking this class, I tended to think of religions as strict systems. After learning about practices such as Hinduism and Buddhism, I came to realize how wrong I was. I was really surprised after my interview with Sampreeth, after I had fully digested everything that was talked about, I was really able to understand and gain a grasp at how varying and allowing some religion can be. Such as within Judaism, where the Talmudic tradition had led to “flexibility and openness to contrasting interpretations” (Smith and Burr 123). Another surprise was the emphasis on experience over belief in religion. Such as within Buddhism, where it focuses on practices and direct insight rather than reason and evidence.

The main learning I am taking away from this class is that religion is not just about belief, not just a strict system, it is about how people align themselves in the world. Whether it is through meditation, chants, prayer, ritual, or action, religion helps people navigate suffering, build communities, and find meaning. It also reminded me that justice and peace are not just political concepts, rather they are both political and spiritual ones. In my Theravada Buddhism paper, I was able to explore how justice in this tradition is not corrective but restorative, rooted in compassion and the alleviation of suffering. As Clasquin states, “If we desire to take the Buddha’s teaching seriously, we should develop the compassion that allows us to see the other person’s suffering as if it were our own, and take the necessary steps to eliminate it or at least soften its impact” (Clasquin 97). This perspective has stayed with me throughout the course, helping reshape the way I analyze conflict and justice.

Looking forward, I believe what I have learned in this class will influence both my religious and personal life. Religiously, it has motivated me to ask more meaningful questions, explore different religions, and reflect more on my own faith journey. For example, the interview with Sampreeth allowed me to look through a window in his religious life, allowing me to see different components of his religious functionality. Personally, it has made me more reflective, more empathetic, and more curious. Understanding other people’s spiritual lives has helped me see the value in perspectives that differ from my own. This is especially important in today's time, where all religions have started to come together in the same place, making peace and mutual respect is important.

Finally, this course has affected my own outlook on my spirituality. While currently, I identify as a Catholic, learning about Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam helped me appreciate the value of spirituality across different traditions. It has helped me open my eyes to the many ways people seek meaning, connection, and inner peace through religion. I have come to realize that all beliefs may be different, but at the core of most, the desire for compassion and purpose is universal throughout these religions. It has made me more open to bringing in practices like mindfulness and daily reflection into my life, not because they belong to any religion, but because they help bring peace, awareness, and compassion. I have also realized the importance of listening, sitting with people from different traditions and hearing what matters to them.

In conclusion, this class has surpassed my expectations. It taught me not just about religion, but about people. Their struggles, hopes, values, and visions of a better world. This kind of understanding will not just be academic, rather universal in life. I see now that religion is not just answers to theological questions, rather it is also a journey for peace for many people in this world.

Bibliography

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*Interview with Sampreeth*.