**CHAPTER I: WORLD RELIGIONS IN FOCUS**

**Lesson Three: Positive and Negative Effects of Religion**

The lines in the picture, taken from John Lennon’s song entitled “Imagine,” encourage the listener to think of a world where nationalities and religions do not exist, for history has shown us that so many wars have been fought in the name of nationality and religion. The song suggests that instead of being caught up in the barriers and divisiveness brought by nationality or religion, we should consider the possibility of living in a world at peace.

Religion has become a very important aspect in the development of civilizations and cultures. In fact, most ancient societies based their worldviews on religion, and it has been proven to be beneficial to the attainment and maintenance of social stability and cohesiveness. However, as time went by, religion has also become the basis of conflicts between societies, even within societies. While religion has promoted solidarity among societies, it has also been the reason behind the outbreak of particular wars in history. In this lesson, we will discuss the positive and negative effects of religion, as well as examples of historical events caused primarily by religion.

Dating back to the emergence of ancient societies, religion has already played an important role in the lives of our ancestors. In Mesopotamia, for example, the Sumerians organized their settlement into temple communities, wherein the temple was found at the center of their communities and the veneration of their gods and goddesses govern their daily lives. They believed that the lands which they tilled were owned by the deities that is why they offered part of their harvest to their priest, who was also their leader and who was seen as people’s intermediary to higher beings. In the absence of an organized religion, their concept of morality was based on the belief that right actions earn the approval of the gods and goddesses and wrong actions may cause punishment. Hence, the importance of ritual practices to appease the supernatural beings whom they considered as having control over their lives.

**POSITIVE EFFECTS OF RELIGION**

1. **Religion Promotes Social Harmony**

Religion believes in supernatural beings and powers. It practices a set of rituals and ceremonious rites of passage and rites of intensification. It also regards religious leaders such as priests, priestesses and shamans in high esteem.

1. **Religion Provides Moral Values**

Perhaps one of the most significant functions of religion is that it encourages moral values. It provides a systematic model of the universe, which in effect determines organized human behavior.

1. **Religion Provides Social Change**

Since religion is a source of moral values, religion provides social change. It can be very effective in lobbying and campaigning for certain social issues using its own moral teachings as the basis of argument.

1. **Religion Reduces Fear of the Unknown**

Religion was developed from man’s need to have a sense of origin and destination; to discover where they came from and where they are bound to go to when they die. Religion provides answers for phenomena and questions that science or reason cannot explain.

1. **Religion Gives Positive Goals in Life**

People were inspired by the stories of different prophets from their own religious affiliations, like that of Moses, Siddharta Gautama, and Muhammad.

1. **Religion Gives People a Sense of Belonging**

Just as family, ethnicity, or nationality give people a sense of belonging, so does religion. For some, religion provides people with personal identity as part of a group with similar worldviews, beliefs, values, practices, and lifestyles.

**NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF RELIGION**

1. **Religion Affirms Social Hierarchy**

Some religions affirm social hierarchy often favoring men and as a result, perpetuate the notions of class or gender discrimination and oppression.

1. **Religion Causes Discrimination**

There are some who say that religion, after turning people against themselves, turn people against each other.

1. **Religion Triggers Conflicts and Fights**

Religion also has some aspects which make it susceptible to be a source of conflict and war.

1. **Religion As An Economic Tool for Exploiting the Masses**

According to the German philosopher Karl Marx, “religion is the opium of the masses.” This is in relation to his critical approach to religion in which he proposed that the bourgeoisie keeps the proletariat in control through religion.

1. **Religion Impedes Scientific Success and Development**

Throughout history, religion has proven to impede scientific development. For example, it has often been said that the Catholic Church used to teach that the world is flat and warned people against going to faraway places if they do not wish to fall off the edge of the earth.

1. **Religion Obstructs the Use of Reason**

Many question the suitability of religious doctrines to the needs of the present and future generations. In order to put this dogma to practice, religion should, therefore, evolve and learn to adapt to the ever-changing world.

**HISTORICAL EVENTS CAUSED BY RELIGION**

1. **Self-Immolation of a Buddhist Monk in Vietnam**

Self-immolation, or the killing of oneself as a form of sacrifice, originally referred to as the act of setting oneself on fire. But now it refers to a much wider range of suicidal choices such as leaping off a cliff, starvation, or ritual removing of the guts (also known as seppuku). It is used as a form of political protest or martyrdom.

1. **Widow Burning Among the Hindus in India**

Sati, or the practice of self-immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, is said to have originated 700 years ago in India. It is believed to have started among the ruling class or rajputs in India, when the rajput women burnt themselves to death after their men were defeated in battles to avoid being taken by the conquerors. Later on, it has become a manifestation of wifely devotion. It has been outlawed by the British rulers in 1829 but rare cases still continue to occur.

1. **The Inquisition**

Inquisition refers to the Roman Catholic Church groups charged with subduing heresy from around 1184, which includes the Episcopal Inquisition (1184-1230s) and the Papal Inquisition (1230s). The Inquisition was a response to large popular movements in Europe considered heretical or profane to Christianity, particularly Catharism (a Christian dualist movement which espoused the idea of two gods, one being good and the other evil) and Waldensians (a Protestant Christian movement which advocated that apostolic poverty is the way to perfection) in southern France and southern Italy.

1. **The Godhra Train Incident In 2002**

In February 2002, a train was set on fire in which 59 people, including 25 women and 15 children, were killed. The fire happened inside the Sabarmati Express train near the Godhra railway station in the Indian state of Gujarat. Those who died inside the train were mostly Hindu pilgrims and activists returning from the holy city of Ayodhya after a religious ceremony at the disputed Babri Masjid site. It took six years for the commission appointed to investigate the said incident to conclude that the fire was committed by a mob of 1000-2000 people. Thirty-one Muslims were convicted by the court for the incident and conspiracy for the crime.

**Summary**

• Religion can be described as a double-edged sword: it can have both positive and negative effects on society. It has played a very important role in the development of societies by integrating and stabilizing them; however, it has also created conflicts.

• Some of its positive effects are: it promotes social solidarity; it is a source of moral values; it nurtures positive goals in life; it gives people a sense of belonging; and it fosters social change.

• Some of religion’s negative effects include: it affirms social hierarchy; it triggers conflicts and fights; it promotes discrimination; it impedes scientific success and development; and it hinders the use of reason.

• Some of the world’s atrocities and conflicts were caused by religion such as the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in Vietnam; the practice of sati or widow burning in India; the Inquisition of the Catholic Church; and the Godhra train incident in India.

**End of Lesson 3!!!**