

Lesson 1: Why Religion?

1. Why Study Religion?

Why should we investigate about religion and study about God? What provokes us to consider religion? There are three reasons:

(A) Love of Knowledge

We all want to know the truth about the world in which we live: Did the heaven with its beautiful stars, the earth with its glorious landscapes, the beautiful birds, the colourful fish, the blue oceans and the high mountains—did all these come into being by themselves or are they the product of an All-Knowing and Powerful Creator?

Besides all this, the first question that comes to mind for all of us is the origin of ourselves: Where did we come from? Why are we in this world? Where are we heading to? The love of knowledge and the searching spirit within us dictates that we must not rest until we find the answers to these questions.

Thus the first reason that compels us to inquire into religion is our thirst and love for knowledge.

(B) The Sense of Thankfulness

The world around us and the world within ourselves is full of marvelous things. The sun and moon, the plants and trees, the mines and minerals hidden deep in the heart of the earth; all of them are of great benefit to mankind.

Within ourselves, we have the digestive system, the respiratory apparatus, the heart and other organs of the body; but the greatest of all, however, is the intellectual ability of man himself through which he can make a mighty mountain crumble into pieces, and create from water and iron enormous power and the most delicate objects.

Now this question poses itself: Should we not engage ourselves in research and inquiry until, if there is a

benefactor, we acknowledge that benefactor, to fulfill our duty and offer him our thanks?

This is the second reason why we should inquire into religion.

(C) Preventing Possible Danger

If a child were to come and tell you that he saw a poisonous snake go into the room you were in, you would immediately jump up from your chair and undertake a thorough search of every nook and cranny until you found it, or until you were satisfied that it was not there.

Similarly, while traveling by night in a dangerous country, if you learnt that bandits were waiting on the road ahead to ambush you—you would without any doubt wait until the way ahead was clear of danger, and would not take a single step forward until then.

In these two examples, we have made clear that reason compels us to investigate conceivable dangers. It is possible that some of the harmful things may turn out to be nothing at all, and that other people may not pay any attention to them; but if an inquiry carries the price of a human soul, then it cannot be ignored.

In the history of mankind, we learn of people who were famous for telling the truth and who lived an honest life. They claimed that they were messengers of God, and they called people towards God and to act in certain ways. As a result of the efforts and the constant sufferings of these special people in all corners of the world, many groups believed in them. Thus the birth of Jesus became the beginning of the Christian calendar and the migration of the Prophet Muhammad was taken by the Muslims as the beginning of their calendar.

Now, we see that these messengers attracted men to religion and to follow particular rules, caused them to fear punishment of their bad deeds and convinced them that they would be tried in the Great Court of Justice before the Righteous and Wise Judge. They trembled at the hardships and perils of Resurrection and the harshness of the punishment there, and warned men of the dire consequences of evil deeds.

The question is: Do the warnings of these people make us realize the possibility of harm and danger in the same way as did the warning of the small child in the example mentioned above? Is it right to ignore the words of the messengers of God who, after all, were men of high moral standards and who made greatest sacrifices for their cause?

Clearly, the words of the messengers —if they do not make a man certain— at least provoke him to think: perhaps what they say is true. If what they say is true, then what is our duty? What answer will we have in the Court of the Great Judge?

Common sense reckons the necessity of preventing this “possible harm”. What is more, these messengers and prophets call man to a healthy and civilized life, and they also say that after death an

extensive new world and everlasting blessings await one who has performed his duty. Does reason allow us to ignore this important message?

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There is a similar argument known as the “Pascal’s Bet,” named so after the famous French mathematician, Pascal (d. 1662 CE). Pascal proved the importance of inquiring about religion in the following way:

If you believe in the life–hereafter, you will gain everything if it really exists; and you lose nothing if it does not exist. Therefore, it is better to bet that it does exist.

The theme of this argument was presented by the Shi‘a Imams long before Pascal. We also know that Pascal had read Abu Hamid al–Ghazali’s works. It, therefore, seems quite possible that Pascal might have read this argument from Imam ‘Ali (a.s.), the first Shi‘a Imam, as quoted in *Mizanu ‘l–A‘mal* of al–Ghazali. Imam ‘Ali said:

*The astrologer and the physician both say, ‘The dead will never be resurrected.’
I say: ‘Keep your counsel. If your idea is correct, I will come to no harm;
but if my belief is correct, then you will surely lose.’*

2. Some Necessary Qualities of Religion

The religion which can fulfill the needs of mankind must have the following qualities:

(a) It must satisfy the intelligence and intellect of human beings.

Islam gives foremost importance to human intelligence. Islam emphasizes that you must understand the faith and then believe in it. Belief follows understanding, and not vice versa.

(b) It must teach and demonstrate dignity of human beings.

Islam places human beings over and above all other creations of God; it promotes equality among human beings. Islam does not allow human beings to lose their dignity by bowing down in worship to a fellow man, animal or an inanimate object.

(c) It must be a complete guide to develop the body, mind and spirit of humans as a whole.

Islam does not only develop the soul at the expense of the body; nor does it promote the care of the body at the expense of the soul. It promotes development of all aspects of human life in a balanced way. Islam not only talks in general terms about the code of life; it gives specific details and also provides

examples in the lives of the prophets and imams.

(d) It must conform with human nature.

The teachings of Islam takes the human nature into consideration. It does not promote, for example, celibacy which is completely against human nature.

(e) It should not be a tool in the hands of oppressors to suppress the masses.

Islam promotes social justice and rejects the theory of predestination. The oppression of a tyrant ruler is not predestined by God. This leaves no room for the tyrant rulers and oppressors to say that the masses have been predestined for serving the ruling class.

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This lesson is based on:

Sayyid Sa'eed Akhtar Rizvi, *Need for Religion*, Tanzania 1970.

Dar Rah-e Haq, *The Roots of Religion*, Qum 1982.

Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *Principles of Islamic Ideology*, Tehran 1985.

It has been compiled & edited for this course by S.M. Rizvi.

Question Paper For Lesson 1

Question 1: [20 points]

True or False:

- (a) Study of religion involves a sincere inquiry into the possible existence of a supreme creator.
- (b) Our rational thinking provokes us to reflect upon this infinite universe and a possible creator.
- (c) Religion is a set of rituals.
- (d) The birth of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was taken by Muslims as the beginning of their calendar.
- (e) Religious investigation can be thought of as an investment which might generate profit in the life hereafter but guaranteed to produce no loss.
- (f) Islam condones the theory of predestination.
- (g) Our sense of gratitude dictates that we should offer our thanks to our creator if He exists.

- (h) Islam promotes the suppression of legitimate desires.
- (i) Faith has no rational basis. The truth is what one believes in.
- (j) Prophets were pious people who preached good things and forbade people from doing evil things.

Question 2: [20 points]

From the statements given below, give a number (in order of preference) to the ones that best describe the essential qualities of an effective religion. If you think that a statement is completely disqualified as a quality of an effective religion, then do not assign any number to it.

- (a) Preaches unity of creator and creatures.
- (b) Promotes faith based on understanding.
- (c) Preserves human dignity.
- (d) Preaches division of society into various classes to create order, discipline and cohesion.
- (e) Promotes and practically implements equality, fairness and justice.
- (f) Conforms to human nature.
- (g) Promotes abandonment of the material luxuries of life to elevate the soul.
- (h) Promotes celibacy as a means of spiritual upliftment.
- (i) Provides a complete and comprehensive code of life.
- (j) Promotes suppression of natural desires to achieve closeness to God.

Question 3: [10 points]

Describe three reasons of your own (other than those discussed in this lesson) that might provoke humans to contemplate on religious matters.

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