God and Mankind: Comparative Religions
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Robert Oden holds six academic degrees and speaks nine languages, including Moabite and Ugaritic. Professor Oden graduated *magna cum laude* in 1969 from Harvard College, where he majored in history and literature and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He received a Marshall Scholarship to Cambridge University, where he earned an additional bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in religious studies/theology. Professor Oden earned his master's degree in theology and a doctorate with highest distinctions in Near Eastern languages and civilizations from Harvard University. Among the many honors he received during this time are the Whiting Fellowship in the Humanities and an honorary master's degree from Dartmouth College.

From 1971 to 1974, Professor Oden taught English and the Old Testament at Harvard. From 1975 to 1989, he taught religion at Dartmouth, serving as chair of the religion department from 1983 to 1989. From 1989 to 1995, he was headmaster of the Hotchkiss School and, in 1995, he became the president of Kenyon College. His professional awards and grants include the 1979 Dartmouth College Distinguished Teaching Award, of which he was the first recipient (the award was determined by vote of the Dartmouth senior class from among all Dartmouth College faculty); a summer stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1979); and selection as first director and fellow, Dartmouth Humanities Institute (1988-89).

Professor Oden has served in a number of positions for the American Academy of Religion, including president of the New England region. He has also been active in the Society of Biblical Literature and was associate editor of *Semeia: An Experimental Journal of Biblical Criticism*.

In addition to teaching and serving on over sixty committees throughout his professional career, Professor Oden has written numerous books, articles, public papers, and lectures.
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God and Mankind: Comparative Religions

Scope:
This course in comparative religions encompasses several spiritually profound issues: death, the meaning of life, the existence of evil and suffering, and the relationship of mankind to the divine, to name but a few. The course will focus primarily on the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the religions of ancient Sumeria and Egypt and two major Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, will also be discussed.

The course begins with a discussion of the nature and study of religion, distinguishing between religion as a matter of faith, on the one hand, and as an appropriate subject of intellectual and academic inquiry, on the other. In addition to discussing the four traditional views of religion, the course will propose a view of religion as a system of communication. This serves as a crucial conceptual framework for exploring the thoughts of the Romanian-American anthropologist of religion, Mircea Eliade. Eliade proposed that the best way to understand world religions is to examine their "cosmologies"; that is, their views of how the world came into being and how it operates on a daily basis. These cosmological principles can be readily seen in creation myths and religious architecture; thus, the lectures cover the Pyramids of ancient Egypt, as well as the creation myths of Hinduism, ancient Sumeria, Judaism, and Christianity to illustrate this point. Special emphasis is placed on the birth narratives of religious founders and heroes, namely Gilgamesh, Moses, and Jesus. These narratives are discussed in the context of the notions of "rites of passage" and mediation by the religious founders/heroes developed by the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep.

The course continues, in lecture five, with an investigation of the so-called "theodicy" problem; that is, the problem of reconciling an all-powerful and benevolent deity with the suffering and evil that are part of human existence. The problem has three facets, with which world religions have attempted to deal in five different ways. Lecture five focuses on a structural analysis of the most famous contemplation of theodicy in the Western religious tradition, the Old Testament Book of Job. Lecture six examines in detail two of the main sources of Christian thinking on the problem of theodicy, Saint Paul and John Calvin and their concepts of Original Sin and predestination.

The lectures conclude with a look at the dynamics of religious communities in general and the impact of one religious tradition, Puritanism, on a particular community—namely, America. After a brief discussion of the "constitutive" nature of ritual for religious communities, the lecture will include a description of the dynamics of the development and life cycle of religious communities using the key terms "church" and "sect." This will enable us to compare stabilizing influences (such as Christian and Buddhist versions of monasticism) with destabilizing events as orthodoxy breaks down in the face of new challenges. This background leads to the conclusion of the series, which is an exposition of the Puritan world view, as evident at the birth of the United States, and which is arguably at the heart of what Robert Bellah describes as an American civil religion.

Learning Objectives:
Upon completion of these lectures, you will be able to:

1. Outline the dominant approaches to the comparative study of religion.
2. Identify the nature of religious cosmologies in general, the most accessible routes to studying them, and what those routes reveal about ancient Egyptian and other Middle Eastern religions.
3. Trace the fundamental issues raised in the Epic of Gilgamesh, and explain how they help us understand both the nature of the ancient Sumerian world view and how that view compares to the promises of other religions.
4. Summarize the basic features of the "rites de passage" model and describe how it helps us understand the logic of both the Moses and Jesus stories.
5. State the main features of the "theodicy" problem.
6. Distinguish among the responses of Judaism (Job), Christianity (Paul and Calvin), Hinduism, and Buddhism to the "theodicy" problem.
7. Evaluate comprehensively the dynamics of religious communities, paying special attention to the interaction of "sect" and "church," as well as the argument about the role of monasticism in preserving stability.
8. Compare and contrast the relationship between Judaism and Christianity with Hinduism and Buddhism.

9. Interpret critically the argument that Puritanism is responsible for several significant aspects of contemporary American society.
Lecture One

Why Nothing Is as Intriguing as the Study of Religion

Scope: This introductory lecture lays out a framework for the study of religion, beginning with the "what" and "why" of the matter and moving onto the real topic, which is "how" religions have been studied in the past. There have been four basic approaches to the study of religion, and the bulk of the lecture attempts to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Outline

I. An Introduction to Religion
   A. Three questions can be raised concerning religion:
      1. What is religion?
      2. Why should we study religion?
      3. How do we go about studying religion?
   B. The third question will be the main focus of this lecture.
      1. There are four basic approaches to the study of religion.
      2. We must keep in mind that religion can be studied *qua* religion (as a matter of faith) and as an intellectual and academic subject.

II. What Is Religion?
   A. Answers to this question are either too precise or too imprecise. An example of what is meant by "too precise" is the nineteenth-century view that religion is "faith in God."
      1. One problem with this answer is that "faith" is a peculiarly Western term. It is appropriate from the point of view of, for example, Luther or Calvin, but not from the point of view of Buddha or Krishna.
      2. Similarly, the term (and concept) of God is appropriate when considering monotheistic religions, but not others.
   B. An example of what is meant by "too imprecise" is the 1950s existentialist view of religion as the "ultimate concern."
      1. This description does not tell us why religious people act as they do.
      2. This description does not separate religious from nonreligious "ultimate" concerns.
   C. "Religion is a communication system that is constituted by supernatural beings and is related to specific patterns of behavior" (H.H. Penner).
      1. This definition imparts a definite structure and complexity to religion that is systemic.
      2. A communication system indicates to those within and outside our religion who and what we are, as well as what we do and do not believe in.
      3. This definition does not limit religion to verbal communication; ritual is a crucial aspect.
      4. One or more supernatural beings must be a part of the system.
      5. This definition implies specific patterns of behavior. As discussed above, all religions are ritualistic by nature. Even those that appear to be nritualistic are ritualistically aritualistic.

III. Why Study Religion?
   A. One reason religion is worth studying is numbers. Three billion people are involved in self-professed religious activities.
   B. A second and perhaps more important reason is that religion is inextricably bound up with other areas of human action and conduct. Religion enables us to understand other people and viewpoints better, as shown in the following examples.
1. Without understanding the nature of Judaism and Islam, it is very difficult to truly understand the Arab/Israeli conflict of the last fifty-some years.

2. One must understand the tenets of Protestantism to understand the growth of capitalism.

3. Cultural manifestations, such as the music of Bach, cannot be studied without reference to Christianity.

4. The same is true of Far Eastern religions. Hinduism and Buddhism exert pervasive influences in such areas as architecture, governance, and social structure.

IV. The Comparative Approach to the Study of Religion

A. The comparative approach examines how different religions answer what are basically similar questions.

B. Using this approach, we will look at basic tenets, but we will not present comprehensive histories of the religions we examine.

C. We are searching for patterns of similarities and dissimilarities. For example, the religions in question are similar in the ideas they propose for treatment of the poor, but possibly for different reasons. Another example is the dramatic difference found in the virtual total absence of the sexual aspects of life in the Gospels, compared to the detailed descriptions of god Krishna's sexuality in Hindu scriptures.

D. We will pay special attention to creation myths of different religions and, in particular, to the interpretation of "cosmologies" developed by Mircea Eliade.

E. We will examine how scholars have approached the following three basic questions:
   1. How have different religions started?
   2. What facet of humanity accounts for omnipresence of religion in human history?
   3. Why have great religions developed as they have?

F. We will detail the four basic approaches to the study of religion:
   1. Religion and history
   2. Religion as amateur or immature science
   3. Religion and the unconscious (psychological explanations)
   4. Religion and society (or social structure)

V. Methodology of the Lectures

A. None of these four approaches, or any other one, has been able to explain all the fundamental questions about religion.

B. As a result, as each approach is described, it might sound "negative," but a better word would be "incomplete."

C. By taking this kind of "critical" approach, we hope to stimulate each listener to generate his or her own analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of these issues.

VI. Religion and History

A. This approach is also known as "euhemerism," after the Cyrenaic philosopher Euhemerus (c. 300 B.C.), who first expounded a theory of mythology in his work, Sacred History.

B. The basic tenets of, and arguments for and against, euhemerism are:
   1. All religions started as stories about actual human beings who were gifted or otherwise distinguished in their lifetimes.
   2. Stories about these people came to be exaggerated after their deaths. This theory might apply, for example, to Moses, Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed.
   3. One compelling argument for euhemerism is that stories, especially in cultures with oral traditions, do in fact tend to become exaggerated over time.
   4. Two arguments against euhemerism are the impossibility of testing antiquity and, more important, the theory's inability to explain why and how religions have developed as they have. An appropriate analogy might be to say that the core of dust in a raindrop doesn't really explain the raindrop.
VII. Religion as Immature or Amateur Science
A. This approach argues that religious data are to be read literally.
   1. Ancients wanted to explain physical aspects of the world, but based on what we now know, their explanations were often wrong.
   2. Writers who ascribe to this approach often use terms such as "primitive" mind and "prelogical thinking."
B. In support of this approach is the fact that many religious texts do make reference to natural phenomena.
C. Weaknesses of this approach include the following:
   1. It is not demonstrable that ancient peoples were any less logical than we are today (cf. Claude Levi-Strauss on this point).
   2. This approach assumes that humans in ancient times were somehow fundamentally different than we are now, which again cannot be validated.
   3. This approach assumes that religious data are to be interpreted literally, not symbolically. Scientific explanations and religious explanations perform different functions, and both approaches can explain the same data (compare the account of seeding clouds and praying to God to make it rain).

VIII. Religion and the Unconscious
A. This is also known as the psychological approach to religion.
B. We can demonstrate the major line of argument of this approach using a bowdlerized version of Freud's theories as an example.
   1. Related to the concept of instinctual drives versus inhibitions, the psychological approach argues that religion and dreams allow us to do narratively what we cannot do in fact.
   2. Furthermore, this view of religion allows us to express needs in a way that doesn't destroy society.
C. The major strength of this approach is that it does an excellent job of explaining the persistence and omnipresence of religion and religious feeling. Religion is, as it were, hard-wired into us.
D. The major weakness of this approach is that it relies on a concept of relatively recent vintage, namely that of the "unconscious."
   1. We are in the nascent stage of our understanding of the unconscious (which leaves us open to the possibility of error).
   2. This view of religion is hard to falsify.
   3. Finally, this view often serves as a dogma itself.

IX. Religion and Society
A. This fourth approach is the group equivalent of the individual psychological explanation.
B. This view is predicated on the belief that humans' key needs are social, rather than individual. Emile Durkheim is chiefly responsible for this mode of argument.
   1. In order to survive, society needs to establish a group identity.
   2. Religion serves this purpose and, in effect, is the glue that holds together otherwise disparate and feuding human beings.
   3. Common beliefs and rituals bond people, so they can act in concert.
C. Support for this societal approach is seen in the obvious need for cohesion and coherence necessary for any society to function and flourish. This can be clearly observed in war, when each party firmly believes that "God is on our side."
D. Weaknesses of this approach include the following:
   1. Religious data are replete with "antisocial actions," including those perpetrated by key religious heroes. Biblical patriarchs are one example: Abraham marries his half sister, and Jacob marries two sisters.
2. It is hard to explain these "antisocial" anomalies, especially because this societal view assumes identification between religion and the society that produced it. Religious data, however, do not support this identification.

3. Most important, the societal approach cannot satisfactorily explain the fact that the same religion has so often been adopted by people who have widely divergent social structures (e.g., Christianity and early Islam in particular).

X. Conclusion
   A. None of these four approaches is able to do a complete job of explaining what religion is, why it arose, and how it operates in the life of people and society.
   B. Religions are powerfully complicated systems, as the people who believe in religions are complicated.
   C. As a result, we must be content with describing religions, not explaining them.

Readings:
A complete annotated bibliography is at the end of the outline booklet. Readings for each lecture are cited by author, title, and recommended chapters, as appropriate. "Essential" means that the book provides an excellent general overview of the material covered in the lecture. "Suggested" means that the book provides additional breadth and depth beyond the essential titles.

Essential:
Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Supplementary:

Topics for Further Consideration:
1. Do you think that the rationale for studying religions laid out in this lecture makes sense? If so, do you think this rationale is sufficient for the study of religion?
2. How do you analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the examination in this lecture of what we call the four main approaches to the study of religion? Just as there are pros and cons for each approach, what would you say are the pros and cons of the approach taken here, especially the conclusion that there is no way to explain different religions but only to describe them?
3. Evaluate the definition of religion as a communication system in the way we evaluated the four other definitions.
Lecture Two

Orienting Humanity—Religions as Spiritual Compasses

Scope: In this lecture, we will continue our comparative study of religions by examining their cosmologies. In general, we will follow the arguments of Eliade, who said that cosmologies are best understood as operating through a dynamic series of binary oppositions. The most universal of these are the oppositions between gods/heaven/life and humanity/earth/death. Fundamental cosmological principles can be found most readily in two areas: creation myths and religious architecture. This contention is illustrated primarily with reference to the creation myths of Hinduism and Judaism and the pyramids of ancient Egypt. We conclude that, for religions that see the world as old, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, salvation comes in escaping from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. In religions such as Judaism and Christianity, which see the world as relatively new, the goal is to gain more chances at life, either collectively or individually.

Outline

I. Nature of Religious Cosmologies
   A. The term "cosmology" as used in religion has a different meaning than that used in physics and astronomy.
   B. The word derives from the roots *cosmos* (world) and *logos* (intelligence, blueprint, plan).
      1. In physics and astronomy, cosmology deals with a theoretical system to explain the origin, structure, evolution, and behavior of the known physical universe (e.g., Einstein's theories and quantum physics helped push back the boundaries of cosmology as understood in this sense of the word).
      2. Religious cosmology means the attempt of religion to help people deal with the uncertainty of life in the world, so they won't be spiritually or psychically lost. In reality, early religious cosmology arrogated the realm of "scientific" cosmology, as evidenced in the repression of the Galilean/Copernican ideas that put the sun, not the earth, at the center of the solar system.
   C. More specifically, religious cosmology addresses the following sorts of questions, the answers to which can provide a meaningful map to the pain and confusion of experience.
      1. Where did the universe come from?
      2. How was the universe brought into being?
      3. What is the nature and destiny of humanity?
      4. What is the meaning of life?
      5. Is there an afterlife?
      6. What is the meaning and content of salvation?
   D. Perhaps the best place to find these answers is in cosmogonies, or creation myths, and in religious architecture.
      1. For example, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the birth of the universe is explained in Genesis 1 ("In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth . . .") and the prologue to the Gospel of John ("In the beginning was the Word . . .").
      2. Key examples of religious architecture include the Pyramids, temples, and cathedrals.

II. Anti-Empirical Nature of Religions
   A. One reason we need to look for cosmologies is that most religions are anti-empirical. In other words, most religions argue that the world is different than what it seems to be from the data we obtain using our senses.
   B. A nonreligious system that is similarly anti-empirical is Marxism.
   C. Basically, an anti-empirical system states that things may look like "X," but "in reality" they are "Y."

III. The Analytic Priority for Cosmology in the Study of Religion
   A. Eliade is the theoretical source of this approach, which does not take the genetic point of view that all religions start as cosmologies, and all else flows from that.
B. The analytic approach argues that cosmologies give us our best analytic entry into the various systems of religious thought.

IV. The Near East from 3500 B.C. to A.D. 500
   A. This location and this 4,000-year span of time are the source of our own Western religious tradition.
   B. In approaching this area, we will avoid "orientalizing" the topic; that is, making it seem more arcane than it is.
   C. This area is the site of a major cosmological initiative—the Great Pyramids of Egypt. According to Herodotus, the Pyramids were constructed for no "rational" purpose except religion.

V. The Ancient Egyptian Creation Myth
   A. Without descending into unnecessary detail, we can state that the key point of the ancient Egyptian creation myth is repetition of binary opposites. The land of the living was equated with Egypt.
   B. The ancient Egyptians saw the world as working rhythmically (again, in binary opposition).
   C. The most important lesson of retelling this ancient creation myth is the analogy between the natural world (represented by the life-giving sun and the Nile River) and human life itself: Just as the sun appears to set, or the Nile appears to recede, that is not the end. The binary cycle will bring the sun and the waters back. The same is true of human life; it is not necessarily over when it appears to be.

VI. The Great Pyramids as the Embodiment of Egyptian Cosmological Principles
   A. Pyramids were intended to serve as tombs for Egyptian kings; they were not built for other civil utilitarian purposes, such as to be used as granaries or fortifications.
   B. As such, the siting and form of pyramids had religious significance as spiritual and psychic guides for Egyptians.
      1. The Pyramids are located on the west bank of the Nile; the stone used for their construction was on the east bank. Why didn't the Egyptians make the job easier by building where the quarries were?
      2. The west bank is symbolically significant, because the sun sets in the west and is reborn each day in the east.
      3. By placing the regal graves on the river's west side, it was possible for people to replicate the journey of the sun and to be reborn.
   C. Similarly, the Pyramids were oriented with amazing precision according to cardinal points of the compass (i.e., along the north, south, east, and west axes).
   D. For the ancient Egyptians, the Great Pyramids were a cosmic replication of the earth.
      1. One of the purposes of the Pyramids was to help people think about the nature of the world.
      2. For that reason, like the world, the Pyramids must have the four cardinal points of the compass.
   E. The shape of the Pyramids is also symbolic and illustrative of Egyptian cosmology.
      1. They are symbolically constructed as stairways to heaven.
      2. They prefigure the concept of a three-tier universe (hell/earth/heaven) developed in the Judeo-Christian tradition.
   F. The Pyramids suggest an answer to one of the basic quandaries of religious cosmologies.
      1. Cosmologies are organized by binary oppositions: "X" and "not X."
      2. The chief opposition is between gods/eternal life and humanity/death. This difference seems to be central to all religions and seems to exacerbate the difficulty of living for all humans.
      3. The Pyramids can be understood as a symbolic and literal means of communication to bridge this seemingly insurmountable gap.

VII. Hindu Cosmology
   A. A key point in understanding Hindu cosmology is to appreciate its chronological aspect.
1. Hindu cosmology is infinitely larger than the Judaic or Christian (scriptural) view that the world is at most 6,000 or so years old.

2. The Hindu view is closer to that of modern physicists or such astronomers as Carl Sagan. (The big bang theory holds that the universe is closer to 12 to 13 billion years old, and the Earth, perhaps a third of that).

3. The Mt. Mehru metaphor discussed on the tape provides additional insight into this concept.

B. The analytic payoff is to come to an understanding of the Hindu goal of reaching nirvana; that is, the escape from the wheel of life, release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.
   1. In religions in which the world is old, the goal is to get off or escape (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism).
   2. In religions in which the world is new and time is short, the goal is to get more. In Judaism, the goal is the world to come; in Christianity, it is personal rebirth and eternal life in Christ.

VIII. Jewish Cosmology

A. The Judaic "creation myth" is contained in the Book of Genesis.
   1. A key feature is that, for Judaism, everything created is good. Humans may make a mess of things, but they start with something that is good.
   2. This is distinctive, because other world religions say the opposite (i.e., they accept that, from the beginning, there is such a thing as "bad").
   3. For Jews, to believe otherwise, would be to criticize God's efforts as creator of the universe and all that lives in the universe.

B. The chief opposition in Judaic cosmology is: god/heaven/life versus humans/earth/death (which is not unlike the basic dichotomy outlined in our earlier discussion of the Pyramids).

C. Any human attempt to become divine is hubris (compare the biblical story of the Tower of Babel); humans cannot achieve divine status on their own.

D. The solution is for God to choose the Jewish people and work with them.
   1. God alone can make the name of the Jewish people great, not the Jews themselves.
   2. Through his selection of, and interaction with, the Jewish people, God conveys his blessing to humanity, to all nations of the Earth.
   3. The Jewish people were not chosen for any reason except that they were chosen; God's divine blessing could just as easily have gone to any other group.
   4. A key concept to grasp is that the choosing is not individual but collective, and this mandates a communal relationship with God.

Essential Reading:

Suggested Reading:
Works cited in the bibliographies of any of the above essential readings.

Topics for Further Consideration:

1. Are you convinced by the arguments in this lecture about the "analytic payoff" to be garnered by examining religious cosmologies? Discuss this question with reference to the treatment of the Great Pyramids and Egyptian religion.

2. Do you agree or disagree with the contention that binary oppositions constitute the fundamental dynamic of religious cosmologies? If you agree, suggest reasons why this might be the case. If you disagree, suggest an alternative explanatory dynamic.
3. Do you agree or disagree with the contention that the "chronological" differences in the Judeo/Christian creation myth versus the Hindu/Buddhist creation myth are responsible for their strikingly different notions of salvation? Support your answer.
Lecture Three

Religious Heroes 1:
Gilgamesh and the Dawn of History

Scope: Lecture three begins by addressing the centrality of myth, especially as a master form of narrative, in making sense of religious cosmologies. In this context, special emphasis will be placed on the birth narratives of religious heroes, particularly the unusual circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of these heroes. We will examine the birth narratives of Moses, Jesus, Sargon the Great, and Gautama the Buddha. This serves as the framework for an extensive retelling of the ancient Sumerian myth, the Epic of Gilgamesh, which was discovered only relatively recently. After a brief discussion of the main characteristics of ancient Sumeria, the lecture provides details of the story of Gilgamesh and its cosmological implications, one of which is in the Sumerian answer to the key question of mortality.

Outline

I. Definition of Myth
   A. Myth, as we will use the term in this lecture, is not defined in the common sense of "it's a myth that men are insensitive" or as a "false belief" refuted by science or some other means.
   B. By myth, we mean "a traditional story about superhuman beings" that has three fundamental elements.
      1. In our study, a myth is a story, in narrative form, with a beginning, middle, and end (thus, Leviticus, a list of rituals, is not a myth).
      2. A myth is a "traditional" and "social," not an individual, creation transmitted almost always orally within a religious or otherwise distinctive society.
      3. Finally, a myth deals with a being who is "supernatural" or has done something that is supernatural; that is, something that it is not possible for an ordinary human to achieve.

II. Similarity of Conception and Birth Myths across Religions
   A. There are some dissimilarities, but many similarities, in the conception and birth narratives of the founders of different religions.
      1. Moses is introduced in the Book of Exodus. He is abandoned by his biological mother, who places him in a reed basket in the Nile. He is found and adopted by the daughter of the new Egyptian king, who hates the Israelites.
      2. Jesus, in the account of the Gospel of Matthew, is divinely conceived by the Holy Spirit and born to a virgin mother. His parents, Joseph and Mary, are forced to flee a wicked, anti-Jewish ruler.
      3. Sargon the Great was the dynastic founder of Akkad in Mesopotamia (c. 2340-2305 B.C.), an ancient empire that flourished approximately one thousand years before the time of Moses (thirteenth century B.C.). His conception ("mother changeling [bastard], father, I knew not") and birth were kept secret. He was sent in a basket of rushes into the Euphrates River.
      4. Gautama the Buddha was born to a mother who dreamed that a white elephant impregnated her. He was born out of her side with no pain. He immediately took seven steps and said, "this will be my last birth."
   B. All these narratives involve unusual circumstances for conception and birth of the heroes; specifically, divine or nonhuman genesis and/or delivery that is usually kept a secret. Two of the stories involve abandonment of the baby in a basket in a life-giving river; two entail the threat of death from a dominant male figure.

III. The Sumerian Setting for the Epic of Gilgamesh
   A. Sumer (Sumeria) comprised current-day Iraq, plus bits of Syria, Turkey, and Iran and is basically the southern part of ancient Mesopotamia (the "land between the rivers" of the Tigris and Euphrates).
   B. Until only approximately a little over one hundred years ago, the knowledge of the ancient civilization of Sumer was unknown to the West. Archaeological study has place the earliest culture in this area to the fourth and third millennia B.C. (3500 to 2000 B.C.).
C. Sumerian is unrelated to any known language, ancient or modern, although Kemal Ataturk claimed that modern Turkish is related to Sumerian.

D. Written language, law, schooling, and books are all attributed first to the Sumerians. Gilgamesh is considered the oldest "Western" epic.

E. The Sumerians were succeeded by the Babylonians (Hammurabi, 1800 B.C.) and Assyrians.

IV. The Gilgamesh Epic
A. The 3,000-line narrative opens with the portrait of Gilgamesh and his city, Uruk (or Erech), which is in southern Iraq, near the Persian Gulf.
   1. Gilgamesh is the King of Uruk and is two-thirds divine (his mother was a goddess) and one-third human.
   2. He is between 16 and 18 years old and is a great hero: the strongest, mightiest, fastest, and smartest person in Uruk.
   3. Gilgamesh is, however, exhausting his subjects, and they are not happy with him. The myth eschews the obvious solution of killing him (regicide), instead creating a double for him, which indicates something significant about Sumerian culture and society.
B. The double, Enkidu, is the rural counterpart to the urban ruler Gilgamesh. Enkidu is equal to Gilgamesh and runs free with the animals in the mountains, deserts, and forests.
   1. Enkidu meets Gilgamesh when he goes into Uruk for a prostitute, the same one frequented by Gilgamesh.
   2. The two become fast friends immediately upon meeting and embark on all sorts of great adventures together.
   3. Then, suddenly, as a result of his hubris, Enkidu dies. This profoundly affects Gilgamesh, because this is his first immediate and personal encounter with mortality.
C. Gilgamesh realizes (but perhaps doesn't want to accept) the inevitability of mortality, so he tries three solutions.
   1. First, Gilgamesh decides that "civilization" is responsible for the death of Enkidu. He returns to the desert and wild nature, where he can enjoy freedom and not be reminded of mortality; however, he misses daily intercourse with other people.
   2. Next, Gilgamesh meets a barmaid whose philosophy is carpe diem, seize the day. This response is that of domestic hedonism (wine, women, and song: eat, drink, and be merry). But this leaves Gilgamesh unsatisfied, because he sees this way of coping as a futile race against time that humans will always lose.
   3. Finally, Gilgamesh searches for immortality. He learns of two immortals and seeks them out. They are flood heroes, who in some ways prefigure Noah and the biblical version of the Great Flood. Gilgamesh does not, however, gain the immortality he seeks and learns no abiding lesson here.
D. The epic concludes with Gilgamesh sitting alone in the desert. Looking up, he sees the city of Uruk towering over the landscape. This is his epiphany.
   1. It is inevitable that all humans will die, but the point is not to become like an animal, or to seek pleasure for its own sake, or to seek immortality and, therefore, to be an exception.
   2. Rather, the point is to live among people, to seek their betterment, in the time allotted for life.
   3. The narrative ends with a description of all the achievements of Gilgamesh in making Uruk (the "world") a better place.

V. The Lessons of Gilgamesh
A. On one level, this is a story about growing up. Gilgamesh starts as an adolescent who doesn't believe in his own mortality, especially because he is partly divine. The lesson of maturity is to accommodate oneself to mortality.
B. The story presents the Sumerian religion as very honest and brave.
   1. Most other religions promise immortality.
2. The awareness and acceptance of the human fate does not engender pessimism.
3. Rather, this acceptance reveals a balanced optimism and commitment to realism. The individual can shape the narrative of his or her own life and must be socially conscious while alive.

VI. The Importance of Gilgamesh in the Comparative Study of Religion
A. The epic was only discovered and translated about one hundred years ago; therefore, it is a bit unfamiliar to most Westerners.
B. The story is a good example of how religious myths portray the spiritual journeys of their heroes on the road to reality. Such narratives give us a sense of what a given religion views as authentic or real in a cosmological sense.
C. Although the epic is from a far distant time and might be viewed as "oriental" and exotic, it also prefigures characters, ideas, and literary usages that we will encounter in the Western (Greco-Hebraic-Christian) tradition. We should not make too much of this fact, but we cannot ignore it in a comparative view of religions.
D. Finally, the Sumerian view of this world as the only reality is both unusual and compelling for its unflinching honesty and forthrightness.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Gilgamesh (any modern translation).

Topics for Further Consideration:
1. Using the definition of myth provided in this lecture, what are the differences between myths and religious cosmologies? What would you say is the basic relationship between myths and cosmologies?
2. Why do you think so many religions claim unusual circumstances regarding the birth and conception of their heroes or founders? Why do you think such claims seem to be an omnipresent aspect of religious myths?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the interpretation offered in this lecture of the lesson of the Gilgamesh epic? If you disagree, what would you argue is the lesson being imparted here? If you agree with this view of the lesson, do you also concede that such a lesson is a relatively braver and more honest response to the issue of human mortality than those of other religions that promise their followers immortality?
Lecture Four

Religious Heroes 2: Moses and Jesus

Scope: This lecture explores the notion of the Belgian/Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, later developed by the American anthropologist Victor Turner, that the rite de passage (rite-of-passage) scheme must be understood as central for religious cosmologies in general. This scheme is also of inestimable importance in understanding the lives of particular religious founders and heroes. The story of Gilgamesh, covered in lecture three, provides an excellent point of departure. This lecture looks at the following major religious heroes and founders in the same context: Moses, Jesus, Krishna, and Gautama the Buddha. Each account has a key point that aptly reflects the cosmology of the religion in question.

Outline

I. "Rites-of-Passage" Scheme
   A. This concept was originally designed for looking at religious rituals; the major exponents are its originator, Belgian/Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, and the American anthropologist Victor Turner.
   B. "Rites-of-passage" interpretations can illuminate stories of religious founders/heroes by casting their lives into three natural phases, with thresholds marking the transition points. The stages are:
      1. Preliminal: before the threshold
      2. Liminal: the actual passage from one state to another
      3. Postliminal: the assumption of a new identity
   C. A ritual usually separates the preliminal from the liminal stage.
   D. The liminal stage has three aspects:
      1. First comes a period of tests and trials.
      2. The hero in the liminal stage is characterized by a confused identity. The figure asks, "Who am I? What is my status?"
      3. Finally, the figure receives some secret religious knowledge.
   E. Usually, another ritual marks the transition from the liminal state.
      1. Baptism is an excellent example of a rite of passage.
      2. The person seeking baptism must first profess the desire to become a Christian (cross a threshold).
      3. During Lent, the applicant might undergo many trials and tests and gain "secret" knowledge about the faith. The person is no longer un-Christian but is not yet Christian.
      4. The ritual of baptism signals, physically and symbolically, the movement from the liminal stage to the postliminal (new identity) stage.
      5. The conjugal "honeymoon" is a liminal period; the couple returns with a new identity (i.e., the man and woman are no longer individuals, but husband and wife).

II. Gilgamesh as Rite de Passage
   A. As you recall, initially, the hero Gilgamesh can do anything and thinks he can live forever. This is the preliminal phase.
   B. After the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh enters the liminal stage.
      1. He is confused about his identity (is he human, god, animal?) and about things that he never thought of before.
      2. He undergoes tests, both physical and moral, that try his mettle.
      3. He obtains "secret knowledge," the story of the flood and its survivors, that may offer the hope of immortality.
   C. In the postliminal phase, Gilgamesh reaches maturity.
      1. He is now sure of his identity; he knows he is human and accepts what that means.
      2. Moreover, he has passed all his tests and trials (he has "looked into the abyss").
3. He can now impart his spiritual knowledge to others with authority and credibility.

III. The Moses Story as Rite de Passage
A. There is not unanimous agreement that Moses was actually a historical figure. Leaving that aside, we can look at the novel and provocative approach of Sigmund Freud to begin to illustrate the concept of the *rite de passage*.
   1. According to Freud, Moses was an Egyptian, not a Jew.
   2. Moses learned his monotheism from Akhenaton (king of ancient Egypt, c. 1372-1354 B.C.)
   3. The account holds that Moses was murdered in the desert by followers. In Freudian terms, this is a classic revolt (primal horde) against sexual repression (Moses being figured as the dominant male).
B. Does the Moses story meet the requirements of a myth?
   1. A myth requires a superhuman figure. Although Moses isn't one, God is, so this test is met.
   2. In fact, Moses' humanity can be seen as a key feature in the myth.
C. The Moses story can also be viewed as a *rite de passage*.
   1. Moses is born in one country, abandoned, adopted, and travels to another country, leading his people. He crosses a river, learns some secrets (e.g., the name of God), and has encounters with God in such mysterious forms as the burning bush.
   2. Moses goes through a liminal period in which he is very confused about his identity.
   3. He undergoes several trials and tests, crosses another body of water the Red ("reed") Sea, and comes to within sight of his goal ("the Promised Land").

IV. The Moses Story and Jewish Cosmology
A. We should focus on the fact that Moses is both mediator and nonmediator.
B. The actions that paint Moses as mediator include the following:
   1. He is the only one who goes up on Mt. Sinai/Horeb.
   2. He receives the Torah (divine teaching or instruction, not the law) directly from God, to bring back to humanity.
C. The elements of the story that show Moses as a nonmediator are the following:
   1. The key thing is not Moses' message, but the instruction he brings to the Jewish people and, thus, to humanity as whole, from God.
   2. Of utmost importance is how the community reacts to the Torah.
D. The fact that Moses dies outside the Promised Land is significant.
   1. Postbiblical Jewish tradition says this fact avoids making Moses a god.
   2. The temptation for messianic deification, to bridge the gap between human and divine, would have been overwhelming, but was resisted.
   3. Moses' death as a human reinforces the key Jewish concept of stress on the *community*, not the individual.
   4. Thus, the Jewish community is the collective mediator between God and humanity.
E. Jesus, on the other hand, represents precisely that individual mediation between heaven and earth. We argue that the lesson of the transition of Jesus is that the same immortality is open to all who accept Jesus as Christ. The tale of Krishna dramatizes the fundamental point of Hinduism that the individual soul does not die but transmigrates, is born again, in another sentient being of whatever form. The spiritual journey of the Buddha finally demonstrates the Buddhist notion that the basic human problem is the attempt to ascribe permanence to what is, at the deepest level, impermanent.

V. The Jesus Story
A. Christ is "the anointed one," which indicates a special status.
B. The Alsatian theologian, musician, and medical missionary Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) stated that every generation finds the historical Jesus to be a reflection of themselves and their own beliefs and assumptions.

C. Does the Jesus story meet the requirements of a myth?
1. Jesus is definitely a superhuman figure, "he who is to come."
2. Proof of his superhuman qualities lies in his ability to cure lepers, raise Lazarus from the dead, and perform other miracles.
3. Jesus is God and man, simultaneously fully human and fully divine.

D. The rite de passage schema works on the grand cosmic scale of the Jesus story.
1. Divinely conceived, Jesus is born as man to the young virgin, Mary.
2. Actually, Jesus was a preexistent being since the beginning of creation. This is the preliminal stage.
3. The liminal stage is his entire earthly ministry, which saw many tests (temptations, sufferings), a radically confused identity, and eventual death.
4. The postliminal phase is the resurrection and return in glory to heaven.

E. In Jesus' earthly life, we can see the same rite de passage stages.
1. Jesus' baptism by John separates the preliminal from the liminal stage.
2. In Mark's Gospel, nothing is said about Jesus before this baptism.
3. Following this transition, Jesus is immediately subjected to tests and trials and suffers a confusion of identity.
4. The only ones who know who Jesus actually is are demons, not his disciples.
5. We could put the postliminal stage at the transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah come down from heaven and join Jesus in the presence of his disciples. Now Jesus has a new identity in the minds of the disciples.

VI. The Jesus Story and Christian Cosmology
A. Jesus is clearly a mediating figure.
1. As an individual, Jesus replaces the Jewish people as the mediating figure with God.
2. He mediates for all of humanity and for people individually.

B. What is the message of Jesus?
1. Jesus' teachings offer new meanings for love, brotherhood, and ritual.
2. He stressed that human life itself is transitional and liminal, although humans are tempted to see earthly life as all there is.
3. Humans must reject an empirical or sensory approach to life and look to the postliminal possibilities of immortality.
4. This option is open to all who accept Christ as God and savior.

VII. Krishna and Hindu Cosmology
A. Krishna is a hero in, but not the founder of, the Hindu tradition.
B. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna is simultaneously himself and an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, the creator god and lord of the universe.
C. This fact has threefold significance.
1. Every human is an immortal eternal soul in a particular body.
2. That soul has been in many past incarnations.
3. That soul will continue to be in many incarnations in the future.

D. The lesson of the life of Krishna is that there is an atman (true soul). Although the world tries to convince us that the soul dies with the body, rather it transmigrates and is born again in another sentient being.
1. The form of that being will vary according to one's karma in this present life.
2. This transmigration and rebirth will continue until the soul achieves mukti (liberation) or nirvana.
VIII. The Buddha Story and Buddhist Cosmology  
   A. Buddhism is to Hinduism as Christianity is to Judaism. Buddhism was born within the older tradition, but argues that the original made a fundamental mistake in its teachings. Buddhism still shares some features and beliefs with its "parent" religion.  
   B. The founder of Buddhism, Prince Gautama (c. 563-483 B.C.), spent his early life in luxury in his father's palace (probably in modern Nepal), but found this very unsatisfying. He tried the ascetic life, but that didn't bring satisfaction either.  
   C. Gautama came to "enlightenment" and expressed the central Buddhist realizations that there is no self and all life is suffering. The attainment of nirvana releases one from suffering.  
   D. In Hinduism, there is a true self, the *atman*, that is continuously reborn.  
   E. In Buddhism, nothing is permanent, especially the soul. Thus, the ultimate truth is that the whole universe is impermanent. Humans run into problems when they ascribe permanence to impermanence. The doctrines of Buddhism (the "Four Noble Truths" and the "Eightfold Path" provide guidance for each person to seek enlightenment.

Essential Reading:  
Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*.  

Supplemental Reading:  

Topics for Further Consideration:  
1. Do you agree with the *rite de passage* interpretations outlined in this lecture? If not, what would you put in place of this interpretation?  
2. We stress the fact that Moses died before reaching the Promised Land, thereby ensuring the centrality of the community, the Jewish people, as the key mediating force between the divine and humanity. Do you agree or disagree with this? Whatever your view, explain what you think are the key lessons to be learned from the Moses story.  
3. We have made an argument for strong *rite de passage* parallels in the Jesus story at both the macro-cosmic and micro-earthly levels. If you agree with this interpretation, what do you see as the implications of these parallels? If you don't agree, where are the flaws in each of these two levels of the Jesus story?
Lecture Five

Pondering Divine Justice: Do We Suffer for Naught?

Scope: This lecture contains a systematic analysis of the so-called "theodicy" problem; namely, how can an all-powerful and benevolent deity allow innocent people to suffer while success and happiness often seem to come to those who are evil? All world religions have attempted to deal with this dilemma. This lecture will cover the five major answers to this question and then provide a structural analysis of the most famous contemplation of theodicy in the Western religious tradition, the Book of Job.

Outline

I. Theodicy, or the Problem of Evil
   A. The theodicy problem can be described as follows: How can we reconcile the existence of an all-powerful and loving deity with suffering and injustice on earth?
   B. The three parts of this problem create a "trilemma" (a neologism in wide use in the theological field).
      1. The first part of the trilemma is an omnipotent deity who could change things.
      2. The second part is a benevolent or merciful deity who presumably loves humans.
      3. The third part is the suffering of apparently innocent people (and the seeming lack of suffering by evil people).
   C. To address the theodicy trilemma, we will take the following approach:
      1. We will try to answer the question: Does human experience validate or rebut religious dogma?
      2. Every religion claims that there is justice in the universe, if not necessarily in the empirical world of sensory data.
   D. Some argue that the theodicy question is the origin of world religions.
      1. This approach sees all religions as attempts to find answers to why "the good die young" or horribly, while the evil succeed in world.
      2. Studies of the sociology of religion indicate, however, that people recognize that what they see in day-to-day experience does not correspond to their beliefs. In addition, "reason" is most often cited for turning away from religion.
      3. In any case, all the great world religions have consistently tried to answer this question.

II. Typology of the Five Main Responses of World Religions to Theodicy
   A. Denial: Human suffering is inconsistent with an omnipotent, benevolent deity.
      1. The response of religion is, therefore, not to ascribe omnipotence or benevolence to the deity.
      2. The horrors of the Holocaust serve as an example of what generates this response.
   B. Dualism: The world contains good and evil.
      1. There can be a benevolent deity, but there is also a supernatural malevolent being who is responsible for evil and suffering.
      2. In a cosmological sense, there is a continuous struggle between these conflicting deities. For example, all gnosticisms (such as Manichaeism) hold to this outlook.
      3. Satan in the Judeo-Christian tradition is an example of this concept.
   C. Just desserts: There is no such thing as truly "innocent" human suffering.
      1. All humans are guilty as such and deserve what they get.
      2. This guilt is the result of the existence of desire, even if no action is taken.
      3. The omnipresence of this sinful element (even with a benevolent, loving deity) means that there are no "innocents."
      4. In Christianity, the concept of Original Sin helps explain the presence of evil and suffering. Even as children, we are all irredeemably guilty.
   D. Doorway to salvation: Suffering is a crucial step in preparing for transcendent salvation.
1. Gods are powerful and good, and people are indeed often "innocent."
2. Salvation must be earned, however; lessons must be learned. When people suffer, they learn what they need to be saved.
3. Above all, suffering helps people to recognize that they are not spiritually self-sufficient.
4. Suffering also helps us learn to seek God's mercy.

E. Duration: Suffering is only temporary, even if it lasts a lifetime in this world.
1. Injustice exists only if you confuse this world with "reality."
2. Any religion featuring transmigration of souls or an afterlife holds to this belief.
3. In return for suffering in this life, people will be rewarded in the next.

III. The Book of Job as the Ultimate Meditation on the Theodicy Problem
A. The background and influence of the Book of Job are significant.
1. This Old Testament book was most likely written in the sixth century B.C.
2. The Book of Job is beloved by modern existentialists, such as Martin Buber (Jewish) and Soren Kierkegaard (Christian).
4. Even an adjective, "Joban," has come into use, meaning "paradigm of innocent suffering."

B. A key motif of the story is the superiority of experience to dogma in approaching evil.
1. Job (who is suffering) is to his three friends (who are observing and judging) as experience is to dogma.
2. The friends quote from the Scriptures and spout dogma, but ignore Job's personal experience.
3. This enrages Job and shows his radical impatience.

C. The narrative leave us with important visual images of Job.
1. We picture him brought low, sitting on a rotting pile of garbage, with a hideous skin disease.
2. Job is also alone and miserable, outside the city gates (hence, outside the community and apparently shunned, if not assailed, by God).

IV. Structural Analysis of the Book of Job
A. Prologue and chapters 1-2
1. These elements are in prose, unlike the poetry of the rest of the book.
2. This part of the book sets the stage by describing Job's worldly success. He is wealthy and has many children, including twice as many sons as daughters.
3. God himself repeatedly says that Job is upright, blameless, god-fearing.
4. Job becomes the object of a wager between God and a powerful supernatural "adversary." This is not the Satan figure of centuries later, but rather a figure borrowed from Persian culture.

B. Dialogue, chapters 3-35
1. Despite the length of these poetic sections, nothing happens.
2. Neither Job nor his "friends" change their minds, despite their disputations. Job proclaims his innocence (as does God), and his friends insist that his suffering is proof of something guilty or evil in his behavior. Job says, "Don't preach, take account of my experience!"
3. It is important to note that the concept of personal immortality was not yet a part of Judaism. Neither Job nor his friends point to a reward for suffering in an afterlife; in fact, Job states that this suffering life is all there is. Only after Jesus do Mediterranean religions offer their adherents personal immortality and an afterlife.

C. God's voice from the whirlwind, chapters 36-41
1. In these dramatic chapters, the God of Israel speaks from a whirlwind and effectively puts a stop to the humans' disputations by displaying his power.
2. This is an example of a "theophony," a divine sound or speech.
3. God's message is: "Look how powerful I am and how much more I know than you do about the world that I created and control."
4. God takes Job to task for failing to recognize that God knows what he, Job, will never know. Job's biggest fault is speaking out of ignorance.
5. God commends Job, however, for speaking from experience, rather than for reciting empty dogma, as his friends did. God takes Job and his experiential knowledge seriously in a way that Job's so-called friends do not.

D. Epilogue, chapter 42
1. Here, the narrative returns to prose.
2. There are two critical aspects to this summing up. First, God praises Job and condemns his friends. Job was right in admitting he didn't understand the universe but wrong in wanting to have divine-like knowledge. Second, Job was also right to insist on the primacy of experience over dogma. Job's friends did not have the proper idea about what was important.
3. Job's friends are made to offer a sacrifice and Job is to pray for them. Then God gives Job twice as much as he had before his suffering.
4. This "Hollywood" ending bothers a lot of people; it seems like distributive justice: "do good, get good."
5. We need to view the ending in light of the larger theodicy problem; the Book of Job examines all the various solutions and dismisses them one by one. In the final analysis, the story tells us there is no "ultimate" solution to human suffering or at least no solution that is comprehensible in human terms.

Essential Reading:
The Book of Job (any version).

Supplementary Reading:
Archibald MacLeish, J.B.

Topics for Further Consideration:
1. Do you agree or disagree with the contention that the theodicy problem lies at the formative heart of the major religions? Explain why or why not with reference to at least two religious traditions.
2. What do you make of the five main responses that have been offered by world religions to the theodicy problem? Are they mutually inconsistent, or can a person or religion maintain several simultaneously? Which, if any, seem most compelling to you and why?
3. Is it correct to argue that, despite its happy ending, the real message of Job's story is that there is no solution to the theodicy problem? If that is right, then how do you explain the "Hollywood" ending? If the message is wrong, then what would you think the answer ought to be (i.e., how would you write the ending to the book)?
Lecture Six

Defending Divine Justice:
Religious Accounts of Suffering

Scope: This lecture continues the discussion of the theodicy problem by examining two of the main sources of Christian thinking on the topic. First is the treatment of theodicy provided by the Apostle Paul, who frames the issue not as one of injustice, but rather as one of justice versus mercy. As the lecture demonstrates, central to Paul's viewpoint is his strong belief in Original Sin. Because man is not truly innocent, there is no innocent suffering, according to the Pauline logic. He continues by asserting, however, that the fact that man is sinful provides proof of God's mercy. The second thinker examined in lecture six is John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Swiss theologian, who pushes Paul's doctrine further into the doctrine of predestination; that is, the notion that salvation is preordained by God's individual selection, about which people can do nothing. This doctrine (which was not new; Saint Augustine also propounded a predestination idea) has always been troubling to a great many people. This lecture will examine the affects of the Paul-Calvin predestination debate on Western Christianity. By way of comparison, the lecture will also discuss the Hindu and Buddhist responses to the theodicy question. Quoting Weber, the lecture will propose that the Hindu doctrines of karmic law and transmigration of souls constitute perhaps the most "rational" response to theodicy. Even so, the Hindu answer leaves many people dissatisfied. The lecture concludes with comments on the Buddhist teaching that all life is suffering, because people continuously attempt to make permanent what must inevitably change. The only release from suffering is to accept the impermanence of the universe and everything in it.

Outline

I. Answers to the Theodicy Question from the Christian Point of View
   A. The emphasis in this lecture is placed on the specific strand of Christian thought deriving from the writings of the Apostle Paul (especially his Epistle to the Romans) and the sixteenth-century Swiss theologian, John Calvin, one of the great figures in Western Christianity.
   B. Showing this strand of thought is important, given that Christianity is riven along denominational lines.

II. Paul and the Theodicy Question
   A. The chief source of Paul's thinking on this issue is found in the Epistle to the Romans, especially the ninth chapter.
      1. Paul alludes to Old Testament writings (e.g., his quote regarding Rebekah from Genesis 24-29).
      2. The question he poses is: Why is one child chosen and the other rejected?
   B. According to Paul, selection doesn't prove that God is unjust at all, but rather that he is merciful.
   C. According to Paul, our job is to praise God's mercy, not to say that he is unjust.
   D. Paul's idea is summed up by the phrase, "He who has hope is saved." This contrasts sharply with the Buddhist belief that "he who has lost all hope rests content."

III. Biographical Sketch of Paul (died in A.D. 64 or 67?)
   A. Paul (or Saul of Tarsus) was, for most of his life, a Greek-speaking Jew from Asia Minor (the northeast Mediterranean). His father (and, therefore, he himself) was a Roman citizen. He was probably a Pharisee and was known to have persecuted Christians.
   B. On the road to Damascus, he was knocked off his horse by a bright flash of light and heard Jesus' voice ask, "Why are you persecuting me?" He saw Jesus as the Messiah and was baptized.
   C. Some call Paul the "second founder" of Christianity (but he'd deny that claim). In any case, he was a fervent evangelist, but his "good news" was about Jesus, not about Paul.
   D. He was very active in founding churches throughout the Mediterranean. In this context, it is important to note that, from its start, Christianity was essentially a "middle-class" religion and was not initially a popular creed.

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E. As a key part of his work, Paul wrote long letters to the various churches in the region. The longest such letter was his Epistle to the Romans. This missive was sent to the home church in Jerusalem and represents the most sustained exposition of theology in the New Testament.

IV. The Pauline Approach to Theodicy in the Epistle to the Romans

A. Paul's chief goal was to demonstrate that God is just and that he justifies those who have faith in Jesus as the Christ.

B. Paul argues against the view that humans cannot do anything to justify themselves and reach their own salvation.
   1. To Paul, the Old Testament proves that no one can be saved by dint of personal efforts alone.
   2. This is a characteristic Christian apologetic about Judaism: The history of the Old Testament is that of a people seeking salvation and failing.
   3. The logical conclusion is that if the Israelites couldn't do it, then no one can do it on their own.

C. The Pauline solution is that the only way to salvation is to throw oneself on God's mercy, which can come only from one's faith in Jesus as the Christ.

V. Structural Analysis of the Pauline Approach to Theodicy in the Epistle to the Romans

A. Paul several times raises the question, "Shall we say God is unjust?" (see chapters 3-6, 9-14). This setup allows him to emphatically answer, "No, God is not unjust." He then offers five responses to the matter of innocent suffering.
   1. People suffer because of wickedness (2:1, 3:9, 3:23).
   2. People suffer because they all have the "guilt of the ancestors." (This phrase derives not from Paul, but from Max Weber.) Paul uses the concept of Original Sin, derived from a Christian reading of Genesis 2-3. Whereas the Jewish interpretation is that Adam and Eve represent the innate human tendency to make mistakes, Paul's interpretation is that they represent the human tendency toward sinfulness and evil. If all people have Original Sin, perfect justice would require all to be damned. God should be praised for his mercy, because this isn't the case, and some people are in fact saved.
   3. Suffering is educational (cf. especially chapters 7 and 8). Suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope. Without suffering, people would think that they can be saved on their own.
   4. Humans must suffer because their creator himself suffers. This distinctive Pauline argument holds that God suffers for two reasons. First, he is pained to see how many humans are unworthy of salvation. Second, God, in Jesus, suffered as a human on the cross; we can be children of God only through sharing in this suffering.
   5. Suffering is temporary, at least for those who will be saved. If you have faith, a gift from God, you have access to salvation and eternal life. This shows that earthly suffering is ephemeral.

VI. John Calvin and the Doctrine of Predestination

A. John Calvin (1509-1664) was born and studied in France, but he is often called a Swiss theologian, because he moved to Geneva in 1536, where he developed his reformation doctrines and lived out his life. Calvin basically ran the city of Geneva with an iron fist as a theocracy. He was a powerful speaker and writer whose influence on the course of the Protestant Reformation and, hence, the future of Western Christianity, was pervasive. He was more in touch than Luther with Europe's transition from an agrarian to a commercial and industrial future. His influence is particularly seen in the Cromwellian era in England and in Puritan New England.

B. Calvin's doctrines include the following:
   1. Free will: Calvin was adamantly opposed to the doctrine of free will, arguing that, if salvation can only be granted by God, a gift of faith in Jesus, then God decides who is saved and who isn't. Because this decision is God's alone, free will does not and cannot exist.
   2. Predestination: Calvin took this to be a highly logical answer to the theodicy problem and as the correct way to read Paul. This doctrine also accorded with his observations that some people received the preached Word of God and some didn't, indicating a predisposition toward or away from salvation.
3. Collective predestination versus individual predestination: The people of Israel were chosen by God at the time they were to make the point that you can't achieve salvation on your own. Calvin believed that doctrine had changed with Christ, and now God deals only with individuals, not groups. He elects people for salvation or damnation.

C. The epistemological ramifications of this doctrine of predestination are significant.
   1. If God makes the choice of who will be saved and who will be damned for all eternity, how does a person know which category he or she is in?
   2. It is possible to receive signs that might reveal your destiny. If you're miserable, you're probably damned; if you receive a call, you're probably chosen, but there is still doubt. You could have been deceived or invented the insight of election. You might think everything is fine and that you are saved, but you really are not.
   3. Like Paul, Calvin believed no one was innocent, because all were guilty of Original Sin and the corollary human depravity.
   4. Like Paul, Calvin also believed that the fact that some are chosen is an example of God's mercy, not justice (which would require damnation for everyone).

VII. The Hindu Answer to Theodicy
   A. The two keys to Hinduism in general, and its response to theodicy in particular, are Karmic law and the concept of the transmigration of souls.
      1. Karma means "action;" in this sense, Karmic law means that every action produces a result that determines one's future lot in life (or in any future life).
      2. Transmigration of souls refers to the belief that the soul is imperishable and passes to another being when we die. Max Weber says that transmigration is the most "rational" answer to theodicy.
   B. The concepts of karma and transmigration of the soul are related.
      1. Karma determines all aspects of future existence, including the very mode or form of existence, one's happiness or lack thereof, social status, intelligence, and other aspects of life.
      2. Karma is cumulative throughout life; it acts like a scale, weighing all actions. Doing one bad thing intentionally does not, therefore, doom a person.
      3. One problem is that an individual can't know where he or she will stand in the future, but can only how he or she has acted in the past, which explains the current state of the individual (i.e., if you are suffering, it is just desserts for past karma). This can be a strong incentive for ethical behavior (to accumulate good karma).
      4. As noted earlier, Weber believed that the transmigration concept was the most "rational" response to theodicy. It does not follow, however, that this concept has actually made people any happier, because odds are that one's condition will be worse in the next lifetime than it is in this lifetime. This can lead to an a fortiori rejection of all theodicy arguments.

VIII. Elements of the Buddhist Response to Theodicy
   A. Central to Buddhist belief are the "Four Noble Truths." The First Noble Truth is that all life is suffering (dukhka), because everything in life is temporary.
   B. This seems pessimistic, but it need not be if we realize that the cause of suffering is the thirst for permanence (trishna). This must be overcome.
   C. There is a state of existence without suffering (nirvana); if one can reach it, then one can rest content. The way to nirvana is the "Eightfold Path," which should lead one to the true insight that not even the soul is permanent.

Essential Reading:
Robert A. Oden, *The Bible Without Theology*, introduction and chapters 4 and 7. (This book is out of print, but may be available in libraries or through used bookstores.)
Supplementary Reading:

Topics for Further Consideration:

1. What do you think of Paul's insistence on making Original Sin the centerpiece of his response to the theodicy question? Is his position supported by the Gospels, or is it something he originated on his own? Whatever your view on its originality, what implications do you think the Pauline view on theodicy has had on Christianity and, by extension, all Western culture?

2. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of each side in the debate between free will and predestination? Can you identify any assumptions about the nature of the deity in Christianity that would tend to favor one side or the other in this debate?

3. What, in your view, are the main features that distinguish Hindu and Buddhist responses to the theodicy issue from each other and from the responses given by the Pauline/Calvinist tradition in Christianity? Are there any structural similarities between either of the Eastern views and the Pauline/Calvinist approach?
Lecture Seven

Religious Rituals and Communities

Scope: This lecture moves away from the theodicy discussion and addresses the issue of the dynamics of religious communities. Central to this is the examination of ritual, including its nature, importance, and ramifications for the religious community. Next, following the arguments of Weber and Troeltsch, the lecture moves onto a description of the dynamics of the development of two main types of religious communities: sect and church. The life cycle is one of birth as a sect, development into a maturing church, followed by the breaking away of dissatisfied elements into a new sect, which then develops into a church, and so forth. The lecture uses the example of the Protestant Reformation and then compares this flux with the relative stability of monastic orders, such as those that emerged in early Christianity and persisted for centuries, creating extraordinary stability for the Western Catholic Church. Buddhist monastic traditions will be studied as well for comparisons and contrasts. As another approach to maintaining stability and vibrancy within a religious community without the cycle of institutional growth and breakdown, the lecture concludes with the Hindu approach of integrating the urge for spiritual purity within the stages of a single individual's existence, as opposed to the community's existence.

Outline

I. The Role of Rituals
   A. If we assume that religion is a key in shaping social or group identity, then we can state that rituals have three roles to play in constituting religious identity.
      1. Ritual creates religious people out of ordinary people. Christian baptism is a perfect example, in which a "child of death" is "cleansed" of Original Sin and emerges as a new person. Augustine stated that baptism "makes" Christians, and it is inarguable that this ritual was a crucial element in salvation for early Christians.
      2. Ritual moves people through the various stages of a religious life. The best example is in Hinduism, in which boys in the three upper classes of the Hindu caste structure assume the "sacred thread," thus becoming "twice born."
      3. Ritual reminds people that they belong to this, not another, group of people. The best example of this is the Jewish retelling of the Exodus story at Passover, which reinforces the notion of Jewish identity as one of a shared history and fate.
   B. Ritual is more important than Americans tend to think it is. Our mainly Protestant (or perhaps even secular) culture rejects the historic Catholic emphasis on ritual. It is considered insignificant and inessential; however, elsewhere in the world, rituals are taken much more seriously.
   C. There is a potential downside to the "social solidarity" aspect of religion, as fostered by ritual, and that is the tendency to denigrate outsiders. A salient example of this is seen in the widespread religious prescriptions about sex and food. "We" eat and mate correctly, and those "others" who don't aren't, perhaps, fully human. "We" are better than "they."

II. The Dynamics of Change in Religious Communities over Time
   A. The terms and ideas in this discussion come chiefly from social scientist Max Weber (1864-1920) and his colleague, Ernst Troeltsch, who can be said to be the founders of the sociology of religion. We will focus on the nature of religious communities, particularly sects and churches. Although these terms are Christian, they can be used comparatively. The main characteristics of each are as follows:
      1. A church is a natural organization into which one is born. Churches tend to be inclusive and universalistic and have social hierarchies imposing certain obligations. Churches are institutionalized and formalized, with only certain officials empowered to conduct rituals or dispense sacraments and blessings.
2. A sect is a voluntary organization that an individual must affirmatively join. Often, this involves leaving the original church "family." Sects are exclusive; potential adherents must meet certain criteria. Sects view themselves therefore as select minorities. Selection of a sect often depends on a particular religious experience and is (somewhat) irrespective of social status. Finally, sects are anti-administrative and anti-institutional and don't (initially) centralize authority in "leaders."

B. All religious communities begin as sects; over time, all sects develop into churches or else they disappear. After two or more generations, sects generate dissatisfaction, generally for having acquired too much institutional complexity. At this point, the splintering off begins.

III. Christianity Evaluated in the Framework of Church/Sect Relations
A. The original New Testament community was very sectarian.
   1. Weber developed the idea of a charismatic community, headed by a leader whose power seems to set him or her apart; this leader is almost superhuman.
   2. Early Christianity meets this definition; its adherents had direct (or once-removed) contact with Jesus. There was no need for bureaucracy or rules.
B. The expectation of an immediate Second Coming and the end of the world changed the picture.
   1. Termed the "the interim ethic" (between the First and Second Coming of Christ), this period saw the creation of numerous rules of guidance, such as don't marry, don't concentrate on making money, don't focus on the things of this world.
   2. Later Christians found this ethic very hard to live up to and a crisis developed. If the world is not going to end, how must people live?
C. In the second and third centuries, the transformation of the early Christian sect into the Church took place.
   1. After the deaths of the early charismatics (e.g., the Apostles), new voices were heard in the Christian world, bringing with them conflicting views on belief and practice.
   2. To distinguish between correct doctrine and heresy, a set of officers (episcopos, or bishops) was chosen to decide issues of orthodoxy.
   3. In Weber's scheme, at this point, we have the "depersonalization of charisma." The "gifts" (and, therefore, legitimacy) no longer pass from person to person (e.g., from Jesus to Peter) but with the office. The fourth-century Donatist controversy, resolved by the Council at Carthage, in which sacramental validity was upheld despite the "unworthiness" of the minister, marked the definitive change from sect to church for Christianity.
D. The issue of maintaining vigor in spite of the realization that the Second Coming may not come so soon remained.
   1. People became too much involved in the world to focus on religion.
   2. Establishing a distinction between the clergy and the laity offered some resolution, but then the clergy became too involved in the world.
E. The creation of monasteries and monastic orders was a brilliant solution to the problem at the time.
   1. The monastic orders were removed entirely from the pressures of everyday life. By living according to the earlier "interim ethic," the members thus provided a permanent source of spiritual regeneration for the entire Church community.
   2. We note here, and will discuss below, that the need for a full-time monastic group is also important in Hinduism and Buddhism for the same reasons.
F. In a summary view, we can see that the sect/church/sect dynamic also helps to explain the Protestant Reformation.
   1. Luther and Calvin were dissatisfied Catholics who left a mature, 1,500-year-old organization, the Western Catholic Church. They were charismatic leaders, but their sects quickly evolved into churches with features that dissatisfied others. Splintering began.
   2. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley left the Anglican Church to found Methodism.
3. The main point here is that the development of a sect into a church necessarily implies a lessening of the sharpness, clarity, and keenness of feeling that created the sect originally. There seems to be an inverse relationship between vibrancy and stability.

IV. Buddhism

A. The Buddhist solution to this problem was very much like that of Catholicism.
   1. Buddhism developed a strong tradition of monks and monasteries in which the elect can devote themselves full time to the religious experience.
   2. This solution basically eliminates the need to start a new sect to experience and maintain a strong religious feeling. The existence of the monasteries co-opts the possibility of upheaval and helps to ensure stability.
   3. This idea is exemplified by our usual image of Buddhism that of a monk in saffron robes with his head shaved, praying or begging alms, a visible picture of the most spiritually active part of a larger religious community.
   4. To go back to the Catholic/Protestant example, the Catholic Church is much more stable than Protestantism because, like Buddhism, it has found a way to channel religious intensity within an institutional framework. Protestantism, with its "this-worldly asceticism," tends to the creation of new institutions when dissatisfaction arises.

V. Hinduism

A. Hinduism offers a different solution to the problem than either Buddhism or Catholicism.
   1. Hinduism incorporates the stability/vibrancy dilemma into the life cycle of the individual, rather than the institution.
   2. In reality, very few Hindus actually follow this course, but it is available to them as a possibility.

B. The four stages of the "ideal" Hindu life and the duties of each are as follows:
   1. Student: Learn about sacred texts and traditions (the Veda, including the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita).
   2. Householder: Marry, set up a family, and have children.
   3. Hermit: After family responsibilities have passed, you can wander and beg alms, if you want to.
   4. Renouncer: The highest stage, in which caste is renounced altogether, indicating the desire to seek total release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.
   5. Under this scheme, if a Hindu is dissatisfied with the present status of life, it is possible to move onto the other stages of life, which can promise renewal.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Topics for Further Consideration:

1. Do you accept or reject the contention that ritual is one of the prime factors in constituting religious communities? If you accept it, explain how it does so. If you reject it, offer an alternative view about how religious communities are constituted. Your answer should include a comparative view of Western and Eastern religions.
2. What reasons can you give for the failure of the monastic solution to prevent the Protestant Reformation? What other factors might have been at work in the early sixteenth century? Were there any long-term benefits conveyed by the Luther/Calvin precedent of making a clean break with tradition?
3. With the abundance of news today about sects of all kinds, how do you assess Weber's model of the life-cycle dynamics of religious institutions? Is it a valid model for today's realities? Could you develop another model and, if so, what would be its characteristics?
Lecture Eight

Bringing It All Back Home

Scope: In this concluding lecture, we move from the comparative sociology of religion to what might be termed the religious nature of a particular society, namely the United States. The thesis and shape of the argument is drawn largely from the writing of the contemporary Harvard scholar Sacvan Bercovitch. The lecture will address the American identity in reference to its Puritan origins, starting with a brief recapitulation of the major elements of the viewpoints of Martin Luther and John Calvin. These viewpoints are important, because the Puritans were the immediate English successors to the first Protestants. The lecture goes on to address the view that America at its birth was probably the most thoroughly Protestant nation in history (in 1776, at least 85 percent of Americans of European descent were of the Reformed, mostly Puritan, persuasion), which accounts for several aspects of American character and rhetoric. The lecture examines the repeated emphasis on America and Americans as God's elect and the constant parallels between America and ancient Israel, creating in effect an American civil religion. The basic themes of this religion are the "chosen" history of America, a strong notion of covenant (America's fate is emblematic of the whole world), and the idea that, in America, the ultimate sovereignty is not the people's but God's. The lecture concludes by discussing four aspects of contemporary American identity that seem to be derived directly from the Puritan tradition: (1) an anti-intellectual favoring of individualism and experience over the collective and theory, (2) a bias against ritual, (3) the strongest fundamentalist tradition in the advanced industrialized world, and (4) a distinctly American anxiety over vocational and occupational calling not found elsewhere in the world.

Outline

I. The Basic Elements of the Protestant World View
   A. Because the Puritans stand in direct line with the earliest Protestant reformers, we must start with a discussion of the two dominant Protestant thinkers and their belief systems. Both were dissatisfied Catholics who decided to go outside the existing structure, with somewhat differing results.
   B. Martin Luther (born in Eisleben, Saxony, in Germany, 1483; died also in Eisleben, 1546) has been described as a likable, honest, even down-to-earth man. He was an Augustinian monk, who became disturbed about salvation.
      1. Luther was uneasy with the prevalent belief that salvation was obtainable through participation in the sacramental system of the Catholic Church.
      2. He believed in Paul's message of salvation by faith alone.
   C. John Calvin (born in Noyon, Picardy, France, 1509; died in Geneva, Switzerland, 1564) was personally much less likable than Luther. He converted at age 19 and wrote a dramatic account of that experience.
      1. Calvin's emphasis on the centrality of a personal conversion experience was very important for the Puritans.
      2. In late the 1540s, Calvin governed Geneva as a Christian commonwealth, a theocracy in which state functions were under strict ecclesiastical control.
   D. Three main themes emerge from the work of Luther and Calvin.
      1. The first theme is the majesty of God. Man cannot cajole God, who is mighty and to be feared; any attempt to do so is sinful. God's providence is his alone, and man can only take what is given in the way of mercy.
      2. The next theme is the depravity of humanity. Humans are infected by Original Sin, and their baseness stands in sharp contrast to God's purity and majesty. Luther felt that a saint was one who knew how bad he or she was; Calvin characterized man as a five-foot worm and children as snakes.
3. The final theme in the works of Luther and Calvin is the centrality of the individual calling in this world. Your calling has no effect on your salvation, but because God has prepared a calling for you, you must find it and pursue it. The fact that you have a calling may be a possible good sign that you are one of the elect, but it is no guarantee. This leads to the notion of "this-worldly" asceticism, in which the mandate is to live a life of frugality and abstinence, not necessarily because it earns salvation, but because to do otherwise is pride and vanity (which the elect would not demonstrate).

II. The Puritan World View

A. The Protestant Reformation began in Central Europe and quickly spread north, east, and west, eventually reaching England (where the impulse of Henry VIII to break with Rome had quite a different genesis than that of Luther and Calvin).

B. The Puritans were a group of reformers, successors really to the very first Protestants, who believed their mission was to "purify" the Reformation even further.
   1. The movement, which was basically Calvinist, developed in the 1560s during the reign of Elizabeth I.
   2. The Puritans did not like the liturgical practice or hierarchical organization of the Church of England, which they accused of placing more stress on externals than real religious matters. Thus, they wished to purify the corruption of the Church.

C. The Puritans extended Continental views even further in their reforming zeal.
   1. They believed that any attempt to influence God or affect his providence was sinful.
   2. The Puritans also believed that the Scriptures did not authorize the hierarchical nature of the Church or the current form of the liturgy.
   3. The Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell beheaded statues in Ely Cathedral, because he viewed the making of statues as an attempt to buy a way into heaven.

III. The Puritan Character of Colonial America

A. As we know, New England was settled by the Puritan separatists who left England, first for Holland and then for America.
   1. Although there were other strains of religious belief, early colonial America was a dramatically Puritan society. By 1776, an estimated 85 percent of the European population held reformed, usually Puritan, views.
   2. This fact makes America in this period arguably the most thoroughly Protestant nation in the history of the world.

B. The American psyche is based on Puritan foundations.
   1. The Puritans placed repeated emphasis on America and Americans as God's elect (similar to his choosing of the Israelites). Boston was called "Zion," and America was seen as God's "last best hope." The New England "Great Awakening" of 1734-35, led by the American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), helped to reinforce the Calvinist views.
   2. We can see roots here of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny of the nineteenth century.

C. The Puritans saw parallels between ancient Israel and America.
   1. Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut governor John Winthrop (1606-1676) was called the "American Nehemiah" in Cotton Mather's biography.
   2. Two people might lay claim to being the "American Moses"; one was George Washington for being "Father of his Country," and the other was Daniel Boone for surmounting the Appalachians to reach new ("promised") lands.
   3. Queen Elizabeth was seen as the new Pharaoh, the Atlantic was the new "Red Sea/Reed Sea," and the native Americans were the new Canaanites. This latter view supported the belief that it was proper to exterminate them. The belief that biblical history was being replayed in America was repeated by the Mormon migration to the West in the nineteenth century.
IV. Robert Bellah's Notion of American Civil Religion

A. The writings of American sociologist Robert Bellah (1927-present) further support the argument that the Puritans greatly affected the formation of the American psyche.

B. Bellah sees a uniquely American civil religion; that is, there is a religious dimension to our political life that has characterized our republic since its foundation.
   1. The basic idea of this civil religion is that America has a higher goal or purpose, something greater than mere existence
   2. The constitutional separation of church and state ensured that no single denomination would dominate all the others or become a state religion.
   3. The United States still, however, has a transdenominational cast to its basic character, as evidenced by the perception of foreign visitors who see America as a very "religious" place. A review of presidential inaugural addresses since George Washington's time also points up this religious slant.

C. Three themes are prevalent in American civil religion.
   1. The first theme is the providential history of the United States. If, as it seems, God has a plan for history, its most likely realization is to be in America. George Washington felt America was part of God's plan and even our only Catholic president, John Kennedy, used this theme.
   2. A strong notion of covenant that comes straight out of the Hebrew Bible is another element of American civil religion. There is an implicit pact with God in the founding of America. With this belief, America shows the entire world the possibilities, so we have a strong motivation to succeed with our work. Abraham Lincoln saw the Civil War as a test of this covenant.
   3. The final theme is an underlying belief that the ultimate sovereignty in America is not the people, but God. Bellah sees this particular belief as a strongly antidemocratic element of the American worldview.

V. The Puritan Influence in Contemporary America Reflected in Four Broad Areas

A. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), the American historian Richard Hofstadter (1916-1970) pointed out the strong predilection for individualism and experience versus collective "wisdom" and theory. The basic message is to trust one's own feelings, not the crowd or strong argument.

B. The anti-ritual bias in American life arises out of the Calvinistic concept that God's freedom is all that determines salvation. Ritual is disdained as an ill-intentioned attempt to influence God.

C. The Puritan influence is also felt in the strong presence of religious fundamentalism.
   1. In general, fundamentalist religious strains are restricted to monotheistic systems, although most of the monotheistic world is not heavily fundamentalist.
   2. Why is this such a pervasive feature in the United States? And, parenthetically, why do these movements tend to conclude with sex scandals, such as the episodes in the 1980s involving Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart, who lived out the portrayal of the tormented fundamentalist preacher in *Elmer Gantry*?
   3. The answer is the Puritan emphasis on the religious call to salvation; the concern of knowing whether one is elect or not is key. Evidence of selection may be seen in the feeling that God has entered one's heart and is followed up by joining a sect.

D. The final Puritan influence is seen in the importance of a vocational calling.
   1. This concept goes back to the notion that, if God has a vocation for you, it is a good sign of selection, if you find the vocation and pursue it correctly.
   2. This might explain why young Americans are so anxious about their occupational choices. By comparison, people in other advanced countries don't seem to worry so much about finding careers.
   3. Part of the shaping of all anxieties or the fear of making an incorrect choice can arguably be seen to derive from the Puritan origins of the American self.

Essential Reading:

**Supplementary Reading:**
Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, part I.

**Topics for Further Consideration:**

1. What evidence can you cite to support or refute the claim that the American self is largely a product of the Puritan tradition? Does this claim take sufficiently into account other religious traditions that were marginalized, but were operating underneath what might be termed the social, political, academic, and religious "hegemony" of the so-called white Anglo-Saxon Protestant world of America? What validity does such a claim have in today's contemporary world? Are we anti-Puritan or still at heart Puritanical (with a capital "P")?

2. Evaluate critically Robert Bellah's notion of an American civil religion. Do you think it exists at all? If so, do you think it has the precise characteristics that Bellah attributes to it, or could there be some other content to this American civil religion? If you don't think it exists, how would you account for the three themes that Bellah identifies? Finally, do the persistent claims of greater "diversity" in America portend an end to this consensual civil religion (if such actually exists)?

3. Do you see any nexus between periods of "puritanical" or fundamentalist revival movements, such as in seventeenth-century England, eighteenth-century colonial America (the "Great Awakening"), and the early nineteenth-century United States, and subsequent periods of civil war and revolution (English Civil War, the American Revolution, the War between the States, respectively)? Is one the cause of the other, or are both symptoms of something larger at work? Is there any twentieth-century parallel?
Annotated Bibliography


The Bible (The Book of Job).


Oden, Robert A. *The Bible Without Theology*. 1987. Here we have a fundamental argument for a "comparative religion" approach to the study of biblical texts, in addition to a fleshing out of some arguments about the nature of
the Pauline views on theodicy.


Weber, Max. "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Manifestations." In *From Max Weber*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1958. (ISBN: 0-19-500462-0.) This is the essay from which we take the greater part of the argument about the church/sect relationship in general and its application to the history of Christianity. The essay also contains some speculation on Weber's part about the Buddhist and Hindu attempts to deal with the same basic issue. The text is very dense but very rewarding.


Obviously, religion is a subject that has generated a tremendous volume of scholarship. In addition to the texts listed here, it is also recommended that you look at the actual scriptural texts of the major religions, but find versions that contain commentary. There are also numerous journals with contemporary writings on comparative religion. With the proliferation of World Wide Web pages, there are additional resources available beyond the more obvious textual sources mentioned above.