

CORH Values – Season 1, Episode 1

What are Religion and the Humanities?

In this first episode, we will look at some basic questions in religion and the humanities. We explore the debate over what exactly these terms refer to and we provide a background that will help listeners understand the questions that we will be dealing with in future episodes.

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Transcript:

Welcome to CORH Values, explorations in religion and the humanities. This podcast is produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at the California State University, Chico. I am your host, Daniel Veidlinger. And I hope you will join us on an exciting adventure where we will grapple with questions, both timely and timeless. Questions such as, where did we come from? Where are we going? What is the meaning of life? What should be our relationship with others, with ourselves, with nature, and even with the cosmos. How should we approach death, suffering, and uncertainty? How should faith and reason inform each other? What do we value in life? And what should we value? You know, when I was growing up, there was a TV show called The greatest American hero, where a humble school teachers given assumed by aliens that gives him superhero power. But he promptly loses. Handbook, has to figure out how they should operate, leading to much There he is. He crashed lands in people's backyard pools and whatnot. Well, we do not have an instruction book that tells us how to live our lives. And different societies have provided widely divergent answers to these questions. For some people, their greatest fears, the finality of death. The idea that once we die, conscious experience will come to a bitter end is now more feast to be big. And God made her death. Make. These people hope against hope that there is something more beyond the gates of death. Perhaps a heaven, or perhaps they long for reincarnation in a beautiful cycle of life and rebirth. Giant Deja vu. I don't think something like a kitchen watch Groundhog Day. Again. Conversely, other people might dread the thought of endless cycles of reincarnation and strive instead for the complete cessation of individual consciousness. And an eternal state of emptiness where there is nothing but the bliss of silence. That last soundbite was supposed to be an excerpt from the classical music piece four minutes and 33 seconds of silence by noted American composer John Cage. Now John Cage was deeply influenced by the simplicity of the Zen Buddhist aesthetic in his works. However, we weren't able to secure the rights to use the cage peace in this podcast. So what you did here was a selection from the lion tamer by beloved French mime Marcel Marceau. Some religions except the pantheon of many gods. Others except only one. And other religious systems don't really seem to have any god. The possibilities are many. And we hope to touch on these and more in this series of podcasts. Most of these podcasts will involve interviews with other scholars in our program on issues that are of relevance to the world today. But in this first episode, I wanted to talk a little bit some of the basic features of the study of religion. So secularization theory was a prominent idea amongst sociologist and indeed amongst the general public in the 1960s and onwards. It holds that religion is playing less and less of a role in public life as modern science and other forms of knowledge advance. It was thought by many that as modernity progresses, religion would be sidelined into a diminishing role in people's lives. Surely is the bright light of reason is shown through the medieval clouds of dogma. People would base their ideas about morality, about the nature of disease, about how to raise their children. About when to go to war, less and less on religion. The eminent political philosopher Charles Taylor called this the subtraction thesis. The idea that science needs to religion being subtracted from more and more areas of life until finally, one, science has all the n's religion would eventually banished from anything. I had the privilege of taking a course on political theory with Professor Taylor when I was in college. And he explained the thinking of such foundational figures as Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau, lock, and Hegel with such eloquence and precision that I only wish I had, had the background knowledge at that age to appreciate when I was learning. But the interesting thing is he was constantly running for seats in parliament and was never

able to win. So here we have the greatest living political philosopher who will literally still be studied with reference in a hundred, two hundred, probably 300 years for his insights into the political life of modern society. But yet he was not able to actually win some measly see it in the Canadian elections. I've always wondered if that's an indictment of him or if US at any rate, I'm sure it's clear to you if you have, let's say, ever read the news in the last 20 years, that secularization theory was quite wrong. And in a very rare about face one, if it's prime advocates, Peter Berger has even admitted that he was wrong. Rates of religious affiliation in the United States have remained above 70 percent. And belief in God is as strong as it ever was, at well above 80 percent across the Middle East, religious leaders hold great power over society. In Sri Lanka, Burma, Ireland is real, Xinjiang, India, Somalia. The list could go on and on religious-based conflicts of pestered over the recent past. We also have a situation in which, for example, people do not fear climate change because they assure that God will take care of the world. People in America have refused to wear masks during the COVID pandemic. Because as one woman told the City Council in her town, they wanted to throw God. Wonderful breeding system out the door. You're all turning your back on it. Of course, having just said that religion still plays an extremely important role in society, it is important to understand that the shape of religion has been changing a lot in recent years. One of the reasons for this is that the traditional sources of religious authority, for example, the church and I think in some ways have been losing their influence on society, but other institutions have been replacing them. One of the theories that helps to explain this change in the shape of religion is media taxation theory. There was forwarded by stick out of it. And this theory states that religious expression is moving out of the more traditional realms, such as the church or the synagogue or whatever it may be into the media. So the media on this understanding has become the primary site for the circulation of religious symbols and contemporary societies. To illustrate this, we would want to think about TV shows that have supernatural features. They're extremely popular these days. There's an amazing amount of shows that featured devils, angels, god, heaven, ****. These kinds of things are being expressed through popular media such as television. Lucifer, star, is that stay team, God-given? I'm afraid. She tell me something. Guide her house from scratch. The benefits of mortality. Think about how many YouTube videos there are that purport to reveal some new way of understanding spirituality. I saw him live, I will be more some, he goes to the Buddha, they pulled these things, gives me that citation not to think about how much debate there is, sometimes civil and sometimes not on Twitter about religion. All of these modern media, our sites of religious expression, they are not just secondary to the church, but nowadays are actually taking on a role that is almost as important as more traditional sources of authority had been in the past. So again, what this means is that the shape of religion is change. The way it looks when you examine it is quite different from the way it might have looked 500 years ago. But the raw fact that people are engaging with religious ideas in their life is remarkably consistent. Remember that while religious belief. To some extent, practice is still quite high in modern times. Religious knowledge is not. And this is where we, as IT Department of Religious Studies comes in. The interfaith diversity experiences and attitudes longitudinal survey found that nearly three quarters of senior college students did terribly on a short standardized quiz testing their knowledge of eight different religious worldviews. Knowledge of the details about the world's religions and even that one's own. That what we call religious literacy is shockingly though, how many people identifying as Jews or Christians could name all the Ten Commandments off hand. Well, not a lot. In fact, a recent survey showed that Americans can more easily name benign cast members. They can attack and even thou shalt not kill is a stumper from any. Of course, one might wish to stay away from the wicked Bible when looking for the right answers to this question. What's the wicked Bible you might ask? Well, it was a Bible that was published in 1631 and England. And there were a few little spelling mistakes in it. Unfortunately, one of them was in the eighth commandments where it says, thou shalt commit to Doug. I did not have sexual relations with that woman. Before we go any further, we should probably discuss a little bit about the basic meaning of the terms that are going to be the theme for this podcast, namely religion and the humanities. So as a professor in a department of comparative religion, I'm often asked, well, what is religion? And my answer to that is, I don't know, and I don't care. Many people often surprised when that's my response. But when we talk about what religion is, this gets into a whole can of worms. You see, religion is not necessarily an actual thing out there. Like a tree. A tree is a physical thing. And we can point to this and say it's a tree. And we can point to that and say it's not. But religion is rather a whole collection of beliefs and practices and experiences. Some of which when they take certain forms, many people call a religion. But there's lots of other beliefs and practices and experiences that people have that people don't call them religion. So we start to get into a whole definitional problem that I think often end up causing people to spend more

time on it than is necessary. There's not a right or wrong answer to this kind of thing. And some cultures don't have any conception of religion whatsoever. I'm not saying that they don't do things that Western scholars would call religion. But I'm saying that in their native tradition they don't have a separate entity called religion. They just think of what we would call religion as just living their life. However, certainly a minimal definition of religion would have to do with how one orients itself towards matters of ultimate concern. I think everybody would certainly agree on at least that element of religion. Some people would say that the Grateful Dead, for example, is key deadhead to follow the band around who dress a certain way, eat certain foods, who have certain ideas about the world and about politics. All of this is a constellation that could be called a religion. In fact, when I was in college, one of my colleagues was writing a master's thesis on the Rocky Horror Picture Show has everything. You might know that there's a whole community of this dress in certain ways, Hans and rituals during the playing of this movie, you have to jump to the end and it becomes a pretty big part of their life. There are, there are associated. And it can certainly be studied as if it were religion. As a professor who focuses on Buddhism, of course, I'm often asked, is Buddhism or religion or not? And again, you won't be surprised to hear that I say, I don't know, and I don't care because it depends on what you consider a religion. I'd like to actually back up a little bit and correct something. I said a minute ago. I said that a religion is not like a tree. That's something out there that either is or isn't a tree. But in fact, even with that, there are differences of opinion. So for example, when I was in Israel, I was working on a kibbutz and we were picking dates from the palm trees. And I had great difficulty getting dates. I've got to tell you. But anyway, I was told that a palm tree is not actually a tree. I was quite surprised to find this out because it sure looks like a tree to me. But apparently, botanist do not consider a palm tree to be a tree. So here we have a perfect example of the kind of problem I'm talking about. Is it a tree or is it not a tree? Well, it kind of depends on what you choose to define as the key features of a tree. I remember there was once a court case about censorship that focused on what counts as *****. And the judge said. Although he couldn't define it's in precise terms, he certainly knew ***** when he saw it. And that's not a terrible approach to take for religion. If you ask me. Mircea Eliade, the, the renowned scholar of religion from the University of Chicago, used to call religion a response to the holy. He stated that for religious people, the idea of the sacred helped orients the human being to the world around them. When I was a student myself at the University of Chicago, I used to see Ellie Abby in the cafeteria and he would always order a turkey sandwich. It was like clockwork. Every time I was down there around 1230 lunchtime, I would see him walk in and he had ordered his turkey sandwich and sit down and eat it. I later found out that Eliana he died some years earlier. So I guess that wasn't LED that I was seeing there, but whoever it was really enjoyed, turkey sandwiches. I know a lot of people say that religion arose as a form of social control. I think that places too much emphasis on the judgmental aspects of many religions. And indeed, there are lots of ways to control people through a system of purely secular punishments and social opprobrium. You don't need religion for that. People are also heard saying that religion is there to make life easier by answering our deepest questions and giving us a framework for life. But it's following a religion really easier when rebellious teenagers refused to follow the multitude of religious rules and regulations in their society. Are they really doing that because they just feel that being religious is too easy. I somehow doubt it. Linnaean smart, who was a well-known professor for the studies, said that if you look at the world's religions, one sees that they tend to have seven features that are common amongst the various religions. One is rituals. Religions tend to have rituals, the ceremonies that follow specific orders and have certain forms that are passed on from generation to generation. They have myths, which are stories that interpret the universe in humanity's place in it. There's an experiential dimension to religions, where the practice of the religion elicits feelings of our mystery, devotion and the bike inside the practitioner, they have social institutions which involve rules for identifying community membership and participation. There are ethical and legal norms that tell humans how to behave. Of course, there's doctrines and beliefs systems and there's awesome material objects associated with the religions. Such are artifacts as goblet on the small scale, ranging all the way up to very large things such as temples. Now, all religions don't have to exhibit all seven dimensions, but most religions have most of these features. Now that you're suitably confused about what religion is, I should say that we don't just study religion in our department, but we studied comparative religion. It's important to understand that there are various different ways of approaching the study of religion in some departments, especially in private schools that are connected to a church or religious group of some sort. They might study religion from the point of view of faith, where they believe in one particular religion. And they're trying to study theology and the history and rituals of that religion more deeply. But into universities such as California State

University, we study religion as academics from an objective or at least as objective point of view as we can. And we don't take sides on the truth of any particular religious claims, but we study them as objects of study in a way that you might study history or anthropology or any other human science. A historian who studies Germany, for example, and no more expects the students to actually go and live in Germany than a professor who comparative religion is to focuses on Buddhism, expects their students to go and become. It's important to understand that. And even other academics often get confused as to why religion is being taught at the university. To which we reply that we're not teaching the students to be religious, we are simply teaching them about the various religions. So when we call it comparative religion, that is a way of emphasizing that we're not taking a particular stand on any one religion. And indeed we look at the various religions of the world and compare and contrast them. We like to look for points of similarity. What ideas do they have in common? What artistic forms do they have in common? What rituals do they have in common? And which ones are different? And then of course, we try to. Explore why they might be similar and why they might be different. Some of the reasons that some religions have similar ideas are historical. So for example, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, you might find similar conceptions of God. One monotheistic God with no physical form. And the reason that those similarities occur, our historical, that those religions are all genealogically related. But you might find other features that are common between people in Brazil or groups in Africa or Europe or Asia. And they might have similarities, but there's been no contact between the groups. So why might that be? Well then you might start looking towards human psychology. The nature of the human mind causes the products of the human mind, such as religion, to take similar shapes because we have similar needs, similar want similar fears and similar desires, were all afraid of death. We all wonder how the world started. So religions, even without any historical connection, might very well have these same features. Comparison is extremely important when coming to understand anything advice, not just religion. Max Mueller, who was one of the founders of the field of comparative religion, used to say he who knows one, knows none. Meaning that if you only really know about one religion, they don't truly understand it at all. Because to know something, you've got a market against something else. And that doesn't just go for religion. But for all things. For example, if you say it's a very warm day outside, really that statement doesn't have much meaning unless you compare it to other days, some of which are colder and some of which are hotter. So compared to a cold winter's day, a mild fall afternoon might be warm. But compared to a hot summer's day, a mild fall afternoon might be chilly. You can even try this at home by taking a lukewarm bowl of water and stick your hand for a minute or two into a bowl of icy water. Then put it into the lukewarm water and it will actually feel hot to you. But if you put your hand into some very, very hot water and then put it in the lukewarm water after a few minutes, it will feel cold to you. So you can see this comparative aspect occurring in your daily life in such an example. Now we have to turn to the human. Well, the humanities is the study of the creative products of the human mind. That makes it include things such as art, philosophy, literature, music, and culture more generally. Again, like religion, what counts as this humanities is also, for some, history is a humanities and for others that is a kind of surface. Often people feel that the key element to consider is how much quantifiable data is used to discipline. If the field focuses more on quantitative data, people tend to see it as a social science. And if it uses more qualitative, uh, and is more descriptive in nature, tends to be thought of as humanities. In fact, a new field called digital humanities tries to breach this gap by applying computerized analysis of big data to help shed light on traditional humanities questions. For example, scholars of Buddhism have argued for decades over the importance of meditation in Buddhism compared to devotional practices. And a computer program that could extract every single reference to both of these modes of religious practice and the enormous Buddhist canon could help to answer a question like that by calculating the relative frequencies of these topics. Humanities, like religious studies, is under great pressure nowadays. There is a lot of emphasis on people studying stem and universities, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. With the idea that somehow these contribute more to society than any other field. Well, we hope that you will change your mind about this if indeed you already agree with that idea. After listening to these podcasts and thinking more about the importance of religion and the humanities to our daily life. In fact, I like to argue that as time goes on, the stem, disciplines, which are highly quantitative and in fact are because of that amenable to being done better by computers and by human beings might in fact be done more and more by computers and less and less by human beings in the future as computers become better and better at what they do. One thing that it's unlikely computers will be able to replace is the humanities. It's unlikely the computers will be able to produce and study art, philosophy, literature, music, as well as human beings. Now let's be clear, computers are already doing those things, but not nearly as well as

they perform mathematical algorithm or as they are able to analyze physics questions and things of that nature. So the joke is, well, I don't know if it's so funny, but that while people are focusing on the importance of science and technology because they see science and technology burgeoning all around us. The very fact that science and technology are being so successful might very well mark an end to their usefulness as a field of study for human beings in a university because they will be done by computers. Whereas again, the humanities are much less likely to be done well by computers in the future. So listen on everybody. And I hope you will find that we convince you that humanities and religious studies are more and more important to our lives every day as we move into the future. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at CSUChico.edu/CEORH. That's CSU CH ICO.edu slash CEO, our H. There you can learn more about our faculty and our programs. One of our newer programs is an online degree completion program. It's one of the few like it in the country where you can take 34 units, that is to say 11 courses in religious studies. That will help you complete your undergraduate degree. If you already have at least 60 credits of undergraduates courses under your belt. We plan to have a few episodes each semester of this podcast. And each semester the podcast is going to have a theme because of the truly biblical pestilence that we are living under, that is COVID-19. This semester's theme is going to be religion and health. There's a lot of fascinating things to discuss in this topic, such as the ethics of organ donation, the role of Chaplin's and hospitals, the appropriateness of euthanasia, and so much more. And I'm sure you will find the following interviews Very interesting. So please stay tuned for that. I want to point out that the opinions expressed here and do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our departments. All of the incidental music was written by me for my high school band, temp is Phuc it here, my actual by my band. No no guys. It's, it's my band and you know it all on the phone you guys were members of my band. I mean, I was the most important layer, as you know, Mario and I wrote an era where even, yeah, even I rotor part of nitrogen drums. I really don't think that's correct. My memory is definitely better, but I was pretty much the superstar and the band. I mean, you guys were good but the back of the band.