Family and Christian Community

Teacher Background

The way individuals perceive God is influenced by their personal experiences and the cultural, religious and historical context in which they live their lives. Such experiences and contexts influence the images of God individuals select, the degree of credibility given to particular images and understandings of God and the way in which these images and understandings are internalised in given individuals. Thus it is more difficult for an individual to see God as loving father and internalise that image in positive ways if the individual’s own father is brutal and uncaring. If people are consistently taught an understanding of God that is unbalanced in that it portrays God as one who is jealous, exacting and judgmental, it is more difficult for that individual to see God as loving and forgiving. If, on the other hand, the concept of God as a loving and forgiving protector is taught in such a way that God is never seen as one who challenges us as individuals to a change of heart, to repentance, conversion, avoidance of sin and renewal of life, an equally distorted image of what it is to be a loving being can be presented. As with human activity, divine loving and being loved sometimes requires what is called “hard love”; that is, the challenge to change and to grow.

The religions of the world exhibit both similarities and differences in what they believe and proclaim about God. Monotheistic religions share a belief in one God whereas polytheistic religions believe in a plurality of gods. Major monotheistic religions include Judaism, Islam and Christianity. These three religious faiths are sometimes known as “religions of the Book” since they look to their foundational scriptures, Hebrew Scriptures, Koran and Old and New Testament Scriptures respectively as the major basis and focus for their faiths. All three religious faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity are sometimes called Abrahamic faiths, since all three acknowledge the religious call of Abraham whom they regard as a significant ancestor in faith.

Both monotheistic and polytheistic religions respond to similar basic life questions and issues and have stories, teachings, practices and rituals to engage with these questions and issues. Among questions and issues that religions help individuals to grapple with are: Who am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? Is life worth living? Why do I have to die? Why is there evil in the world? Why is there suffering in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? What is right and wrong? What is good and bad? How can I be happy? How can I live a good life? Religions of the world exist to address such questions and the associated issues through their ethical codes, their rituals, prayer and celebrations, their stories and sacred texts and the religious way of life that they nurture and promote for their adherents. Thus religions of the world tend to have sacred stories about the origins and final destiny of the world and of human beings. Most religions have rituals surrounding life stages such as birth, initiation into the religious community, entry into adulthood, marriage and death. Narratives, laws, teachings, exhortations and other genres in religious texts provide exemplars, guidance and inspiration for living and grappling with the questions and issues of life.

Religions of the world manifest strong cultural influences both in their origins and in their continuing reality and development in various historical and cultural situations. Judaism, Islam and Christianity all originated in the Middle East, but over time have had to accommodate European, North American, Asian and African cultural contexts. Buddhism arose in Asia, but in recent times has been adapted for growing numbers of adherents from Western countries. Hinduism has its origins in the Indian sub-continent, but now has adherents in many other countries of the world. Diverse historical and cultural contexts influence changes in religions in areas such as mode of dress, dietary laws, expressions of ritual and worship, language of ritual and worship, ethical perspectives and laws and engagement with other religious faiths.