Chapter 6: My story, your story, our stories

Focus questions

Consider these questions in the context of the past and the present.
What is identity and what factors influence identity?
What does it mean to have a dynamic relationship?
What is the dynamic relationship between a religious tradition and its members?
How does membership of a religious tradition influence the identity of its members?
How do religious traditions influence the personal identity of its members?
How do religious traditions influence the identity of the community of believers?
How do individuals and groups influence religious traditions?
How do individuals contribute to their religious tradition?
How do specific communities contribute to their religious community?
What difference does membership of a religious tradition make to the members' life experience?

Outcome to be demonstrated

An ability to recognise and discuss the interaction between members of religious traditions and their tradition.
Religious experience

Religious experience is influenced by a person's involvement in their religious tradition and by their individual life experience. Religion is primarily personal. It is our religious experience that binds us to a tradition, whether in communal rituals or in our individual spiritual lives. Also, individuals may break with their traditions on the basis of their religious experiences. The founders of new religious traditions, or developments within traditions, have had experiences which they pass on to others through doctrines and through new forms of spirituality. There are as many religious life stories as there are believers and the study of such stories gets us to the heart of the religious traditions. In this chapter we will look at some typical religious experiences and some individual religious life stories.

Figure 6.1: Turning points

Turning points

Turning points are times in people's lives when significant changes or insights occur. These become significant for the person in shaping the way they see themselves and the meaning of their life. When they relate to religion, they are often called conversions (the word literally means a turning from one thing to another), and are life-changing experiences that lead to a change of direction. Many of our turning-point experiences are less dramatic, but nonetheless influential, in how our lives develop. They may be family events such as a birth or a death, or a meeting with another person, or a very private experience.
Everyone has had key events or experiences that helped them learn more about themselves. The growth in personal identity may be represented as a journey or road winding through a person’s life. At times this will parallel physical growth, at other times it will outstrip it. An individual’s sense of where they have been and where they are going is part of the meaning-making that is religion.

Activity 6.1

What significant changes or turning points have you experienced throughout life?

Write an email to a friend about one of these experiences (you don’t have to send it). Include the following points:

- The kind of life experience: joy, wonder [awe], suffering, death, major life choices, love, human relationships or commitment.
- How this life experience has shaped the person you are today.
- What this life experience has taught you about yourself and others.

A search for a personal faith or for a meaningful system of beliefs may be forced on us by setbacks in our lives. Can you think of incidents in your own life that have caused such soul-searching? If not, you may well have come across such stories in your reading or in films and television dramas. But not everybody in the same situation finds the same solution. For some the solution is religious, for others not.

Although religious traditions often play a part in personal setbacks, the experience may lead to rejection of a tradition or its answers and a search for other systems of belief. And conversion can be away from religion altogether.

Founders of religious traditions often began their religious quest after an experience of failure or deep unhappiness. In the case of the Buddha, the traditional stories emphasise that he had it all – wealth, power, wife and child – but still felt it was not enough and renounced his former life to seek an answer. In his case it involved rejecting most, but not all, of the Hindu religion he was brought up in. Only after many years did he achieve enlightenment.

In the case of St Francis of Assisi, there was also a dramatic conversion from a life of wealth and pleasure to an austere lifestyle of service to the poor, which challenged the wealth of the church of his day. He did not found a new religion, but a new movement within the Catholic Church. On the other hand, Martin Luther’s experience led him eventually to break with the Catholic Church and create a new ‘reformed’ church.
Activity 6.2

1. Investigate the conversion experience of one of the following figures, or choose one of your own: Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts), St Augustine (the Confessions), John Wesley, The Buddha, Abraham, Muhammad, Mother Teresa, Piri Thomas (Down these mean streets), C.S. Lewis (Surprised by Joy).

2. Outline the type of experience involved.

3. Did a religious tradition assist the individual to find personal meaning and identity through this experience? Explain how.

4. Was the individual challenged by their religious tradition to change and grow or did they issue the challenge to the tradition? Explain how.

Conversion stories vary in detail but each describes experiences that can be called conversion experiences because they changed the participants' lives. In the case of religious conversion, they are religious experiences because they involve an encounter with an Other. These experiences enabled the person to come close to a presence that may be described as transcendent, and helped the person to understand the significance of this presence for them.

Most religious people have not undergone so dramatic a life change as the Buddha or St Francis of Assisi, but they may still have experienced a 'conversion', sometimes after long and painful struggle. Many people have had deep experiences, sometimes called 'peak experiences', which remain with them for the rest of their lives. They may be triggered by nature, by music, or by people. Whether all of these experiences should be called religious is debateable but human beings are not divided into neat compartments labelled 'religion', 'art' and 'morality' as some philosophers or theologians would have it. It is here, more than elsewhere, that the term 'spirituality' comes into its own.

For many religious people, there is no such distinction. God is the maker of the world and when we are amazed by its beauty we are reacting to the presence of God. Great works of art - paintings, music, words - are ultimately the work of God through the artist. Other religious commentators argue that all experiences of intimate relationships, including sexual relationships, may be religious, and ultimately an experience of God.

But the question remains: how much is this interpretation and an imposition of meaning on a common experience that others might not regard as religious? There is a sense in which all religion is interpretation. Perhaps the believer and the atheist hear the same work by Mozart and react in the same way, but one interprets the experience religiously and the other doesn't. Experiments with drug-induced ecstasy have found, not surprisingly, that deeply religious people claim to have had religious experiences while non-religious people don't.
For some people, these special experiences tell them that there is a dimension to life which is spiritual and transcendent rather than only physical and material – indeed, that this spiritual dimension exists within the physical, material world. Many people choose to express and celebrate their experiences of God in a particular tradition, by praying and worshipping with that tradition and allowing their identity as people to grow and be shaped within the tradition. They may come to accept that the beliefs of the tradition express their own understanding of God. But that, too, comes from experience.

**Activity 6.3**

1. Have you experienced a moment which touched the spiritual, religious or supernatural dimension?
2. Be still and reflect upon that moment.
3. Write a description of this experience and explain how you think it went beyond everyday reality.
4. Share something of your experience if you are comfortable doing so.

We have been looking at cases where experience has confirmed and developed religious belonging. Sometimes, though, the opposite happens. An individual may change religion or abandon religion, at least institutional religion, altogether. Another common experience is for someone to drift away from religion only to return in later life through a re-conversion. This section will discuss some of these occurrences.

All religions have moral codes, which many people find irksome. Young people, in particular, may reject them. This is an exercise of freedom. However, it may also be an exercise of freedom to choose the restrictions on behaviour that go with religious commitment and to appreciate their benefits. A good example of this is Islamic dress codes, such as the hijab for women. There can be an argument as to how much dress codes are religious and how much they are cultural, but to deny that they are followed out of sincere belief is to infringe the rights of conscience in a pluralist society. Significantly, the most secularist of European countries, France, has legislated against some forms of Muslim dress and also against religious emblems – including crucifixes – in public places.

Figure 6.3: Since 2004, the French government has banned the wearing of all overt religious symbols, including the hijab (a Muslim headscarf) in all government schools, universities and public buildings.
In recent decades, most Australian churches have set up bodies to pursue the justice and peace agenda that follow from their teachings. There is no great problem when they are speaking directly for the poor or oppressed, but when they take positions on issues currently debated among political parties it may divide their followers. It may also divide the political parties, leading to so-called 'conscience votes' where the party voting disciplines are relaxed because of strongly-held differences.

When people work within religious traditions to change structures or rules, which they see as unjust or oppressive, they act with personal awareness of right and wrong that is communicated in decisions of conscience. Within religious traditions, genuine disagreement about the truth and its interpretation can and does occur. This does not imply that the tradition is under attack, rather it expresses a healthy diversity. Such disagreements are often the means by which the tradition as a whole may learn and grow. Of course, such disagreement must be based on serious consideration of the issue and of the reasons for the position rejected. All religions insist on the dangers of self-deception and self-interest. In the end, though, we must follow our informed conscience.

Similarly, conscience may lead people to oppose the law of the land. Religious bodies and individual religious people may feel obliged in conscience to break the law. Martin Luther King, in his struggle against racial discrimination in the United States of America, and Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa and India, were impelled by conscience to break the law. Those who serve jail penalties in protest at logging in Australian forests are acting in conscience against a perceived wrong.
Activity 6.4

Find statements about freedom of conscience from various religious traditions and answer the following questions.
1. How is an individual expected to arrive at a ‘good conscience’?
2. What should someone do if a law, even a religious law, and individual conscience are in opposition?

Spirituality and traditions

Religion is a highly personal matter. Our value systems are deeply involved in our sense of identity and all aspects of our personal experience. Religious traditions, for many people, are the source of their ultimate values. For others, they are something to be struggled with. That experience of engagement and what we meet on the way develops our spirituality. In the end, we all create our own religion.

However, for many people this spirituality is nourished by the tradition. They find in its rituals spiritual strength and reaffirmation, and in its traditional practices of prayer and meditation an opportunity to search as well as to reflect on their beliefs. There are many kinds of prayer: prayers of praise, prayers of thanks and prayers of petition. They may be prayed aloud, through recitation, chanting and singing (such as hymns). They may be at a fixed time of day, as in Islamic daily prayers and the Christian monastic ‘hours’. They may be completely private and silent. They may be in words or simply involve a sense of presence. Some people find outdoors – looking at the night sky or the power of nature – conducive to prayer. Others find the solemnity of a church or chapel, a mosque, synagogue, or temple helpful. City churches often keep their doors open to encourage people to take time out to think, pray or just sit in silence. To sit in silence is one definition of meditation. All religious traditions have a variety of techniques. Yet it is surprising that though meditation was central in Christian practice, many Christians today seem to discover it only through other religious traditions. However, there is a convergence as the experiential techniques are shared across religious boundaries as part of what has been called ‘multiple religious participation’.

Does religion make a difference?

What then of the declining ranks of the religious? If religion plays so large a role in establishing the identity and self-image of Australians who belong to religious...
traditions, we would expect that differences in religion would be reflected in different behaviour. The spokespersons for the various Australian religious bodies in public statements about moral, social and political issues sometimes differ from each other. Do the ordinary members of these bodies reflect these differences? And do religious believers and belongers in general differ in their behaviour from the general population? In this section we look at the effects that religious belief, and specific religious adherence in particular, have on moral and social attitudes and behaviour.

Religion is only one among many influences on people. When assessing the influence of religion we should always check for other factors such as education, income, whether recently arrived or newly settled in Australia, nationality and place of origin: all of which affect behaviour. Furthermore, in modern society, advertising and the media may be most influential of all. The question 'Does religion make a difference?' is not easy to answer. We can ask individuals to give their subjective judgements on their own behaviour and that of others, and we can examine that behaviour from the outside. But can we ever be sure about other people's motivation – or our own, for that matter? And how valid is it to generalise from one or a few cases?

Alternatively, we can conduct mass surveys, which ask questions about attitudes and behaviour, and establish correlations between religious affiliation and different patterns of behaviour. Some in-depth interviews can provide better insights. But it is very difficult to interpret any of this data in terms of the effect of religion on behaviour. Nevertheless, we can come to certain general conclusions. Such as religion does make a difference to attitudes and behaviour in key areas such as morality, politics and social action. However, there is no direct line between the official teachings of religious bodies and the behaviour of their followers, which would enable us to accurately predict individual behaviour. The degree of religious commitment (religiosity) seems to make the most difference. There are also significant differences relating to age, education and occupation. But what is being measured? Is it depth of religious commitment, or conventionality of religious belief and behaviour? It may be that those who see God as active in the world and in their daily lives, rather than a remote object of worship or in church, are less conservative and more influenced by their beliefs than those who practice religion in a routine and conventional or inward-looking way.

Activity 6.5

1. What are the problems with ascertaining whether religion makes a difference in people's lives?

2. What general conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between religion and people's attitudes and behaviour?

3. It has been suggested that people have become consumers of religion. What does this mean? What are its implications?