

May 2006

## The Many Questions of Religion?

Lee P. Chase  
*St. John Fisher College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>



Part of the Religion Commons

## [How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chase, Lee P. (2006) "The Many Questions of Religion?," *Verbum*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol3/iss2/8>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol3/iss2/8> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjfc.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjfc.edu).

---

## The Many Questions of Religion?

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"One afternoon, in the quiet of a fall weekend, I searched the Internet for an article or news-bit on the subject of religion's relevancy in our world. Having found not one that spoke adequately to me on this subject – I decided to pen one myself. Upon making that initial decision, I was then confronted with a very obvious question – where does one begin with a topic such as this? Why is religion relevant?"

# Faculty Essay



## **THE MANY QUESTIONS OF RELIGION?**

**LEE P. CHASE**

One afternoon, in the quiet of a fall weekend, I searched the Internet for an article or news-bit on the subject of religion's relevancy in our world. Having found not one that spoke adequately to me on this subject – I decided to pen one myself. Upon making that initial decision, I was then confronted with a very obvious question – where does one begin with a topic such as this? Why is religion relevant?

I am sure that, if given the chance, one could study at length the moral and ethical codes of the Jewish Talmud, the Roman Catholic Catechism or even the Islamic Hadith. Morality is always relevant. Ethical debate makes for good controversy. Go to any pub or corner tavern on a Friday night, listen to conversations for fifteen minutes and invariably an ethical issue will be raised, debated (sometimes loudly), and resolved with no one changing their minds. It fills the gap of a conversational void with what seems to be intellectual. Yet, scratch the surface of that chatter and most other moral/ethical debate and you will mostly likely not find religion underneath.

Millennia of religious history can take us from the first fruit offerings given to the gods of the earth (Genesis' Abel paid dearly for his offering) to the very current movie actor, Tom Cruise, espousing the tenets of Scientology. And, good examples though they are, we will still be frustrated in determining the very relevancy of religion because those who practice religion do not, in and of themselves, make religion relevant in any more way than a patriotic president gives relevancy to democracy or the ideals of the founders of the United States.

No, the relevancy of religion can be found in something much more subtle and

intuitive. Relevancy is found in what can only be called the *mysterious*. For by its very reality, at the moment we are connected to or simply acknowledge the very existence of that which is utterly *other*, we are in religion's realm. Logic and reason bring us only so far in this quest. To acknowledge a god who reveals in the midst of the flooding Ganges, the burning of a Midian bush or the execution of an ordinary Jewish man who was experienced, by some, as extraordinary is to go to a place where human logic is confounded and reason breaks down. Religion is relevant simply because, and I even hesitate to write these words, *it is*.

A university survey course, whether undergraduate or graduate, introduces a student to the tenets of a religion. You will read the teachings, contemplate the doctrine and, possibly, even witness worship. Yet you will never truly encounter the truth of that religion until you are fully immersed into the practice of it. Until you can breathe the Buddhist air of tranquility, imbibe the Catholic spirit of social outreach, or dance the Whirling Dervish of the Sufi – and recognize in each the encounter with the utterly *other* – you will not truly understand religion itself. If you cannot respect the encounter with the utterly other, even if completely foreign to your human experience and wiles, you will never fully understand humanity itself.

Could this be why religion is resisted? The encounter of the other is not always pleasant. It too often happens in the worst of times and is rife with danger. It is gazing into a mirror and seeing the complete reflection returned, with all its cracks and growing wrinkles. We live in a culture where people have the greatest of difficulty admitting their day off from work was the adult equivalent of playing hooky. Is it any wonder divinity is denied? “Don't point out my mistakes, bub, life is hard enough.” The Roman Catholic Easter Proclamation exalts the “*happy fault...necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a redeemer.*”

Faults are where earthquakes happen. And, quite frankly, they scare the hell out of us.

Religion exists in the human plane. It becomes a vehicle for someone to cope with the overwhelming grief of a lover's death. If it gives meaning and purpose to someone who finds that nowhere else, it has accomplished its task. The word itself means to bond and to bring together (to tie up loose ends, if you insist). It beckons the person who would start out on its path to confront whatever needs to be confronted.

Growth is the goal, maturity's purpose made known and sought. Spirituality becomes not the end in itself, but the means by which the road is traversed. It is the walking stick that must sometimes become the weapon. "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him," teaches the Zen master. We are never finished products.

Religion is powerful. It can, literally, move people to move mountains. Yes, it can drive planes into buildings and encourage some to explode themselves in busses filled with tourists on a Jerusalem street. It can also move people to open a hospice home for those dying of AIDS or bathe a leper before he dies. Religion nudges a person to scour New York City streets for teenage runaways, saving them from the sex industry of Times Square. This is religion's visage seen over millennia in faces of all color. It may make the next to last item on the 11 o'clock news.

Religion is paradox at its best and its worst: *I set before you life and death, a blessing and a curse, now choose. (Deut. 30:19)* The Pentateuchal verse could be a challenge as much as an offer, if we let it. Is it my life set before me or another's? What exactly is life supposed to be about? And does this very question lead me to another understanding of religion itself or simply beg the question? Do we pester the matter too much? Has God turned off the celestial microphone and stopped listening? That same volume told us two books and some verses before

this one that God was tired from all the work God had done. How does divinity grow weary? In what way does Spirit yawn?

It strikes me that God might be tired because of us, these little fragments of celestial imagination who continually bother with our complaints, laundry lists of wishes and queries that go unanswered, so that we wake up tomorrow and ask again. Can you blame God for not answering most prayers? There would never be any rest. It says in Genesis, that first blurb of sacred writ which most Christians and Jews encounter, that God rested on the seventh day and blessed it. "The Bible," wrote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel "is more concerned with time than space." I will go with the learned rabbi on this only as far as I can distinguish bluntly and without any reservation between God and the Bible. I think God is more concerned with us, and not in the way we would be concerned with ourselves. But giving the rabbi his due, I think time is more important than space. For that thesis, I would be willing to submit to the rack.

Time is something of which I have become acutely aware. As my own time goes on, it seems I measure it not with a clock or the calendar on my library's door but with the ever appearing gray hairs on my head and the evermore fading memories and irrelevance of my young adulthood. Clocks measure minutes. People measure time. I woke up one morning absolutely convinced it was Monday. I left my bed, drank my coffee and showered. As I dressed, I wondered aloud to no one why there was no movement outside my window. Gazing at the clock, a habit I do not have (unfortunate for that day at least), I saw it was only 5:40 a.m. Unashamedly, I continued my waking-up routine with actual exhilaration because of the found time I had acquired to get things done. It was quite a shock for me to realize only a few moments later that it was not Monday but Saturday. Somehow, my brain had lost two days in

the matter of a few minutes. This self-delusion moved into full-blown red-faced shame. The final straw came when I thought of the hours I had lost to simply sleep-in.

I wonder if, along with weariness, God ever lost track of time. Did God ever become red-faced or whatever way divinity displays embarrassment? This had to have happened at least once. When I read further on from the seventh day of creation, to the story Cain and Abel (that sacrifice of offerings that turned deadly, our first example of religion's danger) – God did not know where Abel was and had to ask Cain. My students are always quick to point out that God was only playing with Cain, trying to get him to 'fess up! Of that, I am not so sure. I heard once that Genesis is the story of God growing up and learning how to god. That resonates better for me, especially at six in the morning on a Saturday. Religion's relevance seems less than important at moments of profound human fallibility.

My own questions still haunt me: why is religion here and is God tired or embarrassed? Really, what's the point? After all the time since everything was created and we started filling up the heavenly sound waves with our rattle, wouldn't God be ready to sleep in? Really, could you protest? Even after having asked that question, am I only projecting myself and you with me onto heaven's white wall?

In making the choice to seek out religion's relevancy, I ultimately find myself looking into a reflective mirror (albeit darkly) and seeing humanity's own quest. We are here and we want to know why. What brings authenticity to our lives? These are the existentialist's questions which religion asked first. Have you noticed that there are many more questions on this quest than answers? Religion is at its best when it asks questions.