



LESSON 1
*Why is Religious
Freedom Important?*

MIDDLE SCHOOL EDITION

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LESSON 1

Why is Religious Freedom Important?

Introduction

The phrase “religious freedom” clearly suggests the freedom to be religious. But what does that mean? What is religion? It does not seem like it would be too hard to come up with a definition but, as we will see, it may not be as easy as you think. By the time you finish this lesson, you will be able to define religion, provide evidence for its universal nature, and explain why religion is an important part of human identity. Further, you will be able to explain the connection between religious freedom, human dignity, and human rights and explain why any attempt by a government or powerful private group to control or eliminate religion is a threat to all three.

Key Terms and Concepts

As you read through the lesson, make sure you understand the following key terms and concepts.

Anthropologists	Human dignity	Natural rights
Cognitive science	Human nature	Religion
Explore, Embrace, Express	Human rights	Religious freedom
Family resemblance	Natural	Transcendent

Key Questions

Once you complete the lesson, you should be able to answer the following key questions:

1. How is the “family resemblance” approach used to understand complex subjects?
2. What are some characteristics that are common to the world’s religions?
3. What is a good definition for religion?
4. Is religion natural to human beings or is it learned?
5. Is there evidence that religion is universal?
6. Where does human dignity come from?
7. Can important concepts like human dignity and justice be based on physical laws?
8. Does religious freedom have limits?

THINK ABOUT IT

Imagine: A young girl wakes up early one morning and spends a few minutes in silence. She has an important decision to make and asks a higher power for strength to do what she knows she needs to do. She takes comfort in this time of silent prayer when all alone but will also gather later in the day with others who believe and worship the same as her.

Questions: (1) When in history and (2) where in the world do you think this young girl lives?

My Guess: _____

Now that you have made your guess, read on for the answer.

What is Religion?

Can you define the word **religion**? At first, that might seem like an easy question. Most people would simply describe their own religious experience. If you do not consider yourself religious, you would probably describe the experience of someone you know. However, experts have identified hundreds of different religious traditions and these traditions often believe and practice very different things.

For example, followers of some ancient religions believed there were hundreds of gods and goddesses. Others, like Christians, Jews, and Muslims rejected this idea. They all believed there was just one deity, a belief each holds to this day. However, Christians believe that this one deity exists in three persons (a concept called the Trinity) but Jews and Muslims reject this idea. Like many ancient worshipers, modern Hindus believe in many deities, but Buddhists generally do not believe in a personal god at all. So, why do we consider each of these systems a “religion” even when they seem to believe very different things?

The Family Resemblance Approach

Perhaps it is helpful to think of religion like a family. Big families often have members that look, think, and act differently. However, there are also things that each family member may have in common such as hair color, body shape, or spoken accent. These common characteristics help us recognize them as members of the same family. We call these common characteristics a “**family resemblance**.”







Some scholars think the same technique works for complex things like religion. The world’s religions often believe and practice different things. However, they also have many things in common. For example, most religions have sacred books, significant dates, and important rituals.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: How is it possible to identify individuals that belong to the same family even when they have different characteristics?

Common Characteristics of Religion

The chart below illustrates things that scholars have identified as common to most religions. Let's think about one of these common features—the belief in something **supernatural**. This is a way of describing something that we cannot see or touch—something greater than humans with our material limitations. This helps explain why most religious people pray. It is a way to connect to something they cannot see but still believe to be real. Most religious people also believe that this same supernatural power can communicate to humans and that humans will prosper when they understand what has been communicated and seek to live in harmony with that message.

The Supernatural  Belief in a supernatural being or power	Sacred Objects  Belief that some objects or symbols have special meaning	Rituals  Belief that certain actions help connect to the supernatural
Communication  Connection to the supernatural through prayer or meditation	Morality  Belief in a moral code connected to the supernatural	Fellowship  Desire to worship with others with similar beliefs

Defining Religion

So, are there enough common characteristics to produce a simple definition that applies to virtually all religions in the world? Using the “family resemblance” approach, we can arrive at the following:

Re·li·gion

The human SEARCH for truths about a greater-than-human source of ultimate meaning, and the ORDERING of one's life in agreement with those truths once found

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: Based on our definition, is simple belief in something the same as religion?

Is Religion “Natural” or just “Cultural?”

Now based on this definition of religion, let's ask two important questions. First, *is religion natural to people* or is religion just something taught by someone's family or maybe expected by their culture? There

is no question that family and culture have a big influence on the way we think and act. However, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the desire to seek meaning in an unseen power is found in **human nature**, not just received from human culture.

One important example of this evidence is the recent discoveries in a field called **cognitive science of religion**. This is a field of research that studies the human brain and how it naturally functions. Scientists in this field are finding that humans are naturally curious about supernatural things at an early age and without being taught.

Is Religion Common to All Societies?

Second, *is religion common to all societies?* There are certainly many different beliefs about the existence of a greater than human source of ultimate meaning. However, **anthropologists** have been unable to identify a human society that did not have any beliefs about this existence at all. In other words, in every society throughout history, there has always been some type of activity that resembles our definition of religion. Additionally, archaeologists now commonly believe that the “urge to worship” is what led ancient people groups to congregate in settlements and develop cities. It is no coincidence that almost every ancient city was centered on a temple or religious center of some type. In the earliest stages of known human history, human beings were already doing religious things.



Interestingly, religion doesn't seem to be going away in the modern world either. Even in places like the 20th century Soviet Union or 21st century China where the government works to eliminate organized religion through harassment, violence, and state-controlled education, there remains a strong presence of religious communities seeking after some supernatural being or power.

In fact, a recent study by the Pew Research Center found that 84% of the world's population identified with a specific religion. Many others considered themselves spiritual even if they did not identify with a particular religion. In other words, only a very small percentage of people around the world think that religious ideas or some form of spirituality have no place in their lives. From the evidence, religion seems to be a regular feature of human culture and a natural part of human identity. To be human is to be religious.

THINK ABOUT IT

Question: Why do some people practice their religion even when threatened with harassment and violence?

Is Something “Natural” always Good?

This leads to another important question. If religion is natural to human beings and present in all human societies, is it good for us? For example, things like selfishness and greed may be natural, but they would not be considered good. Religion has been abused by many people throughout history, and sometimes used to harm other people. However, the evidence suggests that religion can also lead to a sense of fulfillment, belonging, and satisfaction. Further, it provides a foundation for caring for others and acting ethically, even when it is difficult. Religion is not only natural but it is also good for individuals and the societies in which they live. In Lesson 3, we will examine the use and abuse of religion in greater detail.

What is Human Dignity and Why is it Important?

Human dignity is rooted in the belief that all humans have value simply because they are human. Further, every person on earth has an equal amount of human dignity. This suggests that supporting universal human dignity is a way of affirming that every person is entitled to be treated with respect and should be considered fully human. This is why the concept of human dignity is also the basis of universal **human rights**. Anything that assaults someone’s ability to be fully human is an assault on their human dignity and a violation of their human rights.

What is the Source of Human Dignity?

If human dignity is so important, it makes sense for us to ask where it comes from. Most people seem to understand that no one has human dignity simply because they are famous or considered “important.” Individuals don’t possess human dignity because of personal accomplishments or great wealth. In fact, there is *no way to earn* human dignity. The good news is that there is *no need to earn* human dignity because everyone is born with an equal amount and never loses it no matter what happens to them.

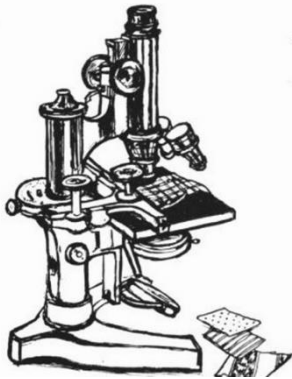
So, where does human dignity come from? It certainly doesn’t come from a government or any other human authority. If human dignity is a gift of government or society, then it can just as easily be taken away by that same government or society. Fortunately, human dignity is rooted in something much bigger than government—human nature. So, to find the source of human dignity, we must find the source of human nature which requires something **transcendent** which is to say something bigger than time and place. That sounds a lot like a “greater-than-human source of ultimate meaning” which you may remember is a key part of our definition of religion.

THINK ABOUT IT

What is the danger of claiming that human dignity comes from government or society?

Can Human Dignity be Grounded in Physical Laws?

Some people might claim that physical laws are universal or transcendent and thus a potential source of



human dignity. However, that presents a problem. If the only connection the entire human race has to one another is biological, then the concept of human dignity becomes impossible to define, much less defend. Let's illustrate this point. Most people believe that honesty and kindness are positive qualities. You may also have heard a lot about justice which is a way of saying that everyone should be treated fairly. There is widespread acceptance of these qualities, but where do they come from and how do we know they are good? Is it possible to observe a drop of equality under a microscope? Can you grow kindness in a petri dish in your science class? Is it possible to buy a pound of justice? The fact that these questions sound silly highlights the difficulty of trying to explain human dignity in natural terms.

This does not suggest that physical science has nothing to say about human nature and the question of human dignity. For instance, we just read how cognitive science suggests that humans have a natural desire to search for things unseen. However, it can't explain why humans are motivated to do so. In fact, no physical science can define things like equality, fairness, and kindness or tell us why humans ought to care about these things. These are moral virtues that don't have a material explanation. The same is true of human dignity. A philosophy of life based only on natural evidence but lacking supernatural considerations will find it difficult to define, much less defend, the concept of universal human dignity. In other words, human dignity, and the human rights that flow from human dignity, need religious explanations.

THINK ABOUT IT

Imagine: Hanna Lévy-Hass was a Yugoslavian teacher imprisoned in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Nazi Germany. While in prison, she kept a diary in which she described the torture and terrible treatment of the prisoners. She wrote about the methods the Nazi captors used to make them forget they had "existed at one time as human beings." On November 18, 1944, she wrote, "In spite of everything, my work with the children continues. . . . I cling desperately to every chance, however slight, to gather the children together to foster in them . . . a basic feeling of human dignity."

Question: Did the Nazis actually take away the children's human dignity? If not, how is it possible to deny someone a "basic feeling of human dignity?"

Religious Freedom, Human Dignity, and Human Rights

So, what happens when someone is denied the right to search for truth and embrace what their conscience suggests is true? What happens when government officials or maybe a powerful private group tries to control or bully someone into keeping quiet about their beliefs? The evidence we just read suggests that

humans possess a powerful, internal drive to know the truth about “greater-than-human” or supernatural things. That requires asking questions. If the drive to know the truth is a part of what it means to be human, and knowing the truth requires asking questions, then an important part of preserving human dignity is protecting a person’s right to ask life’s important questions and then believe and live out the answers he or she finds.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: Why is preventing a person from asking questions and openly discussing the answers an assault on human dignity?

This brings us to the question asked in this lesson’s title—is **religious freedom** important? The answer is a definite yes. To deny human beings the ability to *explore* life’s great questions, *embrace* what their conscience says is true, and *express* that conviction in private and public life is to deny them the ability to be fully human. We have no evidence that other creatures have this capability or this type of curiosity. We certainly have no evidence that they create symbols to express their beliefs or buildings to hold their sacred objects. We have no evidence that they practice rituals to connect to a supernatural power or attempt to live by a moral code. These characteristics all belong exclusively to humans. In other words, religious freedom allows every person to be fully human. When a government or powerful private group of citizens tries to restrict people’s religious freedom, they threaten human dignity which is the basis of all human rights.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Question: Can you use the words “explore, embrace, and express” to explain religious freedom?

Does Religious Freedom Have Limits?

As we bring this lesson to a close, we need to make one more observation. While the evidence suggests that religion is an important part of human identity, history also reminds us that evil people will attempt to control and twist religion to accomplish their own goals. That is exactly why religious freedom is so important. Religious freedom’s ability to prevent government officials or a powerful private group from controlling religion actually protects religion. It allows religion to bless the human race in the way it was intended without being abused, controlled or manipulated. This is also why religious freedom is not an absolute right. There are at least 3 important limitations on religious freedom.

(1) Religious freedom does not create a legal monopoly for one religion.

Religious decisions cannot be forced upon someone by government authorities even if everyone else agrees to do so. That would use religious freedom to destroy itself.

(2) Religious freedom never provides a right to violate the natural rights of someone else.

No individual's religious freedom can be used to violate another person's natural rights and assault that person's human dignity.

(3) Religious freedom never provides a right to be violent or cause physical harm to others.

Religious freedom encourages open and respectful conversation, even if an idea makes someone uncomfortable. However, it can never be used to physically harm another person.

In the next lesson, we will explore the work of a group of individuals that used their understanding of human nature, human rights, and religious freedom to create the world's first political system based on natural rights and a devotion to religious freedom for all its citizens.

THINK ABOUT IT

At the beginning of this lesson, you were introduced to a young girl and asked to guess when and where she lived. If you felt like you needed more information to answer the question, you were right. As we have just read, one feature of human beings throughout history has been the desire to worship something greater than ourselves. Since the beginning of history, people all over the world have been praying and singing to an unseen power that they consider important for success in this life and maybe even preparing for a life after this one. In other words, people from all periods of history and in all places around the world do religious things. It is an important part of human identity. So, it would be impossible to answer this question with certainty. This description could apply to a young girl at almost any time in history and in almost any place.

IMAGE CREDITS

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