

Why Study Religion?

by Prof. Jacob Neusner, Brown University

"Religion is so powerful a force in the contemporary world that without knowledge of religion we scarcely can understand the daily newspapers. A fair example of what happens when people do not know how to make sense of the power of religions in contemporary life is our country's difficulty in understanding the Islamic revolution in Iran, not to mention the Judaic revolution in the State of Israel, the Protestant army of Northern Ireland, the Roman Catholic revolutions in Poland and in Latin America, the Christian army of Lebanon, the tragedy at Jamestown and many continuing evidences of the vitality of religious belief--sometimes healthy, sometimes perverse.

"There is a bias against religion as a force in culture and psychology. Intellectuals in general, and the political left in particular, assume that religion is dead and that God never was. This is surely one possible way of thinking about the character and meaning of society and of life. According to this viewpoint, religion is dying; as we know it, it is a holdover from another age. People who hold this view therefore claim that religion does not require study. Those of us who find religion an exceptionally interesting phenomenon of society and culture, imagination and the heart, can do little to overcome this bias. But it is a bias, for it rests upon the will to wish religion away, not upon the perception that religion has gone away.

"In fact, much of the world as we know it is shaped by the formation of society and culture around religious beliefs, by the way in which people refer to religions to make their choices about how they will live. These beliefs and choices invoke particular modes of supernaturalism, call upon distinctive expressions of revelation, and reflect different ways of looking at and finding God. A nation like ours, in which institutions of religion exercise vast influence over citizens' political and cultural decisions, is wise not to deny that religion is a formative force in contemporary life. Whether or not people want religions to exercise that power, they do. In fact, religions not only speak about supernatural powers, they also constitute powerful forces in this world. So it is a matter of fact that if people do not understand the character of religions, they cannot make sense of much that happens in the world today.

"Nor need we dwell on a more obvious fact. To understand where humankind has been, to make sense of the heritage of world civilization, the transcendent side of the human imagination and of society and culture constitutes a definitive dimension. There is no understanding of humanity without the confrontation with the religious heritage and hope, whatever may be our judgment of the value of the heritage and the hope. So far as universities propose to teach how to interpret the world in which we live, organizing courses and departments of religious studies is a perfectly natural way of teaching what must be taught.

"When we study religion, we study the subject that unifies all the other subjects of the humanities. Until our own time and in many places in our own time, religion is the center of human life. If we do not study religion, we are not studying what is important about ourselves in the world."