**What does the word ‘Religion’ Mean?**

What, then, do we have as a definition of religion? Here are some definitions of religion which others have come up with:

1. *religion* n. Belief in the existence of a superhuman controlling power, usually expressed in worship.
2. *Religious* a. Believing in a religion and carrying out its practices; of a monastic order; very conscientious.

(*The Australian Oxford Dictionary*)

1. ‘religion’ derives one of its meanings from the root words ‘re’ and ‘ligare’ meaning ‘to bind or tie back to oneself again’. Thus religion is that process whereby meaning is gained by reencountering or returning to our own selves, condition, way of life, symbols etc.

(Adapted and enlarged from *Collins English Dictionary*)

1. Religion is a response to the mystery of life and is natural to human beings.

(Ronald J Wilkins, *Religions of the World*)

1. Religion is the quest for the values of the ideal life, involving three phases: the ideal, the practices for attaining the values of the ideal, and the theology or worldview relating the quest to the environing universe.

(The Macquarie Dictionary)

1. Religion is the response of human beings to the human condition. Faced with the difficulties of living in the world, we develop an understanding of our universe and our existence, so that life takes on purpose and significance.

(Myrtle Langley, *A Book of Beliefs*)

Here are some explanations, rather than definitions of religion. Some of these are taken from *Religion in Ancient History* by S G F Brandon. Try to find a word or two which summarises or describes each explanation:

**Xenophanes, Greek philosopher, 6th century BC:**

Mortals think that the gods are begotten, wear clothes like their own, and have a voice and a form. If oxen or horses or lions had hands and could draw with them and make works of art as men do, horses would draw the shapes of gods like horses, oxen like oxen: each kind would represent their bodies just like their own forms.

**Ancient Mesopotamian, 2nd-1st century BC:**

The human race had been specifically created to build temples for the gods and to feed them with offerings: religion was essentially divine service and constituted the reason for the existence of mankind.

**Euhemeris of Messine, 300 BC:**

The deities of many peoples were in origin ancient heroes, whose deeds caused them to be venerated, and ultimately considered divine.

**Lucretius, 1st century BC:**

I do not deny the existence of gods, but they have no contact whatever with this world and its inhabitants. Humans observe the seasons and the heavens, but do not understand them, so they ascribe all activity as being at the nod of the gods.

**Augustine of Hippo, theologian, 4th century:**

You [God] have created us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it comes to rest in you.

**Julian of Norwich, English woman mystic, 14th century:**

Everything owes its existence to the love of God.

**Carl Jung, psychotherapist, 20th century:**

[Religious conversion] gives a human being that sense of wholeness, which he had as a child, but loses when he leaves his parents'. And its common characteristic is a sense of something not earned, or even asked for — a sense of something 'given'. This led men naturally to infer a Giver, and therefore the postulation of a 'Someone', not ourselves, wholly other, out there in the void, and may be directly connected with the origin of religion.

**Dag Hammarskjöld** I don’t know who – or what – put the question I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender had a goal.

**Veronica Brady, Senior Lecturer in English, University of Western Australia, 1991:**

That is what our journey is about: the journey to the God who calls and who is, the love which draws us. The weight which draws me, the dynamic which empowers me, is the God who is the love through whom and in whom we are able to love ourselves in the first place and then others.

1. Which definition of religion do you find the most useful? Why?
2. Do you consider yourself to be religious? Explain your answer.
3. What would you mean if you said someone was very religious?
4. There is a T-shirt which reads: *I’m not religious. I’m a Christian.* What does the T-shirt slogan mean by ‘religious’? By ‘Christian’?
5. Which of the explanations of religion and religious experience do you find most satisfying?

Do you feel there is any truth in any of the following ‘put down’ views on religion?

* A nasty rash that won’t go away.
* A hot air balloon that hovers just above and unattached to people’s ordinary concerns, but defies all efforts to blow it away.
* Does the same as pot, but it’s cheaper.
* A geriatric.

Consider this statement: ‘We must respect the other person’s religion, but only in the same way as we respect their view on which rock star is best.’

What does this mean? What is your opinion of this statement?

Do you feel there is any truth in any of the following ‘put down’ views about atheism?

* An atheist is a person who has no invisible means of support.
* An atheist is a person who believes him /herself to be an accident.
* The worst moment for an atheist is when they are really thankful and have no-one to thank.

What is *your* view of atheism?