**WHY STUDY RELIGION?**

Why study Religion? It’s a reasonable question. And there are many ways to answer it. Some people choose to study Religion because they have come to a point in their lives where they may be searching for meaning and purpose. Others, if they attend a denominational school, may not have a choice, but study Religion as part of the school study program. Others again, regardless of whether they belong to particular faith, may study Religion as a discipline, a phenomenon, common to all cultures in history. Some people may never feel the need to study Religion.

In a survey, senior students expressed misgivings about a serious study of Religion. They say Religion as being boring, as having little relevance to life and not being a marketable product for employment. Some students attending Church schools said that they were sick of Religion because it was “rammed down their throats”. Even students who had studied religion as an academic subject and had enjoyed the work felt that if the subject were to have a broader appeal it should be name something else – like philosophy and religion not just religion.

In a Foreword to a book on Religion for senior school students, Professor John Bowker, of Trinity College, Cambridge, makes another point about why the study of Religion is important. This is what he writes:

It’s hard to imagine any subject more important to study and understand than Religion. More important than Maths? Or French? Or Physics? Or Engineering? Well, let’s say that it is equally important though maybe for different reasons.

There are three main reasons why it is so essential to understand and appreciate what religions are and why they matter so much. The first is that Religions are extremely dangerous. Think of all the evil and vicious things that have been done in the name of religion: people have been tortured and burned alive; holy wars and crusades have been fought; whole groups of people have been kept in subordination and subjection – outcastes, slaves, and women in relation to men. And think also of the many difficult and apparently insoluble problems in the world at present time which have a religious part to them: Northern Ireland, the Middle East, the apartheid system in South Africa. It is not the case that religions alone create those problems, but it is certainly true that religion has a part to play in them. If we want to live in a more peaceful world, it is important that we understand what there is about religion which makes believers so passionate in their commitment and in their divisions from each other.

But there is a second reason why it is wise to study and understand religion; religious belief has been the inspiration of great violence and hatred but also of almost all of mankind’s greatest achievement in art, poetry, music, architecture, spiritual exploration and discovery. The creative power of religion is enormous in all parts of the world and this is still true today.

The third reason professor Bowker gives for studying religion is that ultimately religions are concerned with understanding the purpose of existence. Religions proclaim a way of leading a meaningful life on earth and attaining eternal life and fulfilment after death. Even if one does not believe in a life after death, the way people should live with dignity and compassion for each other is at the heart of what all people strive for, whether they are believers or not. As Professor Bowker goes on to explain:

If it is the case that your life can find its rest in god and can abide there forever, it is obvious that the issues which religion sets before us are a great deal more important than a choice between Cornflakes or Porridge for breakfast. Of course, it may be that what religions claim is false – it may be that there is no reality correctly described as God in whom we can find our eternal life, but we can scarcely know whether that is so before we make some exploration ourselves...