**Religion and Society**

A religion isa system of meaning and belief that gives a context for understanding interpreting both life’s larger questions and significant human experiences. Religions express their beliefs through sacred writings, rituals, social structures, myths and stories, sacred places, sacred times, sacred spaces, artefacts, symbols and moral codes of behaviour and ethics. While religions in the some societies are inseparable from the legal, political, social and economic fabric, this is not so in contemporary western societies. Modern societies, that are multicultural, pluralist and democratic, have political, legal, economic and social dimensions. They are complex, and evolving, usually with a large number of religious traditions that co-exist within a political and legal structure, which may not privilege any of them.

**The Relationship between Religion and Society**

The relationship between religion and society is complex, dynamic, mutually interactive, sometimes positive and other times negative. Either may attempt to dominate the other. At times, and over certain issues, religion and society may be diametrically opposed. Society can offer a critique of the actions and comments of religious leaders. On occasions social critics can contribute to tensions and disunity within religion and between religious traditions and the society in which they exist. While this can be newsworthy, it is not the only, or even the main, expression of the relationship. The realities of modern societies lead to religious reflection, inspiration and initiative. Religions and social institutions, like arms of government, may work cooperatively for the betterment of the whole society. This is evidenced in the many welfare and health partnerships between religious and state agencies. Religion contributes to social cohesion and can work for social transformation. The diversity of religious faith is an expression of the pluralism and multiculturalism that defines modern societies.

**Why Religious Traditions May Be Confronted By Challenges**

In contemporary societies religions may be confronted by attitudes, beliefs, principles and values that contradict or are in tension with theirs. As religious communities strive to adhere to the tenets and traditions set forth in their doctrines, they continually come into contact with the opposing viewpoints of, not only the contrasting religious philosophies of other faiths, but also, from the non-religious or secular world. The major religions of the Western world face difficult issues every day that challenge the foundations of their faiths. Group members ask guidance of their leaders and discuss issues among themselves. They seek approaches about how the religious community might address the issues while continuing to uphold the faith. Religious traditions may even seek to implement their vision for society hoping to transform society into new entity based on religious values of the tradition. Sometimes, religious traditions work with other religious-based groups to promote a particular social direction. On other occasions religious traditions view social transformation differently.

**Ways that religious traditions respond to challenges include:**

* refrain from comment and/or action
* promote discussion,
* research, (questioning, evaluation, re-evaluation)
* develop a position, position papers, public statements
* initiate or participate in internal and or public debate,
* instigate a major gathering for debate/discussion, for example, a conference and/or councils.
* support, embrace change, approve, condemn, argue against
* use of the media
* social action to address the problem
* promote public demonstrations
* invoke prayer – individually or as community witness

**Impact of the actions of religious traditions for itself and for its relationship with society**

* ***The actions of religious traditions impact on the potential future of the tradition***

The actions of a religious tradition can tend to either polarise or harmonise faithful adherents. On the one hand, it may be that a strong affirmation of the ancient faith may disaffect those seeking change within the tradition and have a polarising effect. Similarly, the actions of a religious tradition that flow from a reinterpretation or a shift in emphasis concerning traditional doctrines may disaffect the traditionalists, who may claim that this is a step too far. In this way the approach of religious leaders can appear to be at odds with the ancient vision and draw the leadership of the faith into question. Again the faithful are polarised. On the other hand, the actions of leaders may have a harmonising effect. The actions may bring renewal in belief and its expression for adherents. Believers may be solidified or galvanised against a perceived social evil or opposition. The actions may offer a new and hopeful vision of the faith for its followers.

* ***That action of religious traditions impact on its relationship with society***

The actions of a religious tradition can tend to either polarise or harmonise its connections within society. On the polarising side, many religious issues have social implications and they can be contentious. Democratic societies often struggle to come to terms with revealed truths and inspired writings of religious groups that have other-than-democratic approaches to leadership. Eternal truths can seem to be at odds with domestic concerns. Where eternal salvation is at stake, compromise can be difficult at or even sinful and the religionists can be seen to be standing in unwanted judgement of society. Social critique by religious traditions of public issues is not always welcome. There are strong feelings at work when religion commitments are central to individual identity. Any social threat to one’s beliefs is a threat to one’s very being. Strong reactions are not uncommon on contentious issues. On the harmonising side, the relationship between religion and society can be transformative for both, leading to deeper agreement, and less animosity. The relationship is a complex one. Religiously-motivated social workers, pro-bono legal services, peace and justice workers, international volunteers working as nurses and teachers and community development officers have played important roles in addressing many conflicts, injustices and paucity around the world and within modern societies themselves. The bonds within society can grow in strength simply because people of faith are faithful to their religious vision for societies of peace and justice. These bonds are powerful and far reaching and can be used to heal and to reconcile the human race.

Religious traditions have visions that encompass the way society should be developed over time, and stem from the religious beliefs of religious traditions concerning ultimate reality, the nature and purpose of human life, the meaning of life and death, the relationship between ultimate reality and humanity, the relationship between humans and the relationship between human life and the rest of the natural world. Roman Catholic beliefs about God and about the nature and purpose of human life are integral to the Catholic understanding how human being should act in community of the church and in the world community. It is the integration of these beliefs that give Catholicism its particular vision within the Christian faith tradition. For Catholics the vision is found in scripture and the traditions of the Church.