**Key Concepts for Analysis of Challenges to Religious Traditions**

**Types of Challenge​**

**Theological Challenge:** A challenge to the majority account of faith and belief that is adhered to in the tradition. It challenges how the tradition addresses the ultimate concerns of the faithful in relation to the larger questions of life – the existential questions of reason for being, life’s purpose, ultimate reality, death and the relationship between ultimate reality and humanity. It can also include challenges to the ways in which aspects of the tradition may be best interpreted and explained and understood.

**Ethical Challenge:** A challenge to the traditional account of the nature of good and evil, of right and wrong, and how one can know the difference. It may challenge the way in which the tradition explains relationships between humans and the relationship between humankind and the natural world. It may call into question the notions of the good, the nature of the human person and processes for decision-making. It challenges the received accounts of justice and injustice, of peace and war, of human flourishing and human decline at personal, family, group, movements, regional, national and international levels and in terms of authorities and values.

**Continued existence:** A challenge that calls into question the ongoing relevance and / or membership of the religious tradition.

**When and where of challenges**

**Era:**For ease of understanding the history of religious traditions is often expressed in an overview of periods (eras) that are typically bookended by what are generally considered to be significant events or moments. The boundaries of eras are often a matter of contention among historians as relative significance of challenges is debated.

**Dates:** Each of the challenges are related to dates within eras (periods) of the history of the religious tradition. Dates are represented by the current Gregorian calendar. It is named after Pope Gregory XIII, who introduced it in October 1582

**Events:** Challenges are connected to particular public actions or decrees that need to be identified, named and explained. Events are notoriously open to polemic explanation – the same event seen from different stances.

**Places:** The geographical area or jurisdiction in which the challenge takes place including any other places that are effected by the challenge. Jurisdictions are time and people bound and change significantly in the history of religions.

**People:** Individuals, groups or movements are constituents of any challenge and need to be identified, named and their specific roles explained.

**Aspects of Religious Traditions:**
All challenges to religion affect, in various ways, some of the aspects of that religious tradition. There may be one aspect that is the main focus or target of a challenge but, because the aspects are interconnected, what affects one will inevitably bring questioning, tensions or enthusiastic support for and increased participation in others. For example, the nature of the religious experience, the historical and social context, and the way individuals or groups deal with it in the light of their beliefs will have an impact on the way religious traditions and their adherents express their beliefs and, sometimes, shape their responses.

The particular configuration of mutually supporting elements that make up the religious tradition. They are Beliefs; Sacred stories; Spaces, places, times and artifacts; Texts; Rituals; Symbols; Social structures; Ethics; Spiritual experiences.

**Source of the Challenge**

From a religious perspective, history would seem to show that there is a dynamic momentum that is pushing, guiding and inspiring humanity to move forward. It is a movement about progress towards a moment, or a physical realm, in which temporal time meets eternity – an omega point. This movement in human societies, which is fuelled by human imagination and ingenuity, creates challenges for religions, which are often cautious and conservative in nature. These challenges run throughout the history of religions and continue to confront religious traditions in our world today. Equally society can be challenged by the truth claims and ethical positions of religious people.

Theological and ethical challenges and challenges to a religion's continued existence might arise from **individuals** who pose new and radical ideas or shifts in interpretations of beliefs. They might arise from **social or political movements**whose ideologies may threaten the existence of religious groups.  In modern, pluralist and democratic societies, with a diversity of ethnic groups and value systems and a variety of religious traditions, challenges may arise from many directions but especially from differing understandings of the human person, goodness and right judgement. Challenges may arise from **natural and manmade disasters**, invasion or colonisation, war, famine, discriminatory laws that lead to persecutions, forced exiles, massacres or the destruction of central religious institutions. Also, the pervasiveness of the mass media may present standards and attitudes that challenge many aspects of religious traditions.

At any time, in any society, religious beliefs and ethical aspirations might be challenged by forces within or beyond the tradition. Over time, traditions must respond to challenges that come from either the social / historical milieu in which they exist or come from their own internal dynamics, their changing membership and leadership. Religious traditions face external and internal challenges.

**Internal challenges**may be the result of a change of leadership or a new interpretation of a doctrine or from a development in the understanding about a belief or ritual. Developments in philosophy within the tradition can also challenge religious traditions. Calls for reform are not uncommon in religious traditions and make demands on the tradition to respond.

**External challenges** may come from changing pressures within the society in which the tradition finds itself. These can be caused by social upheavals like war, famine or natural disaster, philosophical shifts or even by changed economic circumstances. Threats can be real or perceived. The response of the tradition to the changed situation is often the stuff of history.

​**Stance**
The position taken by a religious tradition to a particular real or perceived challenge is known as a stance. The tradition may choose to stand firm or to be adaptable, to enter into dialogue or close discussion on matters that call its very existence into question. A stance is a principled perspective which may be expressed in various responses that support this stance, including the option not to respond in any practical or discernible ways. A stance can itself be enough to respond to the challenge and to retain integrity, authenticity and identity for the religious tradition or denomination’s leadership and adherents. The religion must choose a stance.

​Does it accept that growth will be a long process of absorbing, appropriating, adapting or rejecting aspects of its tradition; or does it become impatient and cause conflict in order to expand, redefine, incorporate or discard existing beliefs, practices and structures?

All religious traditions struggle with the ongoing challenge of guiding their adherents in how to live according to the beliefs and ethical systems of the tradition. For some religions this involves not only religious authorities, but all adherents are expected to be giving public witness of their faith. This may include taking a public stand in support of, or in opposition to, particular views about a moral or social issue in their local, national or international community. Such a stance might be led by the official leadership of the religion, or by prominent groups or individuals within the religion, either alone or as informal groups united by their view on a particular issue.

**Responses**
The interconnectedness of the aspects of religion means that there are many ways in which a religious tradition might respond to challenges, and numerous ways that the tradition can experience the consequences of those responses. Religions operate on a number of levels: official, community, family and individual. At an official level, the beliefs, teachings, ethical standards, ritual practice and regulatory requirements of the tradition are developed, reconsidered, adapted or reinterpreted to address advances in human knowledge and newly arisen pastoral needs. These then need to be communicated to the wider membership of the tradition. This may be done by an overarching, worldwide official body, or it might be carried out by numerous affiliated or independent groups, depending on the structure of the religion and where the religion has communities of believers.

Responses refers to the ways in which the religious tradition uses the aspects of the tradition to act on the stance that it has taken on the challenge.  With various stances there will be a mixture of supportive responses that attempt to bring about change or attempt to retain the status quo, though these may not always accomplish the desired results. It includes as assessment of the capacity of those responses to deliver on the stance taken by the tradition in addressing the challenge.

**Significance of the Challenge**

Not all challenges are equally important for religious traditions. There is a relativity to the significance of challenges.

There can be major or minor goods or evils in the balance and these need to be weighed carefully when determining significance. Is the matter on central or peripheral? Is the question pivotal or not essential? Crucial or inconsequential? Needed or unnecessary? These questions needs serious consideration in determining significance.

When debates held at the time of the challenges are most heated and responses most urgent, everything seems of great moment and the relativity of the importance of the matter is not always obvious in the discussions. Arguments tend to polarise opposing groups and raise the stakes and the perceived significance of the challenge. Stances on either side can be held very strongly in the heat of the moment. Stances that tend to be biased in favour of one position and so in opposition to another point of view, can make a challenge appear more significant. The stances of the religious tradition or the challenger may be deliberately aggressive in attempts to win the day. This may be an indication of significance but, in the longer view, judgements may differ.

Hindsight is a judgement made with the benefit of the passage of time. In hindsight, a particular challenge may be judged to be relatively minor or that the response may be regarded as unmeasured or inappropriate or outrageous. Was the challenge truly significant or overstated? Was the response reasonable or over the top? Hindsight is not always a balanced either. Hindsight can also be biased. It may be that the present judgement about an historical challenge is made using cultural sensitivities not available at the period of history in question?

Subtlety is needed in conversations about relative significance. Blanket statements about importance need to be considered warily. The context of the historical period is essential to understanding significance.

Other considerations in understanding significance are the number of persons or human goods that are at stake, the manageability of the challenge, the geographical area/s effected by the challenge, the potential time frame toward resolution of the challenge and the number and relative importance of aspects of the tradition affected by the challenge. The degree of publicity given to the challenge can tend to effect the perceived significance of the challenge.

Significance can also be gauged in hindsight by how the challenge, stance and responses of the tradition can be seen to have offered an opportunity for positive change, by causing adherents and leaders of a religion to engage in self-reflection, self-criticism, self-evaluation and self-renewal. This capacity for healthy rejuvenation can be seen in the writings of scholars, council gatherings and the establishment of learning, pastoral and meditative centres.