**the nature and purpose of religious beliefs in religious traditions generally**

**Search for Meaning**

Across time and cultures, humanity has sought to understand the why and how of existence, in the face of hopes, fears, death, survival and suffering. In this quest humans have consistently posed big questions of life, the existential questions, such as: Where did humans come from? Is there someone or something greater than us – an ultimate reality? What is the purpose of human existence? How should we live? Why do we die? Is there anything beyond death?

In response to this quest, systems of meaning and belief have evolved. These systems have offered ways of establishing meaning and purpose – not only for human existence but also for all that exists. There are beliefs about ultimate reality and the relationship that humans have with that reality. There are beliefs about the nature and purpose of human life as well as the meaning of life and death. Beliefs have also attempted to explain the nature of relationships between humans, between humans and the rest of the natural world, and between humans and ultimate reality. Beliefs of this type are often designated ‘religious’.

**Religious Traditions**

A religion is a system of thought, feeling, and action that is shared by a group and that gives the members an object of devotion, a code of behavior by which individuals may judge the personal and social consequences of their actions, and a frame of reference by which individuals may relate to their group and their universe. Usually, religion concerns itself with that which transcends the known, the natural, or the expected; it is an acknowledgment of the extraordinary, the mysterious, and the supernatural. The religious consciousness generally recognizes a transcendent, sacred order and elaborates a technique to deal with the inexplicable or unpredictable elements of human experience in the world or beyond it.

Central to any belief system are the beliefs held about ultimate reality. These in turn inform particular beliefs about human existence; about its meaning, purpose and destiny. Some traditions hold to beliefs that are said to be revealed at some time, others find truth to be a naturally occurring phenomenon within a universal system. The revealed religions include Judaism (where God revealed the Commandments to Moses), Christianity (where Christ, the Son of God, revealed the Word of the Father), and Islam (where the angel Gabriel revealed God's will to Muhammad). Some religions are non-revealed, or "natural," the result of human inquiry alone. Included among these and sometimes called philosophies of eternity are Buddhist sects (where Buddha is recognized not as a god but as an enlightened leader), Brahmanism, and Taoism and other Chinese metaphysical doctrines.

**Beliefs**

Beliefs are the affirmation of truth that may be individual but are corporate in the case of a religious tradition - the convictions of a community of faithful adherents. Particular truths, or belief statements, held by communities of faith have usually emerged as part of a dynamic synthesis of faith in response to the ultimate questions of human life, perfected and refined by experience and historical circumstance. In Lonergan’s account, truth is the product of a fourfold consciousness of attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility. Beliefs ground the faithful in a distinct religious tradition and provide a basis for living a good life, a blueprint for relationships with the divine, human and natural worlds. To this extent a belief is distinctive for that tradition; that is, traditions may share a common belief but this belief may have a distinctive meaning for each tradition or variant within a tradition. It is this distinctiveness creates a multiplicity of religious meanings and emphasis. For example, the belief in monotheism (one God) does not create the distinctiveness of Christianity.

**Beliefs Expressed**

Religious beliefs may be expressed through the other aspects of a religion tradition, such as myths and other stories, sacred texts and other religious writings (such as formal creeds), rituals, symbols, social structures, ethical principles and oral or written codes of behaviour, religious experience and spirituality. These aspects have developed to assist humans not only to answer the big questions but also to experience the sacred in their lives.

Their religious beliefs enable them to express their relationship with the Ultimate Reality, the world and each other. Thus rituals are actions, and symbols are visual reminders that have a symbolic meaning and purpose, and are connected to the sacred dimension. These may include liturgy, festivals, fasting periods, sacred places and other structured religious experiences that incorporate many of the other aspects of religion. Sacred liturgy as part of rituals includes the formalised process of prayer, action, music and even dancing to recall or re-enact significant beliefs. Sacred myths and other stories, as well as oral and written texts, enable the teaching and passing on of a tradition's important beliefs*,* values and history. The social structure, of religious traditions includes the use of sacred space and time, as well as the various roles of members. Religious experience is where the community and individuals gain a sense of the Ultimate Reality through their feelings, not just intellect, and can express their spirituality. All religious traditions use these eight aspects in many different ways and with varying emphasis to express their beliefs about the nature of Ultimate Reality, humanity and the world in which we live.

**Beliefs Lived**

Religious beliefs have an impact for the way members of the religious tradition/s lead their lives. This affects their lives both in the tradition, in its ritual, prayer, spirituality and social structures, and beliefs effect adherents in family life and society, in one’s attitudes to other human beings, in a coherent pattern of social engagement based on a catalogue of ethical principles.

References

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