WHY RELIGIONS MATTER

What are religions? Why is it important to understand them?

One answer is that religions and religious believers are extremely bad news: they are deeply involved in conflicts around the globe; they harm people of whom they disapprove; and they often seem irrational.

Another answer claims that they are in fact extremely good news: religious beliefs and practices are universal and so fundamental in human nature that they have led us to great discoveries in our explorations of the cosmos and of who we are. The sciences began as part of that religious exploration.

John Bowker demonstrates that there is truth in both answers and that we need both, in order to understand what religion is and why it matters. He draws on many disciplines – from physics, genetics and the neurosciences to art, anthropology and the history of religions – to show how they shed entirely new light on religion in the modern world.

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Acknowledgements

My days and strength have lately been much broken; and I never more felt the insufficiency of both than in preparing for the press the following desultory memoranda on a most noble subject.

John Ruskin wrote those words in 1869 (he comes into this book in Chapter 3 savouring ‘the kisses kept in amber’ of Cardinal Manning). The words apply equally well to myself, so much so that this ‘preparation for the press’ could not have been completed without the help of many people. I am immensely grateful, in particular, to Peter Barrett, David Bowker, Sarah Brunning, Chip Coakley, Quinton Deeley, Gavin Flood, Tim Hart, Gene Lemcio and Fr. Ben O’Rourke, OSA. My thanks go also to those at Cambridge University Press who helped in so many ways, and in particular to Fred Goykhman, Laura Morris, Alexandra Poreda, Siva Prakash and Elizabeth Shand.

Above all, I owe everything to Margaret, my wife, without whom this book would not exist. With my restricted eyesight, she has been my eyes, correcting, writing and rewriting so much that she is the co-author:

From you I receive all things
The reach, the reason and the purpose
And the love.

For that and for so much more, thank you.

When Ruskin published his book, he wrote that it was the result of thirty-five years of work and reflection. This book draws on an even longer period (my first article was published almost exactly fifty years ago) and it is therefore the consequence of a lifelong attempt to show what religions are and why they remain so important in human life and history. The result is, I guess, a desultory memorandum, but it is a truly noble subject. In
the United Kingdom, the academic subject of Religious Studies is being increasingly sidelined at the very moment when it is most needed if we are to succeed in living together in a multicultural society, and in a divided and contested world. I hope that this desultory memorandum will at least indicate why the study and understanding of religions are both fascinating and exciting.

TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration of words from other languages (particularly from Arabic and Sanskrit) is neither academically correct nor consistent. I have not included the diacritical marks because I can no longer see them. I have therefore settled for an approximate anglicised form. Those who know the languages will, I think, recognise the words. A few words correctly transliterated survive when they are in quoted books or texts.