

## DEFINITION FOR RELIGION OFFERED AT THE BBC SITE

**Religion can be explained as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.**

## JARED DIAMOND'S BROADER AND MORE DETAILED DISTILLATION

*A constellation of five sets of attributes, which vary in strength amongst the world's religions (including the traditional religions found in Indigenous Knowledge Systems):*

- 1. Religion is the belief in a postulated supernatural agent for whose existence our senses can't give us evidence, but which is invoked to explain things of which our senses do give us evidence.**
- 2. They are social movements of people who identify themselves as sharing deeply held beliefs.**
- 3. Their adherents make costly or painful sacrifices that convincingly display to others the adherents' commitment to the group.**
- 4. Belief has practical consequences for how people should behave.**
- 5. Many religions teach that supernatural agents not only reward virtuous rule-obeying people and punish evil-doers and rule-breakers, but also can be induced by prayers, donations and sacrifices to intervene on behalf of mortal petitioners.**

*Diamond, Jared (2012: 329-331) [The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?](#) Penguin, New York.*

# The Golden Rule

That nature only is good  
when it shall not do unto  
another whatever is not good  
for it's own self.



Blessed is he who prefers his brother  
before himself.

What is hateful to  
you, do not do to  
your fellow man.  
That is the entire  
Law; all the rest is  
commentary.



Hurt not others with  
that which pains  
yourself.

This is the sum of duty:  
do naught to others that  
which if done to thee  
would cause pain.



No one of you is a believer  
until he desires for his  
brother what he desires for  
himself.

Do unto others as you  
would have them do  
unto you.

## QUESTIONS FOR WHOLE CLASS DISCUSSION

- Armstrong tends to treat as anomalous or marginal the blood-soaked history of many of the world's major religions. She also downplays specific religious dogmata, most fundamentalism and even belief in God itself. In your view, this too narrow a view of religion? According to Armstrong what remains?
- Is Armstrong's perspective compatible with the following "working definition" of religion by philosopher, Daniel Dennett:

*"Social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent whose approval is to be sought."*

**Dennett, D. (2006: 9)** *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Viking, New York.