DEFINITION FOR RELIGION OFFERED AT THE BBC SITE

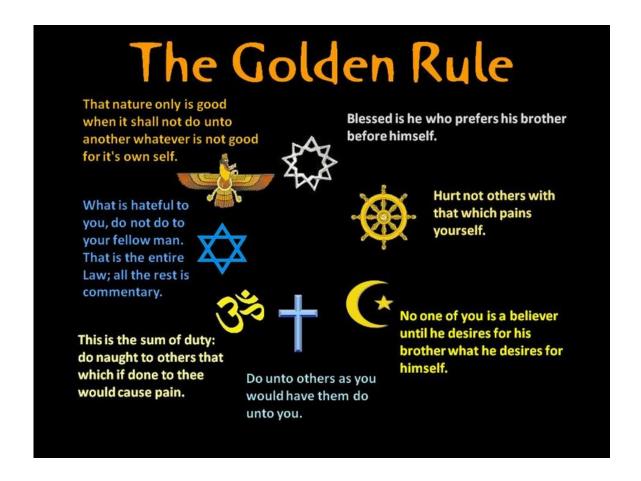
Religion can be explained as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human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



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.