Why Study Religion Essay, Research Paper

Why Study Religion?It seems as if there has never been a time known to man when therehas never been a religion in some guise or another. Nor has therebeen a race of people who have never tried to practice it in someshape or form. The study of religion should not be regarded as a newventure for mankind or a new idea that man is trying to grasp andunderstand. Also, it could be argued that by researching such aphenomena as religion, it does not look like man will come to anyunified agreement in the near future. Especially, if it all comesdown to what religion means to you, and whether you believe in such athing or not. So what is religion? Can it be a way of life?, Does there have to bean element of the supernatural? and what are the consequences if weignore it? Cliffard Geertz sees religion as ‘a system of symbols wichacts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods andmotivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order ofexistence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura offactuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.’One has to keep the definition of religion fairly loose in order toencompass the many diverse religions of the world. If we familiariseourselves with the essence of many of the worlds religions then wewould find they contain simple comparisons such as, rituals, moralityand heritage. The study of religion should involve in-depth knowledge into acollection of facts about the worlds religions and about how thesereligions have evolved throughout history. It is quite possiblethat there has never been any race of people since the beginning ofman on earth that can claim that they have no religion. The study ofreligion should not just involve the study of a few insignificantgroups of people but it should necessitate the study of the whole ofmankind. This could be regarded as a powerful if not intriguingsubject. Studying religion may be understood as just a collection ofideas or concepts which relate to God or some other kind ofsupernatural entity. Sometimes it merely comes down to one group ofpeople arguing that their source of revelation is more correct thanthat of some other group which has competing claims, but surely itmust be something much more deeper than this because it might besomething that is far more closer to home than we think. Therefore,to study religion is to study ourselves because religion cannot existwithout the emergence of man. Religion arouses mans feelings,affects how he thinks and the way he behaves in certain conditions,either individually or in a group, and also what effects these issueshave upon each other. Science uses the criteria of ‘fact’ and ‘theory’ in its study methodswhich in collaboration with real life applications can yield verypositive results. Every religion has a similar criteria, and that is’truth’ and ‘falsehood’, but this formula is quite inter-changeableas regards to the study of religions. So one cannot have one largeblueprint to understand all of the worlds religions but rather atemplate needs to be made for each religion. Only then may weproceed to study and judge a particular religion`s ‘truth’ and’falsehood’ by its own merits. So one could study a religion like a behavioural science likepsychology were peoples theories can be analyzed in an environment ofintellectual academic prowess. One could also study religion forpersonal reasons or one could study it for the purpose of deepeningone’s faith, beliefs or whatever commitments that one alreadypossesses. That way at the end of one’s studies one can eitherconfirm one’s preconceived notions or strengthen their belief inwhichever specific chosen religion or realize that there may be moregreater ‘truths’ than what had originally been thought established. One has to be careful because there may be times when one could getinto difficulties by letting one’s subjective thoughts affect one’simpartiality. Especially, when judging the ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’of any specific religion. One has to be objective at all timesotherwise we run the risk of being confused and inevitably end upbeing lost. Maybe, this is what Wilfred Cantwell Smith meant when hewrote that ‘religious truth is utterly crucial; is the paramount andinescapable issue, before which all other religious matters, howevermighty, must bow. It is final.’ (Smith, 1967:67).

This could be viewed as the reality of religion, in this way everyonecan have access to the ‘truth’. This does not necessarily mean thateverybody can have conflicting truths while at the same time agreewith the ‘Ultimate Truth’. Rather it is to say that one can have a’truth’ that agrees with one’s conscience and beliefs, as well asone’s understanding of something as important as religion. We need a reference point for all the problems that we are facing inthe world today. We can see the impact that religion can have onsocial behaviour for example the role of the religious movements inthe struggle for civil rights in the United States and against theformer apartheid system. Sometimes at the central point of conflict religion may it beJudaism, Christianity, Hinduism or Islam can lead to increasinghostilaty between religious groups within society. The study ofreligion can help us to find out why these conflicts exist,especially when they all share the basic concept of peace to all. i.e in former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland. Many people have themisconception that there would be less wars if there were noreligions. This is maybe because many wars throughout history havebeen fought in the name of religion. If we study the teachings ofthe religion that men are supposidly fighting for, we may come to theconclusion that the bloodshed on this earth is not so much due to thesword of religion, but rather the dictates of selfish leaders whichmay not even believe in the religion that he is calling the people tofight for. Since the power of religion is so great, what better wayis there to clothe your bad intentions. If man was to educatedhimself in the study of religion then surly he would see it as a toolof peace, not war. Sometimes religion may be misrepresentated by some people who breakinto minority sects that go against the grain of the religion wichthey profess to follow. For example ritual suicides, or ritualmurder is a dramatic way of following religion as was demonstrated bythe cult movement in Sweden and Canada in October of this year(1994). The study of religion can help us to understand the reasonsand motives behind such religious behaviour. The study of religion can reinforce our original beliefs andpreconceptions. You may be sitting on a chair that you think is themost comfortable chair in the world, but how can you be sure if youhave not tried anything else? Why go through life in discomfort ifall you had to do was to get up and sit on a comfortable chair? Itcould also be that you sit on other chairs and you may feel why did Ibother because your chair was indeed better, but this is the point. Before you felt it was the best. Now you ‘know’ it is the best. On the other hand you may not believe in any one particular religionor even in none at all but you want to understand the way otherpeople live and what they believe in. Either to exchange ideas orget closer to them for business, social or humanitarian reasons. Forexample how could journalists make a balanced report on religiouswars around the world if they have no insight into the motives andbeliefs of those who are fighting? What better way is there to knowa mans culture, customs, feelings and outlook on life than throughhis religion. What if all the worlds religions were wrong, where do we stand then?If this was the case then this gives us an even more urgent reasonsto study religion. It means that mankind has been living a lie andwe would need to understand where we had gone wrong and what newideas would be needed to be implemented for the future generations. Maybe we would be more like our environment of plants and animals inthat survival of the fittest would rule the land. These are the many things that one may seek answers for in the studyof religion. There can be only one Truth and religions tend tocontradict each other, so which one is the right way? There can beno compulsion in religion. The only way is to study them and followthe way that is right for you. To conclude, if one believes that there is a God who sent messengersto guide those whom submit to God`s will and seek the absolate’truth’, then if religion turns out to be the reality, then whatinstrument could possibly measure his bliss? Are we really here onthis earth just to be tested, or is religion something that is justmerely an expression of the workings of the human heart, mind andimagination? Let us not be ignorant. If there is a Truth of anafterlife to be sought after, then let us try to find it`s facesmiling before it finds ours grieving.