

# Introducing World Religions

## Student Essay Questions

### Chapter 1 Approaching religious traditions

1. Explain what Dipesh Chakrabarty is saying about cultural imperialism in the following quote. Then say whether you agree or disagree with his points.

For the point is not that [European] Enlightenment rationalism is always unreasonable in itself but rather a matter of documenting how – through what historical process – its "reason", which was not always self-evident to everyone, has been made to look "obvious" far beyond the ground where it originated. If a language, as has been said, is but a dialect backed up by an army, the same could be said of the narratives of "modernity" that, almost universally today, point to a certain "Europe" as the primary habitus of the modern.

(Chakrabarty qtd. in King, R. (1999) *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and "the mystic East"*, New York: Routledge, 214-215)

2. Identify strengths and weaknesses of this "definition of religion" provided by your author:

A religion is a dynamic cultural complex with positive or negative impact that stakes a claim to legitimacy based on a foundational connection to reports of hierophany. (See page 12.)

Improve upon it with your own definition. Try out both substantive and functional definitions – or combine them. A substantive definition would pertain to the content of religions. A functional definition would pertain to how religion works.

3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the religionist versus the reductionist approaches to the study of religions. Take a stand, and debate your position.

### Chapter 2 Expressive traditions of Oceania, America and Africa

1. Discuss the impact of European colonialism on the development of religion among the indigenous peoples of Oceania, America and Africa. Be specific as to circumstances before and after European influence, motives for change in religious customs, ideas, and identities. (Hint: Look at the transformation of the Mexican identity, the practice of ta moko among the Maori, Dagara views of nakedness and learning, practice of the Native American Sun Dance, and so forth.)

2. Chapter 2 provided one example for each of the ten elements of performance, including the three expressive aspects (lived place, lived time and lived objects), and the

seven DRESTAT functions: donation, restoration, enactment, symbolization, transformation, accession and transmission. Find at least one other example from world religions (not necessarily drawn from expressive traditions) for each of these ten elements. Then come up with one example that shows the interplay of at least five of the elements of performance.

3. Identify the key features of expressive traditions. See how these features are present in other world religions. Do you think that the predominance of these features in expressive traditions makes religious experience in them qualitatively different from religious experience in other religions? Explain. (Hint: For example, consider the role of oral transmission among the West African *griots*, *babalawô*, and *bokónô*.)

### **Chapter 3 Zoroastrian tradition**

1. Discuss the relationship between the Zoroastrian tradition of Iran and the Vedic tradition of India (see Box 3.1 and Box 10.1).

2. Describe the meaning of some Zoroastrian symbols, such as the Fravahar, fire, the number 12, the color white, and so forth). Then try to find similar symbolism elsewhere in world religions and culture.

3. Compare the *Bundahishn (Creation)* story of time cycles with notions of time and the end of time found among Hindus, Christians, Muslims, or members of other religious traditions.