

The Abrahamic Religions:

An Introduction to World Religions

What is Religion?
**How do religions differ from other
world views?**

Session Week 1

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Aim and Learning Outcomes – Week 1 Session

Aims

- This session intends to introduce students to the historical and contemporary contexts of Religion.
- It consists of staff and students:
 - 1) producing definitions of religion and discussing their definitions,
 - 2) comparing their definitions and
 - 3) looking at various definitions of Religion

Learning Outcomes

Students have some understanding of:

- What constitutes a religion
- What constitutes a world religion

Definitions

Substantive Definitions

- What is Religion?
- What is believed, Practised etc.?

Religion

Dimensions

- What common features/ characteristics do religions have?

Functional Definitions

- What they do?
- What functions or processes they fulfil socially, psychologically, Community?

What is Religion?

- Any system of faith and worship
- Action or conduct indicating a belief in a divine ruling power

- Subscribe to beliefs that determine aspects of lifestyle
- It's seen as personal piety or spirituality

Religion

- A system of belief and practice
- Undertake prayer and/or worship
- Ritual behaviour or doctrinal beliefs.

- Gather in groups of like-minded people
- Reference to the meaning and origin or religion for individuals or society.

What is Religion? More Definitions

- A specific system of belief in God, including a group of definitions concerning Him and His relation to the universe. Universal Dictionary
- Religion denotes properly relation to God. Thomas Aquinas
- A set of rituals, rationalised by myth, which mobilises supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man or nature. Anthony Wallace.
- A system of beliefs and practices directed at the ultimate concerns of a society. William Lessa
- Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. Paul Tillich
- Religion concerns a push...towards some sort of ultimacy or transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest life. W. King
- Religion is a means of ultimate transformation. F. Streng

How do World Religions differ from other world views? (1)

- Several Religions in the world today
- **Middle Eastern Religions** – Monotheism (Abrahamic Religions)
 - Judaism,
 - Christianity, and
 - Islam
- **Primal Religions** emerged in different societies, cultures, and civilizations
 - include
 - the religions of the ancient Greeks,
 - Australian Aborigines, the Vikings,
 - Siberian Shamans,
 - Japanese Shintoism

How do World Religions differ from other world views? Continued(2)

- **Religions of Indian Origin** evolved from primal beginnings to become the faiths of great civilizations – include
 - Hinduism,
 - Buddhism,
 - Jainism, and
 - Sikhism.
- **Religions of Chinese Origin** evolved from primal beginnings – include
 - Confucianism and
 - Taoism
- **New Religious Movements** may grow out of an existing religion, primal or otherwise, or be syncretistic in nature – include
 - Scientology,
 - the Unification Church,
 - the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna Movement)

World Religions - A Glossary of Useful Terms

- **Animism** – the belief that a spirit is, or spirits are, active in aspects of the environment.
- **Bahais** – followers of Baha’ullah (1817-92). Their faith is undogmatic. Baha’ullah taught that there is one God whose successive revelations of His will to humankind have been the Chief civilizing force in history.
- **Jainism** – a religion in which beliefs about reincarnation, karma and moksha feature prominently (as in Hinduism and Buddhism), as does ahimsa (principle of non-violence, or non-injury, to living beings)
- **Monotheism** – the belief that there is one Divine being. The term is used more specifically for belief in God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, many Christian churches follow the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (one God in three persons - Three co-existing persons)
- **Pagan** – a term, like heathen that, used in the past. Such religions were usually polytheistic or pantheistic in character. In the modern era followers of pagan religions have, as it were, “reclaimed” the term and apply it with pride to their expressions of faith.

World Religions - A Glossary of Useful Terms (Continued)

- **Pantheism** – the belief that the whole of reality is divine. Pantheism may be cosmic, or world-affirming, by equating God and nature, or a cosmic, or world-denying, by regarding their sensory experiences to be illusory and only the divine to be real.
- **Polytheism** – the belief in, or worship of many gods.
- **Rastafarianism** – a religion inspired by Marcus Garvey’s “Book of Africa” movement dating from the 1930s. Haile-Selassie, until a few years ago the Emperor of Ethiopia, is regarded as the Messiah of the black “race” who, it is believed, are the true Jews about to be redeemed. A puritan ethic sustains personal dignity, and the smoking of ganja is defined as a peaceful and mystical experience.
- **Shintoism** – the religion indigenous of Japan. Shinto ceremonies, which consist of abstinence, offerings, prayers and purifications, are designed to ensure that the Kami, or the power of nature, protect and treat humankind benevolently. The Kami are the mysterious forces of nature associated primarily with permanent topographical features, in particular unusual mountains, rocky cliffs, springs, trees and stones.

World Religions - A Glossary of Useful Terms (Continued)

- **Shamanism** – the belief that people with supernormal powers, the shamans, can establish contact with spirits when in an ecstatic state. Shamans are not medicine men; nor are they sorcerers. They are intermediaries between spirit world and people here on Earth.
- **Theism** – the belief in one God Who has created Heaven and Earth and is at the very center of faith.
- **Zoroastrianism** – the religion of followers of the ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster (c. 1400 BCE). Zoroastrian teachings are found in the Avesta and the Pahlavi literature. An essential feature of all worship, centered on fire, is physical and moral purity.

World views about Religion (1)

(Emile Durkheim [1858-1917] - Functionalism, Religion)

- **Durkheim** identified three essential elements of religion: (1) belief in the sacred; (2) religious groups, or cults; and (3) ritual.
- In Durkheim's view, religion originated as a form of social self-worship. Religious feeling emerged as a result of social interaction outside the clan, and the symbols and practices of religion function to enhance attachment to the group.
- Functionalists also see religion as something that inhibits change. But they view this as a good thing – something that creates social order based on shared values.
- Durkheim – The sacred (holy or spiritual) stands for the values of society or the community. By worshipping the sacred people are effectively worshipping their society.
- Religion maintains social solidarity by providing unifying practices and beliefs – a collective consciousness.
- Religion strengthens values and promotes a sense of belonging and commitment. Social change and deviant behaviour are restricted, as religion binds people to society.
- **Durkheim** defines, “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden--- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” **Durkheim, Emile (1912/1965) Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (New York, NY: The Free Press)**

World views about Religion (2)

(Karl Marx [1818 – 1883] - Religion)

- **Marx** viewed religion as something that inhibits change – a form of social control that keeps the working classes in a state of false consciousness.
- Religion is a tool of class exploitation – it provides the basis of ruling class ideology and justifies the social order. The hymn *All things bright and beautiful* contains the verse.. The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate.
- “Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world.... It is the opium of the people.” Religion acts as a drug that does not solve problems but merely eases the pain.
- Religion, therefore, involves the distortion of reality. It is ideological, in that it legitimises an unjust social order that makes it appear inevitable and unchangeable.
- Religion is a conservative force which prevents social change. The masses are promised rewards in heaven, so they put up with suffering on Earth.

World views about Religion (3)

(Weber, Berger and Interactionist Theory - Religion)

- **Weber** assumed that as societies advanced technologically and scientifically then individuals would cease to rely on religious meanings. They would use rational explanations to understand their world, which would become less enchanted and sacred.
- **Weber** suggests that religion deals with the problem of theodicy (**justice of god**) – how to make sense of a benevolent god in a world full of evil and suffering. E.g. Calvinist belief in pre-destination; Hindu belief that everyone, no matter how unfortunate, deserve to be in the position they are in.
- **Berger** suggests that one of the most important aspects of religion is its ability to explain phenomena such as evil, suffering and death.
- **Berger** speaks of the theodicy of disprivilege – the promise of salvation may be seen as compensation for poverty. Such ideas promote the view that it is pointless trying to change the here and now.

World views about Religion (4)

Other Scholars' Definitions

- **Melford Spiro** argues as 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.'
Spiro, Melford E., 1971, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, M. Banton, ed., London, England: Tavistock Publications, pp. 85-126.
- **Robin Horton** defines religion as structural symbolism comes to much the same thing as defining the substance of 'linen' in terms of its occasional use as a flag: the symbolic function is as incidental to the nature of the first as it is to the second. **Horton, Robin (1997) Patterns of Thought in Africa and The West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)**
- **Clifford Geertz** defines, religion is:
 - (1) a system of symbols which acts to
 - (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by
 - (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
 - (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
 - (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' (1973:4)**Geertz, Clifford, 1971, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, M. Banton, ed., London, England: Tavistock Publications, pp. 1-46.**

World views about Religion (5)

Other Scholars' Definitions

- **Morton Klass** states:

“Religion in a given society will be that instituted process of interaction among the members of that society--- and between them and the universe at large as they conceive it to be constituted--- which provides them with meaning, coherence, direction, unity, easement, and whatever degree of control over events they perceive as possible.”

Klass, Morton, (1995) Ordered Universes: Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion (Boulder, CO: Westview Press)

Reflection

- List your understandings about ‘Religion’.
- How do you define it?
- What characteristics do share from the above definitions?
- What is excluded from your list?
- What do the religions excluded share?

References

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