

Religion

definition(s) & theories

overview

- religion: background
- definition(s) & theories
- discussion questions

pre-modern understandings

- a category distinguished from others
- modern understandings of pre-modern views are anachronistic
- religion: from the latin *religio* (scruples, devotion, reverence, or rules; ‘obeying the law’)
- arabic: *dīn* (custom or law)
- early modern understandings: christian-centric (the ‘christian ideal’)

Judaism

Indigenous cultures

Feng shui

Christianity

Practice of yoga

Visiting a medium

Islam

Personal meditation

Marxism or existentialism

Hinduism

Reading self-help books

The Metallica fan club

Buddhism

Reading astrology reports

American nationalism

‘religion’: definition?

complex in human history that comprises of 4 dimensions (or some combination of):

- **theoretical: beliefs, myths & doctrines**
- **practical: rites, prayers, moral codes**
- **sociological: churches, leaders & functionaries**
- **experiential: emotions, visions & sentiments**

further distinguished by:

- **object: content of theoretical dimensions (focus of practical & experiential ones)**
- **goal: identified by practical & sociological dimensions (salvation / ultimate wellbeing)**
- **function: provide meaning to one's life, and / or integrate & unify society**

A religion is an institution with a complex of theoretical, practical, sociological and experiential dimensions, which is distinguished by characteristic objects (gods or sacred things), goals (salvation or ultimate good) and functions (giving an overall meaning to life or providing the identity or cohesion of a social group).

Byrne, 'Religion and the Religious.' Clarke & Sutherland (ed.s) *The World's Religions: The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religion*. Routledge (2003), p. 7

theories of religion

attempt to address five questions:

- What kind of subject matter does religion constitute?
- What is the structure of religion?
- What is distinctive / specific about religion?
- What are the origins of religion?
- What work does religion do (effects, functions, or products)?

discussion question (i)

Why is it difficult to define religion adequately to suit all scholars engaged in its study? What are some of the challenges encountered in defining religion comprehensively?

discussion question (ii)

How might the broad definition of faith as “being grasped by an ultimate concern” create challenges in distinguishing among religious, political, sportive, or artistic activities?

discussion question (iii)

Which of the various definitions of religion do you find most compelling, and why? This could mean, among other things, most complete, most adequate for encompassing diverse forms, most useful for pursuing the academic study of religion, most clear for differentiating what does and does not fit the category, etc.

- religion as a “belief system”
- religion as something that specifically concerns “supernatural” matters
- religion as “matters of faith”
- religion as concerning “the meaning of life”
- religion as concerning “spirituality” or “spiritual well-being”

discussion question (iv)

How does religious studies differ from religious education?