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Introduction to the Study of Religion

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Definitions of Religion

- Religion is one of the keywords of modern society used countless times but with very different meanings (see Braun 2000, p. 4).
- Religion is a product of the European academia impossible to translate in non-European languages.

- Founders of religions “spoke of a ‘revelation’ or disclosure of the divine, or of a ‘Way’ of belief and living, or of a ‘Law’, or of the ‘spiritual life’, or of a life of ‘perfection’” – never of founding a religion (Charlesworth 1997, p. 1).
- The term religion conveys the “misleading idea that all the multifarious beliefs and practices and (...) ‘phenomena’ that we now call ‘religious’, have something in common by reference to which we can define religion and clearly demarcate it from other areas of human life such as the realms of ethics, or art, or science” (p. 1).

Jonathan Z. Smith

- There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particular the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.' (*Imagining Religion*, 1982: xi)

Willi Braun

- “we must regard religion as a concept, in the technical sense, and not as a substance that floats ‘out there’, a something that might invade and enlighten us if we should only be fortunate as to have the right kind of receiving apparatus.” (2000, p. 9)

The Term 'Religion'

- from the Latin word religio or re + ligare = to bind back, or to re-bind
- for public and communal worship
- not important in pre-Christian times
- the King James Version (1611) uses "religion" or "religious" only five times
- Became important in order to describe re-established intimacy between God and worshipers by worship
- Until the nineteenth century used only for the three Abrahamic religions
- Since the 19th century used with expanded meaning

Definitions

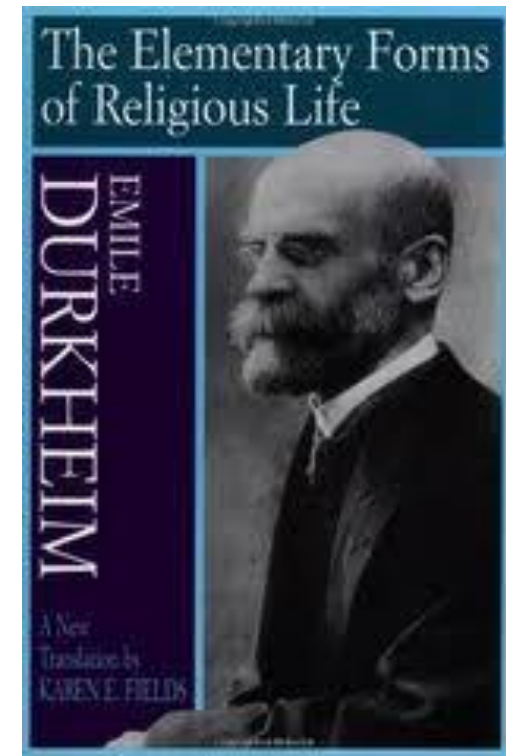
- When we look on the various definitions we can see that the term Religion is used in two ways:
- One way is to look at religion as something-in-itself (**sui generis**), e.g., Religion is belief in God
 - Rudolf Otto (-> the Holy)
 - Mircea Eliade (-> the Sacred)

Examples of Religion as Sacred

- Emile Durkheim: ' A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden'
- Mircea Eliade (sacred – profane) – manifestation of the divine, in a place, object or occasion

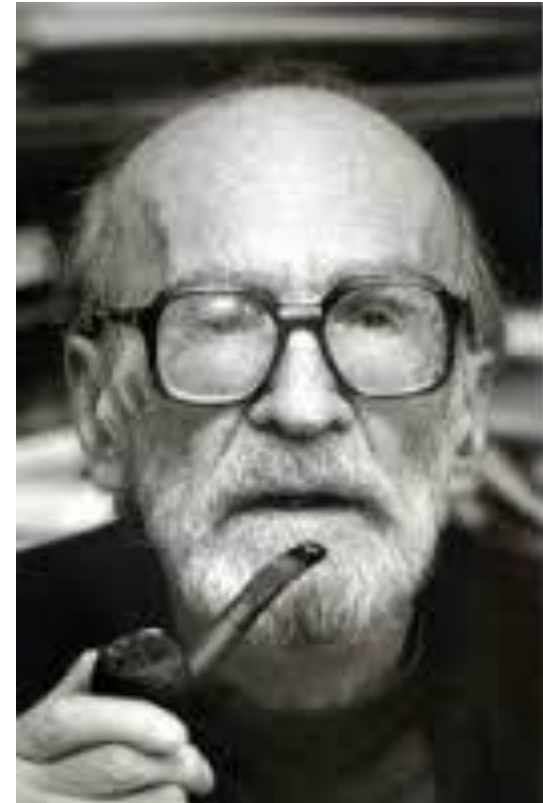
Emile Durkheim - Religion is a Means of Social Organization:

- Emile Durkheim is responsible for the development of sociology and wrote that "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite in one single community'.
- Durkheim reveals how religion serves in social functions.



Mircea Eliade - Religion is a Focus on the Sacred

- Key to Mircea Eliade's understanding of religion are two concepts: the sacred and the profane. Eliade says religion is primarily about belief in the supernatural, which for him lies at the heart of the sacred. He does not try to explain away religion and rejects all reductionist efforts. Eliade only focuses on "timeless forms" of ideas which he says keep recurring in religions all over the world, but in doing so he ignores their specific historical contexts or dismisses them as irrelevant.



But what is 'sacred'?

- "I don't want to call it a sacred site because your idea of something sacred and my idea of something sacred are a little bit different".
–Grant Bulltail, an Apsáalooke (Crow) elder speaking to school children about a prodigious landmark, Heart Mountain, Wyoming, 2003

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Definition 2

- Another way to define religion is as a descriptor of differentiated sets of **phenomena** (religious ideas, religious experiences, religious rituals and the like)
 - Ninian Smart (-> seven dimensions)

Ninian Smart: Religion is a seven-dimensional activity

- 1 Doctrinal
- 2 Mythological
- 3 Ethical
- 4 Ritual
- 5 Experiential
- 6 Social
- 7 Material

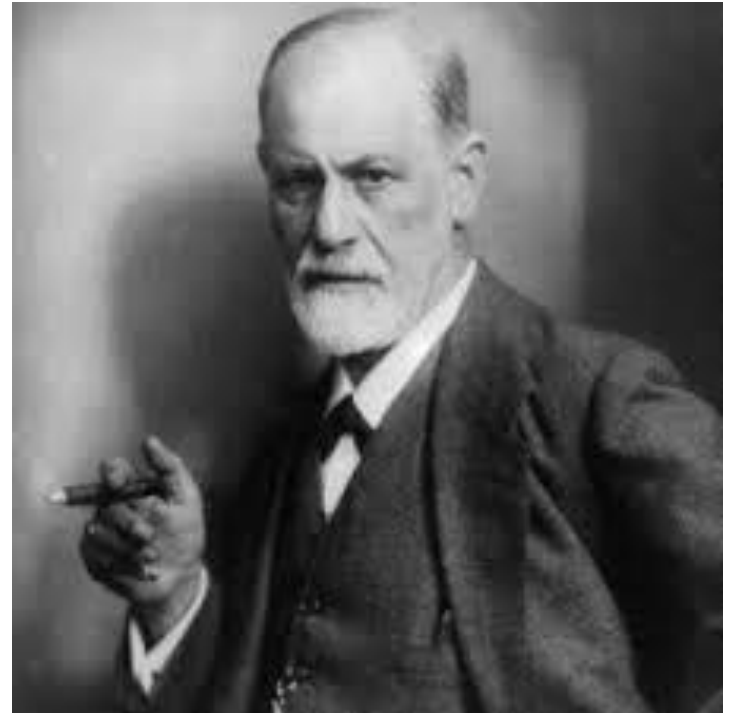


A third way to define religion

- .. is with regard to their functions
 - Social, political or personal

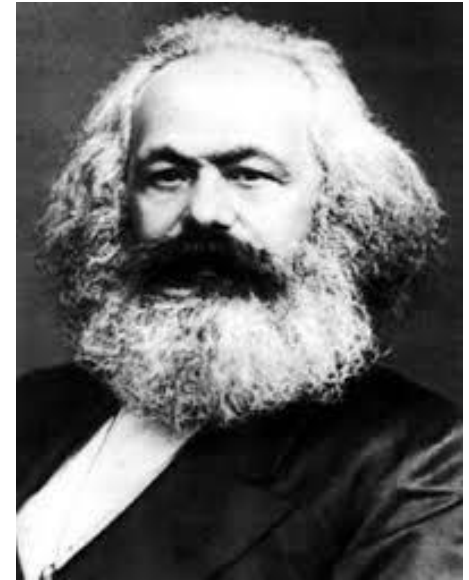
Sigmund Freud - Religion is Mass Neurosis:

- According to Sigmund Freud, religion is a mass neurosis and exists as a response to deep emotional conflicts and weaknesses. A by-product of psychological distress, Freud argued that it should be possible to eliminate the illusions of religion by alleviating that distress.



Karl Marx - Religion is the Opiate of the Masses:

- According to Karl Marx, religion is a social institutions which is dependent upon material and economic realities in a given society. With no independent history, it is a creature of productive forces. Marx wrote: "The religious world is but the reflex of the real world."
- Marx argued that religion is an illusion whose chief purpose is to provide reasons and excuses to keep society functioning just as it is. Religion takes our highest ideals and aspirations and alienates us from them.



Significance?

- Example: Is Spiritism a religion? And what about Vodou? Or Tarot reading?



Typologies of Religion

- World Religions 'have lasted for a long time and in that time travelled and transplanted themselves across the globe in various ways' (Corrywright/Morgan, p. 18).
- Different from local religions and NRM
- But how?

Local Religions

- Local Religions are practiced by a small group, follow orally transmitted traditions, and are practiced only in a small part of the world
- But what about the spread of these religions due to migration?

New Religious Movements

- Movements that emerge from a 'world' religion but have a separate and often controversial status
- Often also described as alternative religious tradition, 'sect' or 'cult'
- What about Mormons – NRM or World religion?

The different categories of religion

- monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism
- Polytheistic religions such as Hinduism
- tribal (indigenous) religions
- Atheistic religions such as Buddhism
- ... But what about mixtures?

Religion today

- 'Religion is what religion does' (Evans-Pritchard)
- Religion is not a homogenous entity but should reflect what people do and believe in.