

## Religion Theories & Concepts

The theories and concepts presented in the following quotations are derived from your course readings and other relevant sources. **These ideas should serve as the foundation for the interpretations in section 7 of your interview report.**

In Section 7 of your Interview Report, the task is to select one of the provided ideas and apply it to your interview data. Whether you opt for a comprehensive summary or a direct quotation, whether you use the entirety of an idea or just part, you have the flexibility to decide how to incorporate the theories or concepts listed below. Once you have decided how you'll use the idea, explain how the chosen idea aids in interpreting a specific aspect of your interviewee's statements about their personal experiences or observations related to religion. In other words, what does that idea help you to see? What conclusions can you draw by considering this idea in relation to your interview data? Clearly articulate the interpretation or meaning derived from their statements through the application of the chosen concept or theory.

Whether quoted directly or summarized in your own words, each concept or theory must be appropriately cited. For your convenience, citations and bibliographic references are provided with each source. The document "Learning About Interpretation" gives instructions as to how to apply these ideas to interview data.

### Food and the Ultimate Source of Life

Dr. Anne Valley argues that, "Because of its primordial importance, food's symbolic associations are found underpinning all aspects of human experience and imagination. Food links us vertically and imaginatively to the ultimate source of life. As the concrete, literal sustainer of individual life, food's association with the mysterious source and sustainer of all existence is commonplace across religious traditions. For many, food is understood to be the material manifestation of that ultimate source." (Valley 2016, 117)

Valley, Anne. (2016). "Food and Religion." *Religious Studies and Theology* 35(2) 117–122. <https://doi.org/10.1558/rsth.32547>

[Explanation: What this means is that food is linked to god or gods, the divine, or the mysterious force that gives life. The human is linked to that source through the consumption (along with preparation, growing etc.) of life-giving material. Many religious traditions have rituals in recognition of food and its ultimate source, as well as practices that recognize food as life-giving.]

### Food and the Creation of Community

Valley argues that food, "links us horizontally, forging trans-historical and trans-geographical ties, collapsing time and space, and binding us in reciprocal webs of care that make society possible. Anthropologists have long noted its centrality in the literal and symbolic creation of human communities: food is the medium through which allegiances are forced and social bonds strengthened" (Valley 2016, 118).

Valley, Anne. (2016). "Food and Religion." *Religious Studies and Theology*, 35(2) 117–

122. <https://doi.org/10.1558/rsth.32547>

[Explanation: Religion is often about community and belonging and those bonds are often forged in food sharing as well as rituals around food. The bonds of community are also reinforced through rules which define who belongs to a community and who doesn't.]

### **Permanent Food Restrictions: The Indian-Based System**

“One approach to religiously proscribed foods emerged in ancient India, and another in the Middle East. The Indian-based system—represented most clearly in Jainism, but also found in Buddhism and Hinduism and some expressions of Sikhism—is grounded in the principle of non-violence. It encourages people to eat food implicated in the least possible amount of violence. The killing of animals for food, in this context, is thought to produce the most violence, so meat is the primary type of food that is restricted, or at least problematized...Generally, though, in Indian-rooted religions the onus is placed on the individual to decide on the best way forward when it comes to restricting foods.” (Desjardins 2022, 39–40)

Desjardins, Michel. 2022. “Religious Food Guidance.” *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue Canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* 9(1) 37–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i1.514>.

### **Permanent Food Restrictions: The Middle Eastern System**

“One approach to religiously proscribed foods emerged in ancient India, and another in the Middle East...The Middle Eastern system—represented here most clearly by Judaism and Islam—takes a different position. This system is grounded in the principle that sacred texts are God’s way of communicating directly with people and God’s commands in those texts need to be obeyed without question. Some of those commands, given in the Bible and the Qur’an...forbid the eating of certain foods...[In the] Middle Eastern-rooted religions the food restrictions are fixed. The leaders of these religions believe that people have only one go-around on the earthly plane before their non-physical soul enters another space, to stay for eternity. Follow God’s commands and you increase your chances of a pleasant eternity (in heaven).” (Desjardins 2022, 39–40)

Desjardins, Michel. 2022. “Religious Food Guidance.” *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue Canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* 9(1) 37–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i1.514>.

### **Food Offerings**

“Food is presented to gods and other entities in the spirit world, and sometimes to religious leaders, in many religious traditions. These offerings are [both] symbolic and concrete ways of showing devotion to supernatural powers, and those intimately connected to them.” (Desjardins 2022, 42)

Desjardins, Michel. 2022. “Religious Food Guidance.” *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue Canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* 9(1) 37–52.

<https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i1.514>.

### **Food Charity**

“Religions have long helped people cope with hunger. With few exceptions, religious groups aim to ease the pain of others by feeding their poor, and often the poor outside their communities. They do so in creative ways, including sharing food at their places of worship, setting up food banks, contributing to disaster relief operations, and distributing food to people in other countries.” (Desjardins 2022, 43)

Desjardins, Michel. 2022. “Religious Food Guidance.” *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue Canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* 9(1) 37–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i1.514>.

### **Special Occasions (Festival, Feast and Holiday Observances):**

“Religion is reinforced through celebrations, and those special occasions are frequently anchored in food. The taste, smell, look, touch, and sound of food are all intrinsic to major religious festivals. Religious people in every part of the world often grow up attaching certain foods to each festival they celebrate, and to special days that mark their weeks and months. The foods vary, to be sure, and as people move through their life cycle or migrate to other parts of the world those foods can also change, but the turkeys, the jalebis, the bread, the couscous, the strawberries, the rice, and the meat stews, for example, are almost always central to the celebration.” (Desjardins 2022, 43–44)

Desjardins, Michel. 2022. “Religious Food Guidance.” *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue Canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* 9(1) 37–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i1.514>.

“Moreover, after talking with people across the world about the foods they prepare for special religious occasions, one thing stands out: the need for traditional food items that come as close as possible to those used in previous years. People are often passionately concerned about specific tastes and textures, and cooks want to reproduce them. Some tastes of childhood you never forget. In the words of Margaret Visser, “Food is tradition, largely because a taste acquired is rarely lost; and tastes and smells which we have known in the past recall for us, as nothing else can, the memories associated with them” (Visser 1991, 29).” (Desjardins 2022, 44)

Desjardins, Michel. 2022. “Religious Food Guidance.” *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue Canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* 9(1) 37–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i1.514>.

### **The Sacred:**

“[S]acredness or profaneness are interrelated elements of a much larger social system of designation and allocation... It is a system that sorts, privileges, and demotes, all according to the

changeable (and therefore contestable) interests of those who are in the position to set whatever they wish apart. Ann Taves prefers to call this setting apart “special”—as in things, places, or people deemed special...all the while ensuring that the actions of others are policed in conformity with the authorized system of distinction and identification...” (Hughes and McCutcheon 2022, 268)

Hughes, A. W., and R.T. McCutcheon, (2022). *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary*. London and New York: Routledge.

### **Ethics:**

“[The term ethics] reflects proper rules of conduct recognized as valid by a particular religious tradition. Ethics also suggests the values and moral principles related to human conduct and the analysis of such actions. Rules about what constitutes correct behavior can vary according to a person’s status in life, such as whether one is an adult or child.” (Olson 2011, 81-82)

Olson, Carl (2011) “Ethics,” In *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.

### **Taboo:**

“Taboo refers to that which is forbidden. It can be traced to the Tongan language of Polynesian culture and the term *tapu*, or the Fijian word *tabu*, meaning prohibited, not allowed, or forbidden. It is closely associated with what is sacred and is surrounded by custom and law. Taboos include certain dietary restrictions (vegetarianism in Hinduism and Buddhism, non-consumption of pork products in Judaism and Islam), sexual restrictions (prohibitions against adultery, homosexuality, incest, or sex with children, animals, or the dead), bodily restrictions (prohibitions against taking certain drugs, spitting, flatulence, burping), and taboos associated with abusive language, death, and dress.” (Olson 2011, 246)

Olson, Carl (2011) *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.

### **Belief:**

“From indigenous to international religions, beliefs are convictions, assertions, and habitually accepted unquestioning viewpoints that define a religious culture’s worldview, its way of life, its social structure, the nature of human existence and its problems, the solution to the problems of life, and an often concise statement of the fundamental agreed upon religious claims. Statements of belief unite a people and differentiate them from outsiders. From a cross-cultural perspective, beliefs can prove to be very durable over a long period of time. This does not imply that beliefs are static once they are established because they continue to be altered and refined according to historical circumstances by religious thinkers. (Olson 2011, 36-37)

Olson, Carl (2011) *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.

### **Words and Power (Scripture and Religious Words):**

“The major functional attributes of scripture [as well as prayers, chants, and other religious words] are bound up with the power felt to be inherent in scriptural word. Both the written and the spoken word carry a seemingly innate power in human perception. At the most basic level, a word is an action: words do not signify so much as they perform. Hence to speak a name ritually is in some measure to control or to summon the one named. For the faithful, a sacred word is not merely a word, but an operative, salvific word. Its unique, transformative power often rests upon its being spoken (or written) by a god (as in Jewish, Christian, or Muslim tradition). In other cases, the sound itself is primordial and holy (as in India), or the message or teaching embodied in the scriptural word is considered to be salvific truth, with little or no reference to a divine origin (as in many Buddhist traditions).” (“Graham 2005, 8200)

Graham, William A. (2005), "Scripture." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones. Vol. 12. 8194–8205. Detroit: Macmillan

### **Prayer:**

"Prayer can be comprehended as a form of communication between humans and higher powers. The word is derived from a Latin term pre-care (to beg or entreat). Prayer is also evocational in the sense that it calls forth a network of symbols related to sense experiences, moods, emotions, and values. This aspect of prayer is associated with rhythmic repetition, symbolic language, sounds, sights, ritual gestures, and dance movements. Prayer is a ritual act that possesses a pragmatic character. It also represents a performative utterance, suggesting that the reciting of the words of the prayer is the doing of an action that makes something happen, such as healing or wish fulfillment."  
(Olson 2011,188)

Olson, Carl (2011) *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.

### **Ritual:**

Quoting J.Z. Smith, Andrew Henry (2016) states, "Ritual is above all an assertion of difference," i.e., from the ordinary" (Henry 2016)

Henry, Andrew M. (2016) "Ritual." *Religion for Breakfast* (Video, 00:06:31). Published July 5. YouTube. [https://youtu.be/F\\_URgZf01hU?si=vzzfmHf0m35O9TRu](https://youtu.be/F_URgZf01hU?si=vzzfmHf0m35O9TRu)

Catherine Bell argues that “ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane”, and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors” (Bell 1992, 74)

Bell, C. M. (1992). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### **Ritual as Meaningful Action:**

"[R]ituals are actions carried out for more than their utilitarian purpose. That is, rituals are actions which have meanings beyond the actions themselves. Perhaps a simpler – indeed minimalistic – definition of ritual is ‘meaningful action’." (Nye 2014, 133)

Nye, Malory. (2014). *Religion: The Basics*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

### **Ritual as Symbolic Action:**

"[R]itual may be seen as ‘symbolic action’, and symbols are at the heart of rituals." (Nye 2014, 135)

Nye, Malory. (2014). *Religion: The Basics*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

### **Ritual and Communication:**

“[R]ituals are often a means of communicating messages to participants. That is, through the performance of a ritual activity, those involved may come to be aware of some idea or concept or viewpoint.” (Nye 2014, 138)

Nye, Malory. (2014). *Religion: The Basics*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

### **Ritual and Rites of Passage:**

“[Arnold] Van Gennep suggested that ritual actions often work in significant ways to transform people’s concepts of time, space, and society...[The] most significant and well-discussed element of van Gennep’s argument is his threefold (or tripartite) scheme, which he presented as being the basic structure of all rites of passage. That is, he argued that all rituals which involve transition have three important stages: separation, liminality, and incorporation. The first stage of rites of passage usually involves some separation between the participant and the world in which they normally live. In this way the person is detached from the roles and obligations that have been associated with their lives up until that time. Such a separation may be portrayed in a very extreme form – with participants being regarded as ‘dead’ during this phase. The second stage of this ritual process was labelled liminality by van Gennep. This stage (like the other two) may last a long time, or it may be very short, but he argued it is a vital part of the transformation which rites of passage attempt to achieve. The word liminality has its origins in the Latin word ‘limen’ which means a threshold. During this middle stage of the ritual the participants are expected to cross a threshold which marks the boundary between the world that they are leaving behind and the social world which the ritual is preparing them for. This threshold, which is betwixt and between two different worlds, is demonstrated in various ways in ritual. The threshold may be marked out physically, for participants to cross in some way – for example, by making them walk over a step or a line on the ground, to jump over a barrier, or to walk through a door...

“At the conclusion of a rite of passage, for van Gennep the third incorporation stage gives an indication of the new role that the participants are to take on. The participants are welcomed back from liminality, as new people who will be expected to behave differently. This incorporation will physically demonstrate a link between the individual who has been transformed, and the social group into which they are entering. They may be welcomed by their new peers, or be expected to stand amongst them, or they may be given a new title or name to indicate this change. The stage of incorporation demonstrates how the ritual has inwardly transformed and outwardly changed the participants, and it installs them into a new place in society.” (Nye 2014, 145–47)

Nye, Malory. (2014). *Religion: The Basics*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

### **Lived Religion:**

“[T]o study lived religion entails a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and of what it means to be "religious." Religion is not only not *sui generis*, distinct from other dimensions of experience called "profane." Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life.” (Orsi 1997, 7)

Orsi, Robert. 1997. "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion." *In Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* David D. Hall (ed), Princeton: Princeton University Press.

“[T]he focus on lived religion...points us to religion as it is shaped and experienced in the interplay among venues of everyday experience...in the necessary and mutually transforming exchanges between religious authorities and the broader communities of practitioners, by real men and women in situations and relationships they have made and that have made them.” (Orsi 1997, 9)

Orsi, Robert. 1997. "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion." *In Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* David D. Hall (ed), Princeton: Princeton University Press.