

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Religions organize themselves—their institutions, practitioners, and structures—in a variety of fashions. For instance, when the Roman Catholic Church emerged, it borrowed many of its organizational principles from the ancient Roman military, turning senators into cardinals, for example. Sociologists use different terms, like *ecclesia*, *denomination*, and *sect*, to define these types of organizations. Scholars are also aware that these definitions are not static. Most religions transition through different organizational phases. For example, Christianity began as a cult, transformed into a sect, and today exists as an *ecclesia*.

Cults, like sects, are new religious groups. In popular usage, this term often carries pejorative connotations. Today, the term “cult” is used interchangeably with the term new religious movement (NRM). However, almost all religions began as NRMs and gradually progressed to levels of greater size and organization. In its pejorative use, these groups are often disparaged as being secretive, highly controlling of members’ lives, and dominated by a single, charismatic leader.

A sect is a small and relatively new group. Most of the well-known Christian denominations began as sects. For example, the Presbyterians and Baptists protested against their parent Anglican Church in England, just as Henry VIII protested against the Catholic Church by forming the Anglican Church. From “protest” comes the term Protestant.

Occasionally, a sect is breakaway group that may be in tension with larger society. They sometimes claim to be returning to “the fundamentals” or to contest the veracity of a particular doctrine. When membership in a sect increases over time, it may grow into a denomination. Often a sect begins as an offshoot of a denomination, when a group of members believes they should separate from the larger group.

Some sects evolve without growing into denominations. Sociologists call these established sects. Established sects, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses fall halfway between sect and denomination on the *ecclesia*–cult continuum because they have a mixture of sect-like and denomination-like characteristics.

A denomination is a large, mainstream religious organization, but it does not claim to be official or state-sponsored. It is one religion among many. For example, the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church, Catholic Church, and Seventh-day Adventist are all Christian denominations.

One way to remember these religious organizational terms is to think of cults (NRMs), sects, denominations, and ecclesia representing a continuum, with increasing influence on society, where cults are least influential and ecclesia are most influential.

Types of Religions

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have strived to classify religions. One widely accepted categorization that helps people understand different belief systems considers what or who people worship (if anything). Using this method of classification, religions might fall into one of the following basic categories.

- **Theism** = Belief in the existence of a God or any gods (<Greek *theos* = “god”)
 - The broadest category; a generic term of which the other –isms are subcategories.
- **Atheism** = Belief that God and/or gods “do not exist” (prefix *a-* = “not”)
 - Atheists are people who have definitely decided that they do not believe in God/gods.
- **Agnosticism** = “Not knowing” whether God exists; “non-belief” in general
 - Agnostics are not sure or have not decided whether or not they believe in God/gods.
- **Gnosticism** = Belief that salvation comes by knowing divine secrets (Gk. *gnosis* = “knowledge”)
 - A popular religious system during the first few Christian centuries (and again today?).

- **Polytheism** = Belief in the existence of “many” gods (Gk. *poly* = “much, many”)
 - Most ancient peoples (Egyptians, Mesopotamians, etc.) worshipped many gods, often in animal form.
 - Greeks & Romans believed in a large family of gods, who were thought to reside on Mount Olympus.
- **Pantheism** = Belief that divinity resides “everywhere” and “in everything” (Gk. *pan* = “all”)
 - The whole universe is considered divine; but there is no “god” separate from the world.
- **Deism** = Belief that God created the world, but no longer influences it (Latin *deus* = “god”)
 - Based on 18th-century rationalism (e.g. Thomas Jefferson).
- **Paganism** = All religions outside of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (from their perspective)
 - Popular connotation is negative: pagans, heathens, unbelievers, hedonists, etc.
 - Academic meaning is neutral: any non-monotheistic religions, esp. of ancient or medieval Europe.
- **Henotheism** = Allegiance to “one” god rather than any other gods (Gk. *hen* = “one”)
 - Presupposes that other “gods” exist, other nations/peoples having their own gods;
 - but maintains, “Our god is stronger/better than your gods!”
- **Monotheism** = Belief in the existence of “only one ” God (Gk. *monos* = “alone”)
 - Asserts that what others call “gods” are at best spirits, at worst idols, but certainly not divine.
 - Core belief of Judaism, Christianity, Islam; a.k.a. the “monotheistic religions”
- **Trinitarianism** or **Trinitarian Monotheism** = Christian belief that the one God is a “Trinity” of three divine persons

- There is only *one* divine “*nature*” but *three* divine “*persons*”: Father (Creator), Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit.
- **Tri-theism** = belief in the existence of three separate gods (Gk. *tria* = “three”)
 - Some people erroneously think Christians are tri-theists (as if the Father, Son, and Spirit were three separate gods);
 - but Christians themselves believe that the Father, Son, and Spirit are inseparable, truly *one* (like a single triangle).
- **NB:** To learn these terms well, study them in pairs that might be easily confused:
 - Atheism vs. Agnosticism, Theism vs. Deism, Monotheism vs. Henotheism, Pantheism vs. Polytheism, etc.

Note that some religions may be practiced—or understood—in various categories. For instance, the Christian notion of the Holy Trinity (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit) defies the definition of monotheism to some scholars. Similarly, many Westerners view the multiple manifestations of Hinduism’s godhead as polytheistic, while Hindus might describe those manifestations as a monotheistic parallel to the Christian Trinity.

It is also important to note that every society also has nonbelievers, such as atheists, who do not believe in a divine being or entity, and agnostics, who hold that ultimate reality (such as God) is unknowable. While typically not an organized group, atheists and agnostics represent a significant portion of the population. It is important to recognize that being a nonbeliever in a divine entity does not mean the individual subscribes to no morality. Indeed, many Nobel Peace Prize winners and other great humanitarians over the centuries would have classified themselves as atheists or agnostics.

ELEMENTS OF RELIGION

Following the Al Qaeda attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 (often called 9/11), studies of religion in world politics increased six fold. In the words of Robert Keohane, the events of 9/11 provoked the realization that ‘world-shaking political movements have so often been fueled by religious fervor’. Indeed, whether it is the disruptions of religion-led revolution, the work of religious development agencies responding to natural disasters, peace-making efforts of religious diplomats or a myriad of other examples, even a glance at global affairs over recent decades seems to support the comment of sociologist Peter Berger that ‘the world today ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever’.

Such a view also seems supported by the numbers as ‘worldwide, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group’ (Pew 2012, 9). Are you numbered among the 20 or 80 per cent? Do you think religious influence on global affairs is a welcome inclusion or a significant problem? Regardless of where we stand, it appears a closer look at the ‘religion question’ is in order. The following five elements of religion may provide a useful introduction.

1. God(s)/Supreme Being

The first element of religion is the belief that divine beings and/or forces hold relevance to the meaning and practice of society today and throughout history. These beings are sometimes understood as a knowable God or gods, sometimes as mythical and symbolic figures from our ancient past and sometimes as impersonal forces beyond the physical realm.

Different religious traditions understand the influence of religion upon society in different ways. Traditions that we might call ‘fundamental’ propose that social phenomena are a matter of organizing society according to divine commands. In Iran, for example, the highest court in the land is a religious one, drawing its principles from the Shia branch of Islam – the second largest Islamic tradition worldwide after the majority Sunni tradition. This court has the power to veto laws of parliament and decide

who can hold power. Likewise, in Myanmar (formerly Burma) an influential group of religious monks has started a movement intent on imposing Buddhist principles on the whole country, including non-Buddhist minorities. Thus, some religious politics is based on 'fundamentals' that, in the view of adherents, cannot be changed without the standards of society also being compromised.

By contrast, traditions that adopt a 'contextual' approach hold that politics is a matter of influencing society according to divine principles but as part of a wider tapestry of influences. For example, religious development organizations such as the Aga Khan Development Network (also from the Shia branch of Islam) work in areas of health care and education in countries of Africa and Asia without seeking to control entire political systems. Likewise, in Myanmar, the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007 saw Buddhist monks stand with the poor against the ruling military dictatorship and support the beginnings of multi-party democracy. In these examples, religious politics is adapted to changing circumstances and takes into account diverse interests and beliefs across society.

What is common to both fundamental and contextual religious traditions is an understanding that social phenomena are in some sort of interactive relationship with the intentions of, or traditions shaped by, gods (or God) and spiritual forces. This contrasts strongly with secular approaches that demote, and sometimes deny altogether, a role for religion in society affairs.

Do you believe that religion has a role to play in public debates or should it be confined to private spirituality only? From an individual point of view, we could address this question by asking what it would be like to live in societies that are either entirely controlled by religion, or entirely without religion. What would the benefits and losses be in each situation? It can be strongly argued that neither scenario exists in pure form. When religion has been used to dominate the public square, a diversity of groups (non-religious and religious) have risen in opposition. Likewise, when religion has been expelled from the public domain, religious actors and interests go underground waiting for a chance to re-emerge.

2. Religious rituals

The second element of religion are rituals that re-order the world according to religious principle. Although the word 'faith' can be associated with belief in unseen realities, humans throughout time have needed to see, touch and smell the sacred. Our senses are portals to the spirit. Therefore, rituals function as tangible symbols of the intangible realm. While some religious rituals are private or hidden, many are performed in public spaces or in ways that are openly accessible to wider society. As such, they are a part of public life.

While many African scholars affirm that everything in the African culture is done religiously, rituals are some of those moments when African religiousness is highly expressed and lived. Rituals can be regarded as the uppermost point of expressing what African people value most and also what they are afraid of or despise. There are four African worldviews that determine rituals and that can help in understanding the epistemological foundation of the same: the Supreme Being as the principle source of all that exists, the intrinsic desire to grow spiritually and morally through rites of passage, the strong bond between an individual and the community, and lastly the universe as an interconnected and interdependent whole. By the term ritual, we intend all religious activities that are carried out to appease the divinities, spirits, or the Supreme Being, such as offerings and sacrifices. By offerings we mean anything offered during worship to divinities, spirits or the Supreme Being while sacrifices are where animals or farm produces are destroyed or burnt in honour of the divinities, spirits, or the Supreme Being. In some cultural communities, human life was also offered as a sacrifice. By ritual we also intend those rites that are carried out to enhance cohesive and continuity of a community such as rites of passage: birth rites, death rites, and harvest rites among others. Rituals and rites can be grouped into five categories: Transition rites that assist a person to move from one stage of life to a new one, for example birth rites, naming rites, teething rites, death rites and so on; Reformation and transformation rites, which facilitate profound spiritual and moral changes among the initiates, for example, adolescence to adulthood transitional rites, wedding rites,

crowning rites; Transformation rites, they are supplication rites which include prayers and petitions directed to the Divine Mystery and to the ancestors, for example, prayers for good health, for peace; Reconciliation and purification rites intended for reconciling two warring groups of people; and lastly thanksgiving and prayers rites that are celebrated in all occasions that call for celebration and festivity.

For religious adherents, rituals symbolize spiritual truths but they can also redefine how power can be understood in the material world. Thomas Merton once described his experience of watching Trappist monks perform the rituals of the Catholic Mass in very political terms. He wrote:

The eloquence of this liturgy [communicated] one, simple, cogent, tremendous truth: this church, the court of the Queen of Heaven, is the real capital of the country in which we are living. These men, hidden in the anonymity of their choir and their white cowls, are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God. (Merton 1948, 325)

Merton's experience of redefining power and influence through sacred symbols is true for millions of people practicing thousands of different religious rituals each day. Beyond the experience of individuals, states also seek divine blessing. For example, over one-fifth of states today have a monarch (such as a king, queen or emperor). Although monarchs differ in the extent of their powers – from figureheads controlled by parliaments to absolute rulers to variations of these – they all draw their power from some form of religious or spiritual authority. The elaborate rituals of monarchies worldwide are understood by their subjects to symbolize divine blessing for the realm and its citizens, redefining where the real power lies.

3. Symbols

The third element of religion is sacred symbols. Constructing and interpreting 'signs' is a basic activity in any society. Symbols have a central part in the human culture and as a consequence, cultural symbolic elements give a specific identity to a culture as they

enrich it too. «As our central nervous system [...] grew up in great part in interaction with culture, it is incapable of directing our behaviour or organizing our experience without the guidance provided by systems of significant symbols»¹. From the early stages of life, a human being is integrated into the society or a cultural community in symbolic ways. Learning and using cultural symbols allow human being to identify him/herself with a particular culture. Some of these symbolic cultural elements are: language, artefacts, lifestyle and rituals, among others. In this section we will analyse these cultural symbolic elements and their identity role to a cultural community.

The kinds of sign I am referring to are tangible reminders in modern societies of who we are as a people. They include styles of architecture (such as bridges or religious buildings), land or waterscapes that influence the activity of life (such as in harbor cities), monuments, flags and other identity banners, styles of clothing and habits of dress, distinctive food and drink – and so on. These signs are more than a tourist attraction, they are symbols that inform members about who they are as a group and that help the group live together cohesively.

For us to understand our religion in a given culture, we need to understand the sacred symbols that culture uses to enhance religiosity in the society. «For the culture in question, such symbols, most abundantly expressed in rituals and myths, explain the origin, purpose and meaning of the world and humanity's place in it. It is this relationship of symbols to meaning, and particularly human meaning that makes them such a fundamental aspect of religion. To Magesa, even the morality of the African people can be understood better through the examining of the world-view and ethos contained in their religious symbols. In his recent work «What is not sacred?, Magesa reaffirmed that «while cultural transformation is desirable and often necessary, any attempt to eradicate any culture, is the most wicked expression of this being genocide, is both reckless and foolish.

Consider, for example, the individual and international significance of national flags as cultural symbols. For individuals, a flag can be so powerful that citizens are prepared

¹ E.E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *The theories of primitive religion*, 49.

to die on the fields of battle fighting for its honor, representing as it does the ‘way of life’ of the nation.

Equally, persecuted communities within a country might see a national or regional flag as a symbol of oppression rather than freedom, symbolizing a dominant way of life that excludes them. In all regions of the world nationalist groups fight for autonomy or independence from a country or countries that surround them, and do so under alternative flags that represent their own cultural identity.

4. Sacred stories/doctrine – connecting past, present and future

The fourth element of religion is teaching traditions based on stories of significant figures, events and ideas from the past and beliefs about the future of time itself – like a spoiler alert about the end of the world. For some religions, however, time itself is an illusion and the main focus is living in the now according to sacred ideas rather than the connection of past–present–future. These elements – interpreting the past, projecting the future, living now – are basic to the development of political ideologies also. Therefore, sometimes religious and political groups can appeal to the same stories or ideas even though the interpretation or intent may differ significantly.

Sacred stories, ideas and teachings from the past have a richness and power that can influence societal affairs today and the aspirations we hold for tomorrow. It is no wonder that one anthropologist observed that what we today call religion has ‘always been involved in the world of power’.

5. Prayers and sacrifices

The fifth element common to most religions is the need for believers to belong to a faith community in order to practice sacred rituals and reinforce the truth of sacred stories. Some religious traditions could be described as high demand, requiring strict adherence to rules and standards in order to maintain membership of the faith community. Other traditions are low demand, adopting a more flexible approach to the requirements for belonging faithfully to the community. Both forms of faith commitment are expressions

of religion as 'identity politics' connected to who we are (that is, who we understand ourselves to be) and how we live.

The connection between religion and social identity can have individual and international significance. For instance, empowered by belonging to a faith community, individuals can act in ways that they might not otherwise have done in isolation. Rosa Parks, an African American woman who famously refused to obey American racial segregation laws and sparked a nation-wide civil rights movement in the 1960s, is often lauded as a heroic individual. This may be true, but as a member of a religious community that affirmed human dignity and the divine principles of racial equality, Rosa Parks was never acting in isolation. This can be understood internationally also, as many faith communities have a transnational membership, and some of these exert significant influence on political issues varying from religion-inspired terrorist action against 'Western' values to faith coalitions for environmental sustainability.

The five elements of religion described above seem in their own ways to be a core aspect of the human condition in the twenty-first century. These elements have a great influence on religion and consequently on the society too.