

Religion in Five Minutes

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What is the function of religion?

Rick Moore

There is no simple answer to the question of religion's function, although several common themes emerge. Religion is often thought to be an institution that helps hold society together, producing what sociologists call social solidarity. One way it does this is through creating and fostering shared beliefs, practices and identities. As religion is social—people attend religious institutions together, participate in common religious practices, and communicate with others concerning their faith—it provides opportunities for the kinds of interactions that create a sense of community. Likewise, religion serves as a marker of difference. Not only does it say who belongs in our community, it lets us know who is outside of it, which in turn brings us closer to the people who share our own religious sentiments.

In addition to creating solidarity, religion serves as means of social control and meaning-making. Religions usually tell people what to do, what actions are acceptable in themselves and in others, and what things should be avoided. They also specify rewards and punishments for compliance or non-compliance with these rules, either in this world or in some future context (e.g., heaven, hell, a future life, etc.). In this way, religion is related to the formation of various moralities. This does not mean that one needs to be religious to be moral, but simply that religions are one important source of morality for their adherents, as well as for societies in

general. But beyond just telling us what we should and should not do, religion usually gives us an explanation for 'why.' Religions explain not only why we should obey their rules, but why the world is the way that it is, more generally. They give accounts of reality and our place in it that add meaning to events, from everyday interactions, to celebratory occasions like births and weddings, to difficult situations like deaths and national tragedies.

These functions of social control and meaning-making have led some to argue that religion has more 'dysfunctions' than functions; in other words, religion has more negative than positive effects on individuals and society. The nineteenth century philosopher Karl Marx, for example, famously referred to religion as the 'opiate of the masses' because, in his view, its main function was that of propping up an unjust society by numbing people to the inequalities he argued were inherent in the social system. Today, somewhat similar views are held by many of the so-called 'New Atheists,' such as the British biologist Richard Dawkins. These individuals are known for publicly arguing that religion is a harmful institution that has outlived its usefulness, for example, by hindering scientific thought or subjugating women. Most religious people would, however, dismiss the notion that religions' main functions are harmful, even if they might agree that religion can have negative impacts in specific situations.

These differing opinions on what the 'real' purposes of religion are point towards the difficulties inherent in asking questions about religion's function. Religions are extremely diverse and varied. It therefore makes little sense to assume that all religions possess a single set of functions that apply at all times and in all locations. Rather, it is more productive to think about the constellation of functions that individual religions might fulfill, depending on the specific context being examined. Which functions are attributed to religion also vary greatly depending on the perspective of the person making the judgment, as can be seen above.

Besides the social functions, other potential functions of religion include psychological, and what can be called spiritual functions. Psychologically, religion generates a wide range of feelings

and emotions. People often take comfort from religion in the face of tragedy or personal difficulties, thus helping them cope with stress. Religion can also create feelings of joy, fulfillment, release from tension and even ecstasy. From the perspective of religious adherents it also provides important spiritual functions. Those who either believe and/or practice their particular faith often understand it as a critical means of communicating with the divine. Religion thus brings them into contact with an aspect of the world that is beyond themselves, fostering experiences of transcendence.

The potential functions of religion are many, as with the functions of any social institution. Depending on the context, other possible functions of religion include: giving people something to do; educating and socializing children; providing employment; and producing societal change, among others. The exact 'functions' of religion depend on the religion being examined, the context, and the perspective of the person asking the question.

About the author

Rick Moore is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Chicago who specializes in the study of religion and secularism in the United States. His research addresses questions of how groups with vastly different perspectives on religion, such as atheists and evangelical Christians, understand what religion is, as well as the political and social implications of their positions.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 4 (sport as religion) and 11 (origins of religion).

Elsewhere

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. New York: Bantam Books, 2006.

Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking, 2006.

Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912].

Orsi, Robert A. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985.

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What is the difference between rituals and habits?

Russell T. McCutcheon

Classification matters—something that’s already probably becoming pretty apparent in this book’s answers. For although the difference between a ritual and a mere habit may seem pretty obvious when you first think about it, it doesn’t take long before you start to see that the difference may be in the eye of the beholder—or, better put, the classifier.

Right from the start, we’d all probably distinguish the two by referring to this thing we call meaning, as in the assumption that rituals are meaningful—in fact, *deeply* meaningful—whereas habits are not. Rituals, as almost anyone would tell you, are something we think about, a lot, while habits are routine, unthinking, and thus redundant and rather unnecessary. The differences are pretty obvious, then. So while communion in a Roman Catholic church, or making a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca, are both rituals, brushing your teeth or unthinkingly bouncing your knee are mere habits.

The ‘mere’ that ends that previous sentence is important—for many people would probably be insulted to elevate (a notion of height, and thus rank and place, is pretty explicit in that very word) so-called bad habits to the level of something they’d call a ritual. In fact, the value-laden distinction between the two is pretty evident in the fact that we’re far more likely to understand habits as bad than good—we don’t often praise people for having ‘good