

Religion in Five Minutes

Edited by
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Where does the word religion come from?

David McConeghy

The modern English word 'religion' has ancient origins. The Latin term *religio*, which began to be used around the 1st century BCE, may have roots in two different verbs: *religare* or 'to bind fast' and *relegere* meaning 'to consider carefully.' The use of these terms is complex, but *religio* first appears in discussions by the Roman philosophers Cicero and Lucretius about the ceremonial duties humans owe to the gods to avoid the wrath of forces beyond our control.

Today, tracing 'religion' to *religare* in the sense of bind or connect is more common, but in the fourth century Christians were comfortable using both meanings. *Religio* meant a person's scruples (or second thoughts) as well as described the proper worship that brought humans closer to each other and god(s). The notable theologian Augustine, for instance, argued it was important for religion's worship to be focused on the correct object (i.e., God as opposed to statues). If you were going to bind yourself to god to avoid damnation then you had better consider your options and choose wisely.

Augustine and many others that followed him wrote about Christianity and Judaism using terms from other languages that were not direct synonyms for *religio*. Latin was the primary language of Christian scholars for hundreds of years, but the Bible was translated from Greek and Hebrew. The Greek word *threskeia*

dealt more directly with ritual worship, but there were also Hebrew terms that had cultural significance like *ioudaismos*, referring to the Judeans or Jews. After the middle of the seventh century it was necessary to have a serious discussion regarding Islam and what Muslims meant when they used the Arabic word *din* or creed. In all these issue of translation, religion became a lens for cross-cultural understanding. Did Christians and Jews both have religion? What about Romans rituals? Religion emerged as an analytical tool for description, identification, comparison, and classification. This process continued for hundreds of years with growing contributions beyond the Mediterranean.

By the colonial and modern era beginning in the nineteenth century, 'religion' was emerging as the catch-all term for those in Europe and America to describe Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, and more. Definitions of religion struggled to identify the core of the term that mattered when comparing these traditions. Did it mean belief in one God? Was action or belief primary? Translation continued as in the use of 'Hindu' for Indian followers of Sanatana Dharma or the eternal law. For many in Asia using a more generic western term offered a trade-off: a reduction in the meaning(s) of expansive and complex native terms in favor of cohesion and recognition as 'world religions' alongside Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

That trade-off is unresolved, so what religion is or what counts as religious varies. The word's primary use remains as a tool of classification to describe an incredibly diverse class of objects, ideas, practices, and institutions. Definitions that have modeled themselves on the legacy of *religio*'s use by early Christianity have been attacked for coercing non-Christians to use a term developed to elevate Christianity and even to denigrate the beliefs and practices of other cultures. These challenges have been exacerbated not only by the legacy of religion's connection to colonial governance, but also because control of the term's scope and meaning influence a range of issues such as the extent of legal protections for religious freedom. The self-evidence of many claims about religion (i.e., 'I know it when I see it') remain a fundamental hurdle for the

term's ongoing development. If it once described what Romans did to appease their gods, then today it is a battleground over identity: can what seems self-evident to one group about what defines religion be used by others who see the world differently? Appropriately, the fight over term's use connects us. We must all carefully consider how cross-cultural translation offers more than synonyms for foreign words. Thus, the word religion's origins remind us that definition and translation are extraordinary powers that shape our connections to others.

About the author

David McConeghy is an independent researcher and writer living in the Greater Boston area. He holds a PhD in religious studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara and has taught religious ethics and world religions at Chapman University in Orange, California.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 3 (classifying religion), 5 (religion v. mythology), and 6 (religion v. philosophy).

Elsewhere

Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Nongbri, Brent. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.

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What does it take for something to be classified as a 'religion'?

Robyn Faith Walsh

Although there isn't a firm consensus, most scholars agree that for something to be classified as a religion, it must demonstrate a concern with or acceptance of some kind of supernatural being or force. Whether described in terms of anthropomorphized gods, elements of nature, deceased ancestors, or unseen agents, these supernatural phenomena are understood to have influence over the natural world. Activities are called 'religious' when these phenomena are acknowledged by some form of ritual or practice such as groups gathering in order to communicate with gods or spirits, ritual meals, or individuals producing specialized kinds of writing or artwork that acknowledge the existence of immaterial forces in the attempt to explain their origins and purpose.

Classifying religion this way allows scholars to identify, describe, and compare certain circumscribed practices and discourses for the purposes of scholarly inquiry. But, this perceived flexibility is also a source of controversy, with critics noting that it imposes what is essentially a modern Western, folk classification onto a set of dynamic practices not so easily set apart from other aspects of social life. To understand this, we must first realize that religion does not exist as a special set of ideas or practices that are universal to all people across time and culture. When any of