

Religion in Five Minutes

Edited by
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Why is it important that we study religion?

K. Merinda Simmons

This question is an interesting one because, so often, there is some assumed substance to the term 'religion' that might be studied. Typically, there are also some go-to examples that stand in for a definition: What's religion? Well, Hinduism is a religion, some might say. This common approach makes sense of why students entering my 'Introduction to religious studies' course often expect, they have told me, a survey of 'world religions' that includes descriptive units about Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Rastafarianism, and other traditions or systems of belief that are deemed to fit beneath the 'religion' umbrella. These students are surprised when I make plain on the first day of class that the course offers no such survey but is, instead, a chance to think in a bit more depth about how we come to identify certain things as 'religion' at all and about the consequences of doing so. On one hand, the term is so frequently used that such an approach might initially seem like an unnecessary exploration of what is already common sense. But if we think seriously about the fact that 'religion' is a word like any other whose meanings have changed a great deal over time and over a great many number of geographical, political, and social contexts, the seemingly common sense nature of the term suddenly seems not so common after all. That familiarity (or lack thereof) with the term is, therefore, what appears worth exploring.

With that in mind, it is not especially important that we study *religion*. Or at least, not if that means analyzing something existing naturally in the world that we scholars passively recognize and describe upon locating it. What *is* important is learning to ask questions about the labels we tend to use more or less unconsciously and the qualities we give them. One of those labels—one to which many people attach a great deal of significance—is, of course, 'religion.' If a system of beliefs or practices is called a religion—as opposed to a 'cult' or 'radical fringe group,' for example—that designation will bring with it a higher level of social, political, and economic legitimacy. The importance of looking at language becomes quickly apparent when considering, for example, how politicians (this is certainly the case in the US currently) simultaneously embrace 'religion' and condemn 'extremism.' What traditions or practices come to be included in either category? Who makes those decisions and how? Studying religion with these kinds of questions in mind allows us to think about how boundaries get established and subsequently defended, policed, or challenged.

What's more, seeing such boundaries and classifications not as natural or stable but as tools people use differently in different settings is crucial if we are to become aware of our own investments in various terms and ideas. We tend not to have to think much about what is familiar (and, thus, 'normal') to us, even as we use it as an important starting point. Religion is one of those familiar points that help chart a course on the map of ideas and concepts that we use to navigate our social worlds. So, there is much to be gained in defamiliarizing ourselves with the term by thinking about it in ways we typically don't have to and by asking what kinds of assumptions and expectations appear in conversations about religion.

If we can start becoming curious about ourselves—how we come to call certain things familiar and how we come to identify other things as strange—then we can start engaging the local and larger worlds around us with more sophistication and complexity. Everything (or nothing) is 'important,' depending on who's talking

about it. So it seems that the substance of our study is not the thing called religion—is ‘it’ even a thing? A set of practices? Beliefs held deep inside ourselves? One sees how quickly one might start sliding down particular rabbit holes. Instead, more productive is looking at what’s at work when this or that person or group calls something ‘religion’ at all.

About the author

K. Merinda Simmons is associate professor of religious studies at the University of Alabama. Her areas of teaching and research focus on identifications of race, gender, and religion in the Caribbean and the American South.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 72 (studying religion in public schools) and 75 (interdisciplinarity).

Elsewhere

Martin, Craig. *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

McCutcheon, Russell T. *Studying Religion: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Nye, Malory. *Religion: The Basics*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

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Is there a difference between religious studies and theology?

Jason N. Blum

Unequivocally, yes. To summarize somewhat simplistically (but not inaccurately): theologians study the supernatural; religious studies scholars study what people say about the supernatural.

One place to begin understanding the difference is the academic institutions associated with each field. In the United States, a degree in religious studies—either a Master of Arts (MA) or a Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD)—is earned through an academic department that typically has ‘religion’ or ‘religious studies’ in its name (i.e., a ‘Department of Religious Studies’ or ‘Department of Religion’). Such departments are found within both public and private universities and colleges. By contrast, degrees in theology are known as Master of Divinity (MDiv) and Doctorate in Theology (ThD), and are typically bestowed by seminaries and schools or departments of theology—that is, by academic institutions that are explicitly religious in nature (this distinction is not always as clear in other countries, where programs in religious studies and theology may operate out of a single department, or the terms may be used interchangeably). The MDiv degree is the standard prerequisite for individuals seeking to become priests or ministers, whereas a degree in religious studies typically does *not* indicate a career in the professional ministry.