

Religion in Five Minutes

Edited by
Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon

equinox

SHEFFIELD UK BRISTOL OR

75

Is the study of religion related to other academic disciplines?

Jennifer Eyl

One word suffices to answer this question: Yes. That is to say, the academic study of religion pertains to almost all fields of academic inquiry, because the practices and beliefs that many people today call 'religion' pertain to every aspect of human behavior. This is not to suggest that all human behaviors are religious all the time, of course (such a claim would bankrupt the very word of meaning), but rather, the things we call 'religion' and 'religious' are not separate from all other things that people do, say, or think. The study of religion tends to be associated with the disciplines of history, anthropology, and sociology, but these disciplines themselves are quite broad. Because the study of religion asks questions about power, social structure, and the constitution of subjectivity (as well as the constitution of social groups), there are few, if any, arenas of human practices beyond the scope of the topic.

The study of religion comes out of a nineteenth-century German school of thinking called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* ('history of religions school'). Early scholars of religion imagined that human intellectual and psychological development began in primitive stages prone to animism and polytheism, but grew and developed toward the ideal (or, fully developed) form of religion, namely, monotheism. This teleological notion of 'development'

has been abandoned by scholars due to the self-congratulatory privileging of Christianity and European culture inherent in such a position. Likewise, many scholars have questioned the usefulness of the category 'religion' in the first place, as the category is imposed upon the practices of people who do not classify their own activities in the same way. Thus, the study of religion is simultaneously a study of how (mostly) Western scholars classify the practices of people around the world and in history, as well as the examination of the practices and beliefs themselves (usually pertaining to gods or other invisible beings). And such practices touch upon all aspects of life.

For example, religion and economics often overlap. When people donate money to churches or temples, when religious organizations manage money, or when the IRS gives religious organizations tax breaks, we see clearly how intertwined religion and economics can be. Discourses about morality and gods often overlap with ideas about money—especially with regard to who is entitled to money (or not), who has been shown divine favor (or disfavor) via wealth, etc. Religious ideology can even contribute to the justification for broad economic systems: at the present historical moment, for example, many Americans believe capitalism to somehow be divinely ordained.

Religion and technology are also intimately connected, such that technological innovations find their way into religious practices, as much as religious concerns motivate technological innovation. For example, some of the most important advancements in technology and communications of the early twentieth century were motivated by concerns about the afterlife. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, was attempting a device so sensitive that the living could talk to the dead. Thomas Edison, inventor of the phonograph, believed it possible to develop an apparatus that could record voices of the dead, just as the phonograph captures voices of the living. A nineteenth-century religious movement called 'Spiritualism,' which included the dead tapping on walls to communicate to the living, gained ground right after the invention of the telegraph. Thus, the study of telecommunications and the study of religion are sometimes co-implicated.

I point to the above examples to demonstrate that even when one imagines the domain of 'religion' to be obvious and separate from other things, one discovers that what we call religion reflects the material conditions of living. Thus, it is common to find university courses and academic books about the anthropology of religion, or the history of Christianity, or sociological studies on various religious groups. The connection between the study of religion and other fields such as history, anthropology, and sociology, is explicitly imbedded in the university curriculum. Yet, the academic study of religion extends even further to fields such as political science, economics, philosophy, psychology, gender studies, critical race theory, art, dance, creative writing, and every field in which discourses and practices about gods, ethics, morality, or invisible powers take place.

This, of course, leads one to ask: if we can speak of religion and politics, religion and sports, religion and science, religion and economics, religion and gender, etc., then what, exactly, is religion? It is not the task of this chapter to answer such a question, but the question should provoke thought about how we construct categories and classify human practices and beliefs.

About the author

Jennifer Eyl is an assistant professor of religion at Tufts University. She works primarily on ancient Christianity.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 69 (texts v. fieldwork) and 76 (contributions of the study of religion).

Elsewhere

Martin, Craig. *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

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

McGarry, Molly. *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.

Nongbri, Brent. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015.