

# Religion in Five Minutes

Edited by  
Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon

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## Is everyone religious?

Russell T. McCutcheon

Historically speaking, we'd have to answer that by saying a resounding no, not at all; for the word *religion* was once applied rather narrowly (some still do this today, of course). That is, 'they' might have been seen by 'us' as being idolatrous heathens, superstitious savages, or practicing magic, while 'we' were cultured, civilized, and, yes, pious, religious, or even saved. But then, it's not difficult at all to trace the manner in which this designation—labeling something as a religion or something or someone as religious—was gradually expanded, such as in the so-called age of discovery. For people newly encountered seemed to be doing things rather like what 'we' were doing (that is what those earlier European explorers, sailors, missionaries, soldiers, traders, and bureaucrats understood themselves to be doing), yet how could they be like us, uncivilized as they were (and all that came with how 'we' once saw 'them'). Sure, we may all have been using water in rituals, or telling creation tales, but ...

But now, unlike past replies, we'd probably offer a resounding yes, of course they are. Google 'world religions map,' for example, and there's a good chance that you'll come across a variety of maps of the globe in which every inch of territory is colored red or blue or green, or whatever color the map's key associates with each of the world's religions. For today, inasmuch as you are a human being, many of us now tend to think that you're necessarily religious (much as today everyone must claim a nationality and own a passport if they expect to move around the globe—but it

wasn't always that way, right?); even people who now claim *not to have a religion*—people who might call themselves agnostics (claiming not to know if there is a god or not), as well as those who see themselves to be atheists (disbelieving in the existence of a god)—are studied today by scholars of religion, which implies that they must have something in common with religious people, given that scholars trained in this one specialty seem to think they have something worthwhile to say about them. In fact, the modern popularity of seeing religion as either a belief system, ideology or worldview—as a way that people make their worlds habitable and meaningful (thereby defining these words in rather particular ways)—implies that inasmuch as everyone could be said to have a point of view then, voila, they're all religious as well. 'The religion of secularism ...' is something people on the religious right now like to talk about when, for instance, making a case for why creationism (or what some now instead call Intelligent Design) ought to be taught in public schools alongside evolutionary theory. Or, again, consider the current fashion of assuming religion to name some deeply human yearning or experience—such as those who see it as synonymous with belief or faith—something that is woven into our very fabric (or, for some biologists and cognitive scientists, we could say our very genes); this means that we can't conceive of 'the human' without at the same time understanding people all to be *homo religiosus*.

So yes, everyone is religious—at least that's what we'd now say.

What should be evident is that answering this question requires one to use a contested term—as other chapters will make evident, there is currently hot debate among scholars around where the word comes from and the limits of its use—that can be defined in so many different ways that the answer tells you more about the one doing the answering than the thing the answer is supposedly about. Case in point: recalling a point made above, consider David Chidester's important book, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (1996), in which the author charts the progressive intellectual moves that, over time, enabled Europeans who at first maintained that the newly

encountered peoples, on the colonial frontier, had no religion to slowly, but eventually, come to see that, well, they were indeed religious, not unlike us. Chidester, like a variety of other scholars in his academic tradition, therefore makes plain that this word religion is a comparative category used in moments of contact—something we talk about inasmuch as we see certain resemblances (or not) across different settings and among different peoples. Should, for example, belief in a creator god rise to the top of your criteria (as it does for many but not all who use the term), then only those systems that satisfy this one requirement may all strike you as looking sufficiently alike to all be called religious. This means that the identification of something *as* religious depends not just on criteria (and, thus, the one determining them) but on how we, as observers of the world, use those criteria to manage what counts as a similarity as opposed to a difference. After all, there are all sorts of things different between, say, Judaism and Shinto, yet if you pick up any world religions textbook you'll find a chapter on each. So the judgment that they're both religions—that people claiming to be each, following customs and making claims associated with each, are religious, as opposed to something else (such as Judaism known as an ethnic identity, at least according to others)—is indicative of a social actors making sense of their world, putting each in their place, so as to manage all that information that comes at us daily. In fact, with that world religions textbook in mind, it's pretty fascinating to look at how it has grown over the years, continually expanding to the degree that, much like the above-mentioned map, virtually every human being alive today is somehow addressed between its two covers.

And it's the malleability of this term, religion, that today strikes some scholars as so interesting. For if that textbook contained only those systems that, as just suggested, claim a creator god to exist, then it would be an awfully thin book. (The apparent absence of a creator god in what we know as Buddhism was among the reasons scholars for so many years—as some do to this day—insisted that it's a philosophy and *not* a religion.) That is, the topics included in such books' chapters all depend on varying degrees of overlap,



since none of these things are all identical (despite so many today still using Christianity as the role model for what gets to count as religious). So it's this move from a strict definition that excludes most of the people on the planet to what we have today—an extremely plastic, even totalizing, definition that encompasses virtually everything—that strikes some of us as the far more interesting issue to study.

So while I hope it doesn't read as what we used to call a cop-out, and thus or an attempt to side-step a tough query, answering this seemingly straightforward question depends on what you mean by religion. For if, as the Rev. Thwackum (a character in Henry Fielding's comic novel of 1749, *The History of Tom Jones*—who, like some to this day, maintained that 'there are various sects and heresies in the world') famously reported: 'When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England' (vol 1, book III.3), then you can imagine an answer far different than one offered by a cognitive scientist who studies religion as but one instance of an evolutionarily hardwired tendency to project the notion of agency onto the world around ourselves, as if the universe is alive and does things—one of which is to either love or punish us.

#### About the author

Russell T. McCutcheon is professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama; his work is on the theories of religion, approaches to the study of myth, as well as focusing on the history of the study of religion and the practical effects of classification systems.

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 2 (origins of the word religion), 3 (classifying religion), 4 (sports as religion), 7 (religions v. cults), 8 (belief in a higher power), 14 (spiritual but not religious), and 15 (atheism or secularism as religion).

*Elsewhere*

Chidester, David. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996.

Smart, Ninian. *Worldviews: Cross-Cultural Explorations in Human Beliefs* (3rd edition). New York: Pearson, 1999.

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