

# Religion in Five Minutes

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

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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

us speaks of 'religion,' we are not referring to something that is self-evident or a real thing-in-the-world. Instead, 'religion' is one of many terms invented by humans to describe certain aspects of social life. In the West, religion has come to possess strong associations with Western values and culture, and such associations should prevent us from taking its definition for granted.

The concept of religion as it is employed today has had a relatively short lifespan. The word derives from the Latin root *religio* meaning something along the lines of 'duty,' but the ancient Mediterranean authors who first used it intended it to mean everything from 'showing integrity,' to 'practices in recognition of the gods,' to the simple idea of 'rules.' While different groups saw different supernatural powers as authoritative (and this could certainly cause conflict!), they recognized such differences as intertwined with other forms of identification, like ethnicity. Thus, 'religion' maintained its tight association with other aspects of social life and was not easily distinguished from politics, medicine, science, economics and so on.

It is not until the Inquisition in Europe that 'religion' begins to be correlated with private belief. Further associations between 'religion' and coherent systems of faith and practice, sacred texts, institutional leaders, and so forth emerged during the fifteenth century onward, notably during the centuries of European colonialism. As the largely Christian political powers of Europe extended their reach into the continents of Asia, Africa, and what would later be known as the Americas, colonists applied their version of 'religion' in observing indigenous populations who shared certain practices or discourses. These indigenous customs were re-named by colonialists with terms like 'Buddhism' or 'Hinduism,' and many indigenous groups eventually adopted this imposed classification as a means of self-description.

In the US, people often talk about religion as interior or private, using phrases like 'personal belief' or asserting claims such as, 'I'm spiritual, not religious.' Interestingly, those who make such claims continue to engage in established practices (e.g., prayer, meditation) or acknowledge supernatural forces commonly associated

with 'religions' (e.g., a creator god) even if they don't explicitly accept such ideas themselves. Relatedly, neither the Congress nor the Supreme Court in the US has ever concretely defined religion, choosing instead to speak in terms of a 'Supreme Being,' 'deeply and sincerely held' morals and ethics, or simply naming various representative categories (e.g., Christianity, Taoism, even Secular Humanism). On one hand, this resistance to classification suggests a certain fidelity to the First Amendment. On the other hand, this failure to define religion, despite repeated calls to do so, demonstrates how difficult it is to isolate it from the larger fabric of everyday social life.

#### About the author

Robyn Faith Walsh is assistant professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of Miami (Florida). Her research interests include the letters of Paul, the history of the interpretation of the synoptic problem, and Greco-Roman archaeology.

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 1 (ubiquity of religion), 4 (sports as religion), 5 (religion v. mythology), and 6 (religion v. philosophy).

##### *Elsewhere*

Arnal, William E. and Russell T. McCutcheon. *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of 'Religion.'* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Stowers, Stanley. 'The Ontology of Religion.' In *Introducing Religion*, edited by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, 434–449. Sheffield: Equinox, 2008.