

### 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 8 (belief in a higher power) and 9 (sacred books).

#### *Elsewhere*

Hume, David. *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (edited by Charles H. Hendel). New York: Pearson, 1995 [1748].

Lincoln, Bruce. 'Theses on Method.' *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 225–227.

# 11

## How did religion start?

Nickolas P. Roubekas

By origin of religion two things are typically meant. First, the historical origin of religion; that is, when did religion first arise in the history of humanity—in other words, when, where, how, and why the first instance of what was later in human history described as 'religion' occurred. Second, the historical origin of a particular religion; that is, when and why did, say, Egyptian religion first arise. Some theorists of religion, that is, scholars who claim to be able to generalize about the category 'religion' across time and space, maintain that they can trace the historical origin of religion and the reason(s) of 'its' emergence. On the contrary, historians of particular religions (e.g., historians of Judaism or Zoroastrianism) are studying the origins of those very traditions without, however, offering a theory of the origin of religion as a phenomenon.

Moreover, origin of religion can refer to two distinct questions: either the historical or the recurrent origin. The latter addresses the questions of when, how, and why religion arises every time it does so; these questions are predicated on the existence of a need, which can vary from longing to come into contact with god(s) to non-religious needs, like for shelter or for explaining the natural world. Theological approaches trace the origin of religion to divine revelations or to an innate divinely given predisposition towards religion, whereas social scientific theories do not usually broach the issue of the truth of religion but rather concentrate on the human conditions that lead people to create religion. In this scheme, theological explanations would reply to the question of

how did religion start by resorting to the very existence of a divine power or realm: religion has always existed as has God (or gods). Contrarily, non-theological approaches—usually called social scientific theories as they stem from the social sciences—answer the question by examining the human conditions and motivations that led/lead to the emergence of religion.

Founding figures of the academic study of religion have given diverse replies to the question of how religion started. Sigmund Freud, for example, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) traced the historical emergence of religion at the dawn of history, as a result of sexual prohibitions and patricide, thus linking the origins of religion to his famous Oedipus complex. Émile Durkheim, on the other hand, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) does not broach the question of historical origin—for him, an unscientific question, since it lies outside any empirical access—and concentrates on the recurrent origin, taking as his case study the Australian aborigines and their totemic religion. For Durkheim, the how of origin is a response to a need for social cohesion, hence denying the idea of individual religion. The latter, however, was maintained by Edward B. Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871), who takes religion to be the result of the observation of the natural world; more particularly, the phenomenon of dreams and agency behind the natural physical phenomena, such as rain, thunder, lightning, etc. in the form of spiritual beings. Thus, for Tylor, religion emerges in place of science due to the lack of ‘unsophisticated’ people to account for their observations scientifically.

Additionally, scholars from archaeology and paleoanthropology have argued that religious practices can be traced back to the Upper Paleolithic period. However, a common mistake often made by scholars from both social and natural sciences is an unreflective utilization of the term ‘religion.’ Thus, scholars often generalize and classify divergent phenomena as ‘religion,’ as if the term is a common descriptor for things in the world that can only be described as such rather than, say, as political, ideological, or cultural. In other words, it is scientifically problematic to argue that there was one moment in time, one particular instance and

one specific reason for which religion started. Considering the way human cultures evolved in the span of thousands of years, their ‘religious’ traditions and practices were based on different motivations and rationales. Still, the very term ‘religion’ is a fairly recent one, which presupposes a certain set of traits that allow for something to be classified as religion. Such anachronistic imposition of a modern term stemming from the Latin language on traditions across time and space creates numerous problems. Hence, the answer to how did religion start is predicated on what is meant as *religion* and according to what particular definition one seeks the *how* of origin of something that is *ex post facto* classified as religion.

#### About the author

Nickolas P. Roubekas is Assistant Professor of religious studies at the University of Vienna, Austria. He received his PhD from the Aristotle University in Greece, and has held teaching and research positions at the University of South Africa, North-West University (Potchefstroom, South Africa), and the University of Aberdeen, UK.

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 12 (function of religion) and 17 (oldest religion).

##### *Elsewhere*

Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (translated by Karen E. Fields). New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912].

Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo* (translated by James Strachey). New York: W. W. Norton, 1990 [1913].

McCutcheon, Russell T. (editor). *Fabricating Origins*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2015.

Pals, Daniel L. *Nine Theories of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

## 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.

## 65

# 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.



*Elsewhere*

Stausberg, Michael. 'History.' In *The Oxford Handbook for the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 777–803. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

## 63

## Who was the first scholar of religion?

Michael Stausberg

This question implies another one: what is 'scholarship of religion'? Or even what is 'scholarship'? Any take on these issues results in different answers. Is it sufficient to say that scholarship of religion is any kind of learned study of one's own religion, or would the range of erudition also need to include religions other than one's own? In the former case, would it be required that this study is historical or critical? In the latter case, would it be required that one studies that other religion in a non-polemical manner, not subjecting it to truth-claims put forward by one's own religion? Does 'scholarship of religion' allow for religious perspectives or does it have to be strictly 'secular' and maybe even critical of religion? Does scholarship require specific media? Is a travelogue scholarship? Or maybe not any travelogue but only such travel reports that give precise dates and times and provide sufficient details and are written in a non-sensational, non-deprecatory manner? Or is scholarship limited to books or journal articles? If so, what kind of books and journals? Does any literature count as scholarship or only texts that have references to sources and other texts, or even footnotes? This is not just hair-splitting. Each question addresses different modes of dealing intellectually or academically with religion. And for each variety one could seek to trace a 'first' protagonist.

This is not limited to the West. For example, certain Muslim scholars are sometimes acknowledged as early scholars of religion,

most famously al-Biruni (973–1048 CE), a scholar who contributed to several natural sciences and also published works on linguistics and history. He lived in what today is Afghanistan and travelled to India. Based on his travels, he published works on India in which he sought to give an impartial, unbiased account of the customs, beliefs, and practices of the Hindus, even though he acknowledged them as the religious antagonists of the Muslims. Around a century later, al-Shahrastani (1086–1153 CE), who lived in Iran, wrote *The Book of Sects and Creeds* in which he provides a survey of different creeds, philosophies and religious communities.

The scholarship of these Islamic scholars, however, did not result in any institutional establishment of religious studies. At the al-Azhar university in Cairo—founded in the late tenth century CE—students would study logic, philosophy, Arabic grammar, astronomy, and Islamic law. In medieval Europe, theology, that is the study of Christian teachings and scriptures, was considered the supreme subject taught at universities. In both cases, knowledge about religions apart from Islam and Christianity respectively was not part of the curricula.

Since the sixteenth century, in tune with the European expansion across the globe scholars studied an increasingly broad variety of cultures, languages and religions—from South and North America, through Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, to South and East Asia. However, the idea of establishing a ‘science’ of religion was first expressed programmatically in the late 1790s—after the Enlightenment, the French revolution and the Kantian revolution of thinking—by a handful of German philosophers and theologians. Their ideas, however, did not find much resonance.

While scholarship on religions expanded throughout the nineteenth century, it was only in 1874 that the idea of establishing a science of religion was once more proclaimed—this time more forcefully and again by a German, Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900). Müller came to England in 1846 and remained there for the rest of his life. In 1867 Müller published ‘Essays on the Science of Religion’ and in 1873 *Lectures on the Science of Religion*. For Müller, this was only one of the sciences he hoped to establish; he

was as much concerned with comparative linguistics and mythology. Müller’s main interest was in ancient Indian scriptures. He was something like an academic celebrity at Oxford with a wide international network of contacts. Though he never held a chair in religious studies and his ideas on religion were soon deemed uninspiring and dated, he came to be regarded as something like a founding figure of the nascent field of the comparative and historical study of religion when the first histories of this enterprise were published in the early twentieth century. One reason for this reputation may also have been that none of the scholars who were appointed to the first chairs of comparative religions that were established since the late 1870s would outshine Müller in terms of intellectual and entrepreneurial achievements.

#### About the author

Michael Stausberg is professor of religion at the University of Bergen, Norway. He has published on a broad variety of topics, including early modern intellectual history, the intersections of religion and tourism, the category of magic, theories of ritual and theories of religion, and Zoroastrianism (a pre-Islamic Central Asian and Iranian religion allegedly founded by Zoroaster).

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 2 (origins of the word religion), 62 (origins of the study of religion), and 65 (religious studies v. theology).

##### *Elsewhere*

Girardot, N. J. ‘Max Müller’s *Sacred Books* and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religion.’ *History of Religions* 41(3) (2002): 213–250.

Stausberg, Michael. ‘History.’ In *The Oxford Handbook for the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 777–803. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Smith, Jonathan Z. 'Religion and the Bible.' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128(1) (2009): 5–27. Retrieved from [www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/presidentialaddresses/JBL128\\_1\\_1Smith2008.pdf](http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/presidentialaddresses/JBL128_1_1Smith2008.pdf).

Wimbush, Vincent L. 'Scriptures.' *Oxford Bibliographies* (September 13, 2010). Retrieved from <http://oxfordbibliographiesonline.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0055.xml>.

## 70

# Is it possible to study religion academically and still be religious?

Richard Newton

The brand of religious studies modeled in this volume represents a disciplined commitment to the history of religion as an opportunity for academic scrutiny. It stops itself from pronouncing judgments and instead examines the complexities that inform human striving.

This approach entails description, explanation, interpretation and comparison. Those performing these investigations consider the enterprise a critical—that is, insightful, analytical, and worthwhile—pursuit of human understanding.

The question asked in this chapter surfaces one aspect of that debate: the scholar's relationship to the object of study—religion—and its affects—the religious. It plumbs the depths of the more fundamental question, 'What does it mean to call something, someone, or even oneself religious?' A given answer is not about solidifying truth but observing just some of the dynamic relationships people have around the idea's legacy.

If by 'religious' you mean one who has intimate knowledge of a specific tradition or set of traditions, a scholar may be perceived as especially religious by those who confess to know very little in comparison. I'm reminded here of the countless plane rides I've taken where small talk turns toward the question of occupation.

No matter how I qualify my work, most people end up considering me religious. They assume that the years I have spent devoted to understanding the subject of 'religion' must constitute some superior level of religiousness to their own. So to those who understand religion as a matter of intellectual investment, an academic may be primed to be religious.

At the same time, many religious studies students can attest to the social reality that there are 'right' and 'wrong' types of knowledge. There were so many times in my undergraduate career where professors introduced ideas that I could hardly raise in the church of my upbringing. And regardless of background, my religious studies students agree that many of the arguments pressed in our conversations would put them at odds with the religious communities from which they hail. Discussions of social construction, cognitive science, and discursive functionalism are too blasphemous to be entertained. The discipline's humanistic tenor has earned a reputation of making students 'lose their religion.' I know of campus ministers who've discouraged students from taking religious studies classes for this very reason. For those who understand religion as a matter of questions to be tabled, then an academic may be precluded from being religious.

In both of these scenarios, there is a presumed element of volition. I made a choice to become a religious studies scholar, just as I choose to follow the rites and customs of a certain community of religious people. But when we take a long hard look at the history of religion, being religious is often less an issue of choice than of circumstance. In my estimation, the label 'world religions' points to discourses with aspirations, if not, a legacy of this. You might think of the persons born into Jewish or Catholic families who, despite their best efforts at distancing themselves from these religions, will never always be Jews and Catholics. From the atheist philosopher of religion who says 'God Bless You' when someone sneezes to the agnostic Saudi-American historian of Islam who drinks at department get-togethers just as earnestly as he fasts during Ramadan, an academic may not help but be religious. The

most pervasive, far-reaching examples of religion are the systems that persist regardless of our compliance.

Whether one can be religious and study religion academically is a question of identity. The intellectual enterprise in which we trade can be a credit or a liability depending on one's interests. And from a certain point of view, the knowledge professed by the scholar of religion is a testament to the influence and currency of our subject matter, making religiosity not a zero-sum game but a matter of degree. But the hallmark of a scholar of religion is their commitment to identify religion as a human activity. As long as other commitments—religious or otherwise—do not inhibit this work, religious studies can continue.

#### About the author

Richard Newton is assistant professor of religious studies at Elizabethtown College. His research focuses on the anthropology of scriptures. He is also the founder of the student-scholar blog, *Sowing the Seed: Fruitful Conversations in Religion, Culture, and Teaching*, and host of the companion podcast, *Broadcast Seeding* ([sowingtheseed.org](http://sowingtheseed.org)).

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 65 (religious studies v. theology) and 71 (existence of God).

##### *Elsewhere*

Martin, Craig. 'How to Read an Interpretation: Interpretive Strategies and the Maintenance of Authority.' *The Bible and Critical Theory* 5(1) (2009): 06.1–06.26. Retrieved from <http://genealogyreligion.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/How-To-Read-An-Interpretation2.pdf>.

Miller, Monica R. 'Black Death and the Godz of the New Pop Art.' *JSTOR Daily* (May 28, 2015). Retrieved from <http://daily.jstor.org/black-death-godz-new-pop-art>.



Jakobsen, Merete Demant. *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits*. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999.

Sidky, Hodayun. 'On the Antiquity of Shamanism and its Role in Human Religiosity.' *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 68–92.7

Vitebsky, Piers. *Shamanism*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001.

## 57

# Is being a vegetarian a religious thing for some people?

Jason W. M. Ellsworth

In the city of Palitana, located in the Indian state of Gujarat, one might find Jains heading to the market or visiting the city on pilgrimage. For many who claim to be Jain, Palitana is considered sacred and thus the city should represent their values as Jains. For many Jains eschewing meat is connected to their values to protect all animal life—thus why Jains often claim to be vegetarian. In 2014 a group of Jain monks went on a hunger strike to petition the government to make Palitana a vegetarian city. Successfully winning their bid Palitana is now a vegetarian zone banning the slaughter of animals and the sale of both meat and eggs in the city. It is often depicted in the media as the world's only vegetarian city.

For Jains, however, their definition of vegetarianism varies from how others use the term. In addition to not eating meat, Jains often do not eat eggs, so one could categorize them as Lacto-vegetarian (one who does not eat meat, fish, fowl, or eggs). Vegetarianism is best examined as a spectrum with multiple subcategories such as vegan, ovo-vegetarian, lacto-ovo-vegetarian, plant-based diet, pescatarian, pollotarian, newly arising categories such as ostro-vegan, and many others. The continued addition of qualifiers leaves one to wonder who or what is vegetarian. Those that require their food to not be cooked beyond a specific temperature add

the qualifier raw food to their definition as well. Jains add another aspect by often eschewing garlic and onion, items that are often considered okay for vegetarians. Do we need another term beyond vegetarian or lacto-vegetarian to describe Jain eating habits?

The identities that are constructed from claiming a specific form of vegetarianism help create an image of who is part of the in-group for a community such as the Jains. At the same time, the claim also separates out those that do not participate in the same practices. In the city of Palitana the government-imposed vegetarian zone appeased Jains, however it was not met with the same acceptance from the Muslims who make up 20 to 25 percent of the population. The Muslim inhabitants claimed that their own religious rights that allows for animal sacrifice have been impinged upon, not to mention the fisherman and butchers in the area.

Hare Krishnas, some Hindus, various Taiwanese Buddhist organizations, Shaolin monks, Jains, or Adventists are just some of the commonly referred to vegetarian religious groups practicing some form of vegetarianism. While vegetarians exist within varying traditions the question may also be raised if vegetarianism in itself is a *religion*? Veganism (often defined by one who does not eat or use animal products in any form) is often labeled with a pseudo-religious connotation. The argument often lies not in whether veganism is associated with a sacred, transcendent being or other wordily entities, but rather that veganism is overly strict with its 'doctrines' in a similar manner to some communities that are categorized as religious. The comparative nature of the analysis leaves open the question of what exactly is a religion? By claiming that veganism is a religion one might be trying to discard the practice as being too hard lined and too similar to structured organized religious communities.

On the other hand, claims that vegetarianism or veganism are in some fashion similar to those things we consider to be religious—such as 'creeds'—are taken up to legitimize the practice. In 2016 in Ontario, Canada it was argued that vegetarians have the right to be protected under the human rights commission due to the credal nature of the practice. In doing so, those that

use this argument not only look to legitimize the practice but also allow them to file for accommodation similar to those that look to protect their religious rights.

By categorizing the spectrum of vegetarianisms as religious, one risks disregarding the vast diversity of reasons that defines each of the practices into an assumed set of similarities under the banner of religion. Rather than state that being some form of vegetarianism is in some way related to a set of practices that we define as religious, one might better ask who is claiming a particular vegetarianism as a religious thing? In this question one can break down what is at stake and for whom in making these claims? What type of identity is one trying to construct in opposition to others?

#### About the author

Jason W. M. Ellsworth is a doctoral student in social anthropology at Dalhousie University and a sessional lecturer at the University of Prince Edward Island. Jason received his MA in religion and culture from Wilfrid Laurier University (2010), an honors BA in religious studies from Saint Mary's University (2009), and a BComm in marketing from Saint Mary's University (2003).

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 3 (classifying religion), 13 (rituals v. habits), and 14 (spiritual but not religious).

##### *Elsewhere*

Crowther, Gillian. *Eating Culture: An Anthropological Guide to Food*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

Hamilton, Malcolm. 'Eating Ethically: "Spiritual" and "Quasi-religious" Aspects of Vegetarianism.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15 (2000): 65–83.

Sharpe, Eric J. *Comparative Religion: A History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978.

## 19

# How does religion spread and what is its appeal?

Sarah E. Dees

In 2015, *Business Insider* published a two-minute video of an animated map depicting the spread of five religions over the course of thousands of years.<sup>1</sup> During the video, five areas with distinct colors—each denoting a different religion—develop, morph, and extend into different regions of the globe. While they offer a basic account of the development of select ‘world religions’ over time, videos like this may obscure more than they reveal. Among the many questions these types of videos raise, let us consider two. First, when religions move and expand, what is moving and expanding? In other words, what do the colorful areas on the animated map actually represent? Second, what cultural, social, economic, and political forces precipitate these movements?

The 2015 animation is likely meant to trace the growth and movement of *people* who are adherents of the different religions represented on the map. People are ultimately the central subjects in the academic study of religion; hence, scholars’ interests in people’s movements when considering the spread of religion. Yet a simple map cannot easily convey spaces of religious diversity and contestation. As an example, consider the city of Jerusalem, sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. In this region and in

---

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved on February 27, 2017 from [www.businessinsider.com/map-shows-how-religion-spread-around-the-world-2015-6](http://www.businessinsider.com/map-shows-how-religion-spread-around-the-world-2015-6).

countless areas around the globe, people from different religious communities have fought for physical and social control over specific areas. This contestation requires us to attend to the ways in which naming and claiming specific areas as 'religious' are also social and political projects. People may not always agree whether one area is the primary domain of one religion.

Let us now focus more specifically on the growth and movement of religious adherents. Religions can spread when religious individuals and communities move to different areas; in addition, religious ideas and practices spread when people who were not previously adherents of a particular tradition convert to or join a new tradition. These processes—of migration and conversion—can both be either voluntary or involuntary. Mass migrations have often been involuntary, caused by social or political issues that threaten the livelihood of specific communities. This is the case with members of the European Jewish community who for centuries endured numerous displacements due to anti-Semitic violence. This creates a *diasporic* community in which members of a tradition are spread throughout different regions of the world.

Some religious groups actively seek to convert others to their traditions. *Evangelism* is the process of actively seeking to spread one's religion. While the term is derived from the context of Christian missionization, we may also consider parallel movements in other religious traditions in which members encourage others to join their community or adopt their beliefs and practices. As an example, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness have, since the 1960s, sought to share their unique form of Hinduism throughout the world.

Many adherents who are engaged in missionization view their work as positive and see the conversion process as entirely voluntary, stemming from an individual's genuine desire to follow the tradition. Evangelists may present positive aspects of their tradition and hope that others who find it appealing will convert. However, the process of conversion can also be violent. In some instances, ruling forces have required those under their rule to convert to a particular religion. This was the case when European

explorers traveled to the Americas. Europeans forced indigenous Americans to renounce previously held beliefs, give up old practices, and adopt new beliefs and lifestyles. It is important to note that these forms of forced conversion of Native Americans, from the fifteenth century to the present day, have often required the rejection of aspects of culture as well as religion. Interestingly, scholars have argued that many Native Americans historically agreed to convert to Christianity because of the medicinal benefits they believed the European Christians could offer.

Finally, it is important to consider the appeal of different aspects of religion when individuals do choose voluntarily to adopt new religious practices. Religious communities promise many benefits—both material and immaterial—to potential converts: a sense of belonging or community, salvation, social status, healing and well-being. Considering the appeal of religions remains a key goal of many scholars of religion. Scholars draw on numerous methodologies—anthropological, sociological, historical, literary—to examine and express the many reasons why aspects related to religion remain compelling sources of individual and social expression.

#### About the author

Sarah E. Dees (PhD, Indiana University) is a postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern University. Her research focuses on American and Indigenous religions.

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 1 (ubiquity of religion) and 12 (function of religion).

##### *Elsewhere*

Boyarin, Jonathan. *The Unconverted Self: Jews, Indians, and the Identity of Christian Europe*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009.



**About the author**

Travis D. Webster received his PhD in Indian Subcontinental Studies from the School of Languages and Cultures at the University of Sydney, Australia. His area of specialization is the Upanisads with a cognitive anthropological approach to Advaita Vedanta.

**Suggestions for further reading***In this book*

See also Chapters 58 (Buddhism as philosophy) and 59 (the Buddha).

*Elsewhere*

DeCaroli, Robert. *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Gombrich, Richard F. *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (2nd edition). Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

Parpola, Asko. *The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and the Indus Civilization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Wynne, Alexander. *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*. London: Routledge, 2007.

## 61

## Are religions in Asia all connected in some way?

Kendall Marchman

Before answering this question, we must break down the two troublesome categories—religion and Asia. Plenty of entries in this volume handle the former, so let's take a moment to consider the latter. Asia is easily the largest continent on the planet, and six out every ten people on earth live there. Yet, despite its superiority in size and population, the concept of 'Asia' was not constructed by any of its indigenous peoples or cultures. Instead, Europeans constructed the concept in order to explain what was *not* European, and in doing so, created the way we have come to understand the world. In categorizing the world, and then proliferating those Western views across the globe through colonialism and imperialism, the West became (and remains) a hegemon.

The reality of shared European culture (e.g., the Latin root of Romance languages) due to the Roman Empire led Europeans to assume the same about Asian culture. As a result, vastly disparate Asian cultures and peoples were lumped together in a single category, originally termed the 'Orient.' Therefore, the early study of Asian cultures was often flawed and blatantly interested in perpetuating Western hegemony. The ramifications of this early scholarship are still felt today when college students enroll in 'world religions' courses, and expect to learn about religions in tidy, unique categories. Unfortunately, the reality of the world is much messier.

This brings us back to the question of 'Asian religions,' but what does that even mean? After all, if we look at the prescribed borders of Asia as generally defined, it is clear that all of the classically understood 'world religions' actually began in Asia! The Abrahamic traditions all began (and remain) in Asia, yet they are not considered as 'Asian religions.' This reality shifts us to the 'Middle East,' which takes an alternate meaning: it is neither completely foreign (it is the home of the Abrahamic traditions, specifically Christianity, which the West has always treated as superior to Judaism and Islam), and yet it is not European. The meaning of 'Asia' in the question of Asian religions is then isolated to only part of the continent, mainly the southern, southeastern, and eastern sections.

Historically, South Asian culture has been dominated by India, which was so large that premodern India (which encompasses much more territory than the national boundaries of India today) was recognized as a subcontinent. Indian history offers perhaps the greatest assortment of religions in the world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism are the most recognized indigenous Indian religions. All these 'isms' are the results of European constructs, much like Asia as whole. Yet, these identities have been accepted, and represent a reality for billions of practitioners globally. Are the religions connected? Of course! They evolved out of the same culture. In the cases of Buddhism and Jainism, they began as counter movements to the beliefs and practices we identify as Hinduism today. Moreover, they often share the same vocabulary and a similar cosmological view. Sikhism too demonstrates Indian culture, while notably drawing from Muslim influence in North India.

Eastern Asia substitutes Indian culture for the equally influential Chinese culture, which dominated throughout the eastern portion of the continent. Still, some Indian influence remains due to the presence of Buddhism, though it was heavily adapted to Chinese culture before reaching its zenith in China. The Chinese produced their own indigenous systems of philosophy, practice, and belief in Taoism and Confucianism. Again, like India, these

two traditions arose out of the same context, and certainly connect through the idea of *tao* (or *dao*, the now preferred term among scholars and Chinese alike, written in pinyin [the official romanized version of Chinese]), though they understand in contrasting ways. These Chinese traditions are even apparent in Shinto, despite the uniquely Japanese focus of Shinto mythology. Southeastern Asia shares the influence of Indian religions (largely Hinduism and Buddhism) and Chinese culture, along with the major import of Islam. These larger traditions are integrated into local popular religious practices to make them unique and acceptable to each independent culture.

Yes, there are some connections between Asian religions. However, if these connections are highlighted simply to suggest that all Asian religions are the same, it neglects the multiplicity inherent to each religion throughout Asia. For instance, the Buddhism of Bhutan looks very different than the Buddhism of Japan. Moreover, this diversity is not restricted to crossing national borders. The Hinduism of Pondicherry in South India is not the same as the Hinduism in Jaipur farther north. Asian religions are complex and multifaceted because they include such a vast collection of cultures and populations. Furthermore, the term 'Asian religions' inherits the messiness of meanings and categorizations that are a legacy of the hegemonic campaign of the West.

#### About the author

Kendall Marchman received his PhD in religious studies at the University of Florida, and is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Young Harris College. His research focuses on Pure Land Buddhism in medieval China.

#### Suggestions for further reading

##### *In this book*

See also Chapters 28 (conflicts over beliefs) and 60 (origins of Buddhism).

## What is the oldest religion?

Vaia Touna

There are many different speculations among scholars regarding which is the oldest religion. Some would argue, based on archaeological findings, that evidence of religious practices started thousands of years ago when the first humanoids began to bury their deceased. Others would see evidence of religious beliefs in the cave paintings (depicting mostly animals and sometimes hunting scenes) found in Africa, Europe and western Asia, dating to almost 40,000 years ago. Although these instances are not considered as organized religions, they can be seen as indications of religious thought, and scholars have developed an array of words and theories to classify and explain these phenomena; so they often talk about 'animism,' (as did E. B. Tylor in the late nineteenth century) or 'anthropomorphism' (as does Steward E. Guthrie in his *Faces in the Clouds*) or 'shamanism' (such as Mircea Eliade; see David S. Whitley's *Cave Paintings and The Human Spirit*). When it comes to judging the oldest among so-called organized religions again there are different views. Some would argue that Hinduism is the oldest religion tracing its origins around 3000 BCE, in the civilization that developed in the basins of the Indus river, encompassing what is today parts of Pakistan, western India, and northeastern Afghanistan. Archaeological artifacts (e.g., texts, statues, pottery, etc.) that have been excavated in that area and from that period have led archaeologists and historians to speculate that they represent religious beliefs. Similarly, scholars will speak of religion in the Cycladic and Minoan civilization that flourished around

3000 BCE in southern Greece, or Ancient Egyptian religion; in fact, for any ancient civilization some scholars will talk about their religious practices and beliefs.

What is of interest, though, is that there are studies that show that those ancient societies didn't have any concept of what we commonly understand today as 'religion'—which makes it curious, then, as to how can we determine or even locate 'the oldest religion' so far back in time. Despite the fact that we commonly think of religion as a natural, cross-cultural phenomenon that's easily identifiable across the world today, or the ancient world as well, this is hardly the case—which makes this question rather difficult to answer in a straightforward or simple.

Of course one might argue that people in the past had gods and performed rituals in their honor; 'doesn't that constitute a religion?' one might ask. If that is one's definition of religion then yes, but belief in the existence of supernatural beings and the narratives (often known as myths) and practices (often known as rituals) associated with these beliefs could also be explained in terms of political, economic, psychological theories and not necessarily seen as being religious. This suggests that it would not be difficult, when we find historical claims about Zeus, for example, to see not religion in the ancient world but, perhaps, political struggle among competing groups, all of whom used myths and rituals as one way to wage their contests.

Which brings us back to the question: 'What is the oldest religion?'

As should be clear by now, in order to be able to answer this question we will need first to determine what do we mean by 'religion.' There are many definitions of religion, which we can generally divide between common sense definitions and those that are scholarly. So, while commonsense may tell us that religion is an essential element of being human, and as such is an ancient thing, some scholars have suggested that the very term 'religion' is a fairly recently developed system of classification used by people to organize and divide their worlds (that is, calling some things religious and other things secular; see Arnal and McCutcheon's



*The Sacred Is the Profane*), doing so in order to meet their own interests. Such scholarly definitions of religion are important because they prompt us to decide which objects or behaviors can be grouped under that classification system—not losing sight of the choices people make in organizing their worlds. Since definitions are not fixed in stone they change over time and according to the scholar's research interest, and theoretical questions, which in effect may change the objects and behaviors that will become her/his object of study. To give you a brief example although Hinduism is today considered as a 'world religion,' when scholars in the eighteenth century were trying to determine which religions counted as world religions Hinduism was not listed as such, in fact only Christianity and Buddhism were thought to be world religions (see *The Invention of World Religions* by Masuzawa); yet today we take its membership in this family for granted. In fact world religions textbooks routinely list Hinduism as a world religion; that is not because of some particular characteristic that those religions possess but, instead, because the definition of what makes something a world religion has changed.

Similarly, we can say that to determine which is the oldest religion depends on how scholars define religion. This act of definition on the part of scholars—as with anyone offering a definition of anything—allows them to organize and systematize archaeological artifacts that can be understood as religious, or to determine whether something is a religion or not. But this act of definition (or we can say of fabricating identities and meanings of material artifacts) has more to do with the interests that drive those definitions and classifications than with the things being defined and classified as religious or religions.

So, to answer the question, perhaps the oldest religion is Hinduism, or Buddhism, or some other religion—or, perhaps, instead, no religion is any older than our fairly recent habit of calling them religions.

### About the author

Vaia Touna is assistant professor at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, USA. Her scholarly interests range widely, from looking at specific concepts of religion in the Greco-Roman world to methodological issues concerning the study of religion in general.

### Suggestions for further reading

#### *In this book*

See also Chapters 12 (function of religion) and 18 (how many religions?).

#### *Elsewhere*

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

Clottes, Jean. *What is Paleolithic Art? Cave Paintings and the Dawn of Human Creativity* (translated by R. D. Martin). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Geertz, Armin W. *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.

Guthrie, Steward E. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

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.

McCutcheon, Russell T. *Studying Religion. An Introduction.* Sheffield: Equinox, 2007.

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

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991 [1963].