

Basic Characteristics of Religion

Elements of Religion

Soteriological (having to do with salvation): Post-archaic religions are schemes of salvation, concerned with the source, nature, and appropriate methods of removal of some evil believed to afflict humans. Most religions are equally concerned with the achievement of blessedness, release, or fulfillment that transcends evil, in either this world or the next, or possibly both. Salvation is one of the basic concerns of post-archaic religion.

Theological (the rationalization of religion): Theology deals with the nature of supreme being, or whatever functions in the religion as the source of supreme validity. Gods are objects of religious devotion and practice, and only secondarily are regarded as conceptions or hypothetical entities to be treated with speculative interest. To understand a particular religious outlook calls for knowledge and appreciation of the way its adherents relate belief and practice to supremely important beings. To deal properly with theology, one must look at the manner in which adherents understand their relation to the objects of devotion, and at the systems of thought in which this relationship is expressed.

Anthropological (nature and possibilities of human *being*): This aspect of religion is intertwined with the soteriological aspect, since in many religious systems (Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, for example), images of human nature define the problem of evil and the ways adherents try to escape from evil.

In orthodox Christianity, sin is characteristic of human nature. This belief sets the stage for salvation by divine grace through God forgiving sin. In Buddhism, suffering is deeply embedded in the human psyche, and this belief sets the stage for salvation through intellectual growth. So for each religion, the problem of evil, the conceptions of human nature, and the methods of salvation are interrelated.

Epistemology (How do we know?): Epistemology refers generally to the problem of knowledge. In a religious context, this means how adherents believe themselves able to communicate with their deities, and how the deities make known their will to humans.

The problem of knowledge is related to the nature of truth as conceived by adherents. Religious knowledge must be reconciled with profane knowledge. This gives rise to a religious doctrine of truth that settles such conflicts by granting religious knowledge a superior epistemological status over profane knowledge. Religious knowledge comes to adherents through various combinations of revelation, prayer, vision, sacred literature, and communication with other adherents.

Ethics (relations between humans): Religion defines appropriate forms of conduct between people. Ethics are institutionalized as informal norms, or formal codes and laws. From the point of view of many social scientists, the ethical function is religion's most important contribution to society.

Cultic Practices (symbolic behavior): Religion confers meaning on acts. Ritual is the means by which religion is publicly embodied. Ritual involves:

- 1) social organization of the religious community
- 2) the functions of types of religious personnel set apart for various religious duties
- 3) the modes of behavior by which adherents approach the sacred dimension
- 4) the devices used to guarantee proper group and individual conduct

Ritual acts are often themselves regarded as *sacred*, or at least as necessary steps to the goal of salvation. This leads to a consideration of:

- 1) the place of symbols in the religion
- 2) characteristic gestures, forms of speech, and movement
- 3) the effects of religious belief on art and architecture

Temporal (having to do with the meaning of time): Religious myths provide an imaginary time scale of important events, including the origins, repetitions, and endings of religiously significant eras. The *end of time* is an especially significant era for religions that posit a progressive history of religious meaning, such as Christianity. Other religions, such as Hinduism, see time as cyclical, a process of birth, growth, decay, and death, beginning again with birth, *ad infinitum*.

At the level of the individual, the meaning of time relates to the birth, growth, decaying, death, and possibilities of an afterlife for individuals.

Cosmology (having to do with the meaning of the universe): Cosmology refers to theories and visions of the creation, nature, meaning, and form of the universe, and the place of humanity in it. A "cosmos" is a portrayal of the universe as a meaningful structure. Science studies a meaningless "universe." Religion portrays our existence as unfolding within a meaningful universe called a "cosmos." Cosmologies link human nature and the structure of society to an imaginary structure of the universe in order to endow human existence and society with meaning.

Categories of Religious Behavior

- 1) addressing the sacred
- 2) music
- 3) poetry
- 4) physiological alteration through drugs, deprivation, self-mortification, and isolation
- 5) exhortation — addressing others as a representative of a divine being
- 6) recitation of the code — the use of sacred, written and oral statements to state doctrine
- 7) sympathetic ritual — imitation of sacred beings and events
- 8) wielding sacred power (mana) — touching objects containing sacred power, including laying on of hands
- 9) taboos — rules specifying avoidance of contact and action to prevent activating unwanted manifestations of sacred power
- 10) feasts — sacred meals

- 11) sacrifice — ritual killing, often as part of a feast
- 12) congregation — meetings, processions, and other forms of coming together
- 13) symbolism — using objects symbolizing the sacred
- 14) inspiration — the pursuit of visions and revelation
- 15) extension and modification of the code
- 16) extended consequences — the results of applying religious values outside of the context of specifically ritual occasions

Definitions of Religion

Joachim Wach — Religion is 3 things: a belief system, a ritual worship system, and a moral system of social relationships. This is a substantive definition of religion. Modern people think first of belief, but the social sciences argue that ritual and social relations are the central aspects of religion. The Latin roots of the term religion are *religare* (to bind together), and *religere* (to execute painstakingly or to rehearse).

Émile Durkheim — "Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them." This is a functional definition, focused on the moral unification function of religion.

Sigmund Freud — "Religion is a collective neurosis."

Karl Marx — "Religion is the opiate of the masses."

Robert Bellah — "Religion is a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence, i.e., death, meaninglessness, egocentrism, and emotional needs which are not rational." Emotional needs of individuals are the main focus of this individualistic, functional definition.

Clifford Geertz — "A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in members, formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." This functional definition focuses on motivation and legitimation.

Anthony Wallace — "Religion is a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature." This functional definition focuses on the use of religion to stabilize or change society, and on the use of religion to magically control nature.

Curt Raney — "Religion is a system of practices, symbols, and interactive and imaginary social relations concerned with establishing and maintaining a form of consciousness in which reality is constructed and perceived in relation to ideals.

Persistent functions of religion

Positive Functions

- 1) Close the gap between hope and reality (e.g., the final victory over death, evil, etc., is in heaven).
- 2) Make virtue out of social necessity (encouraging and requiring the individual to sacrifice for others, ego surrender where the functioning of society conflicts with the functioning of the individual).
- 3) Support and console individuals and groups.
- 4) Enhance social stability through projecting sacredness upon social norms, and through the creation of authoritative sources of opinion regarding moral matters--the "priestly function" of religion.
- 5) Promote social change when religion is in conflict with the prevailing order of society, through social criticism and prophecy--the "prophetic function" of religion.
- 6) Provide a source of personal identity in pluralistic societies afflicted with anomie.
- 7) Facilitate personal growth and maturation, as they are conceptualized by the religion.
- 8) Adjust individuals to the life cycle of changing social status.
- 9) Rationalize social, political, and economic inequality, reducing conflict in stratified societies.

Negative Functions

- 1) Excessive guilt and repression—causing individuals to suffer emotionally for failure to live up to religious ideals.
- 2) Authoritarianism—supporting oppressive authority in society.
- 3) Self-mortification—inducing people to endure physical suffering unnecessarily or to cause themselves to suffer deliberately for religious reasons.
- 4) Ethnocentrism—causing people to have narrow, culturally centered perceptions of other groups, arming them with absolute convictions that can justify repression and violence toward them.
- 5) Promotes intergroup conflict—by causing individuals to feel urgent about exporting their religion, and to feel offended by the religions of other peoples.
- 6) Rationalizes social, political, and economic inequality, preventing social change necessary to reduce social conflict.