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# RELIGION

# THE BASICS

**2nd edition**

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

this book I had two very special children, Micah and Martha, who I continue to adore and dote on. Now, in 2008, I have gained a further three, all of whom I love equally – I am now also blessed with Michael and Madison, and our new addition Marnie. And I save for last the mention of my darling Isabel, with whom I have a love that cannot easily be reduced to words, and which goes far beyond anything I ever expected to find. Thank you for being you, for what you have given me, and for letting me be who I am. Thank you for so much.

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# RELIGION

## Some basics

The first defining moment of the twenty-first century occurred at around 9 am in New York on 11 September 2001. The shocking and unforgettable images of this world-changing event brought to us the nightmares of the modern world. Jet airplanes and tall steel and glass skyscrapers are key images of the modernity in which we all live. Through the instant media technologies of mobile cameras and satellite-relay, we were able to watch the horrific event as it happened. This modernity does, though, have within it many surprises: not only in the terrible scale of the mass-murder, but also because of the motivations and cultural factors leading to the event. In the years since 9/11, it has become clear that religion is part and parcel of the unfolding of twenty-first-century history.

The contemporary world is shaped by religions: the 'war on terror', intelligent design, abortion clinic killings, Waco, conflicts and wars in the Middle East, India, former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, the Jonestown mass suicides, environmental summits, peace demonstrations – the list goes on. Hardly a day goes by when there is not some manifestation of religion (religious identity, religious practice, religious conflict) reported on the TV or in newspapers. To understand the contemporary world, as well as the past, we need a sophisticated understanding of religion.

This book is not specifically about any particular religious tradition (such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, or Judaism), nor is it about any particular conflict or religious issue shaping our modern world. In this book I will seek to give some sense of how we can begin to understand the complexities of religious traditions, and how they shape (and are shaped by) cultures and events. Regardless of what our own religious perspective may be – whether we are not religious at all, profoundly faithful, or somewhere between the two – we need to recognise that in this contemporary world, religion does count. Religion and religions have an impact in both small and significant ways on the world today.

Our starting point for exploring this is to introduce the approach I will be using throughout this book. This approach is based on a simple but profound point: that what we call 'religion' is something that humans do, and so the study of religion is primarily concerned with people and cultures.

## THE BASICS: RELIGION AND CULTURE

There can be no denying that the term 'religion' is complicated, and it is often taken to refer to a number of different concepts and practices. I will be leaving till later in this chapter a discussion of some of the problems of trying to define exactly what we mean by the term 'religion'. For many, there is a clear idea that religion is something that involves going to church (or some other religious centre), reading and reflecting on certain sacred texts, believing and having faith, performing certain ritual practices, and(/or) living one's life in a certain way. It is the case that religion often involves some or all of these things, but we also need to recognise that it can (and often does) involve a lot more. When we look at religion cross-culturally – in different contexts and societies across the globe – religion very often impacts on all levels of life, at both the individual and social level.

It is for this reason that we can talk about religion *and* culture. In many ways we can regard both of these as separate and distinct, but they also overlap and have an impact on each other. The culture in which a person lives is strongly influenced by the predominant religion (or religions) of their society. And similarly, the religion that a person practises will always be influenced by their cultural context and location.



This is why the approach I am introducing in this book can be described as the study of *religion and culture*. At the heart of this is the assumption that when we study religion, we should try not to analyse it as something abstract and set aside. Major religious traditions in the world (such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and others) do encourage practitioners to reflect on and engage with abstract and supra-mundane aspects of reality (for example, concepts of a god or gods). Indeed, we may find that practitioners of religions may consider the abstract and transcendent issues to be the most central aspects of their religion.

However, in all cultural contexts across the world, religion is integral to other aspects of cultural activity. Religion is what people do on a day-to-day level. To put this in another way, religion is nearly always *both* a set of ideas and beliefs that people can engage with (to some extent or other), *and* also the framework for their lived experiences and daily practices. The study of religion and culture therefore is about understanding how religion may be an important element of how people across the world may manifest their differences.

In this sense, the study of religion is comparative, or more accurately the study of religion is *cross-cultural*, looking at religions across a range of different cultures. We should expect to look at more than one religious tradition (for example, the study of religion is not simply a study of Christianity), and we must also build into our approach a viewpoint that takes in the diversity of cultural locations across the world. It may be obvious to expect to find cultural differences if one looks at Christianity (in Europe), Islam (in the Arab world), and Buddhism (in China or Tibet). But any study of a particular religion will *also* need to be cross-cultural. For example, there are different cultural forms of Christianity (in the USA, in Latin America, in Poland, etc.), just as experiences of Islam in Saudi Arabia can be quite different to experiences of Islam in Malaysia, or Nigeria, or Scotland. Therefore, this study of religion and culture is about looking at cultural and religious diversity, in different parts of the world, as well as close to home in our own cultural location. It is about exploring how current and historical events are shaped by practices and influences that could be labelled 'religious', and how much of what we see and do is affected by such religiosity.

A common starting point in the study of religion can often be the search for 'ultimate' truths or answers. I will not risk disappointing the reader any further by stating clearly at this point that I will not be looking at such issues in this book. Some contemporary scholars have a keen interest in examining religions on a cross-cultural basis to discover which religion (from their viewpoint) has the best or most authentic truth. Very often such a search can be conducted from a pre-determined starting point, from a particular religious perspective (whether Christian, Muslim, or any other) – with the cross-cultural comparison perhaps being used to demonstrate the particularity and uniqueness of that religion. I will not be doing this here. Liberation, salvation, morality, belief, and many other such key concepts may be issues we wish to explore when we are studying religion, but we can speculate ad infinitum as to which set of ideas is closer to the 'truth'. On a personal basis, we might prefer certain ideas and perspectives to others, but then we may all differ as to *which* viewpoint we think is actually 'true'.

Many (not all) religions are practised in a way that presumes a reality beyond humans such as gods, deities, supernaturalism. But scholars have to adopt in their approach an element of academic neutrality in this area. Indeed this may also require an element of scholarly 'agnosticism', by recognising that in these studies we should only claim competence in the field of experience which is known: the human world. This is not to argue that there is no 'supernatural' or spiritual reality beyond this, but rather that there are plenty of *other* interesting things to learn and think about religion without presuming (or refuting) this alternative reality.

This is *not* a god-centred or faith-centred approach (theology); we are not looking for answers to questions about whether or not god (one or more) exists and what she or he is like. Instead it is a human-centred approach: the study of religion as a human practice, a type of activity that appears to be integral to humans. This is not to say that such human practices of religion are exclusively human *creations*: the cultural forms of religion that we can study may or may not be 'divinely inspired'. And indeed many people practise their religions because *they assume that* they are divinely created. However, the exploration of whether there is a reality to such assumptions is the preserve of theologians, and the study of religion



on such a religious (faith-centred) basis is called theology. In contrast, the focus of this book is the much broader cultural study of religion. The religious life is the cultural life, one's religion (whether one pursues it fervently, indifferently, or in any other way) only emerges from one's culture. From a distinctly human-centred perspective one cannot fully distinguish religion and culture.

## RELIGION AND CULTURE

There are many approaches that could be included in this cultural study of religion. A central part of these relies on the idea that human beings differ from each other along broad lines, particularly in terms of differences of personality and culture. Generally it has been psychologists who have looked at personality, whilst it has been sociologists and anthropologists who have looked at culture. Even so, the way in which one lives one's personality is bound up with one's culture, and the way in which a person embodies and lives their culture depends, of course, on their individual or particular personality.

At the beginning of the twentieth century most scholars looked at personality as a reason for the existence of religion. Making some very broad assumptions that religion was purely a matter of believing in some spiritual entity, writers tried to explain religion as part of the process by which individuals either thought through ideas in a semi-rational way, or tried to come to terms with the emotional and psychic legacy of their childhoods.

The most famous of these thinkers was probably Sigmund Freud (1990a [1918]), who controversially proposed that religion is a misguided and unhealthy outcome of the problems inherent in a young boy working through, on an individual basis, his relationship with his father. But Freud ignored his own particularly cultural assumptions in putting forward such a theory. That is, his ideas about how humans become religious depended on ideas of behaviour specific to his particular culture. They also relied very heavily on a view which assumed all religions were similar to Christianity and Judaism. Freud made the assumption that religion is derived from the boy's psychological process of making up a heavenly father-figure called god to compensate for relations with his own father. This simply does not apply to those non-Christian

traditions that don't image god as a father figure, or don't even image god at all.

If personality has a place in understanding religion, that personality is itself culturally dependent in many ways. To extend the Freudian example a little further, the father–son relationship is something that we all take for granted. It is seemingly biologically defined, and although there are many different ways of being both a father and a son, we are surrounded by images of what an ideal father should be. But consider for a moment that in different cultural groups fatherhood can take different forms. Indeed the idea of fatherhood can change over time even in the 'same' culture. What is now expected of a father in Britain in the early twenty-first century is very different from what was expected in Freud's late-nineteenth-century Austria. Although, we assume, biological fatherhood is the same everywhere, there are great cultural variations on what fatherhood is taken to be about.

This digression into the area of parenthood is simply to suggest that culture, and cultural difference, is a crucially important factor if we want to try to understand religion. Our assumptions are produced by the cultural world in which we live. Thus our culture gives us a worldview, a means of seeing and understanding the world, by which we live, and which may be radically different from those held by people living in cultures different to our own. Although as individuals we may interpret, live with, and reconstruct that worldview in a way that suits our own personality and needs, we can never fully escape the parameters of our own particular culture.

What, then, do we mean when we talk of culture? And with respect to the subject of religion, where does culture end and religion begin? What is the difference between the two? Particular religions are shaped by particular cultures, and of course the same occurs the other way round – most cultures are largely shaped by their dominant religions. To take an example of this, many people understand the concept of Christianity from their own particular perspective. If I was a Christian in a particular place (for example, a Southern Baptist in the US), then my frame of reference for all Christians and Christian practice would be from this viewpoint. However, we can see from the contemporary world, and from history, that there have been many different manifestations of Christianity in many different cultural contexts: such as in medieval



Europe, Viking Norse settlements at the end of the first millennium, and native (Indian) Catholics in contemporary South America, to name a few examples out of many. No one would suggest that all these forms of Christianity are the same – the experiences of being a Christian in each of these contexts are extremely different, at the level of language, dress, lifestyle, and many other areas of daily practice.

Thus Southern Baptists in contemporary America practise a form of Christianity embedded within the wider context of English-speaking American cultural life. These churches' use of television as a central medium for the distribution of information and church life is closely related to the way television has become an essential and very powerful component of broader American cultural life. At the same time, the 'Bible Belt' areas of the US, where the Southern Baptists dominate, are also culturally influenced by the Christian values of the church: from the strict ethical code on heterosexual monogamy, to the emphasis on personal achievement and success as means of demonstrating one's moral and social character. Thus the religion strongly influences the culture, and the culture is itself the medium through which the religion is experienced and practised. In other words, the 'religion' is not some free-floating thing that exists outside of the cultural setting; to understand it we must also understand that context.

## RELIGION AND RELIGIONS

This now leads us to the fundamental question that I raised earlier, of what do we mean when we use the term 'religion'? What is the term referring to? The answer to this is not straightforward, since – as a starting point – the term works on a number of different levels. That is, we can consider the following four statements:

- Statement 1: '*religion* is an aspect of most cultures'
- Statement 2: 'Buddhism is an important *religion* in Tibet'
- Statement 3: 'a mosque is a *religious* building for Muslims'
- Statement 4: 'meditation is a *religious* action'

The first two statements use the term religion as a noun, although in two different ways. That is, we move from talking of 'religion'

in statement 1 to 'religions' in statement 2. The third statement uses the concept of religion as an aspect of something else, that is as an adjective for a type of building (a mosque, which is a religious building). The fourth use is specific to a type of action – meditation, which some may consider to be a type of religious practice.

These differences are expressed in Table 1.1, which maps out the different uses of the term into noun, adjective, and also possibly as a verb. In the table we move through the idea of religion as: i) a common and quite general aspect of humanity (found in most, and maybe all cultures), through to ii) specific religions (particular traditions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, on so on), and then on to the term as a descriptor of something – whether it be iii) adjectival or iv) as a verb. The last column, referring to 'religioning' is perhaps an unusual way of talking about the subject area, but it indicates an element of religious practice that we will come back to later in this book – that religion is something that is often done in practice. Hence, we could suggest that when a person practises their religion (whether through meditation, prayer, or through their daily life routine), they are doing a practice called 'religioning'.

## RELIGIONS: PARTICULAR TRADITIONS

From these meanings, we will take the second use of the term religion-as-a-noun, that is, to refer to the category of religion that describes particular traditions, such as Buddhism or Christianity.

*Table 1.1* Religion, religions, religious and religioning

| *Noun* | *Noun* | *Adjective* | *Verb* |
|---|---|---|---|
| General category<br>Religion<br>'Universal' aspect of human culture | Specific<br>Religion(s)<br>Refers to particular groups and traditions (e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) | Descriptor<br>Religious<br>Used in general sense to describe a type of thing or behaviour or experience | Action/Practice<br>Religioning<br>Not a 'thing' but an action, more of a process of doing |



To start off doing this, though, we can often see an element of confusion between this use of the term and the first use. That is, particular religions may often be conflated with a singular concept of religion as a universal. Or, to put this another way, what we understand the universal experience of religion to be is often shaped by our own particular religion. Thus, as Morton Klass points out, the fictional Parson Thwackum (an Englishman) was of the opinion:

> 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.
> (From Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones*, quoted in Klass 1995: 17)

From this perspective what everybody else has is not 'religion', or at least what they have is only considered to be religion if it looks like his own experience of religion.

Of course, this is not a very useful starting point; we cannot assume that the experience and practice of religion in different parts of the world, and in different historical times, will be similar to our own. Instead we have to be prepared to learn how to apply and adapt our concept of religion into these other contexts. And we must be ready for the possibility that our concepts and expectations of what religion is may not fit.

We therefore need to break down the concept of religion (as general) into religions (as specific traditions), and so it is of course very common to talk of a number of *different* religions in the world. So, for example, there are Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, each of which is distinct. A very influential way of describing such differences is called the 'world religions' paradigm. This approach looks at discrete, bounded religions – each different from the others – as the basis for making sense of the vast range of religious practices in the world. Thus, scholars have learnt to talk about particular world religions – Christianity, Buddhism, etc. – which exist as bounded blocs of humanity.

I will explore below some of the problems with this world religions approach. But first, what is this approach saying? In particular, what is it that makes particular religions different? In most discussions of distinct world religions, the differences are primarily

framed in terms of each religion having certain characteristics, which can be clustered in particular areas:

- major texts (sacred books)
- foundational ideas, 'beliefs', and worldviews
- particular histories and leaders
- and very often a sense of having a distinct identity.

In this way, we learn to classify Christianity and Islam as different religions: they have different texts (the Bible, the Qur'an), different foundational ideas (broadly God/Trinity and Allah), quite different histories, as well as identities which mark out the distinctions between Christian and Islamic religions. Under these markers of difference we also classify other religions as distinct major religions of the world. Table 1.2 gives some examples.

*Table 1.2* An example of how differences between religions may be mapped out

| *Label and identity* | *Main texts* | *Major ideas* | *Founder* | *Country of origin* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Christianity* | Bible (Old and New Testaments) | Single god – Holy Trinity | Jesus Christ | Palestine/ Rome |
| *Islam* | Qur'an | Single god – Allah | Muhammad | Arabia |
| *Judaism* | Hebrew Bible ('Old Testament') | Single god – Yahweh | Abraham | Israel |
| *Buddhism* | Pali Canon | No god, Four Noble Truths, etc. | Gautama Buddha | Northern India |
| *Sikhism* | Adi Granth | Single god – Vaheguru | Guru Nanak | North West India |
| *Hinduism* | Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas | Main deities – Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva. Many other deities | None | India |



If we wished to expand this further we could include a number of other religions – for example, Jainism from India, Taoism from China, and Shintoism from Japan. We could also discuss much further what the ideas are, the particular characteristics of the founders, the histories, and the texts, and so on. Indeed, there are many excellent books which do exactly this: they take one particular religion and introduce the reader to each of these main characteristics.

However, in setting out this table I do not intend to make it appear definitive, nor indeed is it meant as a point of reference for study-revision on the differences between 'world religions'. I would not recommend for it to be used in such a way. For a start, it is reminiscent of a butterfly collector's pin-board, with the complexity of cultural and religious diversity stripped bare to very basic and simplistic premises. The point of this table is to show how different religious traditions are systematically classified by scholars in terms of these key issues of difference. However, the differences, and the means of classifying and describing difference, are much more complex than such a table suggests.

Such an approach may give us a starting point for mapping out differences and similarities between 'religions', as well as the particularities about a 'religion'. It is of course very important to know the basic elements of Islam, what Hindus believe in, and so on. And such knowledge is not only useful for its own sake: in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century we can be certain that we will encounter people from these religions at some point in our lives – as friends, work colleagues, when travelling, or in business.

But there are problems with this straightforward approach, mainly because it tells us some things, but misses out a lot more. For one thing, it is very dry. Surely there is more to know about being a Muslim than simply texts and history! Where is the sense of the lived experience, such as the sights, and smells, and tastes of Islam? We could add these to our list of characteristics, so as well as knowing that Muslims believe in Allah, we learn that Muslims avoid pork and alcohol. We could also add some helpful pictures – of main religious centres and religious leaders to show that visual sense.

What is more problematic, however, is that this suggests all Muslims (or Hindus, or Christians, etc.) are the same. It may, perhaps, lead

us to think that we know what it is like to be a Muslim: all we need to do is learn about the basics of Islam. But as we have encountered already, being a Muslim in one part of the world may be quite different to what it is in another part – say between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, or between Sudan and the Southern USA. Furthermore, there are the major historical divisions within many traditions, such as between Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant forms of Christianity, or between Sunni and Shi'i forms of Islam. Looking at Islam, or any other religion, as a 'religion' means looking at the *variations* within that religion, how in different cultures the forms of the religion will have varied, even though some of the basic characteristics have remained constant.

This 'world religions' approach also leaves considerable geographical gaps. That is, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, and Shintoism are not the only religious traditions in the world. There are others that we could call 'religions': for example, the traditional religions of Africa, made up of numerous cultural traditions that some argue are diverse expressions of a single tradition.

There are strong arguments that African traditional religion is a religion in the same sense of Islam or Christianity, with a basic set of ideas (in a single creator deity, along with more minor deities, and ancestor spirits). This may be the case, although against this there are many who argue that the differences between, for example, religion amongst Yoruba people in Nigeria and Zulu or Shona people in South Africa are just too great to compound together as a single 'religion'. The answer to this is not simple, and really depends on what makes a group of different religious traditions sufficiently unified to be called a single religion.

In other parts of the world, the situation is equally complex. In Australia, there are numerous small cultural groups of Native (or Aboriginal) Australians, each of whom have religious traditions which are unique to their area. The same is true in many other regions, such as North and South America, the many Pacific Islands, and south-east Asia. Although major religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism have spread to most countries in the contemporary world, there are still (and are likely to remain) alongside these much smaller-scale and culturally local religions. To describe these, we usually have to name them



according to their cultural group, so we talk of Navajo religion amongst that particular Native American group, Yoruba religion in West Africa, and Arrernte religion for a central Native Australian group, and so on.

So how do such small-scale traditions fit in with the world religions typology? They are more geographically bound, and have less global impact, and so offer quite a challenge to the idea of classifying religious differences in this way. One scholarly attempt to solve this has been to lump together how we perceive and label many of the smaller religious cultures (such as Navajo, Arrernte, and many of the religions of Africa) into a wider category, such as 'indigenous religions'. (Or in older terminology, they have been labelled as 'primal' or 'traditional' religions.) What this does is provide a sense of scale for classification – all these 'indigenous religions' cover an area of the globe that puts them on a more equal footing with other 'world' religions. Even though there are highly significant differences between the many indigenous religions in this category, there is similar diversity amongst the other 'world' religions, such as Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

The problem with this 'world religions' approach, however, is that it is mainly about *classification* of cultures and traditions. In fact, it has been argued that it is primarily a *political* activity (see, for example, Smith 1998, Fitzgerald 1990). It may be convenient to think of religions as distinct and qualitatively different from each other, but the differences are very often framed from a particular western perspective. The religions that are concentrated on, and are so classified in terms of 'world' or 'global' categories, are those that have figured most prominently in recent western history.

In sum, to talk in this way of world religions is merely a *starting point* – it points out to us the obvious differences between groups on a world-wide scale. And it encourages us to look further at the cultural issues which underlie these differences, as well as the political conditions in which they are found. But there is also much to be gained from looking at the issues from the other way around – that is, working from the particular to the global. Instead of assuming such large-scale entities as 'world religions', we could begin with reference to particular geographical contexts.

This would, for example, locate a study of Hinduism within the complexity and diversity of Indian culture and society. From this,

there are many different Hinduisms, each emerging out of the many different geographical and cultural locations in India itself. Such a study of Hinduism from this level needs to encompass an understanding of the many different aspects of Hindu cultural and religious life in these locations – including texts and practices, as well as ideas and beliefs. Such a study of Hinduism could also start from another location, for example, from a western context (in Britain, or America, or elsewhere), looking at the many aspects of Hindu religious life and culture in such places.

Similarly, this means we need to give some thought to the assumption that there is a *single* Christianity that encompasses *all* Christian traditions, across history and across the world. As we have seen above, the study of Christianity entails a study of Christians in a *particular* time and place, for example, in twenty-first-century America, or medieval Europe. The assumption we often make that the Christian traditions found in such different contexts amount to the 'same thing' (the same 'religion') needs to be reassessed. Instead we should start with the assumption that these different *Christianities* can only be understood in their own particular terms.

At the same time, however, we also need to recognise the further complication that many practitioners of religions may themselves assume that they belong to a single entity – that Christianity is one religion, with many different branches and manifestations. This local perspective may be combined with the further assumption that theirs is the most authentic and true manifestation of the religion, connected to but also distinct from all the others.

Overall this emphasis on the plurality and diversity of religious traditions breaks down our basic assumptions of particular (world or otherwise) religions into more complex and realistic models. We can, therefore, talk of Hinduisms, or Christianities, or Buddhisms, each specific to particular places and contexts. Likewise, small-scale religious cultures do not need to be lumped into a larger category (as 'indigenous' religions), but instead point to the specificity of *all* religious cultures in places and times. This might not be as tidy as the neat table I gave at the beginning of this section, but it does provide a basic starting point for talking about *religions* which more accurately represents the complexities of religious and cultural differences.



## RELIGION AS A UNIVERSAL

I am now going to return to our discussion of the other use of the term religion-as-a-noun: that is, not as a label to divide and classify different traditions, but as a broad category for describing a universal aspect of human life. One immediate problem is that so many people in the contemporary western world do not seem to have any religion. So is it correct to assume that religion is universal?

So whereas in the past most people in Europe and North America were active practitioners of some form of Christianity, there are now many who do not go to any Christian church, and do not engage in any significant way with Christian teachings. Indeed, there are many who openly refute *any* religion, and who describe themselves as humanists, Marxists, or just plain atheists. The presence of such people seems to indicate that religion is not something that is innate to humanity (after all, there does not appear to be any particular 'religion' gene), but is much more a matter of choice and socialisation.

Against this there are arguments that religion is universal, shared by all humans. That is, many argue that the need for an engagement with an alternative reality, a true meaning of existence, a ground of being, or an ultimate truth is a part of human nature. This experience is usually manifest through particular religions, such as Christianity, or Islam. But in a rapidly changing world, where old traditions and old certainties are being swept away, the manifestations of what we call religion are taking new shapes.

It can be argued that secular ideologies such as Marxism (or Communism) have developed to fulfil the roles and functions that were previously filled by religion, or otherwise that nationalism has provided a new set of 'gods' for many in the western and non-western world. Others have looked elsewhere, to the general national and state culture, or 'civil religion', which seeks to create a sense of religion that binds together those of many different religious backgrounds, as well as none. It is also suggested that new cultural manifestations have emerged to fill this gap, particularly sport – such as football, soccer, or baseball – or the power of film and cinema.

All of these appear to be substitutes for the function or role that has been taken by 'conventional religions' in the past. In this way,

they could be called quasi-religions for a post-traditional, post-modern, and secularised world. But to describe football as a religion does perhaps stretch too far the usual idea of what religion is. In some ways, the cult status of football heroes, the veneration of teams, the sacredness of football grounds, and the mysticism and magic that is associated with the game all suggest something that could be said to be *like* religion. But even so, is that the same as saying it actually *is* religion? It might seem to be trivialising the concept of religion to include things such as football or other sports. But if we are assuming that religion is something universal and basic to humans, then there must still be some kinds of religious manifestations in contemporary western cultures, other than Christianity.

To make this argument work, we need to show that religion can be found in *every* culture. Is religion everywhere, and does everyone have a religion, irrespective of their culture? One problem with answering this question is that 'religion' is an English-language word, and has a particular history within the English-speaking world. The world 'religion' does not easily translate into other languages, and terms found in different cultures might not translate all that happily into the English term religion.

For example, Hindus talk about *dharma*, and often use the term *sanatan dharma* as a name for their religion (a literal translation of this is 'eternal religion'). But *dharma* encompasses other concepts too within its range of meanings. Thus *dharma* also describes the order of the world, the way things are, in a sense that is religious, social, and 'natural' (or inherent). For example, each person has their own *dharma*, which derives from their place in life – the *dharma* of a student is to study (and remain celibate), the *dharma* of a married householder is to have and raise children. And each person will have their own *dharma* (depending on the family into which they are born), which determines their occupation (or vocation): to be a soldier, trader, blacksmith, carpenter, or other occupations. So we might find a broad correspondence or affinity between what we call religion and what Hindus call *dharma*, but they are not the same. This raises the tricky question of what we are studying when we look at the 'religion' of Hindus: should we limit ourselves to what we think is 'religion', or look instead at those things described by the word *dharma*?



To complicate matters further, in many cultures there is *no* obvious word that can be translated as religion. As Gary Cooper points out, for Native American groups 'No tribe has a word for "religion" as a separate sphere of existence' (Cooper 1988: 873, see also Fitzgerald 1999: 81). So when we talk in English of Navajo 'religion', we are not *translating* any particular word or concept – what is happening is that the scholar is applying (and perhaps imposing) the term religion into a new context. And in this case we must remember the raw sensitivities in such an encounter. European Americans have imposed a great deal onto Native Americans – most of which has been negative – through a history of conquest, exploitation, and appropriation of land.

## DEFINING (OR MAPPING OUT) THE TERM 'RELIGION'

If, then, we have to be careful with the words we use, does that mean we cannot talk about religion at all? Surely, even if the word 'religion' itself is not universally translatable, then perhaps the broad area of life it describes is? It seems fairly reasonable to assume that most, if not all, people have something about their lives that if we look closely and sensitively enough we can say is like religion, even if they do not call it that? If so, what is this 'religion' in the general sense? Can such a 'thing' be defined in a way that it includes activities in a range of different cultures that look like they are 'religious'?

As one might expect, the answer to this question is not straightforward. There are indeed many different ways to define religion. For example, Jonathan Z. Smith cites a list (by James H. Leuba) of fifty different attempts to define the concept of 'religion'. What this tells us, says Smith, is not that religion cannot be defined, but rather that 'it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways' (1998: 281). This seems to be stating the obvious, but it is a profound point. The term 'religion' means many different things, and so there are many different ways in which we can say something is 'religious'. Or to put this another way, when the term 'religion' is used (and it is used a lot, by different types of people in diverse contexts), it is not clear what is actually being meant by the term. A person might think that its meaning is straightforward and simple, that religion is a 'thing'

that is the same for everybody, but such a statement may be understood quite differently by someone else.

We must also bear in mind that scholars themselves are responsible for how the term 'religion' comes to mean certain things. Elsewhere Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, in a much quoted (and controversial) passage, that 'Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his [or her] imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy' (Smith 1982: xi). What he is suggesting is that the term religion is more useful as something that scholars think about, rather than something which exists in the 'outside world'. This is a useful comment, especially as in some cases the term is used to describe cultural concepts (such as *dharma*) which are not easily translatable as 'religion'.

The problem is, though, that the word religion is (of course) frequently used well beyond academic life. It is commonly used within the popular culture and daily life of many (particularly English-speaking) people, along with other key words such as 'culture' itself. That is, most people who speak English tend to talk of 'my culture' and others' 'culture', and they may also talk about their own 'religion' as well as that of others.

And this is how I intend to talk about religion in this book: not because it has any distinct meaning, but because it is used in many ways in everyday life. So when I use the term, I intend to refer to the vast array of different things encompassed by this everyday usage of the word. I am not going to put my name to the list of definitions that Smith cites, I am not going to give a fifty-first definition (or rehash one that is already going). Definitions of religion can be a useful starting point, but they tend to narrow down options and often lead us to assume we 'know' our subject before we even start looking at it. I suggest that those who study religion and culture do not become bogged down in finding a definition, but instead work on the assumption that in many cultural contexts there is a field of cultural activity that is labelled as 'religion'. If we accept this as something that is given, then the purpose of our study is to see how the activities that go by this loose term are practised *as part of*, not separate from, the rest of cultural life.



Following this approach we do not have to single out any particular definition of religion. It is not necessary to say that religion has any particular essence (or basis), nor that it plays any particular role in social, cultural, or psychological life. There is no activity, no way of thinking or talking, and no particular type of place or text which is intrinsically religious. Instead religion is about a way of talking about the world, of perceiving differences and similarities with other types of activities.

My use of the terms 'religion' and 'religious' is based, therefore, on their common usage as a way of describing certain aspects of human activity. The terms are key cultural concepts, which have emerged in contemporary English out of a particular cultural and political history. At the same time, however, largely because of the spread of English language and western culture (and religion), the terms 'religion' and 'religious' are used widely across the world. Now many Hindus talk about their religion (using either the English word, or *dharma*). Similarly, many Muslims talk (in English) about their 'religion' (which corresponds to some degree with the Arabic word *din*). Controversial figures such as Osama bin Laden talk about their religion as a justification for the atrocities they commit – whilst the large majority of Muslims say that bin Laden's actions are against Islam and so against their religion. The same is true with many other religious traditions. Religion is a term with a wide range of meanings, but it is used on a global scale for a variety of purposes and in many different, often contrasting and conflicting, ways.

In this way, the study of religion and culture helps us to make sense of the contemporary world. Not only does it tell us about the diversity of these discourses on religion (how and why people talk of what they do as religion), but also how such religion works as part of the lives and cultures of people in so many different contexts. In short, religion is not something mystical and detached from the human sphere – it is what people do, and how they talk about what they do.

## THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

Having said a little bit about what the study of religion and culture is about, and also what it is not concerned with, I will now outline some of the key issues that this approach leads us to. Some of these

points reflect directly on issues I mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, whilst others look ahead to ideas and topics that will be discussed later in this book.

- Religion is studied as a human activity. In short, religion is a part of culture. The term refers to a wide range of activities which are part of, not separate from, the practice of culture and everyday life.
- The study of such 'religion' is concerned with what humans do, the texts and other cultural products they produce, and the statements and assumptions they make. In this sense it is something that is done, not something that does – religious activity ('religioning'), rather than religion.
- 'Religion' is a not a *sui generis* category, that is, it does not exist as a 'thing' in itself (a point I will discuss further in Chapter 5). There is no essence of 'religion'. Instead it is a term with a multitude of meanings and references, to be understood with reference to other human activities.
- The study of religion and culture is based on methodological pluralism and interdisciplinarity. That is, it encompasses different methodological and disciplinary approaches. This includes both social-science-based studies such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology, and humanities-based studies such as history, language and literature, cultural and media studies, politics and philosophy. The examples and approaches used in this book come from a range of methodologies and disciplines.
- There is a strong emphasis on studies with an empirical basis. Although there are many abstract and philosophical issues raised in the study of religion and culture, there needs to be some attempt to ground such issues in cultural practices in either contemporary or historical contexts. This requires a particular methodological approach, such as fieldwork, interviewing, surveying, archival research, or textual analysis, or a combination of several of these.
- The study of religion and culture requires a measure of theoretical and methodological relativism (or agnosticism). Although it is, perhaps, unavoidable, the student should resist the temptation to assert one set of truth claims over any other – whether they are claims of metaphysical or cultural truth or superiority.



- As religion is a human activity, the analysis of religion and culture is the analysis of gender, ethnicity, and other social relations and categories. Such gender, ethnic, sexual, and religious differences (and experiences) are in turn a product of (and also produce) power relations. In particular, I will discuss power in Chapter 3 and gender in Chapter 4.
- The study of religion and culture is cross-cultural, multicultural, and post-colonial. The discipline is located in a global context of profound cross-cultural differences, which themselves are part of wider issues of power and inequality. Such studies are located within a particular context of historical and political circumstances, in which cultural (and religious) differences are largely framed by colonial and post-colonial processes.
- The use of the concept (or category) of religion is culture-bound – it is itself a product of these histories and political processes. It is not an objective or 'free-floating' term, but one that carries powerful political meanings on a range of different levels. It is put to use as a way of describing (and classifying) our conceptualisations of a range of experiences and practices.
- The study of religion and culture is highly relevant to our understanding of the contemporary world. Religion is a key element of many cultural issues, as well as a significant factor in the historical development of the worlds and contexts in which we live.

## SUMMARY

- In this chapter I have argued that religion is something that humans do. The study of religion is concerned with people and culture.
- Religion is an ambiguous term, with a range of meanings and references. In particular, it refers both to specific religious traditions, and also to an aspect of human behaviour which is often assumed to be universal.
- We should remember that the term religion has a particular history. We need to be careful when applying it in non-English-speaking contexts. But the word is often part of common usage in many contemporary cultures, and is a useful way of describing how people talk about their experiences.
- Religion is part of everyday life; it is an aspect of culture.