

THE
RELIGION TOOLKIT

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INTRODUCTION

Prepare to Be Surprised



"That's what they all say, honey."

FIGURE 1.1 © Tom Cheney 1996/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com.

*When the missionaries came to Africa,
they had the Bible and we had the land.
They said, "Let us pray." We closed our
eyes. When we opened them, we had
the Bible and they had the land.*

BISHOP DESMOND TUTU



Religion is found around the world and may well be as old as the human race. Some of the earliest evidence of human life found by archaeologists seems to involve religious **ritual**. And throughout history human beings have developed a mind-boggling multiplicity of beliefs and practices that scholars recognize as religious. Today there are over 10,000 distinct traditions identified as religions, and many of these are divided into smaller groups called denominations and sects. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Christianity alone includes over 9,000 denominations and over 34,000 sects. The diversity within some traditions is so extensive that some scholars do not even use terms like "Judaism" or "Christianity." Instead, they speak of "Judaisms" and "Christianities."

The sheer number of religious groups is only one of the surprises awaiting students of religion. Many are also surprised to discover how different *learning about* religion is from *learning* a religion. The goals and methods of the academic study of religion are quite distinct from those found in the *devotional* or *normative* study of religion. These are terms that describe the approach most people follow when they are taught their own religion. The scholarly approach to learning about religion is so different, in fact, that it is usually called Religious Studies, to distinguish it from the devotional or normative study of religion.

In learning a religion, people are trained to follow it. When people give children lessons in religion, these lessons are about their own religion (or denomination or sect or





What is a Cult?

In ordinary conversation, we may say simply that some people belong to certain religions and other people belong to other religions. But in Religious Studies we make finer distinctions. Scholars have developed several terms to deal with the divisions and subdivisions within religions.

According to the standard vocabulary, a *church* is a religious group that exists in harmony with its social environment, and is sufficiently institutionalized to be passed on from one generation to the next. The term “church” is technically appropriate only for Christianity; people of other religions have different terms for their groups and houses of worship. But “church” is used generically here, so that even Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism count as churches.

A *denomination* is a subset of a church – also existing in harmony within its church and among other denominations, and institutionalized enough to be passed on through the generations. Again, scholars use the term “denomination” for subsets within all religions so that, for example, Reform Judaism is a denomination of Judaism, and Shi’ism is a denomination of Islam.

A *sect* is a subset of a church that does not exist in harmony within its environment or church, although it may eventually come to be accepted within its church and develop institutions to survive generational changes, thus achieving the status of a denomination. An example is The Society of St. Pius X, started in 1970 by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in opposition to recent reforms within the Roman Catholic Church. Archbishop Lefebvre was excommunicated from the Catholic Church when he took upon himself the right to consecrate bishops – a right reserved for the pope. That was in 1988. But in 2009, the Church revoked the excommunication and started a process to integrate members of the Society of St. Pius X back into the Church.

A *cult* is a religious movement that develops outside an established church structure and often exists in tension with socially accepted religious institutions. Scientology is considered by some authorities to be a cult, since it originated outside an established church structure. However, followers of Scientology have organized themselves sufficiently to survive and prosper since their beginning in 1953, and they refer to themselves as members of the Church of Scientology.

While many scholars use these terms as defined above, some reject them as imposing concepts from Christianity onto other religions.

cult). This approach to religion is a kind of initiation into one tradition. Students are taught what their tradition considers true, so that they will be able to distinguish between that and what is false. And they are taught what their tradition considers right and wrong, so that they may do the one and avoid the other. They may learn some of the history of their group, but

will probably spend more time learning stories, rituals, and prayers. If, in the process of being trained, they learn about other religions, it is often so that they will understand why their own tradition is right, and what is wrong with the teachings and practices of other traditions.

In Religious Studies, on the other hand, we are not trying to determine what is true or false or right or wrong about any religion's teachings or practices. Our goal is to understand religious traditions, not be trained in them. In doing this, we examine many traditions that are identified as religions without judging any of them. We do study what certain traditions teach is right and wrong, and true and false, and why they teach what they do. But whether we agree with those teachings or not is not part of Religious Studies. When we study the teachings of a single tradition, we may well learn how they changed over time. There, too, we do not judge the truth or rightness of either the old or the new teachings. In other words, in Religious Studies we learn about diversity, both among and within religious traditions, but our goals and methods are like those of scientists rather than those of preachers.

A second goal of Religious Studies is to understand what religion is in the first place. And this holds still more surprises about the field. When you take a course in Accounting, you know that you will be studying how to manipulate numbers for specific purposes. When you sign up for Chemistry 101, you know you will be introduced to the tiny particles that make up the world we see around us. But when you sign up to study a religion other than your own, you may find yourself studying things that you were not aware could be considered religious.

If you think of your own religion as consisting of certain beliefs, rituals, and values, you might expect to study the beliefs, rituals, and values of the other religion. So it often comes as a surprise to students in Religious Studies courses that they may be studying history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and even economics. In Religious Studies we study these things, and more, because many traditions do not confine themselves to beliefs, rituals, and neatly identified values. Some traditions consider themselves simply a way of life, so that everything in life is subject to religious teaching.

Similarly, you may have grown up with the idea that religion is about what is holy or sacred, as opposed to what is worldly or secular. And so you may expect to find that distinction in other traditions. But, as just mentioned, many traditions consider all of life as the domain of religion, and so they do not use the distinction between sacred and secular.

Because the study of religion gets into so many areas, it is necessarily multi-disciplinary. Experts in Religious Studies may have their primary training in any of the fields mentioned above, or others such as Art History and Classics. And this wide-ranging approach to the subject matter of Religious Studies is also why there is so much debate within the field regarding what "religion" is.

The 19th-century German scholar who introduced the term Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*), Max Müller (see Chapter 3), is often credited with saying "He who knows one, knows none." His idea is that people who know only their own religion cannot understand the nature of religion itself, just as people who know only one language are not qualified to explain the nature of language itself. Asking someone who knows only one religion what religion is would be like asking a fish what water is. "Compared to what?" would be a reasonable answer. Not until we have at least two examples of something can we try to describe the category to which the two specimens belong.

As we shall see, trying to figure out just what religion is began as soon as scholars started trying to identify religions other than their own. Should tribal practices associated with healing in pre-modern societies be considered religious? In modern industrialized societies we generally leave healing to science, not religion. Should practices designed to influence the thoughts or feelings of someone far away be categorized as religion, or should they be called magic or superstition? Should stories about events that modern science says could not have happened be included in religion, or should they be dismissed as holdovers from a pre-scientific era? Is it even possible to distinguish religious stories from myths, or religion from superstition or magic?

This quest, to understand what religion is, is made even harder by the fact that many languages have no word that means the same thing as “religion” in English. Scholars are not even sure where the term “religion” came from. We know that its root is Latin, but what did it mean in early Latin? The 1st-century BCE philosopher Cicero traces the term to *legere*, to read, so that “religion” would mean to re-read (*re-legere*), but the 4th- to 5th-century CE Christian thinker Augustine traces the term to *ligare*, meaning “to connect or bind” (the same root as the English word “ligament”), so that “religion” would mean “to bind again” or “to reconnect.” Many modern theologians favor this etymology, seeing religion as something that binds a community together. However, *A Latin Dictionary* by Lewis and Short traces our modern meaning, “reverence for God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things, [or] piety,” only to the 13th century CE. So what word might earlier Christians have used for what modern Christians think of as religion?

To complicate things further, the term that the **sacred** texts of Judaism and Islam use for “religion” means something quite different from any of the Latin roots for “religion.” This term is *din*. (It might also be counted as a surprise that in both Hebrew and Arabic, the languages of Judaic and Islamic **scriptures**, the term is the same. Hebrew and Arabic are closely related Semitic languages, and Judaism and Islam are very similar traditions.) *Din* can mean “judgment,” as in “Day of *din*” or “Court of *din*.” It can also mean “way of life.” What is more, the same term is used in modern Persian, but that usage is traced to Zoroastrian (the ancient religion of Persia) texts, where it means “eternal law” or “duty.” Similarly, the term from Buddhist texts that sometimes is translated as “religion” is *dharma*. But *dharma* does not mean what “religion” means in English. *Dharma* means “cosmic truth” or “the way the world is.” It also means the teachings of the Buddha, and “duty,” too. *Dharma* is used in Hinduism to mean both “ultimate reality” and human beings’ duties.

Scholars may not agree on exactly what “religion” means, but they generally agree that the term is too narrow to refer to all the phenomena that are examined in Religious Studies. As a result, many scholars use the term **tradition** rather than “religion.” This may be not only surprising, but confusing. By “tradition” Religious Studies scholars do not mean simply something that people do because it has always been done that way. We use the term “tradition” to refer to the amalgam of a group’s beliefs, rules, and customs insofar as they are associated with that group’s ultimate concerns, values, and ideas about the meaning of life.

Because of its interest in understanding what “religion” is in general, Religious Studies includes both historic and comparative elements. Religious Studies scholars examine traditions not just as they are now but as they have developed over time. This aspect of

Religious Studies is known as **History of Religions**. The comparative elements of Religious Studies may involve looking at a single religious tradition in various historic periods, tracing any changes that developed. As well, it may involve studying a number of religious traditions within a single historical period. It may also involve comparing and contrasting the ways several religious traditions deal with a certain topic, such as salvation or war. This approach to Religious Studies is called **Comparative Religions**.

The historical and comparative approaches to the study of religious traditions lead to a number of other surprises for the new student. People who are used to religions that revolve around a single God may be surprised to find that some traditions involve many gods and some do not even require belief in a god. In Hinduism, for example, there are countless **deities** (gods) – 330,000,000 is the traditional number given. Some people worship one of them, such as Shiva or Vishnu, some worship several, and others turn to specific deities for assistance, depending upon the need at hand. The deities of some traditions may have a number of personas. The Indian god Vishnu, for example, can be worshipped as Vishnu, or as Rama, Krishna, the Buddha, or any of several other personalities. These diverse **avatars** are considered manifestations of the one god. Moreover, people who are used to conceiving of God in spiritual or non-material terms may be surprised to find gods that are quite physical. A popular god in India is Ganesha, who has the head of an elephant, with one broken tusk, and is variously depicted with two to sixteen arms.

In Western religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, a central idea is that God has revealed himself and certain truths to human beings, often through messengers called **prophets**. People who believe in divine revelation typically believe that the information transmitted in this way – or at least the most important parts of it – could not have been obtained in any other way. They also consider the written records (“scripture”) of that revelation to be extremely special (“sacred” or **holy**) and, in fact, perfect and absolutely true (**inerrant**, without error). However, if we assume that religions must include divine revelation, we have another surprise coming. Many traditions have texts that they consider sacred, even though these texts come from human sources. The Hindu **Upanishads** and Zoroastrian **Avestas** are examples. Moreover, other traditions, those of some Native Americans, for instance, have no sacred texts; they transmit their wisdom in oral form from one generation to the next. The Anishinaabe teachings shared by the Algonquin, Ojibwa, and other tribes of the United States and Canada hold regular meetings to recount, explain, and pass along their Midewiwin teachings in traditional stories (called *aadizookaanan*) to the next generations.

On a related theme, people who are used to **orthodoxy** – the idea that there is a single set of truths – will be surprised as well to find that in traditions such as Hinduism it is considered perfectly normal for some people to believe in one God, while others believe in several gods, and some believe in no god at all. Another way to put that is that, while some traditions are **exclusivist** – believing there is only one true religion, others are pluralist – believing that different people have different traditions and that each of them is legitimate. Religious **pluralism** can even extend to a single person. **Monotheists** – people who believe in one God – tend to think of each person as belonging either to one religion or to none, but in Japan, for instance, most people follow both Buddhism and Shinto – an ancient set of Japanese traditions. When Japanese people want to get married, they may go to a Shinto priest; to arrange a funeral they may go to a Buddhist priest. The same temple may house



FIGURE 1.2 A temple of Ganesha, one of the five most popular gods in India. He is worshipped as the Remover of Obstacles, and also as the Lord of Success. Ganesha is a god of knowledge and wisdom, and so a patron of the arts and sciences. Stuart Forster/Alamy.

both of them. In China and Taiwan, people participate in Buddhist rituals, Taoist rituals, and rituals dedicated to local gods, and they also visit temples dedicated to Confucius.

As Religious Studies explores how various traditions have developed their worldviews, rituals, and rules, more surprises come to light. For example, we often find that a belief or practice we thought was unique within our own tradition is actually shared by a number of



Who Was Easter?



FIGURE 1.3 *Ostara, Goddess of the Dawn*, by Johannes Gehrts, 1884, from Felix and Therese Dahn, *Walhall: Germanische Gotter und Heldensagen...*, 1901.

SLUB Dresden/Deutsche Fotothek.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the word “Easter” – the name of the most sacred day in the Christian calendar, the day commemorating Jesus’ resurrection from death – is derived from “Eostre,” the name of an ancient goddess of spring. According to *Compton’s Encyclopedia*, “Our name Easter comes from Eostre, an ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess, originally of the dawn. In pagan times an annual spring festival was held in her honor.” So Eostre was a pre-Christian goddess venerated at the vernal equinox (beginning of spring). The Easter Bunny and the colored eggs at Easter also come from pre-Christian rituals to promote fertility. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us, “The egg as a symbol of fertility and of renewal of life goes back to the ancient Egyptians and Persians, who had also the custom of coloring and eating eggs during their spring festival.”

traditions. Christian students, for example, are often surprised to find that Muslims revere Jesus as a great prophet, and honor his mother Mary with an entire chapter of the **Qur'an** (Islamic scripture) named for her. Islam also shares with Judaism and Christianity the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the history of prophets from the time of Abraham forward.

It is potentially even more stunning, especially for those from religions with divinely revealed scriptures, that a number of their beliefs are found in texts that pre-date those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Scholars trace the story of Noah and the Flood that appears in the Book of Genesis of the Hebrew Bible (Christian **Old Testament**) and Qur'an, for example, to the Gilgamesh Epic of **Mesopotamia**. In that story, the gods flood the earth, one man is told to build a huge boat, and he brings many kinds of animals on board.

Religious Studies also includes careful (or “critical”) study of scripture that often reveals how people’s understanding of their own texts has changed. For example, students are often surprised to find that the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) speaks of a time when there was more than one god, the gods intermarried with humans, and the babies they had were giants:

When mankind began to increase and to spread all over the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of the gods saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; so they took for themselves such women as they chose.... In those days, when the sons of the gods mated with the daughters of men and got children by them, the Nephilim [Giants] were on earth. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. (Genesis 6:1–4)

Not only does religious people’s understanding of what happened in history change, but their understanding of morality does too. To take a contemporary example, millions of Jews and Christians now work and shop on the **Sabbath** without giving it a second thought, but the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) condemns work and commerce on the Sabbath. Exodus 31:15 says that “[w]hoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.” In fact, many Jews and Christians took the Sabbath seriously until just a few decades ago, and did not work, or buy or sell things on that day.

Another issue that shows how a tradition can change over time is the morality of war. A book by John Driver is aptly titled *How Christians Made Peace with War*. He explains how, for the first three centuries, Christians followed Jesus’ injunction “Do not resist the evildoer. But if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other as well.... Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:39–44). In the Roman Empire, Christians were well known for their pacifism, and they did not accept soldiers into their group. But then in the fourth century, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, and soon Christian leaders were talking about “just wars.” The 4th- to 5th-century Christian thinker Augustine developed a rationale for wars in order to justify attacking the Donatists, a group of fellow Christians who disagreed with him on some theological issues, and since then Christian scholars have elaborated justifications for war under certain conditions. Similarly, there is lively debate among modern Muslim scholars over whether war may be legally declared at all, and if so, under what conditions.



Is Slavery Wrong?



FIGURE 1.4 Slave.
MPI/Getty Images.

All major traditions, including Christianity, now condemn slavery and consider it immoral, but before 1770 none did. John Newton (1725–1807), the Anglican priest who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” had earlier been the captain of a ship that transported newly enslaved Africans to slave markets in the Americas. He thought that the job of slave ship captain was spiritually enriching because of the long periods at sea. There was, he wrote, no profession that provided “greater advantages to an awakened mind, for promoting the life of God in the soul.”

In the Bible, God not only permits slavery but regulates it. In Exodus 21, right after God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, he says, “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go free [after seven years] as male slaves do.” In the Christian New Testament, too, Paul says, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (Ephesians 6:5).

Actually, the whole history of religious traditions includes a lot of killing. Five hundred years ago, the rituals of the Aztecs included the sacrifice of thousands of people, followed by the eating of the corpses. Most of those killed were captives taken in battle. Here is anthropologist Marvin Harris' account of an Aztec religious ritual:

Forced to ascend the flat-topped pyramids that dominated the city's ceremonial precincts, the victim was seized by four priests, one for each limb, and bent backward face up, over a stone altar. A fifth priest then opened the victim's chest with an obsidian knife, wrenched out the heart, and while it was still beating, smeared it over the nearby statue of the presiding deity. Attendants then rolled the body down the steps. Other attendants cut off the head, pushed a wooden shaft through it from side to side, and placed it on a tall latticework structure or skull rack alongside the heads of previous victims. (Harris 1989, 432)

After they had decapitated the corpse, they cut up the body and distributed it for eating. If these rituals seem brutal, consider the treatment of religious heretics and suspected witches in Europe at the same time: burning at the stake. Again, the point is that in Religious Studies we study not just what people currently believe and practice but also how beliefs and practices change over time.

As these examples show, Religious Studies is about far more than right and wrong, true and false – which are the main concerns when people learn about their own religions. Religious Studies also looks at what people actually do, and so it is not just about the holy and the noble. It is about religion as it is lived, including “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.” In 1978, for example, a religious group of over 900 people from the United States who had established themselves in Jonestown, Guyana, committed mass suicide at the insistence of their founder, Jim Jones. In an article that has become widely known, leading Religious Studies scholar Jonathan Z. Smith criticized those who felt that Mr. Jones was too far out of the norm to require serious scholarly attention. Some even refused to talk about the event, Smith claimed derisively, “because it revealed what had been concealed from public, academic discussion for a century – that religion has rarely been a positive, liberal force. Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity” (Smith 1982, 104).

Some students taking their first course in Religious Studies may find this objective approach disturbing at first. They may feel that it is too relativistic because it treats every tradition as equally valid. Just as a zoology course might compare lions, tigers, and leopards, say, without asking “Which is best?” a major university offers a course called “God/s: a Cross-Cultural Gallery” that compares Yahweh, the God of the Bible, with dozens of other gods, without ranking them. Similarly, the British Library has an online gallery of sacred texts in which the Bible appears alongside dozens of other scriptures: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/sacred/homepage.html>. While it is perfectly natural to feel uneasy when you first see your own religion treated as one among many, it is important to remember that Religious Studies does not preclude the belief that there is really only one true religion. Religious Studies only precludes *teaching* that any given religious tradition is the correct or incorrect one. These are personal convictions that may be described in the classroom, but not advocated in the classroom.



FIGURE 1.5 Pope John Paul II. © Rene Leveque/Sygma/Corbis.

The major lesson of this chapter, then, is that studying religions is like studying any other subject – with one exception. As with the study of any other subject, we have to be willing to look at surprising facts. We have to be ready to imagine what the world looks like to people who think quite differently from the way we do. The 19th-century English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said that appreciating some literature required a “willing suspension of disbelief.” One could say that understanding other people’s religions requires a temporary suspension of belief – our own beliefs. This certainly does not mean that scholars of religion must abandon their own beliefs. It only means that we must not make them the standards by which to judge others’ beliefs and practices. As one of the greatest scholars of religion in the 20th century, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, said,

We have not understood any action or any saying in another century or another culture until we have realized that we ourselves, had we been in that situation, might well have done or said exactly that. Not that we would have done it; that would mean denying human freedom. We must simply appreciate, must feel and make our readers feel, that of the various possibilities open to us at that point, this particular thought or move or comment would have seemed attractive to us, and perceive the reasons why that would be so. (Smith, unpublished paper)

But note that Smith does not use the word “religion” here. He speaks of people’s actions and words; that is what we are really trying to understand in the study of religions. And that is the “one exception.” Unlike the study of other subjects, in the study of religion we are not sure exactly what the topic is. We are still trying to understand what religion is – a question to which we shall return in the final chapter.

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