What is "religion"?

The word's evolving meaning is linked to histories of empire

"Religion" is difficult to define because over the past 2,000 years, the term has been applied to different things for different reasons.

Religio *in ancient Rome and medieval Europe*

The word "religion" is not native to English but was a medieval import from Latin via French. The etymology of the Latin word, *religio*, is uncertain, a subject of debate even among ancient Latin writers. One proposal derives the word from *relegere*, "to re-read," implying the careful learning and performance of scripted ceremonies; another proposal derives the word from *religare*, "to re-bind," implying the renewal of the bond between humans and gods. In any case, ancient Latin writers used *religio* to mean a feeling of fear or reverence toward the gods, as well as obligations or scruples by which people expressed that feeling. Thus, for the Romans who first used the term, "religion" meant something like "god-fearingness," or devotion to the gods. In this usage, religion was conceived as singular—the expression of a personal disposition—not as discrete systems that could be named and listed in the plural ("religions").

Christian apologists in the Roman empire gave a new twist to the word's usage by distinguishing between true *religio*, Christians' devotion to the one God, and false *religio*, devotion to other gods. This distinction had the potential to promote a discourse about multiple "religions"—but that didn't happen. Talk of true vs. false *religio* largely disappeared from Latin Christian writing once Christianity became the Roman empire's only legal religion. During the medieval period, western Christians writing about Judaism or Islam typically did not call the rival system a false *religio*; they used instead the words *secta* (meaning a "way," "school of thought," or "faction"), *lex* ("law"), or *fides* ("faith," as in "the Mohammedan faith"). In medieval texts, *religio* meant, by default, Christian devotion. Indeed, when the word was imported into English, in the 1200s, it referred foremost to Christian monasticism: because of their commitment to an especially devout, disciplined lifestyle, monks were called "men of religion," and monasteries were called "houses of religion." Catholics still use the term that way today when they refer formally to monks and nuns as "men religious" and "women religious." This equating of religion with disciplined devotion gave rise, by the 1500s, to English figures of speech in which the term "religion" could be applied metaphorically to any activity that a person did with care, regularity, or fervor—as when, today, a person might be said to work out at the gym "religiously."

From religio *to "religions"*

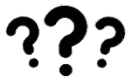
Discourse about true vs. false *religio* resurged in western Europe during the Protestant Reformation, and this time, it did culminate in a conception of "religions," plural, resembling present-day usage. The change can be seen in the motto *Cuius regio, eius religio* ("Whose region, his religion"), which was coined around 1600 to express the principle that a territory's religion should be the religion of its ruler; the principle was meant to prevent wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. While this motto still assumed that *religio* is Christian, the word referred not simply to a devout personal disposition nor to monasticism, but to a discrete system of creed and worship. Furthermore, the motto presupposed that there are multiple such systems (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, etc.), thus multiple "religions." And the motto used the term "religion"

to reference all those systems in a neutral or relativizing way, rather than giving some a loaded label such as “heresy” or “sect.”

The conception of religions as plural was further reinforced during the Reformation era—and was extended beyond varieties of Christianity—as western Europeans expanded their commercial and colonial activities in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. There Europeans encountered cultures with elements that Europeans perceived as analogous to Christianity: buildings analogous to churches, functionaries analogous to priests, texts analogous to the Bible, practices analogous to prayer or sacraments, moral teachings and taboos, conceptions of the afterlife, and so on. These things, too, Europeans dubbed “religion.” One landmark of this expanded usage is the 1614 book *Purchas His Pilgrimage* (meaning *Purchas’s Pilgrimage*), by Anglican priest Samuel Purchas. The book offered readers a wide-ranging survey of what Purchas called the “religions” of Jews, Muslims, Mongols, Chinese, Japanese, peoples of south and southeastern Asia, sub-Saharan Africans, and indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Once they had identified religions beyond Christianity, Europeans sought to categorize them. Initially, a fourfold typology was common: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and then “other,” often designated “heathen.” By the beginning of the 20th century, Westerners had coined the term “world religions,” which they applied to an expanded list of traditions whose names Westerners had also coined, typically ending with *-ism*: Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedanism (a label for Islam), Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Sikhism. These named religions were all literate traditions, associated with societies that Westerners of the 1800s deemed to be comparatively civilized. Religions of peoples whom Westerners deemed more primitive—indigenous Americans, Pacific Islanders, Africans—were not usually named as *-isms*, nor were they usually included in textbooks on world religions until the latter half of the 20th century, i.e., the postcolonial era. Today, in reaction against the legacies of Western imperialism, the boundaries and names that Westerners invented for the world religions are disputed. For example: Instead of a singular “Hinduism,” would it be more accurate to speak of diverse “Hindu religions”? In place of the Western coinage “Confucianism,” would it be better to speak of “Ruism,” reflecting the Chinese terminology—and is that tradition better categorized as a “philosophy” than as a “religion”?

Definitional complexities today



Today, we live in a world where it is widely assumed that there is something called “religion.” The United Nations, for example, has declared freedom of “religion” to be a universal human right. But when people try to define religion for scholarly or legal purposes, they run into a problem. The originally Latin term was applied across cultures based on analogy, and it was applied in different situations based on different analogies: “These people have something like the Bible.” “These don’t have a Bible, but they do believe in something like gods.” “These don’t believe in gods, but they believe in an afterlife,” etc. As a result, it is hard to retroactively devise a pithy definition that will encompass all the various things that people are now used to calling “religion.”

Some definitions prove too narrow. For instance, if we define religion as belief in God or gods, we will exclude nontheistic forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, New Age spirituality, or, for that matter, Christianity, which many people would still call forms of “religion” (albeit, maybe, unusual forms of it). Other definitions prove too broad because they would include things that many people don’t want to call “religion.” Indeed, the definition of

A rough timeline of "religion"

Roman empire
100 BCE – 500 CE

- *Latin* religio = *"god-fearingness," devotion to the gods*
- *Christian apologists distinguish between true and false* religio

Medieval Europe
500 – 1500

- *Christians call Judaism and Islam* secta, lex, *or* fides, *not* religio
- *By 1200s, English "religion" = Christian monasticism*
- *By 1500s, figures of speech apply "religion" metaphorically to anything done with care, regularity, or fervor*

European colonialism
1500 – 1950

- *By 1600s,* Cuius regio, eius religio: *"religion" = a system of creed and worship, assumed to be multiple*
- Purchas His Pilgrimage *(1614) surveys non-Christian "religions" of Asians, Africans, and indigenous Americans*
- *By early 1900s, Westerners have created a list of "world religions"*

Postcolonial era
1950 – present

- *Textbooks include indigenous peoples' religions as "world religions"*
- *Boundaries and names of the "world religions" are disputed*
- *Scholars, jurists, etc., struggle to retroactively define "religion"*

religion as belief in God or gods would be judged too broad by people who believe in God but who also insist that they are not "religious." Some attempted definitions of religion are so broad that they could encompass intense devotion to Communism, to *Star Trek*, or to a sports team. Some scholars are willing to extend the term so far; many other people are not.

Some people today distinguish "religion" from categories such as "superstition," "witchcraft," "spirituality," or "cults." In every case, the distinction serves to exclude from the category "religion" certain things that, for one reason or another, the person balks at calling "religion" but that resemble, in some way, things that the person is willing to call "religion." These distinctions are often normative, meaning that the person making the distinction regards "religion" as either superior or inferior to the other category: for example, superior to "superstition," or inferior to "spirituality." For the sake of neutrality, scholars in the academic field of religious studies tend not to draw these normative distinctions; instead, they subsume all the alternatively labeled phenomena—"superstition," "witchcraft," "spirituality," "cults," etc.—into the category "religion." Scholars may be very interested, though, in tracking how other people draw these distinctions and identifying who is thereby advantaged or disadvantaged. For instance: Does labeling a certain group a "cult" let people justify treating the group in ways that wouldn't be accepted if it were classed as a "religion"?

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*"But how are **you** defining religion?"*

The Empire and American Religion project proceeds from a moderately broad sense of what counts as "religion," in line with common scholarly usage of the term. This usage encompasses some things that some people might not immediately think of as "religion," but hopefully it doesn't

stretch the term to a point that most people would find unpersuasive. In examining ways that “religion” has been used to support or resist “empire” over the course of US history, the Empire and American Religion project assumes that we are examining religion when we examine any of the following:

→ Concepts, rites, norms, scriptures, narratives, mythic beings, historical figures, functionaries, institutions, sacred sites, images, objects, or other symbols distinctive to the various “world religions,” including analogous cultural expressions among indigenous peoples.

→ Instances of what might be called “mythology,” “folklore,” “magic,” “witchcraft,” “mystical experience,” etc., that involve conceptions of the supernatural, even if not associated with an “organized religion.”

→ Generalized forms of God-talk, meaning statements about God, Providence, etc., that do not clearly reflect one specific tradition.

→ Statements made, or actions done, by someone in their capacity as a religious functionary, such as a minister or a missionary, even if they are addressing only this-worldly concerns or speaking in terms not distinctive to their religious tradition.

→ The use of religious identity labels, even when it appears that the identity is conceived more as ethnic or national than as creedal or devotional (such as when a colonial-era writer uses the word “Christians” to refer generally to white settlers as contrasted to indigenous people).

→ At the outer limits of this project’s usage of the term, expressions that could be classified as “civil religion” because they serve arguably religious-like functions, even if they lack characteristics that would more conventionally mark them as religious—for example, a secular but “mythologized” national origin story.

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