

A "Definition" of Religion

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WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson attempts to define religion. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Commonalities
2. Family Resemblance

1. Commonalities

It can be challenging to understand just one religion and even more challenging to understand the many different religions. So where do we begin?

One way you can begin to define religion is by looking at the many associations that you might have with religion. This may include things such as music, silence, prayer, clothing that's worn during services and ceremonies, or rules that guide behavior.

There are also aspects such as the preoccupation and concern with the ultimate questions, the nature of existence, the nature of God and whether God exists, beauty, truth, and death. At the crux of religion is this desire to reconcile the apparently separate worlds of the human and the non-human or the worlds of matter and spirit.

2. Family Resemblance

It seems there are many terms that appear to compete with each other when looking at the definition of religion. This is due to the nature of language itself and the way people engage with it.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein went on at great length about this in a book called *Philosophical Investigations*, which was published after he died. He explored the nature of language and how we interact with it. He had a very active and functional view of language. He believed that any given word uses a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and crisscrossing. He therefore applies the term **family resemblance** to

help mediate the tension that seems so present in language and our human fixation with definitions and their accuracy.

So even though religion is hard to define, it doesn't mean that it can't be understood. Maybe the most practical approach is to look for family resemblances. If Wittgenstein is followed, a more fluid definition of religion might be useful. If there are two seemingly unrelated concepts, and thus two complete, competing, or conflicting approaches to an issue, these original terms might find some commonality through another, intermediate term or terms.

He called it the sense language game of interpretation, and it might be useful to see how religion functions across the borders of a fixed definition.



TERM TO KNOW

Family Resemblance

A theory discussed in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* whereby seemingly unrelated concepts may be connected to each other via intermediate concepts.



SUMMARY

To attempt to define religion, one can examine the **commonalities** that exist between many religions, such as music, prayer, or ceremonial clothing. Many religions also have a preoccupation with the ultimate questions of life, as well as a desire to reconcile the difference between opposing things, such as matter and spirit. Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of **family resemblance** offers a more fluid definition.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Family Resemblance

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