

"Origins" of Religion

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson addresses the often-confusing idea of religion itself. You will look at the roots of the word to get even more tangled and confused. No matter how complicated it gets, you can be sure that religion, as it's most likely understood today in modern global culture, is very different from how it was understood in the past. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Study of Religion

2. A Way of Life

1. Study of Religion

The field of religious studies as an academic discipline really began in the 19th century. It's an approach to studying religions that usually places itself outside of the traditions for the purpose of objective comparative study.

One way to study religion is through **etymology**. This is the study of where words come from and develop through time and culture. It traces a word's roots and can give you the feeling that you're getting closer to something.

Friedrich Max Mueller, a philologist and one of the well-known founders of comparative religion, traced the word "religion" back to the Latin "religio," meaning piety or reverence toward the gods. The English word "religion" can also be traced to the Latin verb "ligare," which means to bind and bring together. There are also links to the French "religion" and the Anglo-Saxon "religium," both of which referred to the religious community.

Using etymology to trace the roots of religion and see how it may have been used and understood in the past is a great way to shed light on the potentially confusing terrain of religion and religious studies. It means reverence for the supernatural, it serves to bind, and it means community.



TERM TO KNOW

Etymology

The study of word origins.

2. A Way of Life

There is a difference between religion as it is studied through etymology or comparative religion and how it was lived and experienced in history.



DID YOU KNOW

In Hebrew language, there is no word for religion that is comparable to our English word. It was, and still is for many, fully integrated into all aspects of the lives of Jewish people.

In many ancient cultures, societal institutions, such as law, were manifestations of a religious sensibility, perspective, and worldview. Religion could not be isolated and separated from life. Some good examples are the cultures of ancient Egypt, Greece, and the ancient civilizations of **Mesopotamia**. Mesopotamia is an area along the ancient Tigris and Euphrates rivers roughly including modern Iraq and parts of Iran, Syria, and Turkey. It is often referred to as the Fertile Crescent.

IN CONTEXT

This is different from what is experienced today in many cultures, so take a look at a real-life example. In ancient Greece in 400 BCE, the trial of Socrates occurred in a society that was governed by the Greek worldview and reverence for the gods. Socrates was accused of offending the gods and corrupting the education of the youth by encouraging a new form of thought and inquiry. The law of the gods was taken into the hands of society, and after the trial, poisoning by hemlock was the sentence.



The Death of Socrates by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825)

It can be challenging to navigate this apparent divide between religion as it used to be and our modern, perhaps more compartmentalized, understanding of religion.



TERM TO KNOW

Mesopotamia

An ancient region encompassing the areas served by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, including modern Iraq as well as parts of Iran, Syria, and Turkey.



SUMMARY

Religion is indeed hard to define. **The study of religion** is the field of religious studies as an academic discipline, which began in the 19th century. Etymology can help trace the roots of words to bring better understanding. The philologist and comparative religion scholar Max Mueller traced it to the Latin word “religio,” meaning piety or reverence toward the gods.

But it can also be linked to the Latin verb “ligare”: to bind, to bring together. In history and some

religious communities today, such as the culture of Judaism, religion wasn't and isn't something separate from the life and the structures of society, like law. Religion is a **way of life**.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Etymology

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