

Reasons for Studying Religion

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Why study religion? Where to begin? In addition to being incredibly inspiring and rich and full of mystery, religion can often be an overwhelming subject. It can be confusing, frustrating, weird, scary, isolating, or just boring. In this lesson, you will get an idea of how religion is threaded through individual human experience and humanity as a whole, historically, psychologically, scientifically, and socially. You will also look briefly at the question and the idea of transcendence beyond this human realm. Finally, you will be able to think about and articulate the practical and ethical importance of recognizing different cultures and religious traditions. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. Religion in History
2. Transcendent
3. Global Community

1. Religion in History

There's some reason why you've chosen to study religion. You may or may not come from a religious background. You may have rejected religion and are returning to it now with some new curiosity and interest. Maybe you want to understand yourself and your neighbor better.

There are personal, individual reasons for studying religion, and there are many approaches to doing so. The academic study of religion is a relatively recent thing when you look at how far back the ideas associated with religion can be traced. Neolithic humanity, as they adjusted to life in settlements and transitioned from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, lived with the belief in an earthly material order that reflected a **transcendent** order. This idea was used to help establish sensible order in society, such as having a central government.

Similarly, the civilizations of ancient Egypt saw the use of geometry and science as practical extensions of a higher law and order. Therefore, they imparted the material earthly world of experience with great religious and spiritual significance.

Practices regarding the body were often considered spiritual. Things such as healing the human body were performed by individuals who were believed to be directly in contact with the transcendent realm. Another

good example is mummification. This was a way of ensuring the safe transition, or the safe passage, of the soul from the earthly realm to the afterlife.



TERM TO KNOW

Transcendent

That which is beyond the ordinary.

2. Transcendent

Moving now to industrialization, there emerged the social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, branches of modern psychology, et cetera. In sync with modern science, these sciences also restrict their ground of inquiry to the observable world. If there are valid questions, there are thought to be valid explanations and answers.

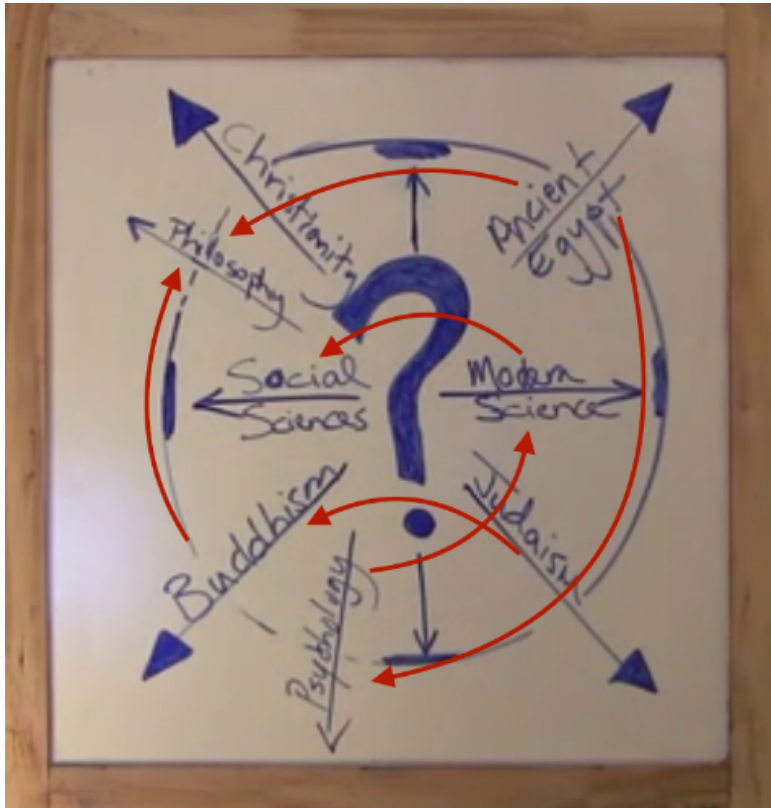
However, in many of these fields, some of these questions can be more open-ended. Those open-ended questions can be addressed in fields such as philosophy and psychology. This diagram is a representation of some of the approaches to religion and some of the fields that interact with religion and study it.



The arrows that do not extend out beyond the circle are modern science and social sciences. This represents the restricted realm of the known and the observable world. Those that extend out are moving into the realm of the transcendent. These are religions and disciplines exploring and interacting with the transcendent, such as ancient Egypt, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, et cetera.

Psychology goes through this perforated area. At times it restricts itself to the known and observable world, but it has questions. Psychology does address some of the questions and leaves them more open-ended.

Of course, all of these things, both religious and nonreligious, are obliged to interact and intersect with the question and struggle of individual and collective **humanity**. The red arrows represent these interactions. There is modern science interacting with social sciences and all religions interact with each other in one way or another. There are religious customs and traditions that maintain that relationship, such as customs of marriage, religious ceremonies, and law.



BIG IDEA

The strongest point to be made here is that modern science and the social sciences do restrict themselves to these questions that are thought to be answerable. The unanswerable questions are addressed more by the main primary religions that we'll be discussing and by certain disciplines, such as philosophy and psychology.

This is what makes it very interesting, rich, confusing, and scary. All of the questions, traditions, and methods of inquiry collide while somehow having originated from the same place. Generally, religion addresses questions about human life, individual and collective, and its relationship to that which is beyond.



TERM TO KNOW

Humanity

A term used to refer to all human beings collectively.

3. Global Community

Living in a global society, interaction with an assortment of cultures, practices, and peoples is inevitable. People who might have some of the same questions about life that you do might approach them from a different angle.

Being able to respond to these differences thoughtfully and compassionately will make it easier to interact with others in a global community. Having the necessary background knowledge to support genuine engagement with the world will help you even beyond a religious context. This is the goal of a global citizen.



SUMMARY

This lesson began by acknowledging that there might be personal reasons for studying religion and that they could, in fact, overlap with humanity's ancient preoccupation with the transcended realm. You looked at several examples of this, from Neolithic humanity to ancient Egypt to modern times, as we uphold certain customs and conventions that can be traced back through **religion in history**. The inherited questions of religion and religious life seem to center around the idea, the hope, and the belief in the **transcendent**. Some approaches to study are more naturally inclined in this way. You also covered the diversity of religious beliefs and the variety of possible approaches to religion. The questions that inspire and surround it require sensitivity to live effectively in a **global community**.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Humanity

A term used to refer to all human beings collectively.

Transcendent

That which is beyond the ordinary.