

Transmission of the Teaching

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson addresses how various religious traditions transmitted through the ages. It will identify different forms and methods of transmission that serve to perpetuate religious tradition and their teachings. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Oral Tradition
2. Other Traditions of Transmission
3. Works
4. Didactic Approaches
5. Religious Holidays and Observances

1. Oral Tradition

One of the most universal means of transmission is **oral tradition**. Every religion has oral tradition as a part of its foundation.

IN CONTEXT

A good example of this is in Christianity, with regard to the life of Jesus Christ. There was no written record of the life of Jesus until 20 years after his death. Therefore the story of his life, all of his teachings, the story of his death, and the story of his resurrection depended upon individuals and communities sharing the word that they had heard and remembered in addition to their experiences.

Christianity as a religious tradition developed and identified itself along the lines of oral tradition. These stories as they were told and later written down became known as the Gospels—the four canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Together they form the first part of the Christian Bible, the New Testament. In a service or a religious teaching, the words of the Bible are generally referred to as **scripture**.

Oral tradition has moved into written form to become a sacred text in some of the other religions as well. In the case of Islam, it forms a central foundation in its teaching. It is believed that the prophet Muhammad, the historical figure Muhammad, was visited by the angel Gabriel with the words of God, Allah. These words form the central sacred text of Islam, called the Qur'an. It is believed that Muhammad had direct communication with Allah; he had a divine revelation. The words from Muhammad's mouth were written down on the spot, a case of oral tradition and sacred text being almost simultaneously formed.



DID YOU KNOW

The other central text in Islam is called Hadith. It's a collection of sayings, actions, and teachings that are attributed to Muhammad, and they were written down only after his death.

In the Judaic tradition, it was Moses who had direct contact with God. These words of God were written down as the Torah, or the five books of Moses that form the Hebrew Bible. This is also the Christian Old Testament.



DID YOU KNOW

Concurrent with the written Torah, there is the oral Torah, believed to have been given to Moses at the same time. The oral Torah provides definitions, explanations, and instructions of the written Torah, and is passed from generation to generation. Eventually, it was written down and preserved in the form of the Talmud, a central, sacred text in Judaism.

In the East, oral tradition is also a significant part of the Buddhist tradition. The oral teachings of the Buddha are known through the sutras, which translates to "the threads that hold things together." The sutras are often memorized or encanted by Buddhist monks. They form the central sacred text in Buddhism called the Pali Canon. The Pali Canon also contains explanations of the direct teachings of the Buddha.

However, oral tradition doesn't necessarily stop when it is written down. There's a dynamic interplay between the oral tradition and the sacred text. To understand that, you need to look at other forms of transmission that support this relationship between the original oral tradition and the sacred text.



TERMS TO KNOW

Oral Tradition

The practice of teaching important religious or other doctrine verbally, without writing it down.

Scripture

Any text held in reverence by any religious group.

2. Other Traditions of Transmission

When you hear the word tradition, do you think of history and something that stretches back in time?

This is often the case, but in order for a religious tradition to be alive and present in a culture, certain practical methods of transmission have to be engaged. In order for the public to have access to the sacred principles of a religion, certain communication methods have to be used.

The public engagement with oral tradition and sacred text takes place in the context of a religious service, known as the **liturgy**. The liturgy is a communal recognition of the tradition and is expressed through prayer, storytelling, readings from sacred text, singing, ritual silence, and other more celebratory rituals, such as a marriage ceremony.

Every religious tradition has its own expression of liturgy. There are forms of transmission that are held in common, such as **preaching**. In Buddhism, one method of preaching is done through Dharma talks, discussions, readings, and insights into the human condition. In Christianity, a preacher delivers a sermon, which is a public teaching that includes references and readings from scripture. It also gives advice, guidance, and encouragement to the congregation or gathering of faithful believers.

Preaching gives us the best example of how oral tradition and sacred text support and depend upon each other.



TERMS TO KNOW

Liturgy

The manner in which a particular religious group conducts public worship.

Preaching

The act of transmitting moral or other teachings to those already within the same religious group—contrast with evangelism.

3. Works

Another example of a universal way of transmitting a teaching is in the form of works. This is the idea of generating a positive intention and actually acting in the world in a beneficial way, according to a teaching.

IN CONTEXT

In Buddhism, there are many references to generating compassion and extending that out from the practitioner to the world, to individuals, and to groups. The term for this is **Metta**, and it means “loving-kindness.” It’s a very conscious practice to help the practitioner not only attain enlightenment but also to help others and alleviate suffering in the world.

4. Didactic Approaches

The oral traditions of sharing the teachings, the lessons, and the codes of conduct with references and readings from sacred texts, are therefore extended and perpetuated through the support of the liturgy. These more direct methods of communicating a religious teaching are called **didactic** approaches. These are methods such as Dharma talks, preaching, and sermons.

In Christianity the most traditional form of didactic instruction is evangelism. **Evangelism** is a didactic method of preaching the Christian gospels with the goal of persuading the listener or audience into the Christian faith. The intention is to convert non-believers to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. When conversion includes services or material benefits, evangelism is called **proselytism**.

The words evangelism and proselytism don't actually appear in the Bible. Rather evangelists, referring to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Saint Paul, traveled throughout the Roman Empire preaching the gospel and establishing churches as they went. Evangelism then, is a form of persuasive instruction unique to Christianity. Islam also has traditions of encouraging others to join this faith.



THINK ABOUT IT

Why is this unique to Christianity and Islam?

The reason is that in these two religions it is generally believed that non-believers will somehow suffer in some way in the afterlife. Judaism, on the other hand, doesn't have a tradition of evangelizing or proselytizing. Jews don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Their religion is firmly held and established. There's no news to report, so to speak, like in Christianity, with the radical appearance of the divine in human form. It's prescribed in scripture and is a very common method of persuasive conversion in some Christian and Muslim communities.

In Buddhism, there is no tradition of evangelism. If conversion were to occur, it's usually the result of Buddhist monks who demonstrate their beliefs and principles through their behavior and through a peaceful exchange with people. In Christianity and Islam, the practice of evangelism reaches far back to the earliest roots of the oral tradition.



TERMS TO KNOW

Didactic

Instructional, intended to educate.

Evangelism

The attempt, usually through persuasive speech or writing, to convert non-believers to one's own religion—typical of most sects within Christianity.

Proselytism

The attempt by one or more members of any religious group to persuade others to become members of that group.

5. Religious Holidays and Observances

Two methods of transmission are universal across all religions. These are religious holidays and religious observances. The recognition of important holidays and observances that mark historical events allows the faithful to observe certain codes of conduct that are contained in the teachings.

When a family, a community, or a culture gathers together to share and re-tell the stories of their religion, that tradition is brought into the present, continually extending the line of transmission.



SUMMARY

Oral tradition is one of the most universal means of transmission of religion. Every religion has oral tradition as a part of its foundation. Sacred texts such as the New Testament, the Qur'an, the Hadith, the Torah, the Talmud, and Pali Canon are all based on oral traditions. **Other traditions of transmission** include liturgy, preaching, and sermons. **Works** are another important mode of teaching that involves beneficially acting in the world. **Didactic approaches** include evangelism and proselytism. **Religious holidays and observances** are a means of bringing tradition into the present and extending the line of transmission.

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