

What is Religion?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson covers the different ways someone can attempt to define religion. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Problems with Defining Religion](#)
2. [The Phenomenological Approach](#)

1. Problems with Defining Religion

What is the definition of religion? The answer, unfortunately, is that there really isn't a good one.

Many people would agree that a good definition of religion would have to include the belief in a **supernatural** being, a deity, some kind of deity or supernatural force beyond the human realm. That works for traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but it wouldn't work for **Buddhism**, which doesn't necessarily believe in a supernatural being in that way.

What if there was a definition of religion that didn't include the supernatural? It would just be too broad and much more difficult to put a finger on.

One thing that can be done to help give some definition is to look at some of the things that are in common among many religions. A key commonality is the idea of **faith** and **belief**. Most would agree that most religions have those two elements. However, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim noticed that society and individuals that make up society have many different beliefs. Many of them are not religious beliefs.

Religion is also inherently a very social thing, and yet religion is something more than just the social. So if the definition is limited to just belief and faith, then it is too restricted with regards to the social aspect.



TERMS TO KNOW

Supernatural

That which is above and beyond the natural or ordinary.

Buddhism

A wide-ranging group of religious philosophies inspired by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha).

Faith

Acceptance of the truth or existence of any thing, person, or idea, even in the absence of substantiating evidence.

Belief

Acceptance of the truth or existence of any thing, person, or idea, even where contrary opinions may be rationally accepted.

2. The Phenomenological Approach

So what can be done? There is always the phenomenological approach to looking at religion. **Phenomenology of Religion** is a kind of approach that doesn't necessarily concern itself with the truth and falsity of religious belief. It is not an empirical approach; it is more of an experiential approach. This might be much more useful in understanding religion and religious experience.

The phenomenological approach looks at the individual and collective nature of experience and not so much the content of experience.



TERM TO KNOW

Phenomenology of Religion

An academic discipline that studies religion as an individual and collective phenomenon to be studied without reference to the truth or falsity of any underlying beliefs.



SUMMARY

There are many **problems with defining religion**. You cannot contain religion to a belief in a supernatural being because some religions do not have this. It cannot be contained to just faith and belief, either. People within society often have beliefs that have nothing to do with religion, and this neglects the social aspect of religion as well. **The phenomenological approach** helps answer what religion is. It does not look at religion empirically. It looks at it through a more experiential approach.

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