

Basic Religious Studies Vocabulary

SHARED VOCABULARY

- deity/deities* - gender and species neutral term for gods, goddesses, and higher beings.
- the sacred* - generic term for that which is interpreted as having momentous significance
- hierophany* - any manifestation of the sacred - this is a subset of "epiphany," which means any moment of insight or significance. A "theophany" is a manifestation of a deity; therefore, it is a special case of a hierophany. A "kratophany" is a manifestation of sacred power.
- hierarchy/hierarchical* - the common language definition of hierarchy now is "any system of persons or things ranked one above another," used especially to describe governmental and authoritative power structures. The root of this word is from the Greek 'hieros' - meaning 'sacred' used in reference to priestly authority
- social stratification* - the existence of different hierarchic levels in a society; a class or prestige-based social structure
- pantheon* - the gods and goddesses of a particular religious tradition, and their system of inter-relations
- iconography* - conventionally agreed-upon ways of presenting deities, persons, or ideas visually
- attributes* - specific ornaments, instruments, colors, garments, or settings associated with particular deities or persons in visual art, by which they can be identified without textual support.
- animism* - the idea that supernatural power is present, but manifests differently in different specific objects; thus, for example, there might be a 'whale-spirit', an 'arrow-spirit' and a 'child-spirit'. Interestingly, many local cultures contain both dynamism and animism; they only seem to be mutually exclusive systems to analysts.
- dynamism* - the idea that there is a generic supernatural force present in all things without distinction based on particular peculiarities. This can be conceived of as a 'life-force' which is the same regardless of whether it is found in a woman, a fish, a tree, or a clay pot.
- cosmogony/cosmogonic* - concerning the beginnings of the universe
- cosmology* - the general structure of the universe (which may or may not include its origins) understood philosophically and/or physically.
- immanent* - indwelling, internal, inherent
- transcendent* - going beyond, exceeding, surpassing
- axis mundi* - 'center of the world' - a term used to describe ceremonial centers
- ontology* - branch of philosophy concerned with existence and being
- soteriology* - religious doctrines concerned with salvation
- soteriological goal* - the desired goal for participants in any given religion (eg. 'heaven,' 'nirvana,' 'moksa,' etc.)
- eschatology* - religious doctrines concerning the end of time
- proselytize* - to convert or attempt to convert
- polemic* - an argument made to incite controversy against an opposing point of view; religious polemics often attack other belief systems or denominations; usually polemics are vigorous and sharp in their tone
- apology* - (not the common language use) - an argument made to defend an idea, doctrine, institution or point of view; the author of such an apology is called an *apologist*
- revelation* - a specific form of communication between a deity and human beings, in which the deity intentionally gives human beings vital information for salvation. Examples include the Jewish *Torah*, the life and activities of Jesus in Christianity, and the *Qur'an* in Islam.

syncretism - the combination of discrete elements from different religions to create a new religious entity; e.g. Spanish Virgin Mary + Aztec Tlecuauhtlacupezuh creates Virgen de Guadalupe and Mexican-Spanish Catholicism

spirituality - the locus of religious experience and the presence of religious sentiment in one's everyday life. In contemporary America, spirituality is often contrasted to institutional religion, but historically, spirituality has most often been located within religions.

asceticism - practices of strict self-denial and/or self-mortification

denomination - a term marking different forms within a specific larger religion. Thus, Protestant Christianity is divided into specific denominations (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, etc.), each of which represents a distinct set of doctrines within Protestantism. While denominations are considered a Protestant phenomenon, similar kinds of internal divisions can be found in almost all major religions.

sect - related to the word 'section,' a sect usually refers to a small group within a larger religious movement, especially when that small group is either breaking away or refining its sense of distinctiveness

cult - one of the most misunderstood words in religious studies. A cult refers to any small religious group which has separated from the larger culture and tries to create its own distinct culture without interacting with the larger society. Cults usually require a total commitment of the person, and often involve adopting practices which are considered hostile to the larger society (such as not wearing clothes, or not paying taxes, or choosing not to use electricity, etc.). Cults are not necessarily evil: early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism can be defined descriptively as cults. This definition of cult is often contrasted with the definition of a mainline church as a religious body which actively cooperates with the larger society. This means that 'churches' may support unjust wars, inequitable social conditions, and other evils. Defining something as a 'cult' or 'church' should not be taken as either a pejorative or a compliment, but merely as a descriptive term.

inclusive/exclusive - these words are used much as they are in common language: an exclusive religion believes that it is the only religion that holds the truth, while an inclusive religion is officially open to influences from other religions, or acknowledges multiple perspectives

unification/assimilation/diversity/separation - these words describe various stages of the acceptance or rejection of difference. For our purposes, these terms are useful in describing both religious and social phenomena, such as immigration and denominationalism

chthonic - deities, spirits and other mythological beings dwelling under the earth

autochthonous - indigenous

divination - to attempt to predict the actions of the divine, prophecy, augury

geomancy - divination by patterns in thrown dirt

taboo - a Polynesian term, used to denote those things which are so infused with the sacred that they are dangerous to touch or be near

BCE/CE - these symbols are used by many scholars instead of the more familiar BC/AD.

BCE = Before Common Era

CE = Common Era

The advantages of using this system include 1) removing the specific religious referent of the current system, 2) standardizing the system around the most commonly used calendar (there are Eastern European variants on the BC/AD system), and 3) the acronyms are related and in the same language as each other, thus, easier to remember

FIVE HEURISTIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SACRED AND HUMAN REALMS

Transcendent: the sacred is much more powerful than we are, it is separate from us, and it is, at best, apathetic toward us

Interventionary: the sacred is much more powerful than we are, it is separate from us, and it is deeply concerned with us. This concern leads to its intervention on our behalf in the form of revelation or direct contact

Overlapping: the sacred realm and the human realm overlap in some places/people, in other ways the sacred extends beyond our knowing, and there are also areas in the human realm which are dangerously void of sacrality

Immanent/Pantheism: the sacred realm and the human realm are co-terminous with each other: everything is sacred

Panentheism: the sacred realm entirely contains the human realm, but the sacred realm is much larger than the human realm.

DEFINITIONS FOR ETHICS

ETHICS - from the Greek root *ethikos* meaning 'custom' or 'usage' - a system of moral principles

DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS - the study of the internal coherence of ethical systems

NORMATIVE ETHICS - the description of what should be part of an ethical system

METAETHICS - the comparative study of ethical systems, the foundations of ethics, and the nature of moral discourse

MORALITY/MORALS/MORAL - from the Latin root *mor* meaning 'custom' or 'usage' - concerned with right conduct

RIGHT is derived from the Latin 'rectus' (via Germanic languages as 'recht'), which means "straight," "natural," "good," or "upright"

Roles for Religion in Human Social Reasoning

Organic - when there is no separation between religious and social reasons for human undertakings

Motivating Force - when religion is the primary cause that prompts people to undertake an activity

Contributing Cause - when religion is one of many (relatively) equal causes that prompts people to undertake an activity

Justificatory Mechanism - when religion, as a 'higher' authority, is used to warrant or sanction an undertaking which is not primarily religious

Titular Role - this can either be the use of religion in a strictly nominal way (as a figurehead), or simply the invocation of a long-standing tradition (as when the President says "God Bless America" at the end of a speech)

Privatized Individualism - when religion is understood to serve no social function; when one's personal spirituality is an entirely private matter

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS SCOPE

Universal - Religions that assume that the human situation is basically identical in all circumstances, and that there is thus a single soteriological viewpoint/solution/perspective for all people. Thus, universal religions tend to proselytize. Examples include Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

Ethnic - Religions which have a unitary ontology, but which base membership and access to this knowledge on kinship, generational ties, and history of a specific ethnic group. These religions tend not to proselytize, yet they are sometimes open to new members. Examples include Judaism, Hinduism, and Shinto.

Local - Religions which are built on the locality and local conditions in which a people live. These religions are specific to given geographic areas and/or to the peoples who live there. Thus, these religious systems are often co-extensive with cultural systems, and thus rarely if ever proselytize (though they may choose to share their insights with others). Their names are usually the same as the name for that people; thus Navajo religion, Ainu religion, Dinka religion. In fact, 'religion' here is a western scholarly distinction not made by the practitioners.

Esoteric - World-views and/or practices within religions which assume that there is a special knowledge (gnosis) that is gained through initiation, intensive study, magic, material transformation (i.e. alchemy), and secrecy. Esoteric religious trends can be found in all traditions, and vary in social location from elite intellectual groups to revolts by the marginalized. Gnosticism, Manicheanism, Taoism, and Tantra are religious traditions that have significant and consistent connections with esotericism.

TYPES OF THEISM

theos - Greek for 'god' ('thea' is the form for 'goddess')

theophany - a manifestation of a deity (a special category of heirophany)

theism - belief in the existence of a deity or deities (antonym: atheism), or a religious system which includes a diety or deities

MONOTHEISM - a religious system which postulates that there is a single deity.

Normally it is understood that this deity is a universal deity, whose acts and judgments affect the entire world, not just those who know or worship the deity.

POLYTHEISM - a religious system which has a multitude of deities, related to one another in a pantheon. These deities can be understood as universal or local, depending on the philosophic outlook of the religious system.

KATHENOTHEISM - a special case of POLYTHEISM, loosely translated as "one-god-at-a-time-ism." Here the deities' heirarchic relation to each other is fluid, as the god or goddess who is being invoked or prayed to at a given moment is given precedence and supremacy over all others at that time. Also called HENOTHEISM.

PANTHEISM - means "all-is-god:" a religious system which postulates a one-to-one unity between sacred being/deity/deities and the universe.

PANENTHEISM - the understanding that the universe is a partial manifestation in unity with the sacred being/deity/deities. The name loosely means "all-is-god-and-god-is-more." Also called PANENHENISM, in which the concept of a deity is replaced by a Unity (Hen=One).

TRANSTHEISM - a system which includes deities, but maintains that they are not ultimate. For example, in Jainism and Mahayana Buddhism the existence of deities is acknowledged, but human beings can transcend these deities by reaching various forms of enlightenment.

PARALLELOTHEISM - a variation of polytheism, in which many deities exist, but have utterly independent areas of interest and specialization. The deities in such a pantheon are not usually married or related to each other in a familial way.

ATHEISM - no deity (atheism ≠ no religion; there are forms of Buddhism and Ethical Culture which are religions without deities)

TRANSCENDENT (TRANSCENDENCE) - above, beyond, separate

IMMANENT (IMMANENCE) - indwelling, within, connected

PHILOSOPHIC CATEGORIES OF COSMOLOGY

Monism - belief/theory that there is a fundamental unity to the substance, energy, and/or structure of the universe. Synonyms include "singularism" and "henism" ("hen" is a Greek root meaning 'one' - it is also present in the words "kathenotheism" and "panenhenic")

Dualism - belief/theory that there are two fundamentally irreconcilable, polarized oppositional structures in the universe

Pluralism - belief/theory that there is a thorough-going diversity of substances, energies, and/or structures in the universe

Complimentarity - belief/theory which understands seeming opposites in a unified way, as two sides of the same coin, as equally necessary and characteristic of the nature of reality. Understands the coexistence of life/death as paradoxical, as part of a continuum, or as transformative. Minoan labrys and Taoist Yin-Yang are examples of duality expressed symbolically. Also called "duality"

Duality and Dualism - duality : dualism :: sex : sexism :: race : racism :: heterosexuality : heterosexism. Duality is descriptive and dialectic, dualism is proscriptive and didactic. Like the corresponding first terms in all of the analogies, duality is not an unproblematic concept, as it bolsters notions of complimentarity which can easily result in actual social inequality (even when abstract equality is granted)

The One and the Many (Hen/Plurra) - the phenomenon - and philosophical conundrum - of unity in multiplicity, of a shared essence within great (apparent) diversity, of the temporal existing within the infinite.

TYPES OF CREATION

EX NIHILO - "from nothing" - deity creates by fiat, by authoritative decree, by the sound of a voice or via the abstract idea of creation (e.g. "God said 'Let there be light' and there was light" - the first Genesis narrative in the Hebrew Bible)

EMANATION - creation as an unconscious or conscious byproduct of a deity's essential nature (e.g. how sun rays emanate from the sun)

ARTISAN - a creator deity fashions creation from available materials (e.g. Marduk's "artful works" with the body of the slain Tiamut)

GENERATIVE - primal forces create by means of sexual reproduction or a process metaphorically likened to sexual reproduction

ENABLING FORCE - an agent (deity, power, etc.) who breathes life into what is a dormant or stagnant mass - what Aristotle and the science of mechanics mean by "prime mover" (Aristotle also postulates an "unmoved mover" who is the first cause of all movement yet which is itself not subject to movement. This is a special case of an enabling force.)

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS OFFICE

There are various roles within religious practices, which are filled by people according to different skills, abilities, and authority. Not all religions will have all of the offices listed below; others will have similar offices known by different names.

The most basic distinction is between those religions which rely on ritual as a reliable technique for contacting, placating, or celebrating the divine, and those which eschew ritual. Religious offices are thus defined by four inter-related elements:

- 1) ritual duties and ritual abilities
- 2) access to divine power
- 3) source of authority (and modes of training)
- 4) hierarchy - social role and stratification

Ritual Officiants - those who are authorized to conduct rituals efficaciously (effectively)

Priest - a person who has been trained to be an effective "technician of the sacred," a priest can conduct the rituals of his/her religion.

Shaman - a person who can travel in the sacred realm in order to retrieve information needed in the human realm.

Medium - a person whose body can be overtaken to become a vehicle for the spirits.

Divine King - in many religio-political systems, the king is considered to be the active link between the divine and human realms. In this sense the king (or queen) has certain ritual activities connected with their office. Presidential inaugurations are a faint modern echo of this tradition.

Non-Ritual-based Offices

Minister - as the name implies, a minister is a religious person who cares for others, gives guidance, etc. This is primarily a Protestant Christian term.

Preacher - this is a highly generic term; any meaning has to include public speaking on religious subjects (e.g. 'exhortation') specifically to convert, inculcate, or convince. Ritual officiants can take on some of the duties of preachers, but this is usually distinct from their ritual activities.

Prophet - a person who becomes the mouthpiece of God; distinct from mediums in the lack of ritual context and in the sense of mission and urgency

Saint - an honorific title given to those individuals who exemplify the virtues and ideals of a religion. Originally a Christian term, similar traditions can be found in Hindu *sants*, Buddhist *arahats*, Muslim Sufi veneration, and the Talmudic rabbis.

Imam - the name for the prayer leader at a Muslim mosque. His role in Sunni Islam is not invested with any special sacralty; he really functions more like the conductor of a chorus than like a priest.

- Rabbi** - this Jewish office comes from a Hebrew word roughly analogous to "teacher." The Rabbi has many duties in common with a Protestant minister, but is also expected to be a scholar. In religions which have revelation, there are often religious people whose duty it is to understand the intricacies of that revelation, as does the rabbi in Judaism; in Christianity, such people are called **theologians**.
- Cultural Hero** - mythic/historic figures who are given semi-divine status.
- Mystic** - a person who claims to have had direct unity or direct contact with the sacred, in an immediate and dramatic manner.
- Layperson** - At the bottom of the religious food chain (in most cases) resides the average person, the one who is not a religious specialist or ritual practitioner. These are the people who *attend* rituals, who recite the assigned prayers -- those who are the religious consumers rather than producers. Lay person is a term derived from Catholic Christianity, but it is applicable to all forms of religion.

SOME NATIVE AMERICAN TERMS FOR THE SACRED

- MANITOU/MANITO/MANDU** - these are various transliterations of an Algonquian term which means "the sacred." For most Algonquian tribes, manitou is an undifferentiated dynamic force which is present in each distinct kind of being. Ideas of manitou undergird the Algonquian tribes' notions of reciprocity and immanence
- WAKAN/WAKANTANKA** - Siouan terms which translate as sacred, mysterious, wonderful; wakan is both a "great spirit" and the specific sacred quality that inheres in different kinds of beings in an animistic sense. Wakan is more of a quality than a being when used adjectivally: things "have" wakan rather than being wakan. Wakan Tanka literally means "great incomprehensibility," but also refers to a set of unified beings who transcend the human realm
- A'NI HIMU** - Acoma term for the sacred which translates to "very something" or "mighty something" (a'ni=very, hard, well, strong)

DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

These categories serve as heuristic prisms for studying religion academically. They give you the tools for analyzing religions as objects developed by human beings, regardless of your feelings about their ultimate truth claims (i.e. it allows you to logically separate the truth claims of a religion from its ritual practices, or its history, so that these areas do not become equated in your mind - or, in other words, it may not be the fault of Catholic rituals that Catholic beliefs perplex you, etc.). With each religion we study or examine in some way, consider how you could apply these categories to your understanding of it.

- BELIEF** - propositions, creeds, philosophies, theologies, truth claims, interpretations of hierophanies
- ETHICS** - how people and other beings are supposed to cooperate and treat each other
- PRACTICE** - behaviors, rituals, types of religious experience and how such experiences are cultivated
- HISTORY** - how the religion developed and why, what were turning points in its development
- GEOGRAPHY** - relation to land, to local conditions and local history
- MATERIAL CULTURE** - arts, architecture, accouterments, ritual objects, souvenirs
- SOCIAL LOCATIONS** - class, gender, age, race, nationality, language, demographics and change in demographics over time
- ORGANIZATION** - internal structure, organizational behavior, internal politics, relation to other large-scale cultural practices (economics, politics)