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What way should we define religions, and how do they help and/or hinder?

Philosophers and thinkers have widely held throughout history that it is the human contemplation and the desire for meaning that separates them from other animals. It may explain why religion has been found to be present in every single human society that has existed. Archeologists and anthropologist have discovered various artefacts, ceremonial sites, and ritual objects belonging to early human societies indicating the significant role religion carried in their lives. However, religious differences have frequently driven disputes and conflict yet it has hardly been questioned for its role until recently.

 Religion can be simply defined as a particular form of awareness of the world, commonly centered on the existence of a divine being, or God, which becomes a source of ethical and moral conduct often reflected in that religion’s sacred scriptures. Researchers indicate the appearance of religions to coincide with the same time when mankind is first known to have appeared. Although not organized, it played a prominent role within early societies (Kripal). However, its importance, defining religion may not be a simple task. In religions such as Buddhism, there are no deities to be worshipped. Instead, it centers around the presence of an alternate spiritual reality which is distinct and separate from the earthly or the material world (Seto). Incorporating this into the definition, religion may be defined as a belief in the existence of an unseen spiritual world. Yet, this definition does not acknowledge the significance of an institutionalized gathering of a community of adherents.

Besides the spiritual and communal aspect, the presence of personal beliefs, faith, and feelings of veneration and reverence, collective rites and prayers, along with prohibitions and moral rules also characterize a religion. Yet, religion by its nature remains different from ideology. Ideologies, like religions, may require demand absolute adherence or loyalty but are not reliant on spirituality or gods. Furthermore, religion is much different from magic as the involvement of a deity does not warrant interference in the material world for desired changes. Prayers in religions, in contrast, are centered around the belief that a deity can answer prayers to achieve a certain outcome based in reality. At the same time, religion is something that connects an Individual with the divine world to bring them a sense of tranquility, confidence and inner warmth by making life more meaningful and purposeful for them by adhering to those beliefs. Therefore, to define religions accurately would require a deeper consideration of all of these different aspects that make it distinct from ideologies, magic, or plain spiritualism.

Understanding the nature of religions also entail an acknowledgment and appreciation of their similarities. Most religions hold the notion of there being a single almighty God. Monotheism is not unique to Judaism, Christianity or Islam, but something shared by a number of different religions that share a consensus that regarding God being the origin or the source of existence. Yet, the three Abrahamic religions strongly emphasize this principle relying upon their sacred scripture to guide their believers into understanding God and his Will. All three of these religions encourage their believers to follow the will of God by adhering to the commandments present within their scripture in order to live a more peaceful and fulfilling life while promising eternal life in paradise after death (Kripal). The Prophets in the Abrahamic tradition are those who could communicate with God, yet many of their stories defy natural phenomena. For instance, Jesus is said to have given life to the dead, Noah to have built a boat that saved humanity from extinction, and Moses to have split the red sea into half. Yet these accounts are unquestioned and even sometimes accepted by those belonging to another religion.

Likewise, a number of similarities exist between Abrahamic religions and other pagan religions. For instance, the idea of pilgrimage is something common to Sikhs, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims as is the use of water to perform various religious rites. Most religions specify these acts within rituals and ceremonies, such as Christians who baptize infants with water, listen to sermons, and pray each Sundays at the church (Pevateaux). In this regard, Muslims are the strictest adherent to monotheism while seeing their faith as a continuance of the real tradition of Judeo-Christian Prophets whose message had become corrupted over time. Religious practice in Islam is based on its five pillars while Islamic law, as defined in the Quran, provides guidance on all important aspects of life and society for its believers (Khan).

Acknowledging these similarities and differences allow one to gain a better understanding of what religion is and what meaning it holds for people. At times, many Christians are seen using confusing phrases, such as Christianity is not a religion but rather one’s connection with Jesus. Similarly, Muslims claim that Islam is a way of life and not just a religion while many Hindus associate the geographic location of India with adherence to Hinduism, instead of seeing it as a distinct religion. However, these statements or phrases are not meant to deny the term religion but rather to emphasize a certain aspect of it that traditional definitions of religion may not fully incorporate.

From our discussion, it can be inferred that defining religion in a way that captures all its different aspects is a complex feat. Yet, even if a formal definition is difficult to formulate, the purpose, nature, and intent of religion is something that remains clear to most. Essentially, religion is about trying to reach God and to provide a human being with a sense of security and purpose. A belief in a higher deity helps human beings understand their place in the world, why they are here and what their ultimate destination might be. This belief is extraordinarily powerful and has transformed people’s lives and shaped human history. Though religions differ with one another, often to the extent of leading towards violent clashes, however, the overall contribution of religion to human society has been positive. It has driven human beings to a higher purpose, encouraged them to become moral beings and has helped them cope with difficulties in their lives. For thousands of years, the connection with the divine has brought human beings out of despair, given them a sense of community and ushered a strong purpose and meaning on their lives giving them a reason to go on and look forward to a life of contentment.

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