

Religion as “An Invention of the Western World”: Construction of the Concept of Religion in Modern West

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Since the 19th century, the social sciences have regarded religion as a universal phenomenon, a *sui generis* sphere of human social life. However, a growing body of scholarship argues that religion is not intrinsic to humanity but has been historically constructed. According to this academic view, the concept of religion as used and understood today, namely, a notion that has existed in all cultures and all times that is essentially interior and private, was gradually invented during the last several centuries. In other words, the equivalent concept did not exist in either the pre-modern West or other ancient civilizations. Therefore, religion in itself is not a natural category but an invented anthropological one. However, despite its recency, religion became an important aspect of the Western *weltanschauung* immediately after its birth.

In this article, I shall discuss how the meaning of this concept has changed over time in the light of the aforementioned reformist point of view. Needless to say, concepts change just like other things in life, and their meanings evolve over time. Certain meanings are the product of historical circumstances and must be evaluated in that particular context. If this is true, then I shall pursue the following questions: What was running through people’s minds when they mentioned “religion” in a specific period of time? To what extent does this concept, as understood today, show parallels with the phenomenon experienced in pre-modern ages? Does it have any equivalent in other pre-modern civilizations, or is it a pure invention of the modern era?

The Latin origin of this concept, *religio*, dates back to ancient Rome (9th century BC – 4th century AC). In Cicero’s (106-43 BC) work, it means “tradition and customs,” which involves social ties, rules and civic duties, as well as all of the people’s responsibilities to the dieties, emperors and citizens. It was, therefore, an inseparable aspect of social and political life. The biggest difference between their understanding and ours is that *religio* did not connote a sense of belief in God or any deities. The Roman world had no distinct realm of belief, one outside of public life, called religion. In that world, loyalty to and worship of the deities was already a civic duty. Indeed, this was the rule, because our concept of religion did not exist in other ancient civilizations (e.g., India, China, Africa and Japan).

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For several centuries after the birth of Christianity, this concept underwent a radical change. Early Christians adopted many concepts, such as *faith* and *religio*, from Latin, although the latter term was not used very often. During the Patristic period (2nd-8th centuries), *religio* seldom appeared in the Latin translations of the Bible, for the term did not correspond to any significant concept of Christian belief. According to the Patristic writings, this word means “worship, ritual practice, piety and clerical office.” Augustine (354-430) was the first one to write a book on *religio*, in which he used the term to distinguish true *religio* (i.e., worshipping God [Christianity]) and false *religio* (i.e., worshipping gods and goddesses).

This term received little attention even during the medieval period, which seems rather odd given that this period is usually regarded as the most religious one. In fact, not even a single book was written about it. At that time, *religio* was generally used to describe “monastic rule or a particular monastic order”. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) defined *religio* as “a virtue of justice, a type of habitus”. For him, *virtue* was produced by repeating acts that require disciplining both the body and the soul in order to construct a set of skills to obey God. Moreover, during the medieval period *religio* was still “inseparable from the end of politics” and “integral to good governing”. Unlike today’s usage, it was not “a system of beliefs” or a “natural interior impulse”, but rather the outward pattern of Christian behavior. It also had a more concrete reference. Therefore, in that historical context, (true) *religio* was not a universal concept, but one unique to the Christian community and church.

From the 15th century on, especially during the Renaissance and the Reformation, and with the contributions of important thinkers, the concept started to acquire its modern meaning and significance. One pioneer of that period, the Platonist thinker Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) who thought that exterior differences were not an essential aspect of religious life, used the term *religio* to signify the “universal, interior instinct of man” beyond all types of practices and the way of worship. Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who made a major contribution to the West by translating Platon into Latin, for the first time used a new term, *Christian religion*, to imply a “universal religion” (a natural human instinct implanted by God). In this way, *religio* came to be belong to one’s interior world and was thereby distinguished from one’s external actions. Besides, for Protestant leaders Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564), *true religion* was a relation between God and humanity, and *false religion* was trusting in someone or an authority, even a religious one, other than God. Last but not least, Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) used the term in its plural form: *religions*. In its new form, the term thus came to mean the diversity of practices. Postel emphasized that true religion was the Christian religion; however, what he really meant with this usage was the central truth of all religions. Eventually in the 16th century, the idea that “truth was universal” and “belief was more important than practices and disciplines of body” became prevalent.

From the 17th century on, Europe came to see the world in a different way. Due to foreign trade and military conquest the Christian West came into contact with other cultures and civilizations. As a result of this, the idea of religions became fully developed and Christianity as a religion became just an example of the “genus religion”. From this century on, thinkers started to use the term to indicate “a system of beliefs or ideas”. One prominent figure,

Lord Herbert of Cherbury's (1583-1648) desire to internalize and universalize a natural and timeless religion caused the concept of *natural religion* to emerge as a new understanding. As a result, the idea proposing that "the belief in God is common to humanity and observable in all cultures" became widespread. Thus, the transhistorical and transcultural idea of religion appeared.

Many dichotomies, such as body-mind, belief-worship, spirit-matter and natural-super natural were shaped with the contributions of such 17th-century philosophers as Descartes (1596-1650) and Locke (1632-1704). Those dichotomies also had an impact on the meaning of religion. Locke regarded it as an "inward and full persuasion of the mind", and thus proposed the separation of the duties performed by the state and the church. As a result, the idea that "religion is just belonged to private domain and civil society is belonged to public domain" emerged. Thus, due to the conceptual separation of secular and religious categories, a new conception arose and became prevalent: Religion is a system of beliefs that belongs to one's inner – as opposed to the public – realm, and one is free to either believe or not believe it.

During the 18th century, the secular-religious binary became clearer. As these domains were becoming distinct, secular ideologies paved the way for the emergence of non-religious modern governments. However, European states initially used this dichotomy to marginalize non-European civilizations. In fact, none of those civilizations had any word for "religion," let alone "true religion," when the colonizers arrived. Accordingly, the Europeans saw them as nothing more than uncivilised savages, some even as animals. As time went by, European missionaries and scholars started to study those societies, gradually tended to see their cultures as their religion and began to study and categorize their customs as their religious systems. In the 19th century, the concept of religion was used to differentiate these cultures from the Western world. Academic studies manufactured new religions, like Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism. As a matter of fact, none of these traditions had any common belief system, church-like organizations or prophets (in the Christian sense of the term) or a common ethical code. Yet none of these facts stopped Europeans from inventing a new concept: "world religions".

In the 20th century, the ongoing effort to define religion maintains its importance even though the West has become increasingly secular. Despite all of the efforts, finding a transcultural essence of religion still poses an unsolved problem. Countless proposed definitions have appeared in academy. Many scholars have described it as a belief in a transcendent being (although many Eastern religions have no concept like God or deities), while others have started to define it so broadly that it includes all ideologies. Thus the definition has become increasingly vague. The question of where to draw a line between the religious and the secular sphere has yet to be answered satisfactorily. But maybe this inquiry itself is misleading, for the basic problem of all approaches to defining religion is the assumption that it is a transcultural and transhistorical concept. However, as seen before, this particular idea and general understanding was manufactured during the Enlightenment.

When we look at the concept's historical evolution, the following points attract our attention. First, we can find no term that is equivalent to religion, as we understand it today, in the premodern Western world or in the languages of ancient civilizations. Furthermore,

during those periods that are regarded the most religious, such as medieval Europe, the term was hardly used at all. Besides, in pre-17th-century Europe, religion was seen as a virtue tied to bodily disciplines, not as a universal and internal, personal impulse. With the onset of modernity and the separation of religion from secular politics, economics and other domains, it was constructed as a distinct category that belonged to one's personal life. During the age of Western imperialism and colonialism, other religions were studied and categorized as if they were counterparts of Christianity, although they shared very few similarities. Consequently the concept of "world religions" and such "religions" as Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Mahumatisme and so forth (except Islam) were invented. To sum up, these findings indicate that religion is not a *sui generis*, transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon, but rather an invented one.

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