

### The Complexities of Defining Religion

Faith spans a wide range of cultures and nations. If we put the definition of faith and religion into one box we could not truly define it. When I was growing up I had no concept of religion, me and my family we are not religious, we did not go to church, and we did not attend mass on Christmas. Due to the difference in our upbringings, I can't define religion the same as someone who grew up religious. My personal definition of religion would be that religion is a set of beliefs that a certain group of people has regarding a higher power. I believe everyone has a different and ever-changing opinion regarding religion, in addition to my last point. I believe every person has their own interpretation of the way the universe works.

Each way of defining religion has its benefits and drawbacks, and there are countless ways to do so. In chapter one of Hedges's book, he brings up the multiple ways that people define religion in the world. One way that he says people define religion is, through "translation" (Hedges 20) and a advantage to that is that people who translate other works of religion are now able to have access to other works of religion. In addition to my previous point, a disadvantage of having translated works is that yet nonetheless works are often mistranslated, in addition, they are misinterpreted into new entirely different meanings. In this chapter, he really shows us how many people define religion in addition to how religion is a broad term. One approach he brings up to defining religion in addition to my previous point " the question is so problematic that some scholars suggest we abandon the category "religion". ( Hedges, 20). This question of

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how we define and base religion is on many cultures and groups. Yet nonetheless, the advantages and disadvantages of having this term to define how a lot of groups of cultures share one singular belief neither outways each other. Hedges brings up how scholars want to change this term based on the “History of Colonialism” but having this term allows for us to define a broad group of cultures and people. Many religions have a deeply horrible history, but we should acknowledge the history and not try to erase it or change it. In doing so we erase the terrible effects of colonization in addition to what that has done to people in this day and age. We should acknowledge as I said before the history and try to learn from the terrible history.

In addition to my previous points, another way that Hedges brings up that people try to define religion is by the naming and classification of traditions. What he means by that, as he says in the book “The names by which we know most religious traditions have been imposed by Western scholars and classifiers” This has many consequences, which fall under the category of mistranslation. Yet one example of this is the naming of Hinduism, as Hedges explains “Hindu originally indicated the land beyond the Indus (River)” (Hedges 23). This term came to categorize a large group who came to share the same belief. Which as I brought up in this essay previously is a good thing, but has a certain disadvantage being that the meaning of the word has changed to show the history of the people.

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An additional point Hedges tries to bring up to define religion is what is considered a religion or is it really a cult. In the book, Hedges brings up the Max Weber definition which in the book says “described a cult as a religion which was newly founded and seeking its place in society” (Hedges 27). Yet nonetheless how can we define a cult differently from a newly formed religion? The fact is a cult is a new set of practices that and religion that we do not understand yet. For example, an example in the book shows that the Chinese government considered Falun Gong as a cult. So the definition of a cult, in a difference to religion, has many disadvantages and advantages. One disadvantage is that how can we define what is just a cult or a religion. Yet the fact is this might be a new religious movement. An alternative point of view to my last point is if we put a cult and religion into two different categories of definition we can see that one is a set of beliefs as Hedges says “is specific practices of devotion within a religion” (Hedges, 27) And religion has a set of beliefs that are about how the universe is governed.

Going back to my last paragraph and how I mentioned Falun Gong, this is one thing that borders on the line of cult or religion. Falun Gong is a “Chinese tradition, that teaches a form of movements that promote a physical and moral well-being” (Hedges 35). This form of movement was harshly criticized by the Chinese government. In addition to what I said before these movements were considered to be a “cult, or bad religion” (Hedges 27). Yet how can we define this as a cult, or is it not considered a set of beliefs that are the same as religious beliefs?

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Nonetheless, within Hedges book, he states how “ Falun Gong members normally do not accept that they are a religion, preferring the term “self-cultivation tradition” (Hedges 35). Yet the fact do they themselves consider themselves to be a part of a religion or are they apart of a “tradition” (Hedges, 35), in addition to that how is that different from a cult. How can we define what is a cult or a new set of traditions? The fact is as I’ve talked about previously in this essay, the term religion has been broadened to the fact that it has multiple and many meanings. So when we are defining religion we cannot ignore the complexities of defining it. What can we define as to what is a religion or a member of Falun Gong calls themselves “ a self-cultivation tradition”(Hedges 35)?

Another case study that was brought up in the book that adds to the complexities of defining religion is the “Christains and Ancestor Veneration case study”. This is a very important case study that helps define how religion is a very complex term to define. In this case study, it brings up the fact that most christains in Asia do not practice worshipping their ancestors, which is a common practice all across Asia and this is something that they have had to debate about. Do worshipping ancestors consider them to be supernatural? Additionally to my last point, "worshipping in Christianity is only accepted for God" (Hedges, 39), this has been debated as doing things associated with Ancestor Veneration is also considered worshipping or a part of the culture in Asia. This has been debated with christains in Asia, for a long time. Nonetheless, I

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must also indicate that Hedges points to the fact that many Daoists in Singapore consider bowing and lighting incense as part of their ancestor veneration (Hedges, 39). As I continue on my discussion of religion, I ask the following questions: are the Christians in Asia not religious enough to be called Christians if they practice ancestor veneration? Even so, these traditions make up their own culture, which makes them unique and unmistakably Christian. It is impossible to define religion and not acknowledge that culture and nationality play a role in how people define themselves.

On the assumption that we take in all that is the term religion is, in addition, do not erase parts of the history and the colonialism that I mentioned previously in this essay. I personally believe that if you study Religion in its entirety you can have a useful category for Academic Investigation and analysis. Religion is a broad term that involves multiple cultures and nationalities that show the history of the world. Religion shows us how people believe the world works, and additionally, it shows what many people in the world believe about what happened after this life. Whether or not you believe in the same higher power that some other religions do. You can see if you truly look at them, their own history and way of life within that culture, from then to now.

In my own personal opinion regarding what is a religious phenomenon or is something that is not a religious phenomenon, we have to see what type of beliefs that it follows. To give an

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example of this, we have to take an example of a following of a pop group, the group of people who follow for example Justin Bieber does not have a certain belief as to how the world works, in regards to Justin Bieber being the supreme leader. No, they simply just like his music. Yet if we take a group of Christians who are at church explaining parts of the bible, that is something I consider religious. That is how I personally define how something is a religious phenomenon or not. Whether or not it involves a supreme being, and how the universe works. Religion is something that is complicated and hard to define but it is something that involves many, many cultures and nationalities.