

*What defines 'religion' as an anthropological field of study?*

Knowing the religion that one practices, or lack thereof, is often an icebreaker in many first meetings. To a more impartial eye, not/ practicing religion can indicate whether our livelihoods follow certain sets of beliefs and a routine in accordance. This routine can be visually evidenced in including religious spaces in urban planning for community-building, and celebrating religious historical events symbolising an underlying championship of fundamental life codes. (Gale 2005; Gil-Mastalerczyk 2016) Academically, Christian theology, Kalam ('philosophy of Islam') and Buddhist studies are existing academic disciplines focused specifically on such religions and their philosophies. So how exactly does religion intersect anthropology? The latter aims is to individuate and understand thought mechanisms underpinning social-behavioural practices in humans. (Ingold 2020) In fact, the opening examples of this introduction are testament to how religion can be an inherent fixture in our livelihoods, and simultaneously how we enable it to be a behavioural obligation and concern in our sociocultural frameworks. Following this observation, this essay postulates that studying religion with an anthropological lens is defined by its social function as a vehicle for thought: how it can organise social behaviour across all levels and aspects of society. Additionally, it attempts to fulfil the aforementioned aim of anthropology by investigating the two-way mobilization of sociocultural organization that religions and their practitioners engage with in personal and public spheres (i.e. communities, state and global entities).

Despite the overarching thesis, the inherent breadth of discussions surrounding religion warrant further specifications before proceeding. This essay defines 'religion' as a set of beliefs that, irrespective of origins from a single individual's principles or that of a collective's, can be interpreted as a code of sociocultural behaviour and etiquette in deep faith that they maintain what is deemed to be a positive order of life. These "tiers" that will be included in the scope of the response are the self, interpersonal relationships, communities/ organisations within societies and state/ global institutions. Anthropological concepts of beliefs and knowledge, social relations, culture and power will also be explored and illustrated throughout the examples that will be used. Moreover, interpretation as a key process of encoding religion into daily life is derived from a combination of Assad's theory on power and religion, as well as Geertz and Wagner's ideas of culture engendering. (Asad 1993; Munson Jr. 1986; Wagner 1984) On that note, examples used consist of anecdotes, ethnographic examples and real-life case studies which will draw on faith in three major religions: Christianity (both Protestant and Roman Catholicism denominations), Buddhism and Islam. Moreover, this response will also

aim to be more holistic by discussing choice to not follow any religion (i.e. secularism), as it considers negotiation with religious hegemonic discourses. (Cannell 2010) Lastly, this piece argues that religion as a vehicle for thought and social organisation is a double-edged sword.

The first type of sociocultural organisation that can be mobilized by religion is that of one's identity, especially their moral compasses and outlooks on life. Social psychologist Lev Vygotsky famously postulates that one's psychosocial conscience is inextricably intertwined with one's social environment. (Vygotsky 1987, qtd. In McLeod 2022) As individuals grow up and evolve their understanding of how they are contextualised within their social environment, internal processes increasingly play a role in shaping ideas of a unique identity. (Lock 1993) Religion as a vehicle of thought can mediate such internal processes. This can be seen in the teachings of Buddhism, and an increasingly popular comparison of its similarities to principles of Western psychology. (Shapiro and Wallace 2006) When participants of existing studies experienced mental health difficulties attributed to volatile, unpleasant outlooks on life, Buddhist beliefs on attaining balance allowed them to reorganise their priorities and work towards a more positive, healthy outlook on life. This shows how religion can be interpreted as a frame for the positive organisation of one's identity as shaped by their outlook on life. This is also evidenced in a personal anecdote. My moral compass during my formative years was heavily influenced by my Roman Catholic upbringing and for many years, deeply faithful that my Catholic identity would consistently ground me in a positive manner.

However, identities are naturally fluid, and religion may not always fit the everchanging mould of sociocultural conscience. Having matured and developed an inherent sense of autonomy, I concluded that being raised to interpret religion as a code for organising my attitude toward my social environment was didactic in nature. My current views on life philosophies — such as the sanctity of life— are incongruent with my previous youth Catholic identity, and I have lesser faith that the religious beliefs I was raised with will continue to positively order my outlook in the long-run. Hence, I choose to not actively practice Catholicism and adopt a more secularist outlook on life, aiming to unlearn certain negatively-conservative religious beliefs. However, it must be noted that these beliefs were fundamental to my development, separating and renewing my conscience from such lessons is difficult, which demonstrates the transformational power of religion on one's identity. Nonetheless, the intrinsic nature of religion to the self can be felt similarly by peers and others around us, especially if we belong to a community of like-minded individuals. Consequently, micro-communities can be born from cultural religious camaraderie amongst multiple individuals.

Depending on the context of any culture in-question, some greater societies as a whole evolved to be grounded in the interpretation of religion as fundamental to internal coherence.

On a larger scale, religion can secondarily mobilize the organisation of communities and greater society by the widespread internalisation of religion as a vehicle of thought. Large religious communities and societies are commonplace in sociocultural realities. Vygotsky's theory is also applicable to this argument, as situating oneself with demographics with positive interpretations of religion can reap benefits to multiple involved individuals. (*ibid*) This is seen in the example of an Evangelical community in the Midwestern region of the United States. Lead by preacher Rick Betcher, this congregation consists of newly-baptised and born-again adult Christians who share a newfound aspiration to reorganise themselves for the sake of increased economic capital. (Bielo 2007) For these followers, their faith in Christian beliefs is implicated in a causal relationship with their financial improvement and success. Subsequently, they interpret their religious faith as their guidance towards a flourishing future, which drives their devotion and practice of Christianity. Surrounded by a community with a similar school of thought, their faith is verified by the testimonials of other followers and all are motivated to continue being devoted to pursue such aspirations. This demonstrates how positive being organised by inspiring, impactful religious behaviour can mobilize communities for progress.

While singular interpretations of religion are adopted by larger quantities of individuals has its benefits, its disadvantages are also witnessed in daily life. Wagner's theory that we impose meaning onto culture finds relevance here. Interpretations of religion as doctrine can be inaccurate, when determined by their materialisations in practice. This is seen in the example of how domestic violence against Jordanian women is normalised by the misinterpretation of the Qur'an in sharia law. (Safadi et.al 2013) Core beliefs of gender expectations and power dynamics in relationships have been misinterpreted as the legal, Islamic approval of domestic violence to maintain such dynamics. From young to adulthood, women are taught to endure the violence with the religious belief that tolerance of physical abuse and subservience to their male partners would be rewarded with a guaranteed spot in heaven when they die. They also endure for the sake of their children's futures. As a result, violence is perpetuated through one's formative years verbally and physically by one's own immediate and extended families, subsequently creating a culture which operates on toxic sociocultural frameworks grounded in misinterpretations of religion. This shows how internalisation of religion and its mobilization of organisation on such a scale can be problematic.

Lastly, religion and the immense faith that drives expressions of devotion can mobilize power relationships. Asad (1993) points out that throughout history and present-day, faith has

been instrumental to and closely intertwined with creating power dynamics. Firstly, it is a major motivation that empowers their followers to impose their beliefs on others as the hegemonic discourse on sociocultural behaviour. When the Roman Catholic Church was head of state during the Middle Ages, the Crusades (1095-1204) were embarked upon to conquer and seize sacred areas of Europe and the Middle East (i.e. Jerusalem) from the ruling medieval Muslim caliphates. (Philips 2013) This was because monarchies that were loyal to the Church had faith that the world order dominated by Christianity would cultivate a global coherence that was positive, especially in their favour. Similarly, the Muslim caliphates perceived the world in a similar manner, culminating in an epoch of clashes driven by forceful impositions of relatively extreme objectives grounded in religion and attempts to establish dominance over the other.

Secondly, through the usage of narcissistic symbols, faith in a trusted entity bestows them with excessive amounts of power to exploit those who believe in them for the sake of social, economic and political gain. An example of this is seen in South Korea's phenomenon of pseudo-Christian cult churches. (*In the Name of God: A Holy Betrayal* 2023) The most notable one is Providence, also more widely-known as JMS ('Jesus Morning Star'). From 1999 till present, leader Jung Myung-seok has faced hundreds of sexual extortion allegations from former female devotees. Started by Jung in 1980, JMS is grounded in the belief that Jung is the second coming of Jesus Christ, and that all actions are linked and mediated through him as a form of salvation. Applying Geertz's thinking of culture being imposed upon our bodies to create symbolic meaning, existing ideas of messiah-hood attached to Jesus Christ's body are secondarily imposed upon leader Jung's personhood. Subsequently, Jung's presence bears a powerful, misinterpreted resemblance to that of Jesus Christ, and thus empowers him to dictate religious right and wrong for personal gain. This is evidenced through a core teaching of JMS, which equates engaging in sexual intercourse with Jung to female followers' repentance for inborn sin. His image as a mediator of divine intervention empowers him to demand faith in his symbolism and subservience to his dehumanising sexual desires, under the guise that it will guarantee them a place in heaven.

On a personal level, while this is not a relationship shared between two separate autonomous parties, personal faith in religious beliefs enable soft, powerful yet lasting influence on one's internal distinction (or lack thereof) between what they were raised to believe versus what their innate agency truly aligns them with. As seen in the aforementioned personal anecdote, the decision to adopt a secularist lens of sociocultural organisation represents agency to negotiate with the dominance discourses of major religions such as Catholicism.

In conclusion, this essay strongly believes that studying religion through an anthropological lens is defined by the insight on how it can drive the social organisation of behaviour of all levels of society. This was substantiated through an analysis of the two-way mobilization of sociocultural coherence occurring between religions and their practitioners, on a personal level as well as the community, state and global levels. While multiple elements across the used examples are relevant to all arguments, this demonstrates that all tiers of society are deeply intertwined with each other, reflecting the depth of religious influence across these tiers. Nevertheless, how specific core tenets of different religions are variously externalised in organised sociocultural behaviour only reveals more about the true, overall idiosyncrasy of human behaviour. Alternatively one can argue that religion, after all, is a cultural human product. Its interpretation is made volatile by their equally-capricious interpreters, and subsequently injected into the ever-changing fabric of society's foundation. As idealistic as such optimism may sound, perhaps one day the evolution of religion will stare back at humanity like a mirror reflection. Only then could we potentially recognise need for a moderated practice of religion, and evaluate our personal compasses of agency and belief.

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