

## Chapter 1 What Do We Mean by the Term *Religion*?

### *Essay Questions*

When it comes to essay questions, students sometimes write poorly because they are guessing about what the instructor wants, even if the question seems to be perfectly clear. For that reason we strongly recommend provision of an **audience** (so students know how much to assume in use of sociological vocabulary as well as how much must be made explicit) and **criteria for evaluation** (which is information that any writer needs to know.) Below are two sample statements that might be used as part of an essay question.

- A. *This essay calls for presentation and defense of an informed opinion. You should write for a well-educated reader, but one unfamiliar with sociological approaches to the study of religion. You will be graded on a) provision of a clearly stated thesis, b) the clarity and sophistication of your rationale, and c) the ability to support your argument with strong evidence. Sophistication of rationale refers to awareness of the complexity of the issues. The side of the argument that you support is irrelevant to the grading criteria.*
- B. *Your audience for this essay should be senior sociology majors who know sociological vocabulary, but have never specifically studied the sociology of religion. The criteria for evaluation will be 1) accuracy of explanation, 2) clarity of illustrations or examples, and 3) thoroughness in exploring all dimensions of the issue.*

Since some of these questions call for careful reflection, you might consider giving students a list of these and other essay questions in advance.

1. Compare and contrast the primary approaches to the definition of religion and explain why one's definition of religion is an important issue.
2. Describe one of the three approaches to defining religion that were introduced in the text. Then critique that definition of religion using one of the other remaining definitions.
3. Provide your own definition of religion. Explain how someone with an alternative sociological approach to defining religion might critique your definition.
4. What are the different functions that your textbook says religion and magic play in a society? Do you agree with the authors of your text? Why or why not? Do you agree that religion is less vulnerable to science taking over its domain than is magic? Why or why not?
5. Write a critical essay on functional definitions of religion focusing on these issues:  
Is there really an innate religious tendency within humans—an intrinsic and universal need for transcendental meaning in life? Is it universal that people develop systems of ideas and a worldview that explain life's experiences and give life meaning? If so, how is this expressed through various religious forms? Does this assume that anything could be "religion"? If not, does this then mean that some individuals have no religion, no faith?
6. What are the elements of Geertz's definition of religion?
7. Compare the key components of your textbook author's approach to definition of religion with that of your instructor. What are the similarities and what are the differences?

8. Write an essay (that clarifies for people who have not read this first chapter of the book) the distinction between religion, magic, science, and spirituality.
9. Explain what it means to say that definitions are not best judged as true or false but as more or less useful, and demonstrate this using the different ways sociologists define religion.
10. Explain the meaning of the phrase “I am spiritual, not religious,” with special attention to spirituality as a social phenomenon and its historical and (possible) future relationship with religion.

### *Multiple Choice Test Questions*

1. A functional definition of religion focuses on
  - a. what people believe.
  - b. what religion does in society and in the lives of people.**
  - c. a concept of supernatural power or supernatural being(s).
  - d. the distinction between the sacred and profane realms.
  - e. whether the religious group has a legitimate leader and truly divine rituals.
2. Which of the following is NOT emphasized as essential in Milton Yinger's functional definition of religion?
  - a. Belief in spiritual beings.**
  - b. The relationship between the individual phenomenon of *faith* and the social phenomenon of *religion*.
  - c. The close relationship between religion and values.
  - d. The role of religion in providing meaning or purpose in life—especially in the face of suffering, death, and injustice.
3. The emphasis of Durkheim and Eliade on sacred times and places as intrinsic to all religions is based on which approach to defining religion?
  - a. Functional
  - b. Conflictual
  - c. Substantive**
  - d. Symbolic interactionist
  - e. Spurious
4. Which of the following is a weakness of functional definitions of religion?
  - a. The range of behaviors and ideas that might be considered "religious" may be so broad that it is hard to keep a clear focus on what is included; almost anything might be religious or quasi-religious.**
  - b. Functional definitions tend to focus almost entirely on very traditional expressions of religion.
  - c. Functional definitions are not good at recognizing the dynamic character of religion as new forms or types of religiosity emerge in a society.
  - d. Functional definitions have a conservative bias, with a tendency to stigmatize new religions as less religious.
5. According to which definition of religion would the Buddhism of monks and Buddhist theologians probably NOT be considered a religion?
  - a. Functional
  - b. Symbolic
  - c. Any definition that emphasizes belief in supernatural beings**
  - d. Buddhism is not considered a religion by any definition; it is merely a form of magic.
6. According to Emile Durkheim, what is essential in defining religion?
  - a. belief in a super human being
  - b. rituals and symbols
  - c. a division of sacred and profane realms**
  - d. "ultimate concern"

7. According to Yinger, what is the problem with using traditional definitions of religion?
  - a. They emphasize belief rather than action.
  - b. They do not emphasize separation of the divine and the profane; rather, they consider all parts of existence to be divine.
  - c. They do not include Islam as a religion.
  - d. They do not include witchcraft as a religion.
  - e.** Traditional definitions of religion may cause one to misunderstand or misidentify religion in a society that is undergoing cultural change.
8. Which of the following approaches to defining religion is amenable to including the study of such phenomena as communism, nationalism, and perhaps even sport as proper objects of study by sociologists of religion?
  - a.** Functional
  - b. Substantive
  - c. Symbolic
  - d. Conflict
  - e. Spurious
9. Ethos refers to
  - a. the reasoning behind ethical decisions.
  - b. the intellectual framework by which one makes sense out of life.
  - c. a system of beliefs.
  - d. the symbols which refer to supernatural beings.
  - e.** moods and motivations fostered in a religion.
10. The intellectual ordering of experience so that injustice, pain, death, and suffering makes sense in terms of some larger picture is called a
  - a. ethos.
  - b. ritual.
  - c.** worldview.
  - d. symbol.
  - e. mood.
11. Sociologists define myths as
  - a. beliefs that people hold to, despite the fact that they have been disproven by science and reason.
  - b. ideologies used in the performance of magic.
  - c.** stories and legends which transmit values in a culture and help people understand the meaning of life.
  - d. folk stories which simply entertain people.
  - e. beliefs which serve a purpose of unifying a culture, but only in preliterate societies.
12. Religious symbols
  - a. replace rituals and myths as religions evolve.
  - b.** store religious meanings and moods.
  - c. become less important in the more advanced religions.
  - d. usually focus on everyday interaction rather than abstract or cosmic matters.
13. As opposed to magic rituals, religious rituals usually
  - a. occur unpredictably.
  - b. occur at times of crisis.
  - c.** occur calendrically.
  - d. are conducted only by the leader without observation or participation by a group.
  - e. are not intended to be intrinsically meaningful.

14. Which of the following factors characterizes magic?
- a. It includes worship of a transcendent being.
  - b. The leader leads the entire group in performance of a ritual.
  - c. It is more likely to occur when people feel they can control adverse events in their lives with technological or scientific methods.
  - d.** It involves manipulation of an impersonal transcendent power for utilitarian reasons.
  - e. It involves a system of ethics or moral behaviors.
15. Which of the following would NOT be considered a form of magic?
- a. Wearing a “lucky” pair of socks for all important occasions
  - b.** Asking God for emotional support and courage in a time of health crisis or injury.
  - c. Sending chain letters to avoid bad luck.
  - d. Water witching.
  - e. Throwing salt over your shoulder when the saltshaker spills.
16. Which of the following is NOT true of magic?
- a. It is an attempt to manipulate one's environment by appeal to impersonal power.
  - b. It is individualistic and does not involve social participation.
  - c. It is resorted to when the likelihood of failure is high for any task.
  - d.** It involves supplication and prayer.
  - e. It is a primitive form of technology.
17. Your textbook authors, Keith Roberts and David Yamane, believe that while magic may be replaced by science and technology, religion will not. They argue that
- a. God will not allow religion to be replaced.
  - b.** religion serves a different function than science: preserving central values and explaining the meaning of life.
  - c. religion is a cultural universal that cannot be replaced or substituted.
  - d. religion is closely related to ethnic loyalty, while science and technology are not.
  - e. The statement above is false. Roberts believes religion will fade into oblivion under the onslaught of secularism and modern science.
18. Micro symbols refer to:
- a. symbols that aid in interpretation of the meaning of life.
  - b. symbols that involve a cosmology or worldview.
  - c.** non-religious symbols that are used in daily communication.
  - d. religious symbols which help to explain lesser known values or beliefs.
19. Some individuals trust that science and technology will one day solve all human problems. This belief system would be defined as “religious” by sociologists using a \_\_\_\_\_ definition of religion.
- a. Symbolic
  - b. Ritualistic
  - c. Substantive
  - d.** Functional
  - e. None of the above
20. How do *faith* and *religion* differ?
- a.** Faith is an individual expression of belief; this shared faith within a group is religion.
  - b. Faith refers to belief in supernatural beings, while religion is defined as following spiritual behaviors.
  - c. Faith refers to following spiritual behaviors, while religion is defined as belief in supernatural beings.
  - d. There is no difference: faith and religion are terms that describe the same phenomena.

21. The empirical research evidence suggests that
- a. Among Americans between 18 and 35, in particular, most people who consider themselves spiritual do not consider themselves religious.
  - b. Those who consider themselves “religious” are usually more geared to organizational structures and maintaining local churches, and often have little sense of personal spiritual life.
  - c. Spirituality and identification as “religious” have no correlation—there is little connection between the two for any age group..
  - d.** Most people who consider themselves religious also consider themselves spiritual.
22. Which of the following perspectives on the definition of religion is NOT proposed by Roberts and Yamane?
- a. Definitions are tools
  - b. Definitions are “ways of seeing”
  - c. Definitions are more or less useful
  - d.** Definitions are mirrors of reality