

Core Curriculum

1 God, Religion and Islam: An Introduction

1.4 **What is “Religion” and What’s the Point of it Anyways?**

INTRODUCTION & BODY OF TEXT

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

Welcome back to the Muslim Converts Channel!

At first glance, we all think we know what religion is. Religion is often defined as a system of thought organized around the belief of a supernatural entity, usually some form of god or gods and a series of rituals and social regulations that stem from this belief.

Religion in this sense can be in many different forms. For one, there is animism where totems and magic rituals form a central part of its worldview concerning the supernatural and the natural.

Then there are other forms of polytheism which posit the existence of many gods who perform tasks specific to them, such as controlling the rain, love or fertility.

Then you have monotheistic religions that believe in one creator God and that there is no deity aside this God. Among these religions we find Judaism, Christianity, Islam etc.

Then you have other earth based religions that do not make a distinction between natural and supernatural, such as shamanistic religions among some ancient Central Asians and Native Americans.

So, what purpose do all these religions serve? There have been plenty of answers to this question. Some, like Karl Marx, have said that religion serves to distract people from their economic problems and class struggles and by making them think positively of their situation and accept their oppression. Others like Sigmund Freud argue that religion is the product of some psycho-social illness.

Other early 20th century sociologists like Emile Durkheim argue that the purpose of religion is to create social cohesion and solidarity. In other words, it is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that ultimately function to unite society under a single morality which Durkheim called a “Church.”

Others like Clifford Geertz saw religion as a system of symbols intended to create strong emotions in people through the formulation of a general order of existence.

Now as you can see, it isn't really clear what religion means, nor is there an agreement as to what its purpose is, at least in current academic Western debates. Something we think so simple is actually quite complex. Even explanations of why “religion” is failing is full of disagreements.

Some say that an increasing globalization and exchange of ideas means that people aren't so sure about their religious beliefs anymore. Others blame materialism, and others blame secularism as a political system that has stripped the public consciousness of religion where direct encounters with religion are no longer allowed or discouraged in public places.

They argue that naturally, humans will attach themselves to whatever they are exposed to the most. Since in schools, in the media and other public arenas religion is largely absent, people will naturally grow

heedless and disinterested in it.

So what does Islam say about all of this? Well, we will look into Islam's understanding of the meaning and function of religion in our next lesson. But here we will give you a brief overview before we go.

Talal Asad, the most prominent anthropologists in Western academia today, argues that the term "religion" - as a conceptual term in English - is a modern creation, and more specifically, the creation of the modern nation state and a direct by-product of secularism.

For secularism to target, isolate and relegate "religion" to the private sphere, it must first define what it is and thus put it into its neat little box; but the problem of defining also leads to an essentializations and generalization of what "religion" is. In order to create a category called religion, you must semantically shape the term so that it serves your power, but by doing so, you allow some definitions and disallow others. Defining what is "religion" therefore becomes a play of power by the nation state.

As such, Asad opts for defining religion as a constitutive activity in the world. This definition is seen as fair and is quite similar to how Islam defines "religion." The Arabic word for religion is *dīn* (deen) which is originally taken from the old Persian word *dā'inah*, meaning a way of life.

Dīn is therefore a way of life that is guided by one ultimate purpose and concern, whatever it may be. A person's *dīn* may be polytheism, or it can be nationalism, or finance and money, whatever it is, it is a cognitive state and a system of knowing and desiring that guides and determines all of one's ways of looking at and acting in the world and all the various commitments and ways of organizing that come as a result of it.

From this Islamic perspective, religion is not failing, it is always there. Even atheism is a way of life and hence a *dīn*. What is failing is a religion which primarily sees itself as being guided and determined by God. The

relationship with God is what is being lost, but this way of approaching life whilst ignoring or denying God is still a way of life and hence a dīn.

Please tune in to our next lesson for a larger discussion on the matter.

Until Next Time, Thank you for watching. As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh.