The concept of “world religions” is a 19th- and 20th-century European and American attempt to understand the global diversity of cultural patterns. Those who use the concept imagine that variations in the world’s religious practices and beliefs can be apportioned into neatly demarcated “religions” that are relatively unchanging over historical time and geographic place. They further assume that all adherents in a given “religion” share similar practices and beliefs, and these can be compared with parallel practices and beliefs in other religions. By the end of the 20th century, all of these assumptions were challenged. Although still widely accepted and used by the general public, the term world religions has fallen into disuse in the scholarly world.

The Concept of Religion

Fundamental to the idea of “world religion” is the notion that there is such a thing as religion that can be defined and contrasted with other religions. As an historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out that the idea of religion as an organization and ideology distinct from secularism is a relatively new invention in history. It emerged during the time of the European Enlightenment as a way of containing what were regarded as religious excesses, superstition and intolerance, and the political and economic influence of the clergy. The alternative of religion was secularism, a concept also invented at the time, which described the values and practices in public life that were unaffected by traditional ideas and clerical control. Hence, the modern world was informed by what Talal Asad has called the “twin concepts” of religion and secularism.

Implicit in this organizational containment of the Christian church and its clergy in post-Enlightenment Europe was not only the notion that there was such a thing as religion but also that there was a specifically European version of it that was called Christianity. Although Christianity was thought to be the dominant religion of European countries, there was an awareness of cultural patterns and beliefs that did not quite fit and that were indications of competing religions. Judaism was the most obvious of the anomalies in Christian societies. For some, Judaism created a problem, or a “question,” for European cultural uniformity. This point of view laid the conceptual groundwork for the tragic attempt at genocide against European Jews during the Nazi reign of terror in the mid-20th century.

The Invention of World Religion

With the European contact of other parts of the world during the era of colonial expansion in the 18th through the 20th centuries, the template of religion provided an easy way of understanding cultural differences in these parts of the world. Inhabitants of non-Christian areas were thought to be adherents of other religions. Hence, concepts of Hinduism, Buddhism, and what was called “Mohammadanism” were invited as comparative terms with Christianity. Islam was known by the name of its founder, with the mistaken idea that the role of the prophet Mohammad (whom most Muslims regard as fully human) played the same role in the Islamic frame of reference that Jesus Christ (regarded by most Christians as a manifestation of God) played in Christianity. In 1893, a Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in Chicago, Illinois, which helped to cement the notion that there were...
such things as world religions, that they had leaders, and that these representatives could meet in a parliament that prefigured the League of Nations and the United Nations by several decades. In many cases, the “leaders” were representative of only small groups of followers. But the 1893 parliament was nevertheless a paradigmatic event for demonstrating the viability of the world religions concept.

The religious patterns in South Asia and China, however, created some of the greatest difficulties for the notion of “world religions.” The first European observers of India’s culture remarked about how many religions there were in the subcontinent. What they were describing were the diversity of practices, groups, and beliefs that were later subsumed under the generic category of “Hinduism.” There was no unified organization or standardization of beliefs and practices until the end of the 19th century, after which modernizing groups within India attempted to give Hinduism the standardization that they imagined that Christianity and other religions already had.

The religious beliefs and practices of China were equally as diverse as in India, but unlike Hinduism, no name was ever invented to encompass the diversity in Chinese culture. Instead, most observers speak of a broad “Chinese religion” that encompasses three strands of religiosity that most Chinese observe, even though they are also described as separate religions: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. The current government of China recognizes only Buddhism as a religion; it regards Confucianism as a philosophy and Taoism as a set of nonreligious superstitious beliefs.

Categories

Although the concept of world religions recognizes that there are major religions in the world, there is no agreement about what they are. An 1883 map carefully demarcates, in different shades, the adherents of the five religions of the world: “Christians, Buddhists, Hindoos, Mohammedans, Fetichists” (the latter referring to tribal and native beliefs) (see Figure 1). Another 19th-century work, Josiah Conder’s *Analytical and Comparative View of All Religions Now Extant Among Mankind*, specifies many more religions under this general fourfold classification, and it also upholds the notion that there is a division between the polytheistic religions of the East and the monotheistic religions of the West. Although the actual diversity of beliefs in both Eastern and Western cultures are much more complicated than this simple dichotomy would allow, the idea of a polytheistic-monotheistic division became a persistent feature of the world religions concept.

The Utility of the World Religions Concept

The idea of world religions has proven to be useful for a variety of social and political reasons. In late 20th- and early 21st-century China, for example, the list of religions helped to identify the religious organizations over which it could exert government control. China recognizes the existence of five religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

Another useful feature of the world religions concept was to identify those religious traditions that were inferior to one’s own and provide comparative categories that would demonstrate their insufficiency. During the era of European colonialism, the idea of world religions was helpful in showing the alleged superiority of Christendom. Missionary descriptions of other religions would frequently end with an analysis of how and in what way the native religions were inferior.

The idea of world religions also helped to convey the notion that there was a universal religiosity around the globe that was similar in character to Christianity. This is the point made in an insightful study by Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was*
Preserved in the Language of Pluralism. Some of the 19th century’s most thoughtful philosophers of religion, including Friedrich Schleiermacher and Søren Kierkegaard, argued for the universality of a kind of essential religiosity. The theme was revived by the 20th-century philosopher and scholar of religion, Huston Smith, who adopted Aldous Huxley’s notion of a “perennial philosophy” that existed as a substratum within all religious traditions; Smith’s primer, originally titled *Man’s Religions*, became the largest selling world religions textbook.

In the 1950s, with the emergence of the Cold War, the political interest in understanding and controlling the cultures of the “Third World” countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America helped to bolster the new field of religious studies and one of its major analytic approaches, comparative religion. The methodology of comparative religion often involved a comparison of other religious cultures with Christianity, and courses in world religions became a mainstay of the undergraduate religious studies curriculum. Textbooks developed for the courses would often develop comparative categories through which religions could be compared, categories such as the founder, sacred text, organization, leaders, beliefs, and ethics. Although these categories fit well only with Christianity, they were applied to all religions as if each was structured the same way.

Figure 1 An 1883 map carefully demarcates, in different shades, the adherents of the five religions of the world: “Christians, Buddhists, Hindoos, Mohammedans, Fetishists.”


Global Religion

Although the term *world religions* is seldom used in the academic field of religious studies in the 21st century, the desire to understand religion from a global perspective persists. Increasingly, the study of “global religion” has become an alternative to the world religions concept. Unlike world religions, the global religion approach avoids essentializing religions; it emphasizes the cultural diversity within religious traditions over time and place and explores the transformative effect of cultural interaction in the context of multicultural societies.

See also:

Buddhism, Christianity, Global Religions, Beliefs, and Ideologies, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Religious Movements, New and Syncretic, Sikhism

Further Readings


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