

## Sample of a Paper Graded A+

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The Definition and Purpose of Religion

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## The Definition and Purpose of Religion

Religion has been a defining element of societies in every geographic location around the globe. Human beings have numerous basic needs, and religion satisfies the spiritual needs of people in every culture. In this way, religion influences the way groups of people live their lives. All religions, regardless of tenets or structure have a system of beliefs, practices and a moral community. Religion comes in all shapes and sizes and is rooted in the faith of a society. But what purpose does it serve a society, and is that purpose always beneficial? In understanding religion it is crucial to examine both the functions and dysfunctions of its existence.

### The Definition of Religion

#### Beliefs and Symbols

Beliefs are one of the major components of religion, and are principles assigned to a particular faith. Beliefs encompass the idea that some things are sacred or deserving of deep respect (Duffy, Glenday, Henslin, & Pupo, 2004, p.348). Beliefs also include a concept of a higher power, values, a unified world-view and also various symbols (Kazarian, 2001, p.156).

The belief in a higher power can be both broad and specific. Kazarian (2001) stated that, “(a group of people known as) atheists believe in the impossibility of knowing God or determining how the universe began” (p.156). Such a belief can be considered very broad whereas the belief in several gods can be considered very specific. In the Shinto religion, “followers see the sacred in all things, including the moon, sun, rocks, trees and animals” (Kazarian, 2001, p.165). The same idea holds true in Hinduism, as members believe in “one Supreme Being that is manifested in many deities (gods or goddesses)” (Kazarian, 2001, p.160).

Values are ideas of what is right and desirable in life and also includes a view of how people should live their lives. According to Kazarian (2001, p.160), Jehovah’s Witnesses value God’s divine law to abstain from blood, and therefore “accepting blood orally or intravenously (including blood transfusions) would violate that divine law”. The Roman Catholic religion holds children in high regard and opposes the use of birth control as well as performing abortions (Kazarian, 2001, p.160).

Symbols are objects used to represent something abstract. In the context of religion they take on numerous forms and function as a way of communicating among members of a religious group. The Koran is the scripture of the religion of Islam, which states “the most beautiful names belong to Allah” (“Names of Allah”, n.d.). The 99

different names serve as symbols of a higher power's beauty and because such names would have no meaning to members outside the group they allow for communication within the group.

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Symbols also provide an identity and sense of solidarity for religious groups. In Taoism “the ancient Yin and Yang symbol represents Tao. Yin is the dark side and Yang is the light side. The two sides symbolize pairs of opposites “good and evil, or feminine and masculine” (Kazarian, 2001, p.166).

### Practices

Religious practices stem from religious beliefs and are expressions of such beliefs. They can take the form of ceremonies and rituals, and also include speech and narrative, religious officials and also dates and times.

Ceremonies and rituals are repetitive practices that unite members of a specific religion. ‘Siyam’ or fasting is one of the most fundamental practices of the Islamic religion and is a practice seen to have a distinct purpose.

Fasting is beneficial for health, self-purification, and self-restraint; it reminds Muslims of their purpose in life and promotes empathy for poor and hungry people. All adult Muslims are expected to fast (abstain from food, drink and sexual relations) from sunset to sunrise during the holy month of Ramada (Kazarian, 2001, p.162).

Speech and narrative aspects of religion include scripture, myth, prayer and song, which are verbal expressions of the teachings of a particular faith. Followers of the Christian Science faith use prayer to transform an ill person's condition, as “scientific prayer knows God, or divine mind as the only healer” (Kazarian, 2001, p.159). The Qur'an is the holy text of Islam, which “contains the words of God communicated to Muhammad” (Kazarian, 2001, p.161). Written or verbal communication is crucial for various religions in maintaining their faith from generation to generation. They also serve as reminders to believers in regard to what their faith means to them.

Many religions carry out various practices under the guidance of a religious official. In Christianity, a priest, pastor or minister who acts as a counselor and teacher facilitates the religious practices of the sacrament of marriage. This official guides the participants through the ceremony step by step and is ordained with the authority to pronounce them man and wife.

## The Purpose of Religion

### Functions

The most fundamental function of religion is that it plays a significant role in the lives of believers around the globe. Religion plays this role as it provides answers to perplexing questions and preserves customs and culture. It also provides guidelines for everyday life and controls people's behavior. Religion also allows for unity among people with shared values and perspectives.

How did we get here? Why do we suffer? What happens to us when we die? By providing answers to some of life's most perplexing questions, religion maintains a sense of purpose both in life and death and everything

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in between. Reincarnation is a idea present in many eastern religions. It is a process of cycle that applies many lives and bodies to a person and serves to explain the difference between people.

Some are healthy, others are tormented their whole life by physical handicaps. Some are rich, others at the brink of starvation. Some have success without being religious; others are constant losers, despite their religious dedication. Eastern religions explain these differences as a result of previous lives, good or bad, which bear their fruits into the present one through the action of Karma. ("Reincarnation: Its Meaning and Consequences", n.d.).

Religion also acts to develop and preserve customs and culture in many societies. It is common for the everyday activities of a specific society to be derived from religious practices and beliefs, and the religion has developed the customs and cultures of that society. For example, in many North American Native tribes religion defined family relationships. According to Gold,

Each family had its own totem, or emblem, usually in the form of an animal. Members of the family or clan, were thought to be descendants of the animal represented by the totem... Those living under the totem were banned from marrying others within the same clan (1997, p.14).

### Dysfunctions

Dysfunctions of religion also play a fundamental role in the lives of numerous groups of people. The prejudice and persecution of religious groups are evident in all corners of the world, as is the existence of charismatic leaders who lead their followers down dangerous paths all in the name of religious beliefs.

According to Schwartz, "in 1959 persecution was rampant in Tibet as the Chinese government set out to obliterate the characteristics of Tibetan culture and absorb Tibet into China. When the Dalai Lama and 100,000 Tibetans fled to India military forces came into the picture".

Virtually all of Tibet's more than 6,000 monasteries and nunneries were destroyed. Nearly all of the more than 500,000 monks and nuns were driven (away); many were tortured, killed, imprisoned, or forced to disrobe...any display of religion was prohibited, punishable by beatings and imprisonment, and all religious objects were confiscated and destroyed" (Schwartz, "Religious Persecution in Tibet", n.d.).

This is an example that is instrumental in demonstrating how the stigma attached to particular religious beliefs by outside societies can play a negative role in people's lives.

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### Discussion

Religion is vital to society in preventing absolute chaos. Governments and institutions provide no deterrent to the general public in deviating from societal norms. Religion is so deeply entrenched in the personalities and culture of so many people, that it serves as more of a check for bad behavior because it is an internal threat of each individual, not a scale against the larger group.

Religion can provide people with hope in times of despair, guidance in times of uncertainty and unity in times of loneliness. Unfortunately, the comfort and sense of peace that is afforded to some faiths is not evenly distributed among all. Some religious beliefs and practices also have potential to create animosity and intolerance through varying world-views.

The Christian faith is reported to have over 2 billion followers, the Buddhist faith to have 350 million and even the Wiccan faith has over 100,000 believers (Kazarian, 2001, p.157). Religion is an integral part of humanity and the beliefs and practices carried in the cultures of these people directly influences their lives and behaviour. Both functions and dysfunctions are present and both are the product of a society's beliefs, practices and moral community.

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