

Exploring the boundaries between religion and culture



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Introduction

People have very different ideas about what counts as religion or spirituality. Some might even think of other people's religions as superstition.

The following questions would make perfect sense to people in some religions but seem utterly bizarre to others. You might like to consider whether you would answer them positively or negatively.

- Do you eat fish every Friday?
- If you visit a religious building, do you cover your head?
- Do you pray when you are anxious?
- Do you wear religious symbols as jewellery?
- Do you say thank you for the food you eat?
- Do you say thank you to the food you eat?
- If bad things happen do you wonder who is to blame?
- Do you think that 'acts of God' should be insured against?
- Do you hope to see deceased relatives or friends in an afterlife?
- Do you hope to be reincarnated as a happier person?
- Do you think that good dogs go to heaven?
- When you can't find something, do you ask a saint to help you find it?
- Do you talk quietly in religious buildings?
- Do you achieve mindfulness every day?

Some of the questions are about ideas and practices that are more historically rooted. Some are officially encouraged. Others are less official but still important to many people. Some may have originated in different religions but make good sense to people who blend them in their own lives. It is also true that doing one or more of them might not make you religious.

This free course, *Exploring the boundaries between religion and culture*, engages with questions about the relationship between religion and culture. Are they different things or synonyms that emphasise different ways of looking at the same phenomena? The course uses 'either/or or both/and' to point to those possibilities for understanding how religion and culture relate to each other. In the next section, a short film enables you to engage with the views and experiences of some cultural performers and invites you to reflect on the issues they raise. Next you'll explore two sections about an ecological activist and musician. People's motivations for engaging in activism are many and various but, for some at least, they include what might be called spirituality – and are certainly expressed in cultural activities such as musical performances. 'Either/or' questions are often asked when people are not sure what the reasons are for doing particular things: 'is it religion or is it culture?' You'll consider some examples, including in relation to the foods some religious people eat or avoid. The course concludes with some thoughts about how messy reality is, and you'll be asked to discuss aspects of religion and culture that might cast new light on these issues.

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University's [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](#).

Resources for teachers

There are discussion questions and a classroom activity suggested at the end of this course.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- clearly explain an understanding of how culture and religion are related
- provide further examples of cultural activities rooted in or expressive of religion
- appreciate some nuances in the use of words like religion, spirituality, culture, performance and ceremony
- develop further ideas about religious people's motivations and activities.

1 Either/or and both/and: belonging to land and ancestors

The following video invites further reflection on the relationship between religion and culture.

It is about indigenous people visiting London during the biennial ORIGINS: Festival of First Nations. It includes people talking about musical and other performances that are rooted in indigenous cultures (i.e. those of Native Americans, Māori, Aboriginal Australians and others).

Activity 1

As you watch the video, pay particular attention to what the performers say about their reasons for participating in the festival. Add your notes to the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Belonging to land and ancestors](#)



Provide your answer...

Discussion

The flow between ritual and performance is an interesting example of a relationship between religion and culture. You might also be familiar with other examples. Music originally intended for religious ceremonies (such as Catholic Masses, Islamic Sufi dhikr, Hindu and Sikh kirtans) is performed in many musical concerts. It can be appreciated for its beauty rather than for more 'religious' purposes.

Similarly, people walk traditional pilgrimage routes, like the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Spain, for reasons other than seeking redemption or specifically

religious benefits. But music and pilgrimage routes are also carefully designed and presented for the benefit of religious people. In these and similar experiences, religion and culture inform each other.

2 Either/or or both/and: eco protest

In the audio that follows, Theo Simon performs one of his best-known anthems. He is the songwriter and lead singer for Seize the Day, a band that often performs at protest sites, as well as at green and pagan festivals. In addition to explicit protest songs, they also perform celebratory anthems inspired by ecological spirituality.

Activity 2

As you listen to this anthem (or read the transcript), reflect on your responses to its message and performance.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Seize the Day

Provide your answer...

Discussion

It is important to recognise that sometimes religiously motivated protest is closely linked with celebration.

3 Interview with Theo Simon

In the next video, Theo Simon, singer-songwriter of Seize the Day, talks about what motivates his activism and his commitments.

Activity 3

Watch the video now, paying particular attention to Theo Simon's linking of celebration and protest, and his ideas about 'spirituality'.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Activism and reverence for nature](#)



Provide your answer...

Discussion

The band has performed at many peace camps and activist events (sometimes labelled 'protests' but also thought of as 'protections'), including Extinction Rebellion events.

He explains how celebration and protest weave together in the band's activism. While he is not keen on the word 'religion', he is clear that devotion to the Earth infuses his songs, and in ways that might be considered 'spiritual'. The terms 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' are often used to refer to more personal practices and experiences, in contrast to those associated with more formal or institutional 'religion'.

This interview helps us understand how activism, protest and/or political activities can be shaped, motivated and energised by diverse religious or spiritual ideas and traditions. Precisely because it is not always easy to distinguish between culture and religion – or between religion and politics – it may be helpful to reflect further about these 'either/or or

both/and' possibilities. The question 'why do they do that?' is explored further in the following sections.

4 Why do they do that?



Sometimes people say ‘that’s not religion, it’s culture’ – or even ‘it’s just culture’.

Sometimes those who object to Islamic veiling and other costume choices argue this is more culture than religion. Much the same has been said of Sikhs wearing turbans, Orthodox Jews insisting that animals should not be stunned before they are slaughtered or Christians wearing religious symbols over their work outfits.

On the other hand, the phrase ‘it’s our culture’ puts a positive spin on this. When people say this, they don’t remove whatever ‘it’ is (costume, food etc.) from also being ‘our religion’ or ‘my religion’. Insisting that a particular style of costume or way of cooking food is ‘culture’ does not end the discussion. Indeed, these labels might not really be a useful contribution to a conversation.

5 Exploring the boundaries between religion and culture

There are stories that ask ‘why do Jews do that?’ One variation goes like this:

A woman is asked by her daughter, ‘Why do we cut the corners off beef when we roast it?’ Both realise that this is not in any typical list of traditional Jewish practices, but they assume that there must be an authoritative rule to explain the requirement. Possibly it is to do with Moses or ancient temple rituals. To find out, the mother asks her own mother the question, which causes bafflement until the older woman realises what started all this. ‘When you were a child,’ she says, ‘my roasting tin wasn’t very big so I always had to cut the corners off the beef’. Laughter all round.

But the point of the story has yet to be revealed. It is not that people get confused or make mistakes. The point is that a family tradition has evolved and now has a similar force to more widely known food practices. This will now be what this family will do – but they will know where the tradition began.

This is intended to be a humorous story. But at its heart is the serious point that people (religious or otherwise) do not have to know the origins or rational explanation for any particular action. Explaining what people do can legitimately be as straightforward as saying ‘we do this because we do it’. Or, ‘to be a Jew, a Muslim etc. is to do these kinds of things’.

Put another way, it is not common to eat horses or dogs in Britain (even though their meat is not so different from that of cows or sheep) and this is probably ‘just’ because ‘horses and dogs are not commonly eaten here’. History doesn’t provide full explanations for this food avoidance and it certainly isn’t fully rational. But this does not make it any less important.

This story shows how some members of a religion might come to do their religion differently from others. This is important in understanding:

- the ways in which religion and culture are woven together
- one of the ways in which religious practices may change over time
- the ways in which our questions about what people believe and why they do certain things might receive unexpected answers.

Conclusion

Culture and religion are rarely easy to disentangle.

Perhaps the effort should not be made. Maybe the claim that something is 'not religion but culture' misunderstands the role of religion in many people's lives.

Indeed, perhaps this is true in the lives of many communities and nations. The assertion seems to want us to decide between 'either/or' when reality is often a more messy affair of 'both-and'.

Similar choices are often offered between 'good religion' and 'bad religion'. The former is usually presented as quiet and peaceful; the celebration of cooperation and harmony. The latter is denigrated as extremist and prone to violence or division.

Messy lived reality suggests that religions can be all-encompassing, inviting commitments to make the world a particular way, but they can also be add-ons to busy lives of work and leisure, inviting people to inject meaning or value by occasionally participating in ceremonies.



Questions for discussion

- Is there anything you or your family do that is part of your 'culture' that might fit within this discussion of religion/culture being difficult to separate?
- Why might people join in ceremonies of religions to which they do not belong?
- Do you think religious music or activities should be protected from becoming entertainment? Should religious buildings be kept apart from tourism?
- Do you think (some) ecological movements have a religious element to their beliefs? Are you aware of other examples than the one discussed here?
- Can you think of other social movements or activities which could be considered to blur the boundary between religion and culture?

Classroom activity

Discuss the questions above as a group.

What next?

Check out the [Religious Studies content on offer from OpenLearn](#).

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University's [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](#).

Further reading

The [Religious Studies Project](#) (an expanding and searchable online resource for the social-scientific and critical study of religion) has some fascinating podcasts and other material relevant to [religion and environments](#).

Acknowledgements

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Seize the Day: 'Child of the Universe' and Theo Simon

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