

Comparative Religion

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COMPARATIVE RELIGION

1.1. Concepts and classifications

- On one hand, religions are very different from each other, each of them originated, developed and formed in a special historical (and thus also social, political and economic) context. On the other hand, there *are* recurring, cross-cultural and cross-historical features that may be detected when religions past and present are compared. Studying such features systematically and comparatively is sometimes called 'phenomenology of religion'. Here, however, we call it 'comparative religion' in order to avoid readers mistaking it for some kind of existentialist or theological 'phenomenology of religion'. Some of the important concepts and classification are mentioned here:

1.1.1. Myths

Myths constitute a class of narratives that may be expressed orally, in writing, in photos, or in rituals. The narratives we call myths very often speak of the beginning of the world and everything important in it. The myth lays the foundation of the society inhabited by the human beings who tell the myth. In this way, it connects the earliest time (chaos) and the present (cosmos).

There are different types of myths, but a common factor to them all is that they explain how something came into being, and how it got its particular status and characteristics. The four main types of myths are 'cosmogonic', 'theogonic', 'anthropogonic' and 'eschatological'.

More information on:

- [Myths](#)

1.1.2. Rituals

Rituals constitute a class of actions that may be combined in, for instance, a regular and repeated kind of worship, or a class of actions that are performed individually. A ritual is an act aiming at changing or maintaining something, not by actual intervention, but only by way of what it says, represents or symbolizes.

A *religious* ritual frequently includes some reference to important aspects and notions of the religion to which they pertain. There are different kinds of rituals, for instance: 'seasonal rituals', 'festival rituals', 'crisis rituals' and 'rites of passage and initiation'. Especially the last-mentioned made up a particular field of interest for the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957). He claimed that a 'ritualistic process' could be divided into three phases: the separation phase, the liminal phase and the incorporating phase.

Muslims praying in a mosque in Bangladesh



More information on:

- [Concepts and classifications](#)
- [The ritual process](#)
- [Sacrifice as a ritual](#)

1.1.3. Sacred or religious places and buildings

This category may also be named ‘places of worship’ because they are mainly used to perform collective rituals and common worship with regular intervals. The worshippers perceive them as and/or make them (via e.g. rituals) into holy or sacred places.

1.1.4. The Sacred

In principle, there is no limit to what can be considered and treated as “sacred” in the religions of the world, past and present: natural phenomena, certain human beings, certain human activities, certain times, places and writings can all be perceived as “sacred” and thus get a special status compared to what is not sacred, i.e. the “profane”.

The classical phenomenology of religion saw “the sacred” as the basis of all religion, but just like “religion”, the “sacred” does not owe its existence to itself, so to speak. Someone sees something as sacred or makes something sacred, and thus an object of respect and a source of authority.

Hoogaltar Kapel from the Netherlands



By opening [this link](#), a page appears where the theoretical formulations here illustrated (Myth, Sacrifice, The ritual process) are accompanied by actual examples from the various religious traditions, with links to the corresponding sections of the various Digital Modules. Click on ‘Comparative Religion’ and choose a category. Press ‘For Teachers’ or ‘Reflective questions’ for more didactical comments, questions, and tasks for the students.