

Elements of religious traditions paper



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Elements of Religious Traditions: Individual Assignment. Religion and Theology Elements of Religious Traditions. Throughout recorded history, and probably even before that time, human societies have reserved an important role for religious traditions. The expression of these traditions varies greatly across cultures, ranging from ancestor worship and animism in some tropical forests to highly regimented liturgical ceremonies in vast European cathedrals. The study of these religions is complex, because everyone comes from a particular cultural background, and it is difficult to be entirely neutral about what people believe and how they behave. One way of resolving this difficulty is to take a comparative approach, viewing what happens with an open mind. It is possible to detect similarities and differences which might illuminate key issues which lie at the heart of human religious experience, such as how these religions help people to conduct a relationship with the divine through special holy places and artefacts, special times and a particular way of relating to each other. The twentieth century European scholar Mircea Eliade wrote an influential study on the sacred and the profane, and identified the fact that religious experience often takes place in clearly marked special places: “ Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.” (Eliade: 1987, 26) Natural features like caves, rivers and mountains were often imbued with this notion of sacredness and archaeologists detect elements of religious significance in early monuments such as stone circles and pyramids. Humans appear to have a need to reserve, or indeed construct, very special places in which to step outside the everyday pressures of life and reflect more deeply. People often find it hard to concentrate on abstract

ideas like holiness and the divine, and so there are often artefacts which help believers to focus. In some religions, such as Hinduism, many small local temples are built to house statues and images of particular gods, and believers visit those places to come into contact with the divine through those physical objects. The concept of the avatar is one that is used to explain how the gods temporarily enter into human space through these objects: “ The sacred image or symbol of the god represents a means of union with the divine, but is not usually identified with the deity - the god or goddess only temporarily resides within the fabric of the image.” (Michell: 1988, 62) Religion requires its own special space, but also its own special times. Many religions have a special day of the week reserved for observance of formal worship: Christians have Sundays, Jews have the Sabbath and Muslims have special prayers on Fridays. There are also many festivals and celebrations like harvest thanksgiving in various shapes across the world. Monks and nuns from the medieval times devised also routines that divided the day up into sections, leaving set times for prayers to be said and songs of praise to be sung. People who did not have the time to sit and follow these ritualized events used to pay for others to say prayers, or conduct masses. An important part of most religions is also that they define how people should behave in relation to each other. Christians follow commandments such as “ Love one another as I have loved you. (John 13: 34) Different religions, and even different denominations of the same religion, have slightly different traditions in the way they treat each other, for example Quakers call each other friends because this reflects the rather relaxed but intimate relationship they have with god: “ Our relationship with the church and all others in the world about us is largely determined by the

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kind of projection we have made of our relationship with God.” (Wilcuts: 1984, 16-17) In Islamic cultures men often call each other “ brother,” and Roman Catholic priests are called “ father.” Jewish people like to set themselves apart from other groups in their eating habits, and some also wear distinctive clothing, which serves, like a uniform, to set them physically apart from non-Jews. In areas of the world where Hindus predominate, people greet each other with a formal gesture which involves holding the hands together and bowing the head in a mark of respect. This gesture is also used to greet holy places and statues, and this reflects Hindu belief that human beings share some elements of the divine in them, and therefore deserve respect. These differences in behavior reflect the influence that religion has on the way people perceive their social roles and show that religion is more than just an appreciation of the divine: it is an appreciation of human beings too. What people believe sets them apart from other groups and they use religious traditions of special places, times and behaviors to help them to focus on the essential moral and spiritual dimensions of life.

References Eliade, M. (1987) [1957] *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Michell, G. (1988) *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press. *The Holy Bible*. King James Version. Willcuts, J. L. (1984) *Why Friends are Friends*. Newberg, OR: Barclay Press.