

Free research paper on how does religion shape and form identity

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Religion refers to the firm belief in spiritual beings that ties human beings into a community. Religion forms the bedrock of cultural systems which gain shape on the basis of religious beliefs and rituals that people belonging to a particular culture are required to adhere. Religion is also responsible for the formation of one's identity which defines a person's individuality. There are different definitions of religion available for common usage. However, the most used definition is " Religion is any specific system of belief about deity, often involving rituals, a code of ethics, and a philosophy of life" (Robinson 2013). There are several religious faiths practiced in the world. Some of the most well-known religions include Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Amish, Buddhism, Jainism, Bahá'í Faith, Jainism, Confucianism and Sikhism. Each of these religions follows a different set of values, principles and cultural beliefs and thus shapes a person's cultural as well as religious identity differently. Since religion plays a big role in people's lives teaching them the right and wrong about life, the religious beliefs, rites and practices mold an individual's identity and his personality. A person's basic character and personality traits depend on how and in which community he grows up. The formation of identity which begins with the very process of naming ceremony continues to form and shape through various observance of religious rites, religious way of life and religious principles.

Before embarking on the discussion about how religion helps in shaping and forming an individual's identity, one needs to know what identity is. Identity is a set of distinctive characteristics that form a person's individuality and identity can also refer to a set of characteristics belonging to a particular social group or category (Browne, Carbonell & Merrill 2003). The formation of

an individual's identity begins right after the birth of an individual when a naming ceremony is performed to give him a distinctive social identity. An individual begins to develop a cultural identity when he begins to identify himself with his near and dear ones including parents, siblings and peers from a particular social group in his adolescence by following the shared characteristics, values and principles of a community.

Religion and religious rites play a very important role in the formation of one's identity. Right from the moment a person is born, these religious rituals and beliefs begin to make an influence on him. In both Judaism and Islam, there is a rite in practice called 'circumcision'. For both Muslims and Jewish, circumcision is the very process that introduces a person to the Islamic faith and Judaism, giving them a sense of belonging to their respective community. Though circumcision has not been mentioned in the holy Quran, but it is an important ritual performed on the majority of Muslim men. For Muslims, there is not fixed age for performing circumcision. This ritual can be performed on the seventh day of a boy's life or can be performed any time during his first few years of life. The preferred age for circumcision is usually seven years. The purpose of circumcision for Muslims is cleanliness. It is an important for Muslim men to wash themselves cleanly before praying. They believe that the foreskin on a penis might keep the urine trapped inside leading to harmful diseases and therefore, circumcision is believed to protect Muslim men from infection and fatal diseases (BBC #1 2009). For Muslims, circumcision can be performed in a hospital or medical center by a physician who does not need to be a Muslim. In Judaism, circumcision is performed on the eighth day of a boy's life. Circumcision is an

important custom for Jewish and if for any reason, circumcision is not done then the persons not circumcised may incur the penalty of kareit meaning excision. Circumcision in Judaism has to be performed by an observant Jew known as mohel. In Jewish traditions, circumcision performed by a physician is not considered as valid even if a rabbi remains present in the scene (Religion Facts 2013). Thus circumcision shapes a Muslim boy's or a Jewish boy's identity right after the moment they are born.

Religious principles also define the way of life for people, thus influencing his cultural identity. For example, a person growing up in an Amish community begins to believe in austere principles as a way of life and begins to identify himself with people who share the same principles. Amish community is known for their traditional way of 19th century life which is influenced by their religious faith. They believe in simplicity and humility and so refrain from any act of self-adulation. They believe that it is important to keep separate from the world to save the progeny from falling into the temptations of modern life and so they have their own small communities where they spend their life keeping themselves aloof from any sort of modern influence. They shun the use of modern conveniences like electricity, cars and telephones as they believe that the introduction of technology might disrupt their principles of simple living and communal bonding (BBC #2 2009).

The formation of one's identity also begins when he is required to adhere to a particular ethical framework. A child when growing up in a particular social and religious structure following a set of religious ethics and codes develops his religious identity. For examples, in both Islam and Christianity, there are

five pillars of life which tie the entire Muslim and Christian community of the world into a holy union of brotherhood. The five pillars for Muslims include Shahadah, Salah, Zakat, Sawm and Hajj. 'Shahadah' meaning faith manifests one's absolute trust and commitment to Islam. Salat alias Namaz meaning prayer is the second pillar that involves the obligation of offering five prayers every day to God (TRESA 2013). Zakat meaning purification is a way of salvation by sharing 2.5% of one's wealth to people in poverty. Sawm meaning fasting is an important pillar of Islam when Muslims are required to fast from dawn until sunset and give up any activity involving carnal intimacy and both active and passive smoking. Hajj refers to the holy pilgrimage in which a huge gathering is held in Makkah each year with innumerable people coming from all across the world to take part in the religious ceremony (TRESA 2013). In a similar fashion the five principles of Christianity include hear or read the gospel, believe in the manifestation of God through Jesus Christ, repent for sins, confess one's belief in Jesus Christ to others and baptism (Church of Christ). All the Muslims and Christians are required to share a religious identity through the adherence of these five pillars.

In conclusion, there are different religions in the world including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Amish, Buddhism, Jainism, Bahá'í Faith, Jainism, Confucianism and Sikhism. Each of these religions by following a different set of values, principles and cultural beliefs shapes a person's cultural as well as religious identity differently. Right from the moment a person is born religious rites like circumcision begin to shape one's identity. Religious principles also shape one's cultural identity showing a particular

path for living a life. Religious and ethical framework like five pillars of Christianity and Islam define the very existence of one's religious identity. Religion, thus, makes a huge influence on a person's life forming and shaping his individual as well as communal identity.

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