

# Religion in a multicultural world analysis essay



Religion In a multicultural world where language, traditions and culture differ from country to country there is one thing that may be deemed to be true and this is that religion is the centre point for most of them. So then what exactly is religion? And how can you define it? In this paper I will be analysing and considering the different definitions that have been proposed by Victoria S. Harrison in her article “ The pragmatics of defining religion in a multi-cultural world” and what I consider to be the most applicable definition of religion to date, though there may not be one.

Firstly before we can analyse a text we must first understand what the author or publisher of that particular text is trying to bring forward. In Harrison’s article she discusses the different definitions for religion that has been tossed around by different philosophers in the world, she states “ there is little agreement about what religion is or, indeed, if “ it” is anything distinctive at all.

Scholars have sought to define religion so as to identify both what makes religion and what if anything, distinguishes religion from secular social clubs” (Harrison, 2006, pg. 133) she continues to go and state that no matter how many definitions there are; the three basic definitions in which every definition given by philosophers towards the practice or doctrine of religion falls into one of the three and they are intellectual definition, affective definition and functional definition.

She then follows this by going into depth about each definition. Reading through the article and the definitions given to us by Victoria S. Harrison and then comparing the definition to the dictionary; which defines religion as

being “ an act of service or worship to God, a Spiritual being or the Supernatural” whilst James Martineau suggested that “ Religion is the belief in an everlasting God” (Harrison, 2006, pg. 134) it can be said that the two definitions link together.

Now for a more accurate definition of the word religion we must study the three aspects/ definitions that have been given to us and observe how they have impacted humans in today’s society as well as the way it has affected the world in centuries. Intellectual definition Harrison suggests that “ Intellectual definitions stipulate that the defining, or essential, feature of religion is belief about a particular sort of object” (Harrison, 2006, pg. 133) e. g. Man worshipping God. Using this definition many believe that there is a spiritual war going on and that from the beginning of time there has always been a strong force or power keeping humans safe and away from darkness one can say a war between light and darkness which have affected cultures and societies within different communities. The stories which were told and passed from generation to generations about God and the devil have caused us as humans to accept the order of things that were brought to us by ministers and priests of that particular religion.

Denying the fact that man worshipping God does not play a good percentage in the role of defining religion would be wrong but in saying this though this particular definition looks into the fulfilment that one gets from worshipping God as a whole yet it fails to recognise the different aspects or dimensions of religion such as the emotionality of it, the traditional roles that are practiced within it and the importance of the faith circulating it.

So in saying this if one was to regard this definition as being the main source of which he or she would base the definition of religion upon they would be saying that certain doctrines would not be considered as a religion, Harrison backs this up by stating that “ A further problem is that defining religion in terms of belief that has a particular kind of object, such as God, entails that certain belief systems which are routinely regarded as religions- Theravada Buddhism, for example – would have to be classed as non- religious” (Harrison, 2006, pg. 34). This then brings us to Harrison’s second definition of Religion. Affective definition Affective definition in Harrison’s view was defined by Friedrich Schleiermacher who stated that “ the essence of religion consists in the feeling of absolute dependence” (Harrison, 2006, pg. 135) before continuing on it must be said that Schleiermacher did not deny that religion incorporated different practices and values such as teachings, doctrines and creeds instead he undermined the importance of them.

Which many may say was a bit hypocritical of him seeing as he was coming from a strict Lutheran religious background. Many today have used this definition of ‘ dependent’ religiosity as ways to define religion as a myth or superstition and they have considered religion as terms in which have become an obstacle to human beings advancement and development and a limitation for free life. Which has in so many ways has deferred from the original main purpose or definition that Schleiermacher presented.

Moreover Schleiermacher’s definition of religion cannot be considered as a definition with no faults; Harrison tells us this when she herself states that “ Religion as a feeling would not appear to be central to, for example most forms of Buddhism, or to take another example, Daoism. If that is the case

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then the feeling of absolute dependence cannot be the defining feature for all religions” (Harrison, 2006 pg. 135). This then leaves us with Harrison’s last definition of religion.

Functional definition Harrison uses the anthropologists J. G. Frazer’s example of religion to define “ Functional definition” Frazer states that “ By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man” (Harrison, 2006, pg. 136) Frazer uses this as an example in stating that Religion isn’t only the worship of God or supernatural forces in fact it is more than that it is a procedure or method in which society has governed or controlled.

By saying this we are actually stating that “ God created man be it in his image or not, Man then created Religion as means of understanding the world without acknowledging that science may be correct in some forms, therefore religion is corrupt. ” Like the two definitions before, this one also does not give clear definition to religion as it does not incorporate all doctrines within it; Harrison backs this statement by stating that “ Frazer, then, defines religion in terms of its supposedly propitiatory or conciliatory function.

But do all religions serves as a function? It would seem not. For yet again, Buddhism constitutes as a clear counter example” It is very difficult to define religion due to the fact that each doctrine, group and culture has a specific definition to suit their own. Harrison believes that it would be easier to combine the three definitions together but she then continues on and concludes that “ a comprehensive definition would be problematic because,

like the various types of definitions examined, it would either encompass too much or too little” (Harrison, 2006, pg. 36). With the help of religion people have the understanding to respect other cultures, costumes and traditions and because of that no one should be disappointed. This life has a meaning so many kinds of religions have sought to understand that and have understood that but yet it is impossible to say one which religion or definition of religion is accurate and which one has been the most helpful and has impacted man in a positive manner. All in all people with religious backgrounds and beliefs should respect humanity with everyone having his or her own say. REFERENCE LIST V. S. Harrison, “ The pragmatics of defining religion in a multi cultural world”, International Journal for Philosophy of Religion (2006) 59: 133-152, DOI: 10. 1007/s11153-006-6961-z