

CHAPTER 1

Beliefs and belief systems

A unique feature of humans is their ability to believe. They can believe to be member of a nation, they can believe in gods or stories of creation, in ideas and ideologies. Believing is the conviction that something is true. It is a driving force behind *ideas* as well as *identities*, which are two of the 3 I's. The act of believing has always been an elementary force that helps shape the way we see our world and the way people should interact. It can also be extremely powerful as a force that drives people to act. For instance, wars are often caused by ideas that people feel strongly about. One such idea may be that they are superior and therefore entitled to rule others, or that their nation is under threat, or that a 'motherland' needs to be reunited. Similarly, enormous monuments are erected, wholly or in part to celebrate a belief, like the pyramids of Egypt and Central America, the Roman and Greek temples, the gothic churches of Europe, the Buddhas of Bamyán in Afghanistan, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Boru Budur in Indonesia, to name but a few.

Monumental belief

In Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, remains have been found of monumental buildings of stone, with carved pillars of five meters and six to seven tons in weight. They date from 11.500 years ago (that is twice as old as Stonehenge in England that dates 5.500 years back, and almost three times older than the pyramids in Egypt that date 4.500 years back). It was the period that people started to settle in larger agricultural communities. Since these buildings do not seem to have any practical use, archaeologists think they may have had a religious purpose.

We call a belief a **belief system** when the beliefs and belief practices of a people are structured and organized. The notion of beliefs is usually equated with religions. Examples of religious belief systems are Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that have elaborate traditions of rituals and scriptural scholarship. Other religious belief systems are less structured (like Hinduism) or focus more on oral transmissions (like many 'indigenous' religions). Belief systems other than religious ones include ideologies like capitalism, communism or fascism. In some instances, even certain cultural customs and practices are considered belief systems. (See below for a discussion on the relation between religion and culture, and between religion and ideology.)

While a belief *system* can emerge, evolve and disappear, the underlying activity of *believing* is a distinct mechanism that is entrenched in humanity, and therefore a global structure.

A **belief** is a conviction about something that one holds to be true. A **belief system** elaborates a belief in a coherent set of doctrines, concepts and rituals.

‘Dreaming’

Aboriginal peoples in Australia have an oral tradition that is often referred to as ‘Dreaming’. By means of song, knowledge is preserved and transmitted about a variety of topics, like mythology, law, kinship, and medicine. When this knowledge is about navigating land routes on the ground as well as paths in the sky, these are referred to as ‘Dreaming Tracks’ (also: ‘Songlines’).

Horizontal and vertical bonds

When someone believes in intangible powers beyond oneself (transcendental powers), this creates a bond between that person and a larger order which may be referred to as divine creation, a cosmic order or a universal truth. It is a bond that may lead to a belief system, like Judaism or Hinduism, or to a mythology, like the ones of the Greeks, the Babylonians or the Mayas, or to a universal order like human rights. We may imagine this as a vertical bond of believing, that is, between a person ‘down here’ and a higher order ‘out there’.

We can also imagine a horizontal bond of believing, that is, among people. We believe in each other, we believe in the legends and myths of our ancestors, we believe in the values and traditions that we find typical for our community. This kind of belief is what shapes people’s identities, whether it is religious, cultural, ethnic or something else. This kind of belief creates a bond among people and acts as the glue that keeps communities together.

It has become common practice to distinguish between the vertical and horizontal bonds as ‘religion’ and ‘society’, respectively, whereby society is usually marked as ‘neutral’ or ‘secular’, meaning non-religious. For that reason, they are often considered to be two separate realms. However, this view is typical for Western epistemology. In most societies, religion plays an intricate role in the daily lives of people, combining rather than separating the transcendental (‘vertical’) and the daily practical (‘horizontal’).

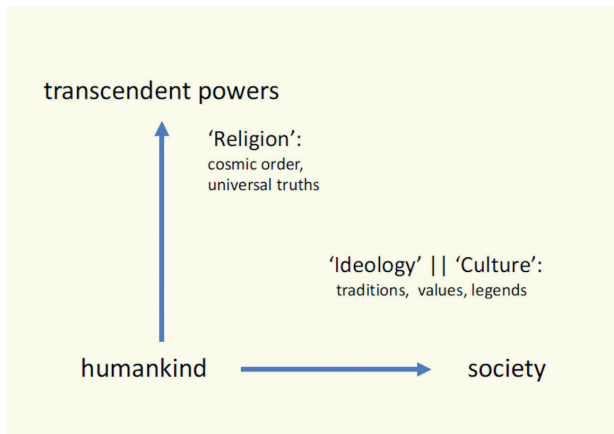


Figure II.1.1 Separating religion and society

Ideology or religion?

This distinction between vertical and horizontal bonds may help explain the difference between religion and ideology. The ways people believe in and practice their religious faith can sometimes be very similar to the ways people believe in and practice communism. What then is the difference between the two? Is communism not like religion, or is Christianity not like an ideology? The distinction between ideology and religion can be illustrated with the notion of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ beliefs. Religion is the (‘vertical’) belief of people in something ‘out there’ and deals with transcendent forces and spirituality, and wonders about the meaning of life. An ideology, on the other hand, deals with the practicalities of life on earth, the here and now, and as such is a belief in human (‘horizontal’) relations. This admittedly schematic differentiation can become blurred when religious views are being interpreted and expressed in norms and rules that regard society and politics. We see this happening today with Hinduism in India, Judaism in Israel, Islam in countries like Iran and Saudi-Arabia, Christianity in America. In those instances, it may be justified to term these uses of religion as ideology.

Culture or religion?

A similar discussion exists about the relation between religion and culture. However, this is a distinction that is often harder to make. An example to illustrate this is female genital mutilation (FGM), also euphemistically called ‘female circumcision’. The severe forms of this practice are widespread in several African countries where it has been a custom for thousands of years, and it is still widely practiced by Muslims as well as Christians and people of other religions. It could therefore be argued this custom is not religion-specific. However, the practice is so deeply imbedded in the local culture of these people, that they consider it a religious imperative, even when religious leaders have publicly and clearly stated that this practice is *not* part of their

respective religions. People apparently feel so strongly about it, that they believe they are held by a higher order or power to continue carrying it out.

FGM shows how culture and religion can be intertwined. Does it matter then whether we call something culture or religion? From the perspective of believing in something, both culture and religion can have the same importance to people. From that viewpoint, the terms religion and culture can be used interchangeably. On the other hand, there is a distinct difference between culture and religion regarding the *source* of that belief. Simply put, a culture is shaped by the norms and rituals to which one is accustomed ('this is how we do things here'), while religion, especially as a belief system, is shaped by what divine authorities are assumed to have ordained ('this is what my religion requires'). In practice, these two may very well overlap in the strength of their beliefs, but the motivation of the two is different.

Countries with the highest FGM-rates:

Somalia	99%
Guinea	95%
Djibouti	90%
Mali	89%
Egypt	87%
Sudan	87%
Eritrea	83%
Sierra Leone	83%
Gambia	73%
Ethiopia	65%
Mauretania	64%

(UNICEF, *Female Genital Mutilation Database*, 2023)

Beliefs and the state

Throughout human history, religion has played an important role for rulers of empires and states. And more recently, in the twentieth century we see how ideologies – especially socialism and communism – have played a similar role. Below, we will focus on religion as it has a longer legacy and, so it seems, still has a stronger impact than ideologies (many states halfway through the 20th century who called themselves socialist are now emphatically referring to a religious identity, including Russia, Poland and Egypt). In its relationship with the state, religion assumes four roles that are sometimes separate, but mostly overlapping:

First, religion is used to **legitimize state rule**. Kings and leaders have often felt the need for endorsement from higher powers to legitimize their rule. To achieve that, the ultimate leadership of rulers was framed in terms of a God-given rule (or, like in China, a mandate from heaven). Nowadays, in most states, this connection with higher powers has been legally severed, and the legitimacy of rulers officially rests no longer on something that is God-given, but on the will of the people. Still, quite a few rulers today feel the need to show that they are close to religion and its institutions.



Figure II.1.2 President Trump and religious community leaders

The second role that religion plays is as the identity of a people, empire or country. In most instances this is made official by naming a religion the **state religion**. This usually means that other religions are allowed, but that the state religion serves as the identity for that state. This has, in the past, also had consequences for the legal and social structure of such countries. The state religion would set the basic rules of that society. For instance, changing religions would be considered laudable when converting to the state religion, but possibly punishable when converting to another religion. Another aspect of religion that was very prominent in the past was that most societies were organized along religious lines: religious segregation was very common, with people belonging to the state religion taking up prominent positions, and people usually marrying within their own religious community and living in their own towns or city quarters in accordance with their own religious customs.

This all changed dramatically in the nineteenth century when, starting in Europe and then gradually spreading to most of the world, the notion of **citizenship** was introduced (a global trend which now has become a global structure). This was a radical break with a centuries-old tradition in which religion usually determined the social fabric of society: the introduction of citizenship meant that all citizens were considered equal, regardless of their religion. The consequences were enormous, because from then on every citizen, regardless of their religion, could obtain social positions that were previously reserved for those who belonged to the state religion. Most states today recognise that equality, although it is often more in rule than in practice: many countries will not have a president with a religion different from that of the majority population or from the state religion.

The third role of religion is that of **guardian of morality**. That which is good or wrong in a given society was usually phrased in religious terms. Nowadays, most states try to pass laws and regulations that are allegedly of a more 'neutral' or otherwise non-religious nature. But still, the overlap remains. For instance, those who oppose the legalization of abortion are mostly not arguing from the legal point of view that killing is a crime, but from the moral and religious point of view that life is sacred.

The fourth role is that of **religion as an institution**. These institutions arose to teach and guide people in their religion, to serve them in performing rituals, to provide them with counsel, to legitimize the rule of state leaders and to determine what is good and what is bad. In doing so, these institutions became powerful actors themselves, whether by their association with the most important state institutions or as actors in civil society. Throughout history and to this day, there have always been tensions between religious institutions and state governments because they both need each other, but also want to keep their independence. Both of them combined in one person is rare today, the most conspicuous examples being the pope (leader of both the Catholic Church and the Vatican) and the supreme leader of Iran.

Secularism and secularization

Two terms need explanation since they are often used interchangeably but have entirely different meanings. **Secularization** is the social process whereby religion becomes less important to the believers and so plays an increasingly lesser role in that society. Whereas secularization has to do with people's relationship with religion, secularism has to do with the state's relationship with religion. **Secularism** is a manner in which the state distances itself from religion.

Confusing about the terms secularization and secularism is that their adjectives are the same: 'secular'. When a state or a person is called secular, it can refer to

secularization as well as secularism. A 'secular state' can mean that a state wants to keep government and religion separate, but it can also mean that the people of that state are not very religious. To complicate matters, 'secular' is often used to denote non-religious. That is not necessarily the case. Persons can be religious and secular at the same time: they can be very religious and do not want the state to interfere with their personal beliefs.

Secularization relates to people: it is the process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose their social significance. **Secularism** relates to the state: it is the legal and political way a state distances itself from religion. '**Secular**' is the adjective of both terms.

Another – mostly Western – alternative term for secularism is the expression '**separation of church and state**'. However, this expression is not clear as it manifests itself in three very distinct ways:

a) *The separation of government and religious institutions.* Religious institutions are not the same thing as belief systems or a community of believers: they are the organized forms of religious communities with a clergy, infrastructure, and offices. In a secular state, religious institutions and governments are assumed to operate independently from each other.

b) *The separation of religion and politics.* This relates to the degree that a country allows religion to be part of politics. In certain countries it is allowed to have religious political parties (like the many 'Christian Democratic' parties in Europe), in other countries that is strictly forbidden (like in France and, until recently, in Turkey).

c) *The separation of religion and the public domain.* This is when religion is reduced to a private affair that should preferably not be visible in the public domain. According to this principle, people are free to be religious, but they are not to show it in public. France is a typical example of this, as it actively bans expressions of religion from all public places that belong to the state, such as parliament, all public offices, post offices, state banks, public schools, and the like.

These three different manifestations of the 'separation of church and state' may help to navigate the complex ways in which each state has arranged its relationship with religion. Still, confusion about these relationships will remain. This is not only caused by the many different structures that exist in regulating this relationship, but also by the religious history and culture of each society. For example, The Netherlands and the United States both claim to uphold a system of secularism, but they are quite different in the manner they do this. The Netherlands has several explicitly religious political parties (Christian and Islamic), while the United States does not. However, in The Netherlands one finds very little if any religious discourse

in the public or political domain, as opposed to the States. This is not a result of a political or legal order, but of custom: the Dutch have a culture where religion is not considered part of the public or political domain, while in the United States religion is customarily very much part of the public and political domain

Further reading

- Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor, 1990.
- Jose Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics*, Brill, 2019
- Clifford Geertz, "Chapter 4: Religion as a cultural system" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays*, Fontana Books, 1993
- Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Handbook on Religion and International Relations*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021
- Mark Juergensmeyer "The Worldwide Rise of Religious Nationalism", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 1-20
- Rhys H. Williams "Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (December 1996), pp. 368-378