

GEOG 247 Cultural Geography

The Geography of Religion

1

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Religion and Geography

❖ **Religion:** social system involving a **set of beliefs and practices** through which people seek harmony with the universe and attempt to influence the forces of nature, life, and death through prayers, incantations, actions, and works of charity and sacrifice.

❖ **Secularism:** Indifference to or rejection of religion; worldly.

Symbols of some religions



➤ **Religions set standards** for how people should behave.

➤ **Religions prepare people for the unknown**, both in the present and in the afterlife, including rationalization of the unexplainable.

Religion and Geography

Geography of Religion:
The spatial study of religions and religious beliefs and practices including their:

- ✓ distribution on the earth
- ✓ source areas and paths of diffusion over time
- ✓ affect on the landscape
- ✓ associated images, sounds, rituals and food
- ✓ affect of interaction both within and outside the religion's sphere on people and areas who share and do not share the same beliefs.

3

Religion and Geography

Religions are studied by geographers to:

- ✓ Ascertain their origin on earth (**hearth**)
- ✓ Look for their interrelationships with the physical environment (**ecology, space, region**)
- ✓ Study their movement and distribution (**diffusion**)
- ✓ Analyze their affect on the landscape (**visual record, creation of place**)
- ✓ Document the relationships between religions and their adherents (**interaction**)

4

Religion and Geography

Geographers are not theologians. Our focus is on those elements of religions that are geographically significant.

Geographers:

- Recognize that religions are derived in part from people's observation and interaction with elements of the physical environment.
- Note that religions and their adherents, in turn, modify the landscape.
- Identify the processes by which a religion diffuses.
- Are aware that the diffusion may be in conflict with the movement, distribution and existence of other religions.

5

Religion and Geography

Using visual clues:

- Religions and religious practices are mapped.
- Sacred sites are identified and located.
- The religious organization of space is analyzed, including the "non-use" of space or the "no evidence" on the landscape.

***Example:** Nomadic people do not build permanent religious structures so their practice of a religion and impact on the landscape is different from that of sedentary people.*

6

Religion, Geography and Culture

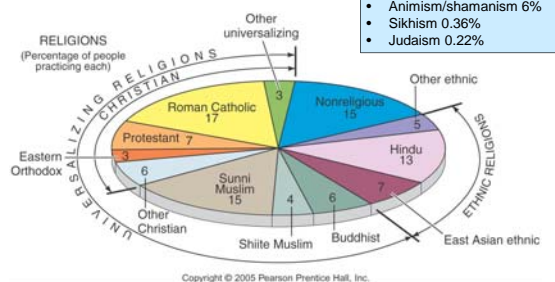
- ❖ **Religion is an integral part of any culture group.**
 - Religion regions overlap both ethnic and language regions.
 - **People usually have deep feelings about religion:**
 - ✓ Religious values are important in how people identify themselves and the ways they organize the landscape
 - ✓ The appeal of religions vary from geographically limited areas to worldwide.
 - ✓ While migrants typically learn the language of the new location, they usually retain their religion and recreate a landscape that may be similar to from where they came. **EXAMPLES?**
 - ✓ In spite of its deep roots, the essence of religion experiences stimulus diffusion and time-distance decay (details change over time; concepts remain).

Religion and Culture

Cultural interaction

- ❖ Joins adherents into a single moral community through a value system (unifier) that involves formal or informal worship and faith in the sacred and divine
 - May intimately affect all facets of a culture, including economy and politics.
 - May affect interaction between culture groups (divider).
 - Varies in its cultural role – dominating in some societies, unimportant in others or repressed in some.

Adherents Worldwide by Religious Group



Classifying Religions

Animism

- Belief system based on place with **sacredness of specific sites and inanimate objects**; considered the **first religious system**

Polytheism

- Worship of **many gods**, usually earth-based gods.

Monotheism

- Worship of **only one God**; a sky-centered god looking down upon world's people.

Orthodox

- Strands within a major religion that emphasize **purity of faith**.

Fundamentalism

- Movement to **return to the founding principles** of a religion, which can include literal interpretation of sacred texts, or the attempt to follow the ways of a religious founder as closely as possible.

Classifying Religions

Universalizing (proselytic) religions

- **Claim applicability to all persons and actively seek conversion** of all
 - Have precise places of origin, based on historic events in the life of a man.
 - Christianity, Islam, Buddhism

Ethnic religions

- **Ethnic centered**; identified with a particular ethnic group; clustered distribution; **does not seek converts**
 - Have unknown or unclear origins, not tied to single historical individuals.
 - Judaism, Hinduism, Shinto

Tribal (traditional) religions

- **Ethnic nature oriented** religions (indigenous, community) specific to small, preindustrial cultures
 - Animism, Shamanism

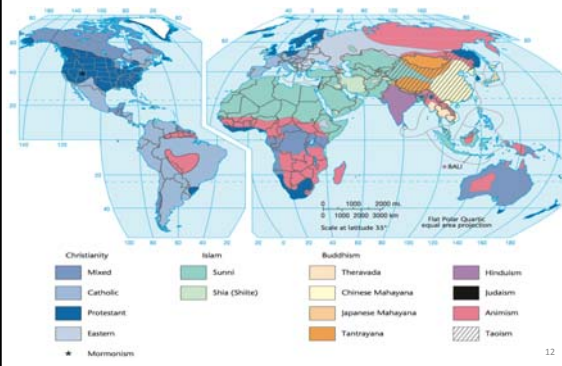
Syncretic religions

- Religions, or strands within religions, that **combine elements of two or more belief systems**.
 - Assimilation/accluration promote this
 - Sikhism, Rastafari, Santeria, Voodoo, Wicca

Secularism

- **Indifference to or rejection of religion and religious belief**

World Distribution of Major Religions



Religious Regions of the US

This generalized map of the religious regions of the United States shows concentrations of the major religions. Adapted with permission from: W. Zelensky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, rev. ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992, p. 96.

New England: Catholic
South: Baptist
Upper Midwest: Lutheran
Southwest: Spanish Catholic
West, Midlands: no dominant denomination

After Zelensky

Figure 7-28
 © John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved. Adapted with permission from W. Zelensky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, rev. ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992, p. 96.

Religious Adherence in the US by County

The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by Maps.com.

14

Secularism in Europe

Indifference to or rejection of organized religious affiliations and ideas

- Varies greatly from country to country and within countries.
- Antireligious ideologies can contribute to the decline of organized religions.
- Church membership figures **do not** accurately reflect active participation.

FIGURE 7.25 Secularized areas in Europe. These areas, in which Christianity has ceased to hold much importance, occur in a complicated pattern, in all of Europe, some 160-million people report no religious faith, amounting to 27 percent of the population. (Source: Jordan Bachman and Jordan, 2002: 104.)

THINKING GEOGRAPHICALLY What causal forces might be at work here?

15

Hearth and Diffusion

- ❖ **Religious hearth**
 A focused geographic area where important spiritual innovations are born and from which they spread.
- ❖ **Religious diffusion**
 The spread of spiritual innovations (religion) from the hearth to other areas (near and far) by spread from the core (expansion diffusion/contagious diffusion) or by the migration of adherents to distant lands (relocation diffusion).

16

Origin and Diffusion of the Five Major World Religions

- Semitic religious hearth**
Judaism, Christianity, Islam
- Indus-Ganges hearth**
Hinduism, Buddhism
- East Asian religious hearth**
Confucianism, Taoism

Legend:
 Christianity: Core area (orange), Spread (orange arrow)
 Islam: Core area (purple), Spread (purple arrow)
 Hinduism: Core area (red), Spread (red arrow)
 Buddhism: Core area (teal), Spread (teal arrow)
 Taoism: Core area (pink), Spread (pink arrow)

17

Diffusion of Universalizing Religions

Islam: 632 by conquest, 632 to 750 by conquest, 750 to 1500 by trade, 1500 to present by migration.

Buddhism: (Map showing diffusion from the Indus-Ganges hearth)

Christianity: (Map showing diffusion from the Semitic hearth)

18

Ethnic Religions

❖ **Most ethnic religions have limited, if any, diffusion.** Principles are usually based on characteristics of a particular (local) area.

- These religions lack missionaries.
- Diffusion and growth of universalizing religions, esp. Christianity and Islam, typically comes at the expense of ethnic religions.

ETHNIC GROUPS - LANGUAGES - RELIGIONS

19

Mingling of Ethnic and Universalizing Religions

Universalizing religions may supplant ethnic religions or mingle with them (assimilation/acculturation).

Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony, is mostly Roman Catholic, whereas **Namibia**, a former German colony, is heavily Lutheran.

This relationship can also be seen in former French and British colonies and is similar to language and legal systems in use.

Elsewhere, traditional African religious ideas and practices have been merged with Christianity.

20

Religious Ecology

❖ **Special relationship with nature:**
Belief that the earth and its elements were created especially for the use of its people.

Appeasing the forces of nature:

- Religion as adaptive strategy to prevent natural hazards and survive the elements
- The wrath of god comes in the form of severe natural events

Religious rituals and holidays are observed (scheduled) **when they coincide with astronomical (celestial) events:**

- Lunar cycles
- Equinoxes and solstices
- Appearance of constellations

SACRED NATURAL SITES
CONSERVING NATURE & CULTURE

21

Religious Ecology

Certain physical features become sacred places in world religions:

- **Rivers:** as the Ganges R., River Jordan
- **Mountains:** as Mt. Fuji, Denali, numerous volcanoes
- **Trees:** various "Trees of Life" as the baobab in South Africa >>
- **Forests:** Sacred forests of India
- **Rock formations:** as Shiprock (NM), Uluru (Australia)

Ganges River

TASARAHOLE

Mt. Fuji

Shiprock

<http://sacrednaturalsites.org/sites/map/>

22