

# Religion, Culture, and Communication FREE

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## Summary

Religion is an essential element of the human condition. Hundreds of studies have examined how religious beliefs mold an individual's sociology and psychology. In particular, research has explored how an individual's religion (religious beliefs, religious denomination, strength of religious devotion, etc.) is linked to their cultural beliefs and background. While some researchers have asserted that religion is an essential part of an individual's culture, other researchers have focused more on how religion is a culture in itself. The key difference is how researchers conceptualize and operationalize both of these terms. Moreover, the influence of communication in how individuals and communities understand, conceptualize, and pass on religious and cultural beliefs and practices is integral to understanding exactly what religion and culture are.

It is through exploring the relationships among religion, culture, and communication that we can best understand how they shape the world in which we live and have shaped the communication discipline itself. Furthermore, as we grapple with these relationships and terms, we can look to the future and realize that the study of religion, culture, and communication is vast and open to expansion. Researchers are beginning to explore the influence of mediation on religion and culture, how our globalized world affects the communication of religions and cultures, and how interreligious communication is misunderstood; and researchers are recognizing the need to extend studies into non-Christian religious cultures.

**Keywords:** religion, communication, culture, community, intercultural communication

**Subjects:** Communication Theory, Communication and Culture

## Intricate Relationships among Religion, Communication, and Culture

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Compiling an entry on the relationships among religion, culture, and communication is not an easy task. There is not one accepted definition for any of these three terms, and research suggests that the connections among these concepts are complex, to say the least. Thus, this article attempts to synthesize the various approaches to these three terms and integrate them. In such an endeavor, it is impossible to discuss all philosophical and paradigmatic debates or include all disciplines.

## Religion

It is difficult to define religion from one perspective and with one encompassing definition. “Religion” is often defined as the belief in or the worship of a god or gods. Geertz (1973) defined a religion as

(1) a system which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

(p. 90)

It is essential to recognize that religion cannot be understood apart from the world in which it takes place (Marx & Engels, 1975). To better understand how religion relates to and affects culture and communication, we should first explore key definitions, philosophies, and perspectives that have informed how we currently look at religion. In particular, the influences of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel are discussed to further understand the complexity of religion.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) saw religion as descriptive and evaluative. First, from a descriptive point of view, Marx believed that social and economic situations shape how we form and regard religions and what is religious. For Marx, the fact that people tend to turn to religion more when they are facing economic hardships or that the same religious denomination is practiced differently in different communities would seem perfectly logical. Second, Marx saw religion as a form of alienation (Marx & Engels, 1975). For Marx, the notion that the Catholic Church, for example, had the ability or right to excommunicate an individual, and thus essentially exclude them from the spiritual community, was a classic example of exploitation and domination. Such alienation and exploitation was later echoed in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who viewed organized religion as society and culture controlling man (Nietzsche, 1996).

Building on Marxist thinking, Weber (1864–1920) stressed the multicausality of religion. Weber (1963) emphasized three arguments regarding religion and society: (1) how a religion relates to a society is contingent (it varies); (2) the relationship between religion and society can only be examined in its cultural and historical context; and (3) the relationship between society and religion is slowly eroding. Weber’s arguments can be applied to Catholicism in Europe. Until the Protestant Reformation of the 15th and 16th centuries, Catholicism was the dominant religious ideology on the European continent. However, since the Reformation, Europe has increasingly become more Protestant and less Catholic. To fully grasp why many Europeans gravitate toward Protestantism and not Catholicism, we must consider the historical and cultural reasons: the Reformation, economics, immigration, politics, etc., that have all led to the majority of Europeans identifying as Protestant (Davie, 2008). Finally, even though the majority of Europeans identify as Protestant, secularism (separation of church and state) is becoming more prominent in Europe. In nations like France, laws are in place that officially separate the church and state, while in Northern Europe, church attendance is low, and many Europeans who identify as Protestant have very low religiosity (strength of religious devotion), focusing instead on being secularly religious individuals. From a Weberian point of view, the links among religion, history, and culture in Europe explain the decline of Catholicism, the rise of Protestantism, and now the rise of secularism.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) focused more on how religion performs a necessary function; it brings people and society together. Durkheim (1976) thus defined a religion as

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things which are set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

(p. 47)

From this perspective, religion and culture are inseparable, as beliefs and practices are uniquely cultural. For example, religious rituals (one type of practice) unite believers in a religion and separate nonbelievers. The act of communion, or the sharing of the Eucharist by partaking in consecrated bread and wine, is practiced by most Christian denominations. However, the frequency of communion differs extensively, and the ritual is practiced differently based on historical and theological differences among denominations.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) focused more on the fluidity and permanence of religion and religious life. Simmel (1950) believed that religious and cultural beliefs develop from one another. Moreover, he asserted that religiosity is an essential element to understand when examining religious institutions and religion. While individuals may claim to be part of a religious group, Simmel asserted that it was important to consider just how religious the individuals were. In much of Europe, religiosity is low: Germany 34%, Sweden 19%, Denmark 42%, the United Kingdom 30%, the Czech Republic 23%, and The Netherlands 26%, while religiosity is relatively higher in the United States (56%), which is now considered the most religious industrialized nation in the world (*Telegraph Online*, 2015). The decline of religiosity in parts of Europe and its rise in the U.S. is linked to various cultural, historical, and communicative developments that will be further discussed.

Combining Simmel's (1950) notion of religion with Geertz's (1973) concept of religion and a more basic definition (belief in or the worship of a god or gods through rituals), it is clear that the relationship between religion and culture is integral and symbiotic. As Clark and Hoover (1997) noted, "culture and religion are inseparable" and "religion is an important consideration in theories of culture and society" (p. 17).

Outside of the Western/Christian perception of religion, Buddhist scholars such as Nagarajuna present a relativist framework to understand concepts like time and causality. This framework is distinct from the more Western way of thinking, in that notions of present, past, and future are perceived to be chronologically distorted, and the relationship between cause and effect is paradoxical (Wimal, 2007). Nagarajuna's philosophy provides Buddhism with a relativist, non-solid dependent, and non-static understanding of reality (Kohl, 2007). Mulla Sadra's philosophy explored the metaphysical relationship between the created universe and its singular creator. In his philosophy, existence takes precedence over essence, and any existing object reflects a part of the creator. Therefore, every devoted person is obliged to know themselves as the first step to knowing the creator, which is the ultimate reason for existence. This Eastern perception of religion is similar to that of Nagarajuna and Buddhism, as they both include the paradoxical elements that are not easily explained by the rationality of Western philosophy. For example, the god, as Mulla Sadra defines it, is beyond definition, description, and delamination, yet it is absolutely simple and unique (Burrell, 2013).

## Culture

How researchers define and study culture varies extensively. For example, Hall (1989) defined culture as “a series of situational models for behavior and thought” (p. 13). Geertz (1973), building on the work of Kluckhohn (1949), defined culture in terms of 11 different aspects:

(1) the total way of life of a people; (2) the social legacy the individual acquires from his group; (3) a way of thinking, feeling, and believing; (4) an abstraction from behavior; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a storehouse of pooled learning; (7) a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems; (8) learned behavior; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; (10) a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men; (11) a precipitate of history.

(Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

Research on culture is divided between an essentialist camp and a constructivist camp. The essentialist view regards culture as a concrete and fixed system of symbols and meanings (Holiday, 1999). An essentialist approach is most prevalent in linguistic studies, in which national culture is closely linked to national language. Regarding culture as a fluid concept, constructionist views of culture focus on how it is performed and negotiated by individuals (Piller, 2011). In this sense, “culture” is a verb rather than a noun. In principle, a non-essentialist approach rejects predefined national cultures and uses culture as a tool to interpret social behavior in certain contexts.

Different approaches to culture influence significantly how it is incorporated into communication studies. Cultural communication views communication as a resource for individuals to produce and regulate culture (Philipsen, 2002). Constructivists tend to perceive culture as a part of the communication process (Applegate & Sypher, 1988). Cross-cultural communication typically uses culture as a national boundary. Hofstede (1991) is probably the most popular scholar in this line of research. Culture is thus treated as a theoretical construct to explain communication variations across cultures. This is also evident in intercultural communication studies, which focus on misunderstandings between individuals from different cultures.

## Religion, Community, and Culture

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There is an interplay among religion, community, and culture. Community is essentially formed by a group of people who share common activities or beliefs based on their mutual affect, loyalty, and personal concerns. Participation in religious institutions is one of the most dominant community engagements worldwide. Religious institutions are widely known for creating a sense of community by offering various material and social supports for individual followers. In addition, the role that religious organizations play in communal conflicts is also crucial. As religion deals with the ultimate matters of life, the differences among different religious beliefs are virtually impossible to settle. Although a direct causal relationship between religion and violence is not well supported, religion is, nevertheless, commonly accepted as a potential escalating factor in conflicts. Currently, religious conflicts are on the rise, and they are typically more violent, long-lasting, and difficult to resolve. In such cases, local religious organizations,

places facilitating collective actions in the community, are extremely vital, as they can either preach peace or stir up hatred and violence. The peace impact of local religious institutions has been largely witnessed in India and Indonesia where conflicts are solved at the local level before developing into communal violence (De Juan, Pierskalla, & Vüllers, 2015).

While religion affects cultures (Beckford & Demerath, 2007), it itself is also affected by culture, as religion is an essential layer of culture. For example, the growth of individualism in the latter half of the 20th century has been coincident with the decline in the authority of Judeo-Christian institutions and the emergence of “parachurches” and more personal forms of prayer (Hoover & Lundby, 1997). However, this decline in the authority of the religious institutions in modernized society has not reduced the important role of religion and spirituality as one of the main sources of calm when facing painful experiences such as death, suffering, and loss.

When cultural specifications, such as individualism and collectivism, have been attributed to religion, the proposed definitions and functions of religion overlap with definitions of culture. For example, researchers often combine religious identification (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, etc.) with cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1991) like individualism/collectivism to understand and compare cultural differences. Such combinations for comparison and analytical purposes demonstrate how religion and religious identification in particular are often relegated to a micro-level variable, when in fact the true relationship between an individual’s religion and culture is inseparable.

## **Religion as Part of Culture in Communication Studies**

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Religion as a part of culture has been linked to numerous communication traits and behaviors. Specifically, religion has been linked with media use and preferences (e.g., Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996), health/medical decisions and communication about health-related issues (Croucher & Harris, 2012), interpersonal communication (e.g., Croucher, Faulkner, Oommen, & Long, 2012b), organizational behaviors (e.g., Garner & Wargo, 2009), and intercultural communication traits and behaviors (e.g., Croucher, Braziunaite, & Oommen, 2012a). In media and religion scholarship, researchers have shown how religion as a cultural variable has powerful effects on media use, preferences, and gratifications. The research linking media and religion is vast (Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996). This body of research has shown how “religious worldviews are created and sustained in ongoing social processes in which information is shared” (Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996, pp. 7–8). For example, religious Christians are more likely to read newspapers, while religious individuals are less likely to have a favorable opinion of the internet (Croucher & Harris, 2012), and religious individuals (who typically attend religious services and are thus integrated into a religious community) are more likely to read media produced by the religious community (Davie, 2008).

Research into health/medical decisions and communication about health-related issues is also robust. Research shows how religion, specifically religiosity, promotes healthier living and better decision-making regarding health and wellbeing (Harris & Worley, 2012). For example, a religious (or spiritual) approach to cancer treatment can be more effective than a secular approach (Croucher & Harris, 2012), religious attendance promotes healthier living, and people with HIV/AIDS often turn to religion for comfort as well. These studies suggest the significance of religion in health communication and in our health.

Research specifically examining the links between religion and interpersonal communication is not as vast as the research into media, health, and religion. However, this slowly growing body of research has explored areas such as rituals, self-disclosure (Croucher et al., 2012b), and family dynamics (Davie, 2008), to name a few.

The role of religion in organizations is well studied. Overall, researchers have shown how religious identification and religiosity influence an individual's organizational behavior. For example, research has shown that an individual's religious identification affects levels of organizational dissent (Croucher et al., 2012a). Garner and Wargo (2009) further showed that organizational dissent functions differently in churches than in nonreligious organizations. Kennedy and Lawton (1998) explored the relationships between religious beliefs and perceptions about business/corporate ethics and found that individuals with stronger religious beliefs have stricter ethical beliefs.

Researchers are increasingly looking at the relationships between religion and intercultural communication. Researchers have explored how religion affects numerous communication traits and behaviors and have shown how religious communities perceive and enact religious beliefs. Antony (2010), for example, analyzed the bindi in India and how the interplay between religion and culture affects people's acceptance of it. Karniel and Lavie-Dinur (2011) showed how religion and culture influence how Palestinian Arabs are represented on Israeli television. Collectively, the intercultural work examining religion demonstrates the increasing importance of the intersection between religion and culture in communication studies.

Collectively, communication studies discourse about religion has focused on how religion is an integral part of an individual's culture. Croucher et al. (2016), in a content analysis of communication journal coverage of religion and spirituality from 2002 to 2012, argued that the discourse largely focuses on religion as a cultural variable by identifying religious groups as variables for comparative analysis, exploring "religious" or "spiritual" as adjectives to describe entities (religious organizations), and analyzing the relationships between religious groups in different contexts. Croucher and Harris (2012) asserted that the discourse about religion, culture, and communication is still in its infancy, though it continues to grow at a steady pace.

## **Future Lines of Inquiry**

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Research into the links among religion, culture, and communication has shown the vast complexities of these terms. With this in mind, there are various directions for future research/exploration that researchers could take to expand and benefit our practical understanding of these concepts and how they relate to one another. Work should continue to define these terms with a particular emphasis on mediation, closely consider these terms in a global context, focus on how intergroup dynamics influence this relationship, and expand research into non-Christian religious cultures.

Additional definitional work still needs to be done to clarify exactly what is meant by "religion," "culture," and "communication." Our understanding of these terms and relationships can be further enhanced by analyzing how forms of mass communication mediate each other. Martin-Barbero (1993) asserted that there should be a shift from media to mediations as multiple opposing forces meet in communication. He defined mediation as "the articulations between

communication practices and social movements and the articulation of different tempos of development with the plurality of cultural matrices” (p. 187). Religions have relied on mediations through various media to communicate their messages (oral stories, print media, radio, television, internet, etc.). These media share religious messages, shape the messages and religious communities, and are constantly changing. What we find is that, as media sophistication develops, a culture’s understandings of mediated messages changes (Martin-Barbero, 1993). Thus, the very meanings of religion, culture, and communication are transitioning as societies morph into more digitally mediated societies. Research should continue to explore the effects of digital mediation on our conceptualizations of religion, culture, and communication.

Closely linked to mediation is the need to continue extending our focus on the influence of globalization on religion, culture, and communication. It is essential to study the relationships among culture, religion, and communication in the context of globalization. In addition to trading goods and services, people are increasingly sharing ideas, values, and beliefs in the modern world. Thus, globalization not only leads to technological and socioeconomic changes, but also shapes individuals’ ways of communicating and their perceptions and beliefs about religion and culture. While religion represents an old way of life, globalization challenges traditional meaning systems and is often perceived as a threat to religion. For instance, Marx and Weber both asserted that modernization was incompatible with tradition. But, in contrast, globalization could facilitate religious freedom by spreading the idea of freedom worldwide. Thus, future work needs to consider the influence of globalization to fully grasp the interrelationships among religion, culture, and communication in the world.

A review of the present definitions of religion in communication research reveals that communication scholars approach religion as a holistic, total, and unique institution or notion, studied from the viewpoint of different communication fields such as health, intercultural, interpersonal, organizational communication, and so on. However, this approach to communication undermines the function of a religion as a culture and also does not consider the possible differences between religious cultures. For example, religious cultures differ in their levels of individualism and collectivism. There are also differences in how religious cultures interact to compete for more followers and territory (Klock, Novoa, & Mogaddam, 2010). Thus, localization is one area of further research for religion communication studies. This line of study best fits in the domain of intergroup communication. Such an approach will provide researchers with the opportunity to think about the roles that interreligious communication can play in areas such as peacemaking processes (Klock et al., 2010).

Academic discourse about religion has focused largely on Christian denominations. In a content analysis of communication journal discourse on religion and spirituality, Croucher et al. (2016) found that the terms “Christian” or “Christianity” appeared in 9.56% of all articles, and combined with other Christian denominations (Catholicism, Evangelism, Baptist, Protestantism, and Mormonism, for example), appeared in 18.41% of all articles. Other religious cultures (denominations) made up a relatively small part of the overall academic discourse: Islam appeared in 6.8%, Judaism in 4.27%, and Hinduism in only 0.96%. Despite the presence of various faiths in the data, the dominance of Christianity and its various denominations is incontestable. Having religions unevenly represented in the academic discourse is problematic. This highly unbalanced representation presents a biased picture of religious practices. It also represents one faith as being the dominant faith and others as being minority religions in all contexts.

Ultimately, the present overview, with its focus on religion, culture, and communication points to the undeniable connections among these concepts. Religion and culture are essential elements of humanity, and it is through communication, that these elements of humanity are mediated. Whether exploring these terms in health, interpersonal, intercultural, intergroup, mass, or other communication contexts, it is evident that understanding the intersection(s) among religion, culture, and communication offers vast opportunities for researchers and practitioners.

## Further Reading

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