

On Religion

On Religion

An introduction to the study
of religions

J.P. Janssen

Author: J.P. Janssen
Cover design: J.P. Janssen
ISBN: 9789465203904
© 2025 J.P. Janssen
Edited via Brave New Books

Contents

PREFACE	8
1 WHAT IS RELIGION?	11
1.1 What is religion?	11
1.2 Of what consists religion?	14
1.2.1 The elements of religion	15
1.3 Religion is universal and pluriform.....	23
1.4 Religion has a history, religions have a history	24
1.5 Theology.....	27
1.6 The dynamics of religion	28
1.7 The description of religion	32
2 LOST AND FOUND	34
2.1 The investigation of religion.....	34
2.1.1 Theological study of religion: The Phenomenology of Religion	34
2.1.2 Jensen's normative cognition	36
2.1.3 Martin's critical approach	38
2.1.4 Other cultural approaches	41
2.2 Social scientific research into religion	41
2.2.1 Sociology of religion	41
2.2.1.1 Max Weber, ethics and capital	42
2.2.1.2 Weber's first claim.....	44
2.2.1.3 Weber's second claim.....	46
2.2.1.4 Weber's followers.....	47
2.2.2 Cultural anthropology	48
2.2.3 Psychology of religion	49
2.2.3.1 Modern psychology of religion	50
2.3 Defining religion	53
2.4 In conclusion	53
3 HOW DOES RELIGION WORK?	57
3.1 Religion is a difficult object to study	57
3.2 Cultural surface structure of religion	62
3.3 Three perspectives	64
3.3.1 The individual perspective	64

3.3.1.1	Regression?	67
3.3.1.2	Religious norms and values	69
3.3.1.3	Symptoms of pathology?	71
3.3.2	The social perspective.....	73
3.3.2.1	The relation of the individual and the religious leader.....	73
3.3.2.2	The religious community as a unit.....	77
3.3.2.3	The religious community as a part of society	81
3.3.2.4	Religious communities laying claims	82
3.3.2.5	The power of a religious community	84
3.3.3	The cultural perspective	86
3.3.3.1	Religion as culture	88
3.4	The religious pattern provides structure	90
3.5	Attachment to the religious pattern by identification	92
3.6	When does a person resort to religion?	95
3.7	In summary	96
4	HOW IS RELIGION FORMED?	97
4.1	The formation of religion	97
4.2	How does culture incorporate social processes?	99
4.2.1	The formation of representations	101
4.2.2	The formation of prayer and sacrifice	105
4.2.3	The formation of other ritual actions	107
4.2.4	The formation of avoidances	108
4.2.5	The formation of norms and values.....	110
4.2.6	Para-religious behavior.....	110
4.3	Representations and behavior are as closely aligned as possible.....	111
4.4	The role of culture in religion.....	112
4.5	Religious culture: a coin with two sides	115
4.6	Religions follow society.....	118
4.7	In summary	118
5	EXPLAINING RELIGION	120
5.1	Religion and research.....	120
5.2	Purpose of the research	120
5.3	Research object: religious facts	123
5.4	The research of religious facts	125
5.5	Identifying religious facts: the Cs priority.....	129

5.6	Interpreting religious facts: the meaning trap	132
5.7	Explaining religious facts: the Ss priority.....	136
5.7.1	An example of a fully developed explanation.....	141
5.8	Verifying and falsifying	146
5.9	In summary.....	147
AFTERWORD.....		149
GLOSSARY.....		151
BIBLIOGRAFY		154

PREFACE

This is a book about religions. Not about gods, but about religions. About people who pray, sacrifice, fast, go to holy places, take part in processions, go on pilgrimages, visit priests, holy men and ascetics and try to convert others.

Why a book about religion? We all know very well what religion is, don't we? Religion is a subject that has seen very little agreement during its long existence. Believers, busy with their(own) belief, usually feel that their religion is true, good and beneficial for everybody. Often they see their religion as the basis of their whole culture and the origin of all ethics. Non-believers on the other hand, feel that religion has nothing more to offer than fairy tales, quarrels and war, and are therefore usually not very interested in the subject. The result is that we do not know much about religion. Even science doesn't have a clear answer to the question what religion is of what its purpose is. Most of what we think we know appears to be based on prejudice and preconceived ideas. Religion is in fact the great unknown element of human culture.

Yet this unknown element determines the lives of many people. Sometimes for the good, and sometimes for the worse. In recent years the massive abuse of children in the Roman Catholic church and other religious communities has come to light. At this moment in Europe the greatest threat to our safety is religious terrorism. Fundamentalism is on the rise, not just in Islam, but also in other religions. Religion is gaining influence and is flooding the news. This situation makes religion relevant for everybody, whether you believe or not.

The purpose of this text is to show what religion is, what it consists of and how it works. We'll formulate in the first chapter a general definition of religion. Then we'll give a general description based on the history of religions. Subsequently there's a chapter critically describing the existing research and the most important theories about religion. In the third chapter, we'll formulate our own theory with the help of

existing ones. The fourth chapter explains how religion, as a cultural phenomenon is formed. Finally, in the fifth chapter we'll relate how religious events can be explained.

This book is written as an introduction to the research of religion from a scientific, that is non believing, point of view. It is meant for - to paraphrase Schleiermacher (Schleiermacher 1799) - educated people who do not despise religion. For people who realize that religion as a universal human cultural expression was, is, and will always be an active factor in the psychological social and cultural life of mankind. We are aware that this position is bound to generate some resistance. If not from the believers, than from the non-believers. That is part and parcel of the research of religion. We regret this, because we do not want to hurt any bodies feelings, but we console ourselves with the fact that in this book we can explain why this is the case.

Religion is part of human culture but it also has psychological and social aspects. We'll treat the theoretical and methodical problems this brings along. We realize that religion is a deeply human affair, sometimes a little too human. And that the study of religion can help us in dealing with the good sides, as well as the bad sides.

This practical approach is applicable in a wide variety of situations. From the daily interaction with other people, the interpreting of a message in the tv news, the paper, the internet or social media, to the use in many jobs and schools. One can think of specialists like theologians, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, historians, lawyers and therapists, but also of more general fields like social work, care homes and judicial aid. Politicians and administrators can also benefit from it. Theoretically, cultural anthropologists can benefit from it. Especially for philosophers this text can be interesting. Is not the shortest way to philosophy the understanding of religion? Basically this book has become an exercise in thinking about religions. Join us in thinking and discovering what religion is, what it is made of and how it works.

1 WHAT IS RELIGION?

1.1 What is religion?¹

Anyone who wants to learn something about religion will have to know what we understand by the term 'religion'. Everyone has some idea of what religion is, but unfortunately that is rarely an adequate idea. In general, people identify the religion(s) that they know from their own experience with the phenomenon of religion in general. But religion is a very multifaceted phenomenon and it is not easy to give a good definition or description of it. In addition, there are many misunderstandings about religion.

What is religion? Countless scientists have wondered about it. Many within various sciences have tried to get a grip on the phenomenon by defining it. However, there is still no generally accepted definition of religion.

Phenomenology of Religion can provide both a definition and a description. It is a scientific discipline within theology, which is now over a century old and which examines the various religions of the world in the present and the past. We base ourselves here in particular on the work of the Dutchman Th. P. van Baaren (1912-1989), who was professor of Phenomenology of Religion at the University of Groningen in Holland from 1952 to 1980. During his career, Van Baaren provided both an extensive description and a number of definitions, which in our opinion are among the best in the field. On the basis of several of his definitions, we'll formulate a working definition.

A first, clear characteristic of religion is formed by the gods. People claim that gods exist and that they have something to do with those gods. One can therefore describe religion with Van Baaren in his introduction to religious science *Doolhof der goden* as:

¹ Where it says 'he', 'she' can also be read.

'the conviction of man that divine beings exist and that there is a relationship between people and gods' (Van Baaren 1960a: 218).

Religion is therefore: belief in gods. But religion is more than that. The second observable characteristic of religion is that people partly at-tune their behavior to those divine beings. They do certain things, such as praying and performing rituals, and they leave certain things undone, for example they do not eat certain things. The definition can therefore be expanded with Van Baaren and Leertouwer in a reprint of the aforementioned introduction:

'..that people hold ideas about supernatural beings as part of their cultural heritage and that on that basis they perform certain actions, or refrain from doing so, based on norms and values associated with the belief in those beings' (Van Baaren and Leertouwer 1980: 3).

In order to be religious, you must therefore have ideas about gods and you must perform or refrain from certain actions. It should be noted that the ideas can be material, such as stone or wooden statues of gods or sanctuaries, but also intangible, such as stories, myths and prohibitions. Van Baaren and Leertouwer point out that the ideas about gods are part of human culture. Religion is therefore part of human culture and can in that respect be compared to language. That is why Van Baaren pointed out in 1973 that, in order to be able to speak of religion, there must always be a group of people who share a minimum of institutionalization and ritual forms (Van Baaren 1973: 40). One person alone cannot have a religion. Not to be confused with the fact that the experience of religion can be a highly individual matter.

A third point is the normativity of religion, the values and standards that religion carries within itself. The behaviors that people show or do not show are related to those values and standards. The authors do not say what those values and standards exactly entail. Are they ethical standards? Or are they customs and traditions? Or both? Van Baaren has not fully explicated this normativity. He does suggest in the aforementioned introduction that this normativity is sometimes ethical in nature and sometimes 'cultic' (Van Baaren and Leertouwer 1980, 130/131). But what that 'cultic' means is not clear. Other authors (see continuation) do not provide any clarity on this either. In his final definition, Van Baaren describes religion as:

'a complex

- of ideas,

- of values from which rules of conduct arise and

- of ritual prescriptions which together generally form a more or less coherent system, relating to man and the world and in which an important function is attributed to one or more beings and/or powers, more or less different from people and usually of a higher order of existence, to which reference is made in explanations concerning the existence and origin of man and the world and in ideas concerning life after death where this belief exists. The belief in these beings and/or powers exerts influence on those who believe in them' (Van Baaren 1986: 12).

This definition does not make things any clearer with regard to the normativity of religion. However, it does point out the coherence of the representations and behaviors; it is a complex. We conclude that religion is part of human culture, that religion consists of representations and behaviors shared by a community in connection with divine beings, that these representations and behaviors are coherent and that they are normative (but what this normativity entails is – as mentioned – not entirely clear). Like almost all other researchers, Van Baaren leaves out one element of religion in his definition. That is at least remarkable, because it is an element that is actually always present, namely: a religious leader. A second omission is that, like in most definitions of religion, the psychological and social aspects are missing. There is for example nothing about the relation of the religious community with the surrounding society. We'll come back to these aspects later. We therefore propose as a provisional working definition of religion:

Religion is a cultural-psycho-social complex of normative representations and behaviors concerning gods, of a community with a leader, in relation to the surrounding society.

This is what we understand by religion and what we will start from in our analysis. Someone who, as a member of a religious community, holds religious beliefs and also performs religious behavior - such as praying - is therefore considered a religious person (a believer). But someone who believes that there is 'something', but otherwise does nothing about it is not a believer. After all, he only has a (rudimentary) religious belief, no religious behavior and is not connected to a religious community with a leader. But someone who is a member of a sect and thinks that the gods are going to punish people for their sins

by letting the world end and who shares religious behavior with the other members of that sect, is a religious person. After all, he has religious beliefs and religious behavior and he is connected to a religious community with a leader. Someone who follows astrology in magazines and only believes that the position of the stars at the moment of his birth determines his fate is also not religious. He is not a member of a religious community and does not perform religious acts. This also applies to people who call themselves 'spiritual' but do not perform any acts in that respect and are not a members of any community. This demarcation of the concept of religion, which will be further specified below by explaining the terms 'religious representation', 'religious behavior', 'religious community' and 'religious leader' used here, has perhaps a grey area, but is sufficient for our purposes.

1.2 Of what consists religion?

In the previous paragraph religion was defined. Another, supplementary method to indicate what religion is, consists of listing and describing the components of the phenomenon. What does and does not belong to religion? The Dutchman Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848-1920) is the founder of the study of religion. Since he wrote the *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (Chantepie de la Saussaye 1887), general introductions to the subject, in addition to, for example, a historical or comparative section, provide a list of the elements that, according to the author, together form religion. This list is referred to as the 'phenomenological ordering of elements of religion'. An attempt is made to indicate which elements are present in all religions and must therefore be essential to the phenomenon. Van der Leeuw gave such an arrangement in his *Phänomenologie der Religion* (Van der Leeuw 1933/56) and in his *Inleiding tot de fenomenologie van den religie* (Van der Leeuw 1948). Bleeker gave his arrangement in *Grondlijnen eener phaenomenologie van den religie* (Bleeker 1943) and Obbink gave his in *De religie in zijn verschijningsvormen* (Obbink 1947). Even more recent works cannot avoid such an enumeration. (see Hoens, Kamstra and Mulder 1985: 74 ff. and Waardenburg 1990: 131 -143).

The phenomenological ordering of elements is the result of the comparative method, which has proven to be very fruitful for religious studies. These lists of elements of religion by different scholars do not differ much from each other. The following is based on the summary of elements of religion as Van Baaren developed them during his

career.² These elements of religion are parts of the phenomenon; you can also recognize religion by it. When people worship gods or when people make sacrifices or go through an initiation ritual, then the other elements of religion are often not far away and you know that you are dealing with religion. Most religions have all these elements of religion, but not all elements are equally strongly represented in all religions. For example, a holy book is lacking in the religions of scriptless peoples. And the founder of some religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, is known. Of other religions, such as Hinduism and Judaism, he is not known.

Here we briefly discuss some of these elements: the contrast between sacred and profane, miracles, gods, souls, myths, rituals, sacred places, sacred times, the religious community, the religious leader, theocracy, sacred book, sacred language and ritual prohibitions.

1.2.1 The elements of religion

The life of the religious person takes place in the tension between **sacred and profane**. The profane world is the ordinary world known to everyone. The world of the sacred is the world of the gods. Because the sacred world is in principle invisible, it is experienced in the visible world and shows itself in the otherness of certain things, in the breaking of regularities and laws of nature, such as miraculous healings, apparitions and levitation, which are experienced as miracles. Rudolf Otto describes the sacred as a world separated from the profane world that is completely different from the ordinary world. The sacred is a category in itself, it is neither ethical nor rational. It is frightening but it also attracts (Otto 1917). The tension between sacred and profane is the tension between ritual purity and impurity, between a life in which man obeys the laws of the gods and the world of sin. In the contact between people and gods, it is always the gods who take the initiative. This is experienced by man as a **miracle**. It is the gods who make themselves known to man in a revelation. (see among others Van Baaren and Leertouwer 1980: 12; idem 2002; 19)

The most important element of religion is undoubtedly formed by **the gods**, who are already known from the definition of religion. The religions of the world know countless types of divine beings; from the almighty, sole ruler, worshipped by millions gods with their own name and known from Christianity, Islam and Judaism to very local, unclear spirits; from impersonal powers to the well-known ancestor figures

² Specifically Van Baaren's publications from 1951 till 1978, see bibliografy.

and the gods in animal form. There are a number of identifiable types of gods, for example creator gods, father gods, mother goddesses, trickster gods, divine enemies, originally mortal heroes who eventually gain divine status, devils and evil spirits, and gods who have only one specific function.

There is a relationship between the types of gods and the society that worships them. For example, peoples who mainly live from hunting often know a god who created the world, who made the most important inventions for people and who thus created the current order. This god often has an animal form (culture hero).

One can also worship gods in animal form if one assumes that there is a special relationship between a certain animal species and a certain group of people, for example a clan (totemism). Among peoples that mainly live from primitive agriculture, a type of god is common that, like the culture hero, created the world and made the most important inventions for people and thus created the current order. But these gods accomplished this by being killed in prehistoric times (so-called demagods). Among these peoples, the idea lives that by killing one creates life.

In the gods of a city-state, such as ancient Rome, the relationship between the gods and the city-state is strongly present. These gods must bless the inhabitants of the city-state with prosperity, fertility and health and protect them.

In ancestor worship, too, there is a relationship between the gods that one worships and the group to which one belongs, because of the family relationship.

Sometimes a religion knows only one god (monotheism), but in most religions there are multiple gods (polytheism).

All gods are depicted in one way or another by the believers, this can be with the help of a statue made of wood, bronze, bone or stone or by a drawn or painted image or in a written or calligraphic form. (for an anthology see: Sierksma 1959).

Within himself, the religious person distinguishes one or more **souls**. In many religions, after death, man can continue to live in one or another way in that holy world with his gods in one (of these) soul(s). This can be in heaven or hell with a reckoning of the good and bad deeds of man during his life, but that is not necessary.

Man obtains knowledge about the gods and their world from the so-called myths that were revealed to people in prehistoric times. These myths tell how the world was created by certain gods and how the

gods and people used to relate to each other; what happened in pre-historic times forms the basis of the order in the present.

Man maintains contact with his gods in the **rituals**³ he performs for the gods. He worships the gods, praises and glorifies them, and asks the gods to help him in all possible areas of his life. This contact of man with the world of the gods during the rituals can be quiet and meditative, but also ecstatic and possessed, often with the aid of alcohol or drugs. There are many types of rituals. The best known are initiation rituals, transition rituals, purification rituals, sacraments, procession, pilgrimage and cult rituals. Cult rituals are rituals that recur regularly such as daily, weekly and annually. A special ritual is exorcism, in which the religious leader drives a spirit or devil out of a believer.

Some rituals are short and performed by just one person, others last a long time, sometimes many days, and many believers participate. In concrete terms, this often means that during the rituals the idols are given all kinds of treatments; they are washed and dressed, incense is burned for them, they are given food and drink, and they are carried around or put on a cart and taken along in a procession. The most important ritual is prayer. (For an extensive study, see: Heiler, 1919). Prayer is a ritual in itself, but is almost always part of other, larger rituals. In prayer, people ask the gods to help and support them. They ask for favors and thank them for their blessings. People often ask for fertility of the fields, wealth, abundance of children, healing from illness, etc. What people try to obtain from the gods is not always socially neutral; sometimes what one believer asks for is in conflict with the interests of another. Sometimes even harming or destroying another human being or group of people is what man tries to achieve through his prayers and other rituals.

Another very important ritual is the sacrifice, which is known all over the world. In the sacrifice, man 'gives' something to his gods. Sometimes the gift is some drink or incense, a fruit or some food, but often the gift is a living being and the giving is done by killing the animal (for an extensive treatment of the sacrifice, see Van Baaren 1978).

Prayer is part of the sacrifice. But sacrifice in turn can also part of an other, larger rituals.

Initiation rituals are widespread. They are rituals for initiation into a religious community. Well-known are of course Christian baptism, the

³ It is advisable to make a distinction between the words 'ritual' and 'ceremony'. A ritual is an act in which gods are involved, a ceremony is only a patterned act. See also the glossary at the back.