1.1 Defining and classifying religion

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____ **Total: 30 marks**

KEY WORDS definition of religion • substantive definition • functional definition • sacred • classification

Objective

Prepare for the new course (first assessed 2029) by learning why **defining religion** is hard: compare **substantive** and **functional** definitions, test them on hard cases, and see how **classification** has consequences.

You must be able to:

- compare Tylor's, Durkheim's and Geertz's definitions of religion
- distinguish substantive and functional definitions
- test a definition against hard cases
- explain why classification as "religion" has real consequences
- state a working definition and its limits

1 Key knowledge and worked examples

■ Three classic definitions

scholar	definition (short)	type
Edward Tylor (1871)	"belief in spiritual beings"	**substantive**: what religion *is*
Émile Durkheim (1912)	a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to **sacred** things, which unite people into one moral community	mixed: the sacred, and what religion *does* (unites)
Clifford Geertz (1966)	a **system of symbols** that creates powerful, long-lasting moods and motivations by forming ideas of a general order of existence	**functional** / symbolic

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Substantive definitions name a content (gods, spirits, the sacred). Problem: some Buddhists do not focus on a creator God. **Functional** definitions name what religion does (gives meaning, unites a group). Problem: football fandom or nationalism may then count as religion.

■ Why classification matters

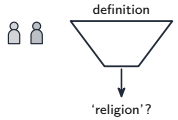
Whether a group counts as a "religion" can decide tax status, legal protection, school teaching and public respect. Governments, courts and scholars classify differently.

Worked test. *A weekly meeting with readings, a shared meal and care for the sick; no god is mentioned.* Tylor: not a religion (no spiritual beings). Durkheim: possibly, if the readings are treated as sacred and the group is a moral community. Geertz: possibly, if its symbols create a lasting sense of order and meaning.

2 Practice

2.1 Distinguish a **substantive** from a **functional** definition of religion. [2]

2.2 Apply Tylor's definition to Theravada Buddhism, and explain **one** problem the result shows. [3]

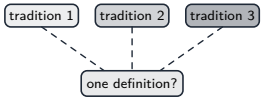


2.3 Explain why a **functional** definition may include too much, with **two** examples. [4]

2.4 Give **two** real consequences of classifying a group as a "religion", and explain who decides. [6]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 *(Preparation essay.)* "No single definition of religion can work for all traditions." Discuss, with reference to **three** traditions. [15]



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Solutions

Marking: **M1** a correct method, **A1** the correct answer, **B1** an independent mark.

Each answer shows the steps, then the **result**.

2.1

substantive: defines religion by its content, e.g. belief in spiritual beings; functional: defines religion by what it does, e.g. gives meaning or unites a community

2.2

Theravada Buddhism does not centre on a creator God; but it does include beliefs in rebirth and in spirit beings in many places, so the result is unclear; problem: a definition built on one kind of religion (belief in beings) may exclude or misdescribe others

2.3

functional definitions count anything that does what religion does; example 1, e.g. football fandom: rituals, symbols, a community, intense feeling; example 2, e.g. nationalism: sacred flags, anthems, ceremonies; so the definition loses what makes religion distinctive

2.4

consequence 1 explained, e.g. legal protection of religious freedom; consequence 2 explained, e.g. tax status, or a place in school teaching, or public respect; who decides: governments, courts or registration bodies, scholars and the group itself, often with different criteria; so classification involves power

3.1

Mark with the markbands: [13-15] clearly focused on the question, accurate knowledge of at least three traditions, the four concepts applied, different views and sources evaluated, well-developed critical analysis, different perspectives evaluated, a reasoned conclusion; [10-12] focused, mostly accurate knowledge, analysis with some evaluation; [7-9] some focus, relevant knowledge, mostly narrative or description with limited analysis; [4-6] little focus, limited knowledge, mostly narrative; [1-3] little understanding of the question. Points that may be included: explains the claim and the purpose of definitions; substantive definitions and their limits (Tylor); functional definitions and their limits (Geertz); Durkheim's sacred and community; tradition 1 tested in detail; tradition 2 tested in detail; tradition 3 tested in detail; the alternative of "family resemblance" or working definitions; classification and power; a reasoned conclusion

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