1.1 Defining and classifying religion

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

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

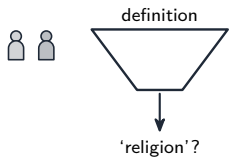
Whether a group counts as a "religion" can decide tax status, legal protection, school teaching and public respect. Governments, courts and scholars classify differently.

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]



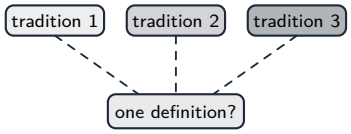
2.3 Explain why a **functional** definition may include too much, with **two** examples. [4]

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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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