

CHIRP Lab: What Is Religion? - Video Transcript

Hello my Name is David Turnbloom, and I am a Professor of Theology at the University of Portland. And I am also a member of the CHIRP lab; CHIRP stands for Collaborate Humanities Investigating Religion and Power. We are an interdisciplinary working group that studies the intersection of Power and Religion. And this video is a part of a series in which we address the key concepts that are important to our work.

This video is going to address the question: What is Religion? Usually when we think of religions, some organized religions pop into our head like Islam, or Christianity, or Judaism. And some practices and beliefs that are common amongst those religions might also come up for us. Theism, the belief in a God, or concepts of rituals, like worship. And those are certainly religion, but what we at the CHIRP lab want to do is to broaden that definition. In order to do that, we are going to follow the work of the professor of Sociology and Anthropology named Meredith McGuire.

Specifically we want to highly recommend her book, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. This book was published in 2008 and in it, Dr. McGuire encourages us to go broader with what we think of, when we think of religion. and she challenges us with this particular question: She says, " what might we discover if instead of looking at affiliation or organizational participation we focused first on individuals, the experiences they consider most important, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expression? What if we think of religion, at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy-even contradictory-amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important?" She's encouraging us to go, kind of go beyond that narrow definition of religion that would say 'well Christians believe this and they do this. and that is what a religion is. And everything else that a person does is secular'. McGuire says well, no, let's ask people: What practices and beliefs are most important to you? What practices and beliefs give your life meaning and purpose? That, is where we are really going to discover people's religions. and following that thought process

Professor Marianne Moyaert who is a professor of Religion and Theology also has a broader definition. She says, "Religious traditions 'provide a symbolic framework through which the transcendent is experienced. This framework is analogous to a language (in the broad meaning of the word) or culture that gives shape to experience and knowledge." The phrase I want us to pay attention to here is, 'symbolic framework'. All of us, in our everyday lives are constantly surrounded by symbols and are using symbols. For instance, the clothing that we choose to wear is a type of symbol that communicates something, and gives expression, self-expression to others. We also use symbols like food as a way of cultivating ourselves in relationships. We use things like Architecture. All of this is the symbolic framework that makes up our culture and our everyday life. and it has huge implications. So these religious, symbolic frameworks do two things, First, they mediate.

Religions mediate an experience of transcendence. And what we mean by that is there are things in life, the invisible, the ineffable, the things that are so difficult for us to give expression to but yet, are at the center of who we are. We've got to find a way to experience that transcendence. So I will give you a concrete example of this: My wife doesn't know what it feels like to love her. My love for her is something she does not have access to, she cannot read my mind. And so I need to give her an experience of that love through symbols. I need to hug her. I need to write her letters. I need to cook her meals. I need to celebrate our anniversary. Those are all the symbolic frameworks that mediate my love to her, and then she does the same in return. And our lives are built up with this symbolic framework that allows us to experience the transcendence of being in love. Religions, the kind of organized religions, do something similar.

They will use sacred scriptures, or certain rituals, certain prayers as a way of mediating an experience of the transcendence that some might call God. So, religions use this symbolic framework as mediation but they also use that symbolic framework to cultivate. Religions cultivate our identities through the use of symbols. So simultaneously, why that symbolic framework is allowing us to experience the transcendent, that symbolic framework is also cultivating that is to say, caring for and maintaining our identity. All those things I described with my marriage, that is a way of my wife and I building our identity as husband and wife.

The way that somebody might garden, diligently, every single day in their backyard is a way of cultivating, not just the garden but also cultivating who they are in relationship to the Earth. And as they cultivate that within themselves, they are also simultaneously, through that symbol, mediating an experience of the transcendence. of the oneness of all of the Universe. So, religions are broadly defined as symbolic frameworks that mediate the transcendent and at the same time, cultivate our identities as individuals and as communities. When we talk about Religion in the CHIRP lab, we are talking broadly. Being able to look at all aspects of human life and practices and to think critically about them.