Religion and Geography

The spatial study of religions and religious beliefs and practices including their:
- distribution on the earth
- source areas and paths of diffusion over time
- affect on the landscape
- associated images, sounds, rituals and food
- affect of interaction both within and outside the religion’s sphere on people and areas who share and do not share the same beliefs.

Geographers are not theologians. Our focus is on those elements of religions that are geographically significant.

Geographers:
- Recognize that religions are derived in part from people’s observation and interaction with elements of the physical environment.
- Note that religions and their adherents, in turn, modify the landscape.
- Identify the processes by which a religion diffuses.
- Are aware that the diffusion may be in conflict with the movement, distribution and existence of other religions.

Religions are studied by geographers to:
- Ascertain their origin on earth (hearth)
- Look for their interrelationships with the physical environment (ecology, space, region)
- Study their movement and distribution (diffusion)
- Analyze their affect on the landscape (visual record, creation of place)
- Document the relationships between religions and their adherents (interaction)

Using visual clues:
- Religions and religious practices are mapped.
- Sacred sites are identified and located.
- The religious organization of space is analyzed, including the “non-use” of space or the “no evidence” on the landscape.

Example: Nomadic people do not build permanent religious structures so their practice of a religion and impact on the landscape is different from that of sedentary people.
Religion, Geography and Culture

- Religion is an integral part of any culture group.
  - Religion regions overlap both ethnic and language regions.
  - People usually have deep feelings about religion:
    - Religious values are important in how people identify themselves and the ways they organize the landscape.
    - The appeal of religions vary from geographically limited areas to worldwide.
    - While migrants typically learn the language of the new location, they usually retain their religion and recreate a landscape that may be similar to from where they came. EXAMPLES?
    - In spite of its deep roots, the essence of religion experiences stimulus diffusion and time-distance decay (details change over time; concepts remain).

Religion and Culture

- Cultural interaction:
  - Joins adherents into a single moral community through a value system (unifier) that involves formal or informal worship and faith in the sacred and divine.
  - May intimately affect all facets of a culture, including economy and politics.
  - May affect interaction between culture groups (divider).
  - Varies in its cultural role – dominating in some societies, unimportant in others or repressed in some.

Adherents Worldwide by Religious Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of World Population</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christianity 33%</td>
<td>Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam 21%</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonreligion (sectarian) 16%</td>
<td>Nonreligion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism 14%</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism 6%</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoic religions 6%</td>
<td>Taoic religions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism 0.36%</td>
<td>Sikhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism 0.22%</td>
<td>Judaism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Classifying Religions

- Tribal (traditional) religions
  - Ethnic nature oriented religions (indigenous, community specific to small, preindustrial cultures)
  - Animism, Shamanism

- Syncretic religions
  - Religions, or strands within religions, that combine elements of two or more belief systems
  - Assimilation/acculturation promote this
  - Sikhs, Rastafari, Santeria, Voodoo, Wicca

- Secularism
  - Indifference to or rejection of religion and religious belief

World Distribution of Major Religions
Religious Regions of the US

This generalized map of the religious regions of the United States shows concentrations of the major religions. Adapted with permission from W. Zelinsky, The Cultural Geography of the United States, 3rd ed., University Press of Virginia, 1992, p. 96.

New England: Catholic
South: Baptist
Upper Midwest: Lutheran
Southwest: Spanish Catholic
West, Midlands: no dominant denomination

Religious Adherence in the US by County

Percent of the US
- 75.0 or more
- 74.9 - 74.9
- 74.8 - 74.9
- Up to 34.9

Secularism in Europe

Indifference to or rejection of organized religious affiliations and ideas
- Varies greatly from country to country and within countries.
- Antireligious ideologies can contribute to the decline of organized religions.
- Church membership figures do not accurately reflect active participation.

Hearth and Diffusion

- Religious hearth
  A focused geographic area where important spiritual innovations are born and from which they spread.
- Religious diffusion
  The spread of spiritual innovations (religion) from the hearth to other areas (near and far) by spread from the core (expansion diffusion/contagious diffusion) or by the migration of adherents to distant lands (relocation diffusion).

Origin and Diffusion of the Five Major World Religions

1. Semitic religious hearth
   Judaism, Christianity, Islam
2. Indus-Ganges hearth
   Hinduism, Buddhism
3. East Asian religious hearth
   Confucianism, Taoism

Diffusion of Universalizing Religions

- Islam
- Buddhism
- Christianity
Most ethnic religions have limited, if any, diffusion. Principles are usually based on characteristics of a particular (local) area.
- These religions lack missionaries.
- Diffusion and growth of universalizing religions, esp. Christianity and Islam, typically comes at the expense of ethnic religions.

Mingling of Ethnic and Universalizing Religions

Universalizing religions may supplant ethnic religions or mingle with them (assimilation/acculturation).

Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony, is mostly Roman Catholic, whereas Namibia, a former German colony, is heavily Lutheran.
This relationship can also be seen in former French and British colonies and is similar to language and legal systems in use.
Elsewhere, traditional African religious ideas and practices have been merged with Christianity.

Religious Ecology

Special relationship with nature:
Belief that the earth and its elements were created especially for the use of its people.
Appeasing the forces of nature:
- Religion as adaptive strategy to prevent natural hazards and survive the elements
- The wrath of god comes in the form of severe natural events
Religious rituals and holidays are observed (scheduled) when they coincide with astronomical (celestial) events:
- Lunar cycles
- Equinoxes and solstices
- Appearance of constellations

Certain physical features become sacred places in world religions:
- Rivers: as the Ganges R., River Jordan
- Mountains: as Mt. Fuji, Denali, numerous volcanoes
- Trees: various “Trees of Life” as the baobab in South Africa
- Forests: Sacred forests of India
- Rock formations: as Shiprock (NM), Uluru (Australia)