# Aspects of Religious Traditions in More Detail

**What does religion mean etymologically***?*

The Latin word *religare*, which means “to tie, to bind fast” is often given as the etymology of the word religion. The Oxford English Dictionary points out, though, that the etymology of the word is doubtful. Earlier writers like Cicero, the ancient Roman philosopher, connected the term with *relegere*, which means “to read over again” or “to recover again.” Whether the idea of religion comes from binding or rereading, the maintenance of religious beliefs is an ongoing and essential task within all religious traditions. All aspects of the tradition, its history, the faith of current adherents and the future of the religion are at stake when religious beliefs are called into question. The reasons for maintaining religious beliefs include an honoring of the past, providing a focus for the present and a hope for the future.

*Honouring the past*
The word, tradition, comes from the Latin *tradere* to deliver or to hand over. Religious faith is understood to be ancient and new. The tradition passes organically from person to person, from generation to generation, in the actions determined by the religious tradition to be most essential to the task of maintaining the faith. The handing-on of the tradition has cross-generational and intra-generational intent. The believer is called to give witness to the faith and to express the faith in ways that enable it to be shared with the youth but also with adult believers and sometimes with non-believers. While not all traditions actively seek converts, all religious groups seek to maintain the continuity of the ancient faith for present and future generations.

*Focus for the Present*
The maintenance of beliefs provides a focus for the present life of the tradition and the individuals and groups who make it up. The activities associated with maintaining the faith exercises the faith of contemporary believers. Activities of commitment, including the performance of rituals, reading from sacred texts and storytelling, provide a sense of direction, hope and purpose within the tradition. Stories require interpretation and application to modern circumstances. Such activities require appropriate leadership and authority. Social structures of a tradition in many ways exist for the maintenance of the tradition. The symbols of the tradition, so often a feature of the rituals and stories, point beyond themselves to the great ancient truths of the tradition and make a significant contribution to the maintenance of belief. The celebrations of religions are bound by sacred understanding of time and special places and spaces. Thus, the expression of beliefs in the tradition becomes the way of life for its members, an essential source of meaning and conviction.

Further to this, the individual search for meaning of members is conducted within the belief structure of the tradition. The processes in place for the maintenance of belief provide a structure against which the individual assesses personal faith and community life. The individual adherent makes judgments and forms commitments based on their personal sense of the community life of the tradition and the patterns and structures of the society in which the religious tradition finds itself. The ethical teaching of any religious tradition points to the appropriate goods and appropriate norms for relationships in the tradition and in society. Each individual adherent is given pause to consider their actions as part of their religious tradition. Their actions will tend to maintain the tradition or their actions will tend support some alternative world view.  Their actions organically affect the ongoing approach to the maintenance of beliefs within their tradition.

*Hope for the Future*
The future hopes of any religious tradition are clearly aligned with maintenance of beliefs. Plans for the development of resources, human and physical, are profoundly affected by the need to maintain faith. Maintaining religious beliefs is central to decisions about providing for mission and outreach from the religious community to those outside the community. From plans for ongoing production and translation of sacred texts, to planning for leadership in ritual and to schemes for revitalising the faithful, the continuity of the faith in central. Equally, the planning for the development of infrastructure, buildings and monuments, training facilities the like are deeply connected to the maintenance of the faith. And so, the future of the religion is wed to the commitment of believers to the maintenance of beliefs. There are internal and external factors that can promote action to maintain continuity of these beliefs.

# **Aspects of Religion: The Building Blocks of Religious Meaning**

# **Beliefs**

Beliefs are ideas that are thought and felt by the adherents of a tradition to be true. In some religious traditions there is a particular set of beliefs which are expressed in an authoritative list (a creed or dogma). In other religions beliefs may be selectively revealed to particular human beings who are remembered as founders of a religious traditions. Most religions develop as the writings and / or teaching of their founders are reflected upon and applied to contemporary contexts. Without beliefs religions would have no internal structure. An adherent would not know what to follow, how to behave or what differentiated them from other belief systems. Beliefs give a religion its identity. Denominations within a larger religious tradition interpret and emphasis specific beliefs and practices differently.

# **Other Aspects**

Other aspects of a religious tradition are expressions of the beliefs and world view of the system of meaning.

**Sacred Stories**

Religious myths and stories relate in imaginative detail a believed truth. Their form may be legend, edifying parable, folklore or historiography but they transmit knowledge to adherents of all ages. Mythical stories can recount the origins of the universe and humankind and usually contain the deep truths of the religious tradition. Sacred stories can be understood at many levels. Many religions of the world developed from cultures in which the telling of sacred stories orally or in song and dance was ritualised. During services some religions read sacred stories from their sacred texts. All forms of sacred stories are learned, retold, sung or danced. At time there are strong taboos surrounding the telling of these stories to ensure that they are told or performed correctly.

**Texts**

Sacred texts are religious writings compiled from oral and written literature in which the essential parts of a religious tradition are recoded. Included in these are a religion’s beliefs, stories, ethical principles and codes of moral behaviour, creeds, prescribed prayer texts, history and legends, poetry and prose. Sacred texts can be in book form, on scrolls, on papyrus, chanted in mantras, recalled by memory in sutras, sung in songs, chants and ballads or performed in dance and movement. Sacred texts can be artistic in the form of a mandala or labyrinth, pottery decoration or pictograph, in reliefs, icons, hieroglyphs, devotional aids, body decoration or rock art.

Sacred texts are connected deeply to beliefs about ultimate reality and are interpreted by leaders of the tradition to explain their origins and their message. Texts are often used as part of rituals and liturgies, being read, spoken, prayed, sung or performed at various times in the ceremony. Texts are authoritative and may be used by adherents in ethical discussions and arguments as well as a source of moral advice.

**Symbols**

Symbols are used to stand for or represent something else, and often a material object is used to represent something immaterial. They are signs, objects, people, actions or places that acquire a special meaning or power, and can sometimes be held to be sacred. The symbolic function is a key element of religious traditions, as symbols can express significant beliefs, be part of rituals and have specific religious meanings. Symbols can express significant beliefs and ethics of a particular religion, and they can even identify an adherent as a member of a particular religion.

**Rituals**

Rituals are a prescribed set of actions that have a symbolic meanings are considered to be sacred. Performing rituals expressed the beliefs of the tradition for those involved and any witnesses. There is usually a set procedure or liturgy that has been passed down by socialisation and there are often strong cultural rules that sanction only initiated members to perform the ritual. Rituals require an adherent to publically demonstrate strong commitment to the religion. Members who do not perform certain rituals may be denied certain membership rights or privileges. Sometimes a religion may alter or reinterpret a belief, which can lead to a change in the ritual expression of the belief.

Rites of passage are rituals that mark a person’s passing from one stage of life to another in relation to the religious tradition; for example, commemorating birth, coming of age, marriage or death. Adherents of a particular religious tradition may not completely follow all the rituals. However, rites of passage are often seen as minimum requirements and may be fundamental to a person’s identity, creating a sense of belonging and connection to the religion.

**Social Structures**

Social structure refers to the institutional aspects of the tradition, its internal organisation, leadership and varied social roles; as well as to its relationship to the wider society. Many religious traditions have established social models to which their religious community conforms. Some are highly centralised on a national or even global scale. Others are less formal and localised, less structured and do not report to any higher authority beyond the local community. Movement into leadership is often the result of special training in especially designated religious training institutions. It is often seen as a sacred call to mission. The leadership of all religious communities take responsibility for the maintenance of the faith of the community and for representing the community in issues of social concern both internal and outside of the religion. The leaders can become the voice of the community when called to address moral questions and ethical debates. Some societies place religious leadership at or near the top of society.

**Ethics**

Ethics is the study of decision making about right and wrong in a culture. Ethical principles are ideals that each theory, perspective, maxim or statement about which seeks to achieve. Visionary ideals offer a picture of a perfect wold from which all morality, laws and duties about what adherents ought to do can be derived. The model citizen is one who possesses desired qualities or values or follows laws that would bring about the ideal. The authority of ethical principles in a religious tradition comes from its understanding of ultimate reality and the relationship of ultimate reality with humanity. Social customs, etiquette, normative behaviour and rules are related to the sacred, which is also invoked to determine the moral and the immoral.

Moral codes within religious traditions can dictate precise behaviours about rituals, diet, calendar, personal decoration, grooming and clothing, the use of sacred texts and sacred spaces and even the thought patterns of faithful adherents. The life-style of adherents may not always match the prescribed codes of behaviour expected within the codes of the tradition. The theory does not always match the practice. In some religions there is an enticement to moral observance. The promise of an afterlife structure of reward and punishment, of a perfect world to come, a better reincarnation or a joining of the totem spirits. For other religions there is a promise of material reward in this life.

**Spiritual Experience**

Spiritual experience can be had in a religious or non-religious context. Both participants and witnesses may find meaning in them. Cultural influences can define spiritual experiences. A person’s religious identity is the sum total of all their religious and spiritual experiences. A positive experience may lead to the desire for greater participation, just as a negative experience can do the opposite. When a powerful emotion is stirred by an experience, the beliefs and other aspects of a tradition may combine to frame the experience.

**Spaces, places, times and artifacts**
The understandings that can be applied to time and particular spaces by religious traditions. Religious groups have particular views about history as well as about the annual timings of festivals, feasts and fasts that make up the rhythm of life. There are holy places that contain sacred spaces, both man made and occurring in the natural world, which can speak to adherents of greater unseen realities. There are also particular objects that hold special significant and meaning within every faith system.​

* *Places* refers to a location for worship or spiritual engagement, such as Rome, Mecca, Jerusalem, Lourdes, caves, stone circles, rivers, mountains, temples, churches, synagogues, mosques. Places are often understood to be holy, special or set apart from other less holy places.
* *Spaces*, which are also focus areas for worship or spiritual experience, are within sacred places. Shrines and altars and alcoves containing symbolic artefacts or healing or restorative powers. Spaces may also be where particular rituals are performed or individuals worship. There may be many such spaces within a place.
* *Times* refers to those periods that are set for annual, monthly, weekly or daily recognition of and participation in a particular spiritual experience within a religious tradition. Time is understood to be sacred. Such may engage the whole membership of the religion or a special group or, under the auspices of the religious tradition, be personal.
* *Artefacts* refers to human made objects and works that carry varying degrees of spiritual significance within a religion. Not all artefacts related to a religion hold such spiritual significance. For example, the artefacts that are produced for sale to publicise and commemorate visits of religious leaders or pilgrimage experiences. On the other hand some artefacts can carry symbolic meaning.