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Organized Religion and Everyone Else
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Judging from responses to my last column, it was a flop; nobody agreed with the argument that atheist organizations were religions. For most readers, the problem lay in the definition: A religion is a group of people who join together because they share a belief about the nature of god or gods. They wanted the definition to read as, "a group of people who share a belief about the nature of the existing god(s)."

OK, let's try out this definition and see how it works.

The definition has two parts. First, it concerns a group of people who get together to think and act for the same purpose. Second, the organizing purpose is that of a shared belief about the character of the divine. In America, where monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam dominate, most people think of a single divine being. Other religions, from Zoroastrianism and Hinduism to Native American religions, believe in more than one.

Some wit once observed the world can be divided into two kinds of people, those who think the world can be divided into two kinds of people, and those who do not. This joke plays on the point that the second option simply negates the first.

In a two-part definition, like this definition of religion, negating each element in turn results in a four-part square. The upper-left corner contains people who believe in a divine being and belong to a group that believes the same. The lower-left consists of people who believe but do not belong. The upper-right corner comprises those who do not believe and who belong to a group of people who do not believe. Finally, the lower-right contains people who do not believe and do not belong.

Those who conform to the definition, a group who believes in a divine being, are often referred to as "organized religion," or, to follow the definition, "organized belief." Members of organized religions meet together and perform activities stemming from them. Such activities may include worship, rituals, education, service to the organization and others (e.g., the poor), and gifts. These include Methodists, Baptists, and Catholics, as well as Orthodox Jews, Sunni Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists.

People who believe but do not join a group (lower left) often consider themselves spiritual. Most of us have heard someone say, "I'm not religious, but I am spiritual." They mean that they do not join religious groups, but they believe in a spiritual realm, with a god; we could call it "non-organized belief."

People who do not believe and do not join are individuals who are atheists (lower right corner). This is "non-organized non-belief." This is a broad category, ranging from those who made a considered judgment that no god exists to those who just do not think about it. These atheists are simply unconnected individuals.

This leaves the upper-right category, those who join a group of like-minded people because they do not believe in the divine. The key term in the previous sentence is "because"; people who get together because they share a belief in that gods do not exist. We can term this "organized non-belief." This is where last week's column comes in.

Many individual atheists are unaware that such organizations exist, but they do. They have names like the Atheist Alliance International or The Humanist Society. They celebrate holidays, such as the Winter Solstice or Human Light. They practice rituals such as baby-naming ceremonies, weddings and memorial services for the dead. And they educate their children in their beliefs about the non-existence of the divine, a "catechism" if you will.

Members of these groups think of themselves in comparison to religious organizations. They believe their views belong in the same place as those of other religious groups, such as a nativity display. This year atheist organizations were represented in displays in Westchester, N.Y. and Olympia, Wash. Atheist groups also "evangelize" their beliefs in signs on buses and in subways, aiming to compete with religious evangelization.

So, if it quacks like a duck and swims like duck, it must be a duck. Right? The essential difference between atheist organizations and religious organizations is the lack of a belief in a god. But since many recognized religions do not believe in a god, such as Buddhism, why should non-belief in a divine being disqualify atheistic organizations from belonging to the classification of religion?

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