

SECTION

1

MEANING AND
RATIONALE FOR
THE STUDY OF
RELIGION



STUDY OF RELIGIONS, GOD’S CREATION AND HUMANKIND

Background to the Study of Religion

Introduction

It is often said that Africans are deeply religious (Mbiti, 1969). This means that religion is part of almost every aspect of African life. Because of this, there is no single definition of the word “religion.” There are several reasons for this.

First, there are many different religions in the world, and each follower sees religion in their own way. Secondly, different fields of study, such as psychology, theology, sociology, and ethics, look at religion from their own point of view. Lastly, it is difficult to create a definition that is both short and clear enough to explain exactly what religion is, while also being broad enough to include all that should be called religion.

This challenge is made even more difficult by the fact that there is a difference between what is religious and what is not. Things like humanism, supporting football teams, ethnic groups, or nations may have some qualities of religion but are not really religions. These issues will be discussed in this section.

In this section, you will learn about some classical definitions of religion and what they tell us about the nature and characteristics of religion. It will also clear up common misunderstandings about studying religion, explain why religious studies are important, and explore different career options in the field of religious studies.

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of religion and the reasons for which religion is studied at the SHS I

Key Idea:

- **Religion:** This is the set of beliefs, practices, and cultural traditions that aim to connect individuals or communities with a higher power, divine being, or spiritual reality. Religion is a complex and multifaceted concept, and this definition may serve as a walking definition for the understanding of its various aspects. Some people may hold wrong perceptions about the study of religion. The misconceptions are incorrect beliefs, ideas, or assumptions that are often based on incomplete or misleading information about religion.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF RELIGION FROM LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE

Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of religion, this does not mean you cannot try to define it yourself. Understanding the main features of religion can help you come up with your own definition. Let us begin by looking at these features.

Features of Religion

All religions share some common features, which are **creed, code, and cult**.

Creed: This refers to the belief system of a religion. It is what members of a religion believe in. For example, Christians have the *Apostles' Creed*, Muslims follow the *Kalimatush-shahada* (Islamic creed), and followers of African Indigenous Religions believe in *mystical powers*.

Code: These are the rules and guidelines that direct how members of a religion should live morally. In Christianity, codes are based on the Ten Commandments, the teachings of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. In Islam, moral codes are found in the Holy Quran and the *Hadith* of the Prophet (SAW). African Indigenous Religions have their codes rooted in beliefs in the Supreme Being, ancestors, divinities, deities, proverbs, myths, and traditional songs, among others.

Cult: This is the physical or outward practice of religion. It includes all the actions that religious people perform as part of their worship. Examples include pouring libation, singing and dancing, worship, prayer, and sacrifice. In many religions, worship and prayer are used as ways to communicate with God or gods.

Religious Activities and Non-Religious Activities

1. **Religious Activities:** These are actions that religious people perform to strengthen their belief in their object of worship. These activities are considered sacred. Examples include Bible or Quranic study, daily devotions, purification rituals, religious fellowship/gatherings, observance of dietary restrictions, etc.



Fig. 1.1: The pouring libation



Fig. 1.2: A group of Christians engaging in a religious activity



Fig. 1.3: Muslims mark Eid-ul-Adha

2. **Non-Religious Activities:** They are actions that both religious and non-religious people perform that are not linked to any religious creed, code, or cult. Unlike religious activities, these are seen as ordinary or non-sacred. For instance, humanism, political activities, support for football teams, and school durbars are examples of non-religious activities.

Activity 1.1

1. Work in groups of three to come up with your own definition of religion through research. Each group member should contribute ideas about what religion means to them based on their experiences and beliefs.
2. Once your group has agreed on a definition, write it down and share it with the class, while discussing the difficulties involved in arriving at a single definition of religion.
3. As a group, compare your definition with others and reflect on the fact that there is no single, universally accepted definition of religion. Remember to respect everyone's views, as we are all from diverse backgrounds.

Activity 1.2

Case Study

Sena and his friends are passionate football fans. Every weekend, they gather at a local football field to cheer for their favourite team, Golden Stars. They wear the team's colours, chant songs, and celebrate together when their team scores. This sense of community brings them closer, and they look forward to these moments. Sena believes that supporting Golden Stars is more than just a hobby – it's a way of life for him and his friends.

On Sundays, Sena also attends church services with his family. During these services, they pray, sing hymns, and listen to sermons. The atmosphere at church feels sacred, and it's a time for Sena to reflect, seek guidance, and strengthen his faith. He feels a deep sense of connection to God during these worship sessions.

Task

1. With a partner, compare Sena's experience of supporting his football team with his experience of attending church.
2. Create a list of similarities and differences between the two.
3. Consider the activities involved, the sense of community, the purpose of each gathering, and how Sena feels about both events.
4. After completing the comparison, write a short report in a paragraph explaining how these activities reflect the differences between religious and non-religious activities.

Activity 1.3

Scenario

Ama lives in a small town where every month the community organises a clean-up exercise to keep the neighbourhood clean. On the last Saturday of the month, Ama and other residents gather to sweep the streets, clear the gutters, and pick up litter. Everyone works together to make the environment healthier and more pleasant to live in. Ama enjoys this activity because it helps the community stay united, and she knows they are making a difference.

Every Friday evening, Ama also attends a prayer meeting at her local church. During the meeting, she joins others in prayer, sings worship songs, and listens to her pastor share a sermon. The prayer meeting is a time for spiritual growth, reflection, and seeking blessings from God. Ama feels peaceful and connected to her faith whenever she attends these sessions.

Tasks

1. In groups of three, compare Ama's experience of participating in the community clean-up with her experience at the prayer meeting.

2. List the characteristics of each activity and identify which one is religious and which is non-religious.
3. Discuss the purpose of each activity, the people involved, and how Ama feels during both.
4. Write a short explanation of the similarities and differences between the two activities, focusing on how they represent religious and non-religious actions.

Present your answers to the class for review.

Activity 1.4

1. Search online for videos or pictures on religious and non-religious activities.
2. Use the worksheet below to record your thoughts on what you observe from the videos.

Describe the activities for the following: Christians, Muslims, African Indigenous Religion (AIR), and Basketball games.	
Identify which activities are religious or non-religious	
Religious	Non-religious
Why?	
What is the significance of these practices? How do they affect the individuals involved?	

Activity 1.5

Compare the experiences of sports fans' commitment to their teams with an individual's religious worship, as seen in the videos you have watched in **Activity 1.4**. Identify the similarities and differences between the two. Consider how dedication, rituals, emotions, and sense of belonging are displayed in both activities. Write a brief summary of your observations, noting how commitment in sports and religious devotion may overlap or differ.

Classical Definitions of Religion

Classical definitions of religion provide a foundation for understanding the concept of religion across different cultures and perspectives. These early interpretations help to explore the essential features and characteristics of religion, highlighting its role in human life and society. Through examining these definitions, we gain insights into how various scholars have approached the study of religion and how their ideas contribute to a broader understanding of religious beliefs, practices, and systems across the world. This lesson will focus on theological, moral, psychological and sociological definitions.

Theological

Definitions of religion that fall into this category often emphasise belief in a supernatural being or beings. For instance:

- Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as belief in spiritual beings.
- St. Augustine described religion as what binds us to the one almighty God.

Moral

These definitions are based on the belief that religion involves a set of laws or rules, often seen as divine commands, which dictate the dos and don'ts that humans must follow. Examples include:

- Immanuel Kant defined religion as “the recognition of all our duties as divine commands.”
- Ludwig Feuerbach described religion as “a dream, in which our own conceptions and emotions appear to us as separate existences, being outside of ourselves.”
- “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).
- Joseph Adler defined religion as “a means of ultimate transformation and/or orientation” (1953).

Psychological

These definitions focus on the idea that religion stems from profound, inexplicable feelings or emotions within individuals, leading them to seek guidance or solace from forces greater than themselves. Examples include:

- Sigmund Freud viewed religion as “an illusion,” a form of neurosis, and an attempt to gain control, describing it as “a mass madness.”
- Bertrand Russell believed that religion arises from the human need for comfort in a world that, when viewed dispassionately, is a terrifying wilderness.

Sociological

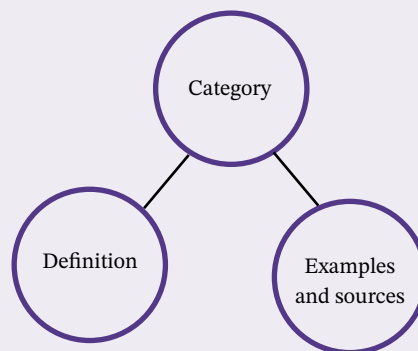
These definitions centre on the existence of a community of people who are identified, bound together, and sustained by their shared beliefs in powers greater than themselves. Examples include:

- Karl Marx defined religion as “a protest against real suffering,” viewing it as “the opium of the people.” Marx believed religion was a tool used by capitalist societies to maintain inequality.
- Emile Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things,” meaning things set apart and forbidden. These beliefs and practices unite all adherents into a single community, referred to as a church.

Activity 1.6

Your task is to explore one category of religious definitions (which will be assigned to you). Use the internet or other reliable sources such as books or articles to research this category in detail. Focus on understanding its key ideas and gather relevant examples to support your findings. You can use the graphic organiser provided below to help organise your information clearly.

Once you’ve completed your research, prepare to share your findings with the class or a classmate. Your goal is to explain what makes this category unique and how it fits into the broader understanding of religion. Be creative in your presentation—use visuals, examples, or storytelling to make it more engaging for your audience.



The resource below may be useful to support your research:

<https://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln101/definitions.pdf>

Activity 1.7

Karl Marx famously said that “religion is the opium of the people.” Your task is to explore what Marx meant by this statement and how it contributes to our broader understanding of religion.

Begin by researching Marx’s idea that religion acts as a form of comfort or escape for people facing difficult social and economic conditions. Think about how Marx viewed religion as a way for people to cope with their suffering rather than addressing the root causes of their problems.

In your research, consider the following questions:

- What did Marx mean by comparing religion to opium?

- How does Marx's view suggest that religion might influence or reflect social inequalities?

Summarise your findings in a brief report. Use examples from history or current events to illustrate how Marx's perspective might apply in different contexts. Your report should help deepen your understanding of how religion can be both a source of comfort and a reflection of societal issues.

Characteristics of Religion

All the major religions in the world are associated and identified by key characteristics. Understanding these characteristics helps you to distinguish between religious and non-religious activities. Five of the key characteristics are presented below:

Belief systems: Religions entail the belief in supernatural beings. Religions that acknowledge only one true God are **monotheistic**. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are examples of monotheistic religions. A religion that has several deities is **polytheistic**. The ancient Greeks and Romans had polytheistic religions. In **henotheistic** religions, the worship of a supreme deity does not deny the existence and power of other deities. For example, Hinduism teaches that a world of spirit called *Brahman* is the supreme power. But Hindus also worship numerous other gods and goddesses. In African Indigenous Religion, people worship a Supreme Being alongside many other deities.

Sacred and profane: Religions identify certain objects, places, and times as sacred. This can include holy sites and significant relics. Additionally, there are actions, behaviours, objects, places, and times that are regarded as profane.

Rituals: Religions involve rituals that unite adherents. These rituals involve acts and ceremonies through which believers honour and serve God, deities, or other sacred powers. Some rituals are performed individually, while others are observed collectively by groups of worshippers. For example, people may gather to celebrate a religious festival.

Moral Code: A moral code is a set of moral teachings and values present in all religions in some form. It guides believers on how to live their lives. Most religions have a moral code that their followers are expected to observe. For example, Christianity has the *Ten Commandments*, Islam follows the *Sharia*, and African Indigenous Religion observes taboos.

Prayer: Prayer is an important part of religion, though it is practised in different ways, such as individually or in groups. Most Christians gather on Saturdays, Sundays and holy days to pray, while Muslims meet every Friday for communal prayers. Followers of African Indigenous Religions also come together on sacred days to pray. In addition to these group prayers, individuals from various religions also pray privately.



Fig. 1.4: People praying

Activity 1.8

Field Visit:

In groups of three, visit at least two different places of worship in your community. These might include a church, mosque, or traditional shrine. As you explore each place, observe and take notes on three key characteristics of religion that you can see. Look out for elements such as rituals, symbols, or communal practices. After your visit, prepare a short presentation summarising your findings. Share your observations with the class, highlighting how these characteristics are displayed in each place of worship.

Online Research:

Use the internet to research a specific religion of your choice. Find detailed information about its key characteristics. Write a brief description of three notable features of this religion. These could include aspects such as its core beliefs, rituals, or moral codes. Be sure to provide clear examples and explain how these characteristics are reflected in the religion's practices and teachings. Prepare your findings to share with the class in a brief yet informative manner.

Activity 1.9

1. Create a flashcard for one of the characteristics of religion, for example, “Ritual.” Write the characteristic on one side and its definition on the other.

Back: definition of religion

Front: characteristics of religion

- a. Working in pairs, share your flashcards and discuss the meanings to see if others have the same definition as you. Work together to agree on a consensus on each term.
- b. Think about how you can challenge and expand the definitions shared by your classmates—why do you think that? What does this practice look like in your religion or a religion in your community?

Misconceptions About the Study of Religion

Understanding religion can sometimes be challenging due to various misconceptions that people hold. These misconceptions often stem from limited knowledge or misunderstandings about what religion truly involves. In this topic, we will explore some common misconceptions about the study of religion, clarify these misunderstandings, and discuss why accurate knowledge is essential. By addressing these misconceptions, we aim to gain a clearer and more informed perspective on the diverse practices and beliefs that shape different religions. The following are misconceptions of religious studies:

- Religious studies seek to make learners worship God/Allah, gods, or deities.
- Religious studies aim to convert students to other religious denominations or faiths.
- The study of religion is to prepare learners to become religious leaders (for example, priest or imam).
- Religious studies seek to find out which religion is the best in the world.
- In religious studies, attempts are made to condemn other religions and make them appear outdated.
- The study of religion will make learners irreligious.

Addressing the Misconception on Religious Studies

Understanding religion involves more than just learning about various beliefs and practices; it also requires clarifying common misconceptions. Misconceptions about religious studies can arise from misunderstandings of what religion truly entails and how it is studied. These misunderstandings can affect how individuals perceive different religions and their practices. By addressing these misconceptions, we can gain a clearer, more accurate understanding of the diverse world of religious beliefs

and practices. This approach helps to foster a respectful and informed perspective on the role of religion in society.

- Religious studies in SHS are non-confessional. This means they are not intended to convert people or make them more committed to any particular religion.
- Practising worship is not part of studying religion. Although learners might be asked to show how different religions practice their faith, this is done purely for academic reasons.
- Studying religion can open many career paths, but becoming a religious leader typically requires studying theology. Studying religion itself does not directly lead to becoming a religious leader.
- Religious studies aim to understand each religion from its own perspective, not to promote or criticise any particular religion. The goal is to promote religious tolerance by recognising that no religion is better or worse than another.
- The choice to be irreligious is a personal decision. The study of religion focuses on academic excellence rather than influencing learners' personal beliefs or religiosity.

Activity 1.10

Partner up with a classmate to explore your personal experiences and views on misconceptions about religion. Reflect on any misunderstandings you or others might have had regarding the study of religion. For instance, consider whether you think studying religion is only for the very religious or if it might limit your perspectives.

Discussion Guide:

1. Imagine if you were starting Senior High School (SHS) again. Would you choose to study religion? Why or why not?
2. Share your thoughts on whether studying religion would impact your beliefs or attitudes.

Once you have discussed these points with your partner, present your insights and reflections to the class. Your presentation should highlight both your personal views and any interesting points from your discussion.

Reasons for the Study of Religion at the SHS

Studying religion at the Senior High School level offers numerous benefits that extend beyond mere academic knowledge. This subject provides learners with a deeper understanding of various belief systems and practices, fostering greater appreciation and respect for diverse cultures and perspectives.

Below are some reasons for studying religion at SHS:

1. Religion is a field of study on its own, and studying it helps to understand human behaviour.
2. The study of religion helps to cultivate tolerance in a world of plural values.
3. The study of religion stimulates critical and analytical thinking.
4. Studying religion helps to develop communication and literacy skills.
5. The study of religion leads to the development of interpersonal skills.
6. Studying religion is a step towards preparation for tertiary education.

Use the space below to record any other reasons you can think of.

Activity 1.11

1. In your group, discuss why studying religion is valuable. Consider what motivated you to choose this subject, or why you might continue studying it in the future.
2. Reflect on and discuss how learning about religion can shape your understanding of the world and help develop important skills.
3. List at least three key reasons for studying religion and explain how these reasons might impact your personal or academic growth.
4. Present your group's ideas to the class in a clear and organised manner. Record your group's findings in the space below for class sharing.

Activity 1.12

You have the opportunity to speak with a professional, a counsellor or a lecturer in religious studies about the advantages of studying religion at SHS. Prepare a list of thoughtful questions **you would ask the resource person during the discussion.**

Consider questions that explore how studying religion can benefit students academically and personally. Think about how it might impact your future studies or career and how it helps in developing important life skills. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

1. How does studying religion at SHS contribute to a student's overall education?
2. Can you explain how understanding different religions can promote tolerance and respect among students?
3. What skills do students develop through studying religion that are valuable in other areas of their lives?

4. How can knowledge of religion help in making informed decisions about future career paths or tertiary education?
5. What real-life examples can you share of how studying religion has positively impacted individuals in their professional lives?

Prepare your questions and be ready to share your findings with the class after the interview.

Activity 1.13

Prepare to engage in a lively debate on the significance of studying religion in the SHS curriculum. Your teacher will provide a motion or question for discussion, such as:

- Religious studies are not relevant to 21st century learners.
- The study of religion should not be part of the core curriculum at SHS.

Work in your assigned groups to prepare your arguments based on whether you are arguing for or against the motion. Here's how you can prepare:

1. **Understand Your Position:** Determine if you are supporting or opposing the motion. Outline the key arguments that support your position. Think about why studying religion is essential or why it might not be necessary.
2. **Develop Strong Arguments:** Identify and prepare key points that highlight the importance or lack of relevance of studying religion. Consider including how it impacts students' personal growth, cultural understanding, and critical thinking skills.
3. **Anticipate Counterarguments:** Think about the arguments the opposing team might present. Prepare counterpoints to address and refute their arguments effectively.
4. **Debate Preparation:** Practice delivering your arguments clearly and concisely. Make sure to listen respectfully to the opposing team's arguments and avoid interrupting. Stick to the allotted time for your speeches. When challenging opposing ideas, focus on the arguments rather than individuals.

Be prepared to present your case confidently and engage in a constructive discussion.

Career Avenues in the Study of Religion

Do you pursue a course of study solely for its own sake? It's unlikely! Every field of study aims to enhance a person's prospects in the world of work. This is also true for the study of religion, which supports various career paths, including:

- **Teaching:** Studying religion can lead to careers as professional teachers in schools where religious studies and Religious and Moral Education (RME) are part of the curriculum. Many lecturers in university religion departments and pre-tertiary institutions have advanced degrees in religious studies.
- **Security Services:** The skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes gained from studying religion can lead to roles in security services, such as the police, military, immigration, prisons, and customs.
- **Public/Civil Service:** A background in religious studies can be beneficial for roles in public or civil service, including positions as coordinating directors, human resource managers, finance officers, social workers, teachers, judges, engineers, and ministers.
- **Counselling:** Many professional counsellors and religious leaders who provide guidance in schools, churches, mosques, public offices, and homes have studied religion.
- **Foreign Affairs:** A study of religion can prepare you for roles in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, such as commissioner, ambassador, consul, or envoy to other countries.
- **Legal Services:** Those who study religion may be well-prepared for further legal studies at the tertiary level and careers as lawyers, judges, court clerks, and administrators.
- **Human Rights Advocacy:** The values learned from studying religion can help you understand and advocate for human dignity, making you a strong candidate for roles in human rights advocacy.
- **Social Welfare:** Essential values for social welfare workers, such as professionalism, empathy, and respect for human dignity, are emphasised in the study of religion. This can help you secure positions in the Department of Social Welfare and Development, or the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection.
- **Religious Leadership:** Studying religion provides you with the knowledge needed to become a religious leader, including an understanding of various religious doctrines and practices.
- **Banking:** Skills such as financial acumen, customer service, and critical thinking, which are vital in banking, are also developed through studying religion.
- **Health Services:** The qualities needed in healthcare, such as empathy, communication, and problem-solving, are reinforced through the study of religion, aiding in your employment in the health sector.

- **NGOs:** Skills like patience, teamwork, and strategic planning, crucial for working with NGOs, are fostered through studying religion, making you well-suited for roles in this sector.

Use the space below to list any other professions or jobs that might be available to graduates of religious studies.

Activity 1.14

Search for admission advertisements about religious studies from universities. Look in newspapers, posters, or online. Then, analyse these advertisements to see what opportunities are available for studying religion further.

Instructions:

1. **Find Advertisements:** Look for ads about religious studies in newspapers, on posters, or on university websites.
2. **Save Your Findings:** Collect copies or screenshots of these ads. Focus on the details like programme names, entry requirements, and special features.
3. **Analyse the Ads:** Look at the information to find:
 - What courses are offered?
 - What do you need to apply?
 - Are there any special benefits, like scholarships or internships?
4. **Write a Summary:** Create a brief summary of what you found. Highlight the opportunities for studying religion and how they can help with future studies or careers.

Reflect: Think about how studying religion could benefit you. Share your thoughts with the class.

Activity 1.15

In groups of three, choose a profession such as journalism, healthcare, law, or another field of your choice.

Instructions:

1. **Choose a Profession:** As a group, select one profession that interests you.
2. **Discuss Relevance:** Talk about how studying religion can be useful in that career. Consider how the skills and knowledge gained from religious studies might apply to the chosen profession.

3. **Use the Worksheet:** Use the provided worksheet to guide your discussion. Record your ideas and notes on how religious studies could benefit professionals in your chosen field.
4. **Present Findings:** After your discussion, prepare to share your findings with the class. Highlight key points about how religious studies can contribute to success in your chosen profession.

Worksheet

Profession		
What skills/knowledge do you need to be good at this job?		
What skills does studying religion give you that would be useful for this work?		
Why would an employer in this field appreciate that a potential employee had studied religion?		

Extended Reading

1. <http://webpace.webring.com/people/fs/stonehavencircle/beliefs/basicbeliefs2.html>
2. Holmes McDougall (1966). Religions of the world, School Study Bible Services (book 7th), Holmes McDougall Ltd, 30 Royal terrace, Edinburgh.
3. <https://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln101/definitions.pdf>

Review Questions

1. Look for a friend in your locality and describe to him or her the processes involved in arriving at your definition of religion.
2. Analyse the characteristics of religious and non-religious activities and create a table to show the similarities and the differences between them.
3. With the help of the internet and/or books, analyse the different definitions of religion and write down the common features that run through the various categories.
4. In your understanding, how does the study of religion make the world a better place to live in?
5. Write a list of questions you would ask a resource person on career avenues and suggest probable answers to those questions.

Answers to Review Questions

1. The processes involved in arriving at the definition of religion include the following:
 - Many religions in the world and believers define religion from their own perspective.
 - The many fields of studies that approach religion from their perspectives.
 - The challenge of having one definition that captures all the essential features of religion.
 - Categorisation of the various definitions of religion
 - Distinctions between religious and non-religious activities
2. The responses for question two should reflect in the table below:

ACTIVITY	SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
RELIGIOUS	They are activities driven, for a purpose, and require the use of mental and physical effort, done by both religious and non-religious people. Both are governed by some rules (codes).	Creed and the cult
NON-RELIGIOUS	They are activities driven for a purpose that require the use of mental and physical effort, done by both religious and non-religious people. Both are governed by some rules (codes).	Purely secular

3. The response should include the following features:
 - Belief in a supernatural being, gods, or deity.
 - There is a relationship.
 - Community of people bound together
 - Inexplicable feelings
4. The following arguments could be made as to how religion has made the world a better place to live:
 - Understanding human behaviour
 - Promoting tolerance in a world of plural values
 - Stimulating critical and analytical thinking
 - Promoting the development of communication and literacy skills
 - It is a step for further studies.

5. The response to the question on career avenue should reflect the following:

- Teaching
- Security Services
- Public/Civil service
- Counselling
- Foreign Affairs
- Legal Services
- Human Rights Advocates
- Social Welfare
- Religious Leaders
- Banking
- Health Services
- NGOs

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