

Chapter 2

“You Believe What?”

A Tour of Religious Belief and Ritual Practice

Chapter Objectives

1. Why are religious beliefs and ritual practices *both* important in the study of religion?
2. How do beliefs and rituals vary across religious traditions?
3. What are “worship wars” and “Sheilaism?” Are they uniquely American religious phenomena?
4. What do sociologists think about religious beliefs and practices?

Chapter Outline

- I. “You Believe What?” A Tour of Religious Belief and Ritual Practice
 - a. In the West, religion is a highly personal and private matter that is rarely discussed outside one’s own religious group.
 - b. This is not true in many parts of the world; in some places you might find yourself barraged with religion.
 - c. To understand religion in our world, you have to realize that religious beliefs, practices, and experiences are social constructs.
- II. Comparing Religious Beliefs and Practices
 - a. Of the nearly 7 billion people in the world today, about 84% belong to one of the world’s major religions.
 - i. Although specific estimates vary, a third of the world’s population (approximately 31.5%) claim to belong to some form of Christianity, making it the largest of the world’s religions.
 - ii. Islam is the second largest religion, with roughly 1.5 billion adherents, or approximately 22% of the population.
 - iii. Hindus represent another 13%, or 860 million people.

- iv. Buddhism, traditional Chinese religion, and the world's indigenous and animist religious traditions each make up 6% of the population, or nearly 400 million people.
- v. Judaism claims 14 million people, or 0.22% of the world's population.

III. Christianity

a. Catholicism

- i. The core beliefs and practices of Christianity center around the life and teachings of Jesus, who is understood to be the Son of the one God and who came to earth to save humans from their sins by dying and returning to life again.
- ii. Some Christians believe the bible is the literal word of God, while others believe it is the "inspired" word of God.
- iii. Most Christians believe that moral conduct in this life determines what happens to them after death.
- iv. Seven rituals or sacraments:
 - 1. Baptism
 - 2. Confirmation
 - 3. Eucharist (Communion)
 - 4. Reconciliation – confession of sins
 - 5. Matrimony
 - 6. Holy orders – where men become priests
 - 7. Anointing of the sick – with oil for healing

b. Mainline Protestantism

- i. Broke from the Roman Church's monopoly on Western Europe
- ii. Mainline Protestant denominations:
 - 1. United Methodist Church
 - 2. Disciples of Christ
 - 3. United Church of Christ
 - 4. Anglican or Episcopal Church
 - 5. Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

6. American Baptist Church

7. Presbyterian Church

c. Black Protestants

- i. The core of Black Protestantism is a set of historic African American religious bodies founded in the days of slavery:
 1. African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)
 2. African Methodist Episcopal Church of Zion (AMEZ)
 3. Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME)
 4. Also central, but more internally diverse, are Black Baptist churches.
- ii. Several Black Protestant denominations broke away from largely white denominations, often in protest against segregation and discrimination.
- iii. Beliefs vary widely among African-American Christians.

d. Evangelical Protestants

- i. Evangelical denominations include:
 1. the Assemblies of God
 2. Holiness Churches
 3. Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches
 4. Churches of the Nazarene
 5. Southern Baptists
 6. Jehovah’s Witnesses
 7. Full Gospel
 8. Apostolic Churches
 9. Churches of God
 10. and many more.
- ii. Most Evangelical groups see their standards of moral behavior as absolute, applicable to all people, and unchanging.
- iii. Believe in the importance of having a “born-again” conversion experience.

iv. Sociologists divide these groups into three categories:

1. Fundamentalists
2. Pentecostals
3. Evangelicals

e. Other Christian Denominations

i. Many denominations do not fit neatly into these broad categories:

1. Christian Scientists
2. Jehovah's Witnesses
3. the Latterday Saints (Mormons)
4. Unitarian Universalists
5. Society of Friends (Quakers)

IV. Islam

a. Islam is the world's second-largest religion.

b. There are five key beliefs and five pillars of ritual behavior in Islam:

i. Beliefs:

1. Muslims believe that there is one God
2. there are angels
3. there have been many prophets in addition to Mohammed but only one message
4. there will be a final judgment
5. it is possible to know God and God's will in this life

ii. Rituals:

1. the *Shahada*, stating that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed is his prophet
2. *Salat*, praying five times a day while facing Mecca
3. *Zakat*, giving alms
4. *Siyam*, observing the one-month Feast of Ramadan
5. *Hajj*, making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime

- c. The Qu’ran is the Muslim scripture
- d. religious laws and observances, codified in *Sharia*, shape daily life
 - i. *Imams*, who are heads of local mosques, interpret *Sharia* law
- e. There are four major forms of Islam:
 - i. Shi’ism
 - ii. Sunnism
 - iii. Sufism
 - iv. Nation of Islam

V. Hinduism

- a. Hindu belief and practice originated in India around 1500 B.C.E.
- b. Although Christians often assume that Hindus worship many gods and goddesses, they are actually all forms of one God, called Brahman, the original spirit and creative force of the universe.
- c. Hindus see the One reflected in a trinity of Gods:
 - i. Brahma, the creator of the universe
 - ii. Vishnu, its maintainer
 - iii. and Shiva, the destroyer who brings new life.
- d. Hindu sacred texts include the Vedas, but their role is different from that of the Bible for Christians or the Qur’an for Muslims.
- e. Dharma is a core Hindu belief that captures the idea of duty and moral righteousness in behavior
- f. Karma are the actions that one takes to achieve dharma.

VI. Buddhism

- a. Buddhism originated after the sixth century B.C.E.
 - i. It emerged from followers of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha or Enlightened One, and his teachings.
- b. Over time, two main traditions arose within Buddhism:
 - i. Theravada - an elite form of Buddhism that is linked to the specialized life and religious devotions of monks who live together in communities called *sanghas*.

- ii. Mahayana - embodies a more complex understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds.
 - c. Both branches of Buddhism embrace four Noble Truths and an eightfold path to enlightenment
- VII. Judaism
- a. Although Jews represent less than one percent of the world's religious adherents, Judaism is among the world's oldest religions.
 - b. Judaism emphasizes the observance of rituals and ethical practices.
 - c. There are two general types of Jewish rituals: seasonal liturgies that follow a lunar calendar and individual liturgies that correspond to key moments in the lives of individuals.
- VIII. Understanding Contemporary Religious Ritual Practices
- a. Worship Styles to Meet Every Need
- IX. The Role of Beliefs and Ritual Practices

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What is the significance for the author to refer to numerous rituals in the beginning of the chapter?
2. Why is it important to know other groups' religious beliefs?
3. What is the demographic breakdown of the world's major religions? How many denominations of Christian are there?
4. What does it mean to have a "literal" understanding of Christian scripture? What about and "inspired" understanding?
5. What are the different congregations of Catholicism?
6. List the mainline Protestant denominations?
7. Explain why Black Protestant denominations became segregated.
8. What are some of the things that Evangelical Protestants reject in modern society?

9. How is the Mormon denomination different from most other denominations?
10. Name and briefly explain the five key beliefs and the five pillars of Islam.
11. List and describe the Hindu trinity of Gods.
12. Who was Siddhartha Guatama and how was he significant to the development of Buddhism? Explain.
13. How are Christianity and Judaism similar? How are they different?

Classroom Activities/Student Assignments

- Break students up into groups and have them develop a ten minute PowerPoint presentation explaining one of the major religions. They may use the book or you may have them use an outside legitimate source like <http://www.religioustolerance.org/>.
- Have students consider, prior to the lecture over this chapter, the reason why there are so many denominations in so many of the world’s major religions. Have them write this up in a 1-2 page paper and ask several students in class to discuss their thoughts on this idea. Use this to open up discussion for the whole class.
- Separate students into groups representing one of the major religions or denominations in this chapter, then ask them to rate how tolerated they believe their group is in American society and have them rate all of the other groups. Use a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is not tolerated at all and ten is completely accepted. Lead them in a discussion as to why this might be.

Suggested Readings

Bellah, Robert, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985.

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Roof, Wade Clark Roof. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.