

Chapter B

Religion

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In December 1992, a mob of fundamentalist Hindus attacked a 350-year-old Muslim mosque in India. Several thousand strong and armed with picks and shovels, they tore it down in a matter of hours, while the mainly Hindu local police looked on but did not intervene. Within a week, 1,000 people were dead as a result of pitched battles between Hindus and Muslims throughout India. In India, Pakistan, Great Britain, and elsewhere, Hindu temples were attacked in retaliation; more than thirty were destroyed by vengeful crowds. Why was the mosque attacked? Because legend among Hindus had it that the mosque had been constructed on the site of a Hindu temple that had been destroyed by Muslims. There is no proof that this is true, but what matters is that it was widely believed among fundamentalist Hindus. Do you think that, 350 years from today, the events of 1992 could form the basis of a new outbreak of violence between Hindus and Muslims?

This example is a powerful indicator of the depth of feeling that religious beliefs and religious conflicts can evoke. Consider, for example, that Christians in the Middle Ages declared “holy war” against Muslims in the series of battles known today as the Crusades. (And further consider, in this context, the reaction of Muslims when President Bush, in a poor choice of words, referred to the effort to bring to justice the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack as a “crusade.”) Consider that in Europe during World War II, 6 million people were killed simply because they were Jews. Consider the thousands of lives lost in violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, where, although the conflict is largely ethnic in origin, it is almost invariably described in religious terms. Or consider Pat Buchanan’s declaration during the 1992 Republican convention: “This country is in a religious war.”

Why is it that a concept identified with spirituality, love, and community evokes such strong feelings that it often leads to wholesale violence between groups with different beliefs? What is it about religion that makes it such a powerful social force? And what are the circumstances under which it can unite societies, as it does so often, or divide them in the destructive ways illustrated by some of the above examples?

What Is Religion?

In order to understand why people are so strongly moved by religion, we must first understand what religion is. To answer the elusive question “What is religion?” Emile Durkheim undertook a study of Australian aborigines, arguing that elementary forms of religion could best be studied in tribal cultures. He later presented his conclusions in his seminal work on religion, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1965 [orig. 1915]). In this work, Durkheim distinguished the aspects of everyday life, which he called the **profane**, from those things, often associated with the supernatural, that inspire awe, reverence, fear, or deep respect, which he called the **sacred**. Durkheim thus defined religion as formalized behavior that is directed toward the sacred. Such behavior usually involved **ritual**, a system of established rites and ceremonies. Durkheim thus developed the following definition of **religion**:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim, 1965 [orig. 1915]).

Often, religion provides a set of rules, or ethical principles, that tell believers how they are expected to behave in everyday life. These principles differ from other rules mainly in the sense that they are seen as being sacred in origin (Johnstone, 1992, p. 13).

Forms of Religion

One way religions vary around the world is in terms of their complexity. The sociologist Robert Bellah (1964) has argued that, as societies become more complex, religions take on increasingly complex forms.

According to Bellah, the primitive stage was characterized by ritualized worship of ancestral figures, who were not considered gods. An example of this type of religion would be Chinese ancestor worship. In contrast, the mythical beings of archaic religions were gods who actively involved themselves in human affairs. People communicated to these gods through worship and sacrifice. Because

these societies had developed a system of social stratification, the upper class assumed the priestly function. Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology typify this pattern. Historic religions retained the idea of a deity but added the crucial concept of salvation. This emphasis on achieving life after death encouraged people to stress their spiritual life rather than the material world. Islam and Roman Catholicism, particularly in their more traditional forms, are examples of this pattern.

As religions moved into the early modern stage, people continued to focus on salvation, but they no longer attempted to withdraw from the material world. Rather, they believed they could achieve salvation through involvement in worldly affairs. In addition, early modern religions stressed a direct relationship with God as opposed to mediation through a priestly class. Protestantism, particularly the Calvinist variety, is an example of this type of religion. The final stage, modern religions, reflects the complexities and accumulation of knowledge associated with the twenty-first-century world. These religions place a greater emphasis on the physical world, stressing individual and social reform, and are less likely to adopt a formal, hierarchical organization. Unitarians and Quakers practice this type of religion.

Religion and Society

Bellah's theory can be accused to some extent of ethnocentrism. His theory could be interpreted as saying the religions of modern industrial societies are more highly developed, while the religions of preindustrial societies are identified as less developed. Yet, while some of Bellah's specific arguments may be ethnocentric, the broader notion that religion reflects society has been well supported (Johnstone, 1992). A sociohistorical study by Guy Swanson (1960), for example, revealed a close correspondence between religious beliefs and societal characteristics. Swanson learned that belief in reincarnation was found mostly in societies with small, intimate bands, of a size smaller than a village. In such societies, the memories of those who die are especially likely to persist in the community after their death. This apparently supports the belief that the dead live on and will eventually return to the community.

Religion: The Sociological Perspective

Because religion exists in some form in all societies, it is of great interest to sociologists. Sociologists study religion within the framework of the social construction of reality, discussed in Chapter 3; that is, they treat religion as a social institution created by human beings. In so doing, they do not pass judgment on the validity of any religion. Rather, sociological perspective holds that, whatever the source of religious beliefs, the forms and roles that a religion assumes within a society are determined by human actions.

In the area of religion, as in most areas, the functionalist and conflict schools espouse different views. We will examine the functionalist perspective first and then proceed to the conflict school.

A Functionalist Analysis of Religion

Functionalists assume that society tends to be a stable and integrated system, and they argue that the interrelated parts of this system (the family, the military, religion) maintain the stability of society by teaching and reinforcing the same set of basic values. Sociologists tend to agree on six basic functions of religion that are inextricably linked: social solidarity, meaning, social control, identity, psychological support, and social change (see Chalfant, Beckley, Palmer and Palmer, 1987; O'Dea and Aviada, 1983). We shall now briefly explain each of these functions.

Social Solidarity

Religious beliefs and practices create a bond among members of a society, and help to foster a sense of community. This idea was central to Durkheim's functionalist analysis of religion; in short, Durkheim claimed that religion was society.

The Christian practice of receiving Holy Communion (the Eucharist) illustrates Durkheim's argument. This sacrament, which is often referred to as the Lord's Supper, represents the central beliefs regarding Jesus's mission, death, and resurrection. In Jesus's time a shared meal signified peace, trust, and community (social solidarity); today the term *communion* connotes a very similar meaning—a

sharing of thoughts and emotions, which is often conceived as fellowship or community.

As the examples in the opening vignette suggest, however, religion can perform this function only when there are at least some religious beliefs that are held in common throughout most or all of a society. When a society is divided on the basis of religion, the result can be severe conflict, as we shall see soon when we examine the dysfunctions of religion.

Meaning

Parsons (1951, 1978) claimed that religion provides answers to our questions concerning the meaning of our relations to others, of existence, of happiness and suffering, and of good and evil. Religions that fail to provide answers to questions about the ultimate meaning of life will frequently lose members. Kelly (1977) used this argument to explain why conservative or fundamentalist churches are growing in the United States. According to Kelly, liberal churches placed themselves in serious competition with nonreligious organizations by offering incentives that are not unique to religion (for example, fellowship, entertainment, and knowledge). Conservative churches, in contrast, kept their focus on salvation, with its attendant answers to questions about the meaning of life, and thereby stimulated growth in their memberships. One could add to this analysis that the liberal churches often define truth as a matter to be individually reasoned or interpreted, whereas the more fundamentalist churches offer clear answers through their more dogmatic beliefs (Rose, 1988, Chap. 2). Those who are looking for straightforward answers about the meaning of life will find them more readily in more conservative, fundamentalist churches.

According to a historical analysis by Finke and Stark (1992), the trends observed by Kelly and by Rose are not new. Throughout American history, new, more fundamentalist churches have sprung up and gained members as the older, more established churches have “modernized” their doctrines and “fit in” to contemporary values. As the latter have modernized, argue Finke and Stark, they have lost some of their attractiveness, and, hence, their membership. The more churches “fit in,” the less they have to offer people who are looking to religion for meaning that they cannot find elsewhere. Thus,

for example, as doctrinaire Puritans evolved into open-minded Congregationalists, they were ripe for challenge by newer, stricter churches, such as Methodists and Baptists. Between 1776 and 1850, the percentage of Americans who were Puritans/Congregationalists fell from over 20 percent to just 4 percent, whereas the percentage who were Baptists and Methodists rose from less than 20 percent to more than 50 percent (Finke and Stark, 1992, p. 55). Ironically, however, the Methodists themselves became an established denomination, became less strict, and have since been challenged in much the same way they once challenged the Congregationalists. Thus, American religious history has been a constant cycle of upstart, stricter sects drawing membership from older, more established, liberalizing churches. It happened 200 years ago, and it continues to happen today.

Social Control

In addition to explaining the supernatural, religions offer prescriptions for life in this world—those things a person must do (virtue) or avoid (sins) in order to attain salvation (Glock and Stark, 1965). Although civil authorities frequently share responsibility for enforcing moral behavior (by punishing such offenses as murder, theft, and improper sexual conduct), religion’s use of a normative power—whose source of legitimacy is usually rooted in a supreme authority—is often the most effective means of exercising control over society’s members. For example, the Bible contains the Ten Commandments, which enumerate what Jews and Christians must do in order to attain salvation. Because socialization is the means by which people learn right and wrong, religion plays an important part in the socialization process in most societies.

Identity and Psychological Support

By providing an answer to the question “Who am I?” religion gives people a sense of security, a feeling of acceptance and belonging. The role that the identity function plays can be seen in Hinduism, because recognition and acceptance of the identity assigned at birth determines a person’s position in the next life.

Religion serves as a source of psychological support during the trying times of a person’s life. Not only do religious rites mark the most stressful and major transitions throughout a person’s

lifetime, but they offer tremendous support during unexpected crises.

Social researchers have devoted considerable effort to studying the actual effects of religious participation on psychological well-being. Most studies show positive effects (Lea, 1982; Witter et al., 1985; Bergin et al., 1988; Schumaker, 1998, 1992), although many show only small effects and the studies are not entirely consistent (Willits and Crider, 1988; Peterson and Roy, 1985; Chamberlain and Zika, 1992; Buggle et al., 2000). Probably the overall effect of religion on mental well-being is positive, but there appear to be some negative effects as well. The positive effects of religion on well-being may be especially strong among groups that encounter discrimination and disproportionate poverty. For example, studies have been very consistent in showing beneficial effects of religious participation among African Americans (Lewin and Taylor, 1998).

Sometimes mixed effects arise from differences between intrinsic religion and extrinsic religion. Intrinsic religion is a religious orientation that is aimed at enhancement of meaning in life, and is an end in itself. Obviously, this type of religion relates directly to the meaning function discussed previously. But it also relates to psychological well-being: This type of religious orientation is associated with greater peace of mind and less anxiety (Donahue, 1985). More generally, people who search for meaning and feel that they have attained it exhibit better mental health (Chamberlain and Zika, 1992). Religion is not the only way this can occur, but it is an important means for many people.

Extrinsic religion, on the other hand, is a means to an end: for example, adapting to social convention. This type of religion has been associated with prejudice and dogmatism, and does not appear to reduce anxiety (Donahue, 1985). People are religious for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, and the presence of one type does not necessarily mean the absence of the other. For example, Pentecostals look to religion for answers, showing strong personal faith. Thus, they have a strong intrinsic orientation. But they also tend to be highly involved in the church socially, reflecting an extrinsic orientation as well (Chamberlain and Zika, 1992).

Although extrinsic religion in and of itself does not seem to promote social well-being, the

social support that comes with religion may be a significant factor in the positive effects of religion on well-being. In other words, religious institutions provide a network of people who can provide both emotional support and personal assistance. They may do this both on the basis of their religious beliefs and on the basis of friendships made within churches and similar organizations. Either way, it appears that the availability of this support to people who participate in religion is helpful to their health and well-being (Ellison and Lewin, 1998).

Social Change

Religion can sometimes serve as a catalyst for social change. One example is the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Among the most prominent leaders were the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and other ministers, many of whom were associated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In addition, representatives of religious groups throughout the country participated in various ways, including marching and demonstrating, lobbying for civil rights laws, and teaching about racial justice. At the local level, black churches played a critical role in the organization of these civil rights activities (Morris, 1984). Later, when the movement became more militant and shifted its emphasis to Black Power, religion continued to play a major role, as Malcolm X based his arguments on the precepts of Islam.

The Iranian revolution provides a more dramatic example of religion as a source of social change. The revolution was, in part, a reaction to the modernization and secularization that had been introduced into Iran by the Shah. Under the leadership of a major religious figure, the Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolution led to the creation of an Islamic state based on strict enforcement of Shi'ite Islamic law.

Dysfunctions of Religion

Although religion often promotes solidarity, it can only serve this function on the societal level if there is some degree of consensus on religion. The vast majority of Americans, for example, have historically identified with the Judeo-Christian tradition, despite the presence of numerous denominations, and thus until recently, religion has

generally promoted solidarity in the United States. However, the past few decades have been marked by heightened conflicts between followers of traditional, fundamentalist religions and those who follow more liberal religions or no religion at all. Issues such as abortion, censorship versus freedom of expression, and governmental family policy have been lightning rods for increased conflict among these groups.

Although religious conflict does occur in the United States, the deepest religious conflicts can be found in other countries where different religions have little in common, or see one another's beliefs as being in opposition. In the former Soviet Union, conflicts between Christians and Muslims have brought parts of the country close to civil war. Similarly, conflicts between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East have been ongoing sources of violence and warfare. As was noted in the opening vignette, Hindus and Muslims have battled for centuries on the Indian subcontinent, and religious conflicts have played a major role in wars through history. Even when religion is not the main cause of international conflicts, such conflicts are nearly always harder to resolve if religious differences are present. An example of this can be seen in the deadly conflict in the now-fragmented Yugoslavia between Serbs, who are mainly Christians, and ethnic Bosnians and Albanians who are for the most part Muslims.

A Conflict Analysis of Religion

Conflict theorists view religion as they do other social institutions: as a mechanism that allows an elite minority to dominate a relatively powerless majority. Conflict theories concerning religion center around the writings of Karl Marx, whose beliefs about religion were heavily influenced by the Young Hegelians, a group of German philosophers who viewed religion as an oppressive force in German society (Coser, 1977). As we saw in Chapter 4, Marx argued that the economic base of society influenced the rest of society—its laws, government, education, and religion. Because the dominant class controlled the economic resources, it was able to control all of the social institutions. Marx referred to religion as “the opium of the people.” By this, he meant that the dominant religion in society was the religion of the ruling class, who formulated and maintained beliefs that

justified the inequalities of the social order. Rooted in beliefs about eternal rewards and punishments, this form of social control was extremely effective. By teaching people to look forward to happiness in the next life, religion led them to accept their lot in this life, no matter how bad or unfair it might be. Thus, argued Marx, religion encouraged people to accept unfairness and inequality rather than fight for change.

Religion and Inequality

The degree to which religion can maintain inequalities and injustices to serve the interests of the ruling class is illustrated by Hinduism, which has for centuries effectively maintained a caste system in India. Although by law the caste system has been abolished, it continues to have a good deal of influence, particularly in rural areas. The rules of *dharma* specify different behaviors to be followed by members of each caste. An attempt to move out of one's caste constitutes a violation of *dharma* that will be punished by rebirth into a lower position. Thus, Hinduism has prohibited the social mobility that has become a central tenet—although often not a reality—of Western thought.

Religion has also been used to maintain racial and economic inequality in the United States. Although there was some controversy among slaveholders in the United States over religion's effect upon slaves, most of them eventually saw religion as an effective means of social control (Marx, 1974). Historian Kenneth Stampp (1956) notes that slaveholders in the American South exploited the Bible by telling slaves that God expected them to be obedient and would punish disobedience, while subservience would be eternally rewarded. In response to abolitionists, slaveholders also interpreted the Bible as saying that blacks were the descendants of people who had disobeyed God, and were thus condemned to an inferior status.

Over the past two decades in the United States, religion has exerted a strong influence over politics, and most of that influence has tended toward conservatism. The rise of the religious right, discussed later in this chapter, played some role—how much is debated—in the “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s and in the Republican sweep of Congress in 1994. These events led to cutbacks in programs for the poor, attacks on affirmative action, and, for a time, a weakening of labor unions in the United States. But religion cuts both ways. As is discussed later in this chapter, churches also

GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY



Catholicism and Unionism: Is There a Relationship?

If it is true, as conflict theory argues, that religion generally supports the existing order of power and wealth, then we might expect that in strongly religious countries, people would be less likely to challenge their employers by forming trade unions. And if we look at the specific beliefs of the Catholic church, we might find further support for that view. In countries other than the United States, trade unions are usually socialistic in their ideologies. (This is much less true in the United States, for reasons discussed in Chapter 11.) And the Catholic church has staunchly opposed socialism over the years. For example, in 1963, Pope Pius XII stated that nobody could be a devout Catholic and a socialist at the same time (Misra and Hicks, 1994). And in the early 1990s, Pope John Paul II, in a tour of Latin America, strongly criticized some priests for supporting a socialist “liberation theology.”

Although these facts are consistent with a conflict theory interpretation, they are only part of the picture. It is also true that, as early as the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the Catholic church expressed its support for the right of workers to unionize. It has also generally supported community and communal responsibility over market forces (McBrien, 1983), and the same John Paul II who criticized “liberation theology” also called unions “a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice” (Foy, 1985). To determine the actual effect of Catholicism on trade unionism, sociologists Joya Misra and Alexander Hicks (1994) examined the

relationship between religious affiliation and union membership in every industrialized country with a population of over 1 million.

Their findings support the notion that the relationship is more complex than one might predict using conflict theory alone. On one point, the data clearly back a conflict theory interpretation: The larger the proportion of a country’s population that is Catholic, the less unionized that country is. But in many Catholic countries, the church has supported a political party, usually known as the Christian Democratic party. This party typically supports unions—particularly ones associated with the Catholic church—though it also opposes socialism. And it turns out that the stronger the Christian Democratic party, the more unionized a country is. So, indirectly, the Catholic church supports unionization through its support for the Christian Democratic parties. Furthermore, where the Christian Democratic party is strong, there is a positive relationship between Catholic population and unionization. But where the Christian Democratic party is weak, the relationship is negative. So if a largely Catholic population leads to the formation of a Christian Democratic party, Catholicism promotes unionism, but in the absence of such a party, its effect is just the opposite. This suggests that in some cases religion can work as the conflict theory predicts, whereas in other cases, it can work in quite the opposite way. And it shows that this is true even if we study the same religion.

played a key role in both the Civil Rights movement and the antiwar movement in the United States during the 1960s, and an Episcopalian bishop, Desmond Tutu, won the Nobel Peace Prize for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa. Earlier in American history, religion played a key role in the movement to abolish slavery: Many of the leaders of that movement, such as Harriet Ward Beecher, Theodore Weld, and Elijah Lovejoy, were closely associated with churches. As is shown in the Global Sociology box “Catholicism and Unionism: Is There a Relationship?” even the same religion can work in different ways, some of which would be predicted by conflict theory, and some of which would contradict it.

Religious Conflicts

Conflict theory explains not only how religion legitimizes and maintains inequalities in a given social order, but also how different religious faiths come into conflict. Thus, as we discussed earlier, wars such as the Crusades, which appear to have been motivated by religious convictions, have been explained in terms of economic motives: The European nobility had a serious economic interest in gaining control over the trade routes to the East. Similarly, conflict theorists view the situation in Northern Ireland more as a class struggle and an ethnic struggle than as a religious conflict. They see its roots in the conquest of Ireland by Great Britain. However, because those of British

ancestry are Protestant and those of Irish ancestry are Catholic, religion came to play an important role in the conflict.

Major World Religions

The world's major religions, which originated in Europe and Asia, have since spread to every continent in the world. Christianity, claiming the largest following, has about 2 billion followers in 254 countries. The Islamic faith is practiced by more than 1.2 billion people in at least 172 countries, with concentrations in Africa and South Asia. Spreading from its birthplace in India, the Hindu religion now has more than 800 million followers in 88 countries, primarily in South Asia. Buddhists can be found in 86 countries, mainly in East Asia and South Asia, and number over 360 million. Located largely in East Asia, Chinese religions (Chinese folk religions and Confucianism) are practiced by almost 400 million people in 59 countries. In contrast to the large number of adherents for the preceding religions, Judaism has only about 15 million followers, but it exerts its influence in 125 countries, mostly in Europe, North America, South Asia, and Russia. (Estimates on the number of adherents to these and other religions worldwide can be found in Robinson, 2009.)

Monotheism, Polytheism, and Sacred Philosophies

The belief that there is only one God is called **monotheism**, whereas the belief in two or more gods is referred to as **polytheism**. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are monotheistic; Hinduism, Taoism, and some forms of Buddhism are polytheistic. However, even monotheistic religions often have some themes or beliefs that approach polytheism, such as the veneration of many saints among Muslims and Christians, and the belief of most Christians in the Trinity—that is, one God in three persons.

In addition to monotheism and polytheism, there are also religions that do not acknowledge the existence of a God or gods. These religions are referred to as **sacred philosophies**: Although they do not recognize a God per se, they do have a concept of the sacred, and from the sacred is derived a set

of moral principles, philosophical guidelines, and norms of conduct. This form of religion, exemplified by Confucianism and some types of Buddhism, is particularly common in Asia. Recently, there has been some increased interest in this form of religion in Europe and North America, as evidenced by the growth of Transcendental Meditation.

History, Beliefs, and Practices of the Major Religions

In addition to differing in their views regarding the worship of one God or several gods, the world's major religions also differ in terms of other beliefs and rituals and practices, as well as in their history. What follows is a survey of the major religious groups, many of which were first studied by Max Weber in a series of monographs comparing the world's religions (1951, 1952, 1958b). For all their differences, there are also quite a few similarities.

Hinduism

Hinduism, a polytheistic religion, is the predominant religion in India, where it originated thousands of years ago. Although most of the basic beliefs of Hinduism solidified about 2,000 years ago, some of the *Vedas* (sacred writings), as well as the gods whom Hindus worship today, date back 4,000 years. Unlike other religions, Hinduism claims no founder and lacks any form of structured organization (that is, a hierarchy of religious leaders). Hindus acknowledge the existence of hundreds of gods, but they recognize Brahman as the greatest deity, the creator of all who, as an everlasting spirit, contains all the lesser gods. Some of the best known of these gods are Vishnu, Rama, and Krishna. Today gurus (teachers) transmit these sacred beliefs. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, part of a lengthy epic (100,000 verses), is perhaps the most famous of Hindu scriptures, and it may come closest to capturing the central truths of Hinduism.

Reincarnation, a fundamental concept of Hinduism, links together explanations of the meaning of life, inequalities in this world, and our fate after death. Reincarnation is the belief in a cycle of births and rebirths. According to this belief, the human soul does not die. Rather, after death the soul goes to heaven, purgatory, or hell until it is reborn. Central to this belief is *karma*, the idea that a person's behavior in this life will determine his

or her position in the next life. Those who follow the rules of *dharmā*, for their caste position, will be reborn into a higher position; those who do not will be reborn into a lower position. Thus, Hinduism is clearly linked to the caste system that was formally recognized for many years in India. This illustrates the linkages that typically exist between religious beliefs and the structure of the larger society.

Like other religions, Hinduism has special **rites of passage** for each of the major transitions in life—birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Rites of passage—rituals that mark the transition from one age-related role to another—are discussed further in Web-Based Chapter C. Among Hindus, a special ceremony for birth occurs before the umbilical cord is cut, and a naming rite is performed about ten days after birth. When a boy reaches puberty, he is invested with a sacred thread, which he wears across one shoulder for the remainder of his life. During the marriage ceremony the bridal couple walks around a sacred fire with their clothing knotted together, reciting vows. Funeral rites involve cremation and the scattering of the ashes in either the Ganges or another sacred river. In the days following cremation, the family of the deceased may give offerings of rice balls and milk to ward off harm from the deceased's ghost.

Buddhism

In the sixth century B.C., Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563 B.C.–483 B.C.) founded Buddhism in India. Although it arose from a rejection of orthodox Hinduism, Buddhism retained reincarnation as a fundamental concept. By 200 B.C., Buddhism had split into two major forms—Hinayana and Mahayana. Hinayana Buddhism, which is based on Buddha's teachings, is a sacred philosophy and code of ethics. Distinguishing itself from Mahayana by the belief that Buddha (Gautama) was human and not divine, the focus of Hinayana is not upon deities, but rather upon the attainment of *nirvana*—a state of perfect bliss in which the self, freed from suffering and desire, loses individual awareness and is merged into the universal. A person achieves this state by practicing a number of virtues, including humility, mercy, charity, and, most important, self-control. In Mahayana Buddhism, which regards Buddha as divine, followers may worship many gods and stress faith, and not good works, as the key to salvation. Mahayana Buddhists perceive

nirvana not as a total loss of individual awareness, but as a state of passionless peace.

Buddha (“the Enlightened One”) rejected the authority of both the Vedas and the Brahman priests, teaching that salvation could be attained through knowing and living by “Four Noble Truths.” These truths maintain that suffering arises from a desire for objects and ideas that are not permanent; this desire—and thus suffering—can be overcome by following the “Noble Eightfold Path.”

Buddha's concept of the self was central to his rejection of the Vedas. In place of sacrificial rites to gods, Buddha emphasized the purification of the self, which he claimed occurred through proper thoughts and actions. He advocated a love for all creation, which would reduce human frustrations.

Although Buddhism spread into Central and East Asia, its influence in India lasted only until about A.D. 500. Today Hinayana is practiced in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia; Mahayana is practiced in China, Tibet, Vietnam, Japan, and Korea.

Confucianism

Regarded as the major traditional religion of China, Confucianism is a sacred philosophy that strongly emphasizes ethical principles, rules for the proper conduct of family, community, and political affairs. The principles of this religion are based upon the teachings of Confucius, who lived around 551 to 479 B.C. Although Confucianism became the ethic of the mandarin class—the elite group—Confucius himself came from a poor but well-respected family. The principle upon which he built his philosophy has been compared to the Golden Rule. Considered central to producing ideal relationships, it is recorded in the *Analects*, a collection of Confucius's most famous sayings, and in other works.

Tzu-kung asked, saying, “Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?” The Master said, “Is not Reciprocity (*shu*) such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” (Noss, 1980)

In addition to this fundamental principle, Confucius taught the importance of many other virtues, including loyalty, wisdom, self-control, filial piety, and self-development. Confucius used the family as the model for society. Those in power

should rule for the well-being of the people, while the rest of society should obey and respect their rulers, as children do their parents.

Unlike other major world religions, Confucianism is not oriented to the metaphysical. Confucius did not speculate about the afterlife or salvation. Characterizing Confucianism as an ethical doctrine that values proper conduct for its own sake, Parsons (1937) noted that in this religion there is no such thing as sin, only error. He described Confucius's view of the perfect gentleman in the following way:

The rational man will avoid display of emotion, will be always self-controlled, dignified, polite. He will always observe the proprieties of any situation most punctiliously. His basic aim is to live in harmony with a social order which is generally accepted and to be an ornament to it.

Judaism

Historians trace the beginnings of the Jewish faith to a period somewhere between 2000 and 1600 B.C. Taking its name from Jacob's fourth son, Judah, Judaism was the religion adopted by the descendants of Jacob and Benjamin who claimed Jerusalem as the capital of their kingdom. Central to Judaism is the belief that salvation cannot be attained simply by adhering to a set of beliefs. Rather, true believers must act in accordance with their faith in Yahweh, the sole creator and ruler of the universe.

Influenced by the cultures of Canaan and Babylonia, Judaism evolved from a polytheistic to a monotheistic religion based on ethical principles. No divine leader is recognized as the founder of Judaism, but several historical leaders are credited with establishing and maintaining the principles and practices of the Jewish faith. Among the most important of these leaders were the prophets Abraham (whose lineage is also traced by Muslims) and Moses, who is credited with the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which contain Jewish law, including the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, as well as an explanation of creation (Genesis).

The worship of and attribution of godlike qualities to man-made objects was common among many religions in that era. The Jews taught, instead, a religion that emphasized social justice and belief in Yahweh.

Although they believe in only one God, Jews view God as having many roles—creator, ruler, helper, friend, father, liberator, and savior. Believing

that God is the creator of good as well as evil, Jews maintain that the human soul is immortal. Thus, if good acts are not rewarded in this world, they will be rewarded in the hereafter.

The ethical nature of Judaism is reflected in its core beliefs, which include, above all, love of God. This love will lead people to do good everywhere. Teachings about good and evil also include the belief in a free will. Jews believe that we are free from sin at birth and consciously choose to do evil. Atonement for sin must be sought directly from God through prayers, reflection, and good works. Judaism's emphasis upon social justice is clearly recognized in Jewish scripture's version of the Golden Rule: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow men." Because we are all created in God's image, all people are equal. Judaism also teaches that the world is good, and that the blessings of this world are to be enjoyed. This does not, however, signify a life oriented to pleasure: Jews emphasize a person's duty to family and community.

The special rites of Judaism are associated with major life transitions. As noted earlier, males are circumcised at birth to symbolize Abraham's covenant with God. At puberty boys have a bar mitzvah and girls have a bat mitzvah to signify their entrance into the world of adult responsibilities. Marriage rites include the use of a special canopy for the wedding ceremony, drinking together from a wine cup, placing of the ring on the bride's finger during the recitation of promises, and the breaking of a glass following the ceremony. For Jews death is a time for a person's confession to God. Funeral rites include dressing the dead in a white shroud and reciting the mourner's kaddish, a prayer honoring the dead. Each year on the day a person died, a candle is lit as a memorial. The candle is allowed to burn itself out.

In the United States, there are three major branches of Judaism—Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative. Orthodox Jews are the most strict and traditional, Reform Jews the least so, and Conservative Jews—the largest group—somewhere between. Many people identify as Jews culturally, but rarely if ever participate in organized religious activities. Some of the latter do, however, hold rituals such as the *seder*, or Passover meal, in their homes.

Christianity

Christianity began as a sect of Judaism nearly 2,000 years ago. The distinctive feature of Christianity is

its focus upon Jesus Christ, who is regarded as a divine being who came into this world to make salvation possible for all people. He achieved this by dying on the cross and rising from the dead three days later. Following his resurrection, he spent a brief period with his followers during which he established his church, and then he ascended into heaven.

Unlike the mythical figures of many other religions, Jesus is a historical figure who lived in Israel during the period of the Roman occupation. He led a brief ministry lasting somewhere from one to three years, during which he preached and performed miracles, such as healing the sick and raising people from the dead. Though his teachings were not organized or written down during his life he did assemble a group of apostles to whom he entrusted the responsibility of spreading his teachings. Thus, Christianity spread rapidly, and in the fourth century it was proclaimed the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Somewhere between A.D. 50 and 100, the twenty-seven documents that were incorporated into the Christian Bible as the New Testament were compiled. Included among these writings are four accounts of the life of Jesus, called the *Gospels*; a history of the early Church, called the *Acts of the Apostles*; and a series of letters, called *Epistles*, many of which are credited to St. Paul.

Divisions Within Christianity. By the Middle Ages most people in Europe had been converted to Christianity. As the Christian Church grew larger, however, it experienced numerous internal conflicts, which eventually led to formal divisions and the establishment of different denominations. In the first major schism two distinct branches of Christianity emerged: the Roman Catholic Church, headed by the pope, in the West; and the Orthodox Church in the East. The Catholic Church remained supreme in most of Europe until the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther inspired the Protestant Reformation, which rejected the authority of the pope and insisted upon the authority of the Bible. Among the many Protestant denominations that emerged from the Reformation were Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism (Episcopalianism in the United States after the American Revolution), Methodism, and the Society of Friends (Quakers). As shown in Figure B.1, the great majority of the American population identifies itself as Christian, with nearly half considering themselves Protestant

and another quarter considering themselves Roman Catholic.

Christian rituals that mark the major transitions in a person's life are called *sacraments*. Different Christian denominations observe some or all of the following: baptism, confirmation, communion, marriage, extreme unction ("last rites"), penance, and ordination.

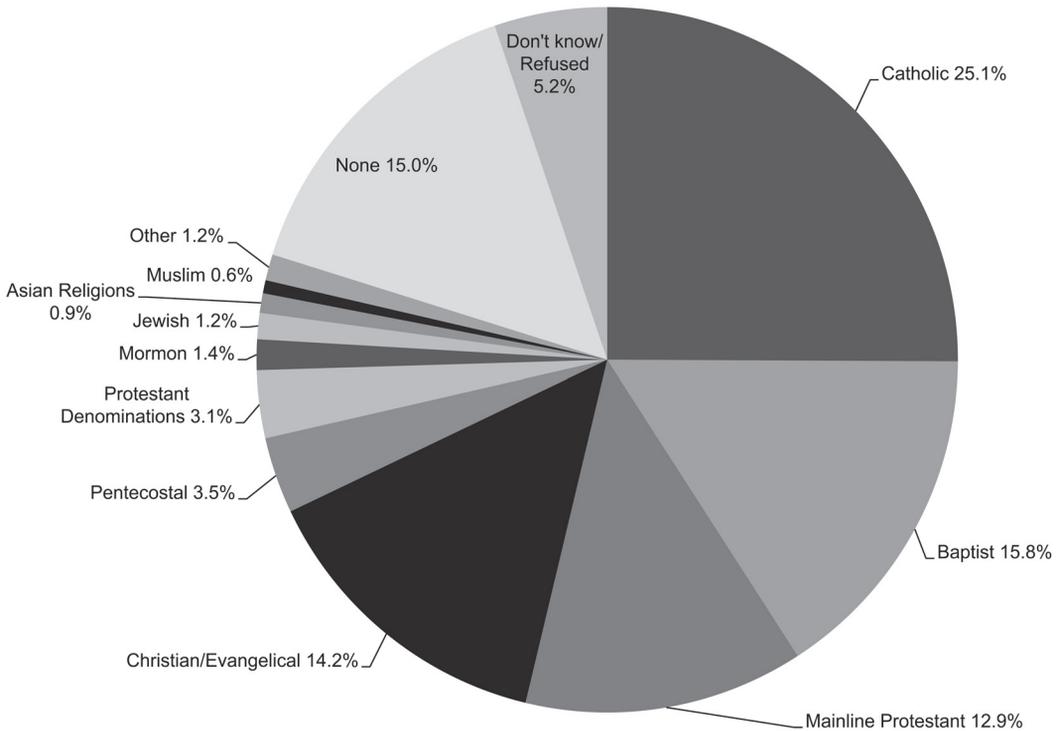
Islam

Of the world's major religions, Islam has existed for the shortest period of time. It was founded in Arabia by Muhammad (A.D. 570–632), whom Muslims regard as a prophet. Islam is linked historically to both Judaism and Christianity, which were established religions by the time Muhammad began to preach. Although Islam recognizes the validity of both of these religions, it maintains that the followers of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ altered these figures' original teachings, thereby producing the religions we see today. Thus, Islam claims that only Muhammad's teachings represent the true words of God, whom they call Allah.

The *Qu'ran (Koran)*, which contains the sacred writings of Islam, consists of 114 chapters, or *suras*. Muslims believe that God revealed these words to Muhammad and therefore regard them as holy truths. Muhammad, like Jesus, did not organize or write these truths down; this task was left to his followers, who assembled his teachings in the Koran after his death.

The central belief of Islam is that God is great, meaning greater than anyone or anything possible. God rules the world and universe, and is seen as both compassionate and merciful. Nonetheless, Muslims, like Christians, believe that there will be a day of judgment when good will be rewarded and evil punished. Muhammad is seen not as divine, but as being the most important of prophets—the one to whom God revealed His truths for all humanity. Because these truths are for all, Islam rejects no one on the basis of race, color, nationality, or social status. Like several other religions, Islam has its version of the Golden Rule: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for this brother that which he desires for himself." In addition to these beliefs, Muslims are expected to perform certain works, including recitation of the creed that "There is no god but God"; prayer and facing in the direction of Mecca five times a day; and abstinence from eating, drinking, and sex from dawn to dusk during

Figure B.1 Religious Preferences in the United States, 2008



Mainline Protestant includes Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and United Church of Christ. Christian/Evangelical includes unspecified and nondenominational Christians or Protestants and persons identifying as “evangelical” or “born again.” Pentecostal includes Assemblies of God, Church of God, and unspecified Pentecostal. Protestant denominations includes Churches of Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventist.

Source: Kosmin, Barry A., and Ariela Keysar. 2009. American Religious Identification Survey, 2008. ARIS 2008 Report, Part 1a—Belonging, http://b27.cc.trincoll.edu/weblogs/AmericanReligionSurvey-ARIS/reports/p1a_belong.html (Accessed November 28, 2009).

the holy month of Ramadan, when Muhammad received his revelations from God. They are also expected to give alms to the poor and to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at some time in their lives.

Like Christianity, Islam has multiple denominations. The two largest and most important are the Sunni and Shi’ite branches. The schism between these two groups began in the earliest days as a political struggle over who was to succeed to the rule of the Prophet Muhammad. Their religious disagreement concerns the role of the *imam*, or spiritual leader of the community. Shi’ites see imams as inspired interpreters of Islamic principles; Sunnis do not. In general, Shi’ite Muslims tend to be stricter and more fundamentalist in their beliefs than Sunni Muslims. However, there is considerable variation in this regard among the Sunnis, who are by far the larger of the two denominations. In Saudi Arabia, for example, Sunni Muslims are far

more traditional and puritanical than most Sunni Muslims elsewhere (Philipp, 1980). Shi’ites are also more opposed to modern and Western influences than most Sunnis, a reality that has been reflected in the political stance of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Shi’ite is the dominant religion in Iran, where it became the official state religion following the 1979 revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. There are also large numbers of Shi’ites in several other countries, including Iraq, where they make up nearly half of the population. In most other Islamic countries, however, Sunni Muslims are the vast majority. This is true in both the Arabic countries, where Islam originated, and in non-Arabic countries where most Muslims live today. These include Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, much of Africa, and several former republics of the Soviet Union. Today, only about 15 percent of the world’s Muslims are Arabic.



Muslim worship at the Grand Mosque in Mecca is an example of a religious ritual. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Religion in the United States and the World

Americans are more religious than people in many other societies, particularly in Europe and Latin America. If asked, nearly 90 percent of Americans will state a religious preference. Nearly two-thirds are actual church members (Gallup Organization, 2001c; Newport, 2009), and the most reliable estimates are that about 20 to 25 percent attend church weekly (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves, 1993). These represent higher rates of church membership and attendance than in most of Latin America and Europe. For example, weekly church attendance averages around 3 or 4 percent in Sweden and Norway (Church of Norway, 1996; Church of Sweden, 1996), and is also quite low in France, ranging from 4 to 10 percent (Alston, 1975), and in Great Britain, about 10 percent (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves, 1993). According to the World Values Survey, Argentina and Chile also have lower church attendance than the United States, though higher than most of Europe (Institute for Social Research, 2000). Americans are also more likely than people in most other countries to view religion as an important source of strength and comfort in their lives (World Values Study Group, 1994).

Why are Americans more religious than people in other countries? One reason can be found in their ethnic diversity (Abramson, 1980; Parillo, 1994, p. 453). Often religion is tied to ethnicity: Swedish and Norwegian Americans are mostly

Lutheran; Italian, Latino, and, in many cases, Irish Americans are Catholic; Scottish Americans are mostly Presbyterian; and many Americans of English ancestry belong to the Episcopal Church, the American organization of the Anglican Church. Several large denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal (a.m.e.) Church and National Baptist Convention, have predominantly African American memberships, and some churches, such as the Greek Orthodox, even have names that identify ethnicity. Thus, church involvement to some extent represents an expression of ethnic identity, making it appealing in an ethnically diverse

society like the United States.

Second, in the United States, there is competition among many denominations and religious movements (Finke and Stark, 1992; Butler, 1990). This is a stark contrast to many European and Latin American countries, in which one religion overwhelmingly dominates. England, Norway, and Sweden, for example, have national churches to which most of the population belongs, yet few people attend services regularly. In Norway, for example, 88 percent of the population belongs to the Church of Norway, but only 3 percent attend church in an average week (Church of Norway, 1996). Similarly, France and most Latin American countries are overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, but again, fewer people attend church on a weekly basis than in the United States. Even in colonial New England, when nearly everyone was Puritan, church membership was far lower than it is in the context of today's religious diversity (Finke and Stark, 1992). About the only exceptions to this pattern among western societies are found in Ireland and Quebec, and in both cases, being Catholic is seen as a symbol of rebellion against domination—by England in the case of Ireland, and by English-speaking Canadians in the case of Quebec (Finke and Stark, 1992).

Finally, Americans as we enter the twenty-first century are more religious than were Americans in the nation's early history. Early Americans brought the low levels of church membership of Europe with them. According to calculations by Finke

and Stark (1992, p. 16), only about 17 percent of Americans were church members in 1776. But as new religions sprang up and competition among churches increased, so did membership. In other words, once people had choices of different churches and belief systems, rather than one institutionalized church, more of them joined. Church membership roughly doubled, to around 35 percent, during the first century of U.S. history, and had reached 60 percent by the mid-twentieth century. Since then it has remained at that level or a little higher. While about two-thirds of Americans in 2001 were church members, over 90 percent identified with some religion. As suggested by Figure B.1, around 80 percent of Americans identify with some Christian church, that is, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Mormon, or some nondenominational Christian congregation. The two largest non-Christian religions in the United States are Judaism and Islam. About 1 percent of the population is Jewish, and a similar percentage is Muslim. Although Americans are more religious than people in other countries and more religious than in the past, there signs that this may be changing. For example, between 1990 and 2008 the percentage of Americans identifying with no religion nearly doubled, from 8 to 15 percent (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009). And among those between eighteen and twenty-nine, 22 percent identified with no religion in 2008.

Types of Organized Religion

As you can see, most of the major world religions include subdivisions: Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims; Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians; Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox Jews; Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhists. Such subdivisions can be placed along a continuum of different types, ranging from a church at one end to a sect at the other. Intermediate types include the denomination and the institutionalized sect.

Churches and Sects

Although the concepts of church and sect were introduced by Max Weber, it was his student, Ernst Troeltsch (1932), who first developed a system to classify religious groups according to these concepts. A **church** can be defined as a religion with

a formal hierarchy (including professional clergy), an established set of rules and procedures, and a relatively diverse membership. In its purest form, as exemplified by the medieval Roman Catholic Church, it exercises religious monopoly and is closely tied to the state (Johnstone, 1992, p. 86). Although churches usually accept converts, they get most of their new members by baptizing or otherwise admitting the children of current members. Churches usually have full-time, professional **clergy** who have religious authority and occupy a status distinct from that of the **laity** or general membership.

At the other end of the continuum is the **sect**, a relatively dogmatic and homogeneous group that is not well integrated into society and lacks bureaucracy and hierarchy (Iannaccone, 1988). Clergy and laity are less separate from one another, and sects often have part-time rather than professional clergy. Sects are usually small—often deliberately so—and the members of such groups know one another well.

As a general rule, churches support the beliefs of the larger society within which they exist, while sects see society as having chosen evil ways (Johnson, 1963; Stark and Bainbridge, 1981). For this reason, sects typically encourage their members to withdraw and avoid society's bad influences. A smaller number of sects actively try to change society. Usually, sects grow out of more established churches when members become disenchanted, perceiving that the church has forgotten its principles (Wilson, 1959, 1961, 1985). They view themselves as the true believers. They recruit most of their members as adult converts who are alienated from an established church.

The theologian H. Reinhold Niebuhr (1929) and the sociologist Liston Pope (1942) added important insights about the social forces that lead people to identify with either churches or sects. It was already noted that sects tend to be more homogeneous than churches; also, they draw their membership mainly from the lower social classes. According to Liston Pope, this happens because people who join sects use the sect as a way of compensating for what society does not offer them: They substitute religious status for social status. Such a person might say, "I don't have a fancy car or house, but I do have true religion and I'm a lot closer to God than the people who have

all those fancy things.” Thus, identifying with a sect becomes a means by which people can deal with feelings of economic or social deprivation (Glock, 1964).

Denominations

It is clear that many religious organizations fall somewhere between churches and sects—a reality that led Niebuhr (1929) to introduce the idea of a continuum between church and sect (Figure B.2). Close to the church is the **denomination**. The main difference is that denominations do not have a monopoly nor do they usually have official state recognition.

They are, however, on reasonably good terms with the government and, usually, with other denominations. Like churches, they get most of their members through births to existing members, and when they recruit, it is from the unchurched or in faraway missionary efforts, as opposed to “raiding” other denominations for members. Like churches, they draw most of their members from the middle and upper classes. American religion is highly denominational (Greeley, 1972); major denominations include Roman Catholics, Methodists, the United Church of Christ, several Baptist denominations, Episcopalians, two Lutheran denominations, Presbyterians, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, and three Jewish denominations. This reflects that, as societies have industrialized and democratized, the notion of a state-sponsored religion has generally been dropped in favor of religious freedom; most industrial democracies are also denominational (Johnstone, 1992, p. 170), though not necessarily to the same extent as the United States. The difference between sects and denominations—the two most common forms of religious organization in industrialized countries—is summarized in Table B.1.

Institutionalized Sects

A step closer to the sect end of the continuum is the institutionalized sect. This includes groups that in one way or another oppose society’s values, yet have become institutionalized and more hierarchical and bureaucratic than true sects. Institutionalized sects may either withdraw from society and form their own communities—the Amish and Hutterites, for example—or may seek to reform society through political action and social-service activities, as in the case of the Quakers. As a general rule, a sect will either move toward institutionalization over time, or fade away (Johnstone, 1992). Why does this happen? In order to become self-perpetuating, a sect must become bureaucratic—just as is true of other formal organizations, as discussed in Chapter 9. Also, if a sect grows over time, it almost inevitably becomes more diverse, lessening its ability to hold to a strict, narrow set of beliefs. Some of today’s major denominations, including the Methodist Church (the second-largest Protestant church in the United States), began as sects but gradually evolved into denominations (Harrell, 1967; Johnstone, 1992; Niebuhr, 1929). Many other sects, unable or unwilling to make this transition, gradually died out.

Cults

A **cult** is a religion that is totally withdrawn from, and often at odds with, the religious traditions of a society. Although there is a great deal of similarity between cults and sects, there are also important differences. Sects often arise from established denominations and attempt to renew a society’s traditional religious values. Cults, in contrast, promote values and behaviors that deviate greatly from established norms (Stark, 1985). Often,

Figure B.2 The Continuum from Sect to Church

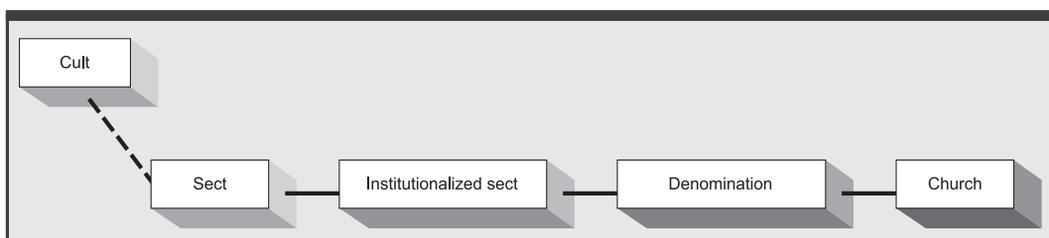


Table B.1 Comparison of the Sect and the Denomination

Characteristic	Sect	Denomination
Size	Small	Large
Relationship with other religious groups	Rejects other groups—feels that the sect alone has the truth	Accepts other denominations and is able to work with them in harmony
Wealth (church property), buildings, salary of clergy, income of members	Limited	Extensive
Religious services	Emotional emphasis—try to recapture conversion thrill; informal, extensive congregational participation	Intellectual emphasis—concern with teachings, formal, limited congregational participation
Clergy	Unspecialized; little if any professional training; frequently part-time	Specialized, professionally trained, full-time
Doctrines	Literal interpretations of scripture; emphasis upon otherworldly rewards	Liberal interpretations of scripture; emphasis upon rewards in this world
Membership recruitment	Conversion experience; emotional commitment	Born into group or ritualistic requirements; intellectual commitment
Relationship with secular world	“At war” with the secular world, which is defined as evil	Endorses prevailing culture and social organization
Social class of members	Mainly lower class	Mainly middle class

Source: Glenn Vernon, *Sociology and Religion*. Copyright © 1962 by McGraw-Hill, Inc. Reprinted by permission of McGraw-Hill, Inc.

they center around claims of new and different revelations. Because cults reject many basic societal values, they may consciously isolate their converts from the larger society to maintain their influence. Such isolation and secrecy is sometimes considered a defining characteristic of a cult (Weber, 1999). Consequently, some cults have been accused of kidnapping and “brainwashing” their members. In some cases, relatives have had members forcibly removed from the cult and “deprogrammed.” Examples of current and recent cults in the United States are Scientology, the People’s Temple, the Children of God, the Unification Church, the Divine Light Missions, Hare Krishna, and the cult of Rajneesh.

Cults often form around a charismatic leader. Among the better-known cult figures is the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who organized the Unification Church in South Korea. Moon’s church later spread to the United States, for a time claiming thousands of members. In the 1970s, the “15-year-old Perfect Master,” Guru Maharaj Ji, led the Divine Light Missions; and in the 1980s, the

guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh organized a commune in Oregon.

Occasionally, the combined influence of an unquestioned leader and the intense beliefs of the members leads to tragedy. One such case involved the Reverend Jim Jones, founder of the People’s Temple. In 1978, Jones ordered the mass suicide of the cult’s 900 members. Similarly, David Koresh led a cult known as the Branch Davidians in a seven-week standoff with federal authorities in 1993. It began with a shootout that killed four federal agents and six cult members, and ended with the fiery deaths of eighty cult members when the cult’s compound was set afire in response to federal agents’ efforts to force a surrender. In 1997, a mysterious leader called “Do” led the Heaven’s Gate cult in San Diego to a mass suicide, resulting in thirty-nine deaths. A new twist in this event is that many of those who died were professional Web page designers, and the Web played a key role in the group’s efforts to attract new members. In Uganda in 2000, a former Roman Catholic priest, Father Dominic Katabaabo, led more than 300

people to their deaths in yet another mass suicide. In this case, as in Jonestown and some others, there is evidence that only some who died committed suicide—others may have been killed by fellow cult members.

Although cults are qualitatively different from sects (they appear separately with a dotted line between them in Figure B.2), they do share one thing not yet mentioned. In general, they must choose either to disappear or to become more like a denomination. Because cults often revolve around one individual, they may end with the death or social demise of their leader. The Rajneesh movement in the United States, for example, ended abruptly when the guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was deported. Sometimes, however, cults evolve into denominations. The Christian Science church in the United States, today clearly a denomination, began as a cult led by Mary Baker Eddy. Similarly, the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims) began as a small group of followers of the Reverend Elijah Muhammad, but later evolved into a large, complex organization with a new name and a stance closer to that of orthodox Islam. Ironically, some of its followers came to feel that it had moved too far from its roots, and under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan formed a new group (using the original Nation of Islam name) with a message closer to Elijah Muhammad's original separatist message. During the 1980s and 1990s, Farrakhan drew large crowds at speeches throughout the country, and membership in the Nation of Islam grew. Thus, just as cults and sects can evolve into denominations, such denominations can give rise to new sects. A current example of a cult that may be making the transition toward being a denomination is the Church of Scientology.

In some cases cults can form when charismatic leaders gain control of sects. The Branch Davidians existed for many years as a sect that had arisen from the Seventh-Day Adventist religion. However, it became a cult when David Koresh took control from its previous leaders and began stockpiling weapons and preaching impending doom. Like many cults, the Branch Davidians became totally centered around the personality of their leader, Koresh, who eventually led them in a self-destructive direction.

Religion and the Economy: Weber and the Protestant Ethic

We noted earlier the association between industrial democracy and denominational society as well as the tendency for religious beliefs and social structures to match one another. Max Weber, the sociologist, is probably most responsible for bringing this to general attention. While Marx saw religion as reflecting and reinforcing economic arrangements, Weber believed that religious beliefs could actually influence the nature of the economy. He explained his theory in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Weber's work focused around those factors that gave rise to capitalism. Although he acknowledged the important roles played by increased agricultural production, industrial technology, and improvements in transportation and sanitation, he considered the decisive factor to be neither science nor technology, but rather the emergence of new values associated with the rise of Protestantism. Weber viewed the notion of predetermination in Calvinism as crucial to the development of materialism. Calvinism held that God knew all along who would be saved and who would not: It was predetermined whether a person would go to heaven or hell. Therefore, Calvinists saw it as unlikely that a perfect God would contradict himself by rewarding a person who was damned with material goods in this life. Thus, worldly wealth was taken as a sign that a person would be saved, while poverty was taken as a sign that a person would be condemned to hell. Since nobody knew for certain how much wealth was a sign that one was saved, there was always an incentive to work harder and amass more wealth. In this way Calvinism encouraged people to place greater emphasis on material success. This lifestyle of hard work, frugality, and individualism came to be known as the **Protestant Ethic**. Clearly, such a religious belief system provided strong ideological support for capitalism. In promoting this more secular view of the world, Calvinism unintentionally paved the way for a major restructuring of economic life.

Weber's analysis of the conditions that gave rise to the development of capitalism was not limited to Europe. He also examined Eastern societies and religions, noting where conditions matched or differed from those in the West. He argued, for

example, that although trade and manufacture had reached fairly high levels in both India and China, the religious beliefs and practices in those societies inhibited the development of capitalism. Regarding India, Hinduism stressed the importance of a frugal and ascetic lifestyle, much as did Calvinism. However, the purpose of this lifestyle was not to enable a person to maximize wealth, as in Calvinism, but rather to separate the Hindu from the material world. Likewise, in China, the ethical principles embodied in Confucianism did not promote the pursuit of wealth and material success.

Weber's explanation of why capitalism emerged in the West focused on, but was not limited to, religious factors. He identified a number of socioeconomic factors that he also considered necessary for the development of capitalism. Most of these factors centered around the concept of rationalization, discussed in Chapter 9. However, Weber's most central argument was that Protestant religious beliefs produced a cultural environment supportive of the development of capitalism.

Impact of Weber's Theory

Weber's theory created a great deal of controversy. Some critics questioned his accuracy in describing different religions and claimed that he lacked empirical evidence for his arguments and that he distorted his concept of "Modern capitalism" so that it would fit specific features of Calvinism. Nevertheless, Weber's thesis on the Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism is a seminal work in the sociology of religion. According to Andrew Greeley (1972), Weber's theory has had a greater impact on modern-day theories about the relationship between religion and society than any other work. It has also inspired research on other ways in which Calvinism may have helped to transform society, for example by contributing to the emergence of national governments (Gorski, 1993).

Weber's theory that religion and society mutually influence each other represents a complex theoretical model, in that it recognizes that each variable—religion and society—operates as both cause and effect. This complexity has hindered efforts to devise a conclusive test of his hypothesis. There are, for example, a variety of alternative explanations that may account for the rise of Calvinism and capitalism during the same general period in history (Johnstone, 1992, pp. 167–69). Even so, there are clearly a number of

ways in which Calvinism could have facilitated the rise of capitalism (Rachfall, quoted in Samuelson, 1961). For this reason, Weber's work has remained influential in the sociological study of both religion and economics.

If the specific relationship between Calvinism and capitalism continues to be debated, the notion of a two-way relationship between religion and the nature of society is not a matter of debate among sociologists. In the United States, one of the first comprehensive studies of this relationship, *The Religious Factor*, was published by Gerhard Lenski in 1958 (rev. ed., Lenski and Lenski, 1963). Lenski demonstrated that religion was linked to economics, politics, family life, education, and science in the United States.

On the other hand, the distinctive features of Protestant theology that may have given rise to capitalism are no longer so distinctive, at least within industrial societies. The theological differences between American Protestants and Catholics, for example, have narrowed, and the two groups no longer vary significantly in their work-related values. As a result, Protestants and Catholics today have similar income and education levels, although various Protestant denominations vary widely in this regard (Greeley, 1977; Roof, 1979).

On the worldwide level, though, there continue to be significant social and cultural differences between countries with a Protestant history and countries with Catholic, Orthodox, Confucian, or communist histories (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). For example, historically Protestant, communist, and Confucian countries all are toward the secular rather than traditional end of the scale, but vary widely in their emphasis of self-expression versus survival. Historically Protestant countries emphasize self-expression; historically communist countries emphasize survival, and formerly Confucian countries are in the middle. Historically Catholic countries, like Confucian ones, are in the middle between survival and self-expression, but they are less secular and more traditional than countries with any of the other three histories (Protestant, Communist, or Confucian) (Inglehart and Baker, 2000).

Church and State in America

Although Lenski was the first American to measure comprehensively the mutual influences between

religion and other major social institutions, the idea that a fine line existed between religion and politics has long been a part of American thought. In formal recognition of the potential influence that the church and the state could exert upon one another, the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights (1791) forbade Congress from passing any law “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

According to John Wilson (1978), there are a number of reasons why the framers of the Bill of Rights chose both to protect freedom of religion and to forbid any official, state establishment of religion. For one thing, many groups, such as Mennonites, Catholics, and Puritans, came to North America to escape persecution in Europe, where other religions were officially established. Moreover, with the large variety of religious groups that existed, freedom of religion—with no one established church—was necessary in order for cooperation and harmony in society. It would also encourage continued immigration, which would lead to the growth of the new nation. There were also many who did not go to church—only one in eight Americans was a church member when the Constitution was framed—so there was also a perceived need to protect the right *not* to be religious. In general, the dominant values of the new nation—liberalism and pluralism—emphasized freedom of choice and individualism in most areas of life, including religion.

The framers also had role models for freedom of religion: in England, where freedom of religion increased after the Glorious Revolution of 1688; in colonies such as Pennsylvania that practiced freedom of religion; and in French prerevolutionary ideas of egalitarianism and deism, which held that God had created the world and then left it to function according to natural laws. The Great Awakening, a religious revival in the mid-eighteenth century, further emphasized nonconformist ideas, and freemasonry, popular among the leaders of the era, advocated religious tolerance. Thus, a variety of social forces led to the protection of freedom of religion and to the separation of church and state.

Civil Religion

Although the First Amendment prevented the government from establishing or prohibiting any one

religion, it did not ensure the complete separation of religion and politics. In fact, general, nondenominational religious themes have long been present in American government and political life. Sociologist Robert Bellah (1970) has referred to this pattern as **civil religion**, arguing that it represents a form of institutionalized religion, though not an established church, in the United States. Bellah notes that although speeches by American presidents on solemn occasions almost invariably contain references to God, these references are neither to Christ nor to any specific deity.

Thus, civil religion plays an important political role within a society. By referring to the sovereignty of God, civil religion teaches that the laws and traditions of U.S. society are sanctioned by God and are therefore good. President Dwight Eisenhower expressed this view when he asserted that “our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is” (quoted in Nash et al., 1986, p. 895). Even today, a president who is being inaugurated takes the oath of office with one hand on the Bible, implying that the chief executive must answer to a higher authority than even the will of the people. Thus, civil religion serves as a means of social control (see Chapter 10) by promoting nationalism and conformity to prevailing social norms.

A good illustration of this function occurred in the 1950s when Congress voted to add the phrase “under God” to the “Pledge of Allegiance” and “In God We Trust” to all U.S. currency. Congress took these actions during the height of the Cold War to emphasize the distinction between the “God-fearing” United States and “atheistic communism.”

You might ask how the concept of God can play any role in the political realm given the separation of church and state. According to Bellah, the separation of church and state did not deprive politics of a religious dimension. Although personal religious beliefs are regarded as strictly private, Americans have since the beginning of the republic shared certain religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals. Thanksgiving, a day that “serves to integrate the family into the civil religion,” and Memorial Day, which serves “to integrate the local community into the national cult,” are both occasions for the public expression of Americans’ civil religion (Bellah, 1970).

Thus, civil religion serves the functions of integration and social control. Although the

importance of these functions can be debated, it is clear that many Americans place great value upon them. In fact, belief in God appears to be a prerequisite for those seeking the presidency of the United States. According to a 2007 Gallup Poll, less than half (45 percent) of Americans would vote for an atheist for president (Jones, 2007).

Religion and Politics in America

The role played by religion has varied at different times in American history; both reform movements and conservative movements have drawn strong support from religion. According to the French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited America in 1831, religion played a strong role in the

emergence of democracy. He wrote in his famous book *Democracy in America* that religion “contributed powerfully to the establishment of a republic and a democracy in public affairs.”

The Nineteenth Century

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the United States experienced a period of humanitarian and social reform that evolved from the major religious movements of that time. Proponents of such reforms as temperance, women’s rights, peace, and the humane treatment of prisoners and the mentally ill drew much of their inspiration from religious revivalism (Unger, 1989, pp. 318–29). Perhaps the most significant of these movements was the drive to abolish slavery. Religion played an important role within both the African American



UNDERSTANDING RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

The Black Church in America

The black church serves as a home to many of its members. It cooks suppers, plans outings, arranges picnics, conducts bingo games, provides day care for children, and lends money. All of this has a familiar, small-town quality, even when it occurs within the setting of a large city. In Lenski’s terms, the black church forms a strong communal bond. Homey or not, the black church contains tensions and contradictions.

In fact, many scholars question whether we should use the term “black church” at all. There is no single African American church in the United States. Rather, the term refers to a collection of mainly Protestant denominations that emerged in response to racial discrimination and the need of African Americans to achieve some measure of self-identity and independence. Most of these denominations can be described as evangelical; that is, they accept the Bible as the word of God, emphasize salvation in the next life, and stress emotional expression in their services. Critical to many black denominations is the idea of a personal conversion and a direct relationship with God. As a regular participant in the Wednesday evening prayer services in a southern church explained, when troubled worshippers “testify” and wail and speak in tongues, “They go and leave their burdens at the altar. It’s like a service station. You go there ‘to get filled up.’”

How and why did the black church emerge as a separate entity? The answer lies in the history of the racial caste system in the United States. By the early 1800s, U.S. slave owners had decided that slaves should be converted to Christianity but should also remain in bondage. To justify this apparent contradiction, they argued that the Christian’s duty was to obey God, and the slave’s duty was to obey his or her master. All of the faithful would then be rewarded in the next life.

At first, owners and slaves worshipped together, although blacks were usually forced to sit in the church balcony. Gradually, however, blacks splintered off from the white congregations. In the North, the first all-black denominations were the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (organized in 1796) and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816). Not surprisingly, black Christianity adopted certain distinctive features. Perhaps the most significant was identification with the Israelites of the Old Testament. Many black prayers and hymns expressed the same hope of liberation from bondage and suffering that was so common in the nation of Israel in that time period.

The transition from interracial to all-black congregations increased dramatically following the abolition of slavery in 1865. As society became segregated (see Chapter 7), so did religion. In addition to their

and white segments of the abolitionist movement. Some of the leading black abolitionists such as the Rev. Moses Dickson were ministers, while others such as Sojourner Truth used religious arguments to move their audiences against slavery. Many leading white abolitionists, including Theodore Weld, Henry Ward Beecher, and Elijah Lovejoy, were closely associated with liberal Protestant denominations.

The Twentieth Century

The interaction of religion and politics continued through the twentieth century. This activity included the full range of political orientations: radical, liberal, conservative, and reactionary. One example of the last can be seen in the activities during the 1930s and 1940s of Father Charles

Coughlin, a Detroit priest. He broadcast a national radio program and published a newspaper entitled *Social Justice* in which he espoused extreme anticommunism and anti-Semitism. Among other things, he stated his support in 1938 for the Nazi persecution of Jews, arguing that it was necessary to stop the spread of communism (Goren, 1980, p. 591). His position was endorsed by several diocesan Catholic newspapers, although other Catholics vigorously opposed it.

Another example of the interaction between religion and politics occurred in the 1960s, when religious values contributed to a period of social reform, as they had before the Civil War. As discussed in the box “The Black Church in America,” religion played a major role in the movement for racial equality. Many religious leaders, including

religious function, African American churches offered the ex-slaves an opportunity to learn to read, to vote (at least for church officials), and to find some personal dignity in a racist society. As time passed, the role of the church in promoting education became especially important. The church was deeply involved in building and supporting schools, and ministers were among the best-educated members of the African American community.

Not surprisingly, given its prominent position within the black community, the black church played a vital role in the struggle for racial equality in the twentieth century. Many African American religious leaders—including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson—became leaders in the movement for black equality. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an association of black ministers that was created during the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–1956, became one of the major organizations of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Churches often served as meeting places, and civil rights marches frequently were accompanied by the sounds of hymns and gospel music.

Today, the black church faces many challenges. Some young African Americans are now turning to secular organizations for help in overcoming barriers to mobility and equality. At the same time, the success of the Civil Rights movement in eliminating legal segregation has raised questions among some concerning the appropriateness of racially separate churches. If and when the United States achieves racial justice and equality, will blacks and whites worship together as one community? Until that time, the

black church will continue to be a core institution in the African American community, playing many important roles. Certainly this remains the case today: recent survey research continues to show that African Americans are more involved in religion than whites, both in the public context, as measured by church attendance, and privately, as measured by the reading of religious materials. These differences persist even after controls for other social factors that influence religious involvement (Chatters and Taylor, 1998). Nonetheless, the percentage identifying with no religion has risen recently among African Americans, but it remains lower than in other racial groups.

Source: Ezra E. H. Griffith, Thelouiz English, and Violet Mayfield. 1980. “Possession, Prayer, and Testimony: Therapeutic Aspects of the Wednesday Night Meetings in a Black Church.” *Psychiatry* 45: 120–28; Gerhard Lenski. 1961. *The Religious Factor* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday); Ronald L. Johnstone. 1988. *Religion in Society*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall); Suzanne T. Ortega et al. 1983. “Race Differences in Elderly Personal Well-Being: Friendship, Family and Church.” *Research-on-Aging* 5: 101–18; Aldon Morris. 1980. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press); and Linda Chatters and Robert Taylor. 1998. “Religious Involvement Among African Americans.” *African American Research Perspectives* 4, 1. Also available on World Wide Web, <http://www.isr.umich.edu/rcgd/prba/persp/spring1998/chatters.pdf>.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., were also active in opposing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. For example, Daniel and Philip Berrigan were Catholic priests who engaged in many antiwar protests. In the 1980s, religious figures were among those who called for an end to the nuclear arms race and for increased aid to the poor and homeless. Also in the 1980s, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops took the position that the American economic system inherently produces social injustice—a position that angered Catholic conservatives and was openly criticized from the pulpit by a few Catholic priests. Religion has also played a major role in recent public debates over such issues as abortion, government policy toward the family, and whether restrictions should be applied to the availability of sexually explicit materials and performances. In 1991, for example, when over 2,000 people were arrested for blocking access to an abortion clinic in Wichita, Kansas, nearly 100 of them were clergy members. In recent years, several Catholic bishops have denied communion to Catholic politicians who have voted to keep abortion legal. Catholic priests and fundamentalist Protestant ministers have been heavily involved in the antiabortion movement; on the other hand, clergy from liberal Protestant and Jewish denominations have often been vocal supporters of abortion rights.

Fundamentalism and the New Religious Right

The battle over abortion illustrates an important recent trend in the relationship between religion and politics: increased political activism by and support for religious fundamentalists. **Fundamentalism** can be defined as a form of religion characterized by strict and unambiguous rules, and by literal and dogmatic acceptance of scripture exactly as written. In the United States, fundamentalist Christians have become increasingly involved in politics since the mid-1970s, through such organizations as the Christian Coalition and its predecessor, the Moral

Majority. To a large extent, fundamentalism has been a Protestant movement, supported largely by Southern Baptists and by members of a variety of evangelical churches and sects. However, there is a comparable movement among conservative Catholics, who have provided much of the support for groups such as the Eagle Forum. The political agenda of religious conservatives has centered on opposition to legal abortion; support for prayer in the public schools; opposition to laws forbidding discrimination against homosexuals; opposition to school-based family-planning clinics and to sex education in the schools; and support for greater restriction of sexually explicit books, art, videos, and performances. Many of these groups also generally oppose the teaching of evolution in the schools, because they believe that this is contrary to a literal interpretation of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, which states that God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh day.

This movement, sometimes referred to as the religious right, has used four major approaches, two of which reflect modern technology and partially account for its increased influence in the “electronic era.”

Televangelism

One technique is televangelism—religious programming broadcast over television. Although



Demonstrators for and against same-sex marriage protest during a rally in front of a federal courthouse in San Francisco, Monday, Jan. 11, 2010. The first federal trial to determine if the U.S. Constitution prohibits states from outlawing same-sex marriage got under way in San Francisco that Monday, and the two gay couples on whose behalf the case was brought were among the first witnesses. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma)

televangelism has existed for as long as television (in fact, religious broadcasting goes back to the early days of radio), its influence increased after about 1970, for two reasons. First, cable television has made it economically feasible to broadcast to an audience that may be limited in any locality, yet sizable on a national scale. Second, religious organizations have increased their ownership of television and radio stations; by 1980, they owned 1,400 radio stations and 60 television stations (Johnstone, 1992, p. 149). In addition, several nationwide cable television networks are also owned by religious organizations. An analysis of several studies estimating the size of the audience during the 1980s suggests that the audience for religious programming during that decade averaged somewhere between 10 and 20 million (Auter and Lane, 1998). Given the increased availability of cable TV since then, it is likely a little larger than that today.

According to sociologists Jeffrey Hadden and Charles Swann (1981), the television preachers appeal to many people because they present simple, certain, and clear-cut answers. In so doing, they offer a refuge from the confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity associated with modern society. Television, of course, is a two-edged sword. In the mid-1980s, the influence of television evangelists was sharply curtailed by widely publicized scandals involving televangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart.

Direct Mail

The second modern technique used by the religious right is direct mail, especially computerized files of supporters and computerized label generation. This technology permits various organizations to share lists of supporters, and it allows for quick appeals for funds, votes, and signatures on preprinted letters to politicians. Direct mail has been used both by religious organizations themselves and by political organizations that work closely with them, such as NCPAC (National Conservative Political Action Committee) and the National Right to Life Committee.

Mobilizing Congregations

The third technique used by the religious right is mobilization of congregations. Issues such as abortion, school prayer, evolution, and homosexuality are regularly addressed from the pulpit, and

congregations are sometimes mobilized for political actions, such as right-to-life marches or attendance at presidential caucuses. The weekend before the 1988 election, parking lots of Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant churches were leafleted in support of Republican George Bush by right-to-life organizations. Sometimes the effort was enhanced by sermons inside the church on the abortion issue.

In 1992 and 1993, local congregations became increasingly involved in efforts to elect fundamentalists to local governmental units such as school boards. This occurred everywhere from small towns in the Midwest and South to San Diego and New York City. In one Iowa town, a church-based campaign led to the election of a write-in slate of candidates that the local press did not even know about. More recently, in states that have legalized gay marriage, churchgoers have been mobilized in opposition, resulting in the reversal of laws legalizing gay marriage in California and Maine.

Christian Schools

While not directly a tool of political action, Christian schools have played an increasingly important role in shaping and building support for the religious right's political agenda (Rose, 1988, p. 26). By the late 1980s, one out of five private school students was enrolled in an evangelical Christian school (Rose, 1988). Christian schools grew rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, as fundamentalists increasingly perceived the public schools as falling under control of the evil forces of modernism and secular humanism—a philosophy basing right and wrong on principles derived from reasoning rather than absolute, God-given rules. Fundamentalists saw certain educational practices such as value clarification; the teaching of gender equality, evolution, and sex education; and the absence of organized prayer in public schools as teaching their children to be godless. This set of fundamentalist values was based on the notion that Biblical revelation, not science, was the source of truth (Rose, 1988; Ammerman, 1987). The fundamentalists also viewed these educational practices as part of a political agenda that violated their freedom to raise their children the way they wanted (Ammerman, 1987, p. 201). Their response was to take their children out of the public schools and enroll them in their own Christian schools, teaching their own values. As a result of the growth of Christian schools, the

fundamentalists became progressively less willing to support public education, which they increasingly saw as having hopelessly fallen to the evils of secular humanism and modernism.

Religion and Politics: The Current Scene

As fundamentalists and their opponents have mobilized, religious conflict has increasingly been acted out in the political arena. The current situation presents a sharp contrast to earlier eras when religious conflict, though common, was denominational in nature. In the 1928 elections, for example, Democrat Al Smith was rejected for the presidency largely because he was a Catholic. Today, religious conflict is occurring between a coalition of conservatives and fundamentalists on the one hand, and a coalition composed of liberals and the nonreligious on the other. Thus, conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Jews are pitted against liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, as well as the nonreligious. The battle today centers around the issues mentioned previously, such as abortion, school prayer, gay rights, sexual freedom, and censorship of sexually explicit art and music. Religious conservatives seek to legislate behavior in accordance with their religious precepts, arguing that America is a religious nation and that this should be recognized explicitly. Religious liberals and the nonreligious argue that religious beliefs are a matter of personal conscience that cannot and should not be legislated, and that attempts to do so are likely to restrict personal freedom and lead to discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs and personal behaviors.

While the reasons for this growing conflict will be explored in the next section of this chapter, the resultant battles have been evident in a number of ways in recent years. The campaigns of the fundamentalist televangelist Pat Robertson and the liberal African American minister Jesse Jackson for the presidency in 1988 are one example. Though their political positions were diametrically opposed, both drew strong followings. Jackson ran a strong second in the primaries and caucuses, outlasting a number of other candidates. However, both also drew strong negatives; many voters were unwilling to vote for either, owing to a widespread perception

that each was rather extreme and uncompromising in his views.

As the possibility of a Supreme Court ruling banning abortion appeared to loom in the early 1990s, the abortion battles escalated, with continued strong religious involvement on both sides. When the Court eventually reaffirmed the right to abortion in 1992 (while allowing previously forbidden state regulation of it), religious conservatives redoubled their efforts. At the 1992 Republican convention, the religious right played a highly visible role. Strongly worded speeches were made by Pat Robertson and Pat Buchanan, a conservative Catholic who campaigned against incumbent president George Bush in the primaries. Buchanan's call to "religious war," noted earlier in this chapter, appeared to frighten many moderates and contributed to George Bush's loss to Bill Clinton in November 1992. This event, and the backlash it generated, may have marked the peak of the religious right's political influence. Buchanan himself drew very little support in subsequent campaigns, and in the 2000 elections, both candidates, George W. Bush and Al Gore, tried their best to avoid religious and cultural issues such as the abortion debate. However, religious fundamentalists were active behind the scenes in support of Bush, and Gore got strong support from both religious liberals and secularists. Thus, as was reaffirmed by public opinion polls (for example, Gallup Organization, 2000b), the influence of religion in 2000 was quieter but still significant. The religious right was again influential in the 2004 reelection of president George W. Bush but swiftly lost sway again with the decline in popularity of the administration starting in the fall of 2005. And in the last few years, many young Evangelicals have moved away from the religious right, focusing instead on issues such as poverty and environmental destruction as moral issues, or on religion more so than politics (Sullivan, 2010, Banerjee, 2008).

The backlash against Buchanan in 1992, along with the failure of the candidacies of Robertson, Jackson, and Buchanan, illustrates an important point. On the one hand, religion plays an important role in U.S. politics. But on the other hand, many Americans find religious appeals either frightening or irrelevant to their economic concerns. This limits the power of both the religious right and liberal

religious activists such as Jesse Jackson and the Berrigans. Dionne (1991) argues that the growing influence of cultural issues in politics during the 1970s and 1980s, including issues linked to religion, is one reason that U.S. voter turnout fell during those decades. Voters were more concerned about economic issues that were then falling by the wayside. When the debate focused on issues of less immediate concern to many voters, such as school prayer, censorship, and so forth, many voters lost interest and stayed home instead of voting. In the short run, according to Dionne, these issues, which were emphasized by both political parties from 1972 through 1988, helped the Republicans, because religious conservatism and fear of change influenced more voters than cultural liberalism. However, in the 1992 elections, the Republicans emphasized these issues at their convention while the Democrats focused on the economy, and the Democrats won. While the role of religion in political debate has diminished somewhat since 1992, there is still polarization between those who believe that their religious beliefs should form the basis for the resolution of a variety of social issues, and those who believe that those issues must be resolved in a manner free of religious influence. Additionally, as noted above, the percentage of Americans identifying with no religion nearly doubled between 1990 and 2008, with the biggest increase among people under thirty—a trend that suggests secularization among the larger society. In our next section, we will examine this issue in depth.

Two Opposing Trends: Secularization and Fundamentalist Revival

It is becoming increasingly evident to sociologists that, as societies modernize, two opposing trends are often unleashed: secularization and fundamentalist revival (Ammerman, 1987, p. 18; Bruce, 1988). We shall first discuss secularization, then examine how it often breeds fundamentalist revival as a response.

A Trend Toward Secularization?

Most definitions of **secularization** include two central ideas: (1) increasing reliance on science rather than religion to explain reality; and (2) greater distinction between the religious and the profane (secular), with important ideas such as those about the basis of life or behavior increasingly coming from the secular rather than the religious realm (Hargrove, 1979; Johnstone, 1992, pp. 316–20). Some sociologists see secularization as a long-term social trend that necessarily accompanies modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. The term itself dates to the Renaissance period, when it was used to describe the transfer of church property to the state or private owners.

Secularization theories developed a wide audience during the 1960s and 1970s. Increased scientific knowledge—including our greater understanding of the genetic code, space travel, new theories in physics, and the growth of social science—all challenged religion as the source of knowledge and interpretation of life and the universe. According to Hargrove (1979), science provided us with an “increased ability to explain what was previously mysterious.” As people learned to rely more on science to understand their lives,



Norms of religious ritual changed drastically with the coming of industrialization and secularization. Though religion remains a key value in the lives of most people in all countries, the ways in which those values are expressed vary greatly from those of the past. Pictured is a drive-in church where worshippers may listen to the gospel from the comforts of their own car in a converted drive-in movie theater. Does this practice blur the line between the sacred and the profane? (Courtesy of Michael Flota)

secularization theorists predicted, their interest in religion would decline.

Some statistics on church membership and attendance seemed to support this conclusion. Roozen and Carroll (1979), for example, demonstrated that church attendance declined for most of the liberal Protestant denominations from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s. Hout and Greeley (1987) similarly showed that there was a large falloff in church attendance among Catholics during that same time period. The latter study found that the major reasons for this decline were opposition to the church's traditional sexual teachings and disenchantment with its authoritarian system of rules and beliefs. One could argue that science had something to do with both of these factors. Technology made it possible to have sex without producing unwanted children, which eliminated one of the traditional reasons for opposing premarital sex. Similarly, as knowledge is increasingly obtained from science, people become less likely to accept ideas solely on the authority of church officials. For many Americans, right and wrong came to be defined not by scripture or church law, but by humanist principles such as freedom of choice, self-fulfillment, and individual reasoning. Even churches themselves have become more secularized—particularly large, mainstream ones. One study of eighty-three Protestant denominations showed declining church control over agencies affiliated with the denominations: Bureaucratic rationalization, not church authority, seemed to be the dominant force driving many of the agencies (Chaves, 1993). Finke and Stark (1992) point to a similar trend of secularization within the Catholic church since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Fundamentalist Revival?

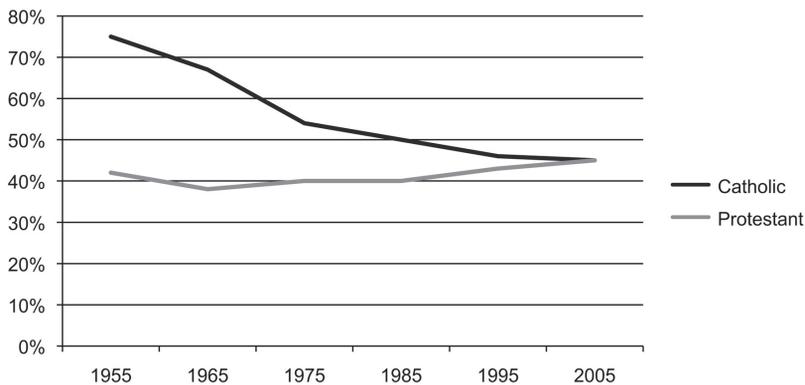
Despite these findings, secularization theories have been widely challenged since the 1980s (Sasaki and Suzuki, 1987; Greeley, 1999). Some of the challenges are methodological: It has been noted, for example, that statistics on church membership are not very reliable. Different denominations use different methods to record membership, and any conclusions drawn from these figures must be approached with caution.

More critically, some sociologists argue that the influence of religion expanded after

about 1980, at least for a time. This argument was based on the rapid growth of a number of fundamentalist denominations, and the ascending political influence of fundamentalism. This growth led to an increased emphasis on such issues as abortion, school prayer, and pornography. Moreover, as shown in Figure B.3, trend data suggest that church membership and attendance stabilized in the 1980s, and may even have increased among Protestants (Gallup, 1987; Hout and Greeley, 1987; World Almanac, 1988, p. 591). According to Hout and Greeley, the decline in Catholic church attendance slowed after 1975, and overall Protestant attendance remained stable from the 1960s through the mid-1980s. Recent data from the Gallup Poll suggest that the overall percentage attending church weekly in 2001 was about the same as it was in the early 1980s (Gallup Organization, 2001c), although there has recently been a slight decline among Catholics and a slight rise among Protestants (Gallup Organization, 2009).

It should be noted, however, that attendance figures from polls such as these suffer from overreporting. Actual observations and counts of church attendance show that the true figure for Protestant attendance in the early 1990s was probably less than 20 percent, not 40 percent as reported by Gallup, and the true figure for Catholic attendance was probably around 28 percent, not 51 percent as reported by Gallup (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves, 1993; Marler, Hadaway, and Chaves, 1998). These findings are supported by time diary studies, which did not directly ask about church attendance (and thereby encourage the socially desirable answer) but did have people keep track of what they were doing on Sundays or other days when they might have attended church. These studies suggest that only 26 percent of Americans attended church weekly in the mid-1990s (Presser and Stinson, 1998). Both the observation studies and the time diary studies suggest that people tell survey-takers that they attend church more frequently than they really do (Walsh, 1998). The survey data may accurately portray the *trend over time* in churchgoing, even while overstating it. However, there are some who argue that as church attendance has fallen compared to the 1950s and earlier, people have become more likely to tell survey-takers they went to church when they really did not. If this is the case, the fall in church attendance may be greater than the polls show, and may be continuing today,

Figure B.3 Self-Reported Church Attendance of Catholics and Protestants in the Past Week, 1955–2005



Source: Gallup Organization, 2009, Churchgoing Among U.S. Catholics Slides to Tie Protestants. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/117382/church-going-among-catholics-slides-tie-protestants.aspx> (Accessed July 30, 2010).

especially among Catholics and mainline Protestant denominations.

The data on overall church attendance mask an important fact, however: When attendance among Catholics and liberal Protestant denominations was declining, membership was rising among fundamentalist denominations (Doyle and Kelly, 1979; Kelly, 1977). During the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the Seventh-Day Adventists, Church of the Nazarene, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Reformed Church, Southern Baptist Church, and Assemblies of God all enjoyed rapid growth. Because these religious organizations offered clear answers and continued to focus on salvation, they appealed to people in a way that many of the larger churches didn't (Kelly, 1977). The stricter churches may have also grown because they don't allow room for "free-riding"—being a member of the church without contributing money, work, commitment, or even regular attendance (Iannaccone, 1994). As a result, these churches prosper because of the greater commitment of their members. The growth of the stricter, fundamentalist churches put the Catholic and liberal Protestant denominations in a bind. If they continued to emphasize traditional rules and beliefs, they would alienate their more liberal, educated, and science-oriented members, who would then stop going to church. If, on the other hand, they tried to "keep up with the times," they would place themselves in danger of alienating those seeking salvation and clear-cut answers, who would then switch to more conservative denominations. The effects of this bind can be seen in statistics showing, for

example, that weekly attendance at Catholic mass fell by about 40 percent in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Stammer, 1999).

Why Secularization and Revival?

We are left, then, with the puzzling task of explaining how such opposite trends as secularization and fundamentalist revival might be occurring at the same time, leaving the old mainstream religions caught in the middle. Part of the answer lies in distinctly American patterns. However, another part of the answer is that to some extent, secularization and fundamentalism each breed the other as a reaction, because each side sees the other as threatening. To the fundamentalist, modern humanist values threaten their ability to raise their children and live according to what they see as divinely imposed rules (Ammerman, 1987, p. 201). The more such values spread, the more threatened the fundamentalists feel. In Bruce's (1988, p. 22) words,

Conservative Protestants of the 1950s were offended by girls smoking in public. In the late 1960s girls were to be seen on news film dancing naked at open-air rock concerts. While both can be abstractly construed as culture threats, the second was taken to be a much greater threat than the first. . . . By the late 1970s, [fundamentalists] were faced with the added and more immediate threat of an increasingly secular state which acted . . . to reduce the autonomy of fundamentalist institutions.

At the same time, the advocates of freedom of choice also have felt threatened by the fundamentalists. They see threats to their personal freedom to live their lives as they choose because of fundamentalist efforts to ban abortion, censor materials they considered objectionable, forbid sex education, require school prayer, and mandate the teaching of creationism as opposed to evolution. Thus, the two sides have polarized, and the middle has not held. Such phenomena are particularly strong in the United States because it has a stronger tradition of religiosity than most countries (Jones et al., 1986). The same tensions, however, have arisen in other countries with strong religious traditions as they modernized. The best examples are Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, where reactions against modernization have brought about strong Islamic fundamentalist movements. In predominantly Shi'ite Iran, where the fundamentalist tradition was strongest, a revolution leading to the establishment of a Islamic republic was the result. In India, fundamentalism has increased among Hindus in recent years, contributing to the violence described at the beginning of this chapter. A Hindu political party has also attracted increasing popular support.

To some extent, fundamentalism grows in response to rapid social change and anomie, because it offers clear and easy answers in a time when things are generally uncertain and confusing (Ammerman, 1987; Balmer, 1989, p. 229). This may explain why fundamentalism grew following the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s; in fact, social upheaval usually does lead to a growth of religious fundamentalism (McLoughlin, 1978).

Response to accelerating social change may also help to explain why fundamentalism has become a worldwide phenomenon since World War II. More than anything else, fundamentalism reflects a rebellion against the influences of modernism. Modernism encourages independent thought, reasoning, and acceptance of difference. As societies modernize and industrialize, and as education levels rise, these values tend to spread. Indeed, it is such values that in large part contribute to secularization. But to many people, these values are seen as threatening to their traditions, and the spread of such values is often accompanied by changes that displace people from their traditional lives. As modernization has spread throughout the world, fundamentalism has arisen in some form in many of the world's major religions—not only

in Christianity, but also in Islam (as illustrated by Iran's revolution that established a Shi'ite Islamic state, and by the strict Islamic state created in Afghanistan by the Taliban when it was in power), in Judaism (as evident in the settlement movement in Israel), and in Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Sikh religion (Nielsen, 1993; Kaplan, 1992).

Because secularization and fundamentalist revival have been occurring simultaneously, we cannot clearly state that America is becoming *either* more or less religious. No great change has occurred since the mid-twentieth century in the proportion of Americans who belong to churches, although since about 1990, the percentage who identify with no religion has been rising. Therefore, sociologists argue that religion has not declined or increased so much as it has adapted to a changing environment (B. R. Wilson, 1985; Swatos, 1983; Hammond, 1985). Their arguments resemble those of Bellah (1964), discussed early in this chapter, that religion takes different forms during different periods of history. According to these sociologists, most people today clearly rely less on mystical explanations of events in the physical world, a basic tenet of secularization theory. At the same time, they continue to turn to religion for values and spiritual support and for consolation in times of crisis. In some cases, religion has assumed a secular form. For example, the great emphasis in the 1980s on "self-fulfillment" (see Chapter 4), which often involved self-help and therapy groups that stress the metaphysical, is frequently cited as a form of religious behavior.

This is exemplified in the New Age movement of recent decades. An outgrowth of spiritual and mystical movements of the 1960s, such as Transcendental Meditation, the New Age movement uses such techniques as extrasensory perception (ESP), spiritual communication, and astrology to achieve personal quests for meaning. The objective is to achieve harmony with oneself, the earth, fellow humans, and the cosmos (see Johnstone, 1992, pp. 325–26, 330–31). Stark and Bainbridge (1985) found over 500 groups that might be broadly identified with New Age ideas; such groups attracted the most members in the West and the fewest in the South—just the opposite of traditional religions. A Gallup Poll in the late 1970s, cited in Johnstone (1992, p. 331), found 6 million people involved in Transcendental Meditation and 3 million in mysticism. More recently, a

Gallup Poll in 2001 found significant increases in the percentage of Americans believing in clairvoyance, psychic healing, ghosts, and the ability to communicate with the dead (Newport and Strausberg, 2001). However, for many of these people, meditation, mysticism, and clairvoyance represent interests, not a primary religious viewpoint or affiliation. In fact, some people with such beliefs attend and identify with regular churches, such as the Baptist or Lutheran denominations. While the beliefs of movements like Transcendental Meditation are different from those of traditional religions, the notion of a search for meaning and the concepts of the sacred and of spirituality have much in common with religion as it has always existed. Many sociologists would therefore agree with the analysis of Emile Durkheim (1965 [orig. 1915]): “There is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself.”

Finally, it is important to remember that today’s simultaneous trends of secularization and revival are not as new as they may seem. Finke and Stark (1992) have shown how fundamentalism has sprung up repeatedly in American history as a response to secularization. As early as 1740, the revivalist preacher George Whitefield drew huge crowds by offering a kind of religion that the more intellectualized Congregationalists of his day could not. He warned that too many of the clergy had become too worldly, and he would thunder “Are you saved?” to crowds of up to 20,000 or 30,000, who would respond by falling to the ground and crying out to God (Finke and Stark, 1992, pp. 46–53). Though he was not a Methodist himself, his ministry laid the ground work for Methodism in the United States. As noted earlier, Methodism arose as a rebellion against the intellectualized, modernist religion that the Congregationalists had come to represent. Ironically enough, Methodism became so successful that it, in turn, became institutionalized and, some fundamentalists today argue, moved away from its roots. So today, Methodists are among those losing ground to the newer, more fundamentalist religions. Thus, the interaction between secularization and fundamentalist revival has occurred repeatedly throughout American history (Finke and Stark, 1992). And this has not just been the case in the United States. As illustrated in the box

“Liberal Islam,” much the same is going on today in the Islamic world.

Summary

Religion reflects a universal human concern with the meaning of life and the supernatural. According to Durkheim, societies distinguish between the aspects of everyday life, called the profane, and those things that inspire awe or deep respect, called the sacred. He defined religion as a system of beliefs and behaviors involving the sacred. This is a broad definition, and the nature of religious beliefs and practices varies considerably from culture to culture.

Sociologists classify religions according to several broad categories. Churches and denominations are established religions with formal rules and hierarchies. Such religions usually distinguish between those with religious authority, called clergy, and the general membership, called laity. A sect is a smaller, more dogmatic group that is not well integrated into the larger society. Some sects gain acceptance and develop into denominations. A religion that is totally withdrawn from the larger society is called a cult.

Religions that worship only one God are called monotheistic, and those that worship two or more gods are called polytheistic. Some religions, however, do not worship any deities; instead, they emphasize spiritual or moral principles on which their members base their behavior. These faiths are referred to as sacred philosophies. Judaism is an example of monotheism; Hinduism of polytheism; and Confucianism of a sacred philosophy. Among the other major world religions are Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

Functionalists and conflict theorists disagree as to the social roles of religion. Functionalists argue that religion contributes to the well-being of a society by encouraging social solidarity, providing meaning and identity to society’s members, and allowing for a degree of social change while maintaining basic social control. Conflict theorists respond that religion, like all social institutions, serves the interests of the ruling classes. By focusing people’s attention on salvation in the next world, religion distracts them from the injustices of this world. For this reason, Marx called religion the “opium of the people.” Weber maintained that the interaction



SOCIOLOGICAL SURPRISES

Liberal Islam

Although the rise of radical, fundamentalist Islam has gotten a lot of attention since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the reality is that Islam, like Christianity, has both liberal and fundamentalist movements under its broad umbrella. And, as is the case with Christianity, these movements often espouse a very different type of religion. The strict, traditionalist version of Islam sees Islam as the one true religion, and views other religions as heretical—just as is the case with some strict, traditionalist versions of Christianity. But there is also a large, and quite likely growing, segment of Islam that espouses a much more liberal viewpoint. Among the views held by the liberal branch of Islam are the ideas that Muslims are obligated to accept the reality that other religions hold different views, and to coexist and cooperate with others. They cite verses from the Qu’ran such as the following ones:

“To you your religion, to me my religion.” (Sura 109, Verse 6)

“O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations

and tribes, that ye may knoweach other, not that ye may despise each other.” (Sura 49, Verse 13)

Much like liberal Christians, liberal Muslims hold that scripture, though divinely inspired, is always subject to human interpretation, and that there can often be more than one way to interpret it. For example, one liberal Muslim leader states, “Religion is divine, but its interpretation is thoroughly human and this-worldly” (Abdul-Karim Soroush, Iran, born 1945, quoted in Kurzman, 1999).

Charles Kurzman (1999), a sociologist who has studied both the traditionalist/fundamentalist and the liberal branches of Islam, argues that more liberal interpretations have emerged, and may be growing, for several reasons. First, educational levels are rising, and more people are being educated in subjects outside the influence of traditional clerics, such as engineering, philosophy, and sociology. This has created an intellectual leadership that does not follow strict religious rules, as had been the case with intellectuals in the past, who were more likely to be educated in

between religion and social structure was too complicated to be classified simply as class conflict. He argued that changes in people’s views of the world brought about by the Protestant Reformation made possible the rise of capitalism in the West.

The United States officially practices separation of church and state in the sense that the Constitution forbids the government to establish or prohibit any religion. In fact, religion and politics interact regularly, and people’s political behavior is frequently influenced by their religious and moral beliefs. This applies to the antislavery and social reform movements of the nineteenth century as well as to the civil rights and antiwar movements of the twentieth century. One current example of religious activism is the “religious right,” which pursues a conservative agenda that opposes abortion, gay rights, and pornography, while supporting prayer in the public schools.

Scholars debate the current and future state of religion in the United States. Some adhere to

secularization theory, arguing that as people accept scientific explanations of reality, religion will become less important to them. Others contend that the United States is in the midst of a fundamentalist revival as people turn to religion to cope with an increasingly complex world. Most likely, secularization and a fundamentalist revival are both occurring at the same time among different parts of the population. In fact, there are some ways in which each contributes to and sustains the other. One possibility is that, as with the family, the role of religion is changing, but the institution itself will remain strong.

Key Terms

profane
sacred
ritual
religion

religion and theology. Second, international contacts are increasing. Travel, trade, television, telephone, and the Internet are all bringing more people in Islamic countries into contact with secular and democratic viewpoints. Third, Kurzman argues that, for the most part, Islamic states such as Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan have failed to deliver on their promises, and as a result, many people have become disillusioned with strict, traditionalist forms of Islam. In Iran, for example, many people—even some in the religious leadership that ran the country after an Islamic state was created in the 1970s—came to the view that the strict Islamic regime had failed to deliver on its promise to bring an era of justice and righteousness, while at the same time it did restrict personal freedom and it did weaken universities by getting rid of professors who did not fit the regime's image of ideological and religious purity. This viewpoint can be seen in the large protests in Iran's urban areas following the disputed Iranian election of 2009. And of course, the treatment of women and others under the Taliban in Afghanistan was seen by many in the Islamic world as frightening.

None of this, of course, is to deny that there is a strong and influential fundamentalist trend within Islam as well. And, as with Christianity, much of the strength of traditionalism and fundamentalism in Islam arises from fears that are generated by secularization,

modernization, and, in the case of Islam, Westernization. Many strict Islamists see liberal Islam as inauthentic and a denial of "true Islam." Again, this is very similar to the ways that fundamentalist Christians view liberal churches such as the Episcopal church. Finally, one force that works against liberal Islam is that in many Western countries, it is commonplace for Islam to be labeled as a religion of fanatics and extremists. The presence of the liberal trends within Islam tells us that this is not so, but—ironically—the fact that many in the West stereotype Islam in the ways that they do actually undermines the influence of the more liberal strains of Islam. Kurzman cites Algeria as an example of this. An Islamic religious party, with liberal and conservative wings, won the majority of the vote in the first round of elections in 1991. The liberal influence was dominant, as it was the group that was setting policy in the party, and a number of candidates were drawn from it. However, with the support of the United States and France, who feared any kind of Islamic government, the Algerian military cancelled the election. The result was that the liberals in the party were discredited, the extremist faction took control, and it even murdered some of the liberal Islamic leaders. In Kurzman's (1999) words, "The Western inability to believe that there might be such a thing as liberal Islam proved a self-fulfilling prophecy."

monotheism
polytheism
sacred philosophy
rites of passage
church
clergy
laity
sect
denomination
cult
Protestant Ethic
civil religion
fundamentalism
secularization

Exercises

1. The Christian Coalition is one of the most important religious organizations in the United States due to its impact on the political scene.

The organization's Web site (<http://www.cc.org/>) provides an informative glimpse at its activities.

- What are your personal views about the Christian right? Do you agree? Disagree? Why?
 - How would you evaluate the future of the fundamentalist movement in the United States? This chapter poses the questions of whether there is a "fundamentalist revival." What do you think?
2. Quoting from the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .*" The issue of secularization continues to be an extremely controversial issue in our society and draws considerable attention from organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU);

see <http://www.aclu.org/religion-belief>. This chapter poses the question of whether there is a trend toward secularization. What do you think? Also, consider these questions:

- Do you agree with the ACLU stand on the issue of secularization?
- What is your stand on organized prayer in public schools?

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