

# CHAPTER 14

## Religion



# U S I N G

## Your Sociological Imagination

More than thirty years after the Beatles' last recording session, the group's tapes and CDs are still being sold by the millions. But there was a moment—at the height of the Beatles' popularity—when radio stations around the United States banned their music and teenagers stomped on their records.

The angry reaction was the result of a comment made by John Lennon in a 1966 London interview:

*Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first—rock 'n' roll or Christianity.*

When the remark was printed in the United States, the resulting uproar caught many by surprise. Lennon's statement was quoted out of context. If the entire interview had been printed, the response might have been less extreme. Nevertheless, efforts to explain the remark failed, and Lennon was forced to apologize for saying something he hadn't really intended to say. Contrary to popular belief, it appeared that many young Americans took their religion seriously.

Today, many people fear that religious influence in the United States is declining. Evidence, however, reveals that America—compared with other industrialized nations—remains fairly religious. This chapter views religion within the context of sociology, defines religion as an institution, and explores the ways people express their religious beliefs.

### Sections

1. Religion and Sociology
2. Theoretical Perspectives
3. Religious Organization and Religiosity
4. Religion in the United States

### Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will be able to

- ❖ explain the sociological meaning of religion.
- ❖ describe the different views of religion as seen by the major theoretical perspectives.
- ❖ distinguish the basic types of religious organization.
- ❖ discuss the meaning and nature of religiosity.
- ❖ define secularization and describe its relationship to religiosity in the United States.
- ❖ discuss religious fundamentalism in the United States from the sociological perspective.



#### Chapter Overview

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# Section 1

## Religion and Sociology

### Key Terms

- religion
- sacred
- profane

### Section Preview

Religion is concerned with sacred things. Durkheim concluded that every religion separates the sacred from the profane. Sociologists studying religion face some unique problems. They do not judge the validity of various religions but rather look at those aspects of religion that can be measured and observed in society.

#### religion

a unified system of beliefs and practices concerned with sacred things

#### sacred

holy; set apart and given a special meaning that goes beyond, or transcends, immediate existence

#### profane

nonsacred

### The Sociological Meaning of Religion

**A** religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices concerned with sacred things. This definition comes from Emile Durkheim, whose work was based on studies of the Australian aborigines in the late nineteenth century. According to Durkheim, every society distinguishes between the **sacred**—things and ideas that are set apart and given a special meaning that goes beyond, or transcends, immediate existence—and the **profane**, or nonsacred aspects of life. Profane in this context does not mean unholy. It simply means commonplace and not involving the supernatural. Another word for profane is *secular*.

Sacred things take on a public character that makes them appear important in themselves; profane things do not. The particular things considered sacred vary from culture to culture. For example, Bolivian tin miners attach sacred meaning to figures of the devil and of bulls. Because Americans do not share these religious beliefs, these cultural items are part of their nonsacred, or profane, world. Moreover, some nonreligious aspects of culture can assume a sacred character. Here, two sociologists illustrate the difference between the sacred and the profane:

*When Babe Ruth was a living idol to baseball fans, the bat he used to slug his home runs was definitely a profane object. It was Ruth's personal instrument and had little social value in itself. Today, however, one of Ruth's bats is enshrined in*



*Buddhas, like this one in a Korean temple, are sacred objects in the Far East and Southeast Asia, and wherever Buddhists live. What makes an object sacred?*

*the Baseball Hall of Fame. It is no longer used by anyone. It stands, rather, as an object which in itself represents the values, sentiments, power, and beliefs of all members of the baseball community. What was formerly a profane object is now in the process of gaining some of the qualities of a sacred object (Cuzzort and King, 1976:27).*

Babe Ruth's bat illustrates two particulars about the sociological study of religion. First, a profane object can become sacred, and vice versa. Second, sociologists can deal with religion without becoming involved in theological issues. By focusing on the cultural and social aspects of religion, sociologists avoid questions about the ultimate validity of any particular religion. This point is so important that it needs more explanation.



*Is this Ford Mustang convertible a sacred or secular object? Why?*

## The Sociological Study of Religion

The sociological study of religion involves looking at a set of meanings attached to a world beyond human observation. Because this non-physical world cannot be directly observed, this task is particularly difficult. Sociologists have to ask themselves hard questions: How can we find evidence for something that can't be seen? How can we remain objective about such a value-laden subject, especially when we have our own beliefs? Is science really the proper tool to evaluate religion?

Obviously, sociologists cannot study the unobservable. Consequently, they avoid the strictly spiritual side of religion and focus on social aspects of religion that can be measured and observed. Sociologists, then, are not in the business of determining which religions people ought to follow. Sociologists keep their own faith personal while investigating the *social* dimensions of religion. Like people in any other occupation, sociologists themselves follow a variety of religions.



*Sociologists study the social aspects of religion. One such aspect is the charitable work done by members of different religious organizations.*

### Section 1 Assessment

1. How does the sociological definition of religion differ from how you previously thought of religion?
2. How do sociologists manage to study religion if they can't see the spiritual world?

#### Critical Thinking

3. **Evaluating Information** Do you think religion can be studied scientifically? Using the material just presented, make an argument for or against this practice.



# Another Place

## Religion at War

**As part of studying the effects of religion on society, sociologists note that throughout history, religion has both promoted social stability and led to social conflict. In this excerpt from the article *Religion at War*, the conflict aspect is highlighted.**

In virtually every one of the world's 480 major wars since 1700, each side has imagined itself to be exclusively on the side of God, Gött, Allah, Dieu or other names for the deity.

Religion is often so closely linked with ethnic or national identity as to be seen as inseparable from them. Thus a struggle for expressions of eth-

nic or national identity is experienced as a religious war. This is so of the current unrest in the Punjab, created by Sikh demands for a separate Sikh state.

Religion evokes powerful emotions and commitments. It is capable of producing believers whose faith moves them to acts of great self-sacrifice and charity. At the same time it can produce believers who feel that their faith calls them to struggle violently in what they believe to be a just cause. One example is the Hindi/Muslim tension in India focused on Ayodhya. Here, a mosque built in the 15th century was destroyed in 1992 by militant Hindus because it is believed to have been built over the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. While the majority of Hindus and Muslims have lived together peacefully for generations, extremists on both sides are capable of arousing violence through use of powerful religious symbols.

In many faiths, the issue of whether warfare is permissible has given rise to various theories of the just war. Such theories seek to define whether believers can ever engage in the use of violence. The usual conclusion is that violence—including warfare—is only acceptable in pursuit of a greater good. The problem, however, is who defines the greater good?

Source: Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer, *The State of Religion Atlas*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 117. Reprinted by permission.

### Thinking It Over

Does functionalism or conflict theory best explain the link between strong religious conviction and war? Why?

*Activists of a Hindu religious sect demand the right to build a temple on the site of a demolished mosque. Why are wars and conflicts often rooted in religious beliefs and values?*



## Section 2

# Theoretical Perspectives

## Key Terms

- legitimate
- spirit of capitalism
- Protestant ethic

## Functionalism and Religion

Religion exists in some form in virtually all societies. (See Figure 14.1 on page 468 and World View on page 469 for a global distribution of major religions.) The earliest evidence of religion and religious customs and taboos has been traced as far back as 50,000 B.C. Humans had by then already begun to bury their dead, a practice based on the belief in existence after death. Evidence of religious practices appears in many ancient cultures. In Rome, there were specific gods for objects and events—a god of trees, a god of money, a goddess of fever. While the early Hebrews believed that pigs were unclean animals whose pollution would spread to all who touched or tasted them, the tribes of New Guinea considered pigs holy creatures worthy of ancestral sacrifice (Harris, 1974).

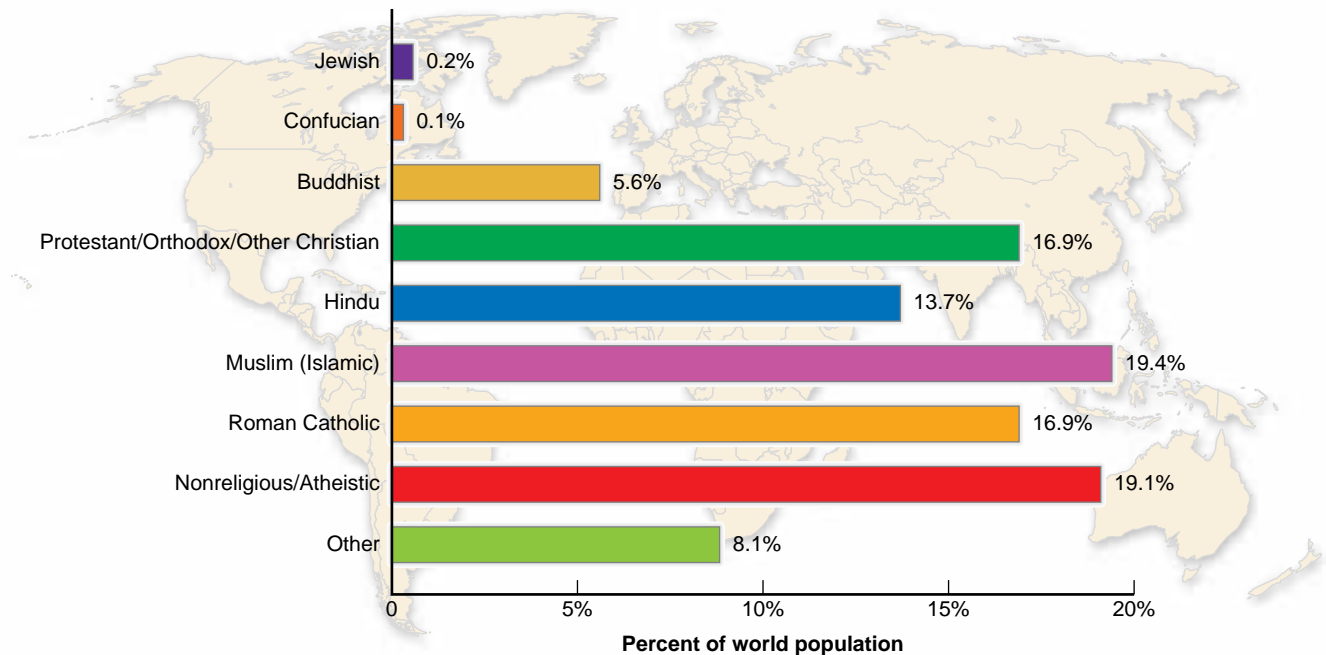
Emile Durkheim, the first sociologist to examine religion scientifically, wondered why it is that all societies

## Section Preview

Religion has several functions. It legitimates the structure of society, promotes social unity, and provides a sense of meaning and belonging. Marx argued that religion is used to justify and maintain the group in power. Weber believed that religion could promote social change. He connected the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism.



*We know that religion is an important part of almost all societies because of the religious symbols most have left behind.*



**Figure 14.1 Division of World Population by Religions.** This graph compares the number of all religious believers belonging to a particular religion to the total estimated world population.

have some form of religion. In one of his books, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915), Durkheim offered an explanation rooted in the function religion performs for society. The essential function of religion, he believed, was to provide through sacred symbols a mirror for members of society to see themselves. Through religious rituals, people worship their societies and thereby remind themselves of their shared past and future existence.

Following Durkheim's lead, sociologists have identified the following social functions of religion.

- ❖ *Religion gives formal approval to existing social arrangements.* Religious doctrine and scripture **legitimate** the status quo. Religion, then, justifies or gives authority to social norms and customs. A society's religion explains why the society is—and should be—the way it is. It tells us why some people have power and others do not, why some are rich and others poor, why some are common and others elite. Many social customs and rituals are based on religion. According to Durkheim, legitimation is the central function of religion.
- ❖ *Religion encourages a sense of unity.* Religion, according to Durkheim, is the glue that holds society together. Without religion, society would be chaotic. As Cuzzort and King have stated (1976), Durkheim “provided the greatest justification for religious doctrine ever formulated by a social scientist when he claimed that all societies must have religious commitments. Without religious dedication there is no social order.”

In some cases, though, religion causes societies to fragment, even to the point of civil war. Religion divides Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Thus, while it is accurate to say that religion is usually a source of social unity, it can also divide a society. (See *Another Place*, page 466.)

- ❖ *Religion provides a sense of understanding.* Religion not only explains the nature of social life and encourages social unity, it also provides

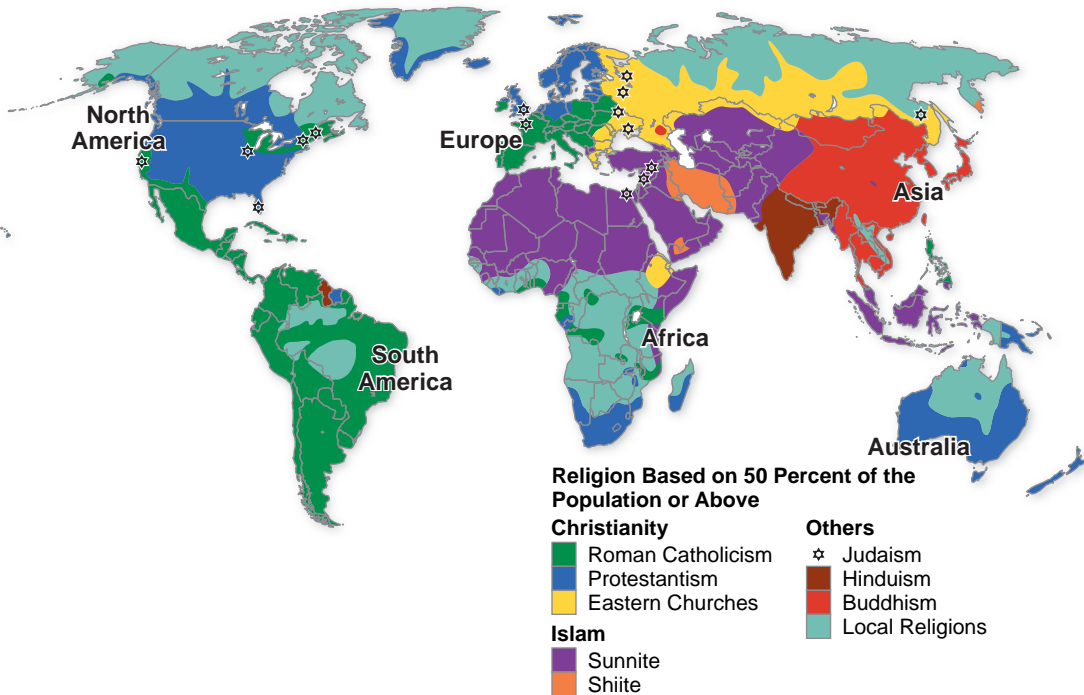
**legitimate**  
to justify or give official  
approval to

# World View



## Religions of the World

This map displays the worldwide distribution of all religions. Emile Durkheim showed that suicide rates vary according to group characteristics. One of these characteristics was religious background. For example, Durkheim showed that the suicide rate is lower among Catholics than among Protestants.



### Interpreting the Map

1. Based on the information shown in this map, identify two countries where you would expect to find lower rates of suicide than in England.
2. What information on the map did you use in your analysis?

individuals meaning beyond day-to-day life. People mark important events in life—birth, sexual maturity, marriage, death—with religious ceremonies and explain such events in religious terms. Religion gives believers a sense of their place in the cosmos and gives eternal significance to a short and uncertain earthly existence.

- ❖ *Religion promotes a sense of belonging.* Religious organizations provide opportunities for people to share important ideas, ways of life, and ethnic or racial backgrounds. Religion supplies a kind of group identity. People usually join religious organizations freely and feel a



Religion	Origination	Key Figure	Beliefs	Main Geographic Areas	Number of Followers
Hinduism	Before 2000 B.C.	Unknown	Of many gods, Brahma is the creator of the universe. Life is determined by the law of karma (the spiritual force generated by one's own actions, which determines one's next reincarnation).	India	793,076,000
Judaism	Before 1200 B.C.	Abraham	The one true God has established a covenant with the people of Israel, who are called to lives of justice, mercy, and obedience to God.	Israel, Eastern Europe, USA	13,866,000
Buddhism	About 500 B.C.	Siddhartha Gautama	The existence of God is not assumed. Through adherence to the Eightfold Path (correct thought and behavior), one can escape from desire and suffering and achieve nirvana (a state of bliss reached through extreme denial of the self).	Far East, Southeast Asia	325,275,000
Confucianism	About 500 B.C.	Confucius	The <i>Analects</i> (sayings of Confucius) stress moral conduct and virtuous human relationships.	China	5,086,000
Christianity	About A.D. 1	Jesus Christ	Jesus is the Son of the one true God. Through God's grace and profession of faith, people have eternal life with God.	Europe, North America, South America	1,955,229,000
Islam	About A.D. 600	Muhammad	Muhammad received the Koran (holy scriptures) from the one true God. Believers go to an eternal Garden of Eden.	Africa, Middle East, Southeast Asia	1,126,325,000

**Figure 14.2 Major World Religions.** *This figure summarizes characteristics and beliefs of the major world religions being widely practiced today.*

degree of influence within these organizations. For many people in modern society, membership in a religious organization provides a sense of community. This feeling of belonging helps to counteract depersonalization, powerlessness, and rootlessness.

## Conflict Theory and Religion

Conflict theory focuses on how religion works to either inhibit or encourage social change. Two early and important sociologists who looked at religion from these perspectives were Karl Marx and Max Weber.

**What did Marx say about religion?** Marx believed that once people have created a unified system of sacred beliefs and practices, they act as if it were something beyond their control. They become “alienated” from the religious system they have set up. People have the power to change (or, better yet, in Marx’s mind, to abandon) the religion they have created. They don’t do so, however, because they see it as a binding force to which they must conform. Religion, Marx wrote, is used by the ruling class to justify its economic, political, and social advantages over the oppressed. Those in power justify poverty, degradation, and misery as God’s will. To eliminate inequalities and injustices is to tamper with God’s plan. Religion, then, gives people a sense that all is the way it should be.



Religions are many and diverse, but reason and goodness are one.

**Elbert Hubbard**  
American writer

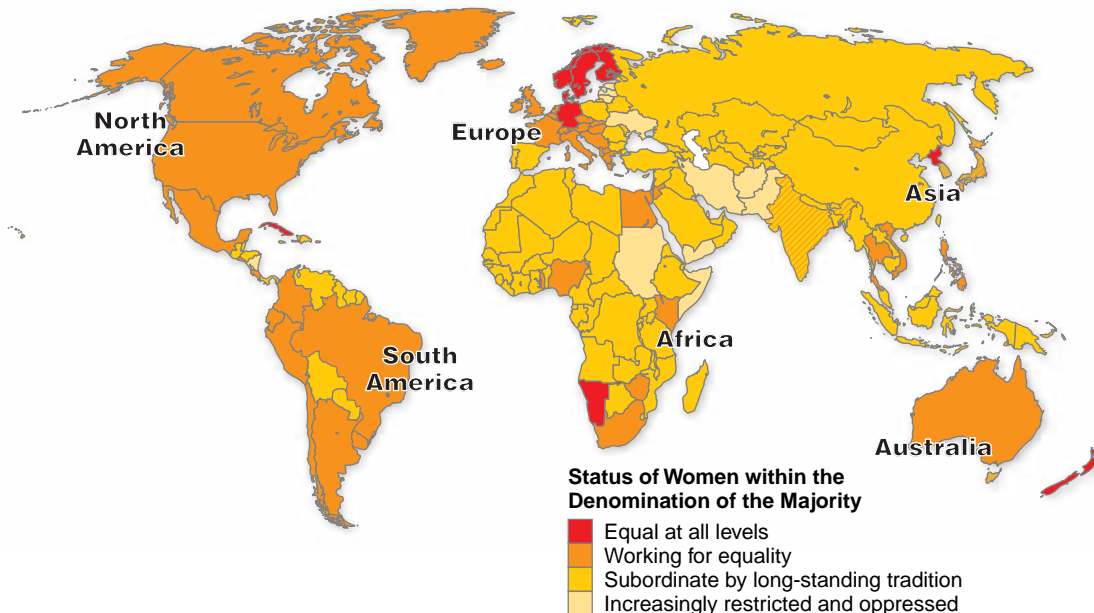


# World View



## Gender Inequality in Religion

Women have been fighting for equal rights in all aspects of society—religion as well as government and business. In some religions women have equal status within their orders. Other religions see feminism as a “Western” issue and irrelevant to their faiths. This map shows how major denominations in each country view the status of women.



### Interpreting the Map

1. Do you see any patterns of inequality in women’s rights in religion? Explain.
2. Where in the world would a woman be most likely to head an entire religious organization? Support your answer. Do some research to see if this has occurred. If it has not, explain why.
3. How does the United States compare with the Scandinavian countries in terms of gender equality? Why do you think this difference exists?
4. How would you explain the mixed status of women in India?

Adapted from *The State of Religion Atlas*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

**How did Weber link Protestantism and capitalism?** Whereas Marx believed that religion works against social change, Max Weber suggested that religion sometimes encourages social change. He pointed to the relationship between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. Weber wondered why capitalism emerged in northwestern Europe and America and not in other parts of the world. A possible answer lay in what he termed the *spirit of capitalism*

**spirit of capitalism**

the obligation to reinvest money in business rather than to spend it

**Protestant ethic**

a set of values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes stressing hard work, thrift, and self-discipline

and the *Protestant ethic*. With capitalism, work became a moral obligation rather than a mere necessity. If businesses were to grow, money (capital) had to be put back into the business rather than spent. Investment for the future was more important than immediate consumption. All of this Weber called the **spirit of capitalism**.

Most major religions did not define hard work as an obligation or demand the reinvestment of capital for further profits (rather than for immediate enjoyment). But some Protestant sects did. Here, then, was a religion with a cluster of values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes that favored the emergence of modern capitalism. Weber referred to this cluster of values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes that stressed the virtue of hard work, thrift, and self-discipline as the **Protestant ethic**.

**What is the nature of the Protestant ethic?**

The Protestant ethic is often associated with John Calvin (1509–1564), an early Protestant theologian. Calvin's followers were known as Calvinists. Calvinist beliefs illustrate several features of the Protestant ethic.



*The theology of sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin formed the basis for the Protestant ethic.*

- ❖ According to Calvin, God identifies his chosen by rewarding them in this world. Therefore, the more successful people were in this life, the more sure they were of being a member of God's select few.
- ❖ Consumption beyond necessity was considered sinful; those who engaged in self-pleasure were agents of the devil.
- ❖ Calvinists believed there was an underlying purpose of life: glorification of God on earth through one's occupational calling. Because everyone's material rewards were actually God's, and the purpose of life was to glorify God, profits should be multiplied (through reinvestment) rather than used in the pursuit of personal pleasures.


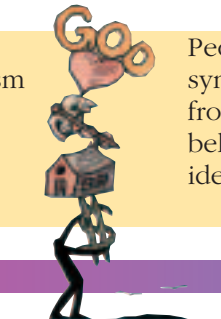

## Symbolic Interactionism and Religion

Sociologist Peter Berger (1990) captured the relationship between religion and symbolic interactionism in his book, *The Sacred Canopy*. In this book, Berger explored the idea that humans create from their religious traditions a canopy, or cover, of symbolic meanings, to “lay” over the secular world. These otherworldly symbolic meanings are used to guide everyday social interaction. Religious beliefs, rituals, and ideas tell people the difference between the sacred and the profane and provide stability and security in a changing and uncertain existence.

Symbolic interactionism, for example, helps us understand the expression “there are no atheists in foxholes.” Insecurity and uncertainty, of course, are at a peak in the life-and-death situation of war, and the desire to regain

## Figure 14.3 Focus on Theoretical Perspectives

**Religion.** This table shows that in examining religion the three major perspectives focus on different aspects. Discuss the conclusion of any one of the theories in light of your experience with the institution of religion.

Theoretical Perspective	Focus	Conclusion
Functionalist 	Look at contributions of religion to society.	Religion legitimates social arrangements. It promotes social unity. It provides a sense of understanding. It encourages a sense of belonging.
Conflict Theory 	Elites use religion to manipulate the masses.	Religion is used by the most powerful to justify their economic, political, and social advantages.
Symbolic Interactionism 	People create symbolic meanings from their religious beliefs, rituals, and ideas.	People use their socially created symbolic meanings to guide everyday social interactions.

security and certainty is a natural human response. Religious meanings, especially those related to an afterlife, can offer some relief. Japanese kamikaze pilots in World War II and Middle Eastern terrorists infuse their sometimes suicidal behavior with ultimate meaning by focusing on their reward beyond life. Less dramatically, people enduring troubled marriages can be strengthened by their commitment to uphold their holy vows of matrimony spoken in a place of worship.

Each of the three major theoretical perspectives aids in the sociological study of religion. Figure 14.3 shows the unique light each perspective sheds.

### Section 2 Assessment

1. How did Karl Marx view religion?
2. What was Weber's contribution to the sociological study of religion?
3. What did Berger mean by the phrase "the sacred canopy"?

### Critical Thinking

4. **Analyzing Information** Does the Protestant ethic still exist in America today? Use Weber's analysis to justify your position.



You have not converted a man because you have silenced him.

**John, Viscount Morley**  
English statesman



# Tech Trends

## Is Cloning Humans Ethical?



**A**ldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* described a society in which babies were created scientifically. Another novel—*The Boys from Brazil*, written by Ira Levin and published in 1976—features a story about German Nazis cloning Adolf Hitler. Both of these books play on our fears about the effects and ethics of human cloning (a nonsexual creation of a genetically identical copy). Although no human has yet been cloned, the reproduction of a sheep called Dolly in February 1997, along with several subsequent clonings of mice, sheep, and pigs, have made the question much more pertinent today than it was a few years ago.

Even though the technology is not yet available to clone humans, companies and scientists are already beginning to offer their services to interested individuals. Dr. Richard Seed, an American physicist, announced in 1998 that he plans to clone humans, using his wife as the first subject. He also plans to open a for-profit clinic to assist childless couples in cloning themselves. A company called Valiant Venture has been formed to offer cloning services to humans—for as “little” as \$200,000. Valiant Venture is owned by the Raelian Movement, an international cult whose members claim that life on earth was created in laboratories by extraterrestrials.

More traditional religious groups have expressed serious concerns about cloning. According to the general argument of Judaism and Christianity, human cloning allows the sacred process of generating life to enter the profane realm. A group of scientists sponsored by the Church of Scotland reached the following conclusions.

- ❖ If humans are cloned, people will be placing themselves in a position only God has occupied.
- ❖ The basic dignity and uniqueness of each individual will be violated.
- ❖ Political power could influence the creation of clones.
- ❖ Cloning will be limited to those who can afford it.

On the other hand, might it not be beneficial to clone Bill Gates, Mother Theresa, or Michael Jordan? What about the potential contributions from a new Christiaan Barnard, the South African physician who did the first heart transplant in 1967? Human cloning is just the latest in a long line of medical technologies that affect the length and quality of life. Society will have to decide if cloning is so different from other scientific advances that it should be legally prohibited.

### Analyzing the Trends

What role, if any, should religion play in the debate over human cloning? Include some information from this chapter to support your answer.

# Section 3

## Religious Organization and Religiosity

### Key Terms

- church
- denomination
- sect
- cult
- religiosity

### Religious Organization

In Western societies, most people practice religion through some organizational structure. For this reason, the nature of religious organization is an important component of the sociological study of religion. Early scholars identified four basic types of religious organization: *church*, *denomination*, *sect*, and *cult*.

**How do sociologists distinguish among the basic types of religious organization?** To sociologists, a **church** is a life-encompassing religious organization to which all members of a society belong. This type of religious organization exists when religion and the state are closely intertwined. In Elizabethan England, for example, Archbishop Richard Hooker of the Church of England wrote that “there is not any man of the Church of England but the same man is also a member of the commonwealth; nor any man a member of the commonwealth which is not also of the Church of England.” As you can see, the sociological definition of *church* is different from the one commonly used in American society. When Americans talk about “churches,” they are actually referring to denominations.

A **denomination** is one of several religious organizations that most members of a society accept as legitimate. Because denominations are not tied to the state, membership in them is voluntary, and competition among them for



### Section Preview

The major forms of religious organization are churches, denominations, sects, and cults. Religiosity—the ways people express their religious interests and convictions—can be analyzed in terms of five dimensions: belief, ritual, intellect, experience, and consequences.

**church**  
a life-encompassing religious organization to which all members of a society belong

**denomination**  
one of several religious organizations that most members of a society accept as legitimate

*The Amish are a religious sect. How does a sect differ from a church, denomination, or cult?*



# Sociology Today

## Understanding the Danger of Cults

In late November 1978, news began to arrive in the United States that a semireligious, socialistic colony in Guyana, South America, headed by the Reverend Jim Jones—founder of the California-based People’s Temple—had been the scene of a shocking suicide-murder rite in which some nine hundred people died from cyanide poisoning. Many Americans wondered how people could have become involved in something like that.

Some dismissed the participants as ignorant or mentally unbalanced. But as more news came out, it became known that many of the members were fairly well-educated young people and that Jones was trusted and respected by some members of the California political establishment. We also learned that such events, although rare, have occurred before.

Why are people willing to join extremist religious groups? Sociology can help us understand the motivations.

- ❖ *Most converts to extremist religious groups seek friendship, companionship, acceptance, warmth, and recognition.* These groups can provide a supportive community that helps overcome past loneliness and isolation. They can provide emotional ties that converts have not found at home, school, church, or work. Many groups even adopt kinship terms to give recruits new identities to separate them from their former lives.
- ❖ *Most extremist religious groups emphasize immediate experience and emotional gratification.* Converts “feel” religion rather than merely think about it. Whether by meditation, speaking in tongues, or singing hymns, followers have frequent and intense emotional experiences they have not found elsewhere.
- ❖ *Extremist religious groups emphasize security through strict authority.* Under a firm authority structure and a clear, simple set of beliefs and rules, converts have something in which they can believe. Converts think they can exchange



*The Reverend Jim Jones was the leader of a religious colony in Guyana, South America, where some nine hundred people were involved in a suicide-murder rite.*

uncertainty, doubt, and confusion for trust and assurance through absolute obedience.

- ❖ *Extremist religious groups claim to offer authenticity and naturalness in an “artificial” world.* By emphasizing such things as natural foods, communal living apart from civilization, and a uniform dress code, these groups attempt to show they are not part of the flawed outside world.

Religious movements may not actually be able to meet their followers’ needs any better than the outside world. Many of these religious groups lead to disillusionment, frustration, and bitterness when members realize that they cannot completely escape the outside world, which is full of uncertainty, confusion, fuzzy choices, and shades of gray. Moreover, many of these religious groups have joined the consumer society they profess to deplore, attractively packaging and selling themselves to the public. Not only may the new religious groups not solve the problems people in modern society must face, many are as inauthentic as they accuse society of being.

Some key questions exist to evaluate the authenticity of any religious group’s claims. For purposes of self-protection, these questions should be answered carefully before committing to an extremist religious group.

- ❖ Does it require that you cut yourself off from family and friends?
- ❖ Does it consider drugs to be a major vehicle for true religious experiences?
- ❖ Is corporal punishment or intensive, hours-long psychological conditioning a part of its program?
- ❖ Does it claim to have special knowledge that can be revealed only to insiders?

If the answer to any *one* of these questions is yes, you stand a chance of getting “hooked.” If the answers to *several* of these questions are positive, the chances of getting hooked increase dramatically.



*Friends and family mourn the loss of loved ones who died in Jim Jones’s People’s Temple mass suicide.*

## Doing Sociology

1. Do you agree or disagree with the reasons given for why people join extremist religious groups? Discuss each reason and explain why you agree or disagree.
2. Can you think of other reasons why people may be attracted to such groups? Show that any reason you identify does not fit into one of the four reasons stated.
3. If you had a friend considering membership in an extremist religious group, how would you use the information in this Sociology Today to discourage him or her?



**sect**

a religious organization that arises out of a desire to reform an existing religious organization

**cult**

a religious organization whose characteristics are not drawn from existing religious traditions within a society

members is socially acceptable. Being one religious organization among many, a denomination generally accepts the values and norms of the secular society and the state, although it may at times oppose them. As mentioned, most American “churches”—Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Reform Jew, for example—are actually denominations.

A **sect** is a religious organization formed when members of an existing religious organization break away in an attempt to reform the “parent” group. Generally, sect members believe that some valuable beliefs or traditions have been lost by the parent organization, and they form their own group to save these features. Thus, they see themselves not as establishing a new religious faith but as redeeming an existing one. The withdrawal of a sect from the parent group is usually psychological, but some sects go farther and form communal groups apart from the larger society. The Separatists, or Pilgrims, who landed at Plymouth in 1620, wished to reform the Church of England from which they had separated. Another example is the Amish, a sect formed in 1693 when a Swiss bishop named Jacob Amman broke from the Mennonite church in Europe (Kraybill and Olshan, 1994). Less extreme sects in the United States today include the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Quakers, and the Assemblies of God.

Unlike a sect, a **cult** is a religious organization whose characteristics are not drawn from existing religious traditions within a society. Whether imported from outside the society or created within the society, cults bring something new to the larger religious environment. We often think of cults as engaging in extreme behavior. The world has been shocked twice in recent years. In 1997, reports came of the ritualistic suicides of thirty-nine members of the Heaven’s Gate cult in California (Thomas, 1997). Dwarfing this incident was the mass killing of ap-

**Student Web Activity**

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**CLICK HERE**



*In 1997, thirty-nine members of the Heaven’s Gate cult in California committed ritualistic suicide. Most cults are not this dangerous, however.*

**CONTENTS**



*Calvin and Hobbes are engaged in a conversation about religiosity. Their beliefs are clashing.*

proximately 1,000 members of the Ugandan cult called the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in March 2000. Cults do not usually appear in such an extreme and bizarre form, however. More conventional examples of cults are the Unification Church, the Divine Light Mission, and the Church of Scientology (Clark, 1993).

## Religiosity

Sociologists Charles Glock and Rodney Stark are two sociologists who have studied religion and society. Their work has focused on **religiosity**—the types of religious attitudes and behavior people display in their everyday lives.

**How do people display religiosity?** Glock and Stark identify five dimensions of religiosity: belief, ritual, an intellectual dimension, experience, and consequences (Glock, 1965; Stark, 1968).

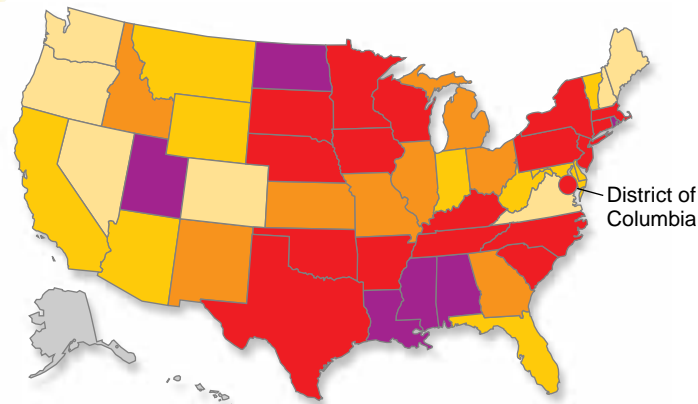
- ❖ *Belief* refers to what a person considers to be true. People may, for example, believe that Jesus is the son of God or that there is no God but Allah.
- ❖ A *ritual* is a religious practice that the members of a religion are expected to perform. A ritual may be private, such as personal prayer, or public, such as attending mass.
- ❖ The *intellectual dimension* of religiosity may involve knowledge of holy or sacred scripture or an interest in such religious aspects of human existence as evil, suffering, and death. Religious persons are expected to be knowledgeable about their faith.

**religiosity**  
ways in which people express their religious interests and convictions



*The display of religious affiliation varies widely. Golfer Tiger Woods wears a Buddha image, and a Jewish boy reads from the Torah at his Bar Mitzvah.*

## Snapshot of America



Religious Adherents as a Percentage of State Population

Dark Purple	≥ 70%
Red	60–69%
Orange	50–59%
Yellow	40–49%
Light Yellow	< 40%
Grey	No data

### Religious Believers

Religion is common to all societies. Although the majority of Americans are Christian, many other faiths are represented in the United States. This map shows the percentage of the population of each state who identify themselves as members of a faith or religion.

#### Interpreting the Map

1. Create a database comparing the number of religious believers in your state with other states in your region.
2. What do you think this map says about the state of religion in the U.S.? Explain.

Adapted from *The State of the U.S.A. Atlas*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

- ❖ *Experience* encompasses certain feelings attached to religious expression. This dimension is the hardest to measure. For example, a religious believer may feel “close” to the deity when praying.
- ❖ *Consequences* are the decisions and commitments people make as a result of religious beliefs, rituals, knowledge, or experiences. Consequences may be social, such as opposing or supporting capital punishment, or personal, as when practicing sexual abstinence before marriage or telling the truth regardless of the cost.

### Section 3 Assessment

1. In your own words, describe the difference between a cult and a sect.
2. Give one example of each of the five dimensions of religiosity, using examples not given in the text.

#### Critical Thinking

3. **Summarizing Information** Of the dimensions of religiosity discussed in the text, which do you think is most important to denominations today? Give reasons for your answer.

# Section 4

## Religion in the United States

### Key Terms

- secularization
- fundamentalism

### The Development of Religion in America

The search for religious freedom was only one of many reasons Puritan colonists came to America—but it was an important one. From the outset, the Puritans viewed themselves as a religious example for the world to follow and admire. Sociologist Robert Bellah has described the American religious connection this way:

*In the beginning, and to some extent ever since, Americans have interpreted their history as having religious meaning. They saw themselves as being a “people” in the classical and biblical sense of the word. They hoped they were a people of God (Bellah et al. 1991:2).*

*The U.S. guarantees religious freedom. Pictured clockwise from the bottom left are a Hindu priest in Ohio, an Islamic prayer group in Maine, a Baptist congregation in Alabama, and a Jewish Chanukah celebration in Maryland.*

### Section Preview

Through the process of secularization, the sacred and the profane tend to become intermixed. There has been a revival of religious fundamentalism in the United States. Religious faiths can be analyzed by major social characteristics such as class, and political tendencies.



The framers of the U.S. Constitution seldom raised arguments against religious faith. They were, however, sharply critical of any entanglement between religion and the state. Indeed, the ideas of separation of church and state and freedom of religious expression are cornerstones of American life. Despite this tradition, people in the United States have experienced incidents of religious persecution, including some directed at immigrant groups.

Religion has always been of great importance in American life; but historically, it has played a more active part in some periods than in others. There have been several “Awakenings” in U.S. history when religious principles have guided the development of culture and society. The 1830s, for example, saw new life come to many religious reform movements, including those against slavery and drinking alcohol. Later, the Protestant-led temperance movement resulted in the outlawing of alcohol for a short period during the 1920s.

## Secularization in the United States

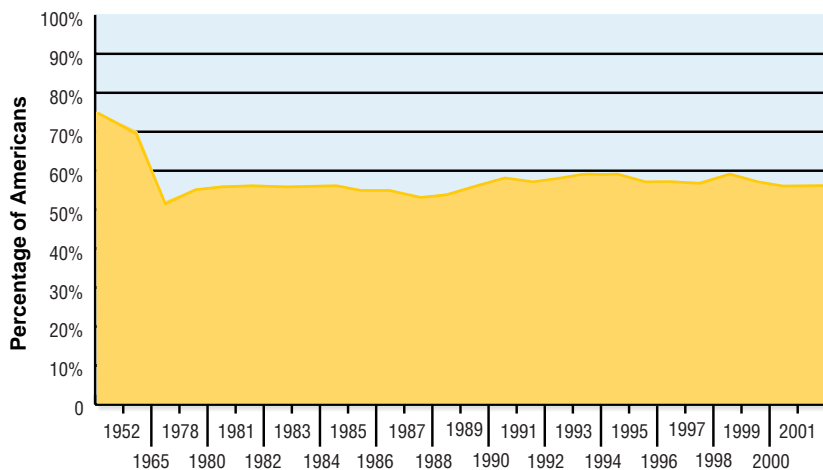
**secularization**  
process through which the sacred loses influence over society

Countering the growth of religion in U.S. history is **secularization**. Through this process, the sacred loses influence over society, or aspects of the sacred enter into the secular (profane) world of everyday life. For example, formal education originally was a function of religion. Most early teachers and professors were clerics and church members. Over time in the United States, this function was taken over by the state, although many church-sponsored schools still exist.

**Is secularization destroying religion in the United States?** Evidence is mixed concerning the relative importance of religion in the United States today. On the one hand, some findings indicate a decline in the importance of religion. The percentage of Americans claiming that religion is very important

in their lives fell from 75 percent in 1952 to 57 percent in 2001. (See Figure 14.4.) Scores on the Princeton Religion Index, made up of eight leading indicators, have also declined since the 1940s. In 1957, 14 percent of the public indicated that they believed religion was losing influence on American life. In 2001, 55 percent of the public saw a loss of influence (Gallup, 2001).

On the other hand, some recent research has found Americans today to still be highly committed to religion. Whether measured by the number of churches per capita, the proportion of regular churchgoers, or financial support of the churches, sociologist Theodore Caplow observed a trend toward greater involvement in religious affairs (Caplow, 1998).



**Figure 14.4 Percentage of Americans Saying Religion Is Very Important in Their Lives: 1952–2001.** This figure tracks changes in the percentage of Americans who say that religion is very important in their lives. Why do you think the percentage was so high in the early 1950s? What prediction do you make for the next ten years?

Source: The Gallup Organization, Gallup polls on religion.



## Figure 14.5 Global Comparisons in Religiosity

This table compares the level of religiosity among selected industrialized countries. Which finding do you think is the most important? Which finding is the most surprising to you? Explain in both cases.

Consider Selves Religious Persons		Attend Church at Least Weekly		Average Ratings of Importance of God*	
Italy	83%	Ireland	82%	United States	8.2
United States	81	United States	43	Ireland	8.0
Ireland	64	Spain	41	Northern Ireland	7.5
Spain	63	Italy	36	Italy	6.9
Great Britain	58	West Germany	21	Spain	6.4
West Germany	58	Czechoslovakia	17	Finland	6.2
Hungary	56	Ethnic Lithuanians	15	Belgium	5.9
France	51	Non-ethnic Lithuanians	12	Great Britain	5.7
Non-ethnic Lithuanians	50	Great Britain	14	West Germany	5.7
Czechoslovaks	49	Hungary	13	Norway	5.4
Scandinavia	46	France	12	Netherlands	5.3
Ethnic Lithuanians	45	Scandinavia	5	Hungary	4.8
				France	4.7
				Denmark	4.4

\*“10” is of highest importance.

Source: *Religion in America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religion Research Center).

In fact, as suggested in the Sociological Imagination opening this chapter, America still appears to be a religious nation when compared with other industrialized countries (see Figure 14.5). Only 8 percent of the American population is without a religious preference. About 88 percent identify themselves as Protestants, Catholics, Jews, or Mormons. There are now over three hundred recognized denominations and sects and thousands of independent congregations in the United States (Linder, 2000). About seven in ten Americans belong to some church, and over half of these claim to be active in their congregations. Four Americans in ten claim they have attended a church or synagogue in a typical week. (In England, for example, the average weekly church attendance is 14 percent.) Furthermore, although the proportion of Americans belonging to a church or synagogue has declined slightly from a high of 76 percent in 1947 to 69 percent in 1995, church attendance has changed very little over the years. Since 1939, weekly church or synagogue attendance in the United States has remained relatively stable—from 41 percent to 43 percent in 1995.

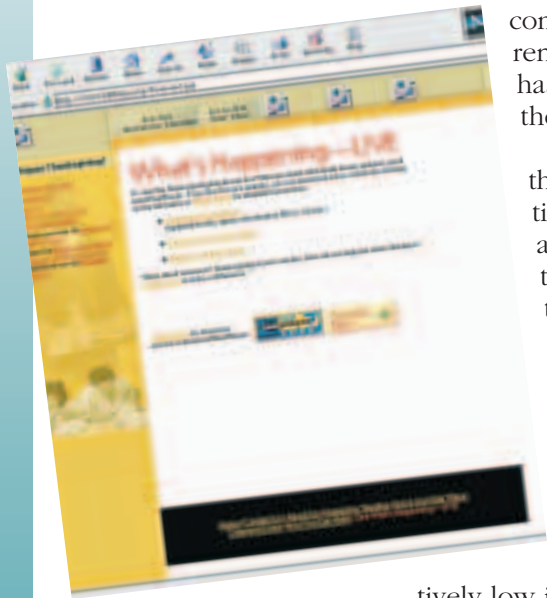
Americans also tend to support traditional religious beliefs. Ninety-six percent of the American population believe in God or a universal spirit, 65 percent believe in life after death, 90 percent believe in heaven, and 73 percent believe





# Focus on Research

## Survey Research: The Electronic Church



*Along with the more “traditional” forms of radio and television, the Internet also offers remote religious services.*

Old-time religious evangelists traveled from community to community and preached to the faithful in tents, open fields, or rented meeting halls. Modern-day communications technology has changed all that. To a great extent, radio, television, and the Internet are replacing the traditional meeting places.

Although the “electronic church” (church attendance through telecommunications) has attracted considerable attention, disagreement exists as to the actual size of its audience and the extent of its impact. Many television evangelists claim to have very large audiences, but most rating services estimate the total religious television audience to be of a rather modest size, approximately ten to thirteen million viewers.

William Stacey and Anson Shupe (1982) have advanced sociological understanding of the electronic church by examining the characteristics of its viewers. They surveyed residents of the Dallas–Fort Worth metropolitan area. This area is often referred to as the “buckle” of the southern Bible Belt.

Stacey and Shupe found regular viewers to have relatively low incomes and less than a high school education. Viewers also tended to be female, to be over thirty-five years of age, and to have large families. Blue-collar workers were more likely than white-collar workers to watch, but retired persons and homemakers were more likely to be viewers than people with jobs.

People who attended church regularly tended to watch, an important finding because it contradicted the claim that the electronic church was depriving local churches of members. Fundamentalists were more likely than reformed or moderate believers to tune in. The electronic church preaches to the converted who are already predisposed, or self-selected, to seek out its messages.

### *Working with the Research*

1. According to Stacey and Shupe’s research, what demographic groups are most likely to watch religious programming?
2. Would you predict that the electronic church will have greater social impact in the future? Why or why not?



in hell. Seventy-two percent believe in the existence of angels (Gallup, 1996).

## Religious Preferences

### What are the religious preferences in the U.S.?

Although there are over three hundred denominations and sects in the United States, Americans in the mid-1990s were largely Protestant (58 percent) and belonged to a few major denominations—Baptist (20 percent), Methodist (10 percent), Lutheran (6 percent), Presbyterian (4 percent), and Episcopalian (4 percent). Fourteen percent prefer various other Protestant denominations. Catholics constitute a relatively large proportion of the American population (25 percent) and Jews a relatively small proportion (2 percent). As noted earlier, only 8 percent of Americans have no religious preference (Gallup, 1996). Figure 14.6 lists many of the religious organizations in the United States with memberships above 300,000.

Religious Organizations in the U.S.	Number of Members
Roman Catholic Church	60,280,454
Southern Baptist Convention	15,663,296
United Methodist Church	8,538,662
Jewish	6,840,000
Lutheran Church in America	5,190,489
Muslim	5,000,000
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	3,669,489
Episcopal Church	2,536,550
Assembly of God	2,387,982
United Church of Christ	1,472,213
Jehovah's Witnesses	966,243
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	929,725
Seventh-Day Adventist	790,731
Church of the Nazarene	601,900
Salvation Army	453,150
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	412,478
Reformed Church in America	306,312

**Figure 14.6 Membership in Selected Religious Organizations in the United States.** *On the basis of these data, how would you describe the religious composition of the U.S.?*

Sources: Gale Research and composite sources, 1995–1997.

## Fundamentalism in America

Any careful observer of religion in the United States over the last twenty years or so will note the rise of religious *fundamentalism* in the country, especially among Protestant denominations. **Fundamentalism** is based on the desire to resist secularization and to adhere closely to traditional religious beliefs, rituals, and doctrines. It is, of course, inaccurate to limit fundamentalism to Protestants alone. Fundamentalism is found in all religions, including the Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim faiths. This discussion, however, will focus on Protestant fundamentalism.

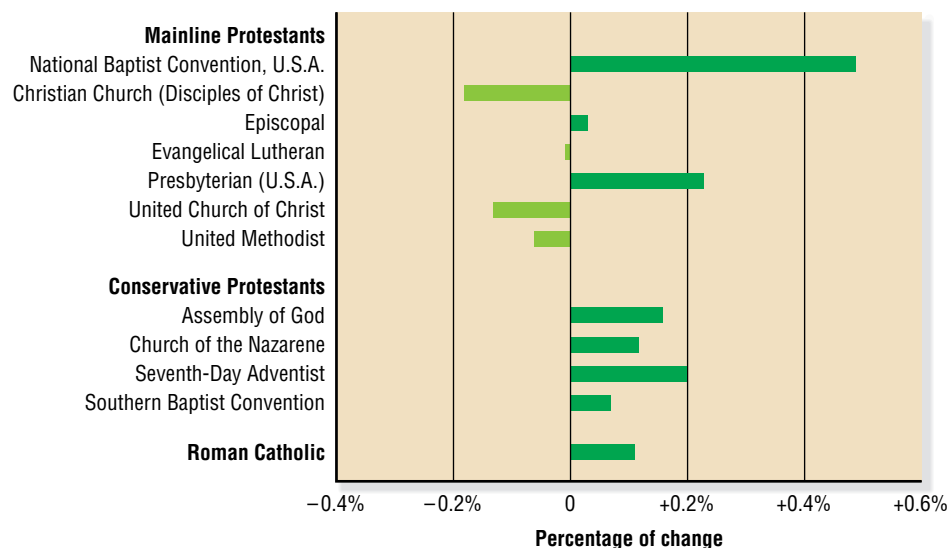
It is not surprising that most fundamentalists are politically conservative, given that the roots of contemporary religious fundamentalism are in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Two issues disturbed the early fundamentalists. First, fundamentalists were concerned about the spread of secularism. Science was challenging the Bible as a source of truth; Marxism was portraying religion as an opiate for the masses; Darwinism was challenging the biblical interpretation of creation; and religion in general was losing its traditionally strong influence on all social institutions. Second, fundamentalists rejected the movement away from emphasis on the traditional message of Christianity toward an emphasis on social service (Johnstone, 1996).

Since the late 1960s, many of the largest American Protestant denominations—Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians—have either been declining in membership or fighting to hold their own. In contrast, contemporary

**fundamentalism**  
the resistance of secularization and the rigid adherence to traditional religious beliefs, rituals, and doctrines







**Figure 14.7 American Church Membership Trends: 1990–1999.**

*Do you believe that this pattern will continue in the twenty-first century? Explain your conclusion using text materials.*

Source: *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1999.*

fundamentalist denominations have been growing. Fundamentalists exist in all Protestant organizations, but they are predominantly found in such religious bodies as the Mormons, the Assemblies of God, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Baptists, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. (See Figure 14.7.)

**What is the nature of fundamentalism today?** The theological agenda of today's fundamentalists is very close to that of their forebears in the nineteenth century.

Fundamentalists believe in the literal truth of the Scriptures, or in taking the Bible at "face value." Protestant fundamentalism involves being "born again" through acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Son of God who was sent to redeem mankind through his sacrifice. Fundamentalist doctrine includes belief in the responsibility of all believers to give witness for God, the presence of Satan as an active force for evil, and the destruction of the world prior to the Messiah's return to establish His kingdom on earth.

**Are all fundamentalists alike?** Religious organizations that share in much of the fundamentalist theology have some unique beliefs and practices of their own. An example is neo-Pentecostalism—or the *charismatic movement*, as it is sometimes called—which has occurred for the most part within traditional religious organizations, particularly the Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches. Those involved in this movement often speak of receiving "the baptism of the Holy Spirit." But central to most neo-Pentecostal groups is the experience of "speaking in tongues," which believers claim is a direct gift of the Holy Spirit (Cox, 1992, 1996; Hunt, Hamilton, and Walter, 1998).

**Why is fundamentalism so strong today?** Several reasons for the growth of fundamentalism have been proposed.

- ❖ Many Americans feel their world is out of control. The social order of the 1950s was shattered by a string of traumatic events beginning with the civil rights movement and progressing through campus violence, political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and Watergate. Increases in substance abuse, illegitimate births, divorce, and crime are taken as signs of moral decline. Fundamental religion, with its absolute answers and promise of eternal life, provides a strong anchor in a confusing, bewildering world.



*This charismatic minister in Atlanta is engaged in faith healing.*

- ❖ Fundamentalist churches, by emphasizing warmth, love, and caring, provide solace to people who are witnessing and experiencing the weakening of family and community ties. Mainline churches tend to be more formal and impersonal.
- ❖ Fundamentalist churches offer what they consider a more purely sacred environment, in contrast to mainline denominations that fundamentalists see as accommodating to secular society.
- ❖ The electronic church, in its role as part of the mass media, has been an important contributing factor in the growth of religious fundamentalism. (See Focus on Research on page 484.)

## Religion, Class, and Politics

Religious affiliation is related to social class. There are marked differences in social class (as measured by education and income) among the various religions in the United States. Generally speaking, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Jews are at the top of the stratification structure. Below them are Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists, followed by Baptists. Because these are average figures, there are, of course, many individual exceptions to these rankings.

Differences in religiosity exist between the upper and lower classes as well. Religion is important at both ends of the stratification structure, but the upper and lower classes express their beliefs in different ways. The upper classes display their religiosity through church membership, church attendance, and observance of ritual, whereas people in the lower classes more often pray privately and have emotional religious experiences.

Political affiliation, too, is related to religion. Followers of the Jewish faith are particularly aligned with the Democratic Party, followed in strength of support by Catholics and Protestants. This is predictable, because Protestants generally are more politically conservative than Catholics or Jews, and the Democratic Party is generally not associated with political conservatism in the United States today. Of the major Protestant denominations, the greatest support for the Republican Party is found among Episcopalians and Presbyterians. This is hardly surprising, because the upper classes are more likely to be identified with the Republican Party.

There are some contradictions in this general pattern. Despite their affiliation with the more conservative Republican Party, Episcopalians and Presbyterians are less conservative than Baptists, who are the strongest supporters of the Democratic Party of all Protestant denominations, especially in the South.

## Religion, Science, and Society

Both science and religion examine humanity's relationship to the world, but they examine it in very different ways. Religion involves matters beyond human observation, while science is all about observation. These fields of study are not mutually exclusive. Many scientists are religious individuals, while many professional clergy appreciate and support the intellectual achievements of the field of science.

Sometimes, however, these two institutions can appear to be in conflict. Depending on the values and norms of the culture, society may favor religious





*Religion and science sometimes come into heated conflict. One famous case was the 1925 “Monkey Trial” of John Thomas Scopes in Tennessee.*

or scientific explanations. In the United States, following the principle of separation of state and church, it has been common to keep religion apart from government-sponsored institutions. Scientific explanations for natural phenomena, when commonly accepted, have been taught in the schools, leaving religious groups free to teach other interpretations within their organizations.

Strict fundamentalists do not believe that scientific theories such as the theory of evolution and the Big Bang theory of creation should be presented in public schools as facts, while Bible-based explanations such as creationism are not even discussed. In 1999, fundamentalists convinced the Kansas Board of Education to remove any questions about evolution from the state high school exit examination. Until the decision was repealed in 2001, Kansas teachers were not required to teach the theory of evolution.

Today, many people are questioning whether “pure science” can remain independent of cultural or social norms, as some scientists believe. Scientific discoveries and processes, such as cloning and gene therapy, are moving into ever more ethically debatable areas. The result appears obvious: the interface between science and religion is sure to increase. Society, in particular government, will need to learn how to deal constructively with apparent contradictions in these two areas.



Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.

**Albert Einstein**  
Nobel Laureate physicist



## Section 4 Assessment

1. What is secularization and why is it an important process to explore?
2. Describe the relationship between religion and political allegiance in the U.S.

### Critical Thinking

3. **Analyzing Information** Analyze how progress in scientific research will affect religious beliefs and practices over the next twenty-five years.

# CHAPTER 14 ASSESSMENT

## Summary

### Section 1: Religion and Sociology

**Main Idea:** Religion is concerned with sacred things. Sociologists studying religion face some unique problems. They do not judge the validity of various religions but rather look at those aspects of religion that can be measured and observed in society.

### Section 2: Theoretical Perspectives

**Main Idea:** Religion has several functions. It legitimates the structure of society, promotes social unity, and provides a sense of meaning and belonging. Marx argued that religion is used to justify and maintain the group in power. Weber believed that religion could promote social change. He connected the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism.

### Section 3: Religious Organization and Religiosity

**Main Idea:** The major forms of religious organization are churches, denominations, sects, and cults. Religiosity—the ways people express their religious interests and convictions—can be analyzed in terms of five dimensions: belief, ritual, intellect, experience, and consequences.

### Section 4: Religion in the United States

**Main Idea:** Through the process of secularization, the sacred and the profane tend to become intermixed. Religious faiths can be analyzed by major social characteristics such as class and political tendencies.



#### Self-Check Quiz

Visit the *Sociology and You* Web site at [soc.glencoe.com](http://soc.glencoe.com) and click on **Chapter 14—Self-Check Quizzes** to prepare for the chapter test.

CLICK HERE

CONTENTS

## Reviewing Vocabulary

Complete each sentence using each term once.

- |                         |                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| a. religion             | h. denomination   |
| b. sacred               | i. sect           |
| c. profane              | j. cult           |
| d. legitimate           | k. religiosity    |
| e. spirit of capitalism | l. secularization |
| f. Protestant ethic     | m. fundamentalism |
| g. church               |                   |

- \_\_\_\_\_ is the word used to describe things and ideas that are set apart and given a special meaning.
- A religious movement based on the desire to adhere closely to traditional beliefs, rituals, and doctrines is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- The \_\_\_\_\_ are the nonsacred aspects of life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is the name given to a cluster of values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes that favored the growth of capitalism.
- \_\_\_\_\_ means to justify or give official approval to.
- A religious organization arising out of a desire to reform another religious organization is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is the obligation to reinvest money rather than spending it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is the name given to a life-encompassing religious organization to which all members of a society belong.
- A unified system of beliefs and practices concerned with sacred things is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- The ways in which people express their religious interests and convictions is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- A \_\_\_\_\_ is a religious organization whose characteristics are not drawn from existing religious tradition within a society.
- The process through which the sacred loses influence over society is known as \_\_\_\_\_.

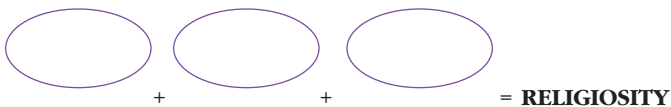
# CHAPTER 14 ASSESSMENT

13. A \_\_\_\_\_ is one of several religious organizations that most members of a society accept as legitimate.

## Reviewing the Facts

1. Religious faiths can be analyzed by two major social characteristics. What are those characteristics?
2. Based on Figure 14.4 on page 482, has the percentage of Americans who claim that religion is very important in their lives decreased over time, increased over time, or showed no significant change?
3. How does the upper social class define its religiosity? Use the diagram below to record your answer.

### RELIGIOSITY AS DEFINED BY THE UPPER CLASS



4. In 1978, the Reverend Jim Jones led hundreds of people who belonged to his group in a mass suicide-murder. What term is used to describe Jones's religious organization?
5. Which sociologist published *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in 1915 and spoke of the functions of religion?

## Thinking Critically

1. **Making Inferences** The crucifix is a widely known symbol even to non-Christians. How do the various meanings attached to this symbol relate to an understanding of Durkheim's concept of the sacred and profane? Could the crucifix easily represent other things if it was not for its relationship to Christ? Explain your answer.
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Current research says that religion often reflects conventional (traditional) norms. Accordingly, religious clergy tend to address their messages to the more tradi-

tional segments of society. Sermons, for example, are aimed at the typical married family arrangement (mother, father, two children). What effect, if any, do you think this could have on general attendance at gatherings?

3. **Analyzing Information** The United States has one of the highest standards of living in the world. It also has one of the most materialistic cultures and societies. Do you think this says anything about the religiosity of Americans?
4. **Making Inferences** About 96 percent of all Americans say they believe in God. Nevertheless, defining who is or is not religious is very difficult. Some people don't go to church yet claim to be religious, while others go to church but don't seem to be religious, for example. What dilemmas do all these issues present for sociologists who want to study religiosity? What variables could help to explain what religiosity is? Why do you think sociologists should research this issue at all?
5. **Analyzing Information** Do you think that economic decisions are influenced by religiously based motivations? Elaborate.
6. **Evaluating Information** Based on scales developed by sociologists, African Americans rate higher in religiosity than other racial or ethnic groups. Men like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Abernathy and women like Aretha Franklin have attributed their success to the role religion played in their lives. What events in this country's history might have contributed to the role that religion plays in the African American community?
7. **Applying Concepts** Many people appear to be less interested in religion during their teenage years. This might be seen in falling church attendance for this age group. Using your sociological imagination, suggest some reasons for this apparent lack of interest. Consider developmental (age) and social factors. Depending on your answers, what suggestions might you make to religious organizations looking for ideas on how to keep teenagers involved and active?

## Sociology Projects

- 1. Researching Religions** Choose a religion, denomination, sect, or cult to research. You can learn about the group by talking with some of its members. You can also find excellent material in libraries and on the Internet. (Be sure to consider the source of all information gathered from the Internet. Check it for bias, accuracy, and “hidden agendas.”) In your research, focus on the following aspects of the group: its origin; fundamental beliefs, important rituals or ceremonies; internal social changes that occurred over time; and membership demographics (social class, ethnicity, and so forth). You may want to work with a classmate. Based on your research, prepare a report with visual aids that can be given orally. (You may want to use a computer presentation package such as PowerPoint.)
- 2. Sacred and Profane** The chapter discusses the concepts of *sacred* and *profane*. Any object by itself is profane; people give it sacred meaning. Working with two of your classmates, select an object (profane), and create a skit in which you show how the profane object might become a sacred object.
- 3. Defining and Analyzing Religion** This exercise will help you understand the difficulty social scientists have when it comes to defining and analyzing religion. Take out a piece of paper and answer the following questions:
  - a.** How do you define religion?
  - b.** What does it mean to you?
  - c.** Do you believe in the supernatural?
  - d.** If you do believe in the supernatural, how do you imagine it to be?After everyone in class has completed these questions, turn to your neighbor and compare your answers with his or her answers. Note the similarities and differences. Share your answers with as many of your classmates as possible.
- 4. Charitable Organizations** Contact a religious organization in your neighborhood, and arrange to take part in some community service activity

in which this organization is involved. Pay close attention to the various ways in which these groups conduct charitable work. Report to the class on the effectiveness of your service—both for the recipient and for yourself. Then consider how your community would be affected if the group stopped providing this service. Would some political or non-governmental organization continue it?

- 5. Attitudes on Religion** Design a survey that would allow you to conduct an “unofficial” study of student attitudes toward religion. (You may want to refer back to the section on survey methods in Chapter 2.) Remember that your questions are directed at social practices and not at what or why individuals specifically believe. Some topics you may want to ask about include attendance at religious services, prayer, and belief in an afterlife. Information about respondents’ ethnic and religious backgrounds would prove useful as well. Compare your survey with the surveys created by your classmates. Work with four or five students to combine your questions into the best survey possible, and ask twenty students to complete the survey for your group. Report your findings to the class. Do these results reflect the community you live in? Do you think that teens are more or less outwardly religious than adults?

## Technology Activity



- 1.** Using your school or local library and the Internet, research information on the clergy during the middle ages. Based on your research and the material you read in this chapter, how would you classify their religious organization? Some of the characteristics of the clergy might be regarded as a cult. Explain why the clergy in the middle ages were not a cult. Using proper grammar, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation, write a paragraph defending your conclusion.

## Chapter 14

## Enrichment Reading

## India's Sacred Cow

by Marvin Harris



**People often take their own religion for granted, overlooking its connections with the rest of society. We are better able to see the link between religious beliefs and culture when we examine an unfamiliar setting. Marvin Harris's analysis of the place of the cow in Hinduism provides such a backdrop.**

News photographs that came out of India during the famine of the late 1960s showed starving people stretching out bony hands to beg for food while sacred cattle strolled behind undisturbed. The Hindu, it seems, would rather starve to death than eat his cow or even deprive it of food. The cattle appear to browse unhindered through urban markets eating an orange here, a mango there, competing with people for meager supplies of food.

By Western standards, spiritual values seem more important to Indians than life itself. Specialists in food habits . . . consider Hinduism an irrational **ideology** that compels people to overlook abundant, nutritious foods for scarcer, less healthful foods.

Cow worship . . . carries over into politics. In 1966 a crowd of 120,000 people, led by holy men, demonstrated in front of the Indian House of Parliament in support of the All-Party Cow Protection Campaign Committee. In Nepal, the only **contemporary** Hindu kingdom, cow slaughter is severely punished. As one story goes, the car driven by an official of a United States agency struck and killed a cow. In order to avoid the international incident that would have occurred when the official was arrested for murder, the Nepalese magistrate concluded that the cow had committed suicide. . . .

The easy explanation for India's devotion to the cow, the one most Westerners and Indians would offer, is that cow worship is an integral part of Hinduism. Religion is somehow good for

the soul, even it if sometimes fails the body. Religion orders the cosmos and explains our place in the universe. Religious beliefs, many would claim, have existed for thousands of years and have a life of their own. They are not understandable in scientific terms.

But all this ignores history. There is more to be said for cow worship than is immediately apparent. The earliest Vedas, the Hindu sacred texts from the second millennium B.C., do not prohibit the slaughter of cattle. Instead, they ordain it as part of sacrificial rites. The early Hindus did not avoid the flesh of cows and bulls; they ate it at ceremonial feasts presided over by Brahman priests. Cow worship is a relatively recent development in India; it evolved as the Hindu religion developed and changed.

This evolution is recorded in royal **edicts** and religious texts written during the last 3,000 years of Indian history. The Vedas from the first millennium B.C. contain contradictory passages, some referring to ritual slaughter and others to a strict taboo on beef consumption. . . . [M]any of the sacred-cow passages were incorporated into the texts by priests of a later period.

By 200 A.D. the status of Indian cattle had undergone a **spiritual transformation**. The Brahman priesthood **exhorted** the population to **venerate** the cow and forbade them to abuse it or to feed on it. Religious feasts involving the ritual slaughter and consumption of livestock were eliminated and meat eating was restricted to the nobility.



*Anthropologist Marvin Harris contends that science and culture can explain the reason cows are sacred to Hindus. How does he attempt to support his claim?*

By 1000 A.D., all Hindus were forbidden to eat beef. Ahimsa, the Hindu belief in the unity of all life, was the spiritual justification for this restriction. But it is difficult to **ascertain** exactly when this change occurred. An important event that helped to shape the modern complex was the Islamic invasion, which took place in the eighth century A.D. Hindus may have found it **politically expedient** to set themselves off from the invaders, who were beefeaters, by emphasizing the need to prevent the slaughter of their sacred animals. Thereafter, the cow taboo assumed its modern form and began to function much as it does today.

Source: Excerpted from James M. Henslin, *Down to Earth Sociology: Introductory Readings*, 10th ed., The Free Press, 1999.

## What Does it Mean?

**ascertain**  
determine

**contemporary**  
modern, current

**edict**  
official proclamation  
or law

**exhorted**  
strongly urged

**ideology**  
a systematic body of  
thought about human  
culture or society

**politically expedient**  
based on practical or  
advantageous reasons

**venerate**  
worship or revere

## Read and React

1. Summarize your understanding (prior to reading this article) of the Hindu religious belief about cows. Has your opinion changed after reading it? Why or why not?
2. How do non-Hindu people's reactions to the sacred cow relate to ethnocentrism and cultural relativism? Explain in each case, drawing on material in the reading.