



# The Sociological Perspective on Religion

**R**eligion is one of the most powerful, deeply felt, and influential forces in human society. It has shaped people's relationships with each other, influencing family, community, economic, and political life. Religious beliefs and values motivate human action, and religious groups organize their collective religious expressions. Religion is a significant aspect of social life, and the social dimension is an important part of religion.

Sociologists are interested in studying religion primarily for two reasons. First, religion is very important to many people. Religious practices are important parts of many individuals' lives. Religious values influence many people's actions, and religious meanings help them interpret their experiences. Sociologists seek to understand the meaning of religion to believers themselves. Second, religion is an important object for sociological study because of its influence on society and society's impact on religion. Analysis of this dynamic relationship requires examining the interdependence of religion and other aspects of society. Often this means questioning taken-for-granted ways of understanding social action. From the earliest foundations of the discipline, sociologists have sought to understand the larger society through examining religion and its influence.

## THE RELIGIOUS CONTOURS OF A COMMUNITY

Before probing religious phenomena in depth, we might note the broad contours of religion as they appear in one community.<sup>1</sup> This highlighting of religion suggests some of the questions a sociologist might ask in surveying, analyzing, and interpreting the place of religion in contemporary society. For example, what are some of the religious contours of San Antonio, Texas, where I live and work?

Conveniently for this example, the city is named for a Catholic saint, Anthony, who was patron of the eighteenth-century Franciscan Mission San Antonio de Valero (better known today as the Alamo). Catholicism has always been a central religion in San Antonio, but there is also a long history of religious and ethnic diversity within local Catholic religious expression. Large clusters of immigrant peoples brought their Catholic faith from other places, like Spain's Canary Islands, Germany, Ireland, France, and Czechoslovakia, and these groups expressed their faith differently. Not only ethnic differences but also class and status differences shaped local Catholicism. In the nineteenth century, the economically comfortable children attending the convent school encountered a different version of their religion than did the poor laborers whose religion was mediated by folk saints, mystery plays, pilgrimages, and a rich popular lore.

Many decades later, despite homogenizing experiences of education, economic mobility, intermarriage, and changes within their church internationally, many of these Catholics still participate in different styles of worship and religiosity, in different languages, gestures, and idioms, often celebrating very different aspects of the same world religion. A sociologist would want to know more: What does it mean to believers themselves to be Catholics in San Antonio today? How does their religion help them make sense of their lives? How does it influence their everyday behavior, such as decisions in the workplace or use of leisure time? How, too, does their religion influence their political and moral behavior? Do they experience a sense of belonging to a community of fellow believers? Which fellow believers are experienced as "us," and how does that community, in turn, shape religious expression?

The rough contours of religion in San Antonio also show that Catholicism no longer holds the allegiance of all Latinos (mostly Mexican-Americans), who constitute the ethnic majority of the city's populace. The city abounds with numerous small but active Spanish-speaking Pentecostal and evangelical Protestant churches. Separate but similar in style of worship are many Pentecostal and evangelical groups serving the city's minority populations of Anglos (whites) and African-Americans. Many of these growing congregations are nondenominational, neither affiliated with nor under the supervision of

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1. Phillip Hammond suggested the metaphor of religious contours.

any larger denominational body. Some of these churches practice a much more enthusiastic form of worship than do mainstream religious groups.

Effervescent religiosity (including such expressions as speaking in tongues, faith healing, and exorcism) has long fascinated sociologists and anthropologists, who have asked questions like: What is the social nature of these extraordinary religious experiences? For example, how does the group mediate healing to the sick person? How does the group generate and channel such fervor? What are some of the effects of this kind of religiosity on members' everyday lives? How do these groups recruit and convert new members? How are some of the social class, education, and other background characteristics of members linked with these groups' appeal? What are the effects on group structure, beliefs, and practices of being so independent of external denominational affiliation?

San Antonio's Southern Baptist churches exemplify the fact that even religious groups identifying with mainstream denominations may find that affiliation problematic. In recent years, this mainstream denomination has been wracked with disagreement and uncertainty about the proper role of the national denominational body: Does the faction that controls the national convention have the right to demand member congregations to conform to its particular version of Baptist belief and practice? What seems like an organization struggle, however, involves some of this religion's core values and beliefs. Southern Baptists are the most numerous Protestant denomination in the city, and local leaders are also prominent in the national struggle. Each time the national conference is held, news of Southern Baptists is a front-page story—indeed, often headlines—in the city's major newspaper.

Sociologists would be fascinated to learn more about this denomination, locally and nationally: What happens (at any level of organization) when one segment of the membership tries to establish an orthodoxy (i.e., boundaries around what one should believe or practice in order to be “one of us”)? How do religious groups variously respond to societal changes and modernity? Does change within a religious group occur from the top down or from the bottom up? How does the stance of this denomination affect its larger influence in society and its members' lives?

While orthodoxy is historically rather alien to Baptists, it is both familiar and valued among many hierarchical religions. Besides Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, many ancient hierarchical religious groups are nestled into the religious contours of this city. Making news headlines, for example, was the visit of the Patriarch to the local Coptic church, Saint Anthony the Great. Coptic Christianity dates to the first-century evangelization of Egypt, and today the vast majority of adherents of this faith live in the Mideast. The Coptic enclave in this U.S. city is very much a church in diaspora (i.e., a people settled far from their ancestral homelands), as are the congregations of Lebanese Maronites, Greek Orthodox, and other ethno-religious minorities.

Surveying these small but significant outlines on the religious horizon of the city, the sociologist would ask, among other questions: How is religion linked with ethnic and language identity? How are those identities preserved in the face of pressures for integration into the larger culture, for intermarriage, and

for bilingual or English-only education and mass media? How do religious groups so steeped in tradition respond to modern challenges to traditional norms (such as efforts to redefine women's roles or to democratize decision making in the church itself)? Similar questions would apply to non-Christian traditions active in San Antonio, such as the Jews, Hindus, and Muslims.

Developments in San Antonio's American Moslem Mission mirror national changes. A visitor to this highly committed congregation would immediately notice the balance of U.S.-born black members, together with Mideastern Muslims. The Black Muslim movement was once virulently intolerant of other races and religions; it was also relatively unconnected with Islam as a world religion. Malcolm X was one of the first Black Muslim leaders to embrace a larger vision of Islam, and one faction of the movement followed his lead to greater tolerance and intense study of Islam, becoming part of the Sunni branch of the international faith.

Observing these U.S.-born blacks, with their knowledge of the Qur'an scriptures and their commitment to the strictures of Muslim religious practice, the sociologist might ask: How does this religious commitment constitute a form of protest against the values and attitudes of the dominant U.S. culture? How does religion figure into racism and other intolerance in U.S. society? How do sectarian enclaves, like the Black Muslims, recruit and maintain commitment? How have the beliefs and practices of this group influenced the socioeconomic situation of its members?

Besides representatives of recognizable world religions, the religious contours of San Antonio include many emerging religious movements. Numerous meditation groups gather to practice eclectic combinations of Eastern meditation techniques, body disciplines, and healing rituals. One New Age group, for example, borrows elements from Yoga meditation, Reiki (a Japanese "new religion") healing, aromatherapy, pagan and Christian symbolism, and modern psychology. Many of its members simultaneously remain active in their Christian denominational churches. Another group is limited to women members, who seek to create and express a nonpatriarchal religion, focusing on goddess imagery derived from ancient Celtic lore but interwoven with their own new symbols and rituals.

Particularly fascinating to the sociologist-observer is that these emerging religions are frequently found among the relatively well-educated, economically comfortable, young adult or middle-aged members of the community—precisely those who were, according to earlier predictions, most likely to become nonreligious altogether. What do these emerging forms of religion suggest about the place of religion in modern society? What is the basis of their appeal to these segments of the community? How is it possible to put together a "new" religion? How potent are changes in ritual and symbolism for producing long-lasting transformations of people's identities and way of life?

Although these emerging religious movements may not advertise themselves as alternatives to traditional religions, there is clearly a religious quality to their beliefs and practices. Less obviously religious is the vast range of quasi-religious or parareligious groups in the community. To analyze fully the religious

contours of San Antonio, one might include a study of some of these groups that function very much like religious groups, although whether they are actually “religions” is a matter of definitional debate (described shortly). One of the oldest parareligious groups in the city is the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a militant and occasionally violent secret society organized against nonwhites and non-Christians. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Klan paraded openly in full hooded regalia in the streets of San Antonio, asserting their local “muscle” and celebrating their group identity in photographs posed before the Alamo. The rituals, symbols, and group identity of parareligions like the Klan are also worth analyzing.

And what should the sociologist of religion make of the quasi-religious rituals and symbols by which the nation is celebrated and understood? The religious quality of the awe inspired by the Alamo, for example, is interesting. Visitors to this “shrine of American liberty” are moved by the image of martyrs, “sacred” places, and objects arranged solemnly within the crumbling walls of the old mission to bring to collective memory certain values of the nation. The Alamo inspires collective memory among U.S. tourists and many local Anglos, despite the conveniently forgotten historical likelihood that the heroes of the Alamo were fighting for the status of Texas within Mexico (rather than for union with the United States) and were motivated by economic self-interest as much as (or more than) political freedom.

This kind of religiousness about the nation and its symbols (discussed further in Chapter 6) is of considerable interest to sociologists, who ask: How do complex, modern societies generate, maintain, and express cohesion? How do our myths and rituals involve an ongoing selective remembering? How do these beliefs and practices shape what kind of a nation we want to be and serve as a basis for national self-criticism? How are civil religious ideas and fervor sometimes used to legitimate the interests of one group over another? How are they used in political manipulation?

Is religion losing its influence? I once challenged a class to use instances from this community to persuade me that the answer was not an unqualified yes. They presented extensive data about the vitality of church-oriented religiosity in the city, such as the size of church membership rolls and number of people attending services regularly. The most impressive evidence, however, was of the influence of religious expressions not overtly identified with religious organizations. One student described a middle-aged Anglo couple who chose to live, work, and raise their children in a Latino barrio, near one of the worst public-housing tracts in the city. Their daily efforts to help organize the poor for better education, housing, and community services were expressions of their religious convictions, even though they did not identify their unpaid work with any specific religious organization. Another example was a group of women who have formed a spiritual and psychological support group for battered women. Instances such as these are sure significant, if less visible, parts of the religious contours of the community.

This rough sketch of the religious situation in one city illustrates that a deeper analysis of the role of religion is essential for an understanding of the

whole society. Sociological analysis can give us an interpretive grasp of the everyday meanings, potent traditions, dynamism, and change of religion today.

## **THE NATURE OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Because religion is so intensely personal and reverently held, some people have difficulty grasping a sociological perspective on it. The sociological perspective is a way of looking at religion that focuses on the human (especially social) aspects of religious belief and practice. Religion is both individual and social. Even the most intensively subjective mystical experience is given meaning through socially available symbols and has value partly because of culturally established interpretations of such experiences. A personal religious experience such as conversion is voluntary and subjective, yet is situated in social circumstances and given meaning by social conventions. When the individual communicates that religious experience, the symbols used to interpret it are socially determined.

Two characteristics of the sociological perspective separate it from nonscientific approaches to religion: It is empirical and objective. As much as possible, sociologists base their interpretations on empirical evidence. They seek to verify their images and explanations of social reality by experimental or experiential evidence. And they look for generalizations about a larger societal, historical, and cross-cultural picture, continually asking: Of what larger phenomenon is this particular situation an example? Objectivity means that sociological interpretations of religion do not attempt to evaluate, accept, or reject the content of religious belief. Sociological researchers set aside, for purposes of the study, their personal opinions about religion and try to be as unbiased as possible in observing and interpreting the religious phenomenon under study. From a sociological perspective, one religion is not superior to another. Indeed, the sociological perspective does not even presume the merits of religious over nonreligious approaches.

These aspects of the sociological perspective on religion may discomfort students who find their cherished beliefs and practices dispassionately treated as objects of study. It may be disturbing to have one's own religion treated as comparable to other religions and not as superior or uniquely true. The perspectives of the religious believer and the sociologist are necessarily quite different, but neither perspective represents the whole reality of religion.

Let us use the analogy of another object of attention. In looking at a flower, several people could view the same one, yet each employ a different perspective. A botanist could employ a scientific perspective, analyzing in great detail the flower's physical properties, comparing it with other plants, and classifying the flower accordingly. An artist could interpret the flower onto the canvas, abstracting those visual qualities that convey its image. A mystic could use the flower as a focal point for meditation, perhaps experiencing a sense of oneness

with the flower and the rest of the natural environment. And a child could examine the flower to consider its suitability for a daisy chain. The point is that none of these perspectives has a monopoly on the reality of the flower; what is discovered from the perspective of the botanist does not disconfirm what the artist's perspective has revealed.

Similarly, the religious perspective on human life often produces a very different picture of that reality than does a sociological perspective. What is relevant to the religious believer may be irrelevant or inadmissible evidence to the sociologist. What is central to the sociologist may be irrelevant or uninteresting to the religious believer. The reality perceived from the sociological perspective cannot disprove that of the religious believer; it is not possible for a sociologist to prove, for example, whether or not a religious prophecy or vision is from God. Furthermore, the perspective of the religious believer does not disprove that of the sociologist. If, for example, a religious "revelation" contradicts sociological evidence, the fact that the believer considers the "revelation" to be from God does not disprove the sociological observation.

These two different perspectives, however, are often difficult to reconcile. The sociological perspective, by definition, lacks a key religious quality—faith. The believer accepts certain beliefs and meanings on faith. Faith implies taking certain meanings or practices for granted, implicitly trusting, not questioning. By contrast, the sociologist does not take the believer's meanings for granted but takes them as an object of study.

The sociological perspective sometimes implies that people belong to religious groups for reasons other than the truth-value of the belief system. For example, sociologists have observed that upper-class persons are likely to belong to different Christian denominations than lower-class persons. In 1990, the median reported household income for Baptists and for Nazarenes was less than two-thirds that of Episcopalians and Unitarians. Similarly, the percentage of college graduates among Episcopalians and Unitarians was roughly five times as great as that of Baptists and Nazarenes (Kosmin and Lachman, 1993:260). These data suggest that social class, as well as belief, influences people's religious affiliation.

The more causality that believers attribute to supernatural sources, the less their interpretation can be reconciled with a sociological perspective. The very fact of treating certain interactions like conversion as human behavior, as an object of sociological study, is often incompatible with the basic beliefs of some religious groups. Sociology must necessarily "bracket" (i.e., methodologically set aside) the crucial religious question: To what extent is this action also from God? This does not mean that sociology treats religious behavior and experience as "merely" human. Important dimensions of religion may not be accessible to sociological interpretation. Nevertheless, whatever else they may be, religious behavior and experience are also human and are therefore proper subjects for sociological research and understanding. With these limitations of the sociological perspective in mind, let us explore some definitions of religion within this perspective.



## DEFINING RELIGION

The purpose of a sociological definition is to bring order to a vast array of social phenomena. The definition of any concept establishes (somewhat arbitrarily) boundaries around those phenomena to be considered as instances of that concept. Thus, to focus our attention on phenomena to be considered “religion,” we must establish a working definition of religion.

Try writing your own sociological definition of religion. It should be broad enough to include all kinds of religion but narrow enough to exclude what is similar to, yet not the same as, religion. One way to construct your definition is to think of specific instances of “religion” or “nonreligion” and see whether your definition includes or excludes them. For example, does your definition include the religions of Asia or Africa? Does your definition use terms (e.g., *church* or *god*) that, unless clarified, may apply only to some religions? Is your definition narrow enough? Does it distinguish between religious commitment and other commitments such as allegiance to a social club, an ethnic group, or family? There are several phenomena that only some sociologists define as religion (e.g., magic, superstition, witchcraft, astrology, spiritualism). Does your definition account for these phenomena? If so why? How do the phenomena of nationalism, atheism, or environmentalism fit into your definition? Does your definition include or exclude them? Why? Do you consider psychotherapy, football, or rock music to be “religion”? Some sociological definitions of religion are so broad as to include all of these phenomena; others exclude some or all of them. We will examine some of these definitions and some arguments for excluding or including certain characteristics within a definition of religion.

Definitions of religion are an issue of serious debate, not just academic wrangling, in sociology. How one defines religion shapes one’s explanation of its role in society. Different definitions of religion result in different interpretations of issues such as social change (see Chapter 7), modernity (see Chapter 8), and nonchurch religion (see Chapter 4). Indeed, part of the problem in determining a satisfactory definition of religion is that the issue of what is “properly religious” is a continuing controversy in modern societies.

### Definition as Strategy

It is useful to approach sociological definitions as strategies rather than as “truths.” A definitional strategy narrows the field under consideration and suggests ways of thinking about it. Definitions can be evaluated according to how useful they are for a given task. What interpretive tasks does any given definition help to accomplish? Pragmatically, then, it is sometimes helpful to use different, even opposing, definitional strategies to approach a phenomenon.

Two major strategies used by sociologists of religion are substantive and functional definitions. **Substantive definitions** try to establish what religion *is*; **functional definitions** describe what religion does. These approaches can be illustrated by analogy with definitions of the concept *chair*. A substantive definition might state that a chair is an object of furniture that usually has four



legs and a back; the definition might add further physical details to distinguish a chair from a sofa, bench, or toilet. A functional definition of *chair* might state that it is a seat, usually for one person. This functional definition is somewhat broader, encompassing objects that various cultures use as seats but that may have no legs at all. Defining *chair* is easier than defining *religion*, however, because one can point to various physical objects called *chair* and then derive a set of distinguishing characteristics from observing them. Religion does not have clear-cut physical properties, nor are its characteristics readily ascertained and agreed on. Indeed, religious groups themselves disagree about religion's essential nature, which partially accounts for the vast diversity of belief systems.

### Substantive Definitions

A substantive definition defines what religion is. It attempts to establish categories of religious content that qualify as religion and other categories specified as nonreligion. Melford Spiro offers a straightforward substantive definition of *religion*: "An institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (1966:96). By "institution," this definition refers to socially shared patterns of behavior and belief. All institutions include beliefs, patterns of actions, and value systems; the critical feature of religion is that the beliefs, patterns of action, and values refer to "superhuman beings" (Spiro, 1966:98).

Spiro's definition of religion is a good example of a sociological definitional strategy because all of the categories in the definition—"institution," "culturally patterned," "culturally postulated"—are sociologically relevant. His explication of the concept of "superhuman beings" is also sociologically significant because it emphasizes the sense of *power*. "Superhuman beings" are defined as those having greater power than humans, beings who can help or hurt humans but can be influenced by human action (Spiro, 1966:98). Power is one of the most important concepts in the sociology of religion, and a definition that emphasizes power can be useful. Other substantive definitions of religion use similar concepts, including "nonhuman agencies," "supernatural realm," "super-empirical reality," "transcendent reality," and "sacred cosmos."

Besides these theoretical approaches to religion, many empirical studies of institutional religion implicitly use substantive definitions for a different reason: They are easier to adapt to survey research. A somewhat oversimplified example is seen in the questionnaire that asks the respondent's religion, then lists the following alternative choices: "Protestant," "Catholic," "Jew," "other," "none." The underlying assumption of such a question is a substantive definition of religion as a specific Western religious institution.

The major advantage of substantive definitions is that they are more specific than functional ones. They are more explicit about the content of religion. Substantive definitions tend to be narrower and neater than functional definitions; using them, one can specify whether a phenomenon is or is not religion. Substantive definitions also tend to correspond more closely than functional definitions to commonsense notions of religion because they are generally based

on Western—especially Christian—ideas about reality. For example, the distinction between *natural* and *supernatural* is a product of Western thinking, such as the elaborate medieval cosmographies (i.e., pictures of the universe) that classified natural and supernatural beings on numerous levels. Although hierarchies of archangels and seraphim may not be relevant in contemporary society, the division of natural from supernatural still seems familiar.

Substantive definitions are appropriate for studying religion in relatively stable societies, which present few problems with issues of social change and cross-cultural applicability. Substantive definitions are problematic precisely because they are historically and culturally bound, based on what has been considered religion in one place and time. Because of their basis in Western historical experience, substantive definitions are often too narrow to account for non-Western religious phenomena. Substantive definitions are sometimes deceptively neat. Without specifying the functions of supernatural beings, for example, it is impossible to distinguish the gods from ghosts, Santa Claus, and the tooth fairy.

Some sociologists identify religion with church-oriented religiosity; relatively few non-Western societies, however, have formal organizations like churches. Does this mean that such societies therefore have no religion? If supernatural, nonempirical, or nonrational entities do not figure importantly in a society, does that society lack religion? Confucianism (the state religion of China from about 200 B.C.E. until the early twentieth century C.E.) is essentially a set of principles of order, especially regarding social relationships surrounding authority and kinship. It does not include the worship of any gods, although nature and ancestors receive much ritual reverence. If supernaturalism is a key criterion of a substantive definition, then Confucianism and some strains of Buddhism (in which there is no deity and no dualistic conception of the nature of being) would not be considered religions. Some contemporary Christian theology also levels this-worldly and otherworldly distinctions. Would Christianity without supernaturalism cease to be a religion?

Substantive definitions have difficulty accounting for religious change. If religion is identified only in terms of religious expression in one historical period, any change from that form of expression looks like nonreligion. Many theories of religious change, for example, start from a notion of a time when people were “really religious.” In Christian history, the thirteenth century is often identified as the period when religion was a powerful force in the entire society and thoroughly interwoven with other aspects of life—work, education, politics, family, and so on (note, however, that recent historical scholarship reveals “there never was an ‘age of faith’” [Obelkevich, 1979:6]). If one equates that image of religion with “real religion,” any change from that pattern is viewed as a trend toward nonreligion (“secularization”). A parallel problem occurs in studies of the family. If *family* is defined in terms of its historical manifestations (e.g., concrete blood or marriage ties), many contemporary living arrangements do not qualify as family. Do two unmarried people and their offspring constitute a family? What about a single woman and her adopted children? What about six unmarried persons sharing sexual partners and collectively caring for their offspring?

Because cultures constantly and sometimes rapidly change, it is difficult to create a substantive definition that applies through time. On the other hand, it is difficult to document historical changes in religion's place in society if we lack a sufficiently specific definition of religion. If we compare, for example, the situation of religion in the French Revolution with the religious situation of the American Revolution, we must be able to identify exactly which aspects of social life we mean by *religion*.

As a definitional strategy, substantive definitions have advantages: They are more specific and amenable to empirical studies of religion. On the other hand, they tend to be more historically and culturally bound than functional definitions. Substantive definitions, in short, produce a very different interpretation of social change than do functional definitions. (For essays promoting substantive definitional approaches, see Berger, 1967:175–178; Robertson, 1970:34–51; Spiro, 1966.)

### Functional Definitions

A functional definition of religion emphasizes what religion *does* for the individual and social group. Accordingly, religion is defined by the social functions it fulfills. The content of religious belief and practice is less important for this definitional strategy than the consequences of religion.

Clifford Geertz's definition of religion is a useful example of a functional definition: "A *religion* is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1966:4).

This definition emphasizes several sociologically important concepts. The most important element is the provision of meaning because the establishing of shared meanings (i.e., symbols) is an essentially social event. The definition also accounts for social structural and social psychological functions through the concepts of *moods*, *motivations*, and *factuality* (which also relate to the notion of *institution*, as Spiro uses it). The distinguishing features of this definition are the "conceptions of a general order of existence" and their realism. According to Geertz, people interpret events and experiences as meaningful by linking them with a larger sense of *order*. This larger sense of order is perceived from a religious perspective as entirely real—even more real than mundane events and experiences. Empirically this distinction means that the content of religious beliefs and practices does not matter as long as it serves to symbolize some transcendent order to believers (Geertz, 1966:12ff.).

Some of the functions identified by various sociological definitions of religion include the provision of ultimate meaning, the attempt to interpret the unknown and control the uncontrollable, personification of human ideals, integration of the culture and legitimation of the social system, projection of human meanings and social patterns onto a superior entity, and the effort to deal with ultimate problems of human existence. Some of these functions are described further in later chapters.

One distinction used in many functional definitions is the social attribution of the **sacred**. Whereas the natural/supernatural distinction of some substantive definitions refers to the intrinsic quality of the *object* of worship, the sacred/profane distinction refers to the *attitude* of worshippers. The realm of the sacred refers to that which a group of believers sets apart as holy and protects from the “profane” by special rites and rules (Durkheim, 1965:62). The sacred is regarded as especially powerful and serious. For example, a communion wafer may be regarded as nothing but a piece of bread by nonbelievers, but Christian worshippers regard it as special and treat it differently from ordinary bread. Natural objects such as candles, beads, books, water, oil, and wood can be regarded as sacred. Thus, nonsupernatural cultural systems (e.g., nationalism) could be viewed as sacred systems because of the attitude of their followers. Nationalist groups often treat the state and its symbols—flags, national holidays, shrines—as sacred.

Functional definitions of religion include all that substantive definitions identify as religion, but they are usually much broader. Both substantive and functional approaches would define the phenomena of Calvinism, Roman Catholicism, Methodism, Mormonism, and Reform Judaism as “religion.” The inclusiveness of some functionalist approaches, however, extends to some phenomena that substantivists identify as nonreligion: ideologies, ethos, value systems, worldviews, interpersonal relations, leisure activities, voluntary associations, and so on. Geertz (1966:13) points out that his definition of religion would include, for example, golf—not if a person merely played it with a passion, but rather if golf were seen as symbolic of some transcendent order. Functional definitions often include as “religion” phenomena such as nationalism, Maoism, Marxism, psychologism, spiritualism, and even atheism. The religious qualities of less comprehensive human activities, such as sports, art, music, and sex, are incorporated into some functionalist definitions as well.

The primary advantage of a functionalist definitional strategy is its breadth. Functional definitions tend to be better than substantive definitions for encompassing cross-cultural, transhistorical, and changing aspects of religion. Functional definitions encourage the observer to be sensitive to the religious quality of many social settings.

A drawback of some functional approaches to religion, however, is their assumption that society has certain functional requisites. This assumption implies that society requires certain social functions, some of which are uniquely fulfilled by religion. Some theories, for example, assume that society requires cultural integration (i.e., a common core of beliefs, values, and commitments). If religion is then defined as that which provides cultural integration, the theory implies that religion is a requisite for society’s existence (Parsons, 1944:86). Such an argument is circular, describing religion as that which provides that which is defined as religion. The assumption that religion is necessary is unproven.

The breadth of functional definitions is a mixed blessing. While functional definitions are less culturally and historically bound, this inclusiveness makes it difficult to use them for empirical studies requiring neat, quantifiable cate-

gories. Some critics say that functional strategies result in all-inclusive categories, defining virtually everything human as religion.

Sociologists using functional definitions need to show why they include phenomena that participants themselves do not consider to be religious. From a functionalist standpoint, a good case could be made for considering psychotherapeutic groups as essentially religious phenomena. They give their members a sense of purpose and meaning, and they use symbols (e.g., words and gestures) to establish moods and motivations that members believe will help them cope better with “real life.” Members of these groups, however, often do not recognize their own beliefs and behavior as religious; they may even intensely disavow the religious label. Many Native Americans, for instance, insist that theirs is not a “religion” but a way of life. On the one hand, it seems fair to accept the participants’ notion of what they are doing. On the other hand, it is an honorable sociological tradition to point out the facades behind which people mask their activities. Few sociologists would accept at face value prison staff members’ assertions that prisons are mainly for the purpose of rehabilitating prisoners. Similarly, there may be good sociological reasons for questioning whether vehemently nonreligious groups are actually nonreligious. Representatives of Transcendental Meditation (TM) argued strongly in court that TM is not religion and therefore should be allowed in the public schools. The religious aspects of TM’s beliefs and practices are downplayed because the desired image of TM is as technique rather than religion. The fact that a movement’s desired image may be promoted by denying its religious qualities is worth studying, but sociologists need not accept a group’s self-definition. (For essays promoting functional definitional approaches, see Geertz, 1966; Lemert, 1975; Luckmann, 1967, 1977.)

The choice between substantive and functional definitions is finally a matter of strategy. Each approach has advantages that may recommend it to certain sociological tasks. The two strategies, however, result in very different interpretations of various issues such as social change, secularization, the relationship between religion and other institutions in society, and new forms of religion. An awareness of the limitations and scope of each definitional approach will enable us to evaluate these other issues more critically. This book draws largely on examples that would be defined as religion by both substantive and functional definitions. At the same time, however, because of specific attention to what *individuals* hold as religiously meaningful, this book also explores phenomena that only functional approaches would consider to be religion. This approach seems fruitful for two reasons: It allows us to apply a sociology of religion perspective to an interesting range of phenomena, and it raises broader theoretical issues.

### Definitions of Religion as Contested Boundaries

All definitions establish boundaries—somewhat arbitrary limits—around that which is “defined in,” separating the object of definition from that which is “defined out.” For relatively neutral concepts (e.g., “bird”), the precise boundaries are not problematic (e.g., the inclusion of flightless birds like penguins but

exclusion of other creatures that fly and “look” like birds but are not, such as bats or pterodactyls). Most people are content to let the scientists dicker over such definitional boundaries.

By contrast, other boundaries—equally arbitrary—are hotly contested. The definitions of nations, races, ethnic groups, religions, ideologies, political parties, professions, and languages, are all contested boundaries. Power is at the root of any faction’s success in getting its definition accepted as the boundary. Thus, sociology of religion must remember that there is a political history to the very definitions of religion that we use.

**Official Religion** A major transition occurred in late Medieval and early Modern Europe, when the churches (both Catholic and Protestant) tried to gain control of the beliefs and practices of the people in order to purge Christianity of “impure” elements, such as pagan rituals, superstitions, local devotions, and so on. The effects of this process are described further in Chapter 4. The churches tried to consolidate their power over local religious belief and practice, which had previously been relatively unimportant to church authorities. They created *definitional boundaries* separating what was properly “religion” from other practices, which they defined as “magic,” “pagan,” “witchcraft,” “heresy,” and so on. Using their growing institutional power, the churches enforced the new boundaries, often violently. By the nineteenth century beginnings of sociology, however, the church-established definitions were culturally taken-for-granted in most of Europe and the Americas, resulting in a general lack of critical awareness of the contests of power over what came to be defined as “religion.”

**Colonial Expansion** The category of “religion” referred not only to disputed European boundaries, but also to contested boundaries around “the Other”—especially natives of colonized lands. Interestingly, for example, some of the earliest ethnographies of the New World indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup> were produced to provide the guardians of the official religion (e.g., the Inquisition in Mexico) with a way to distinguish the people’s Catholic faith from vestiges of indigenous religiosity (Martin, 1994; see also Curcio-Nagy, 1999). Official religion thus often proceeded hand-in-glove with colonial domination.

Westerners carried an implicit cultural model of “religion” with them even as they encountered Others. Thus, they influenced or imposed definitional boundaries on Others’ religions by “discovering” or inventing the institutional counterparts of “religion.” For example, Hinduism is a modern invention, coproduced by British colonial policy and several indigenous social and political movements. Still a contested definition, “Hinduism” represents a symbolic unification of highly diverse religious practices of separate regions, castes, localities, and gurus, complete with imagined common history, texts, and

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2. The most famous is Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*; others include Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, and Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón, *Tratado de las supersticiones*.

teachings (Beyer, 1998). Thus, the boundaries of world religions, like the boundaries of nations, might be best understood as “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991), discussed further in Chapter 6.

**Court Contests in Pluralistic Societies** Contemporary contests over the definition of “religion” are evident in the courts and legislative bodies of various modern, pluralistic societies. The disputed issues vary depending upon the particular church–state relationship in each country (discussed further in Chapter 8). In the United States, constitutional protection of religious liberty for minority religions has resulted in court contests over whether certain religious practices of diverse immigrant groups and Native Americans could be considered properly “religion” and, thus, constitutionally protected.

## ASPECTS OF RELIGION

There are many facets of religion that are important for the sociologist to recognize. In Western societies, much emphasis is placed on formal beliefs. Religious education consists of informing children of what one’s group believes; children read religious textbooks of explanations, learn catechisms (i.e., statements of propositions to which a believer should assent), study scripture, hear sermons. Christianity and Judaism place relatively great emphasis on intellectual and formal belief. In other cultures, however, the cognitive aspect of religion is relatively unimportant. More important aspects of religion include ritual, religious experience, and community. In those cultures children learn all that is relevant to their faith by participating in group ceremonies and imitating their elders’ experiences. The following aspects of religion refer not only to the individual’s religion but more generally to the ways in which the religious group organizes itself to focus its shared meanings.

### Religious Belief

Every religion has an essential **cognitive aspect**. The religion shapes what the adherent *knows* about the world. This knowledge organizes the individual’s perceptions of the world and serves as a basis for action. If I believe, for example, that active, powerful evil spirits surround me, I will perceive “evidence” of their activity, and I will take actions to protect myself from them. My belief in evil spirits helps me explain other aspects of my life, such as why I cannot get a job and why I feel depressed and anxious. The same belief suggests appropriate actions, such as necessary prayers to ally myself with good spirits or use of amulets to ward off the influence of these evil spirits.

There is a tendency in modern Western societies to treat religious beliefs as “mere opinion,” as opposed to empirical beliefs, which are treated as “knowledge.” This distinction hides the fact that both types of belief are “knowledge” to the individual who holds them. If a person considers evil spirits to be real, they *are* real in their consequences; they shape the person’s experience and



### BOX 1.1 Cross-Cultural Comparison: What Does U.S. Law Define as Properly “Religion”?

Santería is an Afro-Caribbean religion practiced in many parts of the United States. In its beliefs and practices, Santería differs dramatically from the kinds of churches that the framers of the Constitution considered when they protected the “free exercise” of religion. For instance, many of its central rituals involve the blood of sacrificial animals, such as pigeons and chickens. Is Santería a “religion” and, thus, due the protection of the Constitution? The City of Hialeah, Florida, made a law to prohibit animal sacrifice, and the Church of the Lukumí Babalú Ayé appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court to protect the constitutionally guaranteed “free exercise” of their Santería religious practice. In 1992, the Supreme Court struck down the

city’s ordinance as discriminatory (Do Campo, 1995).

- What questions could the Supreme Court justices ask to determine whether the ordinance was discriminatory toward this religion or a fair exercise of city jurisdiction over sanitation and public health?
- What questions might a sociologist ask to determine whether the town’s stance was more about ethnic discrimination than about religion *per se*?
- Why do the practices of newer immigrant groups challenge our legal definitions of religion more dramatically than did the immigrants in the early twentieth century?

actions. The individual who believes that evil spirits cause illness and the individual who believes that germs cause illness are both acting according to their “knowledge.”

Most of us are quite familiar with formal religious beliefs, the statements to which adherents of a given religion are supposed to assent, such as a catechism or a creed. The entire enterprise of theology out of which formal beliefs are developed represents a highly specialized and intellectualized approach to religion. But religion also includes less formal kinds of beliefs such as myths, images, norms, and values. Myths of creation and rebirth, for example, are told and enacted in dance and song. These other kinds of symbolization are often more potent influences on behavior than intellectual beliefs.

Religious beliefs are not mere abstractions that are irrelevant to everyday life. People use their beliefs to make choices, interpret events, and plan actions. Myths, one form of religious belief, are paradigms of human existence. There are myths about all major aspects of human life: birth and rebirth, creation and transformation, one’s people and place, marriage, work, fertility, sterility, and death. Myths are stories that provide a rationale for a group’s actions. They can be metaphors for concrete social structure and for real human events. Individuals draw on these interpretations to give meaning and direction to their own actions. Indeed, the very language in which beliefs are expressed structures believers’ perceptions of the world.

Religious beliefs also inform the individual what action is good and desirable or bad and to be avoided. They may tell the individual that marriage is good and right because the holy marriage of the gods is to be copied by humans. Religious beliefs may inform the individual that eating other people is wrong because the gods value people and therefore do not define them as appropriate food. Thus, an entire range of values, norms, and attitudes derives from religious beliefs.

### Religious Ritual

**Ritual** consists of symbolic actions that represent religious meanings. Whereas beliefs represent the cognitive aspect of religion, ritual is the enactment of religious meaning. The two are closely intertwined. Beliefs of the religious group give meaning and shape to ritual performances. Ritual enactments strengthen and reaffirm the group's beliefs. They are ways of symbolizing unity of the group and, at the same time, of contributing to it. Ritual helps generate religious conviction. By ritual action, the group collectively remembers its shared meanings and revitalizes its consciousness of itself. This has important consequences for both the group and the individual member. The group renews its fervor and sense of unity, and individual members come to identify with the group and its goals (Durkheim, 1965:420; Geertz, 1966:28).

Ritual is an effective way of transforming space and time. Ritual places (such as a mountain or a shrine) can be transformed into the locus of power and awe. Time, too, can be changed, becoming a metaphor for sacred meanings and a catalyst for religious experience (Fenn, 1997; Kertzer, 1988; Smith, 1987). For example, a pilgrimage is a ritual journey in which the participant enacts (both literally and metaphorically) a transition from one situation and self to another (Turner and Turner, 1978; see also Pace, 1989).

Ritual practices (such as eating and drinking communion, kneeling, anointing, and singing) are often ways of transforming body metaphors into physical, mental, and/or emotional realities (McGuire, 1996; see also Csordas, 1994). For example, an early Buddhist teacher (Kukai, 774–835 C.E.) taught, “We become the buddha through our bodies” (quoted in Kasulis, 1993:310). He emphasized use of specific spiritual practices, including disciplined bodily postures, harmonizing sounds, and meditation practices, the end of which was to embody buddhahood.

Various religious groups place different emphasis on ritual. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Episcopalian Christians emphasize overt ritual more than Baptists or Methodists. The use of symbolism, such as processions, sacraments, candles, icons, and chanting, aids the collective remembering of the group's shared meanings. Even groups that do not consciously use rituals repeatedly symbolize their unifying beliefs. “Revival” meetings often emphasize spontaneity in worship and downplay formal ritual. Nevertheless, though the words of their prayers may not be formally set, members respond especially fervently to prayers that fit a familiar formula, and their responses are often equally stereotyped and expected. These periodic reenactments are just as much ritual as the “high church” ceremonies of Episcopalians.

As these examples suggest, the *content* of an act is not what makes it a ritual act; rather it is the symbolic meaning attached to the act by participants. This symbolic value is what distinguishes, for example, lighting a candle to beautify one's dinner table and lighting a candle of the menorah to commemorate the Feast of Lights (the Jewish holiday of Chanukah). There are also ritual acts that have, over time, become remote from their symbolic significance. For example, Roman Catholic priests wear different colored vestments to celebrate Mass on various holidays, but many people in the congregation may not even know what the symbolism of pink or green vestments means, and thus the ritual significance of the vestments is empty for them. Ritual performed for its own sake, empty of meaning for participants, has led to the notion that ritual itself is sterile or deadening.

It is not that ritual per se is sterile but rather that the relationship between the symbolism and the group's shared meanings is weak or severed. Events or beliefs that a given ritual has symbolized may, over time, become less important or even forgotten. Perhaps the group may have moved on to new ways of symbolizing itself and its beliefs. Or perhaps the empty ritual may be symptomatic of weak ties in the group itself, that it has no essential unity to celebrate. By contrast, ritual that is a vital symbolic expression of important meanings for the group can be a sustaining, strengthening, and enlivening experience of unity.

The dynamic potential of religious ritual suggests its link not only with religious belief but also with religious experience. Religious symbols, expressed in beliefs and rituals, have *real* power, which can be experienced personally by the individual. Ritual words and ceremonies can evoke experience of awe, mystery, wonder, and delight. Religions often emphasize the power of ritual words, as exemplified by the seriousness surrounding the pronouncement of the words "This is my body" in Christian communion services or by the expectation surrounding the exclamation "Heal!" in a faith-healing service. Ritual has the potential to produce special religious experiences for the group and its individual members.

### Religious Experience

Religious experience refers to all of the individual's **subjective involvement** with the sacred. Although such experience is essentially private, people try to communicate it through expression of beliefs and in rituals. A communal ritual may be the setting for a personal religious experience. Thus, a person receiving communion (i.e., a communal ritual) in a Christian worship service may also experience an intensely subjective awareness of God. Prayer, meditation, dancing, and singing are other common settings for personal religious experience. Similarly, even a private experience has a social element because socially acquired beliefs shape the individual's interpretation of religious experience. The symbolism of various religious traditions shapes the interpretations of even highly mystical experiences through such images as the pilgrimage, perfect love and marriage, and rebirth or transformation (Underhill, 1961:125–148).

Individual religious experiences vary considerably in intensity. They range from momentary senses of peace and awe to extraordinary mystical experiences. Different religions place different emphases on religious experience. Most Christian denominations do not actively encourage highly emotive religious experiences, whereas in some Pentecostal groups, these experiences are central and eagerly sought. In many religions, extraordinary and intense experiences are segregated, appropriate only for certain members or on certain occasions. Thus, among the peoples of the northern Asian arctic region (e.g., Eskimos), extraordinary religious experiences are expected of certain members called “shamans.” *Shamans* are religious specialists who have undergone an intense encounter with sacred forces and emerged with special powers to effect good or evil on behalf of the rest of the group (see Eliade, 1964). Another example is the segregation of occasions for special religious experiences (e.g., initiation rites).

The content of religious experience varies. It may include pleasurable aspects such as a sense of peace, harmony, joy, well-being, and security. Religious experience may also produce terror, anxiety, and fear. While the content of the experience partly depends on the group’s beliefs about what is being encountered, both the pleasurable and frightening experiences are related to the sense of power or force with which the sacred is believed to be endowed. The individual who experiences a sense of security does so because of the power of the sacred to protect from harm; the individual who experiences great fear does so because of the power of the sacred to cause grave harm. The notion of the sacred thus entails both harmful and helpful aspects. Personal experiences of this power can be overwhelming.

William James (1958:67) quotes an account of a religious experience that illustrates the intensity of some of these aspects:

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep,—the deep that my own struggle had opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His. The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exaltation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not anymore have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.

This kind of religious experience represents an “alternate state of consciousness”—a situation in which the individual’s consciousness is relatively

remote from the sphere of everyday reality. The person may experience being out of body or being one with something or someone else. For example, one person described such an experience as follows: "I came to a point where time and motion ceased. . . . I am absorbed in the light of the Universe, in Reality, glowing like fire with the knowledge of itself, without ceasing to be one and myself, merged like a drop of quick-silver in the Whole, yet still separate as a grain of sand in the desert" (quoted in Happold, 1970:133).

Alternate states of consciousness are not necessarily religious. Substances such as peyote, for example, can produce alternate states of consciousness, but the context in which they are taken (e.g., ritual) and the meanings attached to taking them (i.e., symbolism) determine whether they produce religious experiences. "Alternate states of consciousness" or "peak experiences" are only one extreme of a continuum of religious experiences (see, e.g., Maslow, 1964). Less dramatic religious experiences include a sense of the presence of God, a moving conversion experience, or a deeply absorbing ritual experience.

Contemporary society often ignores or discourages such experiences. Peak experiences such as those described, however, may be more common than generally acknowledged (See Genia, 1997; Hood 1985). Approximately 37 percent of Americans surveyed reported having at some time felt "very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself" (General Social Survey, 1983, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1991,  $N=6,918$ ). Perhaps a self-fulfilling prophecy may operate in a culture's encouragement or discouragement of such experiences. In those cultures that value and encourage special religious experiences, members have felt and acknowledged these experiences; in cultures that devalue or discourage these experiences, members neither seek nor recognize them.

While a sizable proportion of the U.S. populace has had some special spiritual experience, the culture in general does not particularly value such experiences. This culture places great emphasis on rational, intellectual, dispassionate ways of knowing. Religious experience, by contrast, is a way of knowing by subjectively apprehending a reality. One woman described her own experience as follows: "I felt a deep sense of warmth and security and a startling awareness of how much the Lord cares for me personally." This kind of knowledge, although it may correspond with the official belief system of a religious group, is not simply learned, deduced, theologically debated, or received from church authorities.

### **Religious Community**

Religious experience may also include the awareness of belonging to a group of believers. Religious groups are essentially "communities of memory"; that is, they hold in common important collective memories and exist through the continuity of those memories (Hervieu-Léger, 1998, 2000). Thus, the religious group's shared experiences and rituals continually reproduce—and transmit to the next generation—the collective sense of "who we are" and "what it means to be one of us."

### BOX 1.2 Methodological Note: What Difference Does the Question Make?

Social scientists rely heavily upon social surveys for their empirical data. Because good social surveys are extremely expensive to conduct, most survey data come from a few large-scale surveys, such as the General Social Survey (GSS), which have the added advantage of being conducted regularly so they can produce interesting comparisons over time. Although some social scientists are involved in the construction and refinement of survey questionnaires, most users of survey data cannot frame the questions or controls, so they are limited in what they can infer from the data. The wording of a question makes a big difference in the meaning of people's response.

Between 1983 and 1991, the GSS asked: *"How often [have you] felt as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?"* In 1998, the Survey asked a different question: *"Did you ever have a religious or spiritual experience that changed your life? While the proportion (roughly 60 percent) who answered "No" to the new question was approximately the same as the proportion who answered "Never" to the earlier question, the two questions tap entirely different kinds of experiences.*

We cannot reinterview the respondents and ask, "Exactly what kind of experience did you have?" We get some clues, however, when we discover that roughly the same proportion of Catholics and respondents claiming "no affiliation" answered positively to the 1988 and 1998 versions of the GSS question. By contrast, there was a big jump in positive responses from Protestants—dramatically so from persons who considered themselves "fundamentalist Protestants" (from less than 40 percent in 1988, to 56 percent in 1998). Clearly, the 1998 question taps mainly persons who believe they have had a "born again" religious experience, while the 1988 question taps a more diffuse religious experience.

- What does this difference imply for how we study religious experience?
- How forthright do you think people are in answering questions from an unknown interviewer about their religious experience?
- What methodological approaches might get us deeper or more accurate answers?

Rituals often remind the individual of this belonging, creating an intense sense of togetherness. Communal religious settings can produce a resonance of several individuals' experiences and thus an even deeper sense of sharing "inner time" (see Schutz, 1964). Like making music together, such shared religious experience can create a sense of sharing vivid present time—an experiential communion (Neitz and Spickard, 1990). For example, participants in the several days and nights of a Navajo "chant" can, through ritual acts, attune their individual experiences toward the culturally valued sense of harmony between the individual, social group, and environment (Spickard, 1991). The *ritual* creates a group religious *experience*, which parallels and reinforces *belief* and ties

together the *community*. All four elements are, in this example, tightly intertwined (although they are not necessarily so close in all religious settings).

The community of believers may be formally or informally organized. Formal specialization of a group into an organization such as a church is a relatively recent historical development. The religious group—formal or informal—is essential for supporting the individual's beliefs and norms. Coming together with fellow believers reminds members of what they collectively believe and value. It can also impart a sense of empowerment to accomplish their religious and everyday goals. And the nature of the religious community illustrates the social context of religious meaning and experience. We will explore this aspect further in the next two chapters.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

The very development of sociology, and of the sociology of religion in particular, is rooted in some of the social processes we will examine. Only as beliefs and social practices were perceived as something other than taken-for-granted realities could a scientific study of these “social facts” become possible. The development of Enlightenment rationality and paradigms of scientific thought encouraged examination of religion as human action (see Robertson, 1970:7–33).

Ironically, these same developments also acted on religion, possibly changing it fundamentally. Thus, sociology has had some complicity in this alteration; to a certain extent, popularization of the sociological perspective on religion has had the effect of altering the nature of religion itself. The social sciences, as heirs to Enlightenment humanism, have interpreted religion as a human construction, undermining its claims to transcendence. Some recent sociologists have called attention to this perspective and questioned whether the social sciences can validly claim to be value-free if their very choice of an interpretive stance implies certain value judgments. They ask whether it is possible to have a social science of religion that allows for the truth of religion (see Anthony and Robbins, 1975; Bellah, 1970; Greeley, 1972; and especially Johnson, 1977).

An important strand of classical sociology of religion has a prophetic ring. Max Weber's doubts about the future of a fully “rationalized” society, Emile Durkheim's concern about the impact of social change upon the cohesion and moral unity of society, Georg Simmel's insights into the threat to the individual of increasing societal controls, and Karl Marx's questioning of the continued legitimacy of capitalistic modes of organization all contain strong critical themes (see Durkheim, 1965; Marx, 1963; Simmel, 1971; Weber, 1958a). These theorists saw their contribution to a sociology of religion as part of a larger examination of the nature of modern society. They asked questions such as: In what direction is modern society going? How did it develop to this



point, and what factors influence its further development? What is the place of the individual in modern society, and what is the impact of these broader social changes on the individual? These classical contributions are emphasized in several chapters of this book.

Later developments in sociology, especially in the United States, did not continue these themes of concern. The sociology of religion was largely ignored until the late 1940s and 1950s, when an upswing in church membership and participation, combined with increasing interest of religious leaders in institutional research, provided an impetus for sociologists to focus again on religion. The dominant theoretical perspectives on religion then current in sociology, however, were very narrow (see Berger and Luckmann, 1963). Religion was defined strictly in terms of its formal organizational setting: the institutional churches. The needs and interests of these organizations circumscribed much of the research. Demographic features of parishes were studied, for example, in order to predict future building and staffing needs. The standard methodological approaches of that period were similarly restricting; survey research techniques were best suited for measuring clearly definable institutional behavior or opinions. A survey interviewer could more readily ask a respondent to name a denominational preference than to describe fully an entire personal meaning system.

This stage in the development of sociology of religion was characterized by several assumptions, notably the identification of “church” as “religion.” Another general assumption of this phase was that individual religiosity could be equated with individual participation in religious institutions. A corollary assumption was that the subjective aspects of religion could be tapped by identifying the individual’s religious opinions or attitudes (see Luckmann, 1967:20–23; some criticisms of these assumptions are developed further in Chapter 4). Perhaps as a by-product of this narrow definition of the field’s scope, the sociology of religion has been rather isolated from other sociological knowledge and subdisciplines. It was not until the 1980s that sociology of religion seriously explored the important connections with other subfields such as women’s studies, sociology of health, and mass media (Beckford, 1990).

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the sociology of religion greatly broadened its conceptual focus and research interests. New developments in Western religion spurred this expansion. Protestant theologians debated the viability of culturally bound Christian theology, and a school of theology proclaiming the “Death of God” developed. Simultaneously, Catholic theologians explored new interpretations of their tradition, and the Second Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) established far-reaching structural changes in that church. Religious participation in various human rights movements, the articulation of various national “civil religions,” and the emergence of numerous new religious movements raised important sociological questions that pressed the discipline to expand its interpretive scope. Political events have brought religious issues and groups to the fore, stimulating research and analysis on such themes as the prominence of religion in conflicts in the Mideast, India, the former Yugoslavia, and Northern Ireland. Globalization

has affected religion and religious institutions through the spread of media images of many and diverse religious alternatives, the increase of immigration and other sources of cultural pluralization, and the sheer scope and power of many global political-economic shifts.

Recent sociology of religion is characterized by its broader emphasis. It encompasses not only Western but also non-Western religious expression. Indeed, sociology of religion is beginning to consider non-Western social theories for understanding our field (see Spickard, 1998a, 2000). It sees parallels between religious behavior in this society and simpler societies; it is interested in both institutional and noninstitutional religious behavior. Its theoretical concerns reflect both a thoughtful return to classical themes and an ability to go beyond the classics. This development is part of a generally larger interest within sociology in building critically on classical theory. Recent sociology of religion is more central to the larger sociological enterprise than before, asking *what can we understand about the nature of society through examination of religion?* This focus leads current sociology of religion to themes that are central in contemporary theory, such as the legitimation of society, the individual-to-society link, and the impact of social change (Robertson, 1977).

### SUMMARY

This chapter has examined a key feature of the sociological perspective on religion: its unbiased, empirical focus. Definitions of religion are matters of serious academic debate, and the choice of definitional strategies (i.e., substantive or functional) influences the observer's conclusions about the place of religion in contemporary society. To understand how religious groups organize themselves around shared meanings, it is necessary to examine several aspects of religion: religious belief, ritual, experience, and community.

The development of the sociology of religion is itself rooted in some of the social processes that have influenced religion's role in society. Only as beliefs and social practices lost their taken-for-granted quality could a scientific study of them proceed. Sociology of religion was central to the focus of classical sociology—its concern about the emerging forms of societal legitimacy, social controls, and the place of the individual in modern society. Recent sociological thought examines these issues with renewed fervor.