

# Religion

## *Learning Outcomes*

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

- Define terms relevant to the study of religion.
- Recall the world's major religions.
- Recall the U.S.'s major religions.
- Apply the theoretical perspectives to the study of religion.

**Religion** is a unified system of beliefs, rituals, and practices that typically involve a broader community of believers who share common definitions of the sacred and the profane. **Sacred** is the supernatural, divine, awe inspiring, and spiritually significant aspects of our existence. For you, religion might be a personal definition of how you feel about your place in the universe. It may also reflect how you understand categories of people who share a common system of beliefs that differ from your own (Jews, Muslims, Christians, etc.). **Profane** is that which is part of the everyday life experience. So while you may wear a cross as a symbol of your faith (sacred) others may wear them as fashion statements (profane). **Religiosity** is the measurable importance of religion to a person's life. Religiosity can be measured by considering things such as how often someone attends formal services; how attached they feel to their religion; how often they privately worship in their home; and other factors.

For sociologists, religion is typically studied in two approaches: 1) a cultural approach that evaluates the religious aspects of the culture shared by followers of a certain religion; and 2) a theoretical approach to religion including its symbols, functions, exchange-based interactions, and power issues. Religion has always been an important issue at both levels of society: personal and larger social. Figure 1 shows a pie chart of the 2007 estimate of the world's composition of religious followers. Muslims collectively comprise the largest single religious belief system in the world in 2007. Over the last century birthrates among Muslims have remained high. By sheer numbers alone, a high birthrate among an estimated 1,300,000,000 people makes birth become a significant factor in the Muslim world growth rate. A less common factor is that in many Muslim nations polygamy continues to be the norm with 1 to 4 wives being acceptable.

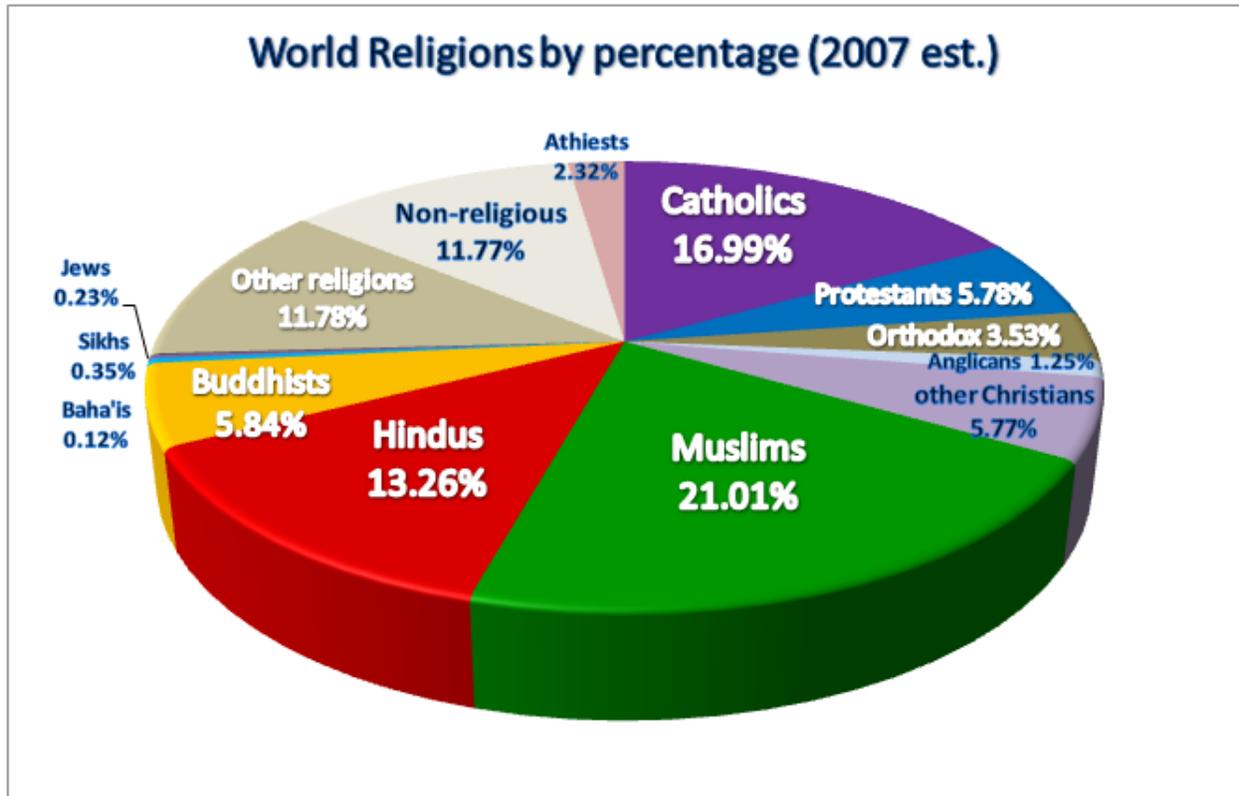
Following Muslims, Roman Catholics made up about 17% of the world's population. Catholicism has strong membership in Western Europe, Latin America, the United States, as well as other countries and regions. Hindus, who are primarily located in India, come in a close third (13.26%).

## The United State's Religions

Figure 2 shows the CIA's estimated U.S. religions for 2007. The collective category of U.S. Protestants is the largest collection of religious belief systems. Protestantism includes Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, and various non-Catholic and non-Orthodox Christian denominations. Second in percentage is the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast to the Protestant classification which is comprised of many diverse denominations, the Roman

Catholic Christian Church is comprised of only one denomination headquartered in Rome, Italy.

Figure 1. 2007 Estimation of Percentage of World Religions, 2007.<sup>1</sup>

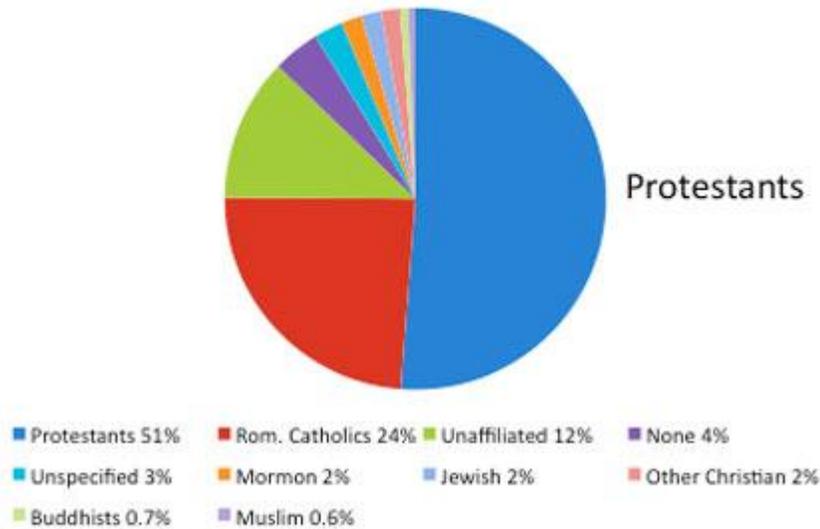


The Roman Catholic population in the U.S. has grown for two primary reasons. First, Roman Catholics continue to have higher birthrates than others (yet about the same for Mormons). Second, since the 1980s many U.S. immigrants come from Mexico and bring their Catholicism with them to the U.S. About 12% of the population claim to be unaffiliated, four percent reported none, and three percent chose not to specify their religion. After that, Mormons were next with nearly two percent. Mormons have a very high birthrate and a strong force of proselytizing missionaries throughout the U.S. and the world.

Given the peaceful nature of most of the major religions, it is paradoxical to have so many religious-based wars, genocides, population transfers, conquest, and other forms of large-scale aggression which have transpired throughout history. In the Race and Minority chapter, we learned about prejudice and the goal of finding common ground in building bridges and overcoming prejudices. With religions this is particularly difficult to apply.

Figure 2. 2007 Estimation of Percentage of United States Religions, 2007.<sup>2</sup>

### US Percentage of Major Religions: Ranked in Descending Order Clockwise



Many of us believe very deeply in our religious convictions. We change and alter our lifestyles and desires because we believe that our hope, salvation, or existence will be made better because of our sacrifices. It is understandable that we are deeply devoted and passionate, but we also tend to believe that we belong to the exclusively right or correct faith and that all others are mistaken and perhaps going to hell. Some religious fanatics believe so strongly in the damnation of non-believers that they feel justified in killing others as an act of so called, "saving other people from themselves." This explains in part the rationale of the religiously-based conflicts in our current and historical experiences.

### Religious Tolerance

In his work, Jeffrey Moses describes common beliefs and values, which are articulated in the core doctrines and scriptures of many of the world and U.S. religions. "Honor thy father and mother," "Be good to those around you," "It is better to give than receive," and "Respect the elderly in your life" are just a few examples of teachings common to many diverse religions. To take such an open-minded stance requires a concerted effort on our part. To be able to feel secure enough in our own beliefs to find acceptance in the beliefs of others takes devotion to our own faith and deep caring about the quality of the human experience in our many relationships. We sometimes mistakenly believe that we have strength in commonality when often there is just as much strength found in mutually respected tolerance of different people who respect and honor one another.<sup>3</sup>

## Sociology of Religion

Sociologists classify religions to distinguish them based on beliefs and rituals.

**Supernaturalism** is a *belief system with no gods, but focuses on human and non-human supernatural forces that can influence human events*. **Animism** is also a *belief system that has no gods, but focuses personalized spirits or ghosts of ancestors that take an interest in, and actively work to influence, human affairs*. Theistic religions (**theism**) include the *belief in divine beings which are gods that actively influence human affairs*. **Monotheism** refers to the *belief in only one god*. The three main monotheistic religions include: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. **Polytheism** refers to *religions with multiple gods* such as Hinduism. **Abstract ideals** refers to *religions that focus on sacred principles and thoughts which guide our lives and typically have no divine beings in charge of the world and universe*. Buddhism is an example of an abstract idealistic religion.<sup>4</sup>

Sociologists study the relationships between society and religion from a scientific perspective. For example, to Christians, Jesus was the Messiah, to Muslims, Jesus was a prophet, to sociologists, Jesus is a religious symbol. Religious symbols acquire their attached meanings through the religious belief system of which they are a part.

One final concept should be discussed. **Secularization** is *the trend toward worldly concerns and away from concerns for the religiously sacred in the lives of society's members*. A study of U.S. religiosity was conducted over three years (1990, 2001, and 2008) and the data indicated an increase in the percentage of those in the U.S. claiming no religion, from 8.2% in 1990, to 14.2% in 2001, and finally 15% in 2008.<sup>5</sup> This trend indicated that the U.S. is becoming more secularized. Typically, the more modern a society becomes the more secular it becomes. There exists an inverse (opposite) correlation between science, modernization, and rationality and religious traditions and adherences.<sup>6</sup>

There are some distinctions to be made about religious groups. A **cult** is *a newer religion with few followers whose teachings are perceived to be at odds with the dominant culture and religion*. Most religions begin as cults. Even Islam and Christianity began with only a few followers. A cult could be compared to a group of friends who form a soccer team, then add members and grow to several soccer teams, and eventually they have their own league. Most new cults rarely get past their small foundation nor do they typically endure for extended periods of time.

A **sect** is *a group larger than a cult and is seen as having heretical beliefs or practices that deviate from those of groups considered orthodox and is often treated with hostility by non-sect members*. A sect is relatively small by comparison to an established church. A **church** is *a sect that has gained numerous followers and has become highly bureaucratized*. Today's trend in U.S. Christian worship involves megachurches, or modern churches attended by thousands of followers in person and even many thousands more via television or the internet.<sup>7</sup> An **ecclesia** is *a large assembly of people, a congregation, or a church*.

## The Functionalist Perspective

For decades, sociologists have studied the functional aspects of religion as a social institution. Functionalists have examined the functions that religion plays in social life. It is safe to conclude that religions are functional (and sometimes dysfunctional) at both the personal and larger social level. There are four functional aspects of religion. 1. Religion satisfies individual needs. Religion offers individual ways to reduce anxiety and to promote emotional integration. 2. Religion promotes social cohesion. Durkheim recognized the ability of religion to bring about group unity. The stability of society is strengthened when people are tied to one another through religion. 3. Religion provides a worldview. According to Max Weber, religion responds to the basic human need to understand the purpose of life. This means religion creates a worldview that can have social, political, and economic consequences. 4. Religion helps adaptation to society. Durkheim studied the presence of religion in societies, the nature and meaning of rituals and rites of passage, the way in which religion supports or undermines political authority, and how religions satisfy personal needs.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim explained that religion divides society into two categories, the profane and the sacred. The **profane** consists of all empirically observable things, things that are knowable through everyday experiences. The **sacred** consists of things that are awe-inspiring and knowable only through extraordinary experiences. Durkheim believed the sacred had the capacity to represent norms, values, power, and beliefs. However, the profane had little to do with public relevance, even though it may have been shared by more than one person.<sup>9</sup>

Further, Durkheim noted that all societies have a constant need to reaffirm and uphold their basic sentiments and values. This is accomplished when people gather and proclaim their acceptance and support of the dominant belief system. Durkheim believed he could best understand the social role of religion by studying the totemism of the aboriginal Australian—mainly because totemism is one of the simplest forms of religion. A **totem** is an ordinary object, such as a plant or animal that has become a sacred symbol to and of a particular group or clan, who also identify with the totem.<sup>10</sup>

Religious symbols such as totems, as well as religion in general, arise from society itself. In other words, individuals and groups create religion, rather than religion creating individuals and groups, and the symbols attached to religious beliefs. Religion, according to Durkheim, did not rise from somewhere outside of society. Therefore, when people recognize or worship supernatural entities they are really worshipping their own society; they are worshipping their own creation (religion). They do not realize their religious feelings are actually a result of their intense emotions aroused when people gather together at meetings to celebrate their religious creations. Therefore, society is the origin of a religion's beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

## The Conflict Perspective

Max Weber also studied religion and focused on how religion gave the individual a context for understanding life and the purpose of it. He claimed that Protestant ideals of self-discipline, self-control, and hard work lead to the financial success of many who felt “righteous in God’s eyes” as they lived Protestant work ethics and simultaneously built the collective foundation for capitalism’s success in Western Civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Karl Marx asserted that the dominant ideas of each age have always been the ideas of the ruling class and from this Marx surmised that the dominant religion of a society is that of the ruling class. Marxist scholars still emphasize the importance of religion’s roles in “justifying the political status quo by cloaking political authority with sacred legitimacy and thereby making opposition to it seems immoral”.<sup>13</sup>

Marx also defined **alienation** as *the process by which people lose control over the social institutions that they themselves created*. According to Marx, people begin to feel like strangers in their own world. He further believed that religion is one of the most alienating influences in human society. Marx said, “Man makes religion, religion does not make man.” The function of God was to serve man by being an example of an ideal human being. People soon lost sight of the fact that God was a socially created entity and began to worship and fear the ideal they had created as if it were a separate powerful entity. Thus religion, because of the God they worship and fear, that they themselves created, serves to alienate people from the real world.

Further, Marx saw religion as a tool that the upper class used to maintain control of society and to dominate the lower classes. He called religion *the opiate of the masses*, believing that through religion, the dominated masses were kept from actions that might change their relationship with those in power. The lower classes were distracted from taking steps toward equality and social change by the promise of happiness through religion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/mysticism/world\\_religions\\_populations.html](http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/mysticism/world_religions_populations.html)

<sup>2</sup> Taken from Internet on 26 March 2007 from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html>

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Moses, Oneness: Great Principles Shared By All Religions

<sup>4</sup> Tischler, Introduction to Sociology; 9<sup>th</sup> Edition

<sup>5</sup> The American Religious Identification Survey was taken from the Internet on 9 March 2009 <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.adherents.com/>

<sup>7</sup> 27, March 2009 from <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>

<sup>8</sup> See Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; New York, Collier Books, 1961

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> See *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*; translated by Talcott Parsons; Scribner Pub. NY

<sup>13</sup> Tischler, Introduction to Sociology, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition

<sup>14</sup> If you find the scientific study of religion to be interesting you might consider some of the WebPages below:

- The Association of Religion Data Archives at <http://www.thearda.com/>

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- SSSR Society for the Scientific Study of Religion at <http://www.ssrweb.org/>
  - ASR Association for the Sociology of Religion at <http://www.sociologyofreligion.com/>
  - Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America at <http://www.goarch.org/>
  - The Website of The Bahá'í Faith <http://www.bahai.org/>
  - American Atheists at <http://www.atheists.org/>
  - Rastafarian.net at <http://www.rastafarian.net/>
  - Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies at <http://www.asarb.org/>
  - The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches at <http://www.electronicchurch.org/>
  - The National Council of Churches at <http://www.nccusa.org/>
  - Beliefnet.com <http://www.beliefnet.com/>
  - American Buddhist at <http://www.americanbuddhist.net/>
  - American and World Sikhs at <http://www.worldsikhcouncil.org/>
  - American Hindu net at [http://www.hindunet.org/anti\\_defamation/](http://www.hindunet.org/anti_defamation/)
  - American Jewish History at <http://www.350th.org/> or <http://www.ajhs.org/>
  - Black American Jews at <http://www.blackandjewish.com/bajpages/bajindex.html>
  - The Anglican Communion at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/>
  - The Southern Poverty Law Center teaching Tolerance at <http://www.splcenter.org/center/tt/teach.jsp>
  - The American Muslim at <http://www.theamericanmuslim.org/>
  - Muslim American Society at <http://www.masnet.org/>
  - The American Catholic Church in the United States at <http://www.accus.us/>
  - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) at <http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vnextoid=e419fb40e21cef00VgnVCM1000001f5e340aRCRD>
  - The Southern Baptist Convention at <http://www.sbc.net/>
  - The American Association of Lutheran Churches at <http://www.taalc.org/>
  - The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church at <http://www.amez.org/news/index.php>
  - National Baptist Convention of America Inc. at <http://www.nbca-inc.com/>