10.9: 10.4- Religion

Learning Objectives

- Describe key developments in the history of religion since ancient times.
- List the major religions in the world today.
- Summarize the major functions of religion.
- Explain the views of religion held by the conflict and symbolic interactionist perspectives.
- Understand the differences among the major types of religious organizations.

Religion is the set of beliefs and practices regarding sacred things that help a society understand the meaning and purpose of life. Émile Durkheim (1915/1947) observed long ago that every society has beliefs about things that are supernatural and awe-inspiring and beliefs about things that are more practical and down-to-earth. He called the former beliefs sacred beliefs and the latter beliefs profane beliefs. Religious beliefs and practices involve the sacred: they involve things our senses cannot readily observe, and they involve things that inspire in us awe, reverence, and even fear.

Durkheim did not try to prove or disprove religious beliefs. Religion, he acknowledged, is a matter of faith, and faith is not provable or disprovable through scientific inquiry. Rather, Durkheim tried to understand the role played by religion in social life and the impact on religion of social structure and social change. In short, he treated religion as a social institution.

Sociologists since his time have treated religion in the same way. Anthropologists, historians, and other scholars have also studied religion. The remainder of this chapter reviews what we know about religion as a social institution and the role it plays in American life.
A Brief History of Religion

Every known society has practiced religion, although the nature of religious belief and practice has differed from one society to the next. Prehistoric people turned to religion to help them understand birth, death, and natural events such as hurricanes. They also relied on religion for help in dealing with their daily needs for existence: good weather, a good crop, an abundance of animals to hunt (Noss & Grangaard, 2008).

Although the world’s most popular religions today are monotheistic (believing in one god), many societies in ancient times, most notably Egypt, Greece, and Rome, were polytheistic (believing in more than one god). You have been familiar with their names since childhood: Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, Mars, Zeus, and many others. Each god “specialized” in one area; Aphrodite, for example, was the Greek goddess of love, while Mars was the Roman god of war (Noss & Grangaard, 2008).

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church dominated European life. The Church’s control began to weaken with the Protestant Reformation, which began in 1517 when Martin Luther, a German monk, spoke out against Church practices. By the end of the century, Protestantism had taken hold in much of Europe. Another founder of sociology, Max Weber, argued a century ago that the rise of Protestantism in turn led to the rise of capitalism. In his great book The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber wrote that Protestant belief in the need for hard work and economic success as a sign of eternal salvation helped lead to the rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution (Weber, 1904/1958).

Moving from Europe to the United States, historians have documented the importance of religion since the colonial period. Many colonists came to the new land to escape religious persecution in their home countries. The colonists were
generally very religious, and their beliefs guided their daily lives and, in many cases, the operation of their governments and other institutions. In essence, government and religion were virtually the same entity in many locations, and church and state were not separate. Church officials performed many of the duties that the government performs today, and the church was not only a place of worship but also a community center in most of the colonies (Gaustad & Schmidt, 2004). Gaustad, E. S., & Schmidt, L. E. (2004). *The religious history of America.* San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. The Puritans of what came to be Massachusetts refused to accept religious beliefs and practices different from their own and persecuted people with different religious views. They expelled Anne Hutchinson in 1637 for disagreeing with the beliefs of the Puritans’ Congregational Church and hanged Mary Dyer in 1660 for practicing her Quaker faith.

### Key World Religions Today

Today the world’s largest religion is Christianity, to which more than 2 billion people, or about one-third the world’s population, subscribe. Christianity began 2,000 years ago in Palestine under the charismatic influence of Jesus of Nazareth and today is a Western religion, as most Christians live in the Americas and in Europe. Beginning as a cult, Christianity spread through the Mediterranean and later through Europe before becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire. Today, dozens of Christian denominations exist in the United States and other nations. Their views differ in many respects, but generally they all regard Jesus as the son of God, and many believe that salvation awaits them if they follow his example (Young, 2010). Young, W. A. (2010). *The world’s religions: Worldviews and contemporary issues* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

The second largest religion is Islam, which includes about 1.6 billion Muslims, most of them in the Middle East, northern Africa, and parts of Asia. Muhammad founded Islam in the 600s A.D. and is regarded today as a prophet who was a descendant of Abraham. Whereas the sacred book of Christianity and Judaism is the Bible, the sacred book of Islam is the Koran. The Five Pillars of Islam guide Muslim life: (a) the acceptance of Allah as God and Muhammad as his messenger; (b) ritual worship, including daily prayers facing Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad; (c) observing Ramadan, a month of prayer and fasting; (d) giving alms to the poor; and (e) making a holy pilgrimage to Mecca at least once before one dies.

The third largest religion is Hinduism, which includes more than 800 million people, most of whom live in India and Pakistan. Hinduism began about 2000 B.C. and, unlike Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, has no historic linkage to any one person and no real belief in one omnipotent deity. Hindus live instead according to a set of religious precepts called *dharma*. For these reasons Hinduism is often called an *ethical religion*. Hindus believe in reincarnation, and their religious belief in general is closely related to India’s caste system (see Chapter 6 “Social Stratification”), as an important aspect of Hindu belief is that one should live according to the rules of one’s caste.

Buddhism is another key religion and claims almost 400 million followers, most of whom live in Asia. Buddhism developed out of Hinduism and was founded by Siddhartha Gautama more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Siddhartha is said to have given up a comfortable upper-caste Hindu existence for one of wandering and poverty. He eventually achieved enlightenment and acquired the name of Buddha, or “enlightened one.” His teachings are now called the *dhamma*, and over the centuries they have influenced Buddhists to lead a moral life. Like Hindus, Buddhists generally believe in reincarnation, and they also believe that people experience suffering unless they give up material concerns and follow other Buddhist principles.
Another key religion is Judaism, which claims more than 13 million adherents throughout the world, most of them in Israel and the United States. Judaism began about 4,000 years ago when, according to tradition, Abraham was chosen by God to become the progenitor of his “chosen people,” first called Hebrews or Israelites and now called Jews. The Jewish people have been persecuted throughout their history, with anti-Semitism having its ugliest manifestation during the Holocaust of the 1940s, when 6 million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis. One of the first monotheistic religions, Judaism relies heavily on the Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible, and the Talmud and the Mishnah, both collections of religious laws and ancient rabbinical interpretations of these laws. The three main Jewish dominations are the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform branches, listed in order from the most traditional to the least traditional. Orthodox Jews take the Bible very literally and closely follow the teachings and rules of the Torah, Talmud, and Mishnah, while Reform Jews think the Bible is mainly a historical document and do not follow many traditional Jewish practices. Conservative Jews fall in between these two branches.

A final key religion in the world today is Confucianism, which reigned in China for centuries but was officially abolished in 1949 after the Chinese Revolution ended in Communist control. People who practice Confucianism today do so secretly, and its number of adherents is estimated at some 5 or 6 million. Confucianism was founded by K'ung Fu-tzu, from whom it gets its name, about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. His teachings, which were compiled in a book called the Analects, were essentially a code of moral conduct involving self-discipline, respect for authority and tradition, and the kind treatment of everyone. Despite the official abolition of Confucianism, its principles continue to be important for Chinese family and cultural life.

As this overview indicates, religion takes many forms in different societies. No matter what shape it takes, however, religion has important consequences. These consequences can be both good and bad for the society and the individuals in it. Sociological perspectives expand on these consequences, and we now turn to them.

Sociological Perspectives on Religion

Sociological perspectives on religion are similar to those on education in that they try to understand the functions religion serves, the inequality and other problems it can reinforce and perpetuate, and the role it plays in our daily lives (Emerson, Monahan, & Mirola, 2011). Emerson, M. O., Monahan, S. C., & Mirola, W. A. (2011). Religion matters: What sociology teaches us about religion in our world. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. Table \(\PageIndex{1}\) summarizes what these perspectives say.

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<td>Religion serves several functions for society. These include (a) giving meaning and purpose to life, (b) reinforcing social unity and stability, (c) serving as an agent of social control of behavior, (d) promoting physical and psychological well-being, and (e) motivating people to work for positive social change.</td>
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<td>Conflict theory</td>
<td>Religion reinforces and promotes social inequality and social conflict. It helps to convince the poor to accept their lot in life, and it leads to hostility and violence motivated by religious differences.</td>
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<td>This perspective focuses on the ways in which individuals interpret their religious experiences. It emphasizes that beliefs and practices are not sacred unless people regard them as such. Once they</td>
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The theoretical perspective

Major assumptions

are regarded as sacred, they take on special significance and give meaning to people’s lives.

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The Functions of Religion

Much of the work of Émile Durkheim stressed the functions that religion serves for society regardless of how it is practiced or of what specific religious beliefs a society favors. Durkheim’s insights continue to influence sociological thinking today on the functions of religion.

First, religion gives meaning and purpose to life. Many things in life are difficult to understand. That was certainly true, as we have seen, in prehistoric times, but even in today’s highly scientific age, much of life and death remains a mystery, and religious faith and belief help many people make sense of the things science cannot tell us.

Second, religion reinforces social unity and stability. This was one of Durkheim's most important insights. Religion strengthens social stability in at least two ways. First, it gives people a common set of beliefs and thus is an important agent of socialization (see Chapter 3 "Socialization and Social Interaction"). Second, the communal practice of religion, as in houses of worship, brings people together physically, facilitates their communication and other social interaction, and thus strengthens their social bonds.

A third function of religion is related to the one just discussed. Religion is an agent of social control and thus strengthens social order. Religion teaches people moral behavior and thus helps them learn how to be good members of society. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments are perhaps the most famous set of rules for moral behavior.

A fourth function of religion is greater psychological and physical well-being. Religious faith and practice can enhance psychological well-being by being a source of comfort to people in times of distress and by enhancing their social interaction with others in places of worship. Many studies find that people of all ages, not just the elderly, are happier...
and more satisfied with their lives if they are religious. Religiosity also apparently promotes better physical health, and some studies even find that religious people tend to live longer than those who are not religious (Moberg, 2008). Moberg, D. O. (2008). Spirituality and aging: Research and implications. Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging, 20, 95–134. We return to this function later.

A final function of religion is that it may motivate people to work for positive social change. Religion played a central role in the development of the Southern civil rights movement a few decades ago. Religious beliefs motivated Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists to risk their lives to desegregate the South. Black churches in the South also served as settings in which the civil rights movement held meetings, recruited new members, and raised money (Morris, 1984). Morris, A. (1984). The origins of the civil rights movement: Black communities organizing for change. New York, NY: Free Press.

Religion, Inequality, and Conflict

Religion has all of these benefits, but, according to conflict theory, it can also reinforce and promote social inequality and social conflict. This view is partly inspired by the work of Karl Marx, who said that religion was the “opiate of the masses” (Marx, 1964). Marx, K. (1964). Karl Marx: Selected writings in sociology and social philosophy (T. B. Bottomore, Trans.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. By this he meant that religion, like a drug, makes people happy with their existing conditions. Marx repeatedly stressed that workers needed to rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie. To do so, he said, they needed first to recognize that their poverty stemmed from their oppression by the bourgeoisie. But people who are religious, he said, tend to view their poverty in religious terms. They think it is God’s will that they are poor, either because he is testing their faith in him or because they have violated his rules. Many people believe that if they endure their suffering, they will be rewarded in the afterlife. Their religious views lead them not to blame the capitalist class for their poverty and thus not to revolt. For these reasons, said Marx, religion leads the poor to accept their fate and helps to maintain the existing system of social inequality.


As the Puritans’ persecution of non-Puritans illustrates, religion can also promote social conflict, and the history of the world shows that individual people and whole communities and nations are quite ready to persecute, kill, and go to war over religious differences. We see this today and in the recent past in central Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland. Jews and other religious groups have been persecuted and killed since ancient times. Religion can be the source of social unity and cohesion, but over the centuries it also has led to persecution, torture, and wanton bloodshed.

News reports going back since the 1990s indicate a final problem that religion can cause, and that is sexual abuse, at least in the Catholic Church. As you undoubtedly have heard, an unknown number of children were sexually abused by Catholic priests and deacons in the United States, Canada, and many other nations going back at least to the 1960s. There is much evidence that the Church hierarchy did little or nothing to stop the abuse or to sanction the offenders who were committing it, and that they did not report it to law enforcement agencies. Various divisions of the Church have
paid tens of millions of dollars to settle lawsuits. The numbers of priests, deacons, and children involved will almost certainly never be known, but it is estimated that at least 4,400 priests and deacons in the United States, or about 4% of all such officials, have been accused of sexual abuse, although fewer than 2,000 had the allegations against them proven (Terry & Smith, 2006). Terry, K., & Smith, M. L. (2006). The nature and scope of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and deacons in the United States: Supplementary data analysis. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Given these estimates, the number of children who were abused probably runs into the thousands.

Symbolic Interactionism and Religion

While functional and conflict theories look at the macro aspects of religion and society, symbolic interactionism looks at the micro aspects. It examines the role that religion plays in our daily lives and the ways in which we interpret religious experiences. For example, it emphasizes that beliefs and practices are not sacred unless people regard them as such. Once we regard them as sacred, they take on special significance and give meaning to our lives. Symbolic interactionists study the ways in which people practice their faith and interact in houses of worship and other religious settings, and they study how and why religious faith and practice have positive consequences for individual psychological and physical well-being.

Religious symbols indicate the value of the symbolic interactionist approach. A crescent moon and a star are just two shapes in the sky, but together they constitute the international symbol of Islam. A cross is merely two lines or bars in the shape of a “t,” but to tens of millions of Christians it is a symbol with deeply religious significance. A Star of David consists of two superimposed triangles in the shape of a six-pointed star, but to Jews around the world it is a sign of their religious faith and a reminder of their history of persecution.

Religious rituals and ceremonies also illustrate the symbolic interactionist approach. They can be deeply intense and can involve crying, laughing, screaming, trancelike conditions, a feeling of oneness with those around you, and other emotional and psychological states. For many people they can be transformative experiences, while for others they are not transformative but are deeply moving nonetheless.

Types of Religious Organizations

Many types of religious organizations exist in modern societies. Sociologists usually group them according to their size and influence. Categorized this way, three types of religious organizations exist: church, sect, and cult (Emerson et al., 2011). Emerson, M. O., Monahan, S. C., & Mirola, W. A. (2011). Religion matters: What sociology teaches us about religion in our world. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. A church further has two subtypes: the ecclesia and denomination. We first discuss the largest and most influential of the types of religious organization, the ecclesia, and work our way down to the smallest and least influential, the cult.

Church: The Ecclesia and Denomination

A church is a large, bureaucratically organized religious organization that is closely integrated into the larger society. Two types of church organizations exist. The first is the ecclesia, a large, bureaucratic religious organization that is a formal part of the state and has most or all of a state’s citizens as its members. As such, the ecclesia is the national or
state religion. People ordinarily do not join an ecclesia; instead they automatically become members when they are
born. A few ecclesiae exist in the world today, including Islam in Saudi Arabia and some other Middle Eastern nations,
the Catholic Church in Spain, the Lutheran Church in Sweden, and the Anglican Church in England.

As should be clear, in an ecclesiastic society there may be little separation of church and state, because the ecclesia
and the state are so intertwined. In some ecclesiastic societies, such as those in the Middle East, religious leaders rule
the state or have much influence over it, while in others, such as Sweden and England, they have little or no influence.
In general the close ties that ecclesiae have to the state help ensure they will support state policies and practices. For
this reason, ecclesiae often help the state solidify its control over the populace.

The second type of church organization is the denomination, a large, bureaucratic religious organization that is closely
integrated into the larger society but is not a formal part of the state. In modern pluralistic nations, several denominations
coexist. Most people are members of a specific denomination because their parents were members. They are born into
a denomination and generally consider themselves members of it the rest of their lives, whether or not they actively
practice their faith, unless they convert to another denomination or abandon religion altogether.

The Megachurch

A relatively recent development in religious organizations is the rise of the so-called megachurch, a church at which
more than 2,000 people worship every weekend on the average. Several dozen have at least 10,000 worshippers
(Priest, Wilson, & Johnson, 2010; Warf & Winsberg, 2010); Priest, R. J., Wilson, D., & Johnson, A. (2010), U.S.
megachurches and new patterns of global mission. International Bulletin of Missionary Research, 34(2), 97–104; Warf,
33–51. the largest U.S. megachurch, in Houston, has more than 35,000 worshippers and is nicknamed a “gigachurch.”
There are more than 1,300 megachurches in the United States, a steep increase from the 50 that existed in 1970, and
their total membership exceeds 4 million. About half of today’s megachurches are in the South, and only 5% are in the
Northeast. About one-third are nondenominational, and one-fifth are Southern Baptist, with the remainder primarily of
other Protestant denominations. A third spend more than 10% of their budget on ministry on other nations. Some have a
strong television presence, with Americans in the local area or sometimes around the country watching services and/or
preaching by televangelists and providing financial contributions in response to information presented on the television
screen.

Compared to traditional, smaller churches, megachurches are more concerned with meeting their members’ practical
needs in addition to helping them achieve religious fulfillment. Some even conduct market surveys to determine these
needs and how best to address them. As might be expected, their buildings are huge by any standard, and they often
feature bookstores, food courts, and sports and recreation facilities. They also provide day care, psychological
counseling, and youth outreach programs. Their services often feature electronic music and light shows.

Although megachurches are obviously popular, they have been criticized for being so big that members are unable to
develop the close bonds with each other and with members of the clergy characteristic of smaller houses of worship.
Their supporters say that megachurches involve many people in religion who would otherwise not be involved.
Sects

A sect is a relatively small religious organization that is not closely integrated within the larger society and that often conflicts with at least some of its norms and values. Typically a sect has broken away from a larger denomination in an effort to restore what members of the sect regard as the original views of the denomination. Because sects are relatively small, they usually lack the bureaucracy of denominations and ecclesiae and often also lack clergy who have received official training. Their worship services can be intensely emotional experiences, often more so than those typical of many denominations, where worship tends to be more formal and restrained. Members of many sects typically proselytize and try to recruit new members into the sect. If a sect succeeds in attracting many new members, it gradually grows, becomes more bureaucratic, and, ironically, eventually evolves into a denomination. Many of today's Protestant denominations began as sects, as did the Mennonites, Quakers, and other groups. The Amish in the United States are perhaps the most well-known example of a current sect.

![The Amish](https://biz.libretexts.org/Courses/Sacramento_City_College/Book%3A_Managing_Diversity_in_the_Workplace/10%3A_Divers...)

**Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\): The Amish, who live in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and many other states, are perhaps the most well-known example of a sect in the United States today.© Thinkstock**

Cults

A cult is a small religious organization that is at great odds with the norms and values of the larger society. Cults are similar to sects but differ in at least three respects. First, they generally have not broken away from a larger denomination and instead originate outside the mainstream religious tradition. Second, they are often secretive and do not proselytize as much. Third, they are at least somewhat more likely than sects to rely on charismatic leadership.
based on the extraordinary personal qualities of the cult’s leader.

Although the term cult today raises negative images of crazy, violent, small groups of people, it is important to keep in mind that major world religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and denominations such as the Mormons all began as cults. Research challenges several popular beliefs about cults, including the ideas that they brainwash people into joining them and that their members are mentally ill. In a study of the Unification Church (Moonies), Eileen Barker (1984) Barker, E. (1984). The making of a moonie: Choice or brainwashing. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.found no more signs of mental illness among people who joined the Moonies than in those who did not. She also found no evidence that people who joined the Moonies had been brainwashed into doing so.

Another image of cults is that they are violent. In fact, most are not violent. However, some cults have committed violence in the recent past. In 1995 the Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) cult in Japan killed 10 people and injured thousands more when it released bombs of deadly nerve gas in several Tokyo subway lines (Strasser & Post, 1995).Strasser, S., & Post, T. (1995, April 3). A cloud of terror—and suspicion. Newsweek, p. 36–41. Two years earlier, the Branch Davidian cult engaged in an armed standoff with federal agents in Waco, Texas. When the agents attacked its compound, a fire broke out and killed 80 members of the cult, including 19 children; the origin of the fire remains unknown (Tabor & Gallagher, 1995).Tabor, J. D., & Gallagher, E. V. (1995). Why Waco? Cults and the battle for religious freedom in America. Berkeley: University of California Press. A few cults have also committed mass suicide. In another example from the 1990s, more than three dozen members of the Heaven’s Gate killed themselves in California in March 1997 in an effort to communicate with aliens from outer space (Hoffman & Burke, 1997).Hoffman, B., & Burke, K. (1997). Heaven’s Gate: Cult suicide in San Diego. New York, NY: Harper Paperbacks. Some two decades earlier, more than 900 members of the People’s Temple cult killed themselves in Guyana under orders from the cult’s leader, Jim Jones (Stoen, 1997).Stoen, T. (1997, April 7). The most horrible night of my life. Newsweek, p. 44–45.

Conclusion

- Every known society has practiced religion. Ancient Greece and Rome were polytheistic, while in the Middle Ages the Catholic Church was the dominant religious force in Europe.
- The major religions in the world today are Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Confucianism.
- Religion ideally serves several functions. It gives meaning and purpose to life, reinforces social unity and stability, serves as an agent of social control, promotes psychological and physical well-being, and may motivate people to work for positive social change.
- On the other hand, religion may help keep poor people happy with their lot in life, promote traditional views about gender roles, and engender intolerance toward people whose religious faith differs from one’s own.
- The three major types of religious organizations are the church, sect, and cult. The two types of churches are the ecclesia and the denomination.

For Your Review

1. Describe the assumptions of the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches of religion.
2. Write a brief essay in which you indicate which of these three approaches you most favor and state the reasons for your choice.