The growth of terrorism and the war on terrorism are accelerating many of the changes taking place on our planet and heightening the role of religion in our daily lives and in global politics. The whirlwind of change in our economic, social, political, and personal lives that we are experiencing may change the course of human history, but at the same time we are rooted in ancient faith traditions that both resist and promote social change. Never has the study of religion been more important or an understanding of the various traditions more crucial.

Fortune tellers in China now provide computer-generated astrological charts. Telecommunication satellites link isolated religious communities at separate ends of the earth; American television offers its viewers Christian preachers and Buddhist teachers. In the summer of 1993, representatives of religious communities met at a Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago to establish a process for ongoing dialogue and to initiate a debate on a declaration of a global ethic. The parliament had not met since 1893, but met again in South Africa in 1998 and in Spain in 2003. At lectures given by a Hindu teacher in Texas, a large, color portrait of the Indian guru Sai Baba is framed by a vase of fresh flowers and a candle painted with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the middle of Colombo, Sri Lanka, sits Saint Anthony’s Cathedral, a pilgrimage center for hundreds of thousands each week, 90 percent of whom are not Christians but Buddhists and Hindus.
The pleasant coexistence of religious traditions is only one side of the story, however, as anyone who follows the news already knows. In early 1994, for example, an Israeli doctor entered a mosque in Hebron at the Cave of the Patriarchs, where Abraham is supposedly buried, and murdered more than 30 Muslims at prayer. He was beaten to death on the spot by the worshippers, and violence broke out again between Jews and Muslims throughout the region. In India, Hindus and Muslims have been killing one another in a flare-up of a centuries-old conflict, with current issues including the political status of Kashmir, the destruction of a Muslim mosque by Hindu nationalists at a disputed site in Ayodhya, and the development of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan. Catholics and Protestants have been fighting one another viciously in Northern Ireland. Militants have been killing and injuring thousands in the name of Islam, while the United States administration calls on the name of God to justify its war against terrorism and invasions of Iraq. The Ku Klux Klan still marches in the United States, using religious arguments to denounce African Americans, Jews, and others. In the former Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox Christians engaged in a campaign of “ethnic cleansing” of Muslims that involved wholesale slaughter.

The global village is becoming a reality economically and socially, if not politically, as every isolated corner of the planet is being knit together into a world system. This global order, emerging for several centuries, has become a reality in the twentieth century, as all humans increasingly participate in a “shared fate” (Joseph 1993; Wallerstein 1984; cf. Durkheim [1915] 1965). Our economic and social institutions, our culture, art, music, and many of our aspirations, are now tied together around the world. The human race, however, is constructing a multicultural global village full of conflict and violence as well as promise.

Just as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union ended in the 1990s and we made astounding progress in solving old conflicts, ethnic and religious nationalism exploded in violence around the world. Mark Juergensmeyer contends that rather than witnessing the “end of history” (see Fukuyama 1992) and the emergence of a worldwide consensus in favor of secular liberal democracy, we may see the coming of a new Cold War, one between the secular West and numerous new religious nationalisms. “Like the old Cold War,” says Juergensmeyer (1993:2), “the confrontation between these new forms of culture-based politics and the secular state is global in its scope, binary in its opposition, occasionally violent, and essentially a difference of ideologies.” The new millennium ushered in not an end to the bloodshed of the last century, but the terror of a new violence.

Social life may be fundamentally different in the coming century, although many features of today’s life will persist, just as there was much
continuity between preagricultural and agricultural eras, premodern and modern times. A major task of the coming millennium will be to order our lives together and to create an ethos, or style of life, with a moral basis. The ethos must include sufficient agreement about common norms to facilitate cross-cultural interactions, international commerce, and conflict resolution while permitting considerable cultural diversity on the planet. The process of coming together, however, will not be an easy one. Religious traditions are central to that process because of their role in defining norms, values, and meaning; in providing the ethical underpinning for collective life; and in forging the cultural tools for cooperation and conflict.

Much of the best and worst of human history is in the name of its Gods, and religious traditions continue to provide both an ethical critique of, as well as a justification for, much bloodletting. The central thesis of this book is that the sociological study of religion has important insights into the central issues of how we can live together in our multicultural global village as well as helpful tools for investigating the problems created by our newly created common life with its diverse norms and values. The task here is to review those insights, assess the tools, raise questions, and develop some tentative conclusions about the role of religions in promoting chaos or community as humanity moves into the twenty-first century. Whether or not we can discover a means for sustaining a diversity of religious traditions and a wide range of ethical values and still live together remains an unanswered question.

The world’s religions will be an integral part of the process, for better or for worse. Faith traditions “work” because they answer fundamental questions in a comprehensive way. That very strength, however, sometimes results in exclusivist claims to a monopoly on the “Truth,” which, in a multicultural global village, often precipitates fatal conflicts among competing religious claims and the people who make them. The very things that hold a community together can also tear it apart.

Religion and the Globalization of Social Life

Our ancient ancestors sat around the fire and heard stories about their forebears—about the time when life first emerged in the universe, about lessons for living their lives. When people gather today, the flickering light comes from a television rather than a fire, but we still hear stories about the nature of reality as we perceive it in our own cultures. Many of Earth’s previous inhabitants heard only one story about creation during their lifetime, but today most people hear more than one as the various religious traditions of the world—as well as newer scientific ones—diffuse widely through
modern means of mass communication. We are surrounded by not only our own cultures but those of countless other peoples. Encountering these different perspectives on life is stimulating and enticing, but the overall process of cross-cultural contact is highly complicated because meaningful differences do exist among religions and sometimes provide the basis or excuse for confrontation.

Historically, religious ideas have provided the major organizing principles for explaining the world and defining ethical life for elites and masses alike, and they continue to do so, but modern critiques of religion have shaken them to the root. The globalization of our “lifeworlds” (Habermas 1987) will have as great an impact on religious life as industrialization did. Just when humanity most needs an ethical system that enables diverse peoples to coexist peacefully and justly, the traditional sources of such guidelines are being daily undermined by the challenge of modern science and the increased cross-cultural contact.

Many conflicts occurred throughout the history of Christianity, of course, but none so radical as those precipitated by the crisis of modernism in the last two centuries. Scientific arguments called into question not just specific dogmas but the very notion of dogma. As the Roman Catholic pope put it in 1907, modernism lays “the axe not to the branches and shoots, but to the very root” of the faith (Pius X 1908:72). Cross-culturally, meanwhile, competing religious traditions were offering alternative religious explanations to fundamental questions about life and how it should be lived.

Even before the changes in society and culture associated with industrialization had time to become fully absorbed, however, the world changed again—just as profoundly—when the various human communities were thrust into intimate contact by late twentieth-century communications and transportation technologies and the globalization of an advanced capitalist economy that relies on far-flung networks of production and consumption. Most scholars in the nineteenth century predicted a new era of peace and prosperity; yet the twentieth century brought bloodshed on a scale never before experienced and prosperity for a privileged few, accompanied by mass starvation and misery for many more.

The communications and transportation revolutions of the twentieth century took off in the post–World War II era. By the time Marshall McLuhan (1960) introduced the term global village into our vocabulary, a new awareness of the interconnectedness of our lives was emerging. In the 1960s and 1970s, a massive increase in international trade transformed the nature of economic processes. Capital from the industrialized countries, in search of cheap labor, shifted to so-called “less developed” nations so that much of the actual production process moved outside the United States and Western
Europe and into Third World countries. By the early 1970s, the 500 major U.S. corporations were making 40 percent of their profits abroad.

These economic changes were intertwined with dramatic transformations in the civil society and political spheres as well. In 1900, there were about 200 nongovernmental organizations in the world, that is, noneconomic institutions organized to take care of some aspect of human life. By 1990, the number had risen to 6,000 and rose another 50 percent to 9,000 by 1993 (Smith 1999), creating a web of structures ranging from religious organizations to humanitarian, activist, and other civic organizations. Cultural diffusion, driven in part by economic developments, has resulted in a global greed for consumer goods among those people who can afford to participate in the system (and often a hope for participating among those who cannot afford to do so). In addition to nation-states, regional and international political alliances and institutions are playing an increasingly important role, right up to the United Nations, which functions as something of a quasistate at the global level.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the sociologist Emile Durkheim ([1893] 1933) observed that the emerging world system of his day showed two separate and contradictory trends: increasing unity and increasing diversity. This insight proved to be an enduring one. Even as our lives become ever more intertwined, the people who exist in our everyday world are increasingly diverse. Most people live not in isolated homogeneous villages but in heterogeneous cities. International trade, global social networks, and telecommunications locate us all in the same shared space. Even rural villagers are linked in an unprecedented way to the world economy as they send and receive goods around the globe.

Most people are probably ambivalent about the new world order. Many enjoy the material benefits, but they have come at a high price—including the destruction of many of the world’s indigenous cultures and radical transformations of other societies as well as widespread ecological devastation. The last two centuries have seen violence and misery on an unprecedented scale, but a large portion of the world is healthier, eats better, and lives longer than the royalty of past civilizations. In the nineteenth century, the people with the most advanced technology, Western Europeans, subjugated most of the rest of the world. In the twentieth century, they began slaughtering one another at an unprecedented rate as militarized conflict was industrialized and the technology of war created “total war,” in which—for the first time in history—all humanity is involved and all are potential victims.

The academic study of religion provides one valuable approach to a serious study of the dilemmas plaguing modern culture. In the nineteenth century, science seemed to be replacing religion in the cultural centers of
Europe; the Christian church cast its lot with the monarchy and appeared to be dying along with the old order. More than a century later, however, religion persists as a vital force in the world. Because of its persistent importance, the study of religion remains central to any adequate understanding of the nature of human life. The discussion that follows introduces the history of the scholarly (mostly sociological) analysis of religion, some of the analytical tools that can be used to explore current trends in religious life, and the series of themes that will inform this book.

**Religion and the Sociological Tradition**

Nineteenth-century sociologists, even as they mistakenly anticipated the imminent demise of religion, created a new approach to the study of religion that is rich with insights relevant to our lives. By identifying the very issues that define our present struggle, the intellectual quest initiated by Durkheim, Weber, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud can help us as we move into a twenty-first century that teeters between destructive conflict and harmony.

The creation of the discipline of sociology in the nineteenth century was largely an effort to come to grips with the crisis of faith and the revolutionary turmoil of the post-Enlightenment West. With the modern sensibility came a new level of self-consciousness about fundamental questions ordinarily taken for granted or explained by religious tradition. This intense reflexivity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave birth to the modern social sciences and explains why the earliest social scientists attempted to use scientific methods not only to explain social life, but to create a new basis for morality as well. From Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, Auguste Comte, and G. W. F. Hegel to Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Emile Durkheim, most of the major European intellectuals of this period sought to formulate a scientific moral basis for collective human life that would replace the religious foundations of European culture.

It is no accident that three of those intellectual giants—Marx, Freud, and Durkheim—were Jews living in a culture built on a Christian tradition that was being widely challenged by science and competing religious perspectives. Cross-cultural encounters and social and cultural revolutions usually precipitate innovation, and the post-Enlightenment West was no exception. Moreover, the personal torments of these men—and of others who built the social sciences—were representative, in many ways, of the experience of millions buffeted by the storms of modernism.

The founder of sociology, the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), was trapped between his traditional family—his father was a...
fervent Catholic and royalist who supported the monarchy and opposed
democratic reform—and the rebellious democratic, anticlerical milieu he
encountered when he left home. Comte became a champion of scientific
inquiry, contending that antiquated theological thinking gave way first to
metaphysics and then to science, or what he called “positive philosophy.”
He insisted on applying the methods of physics and the natural sciences to
social life to construct a rational social order, solve the profound problems
of human life, and elevate the intellectual over the rest of humanity with its
coarser affective faculties.

Comte initiated a series of lectures outlining his master plan of human
knowledge—the “Course of Positive Philosophy”—in which he proposed
that a scientific sociology could solve the burning social problems of the
day that the monarchy, the church, and the Revolution alike had failed
to address. He insisted that religion was simply a residue from an earlier
era and that science could replace it to everyone’s benefit. Just as his lectures
began, however, Comte suffered a mental collapse and attempted suicide.
The vociferous opponent of religion and champion of science eventually
became a practitioner of “cerebral hygiene” and refused to read anything but
the medieval devotional classic The Imitation of Christ. In his final years,
isolated from his peers, Comte founded a “Religion of Humanity” in which
he championed affect over intellect.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) came from a long line of Jewish rabbis, but
his father converted to Christianity as a compromise to advance his position
in the predominantly Lutheran community in Germany in which he lived.
Marx’s own disenchantment with religion was fueled by what he saw as the
co-opting of religion by elites to control the dependent classes. He attacked
religious ideologies of repression with a moral passion, called on the
oppressed to turn from theology to politics, and was marginalized and exiled
for his views, as well as lauded by many seeking change.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)—himself a victim of anti-Semitism
in Vienna—saw religion as a psychological defense mechanism to compen-
sate people for the deprivations they suffered as a consequence of social
organization, such as the repression of sexuality and the channeling of ener-
gies into building civilization rather than meeting personal needs. Freud
advocated that rational mastery of one’s environment replace the “illusions”
of religion.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), as the son of a French rabbi, made a sharp
break with the Ashkenazi Jewish community that had nurtured him from
infancy when he took up Auguste Comte’s sociological banner. Durkheim’s
lifelong intellectual struggle to find a scientific substitute for the civic morality
French culture lost when it rejected its Catholic past resonated deeply
with his own personal trauma as he converted to the anticlericalism of the
Parisian intellectual scene of the late nineteenth century.

German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) spent his life struggling
with the contradictions between the religious faith of his pious Protestant
mother and the secular bureaucratic world of his politician father. He
became increasingly estranged from his father, who died shortly after a visit
to the younger Weber’s home, where they fought and Weber asked his father
to leave. After this event, Weber fell into a deep depression for five years.
When he recovered, he grappled with the issue that became the central
agenda of his intellectual life: the tension between religious faith and mod-
ern Western rationality.

The groundwork for contemporary sociology of religion was thus laid
by five men—Comte, Marx, Freud, Durkheim, and Weber—who were per-
sonally as well as intellectually caught up in the broad historical currents
of change sweeping through Western civilization. Religion was one of the
first phenomena to occupy sociologists because it lay at the center of the
intellectual, religious, and political controversies of their time just as it does
today. When Comte coined the term sociology in the mid-nineteenth century
and advocated replacing the “arbitrary” authority of the church with a new
authority based on science, Christian clerics branded sociologists as the
devil’s workers. Sociologists and practitioners of religion have enjoyed a
love-hate relationship ever since.

Tools of the Trade

Methods

The methodological tools sociologists use in studying religion are part
of the intellectual heritage of Western European social thought from the
seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Like the other social sciences,
sociology draws from the post-Enlightenment concept of the scientific method, which requires the investigator to disengage as much as possible from personal biases to gather and interpret information about the world.

The first task of sociologists, like other social scientists, is to gather data and attempt to define their subject matter with clarity. Sociologists of religion utilize standard data-gathering techniques such as social surveys and interviews, ethnographies (direct observations of settings), and textual analysis (of religious writings, speeches, etc.). All scientists simply look for indicators of the reality they are exploring, and instruments to measure the phenomena in question. Social science methodologies have become more sophisticated in recent years, and many scholars of religion make skillful use of traditional statistical methods. Because of the nature of their subject matter, however, sociologists who study religion tend to be eclectic in their approach. They often draw upon techniques from the humanities as well, and use such conceptual tools as metaphors and what Herbert Blumer (1954) calls a "sensitizing concept," that is, one that "gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances . . . [and] rest on a general sense of what is relevant" (Blumer 1954:7). Some of the best work in the sociology of religion relies on metaphors, sensitizing concepts, and statistics.

Ethnography involves close-up observation, description, and analysis of a community or social setting over an extended period. It has long been a favorite method of anthropologists and qualitative sociologists, and often involves narrative and discourse analysis, that is, looking for patterns in the writing and speech of a community. By examining the words and frames people use to explain the world and interpret events, ethnographers can learn much about how people think. Ethnography also involves observations of actions as well as words—what kinds of body language do people use and how do they organize themselves spatially? Do people stand close to one another when they talk or keep a distance from each other? Are there differences in how people relate to others who are of another gender, race, or class? If so, are those actions explained by the rhetoric of the actors? Do believers explain their behavior in religious terms or link it to religious beliefs and sacred texts? These are the kinds of questions easily explored with close-up ethnographic methods.

Textual and historical criticism allows scholars to examine historical or sacred texts of a religious community from a scientific or disinterested point of view. It is a favorite method of historians of religion, who sometimes do not have communities available to study with ethnographic methods, and has the advantage of allowing a scholar to see what people in religious institutions actually wrote or said. Much of it is now available on
the Internet, including ancient primary documents in original languages and in translations. Comparative analysts can compare a wide range of religious traditions on a particular theme, like Joseph Campbell’s (1968; cf. Campbell 1988) famous study of *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* that looks at the hero motif across the globe and notes similarities and differences. It would take many lifetimes to do such a study with ethnography, but it is possible to analyze the actual texts of many traditions.

Criticisms of sacred texts is a standard method of religious studies scholars as well and is highly developed. Such scholars will look, for example, at the authorship, composition, and sources of a particular text, often comparing parallels in other texts, both within and outside of the tradition. A number of texts include flood stories, for example—not only the story of Noah, but also the ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh* and in Hindu, Aztec, and other traditions as well.

These methods not only are valuable in discovering the nature and history of faith traditions, but also create considerable controversy when scholars find problems in comparing the texts. The lineage of Jesus, for example, is strikingly different in two books of the *New Testament*, Matthew and Luke. On the one hand, people who adhere to biblical literalism—that is, those who believe that every word in the Bible comes from God and is literally true—may find such discoveries problematic and may discredit the method. On the other hand, some opponents of Christianity may use such comparison to attack the faith on religious and political grounds, missing the other spiritual meanings that believers find in the text. This issue, as we shall see later in the discussion of modernism, was the subject of great controversy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Different academic disciplines have affinities for particular methods of study. Anthropologists traditionally use ethnography, whereas historians often employ textual analysis. Other social scientists prefer statistical analysis. Sociologists use all of these different methods, depending on the particular subject they are studying and the customs of their training and personal preferences. In recent years, a “triangulation” of methods has become popular, that is, looking at a particular phenomenon from several methodological angles, such as statistical survey analysis, ethnography, and textual or discourse analysis. With the development of personal computers and sophisticated statistical methods, statistics have become particularly popular because they allow scholars to study broad patterns efficiently. The statistical manipulation of data can sometimes enable a scholar to discern patterns and trends in attitudes and behavior, and to see broad relationships among different kinds of attitudes and behavior. One very interesting and successful area of inquiry in the sociology of religion in recent years is the study of
the relationship between religious practice and health, which will be discussed in Chapter 4 (see, e.g., Ellison 1999; Flannelly, Ellison, and Strock 2004; Hummer, Ellison, Rogers, Moulton, and Romero 2004).

### Sociological Definitions of Religion

One of the first conceptual tools necessary to begin any intellectual inquiry is a good definition, but religion poses an obstacle. Weber admits that the term is impossible to define, at least at the beginning of a study (Weber 1968; cf. Plock 1987); William James ([1902] 1960:46) similarly advises us not to look for a single essence, but rather to explore the many characters of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, as Barbara Hargrove (1989:21) correctly observes, we cannot beg the question of definition, because it will shape “the questions we ask, the behavior we observe, and the type of analyses we make.” A website devoted to religious tolerance has an interesting compilation of various definitions of religion and a discussion of problems with them, for people interested in pursuing this issue further (see http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_defn.htm [retrieved 20 August 2005]).

The classic sociological definition comes from Durkheim ([1915] 1965:62), who says that religion is a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Deleting the ethnocentric term “church” gives us a still serviceable definition that points to the three major sociological components or pillars of the academic study of religion. Religion, then, consists of (1) the beliefs about the sacred, (2) practices (rituals), and

---

**Table 1.2** The Lineage of Jesus in Matthew and Luke

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Heli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthan</td>
<td>Matthat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elea’zar</td>
<td>Levi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli’ud</td>
<td>Melchi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achim</td>
<td>Jan’na-I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zadok</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azor</td>
<td>Mattathi’as</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(3) the community or social organization of people drawn together by a religious tradition.

A religious tradition’s worldview is outlined in a set of interrelated beliefs that explain the world and guide people in living their lives. These ideas are expressed through narratives (myths and legends) that incorporate the oppositions and contradictions of life. They are reenacted and reinforced through rituals that are sustained by, and in turn provide legitimacy for, the institutions of each religious movement. Every religion has a system of beliefs about the world and what should be considered sacred or held in awe (Durkheim [1915] 1965), or what is of “ultimate concern” (Tillich 1967) or “unrestricted value” (Hall, Pilgrim, and Cavanagh 1986), which are expressed in narratives that encompass a wide range of possibilities. Viable religious traditions usually incorporate some answers to the fundamental questions of the meaning of life and how the world was created; they offer some comfort, perhaps even joy, in the face of suffering and death. They provide standards of Truth and Beauty and ways of seeing and interpreting the world, its seen and unseen forces. Ancestors and other significant figures usually weave such ideas together into a series of narratives that include stories about unusual encounters with the sacred experience. The beliefs of a religious tradition never stand in isolation, either from one another or from the life of the community. Any given religion is also part of a people’s culture; in societies with little institutional differentiation, religion and culture are often essentially the same. Heterogeneous societies with multiple religious communities will develop a culture in which religion (even all religions represented in the society) constitutes only a part of the culture, especially when there is a secular state. The fundamental “truths” they contain are persistently recalled and reinforced in ritual practices that also sustain the social order. Rituals include religious festivals, rites of passage (including births, marriages, and funerals), and the like, which hold the spiritual and material world together.

The elements of religion we explore will no doubt continue to play a role in human societies. The form and content of these inherited traditions will persist, although they will also be transformed. When the world changes, so does tradition—even when presented as immutable truth.

Sociological Metaphors and Sensitizing Concepts

Sociologists have used a number of metaphors to describe elements of religious life, that is, analogies that sensitize observers of religion to aspects that might not be immediately apparent. Among the most common metaphors are three that will be employed throughout this book: the sacred canopy, the religious marketplace, and elective affinities.
Constructing a Sacred Canopy

Religious and cultural traditions are a result of the construction of what Peter Berger (1969) calls a sacred canopy over the life of a people. That is, they provide a sheltering fabric of security and answers for both the profound and the mundane questions of human life: What is the meaning of our existence? Why do people suffer and die? How can we get food for our family today? A particular social group’s answers to these questions usually provide an overarching vision of the universe as well as a perception of how best to organize individual and collective life. That canopy may cover only a small subculture (such as a religious commune or an isolated tribe), or it may cover an entire national culture (such as Iran’s). People may use it to legitimate either a resistance movement or a national elite.

Meant to function in a small, homogeneous society, these unilateral belief systems are difficult to construct and maintain in a multicultural society. In pluralistic societies such as the United States or India, the belief systems of social groups differ so sharply that even the most vague consensus is difficult to reach. Here, the canopy metaphor is not adequate for describing the rich religious life of the entire society unless we think of it either as sewn from numerous differing threads or as a patchwork quilt. Perhaps a “force field” would be a more appropriate metaphor than a canopy, because it implies a dynamic system that has a reality of its own but one that is constantly changing. I will, however, cautiously use the sacred canopy metaphor in this analysis because it has been widely used in the past 25 years and it points to a key aspect of religious phenomena: Believers do try to construct a sacred canopy that shields them from the vicissitudes of life, and they often think they have succeeded. The problem with the metaphor is that it presents an image that is too static for this dynamic phenomenon: The canopy is never a finished product; its construction is a process that is constantly underway.

Whether a society is small and homogeneous or large and diverse, its religious symbols grow out of, and in turn act back upon, social life. Religion is a matter of what Berger (1969) calls world construction, that is, it is an attempt to make sense out of the universe. Although our natural and social worlds are given to us when we are born into them, humans are also cocreators of their world. Certain fundamental parameters (e.g., the law of gravity and the inevitability of death) impinge on us. Yet we continue to form our own interpretations of the ecosystem, creating perceptual models that significantly affect the reality outside us. Because we are all involved in world constructions, this active creation of ours is a dynamic process that continuously acts back upon us, its producers.
Religion is at the core of the world-constructing process because it involves the highest level of the process: what a people holds sacred. Berger (1969) suggests that the construction of the sacred canopy involves three basic elements: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The first element, **externalization**, is simply the ongoing outpouring of human beings into the world around them, both physically and mentally. In our daily lives, our thoughts and actions affect and shape the world in which we exist. Through our activity, we create **material objects** (e.g., buildings, machinery, toys, paintings, books) and **cultural objects** (e.g., theology, money, institutions, social networks, etc.; see Griswold 1987) that change the world in some small or great way.

In the second stage of this process, our creations become objects external to us. This **objectivation** means that after we project our creations onto the world, they confront us, their original creators, as facts external to and separate from us. Sometimes authors who create fictional characters find that they lose some of their control over those “people” as the figures develop personalities of their own. In the same way, once we create an institution—a university, a corporation, or a church—it seems to take on a life of its own, functioning independently and sometimes even in opposition to its designers.

Finally, in the third stage of world construction, we reappropriate the reality that has become objective and transform it from structures of the external world back into structures of our subjective consciousness through **internalization**. In other words, we **internalize** the outside world through the process of socialization. In relating to other people, individuals learn to accept their culture’s sacred canopy as a given and natural reality. Each society, according to Berger (1969), thus creates a **nomos**, a meaningful order that people impose upon the experiences and meanings of individuals and provides norms, or rules, for every situation and every social role. Traditionally, this process of constructing a worldview and **nomos** has been a religious quest, although it has become more self-conscious and dispersed since the arrival of the modern era. Broad theories of the universe and the ethical systems and rituals that grow out of them are now created by a variety of institutions, some traditionally religious, like churches, synagogues, and religious orders, and also by people who are deliberately independent of religious institutions, such as mythmakers and other shapers of culture, like writers, artists, scientists, journalists, entertainers, and intellectuals. Although the struggle to control the production of culture has been widespread throughout human history, clearly no one has a monopoly on it in the postmodern world (see Griswold 1994). Religious leaders find themselves competing in a cultural marketplace even when they try to make exclusive claims to the truth.
Religious Marketplaces

Since cultural and social diversity are the distinguishing characteristics of modern life, individuals or groups in the global village can choose their religious orientations from a variety of options rather than simply accepting the specific sacred canopy transmitted to them by their family and friends in early childhood. Thus, a second central metaphor in the study of religion is that of the **religious marketplace**. Dissatisfied with the sacred canopy metaphor, recent scholars coined this term to emphasize the fact that in a multicultural society religious institutions and traditions compete for adherents, and worshippers shop for a religion in much the same way that consumers choose among goods and services in the marketplace (Warner 1993).

As Warner (1993) correctly notes, the reality addressed by the religious marketplace metaphor in the American case is not so much economic viability as the disestablishment of religion. It turns out, in fact, that the secularization contested in the post-Enlightenment European sociology of religion is actually the exception worldwide rather than the rule. Europe’s established Christian churches of the Middle Ages were something of an anomaly, though one often taken as a universal norm by European and American sociologists of religion, and the extent of the Catholic monopoly may have been overdrawn (see Finke and Stark 1992). Although religious perspectives may be relatively uniform in small, homogeneous societies, they are never so in heterogeneous ones and attempts to impose a single sacred canopy over such societies are never fully successful. The more pluralistic a society is, the more likely it is that people can choose their religious preferences. Students of American religion have thus found the marketplace metaphor helpful for examining various developments in the United States (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1991; Lee 1992; Stark and Bainbridge 1985) in which people seeking religious experience make a rational choice among various “spiritual entrepreneurs” (Greeley 1989). Sherkat and Ellison (1999:378) identify

Two schools of rational choice thought about religion. Supply-side theorists emphasize the importance of constraining and facilitating factors on the collective production of religious value—and assume that underlying preferences for religious goods remain stable. Demand-side theorists highlight shifting preferences and the influence of social constraints on individuals’ choices. At the heart of all rational choice perspectives is the market analogy applied to religion, and the following axioms are common to studies in this genre: that religious markets involve exchanges for general supernatural compensators—promises of future rewards and supernatural explanations for life events and meaning (Stark & Bainbridge 1985). Like other commodities, religious goods are produced, chosen, and consumed.
A number of forces shape the religious market: individual preferences of consumers (see Iannaccone 1990; Sherkat and Wilson 1995); the process of cultural production and the creators of the narratives embodied in a tradition (Stark and Bainbridge 1985); and the social world in which cultural constructions are found, including both the religious community with its norms that shape individual preferences (Ellison and Sherkat 1999; Sherkat and Wilson 1995) and the broader world in which that group exists. The marketplace metaphor has its shortcomings too, of course. Ethical systems and beliefs of ultimate concern are not bought and discarded as easily as shoes or houses, and ancient religious practices persist in the most advanced technological societies.

As Iannaccone (1988, 1992) observes, subgroups gain from their distinctiveness in the religious marketplace, so that such issues as sacrifice and stigma—which are usually seen as costs when an individual is making choices—actually become benefits to a religious group that deliberately seeks tension with the dominant culture to provide participants with a distinctive identity (see Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Religious worldviews usually acknowledge that believers might incur costs or be labeled negatively for their beliefs but claim that future rewards will compensate them for any current sufferings. This insight suggests that religious particularism will thrive even as the globalization process intensifies; membership in a religious community labeled deviant by the mainstream becomes, for many believers, a way of protesting the trends of modernism and postmodernism, which they abhor. Whether they are located within the Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or some other tradition, religious traditionalists, as I shall call them (see Chapter 6), cling to localized versions of a religious tradition in defiance of broader global developments.

**Elective Affinities**

Since, as we have seen, a sacred canopy usually does not span the life of an entire society in the global village, it still may serve to protect a particular social stratum or group. Because religious beliefs and expressions are always closely linked to social life, individual social groups are drawn toward their own cultural styles and definitions of the sacred. Certain ideas seem particularly suited to some status groups and lack any sensible fit with others.

Weber (1947:83) uses the metaphor of elective affinities to describe this relationship between ideas and interests (cf. Howe 1979). He takes the metaphor from Goethe’s famous novel of the same name in which two people are inexorably drawn to each other despite being already married to other
people. The concept of elective affinities is an extremely useful one for examining the relationship between culture and social structure, in part because it shows the connection between the two phenomena in a dynamic and non-deterministic way. Farmers and businesspeople are drawn to pragmatic theologies, for example, whereas university professors might prefer more abstract religious ideas. Affinities between the interests of some status groups and particular ideas or belief systems do emerge, but that does not mean that people have no free choice in selecting their own beliefs and practices.

The extent to which a religion is attached to particular social strata or ethnic groups varies over time and across traditions. Judaism has always been closely linked with a particular ethnic group and continues to be tied to the phenomenon of being Jewish by blood. Similarly, Hinduism is closely linked to the South Asian subcontinent; few people outside that geographical region are practicing Hindus unless their ancestral roots are there. The other major world religions are less clearly linked to ethnic groups, although Buddhists are most likely to be Asian (but do not have to be) and Arabs are predominantly Muslim (although most Muslims are not Arab). Some subgroups link their identity to religious traditions: Latin people are more likely to be Roman Catholic than Muslim or Quaker, for example.

These tendencies are partly a result of historic circumstances (such as who conquered whom), but may also be related to Weber’s (1947:83) notion of elective affinities between the ideas and the interests of particular social strata. Specific groups of people sometimes use religion as a way of promoting their own interests, but they also may find a given religious orientation more helpful in explaining the world as they experience it. Ethnic variations in religious expression become socially significant only when ethnic status is meaningful in a society—that is, when lifestyles and social status are based at least in part on ethnic criteria.

Religion has traditionally been linked to specific geographic locations in the social world. Because faith traditions can either sustain or subvert the social systems in those places, some traditions—or versions of them—attract a system’s elites, whereas the rebels in a society have a natural affinity for other religious beliefs or interpretations of the same tradition. Elites in virtually every culture use religious legitimations to explain why they are in control and others are not. Similarly, the most effective dissident movements often employ religious arguments to legitimate their own positions. Some of the most successful movements for social change are religiously motivated and religiously framed, which gives the struggle an intensity and legitimation otherwise unavailable, and makes it easier for reformers and revolutionaries to mobilize popular support. Religious traditions have provided both ideological support and institutional resources for a number of significant
social change movements in the twentieth century, from the Indian Freedom Movement to the U.S. civil rights movement, from the People Power Revolution in the Philippines to anti-apartheid forces in South Africa and pro-democracy forces in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (see Chapter 6).

In the analysis that follows, I shall use the elective affinity metaphor to identify connections between religious traditions and various social groups in the global village. Of special interest is the common tendency for intense ethnic, class, and even gender conflicts to emerge along religious cleavages and to be framed in religious rhetoric.

Contemporary Approaches
to the Sociology of Religion

Like the discipline of sociology in general, the sociology of religion has become more empirical and quantitative in its methodologies since Weber and Durkheim, largely because of the development of computer technology, statistics, and social surveys and in part because of the theoretical orientation of modern researchers. Consequently, even though contemporary sociologists of religion usually examine the same issues as the discipline’s founders and in much the same way, they are more precise and therefore often more narrow (see Wuthnow 1987). I will now examine four current theoretical frameworks that form yet another set of tools for the contemporary sociologist of religion.

The classical sociological tradition of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim has produced a “neoclassical” perspective—represented by Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz, Robert Bellah, and Thomas Luckmann—that tends to be subjective, emphasizing individual beliefs and attitudes, opinions and values. This perspective, which dominates much current work in the sociology of religion, adapts well to survey methodologies and often uses the sacred canopy metaphor to frame its questions. The focus of these social psychological studies is usually on the problem of meaning and an individual’s interpretations of reality.

In recent years, a second, structural approach has explored patterns and relations among cultural elements. Its central task is the identification of structures (orderly relations and rules) that give culture coherence and identity. Structural studies by such scholars as Mary Douglas examine such phenomena as boundaries, categories, and elements of behavior (as opposed to attitudes, beliefs, and values), a category that includes discourse, gestures, objects, acts, and events that are amenable to observation. Thus the structural approach examines not so much the content of the tradition’s beliefs as the relationship between the religious system and the structures of social life.
A third, **dramaturgical** approach examines expressive or communicative properties of culture and its interaction with social structure. This approach, as Wuthnow (1987) suggests, explores the expressive dimensions of social relations over either individual feelings (the subjective approach) or structural categories (the structural approach). Much of this analysis focuses on ritual and its symbolic expressions of a moral order as a prototype of other symbol systems. It can be traced historically to Durkheim’s ([1915] 1965) and Malinowski’s (1954) studies of ritual, embellished by Kai Erikson’s (1966) exploration of witchcraft trials in colonial New England and more recent work inspired by Erving Goffman and others.

A final contemporary school—and one especially relevant for examining culture in the global village—is the **institutional** approach, represented in work by Guy Swanson and others. From this perspective, “actors who have special competencies” produce culture and sustain it through institutions that ritualize, codify, and transmit cultural products (Wuthnow 1987:15). Proponents of this approach maintain that these social institutions of religion are often more securely understood than the more abstract notions of myth and ritual, and thus provide the firm empirical ground on which to address the larger issues.

In this volume, I will weave together elements of the four approaches—subjective, structural, dramaturgical, and institutional—as I analyze the world’s religions, because each identifies a significant element of religious life. The subjective element is important in identifying how individuals are linked with the broader human community through the worldview and ethos options available to them in a diverse social setting. The various beliefs of religious systems are interconnected structurally and tied in patterned ways to each other and to the social system in which they are developed. Sociologists tend to be especially interested in religious institutions as key players in the social world, and the ways in which religious ideas are performed on the world stage. An individual Hindu, for example, interprets the world and acts in it according to the cultural patterns provided by his or her social networks and institutions as they collide with the institutions, beliefs, and practices of people from other religious traditions by means of the globalization process.

Anyone trying to understand religion in the global village will find in sociology a fruitful analytical framework. It is only fair, however, to warn the reader of some problems with the way sociologists look at religion. Religious traditions are, from a sociological perspective, comprehensible constructions of the human mind, yet they transcend comprehension. They constitute a collective effort to make sense out of life and death, but (like life itself) are riddled with contradictions and paradoxes. Religion tries to bridge
the gap between temporal reality—what sociologists are rather good at describing—and the mysterious aspects of reality that cannot be easily examined, if they can be studied at all, by empirical methods. Consequently, sociologists often focus on those elements of religious life that are immediately observable: religious institutions, written texts and patterns of behavior, opinions about religious matters studied through surveys. Much of this subject does not fit neatly into our narrow conceptual boxes of survey instruments, however. We cannot discern by data gathering if the Gods exist, let alone interview them face to face, so our conclusions seem always inadequate. Like astronomers looking for faint evidence from distant galaxies or archaeologists examining potsherds from the bottom of a 3,000-year-old well, we often have to choose between focusing on inconsequential details and constructing explanations that go far beyond what our data allow us to say.

The sociologist of religion tries to discern patterns, but because religious expression is so varied, the enterprise is fraught with danger. The sociologist of religion may also offend a person’s religious sensibilities by subjecting his or her beliefs to rational scrutiny. The historical prejudices of the sociological tradition, developed primarily by white Western men, also stands in the way of objective observation. Even the language we use to discuss religion is riddled with prejudice. In talking about the deities of the world’s religions, for example, it is difficult to generalize. If we talk about a “God,” we imply a monotheism common in Western, but not Eastern, religions. If we refer instead, to “the Gods,” monotheists may object. Some, like Buddhists, are uncomfortable with the idea of a transcendental deity, because they believe that all creation is ultimately a unity.

Do the Gods—or God—exist? The norms of science require us to be as objective as possible, yet science cannot answer this question because it involves a faith stance, not a strictly empirical one. Scientists examine phenomena indirectly by looking at indicators. If we could agree on what or whom God is and what indicators might prove his/her/their existence, then we could test its reality. We could not, however, agree on the most basic indicators, and if we did, measuring them would be difficult as well.

Each of the sets of sociological tools I have examined here—definitions, metaphors, and theoretical frameworks—aids the task undertaken in this book. The sociology of religion, growing as it did out of the social turmoil of nineteenth-century Europe, identifies the struggles of late twentieth-century multiculturalism and points us in a direction that will assist us in understanding the current state of religion in the global village. The tumultuous history of the field betrays its assets and liabilities: The sociology of religion is relevant and valuable because it was born out of the early stages of battles
we continue to fight. Yet those who forged it were partisans in the fight, and we must remain conscious of their limitations as well as of their insights.

Three Pillars of Analysis: Beliefs, Rituals, and Institutions

The focus of the following discussion is the interplay among beliefs, rituals, and institutions, which Durkheim identified as the central components of religious life in his classic study *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915 1965). I will undertake a brief overview of many contemporary religious patterns not only in terms of how they function (Durkheim’s primary focus) but also in terms of how they have changed over time. The change process especially has profound implications for the future of religious life and collective life in the twenty-first century.

**Anatomy of a Belief System**

Each religious tradition has a set of interdependent beliefs that are woven together in such a way that the integrity of the entire fabric is dependent on each strand. The structure of these cultural systems involves the identification of what is considered sacred and meaningful, a set of theories about how and why the world was created, and an explanation for suffering and death.

Belief systems express a worldview, that is, a culture’s “picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order” (Geertz 1973:127). In contrast, Geertz continues, the ethos of a people encompasses the culture’s “tone, character, quality of life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude that people have about themselves and the world that life reflects” (Geertz 1973:173).

Religious myths both reflect and inform the world or, as Geertz (1973) puts it, provide both models of and models for reality. First, they are models of reality in the sense that they offer information and explanations about the world. As models for reality, sacred stories also show how the world “really is,” in spite of appearances to the contrary. They often highlight the gap between appearance and reality, or between the sacred and the profane. I will now examine each of these elements of a belief system.

*The sacred and the profane*. Emile Durkheim ([1915] 1965) believed that the entire world of human experience could be divided into two categories: the sacred, what is of ultimate concern, and the profane, what is considered
ordinary and mundane. The fact that Durkheim was the son of a Jewish rabbi may have influenced his theoretical model because the division of the world into these conceptual categories is central to Judaic thought and ritual. Durkheim’s distinction became central to the academic study of religion even though some religious traditions insist that all of life, not simply one sector, is sacred. To understand most of the world’s religions, however, one must grasp this fundamental distinction, which has been elaborated by comparative religions master Mircea Eliade in his 1959 classic, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

The two categories of sacred and profane actually lie on a continuum. Some things are considered more sacred than others and are ranked according to their sacrality. What constitutes the sacred varies from culture to culture and changes over time. The sacred may be recognized (or “manifest itself”) in the form of a stone or tree, a flag or mountain, or even an idea. Scholars use the term *hierophany* to identify the process in which people encounter and experience the sacred. Sometimes two phenomena defined as sacred may come into conflict, and people must choose which is the most sacred. A theophany is a type of hierophany referring to the appearance of the sacred in a visible form to a human being, either a human or humanlike figure (Jesus, Radha, Krishna, angels) or a natural object such as the “burning bush” that many believe Moses saw in the wilderness. The problem of representing the sacred in art or imagery led to prohibitions on doing so in Judaism and Islam.

The idea is that it is impossible to represent God accurately because human efforts to do so are always inadequate and therefore misleading. All one has to do is to go to a major art gallery in the West to see the problem—the famous classical European paintings of biblical characters (including Jesus and even God) usually represent them as fair-skinned Europeans. Even a master like Michelangelo may present a very misleading idea of what God is like by painting God as an aging bearded white man reaching down from heaven. Whether angels could be represented was an interesting controversy in medieval Byzantium culture (see Peers 2001).

For the religious, specific times and places are identified as sacred. Most societies designate holidays (“holy days”) and sacred sites (Eliade 1959). A certain location—a temple, mosque, or cathedral; a war memorial or cemetery; the birthplace or grave of a famous person—often affords an encounter with the sacred. Crossing from profane to sacred space often requires certain actions, dress, or attitudes: taking off shoes, genuflecting in front of the cross, bowing in respect, refraining from loud talk, and so on. In the modern world, some of these spaces become sources of great political controversy (such as Jerusalem) or tourist sites (see MacCannell 1976).
Religions also traditionally divide time into the sacred and the profane. Religious festivals and rituals involve the *reactualization* of sacred events that took place “in the beginning,” or during some significant hierophany; the sacred elements of time are thus transformed and shifted to the present moment. Belief systems of the various religious traditions are almost always systematized and disseminated by a select group of religious elites, but also in the speech and rhythms of everyday life; for most people, their faith is encountered not in the subtle theologies or massive writings of their tradition, but in its rituals, that is, the regularly repeated behaviors that symbolize the values of their belief system. Ritual behavior, as Durkheim ([1915] 1965) observed, provides the occasion for an encounter with the sacred, and it is socially organized in such a way as to reinforce the values and authority of the community.

Religious pilgrimages, such as the Hajj, the Islamic duty to go to Mecca if possible during one’s lifetime, sometimes combine sacred space and time, so that it is optimal to visit a sacred location during a particular season or time of the year. Muslims may try to go to Mecca during the month of Dhu Al-Hijjah. Similarly, a Catholic might try to visit the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12. That is the day she was believed to have appeared to the Native American peasant Juan Diego in 1531 and an official national holiday in Mexico complete with pilgrimages, masses, fiestas, and processions honoring the event.

Faith communities preserve their religious beliefs in often contradictory narratives united at an abstract level by the structure of the stories themselves (see Kurtz 1979). Life and death, good and evil, the divine and the human all exist side by side within the narrative. The world gets created twice in every culture: First, in the material sense, the world comes into being. Then it is recreated through sacred stories or mythologies (or by means of scientific theories) in a cosmogony that links the present with the past. Some sacred events are more significant than their frequency would suggest (like religious visions, death, and sexual intercourse). They may even be statistically insignificant but still have a profound impact on our lives—what is significant statistically may not be the best indicator of what is important to people, especially in the realm of the sacred.

*Cosmogonies.* Most religious systems have a *cosmogony*, a story about how and why the world was created. These stories tell us a great deal about a religion’s most significant ideas. All the world’s creation stories fall into a few basic patterns: A God creates the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). Life emerges from a cosmic egg. A prechaotic animal pulls mud up out of the water. A mountain rises up. A giant sustains the sky. The world takes shape as a spiral. A God delegates power to a demiurge (minor deity)—and so forth.
These cosmogonies link the people who tell the story with the creation process, because their Gods and/or ancestors were involved in giving birth to the world. Most creation stories also have an anthropogeny—that is, a theory about the creation of humans and how they should think of themselves. Sometimes the Gods are bored and want to play; other creation stories provide no clear reason why humans come into existence. Sometimes people are created out of clay, mud, water, or blood; other times, they are chiseled out of stone or a primeval tree trunk or are brought out of a plant. Not everything always goes right in the process of creation, nor are the Gods uniformly good or evil. Sometimes the Creators are good, other times they are amoral jokers or tricksters. In most cases, however, the events at the beginning of time have special significance for the faith community’s present situation. The stories provide a paradigm for all creation, blueprints of necessary accomplishments to prevent evil or the reversion to chaos. A cosmogony is one of several basic building blocks of the world-constructing process—the means by which a system of beliefs is developed that explains the world and its implications for daily life.

Not all religious traditions posit a clear-cut beginning point for creation. The Vedas, for example, present a vision of vast time and space that involves endless cycles of birth and rebirth. The cosmos has no beginning or end, although the known ages of the world are born and die just as individuals do. Consequently, the Hindu belief system suggests there are strict limitations on what one individual can change about this vast world and even on the given cycle of time in which one now lives. Buddhist cosmogonies present a similar philosophical view of the universe, in which the five cosmic elements (skandhas)—form, sensation, name, conformation, and consciousness—participate.

Because a religion’s worldview and ethos are closely related, its creation story provides clues into the nature of the culture to which that religion is linked. In the Babylonian creation story, a great God made minor Gods out of stone, brick, and other materials; because these lesser Gods had to do menial tasks, they in turn created humans to do their work. Such a cosmogony implies that the meaning of human life is to be found in serving God, or perhaps God’s representatives. In other religions’ creation stories, God created humans in God’s own image, thus setting homo sapiens apart from the rest of creation. Such a creation story may empower the species to take control of the rest of nature in an effort to force it to serve humans.

Theodicies. Theodicies are the explanations a religion offers for the presence of evil, suffering, and death in the world, a perennial concern of religious traditions. What causes these events, how can they be alleviated or transcended, and why should the righteous suffer? Each tradition has a theory
about suffering and a wide range of explanations occur, including punishment for an individual’s sinful behavior, a battle between good and evil forces, the result of natural processes, and so forth. Just as nature has cycles of death and regeneration, so an individual may experience death and rebirth or patterns of illness followed by health. Because suffering and death are such obviously universal and mysterious elements of the human experience, a tradition’s theodicy plays an important role not only in religious traditions but in social relations as well. Though we are not usually conscious of it on a daily basis, the ever-present fact of death affects the way in which we organize our lives (see Dunne 1965). In addition, a theodicy that explains suffering primarily as punishment for wrongdoing, for example, can lead to a justification of social oppression of those who suffer. Different traditions and subtraditions have varying themes and emphases in their theodicies.

One significant element of most theodicies is the social construction of evil, that is, identifying the sources of evil in the world. This framing of evil often has a profound impact on collective life because it affects the nature and intensity of social boundaries; as a social construct, it encourages certain kinds of conflict and discourages others. The most potent construction of evil occurs when a social group’s enemies are defined as a deity’s enemies so that the latter’s destruction or subordination is seen as divine retribution. Sometimes, the same God is claimed by both sides, as in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s or in World War II, when Allies and Germans alike claimed a Christian God on their side.

Evil may be of divine or human origin, although the two are often intertwined, especially in the heat of conflict. Dualistic theodicies connote a struggle between the powers of light (good) and those of darkness (evil). Suffering is thus caused by the evil forces as part of the ongoing battle for control of the universe. Dualistic theories, most highly developed in Zoroastrianism, Mandaeism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism but also found in other religious traditions including Christianity, often lead to contentious political views. Enemies are identified with evil cosmic forces, making peaceful coexistence difficult and affecting the style and tone of interpersonal and intergroup relations as well as cross-cultural and international conflicts.

Eastern religions do not delineate good and evil as clearly as Western religions do because they tend to claim that the cosmos is unified and that such distinctions are mere illusions. On another level, however, Eastern sacred texts (especially Hindu) are richly populated with demonic figures that battle with heroes. Even the worst characters have some element of good in them and the Gods themselves can cause pain and suffering, so that evil can still be seen as something independent of persons or even the Gods themselves. Mohandas Gandhi, as I will discuss later, emphasized this
characterization of evil as an independent entity in his effort to promote the idea of struggling against ideas and systems rather than other people.

One of the most troubling realities for a religion to explain is why the righteous suffer. Because most theodicies offer a way out of suffering through ethical behavior, the fact that the righteous suffer presents a difficult anomaly. The major religions prefer to suggest that suffering is simply embedded in the nature of the universe and leaves no one, including the righteous, untouched.

Table 1.3 Comparative Theodicies

“Primitive Religion”
- No sharp boundaries: between individual and society, between society and nature
- Significant boundaries: between social groups
- Suffering: result of crossing social boundaries, violating taboos
- Death: part of the natural rhythms of nature

Mysticism
- Seeks union with sacred forces or beings
- Individual death and suffering are trivial and insignificant

Messianic/Millenarian Eschatologies
- Millenarian: an ideal society will come (often through revolutionary action)
- Eschatology: concern with final events of history
  - This-worldly: transformation of society; a hero or messiah will bring justice; suffering may be rewarded
  - Otherworldly: change will come in the afterlife or next world

Dualism
- Mandaism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism
- Struggle of powers of darkness (evil) versus light (good)
- Zoroastrianism: suffering caused by evil forces as part of an ongoing, often cosmic, battle

Karma and Transmigration
- No bifurcation of the world as in dualism, although there is guilt and merit
- Karma: action or action energy; has effects that later become causes as part of an inexorable law of cause and effect ruling all actions
  - The world is completely connected
  - Cosmos of ethical retribution
- Transmigration: a wheel of rebirths (samsara) in which guilt and merit are compensated by fate in successive lives of the soul

SOURCES: Adapted from Weber (1968) and Berger (1969).
This tension between admonitions to live an ethical life and the apparent lack of immediate reward for doing so has inspired theodicies that promote the idea of reward or release from suffering in another world. Those who fulfill their religious duties can sometimes escape suffering by leaving this existence altogether, either in the Hindu-Buddhist effort to liberate themselves from the cycle of rebirths or in some sort of heaven or otherworldly plane, as in Christianity or Islam. A second major solution to the problem of the suffering of the righteous is to hope for some positive result to come out of the struggle itself—the “no pain, no gain” belief that pervades many theodicies. A third solution is to recognize that one’s current woes are not as bad as they could be; suffering is thus reframed and placed in another context.

Religious Rituals

Ritual, a regularly repeated, traditional, and carefully prescribed set of behaviors that symbolizes a value or belief, plays a central role in all the world’s religions. Rituals come in a wide variety of forms; some help people to show devotion to the Gods, as in corporate worship and certain modes of communicating with the Gods, such as prayers, chanting, singing, and dancing. Others, such as meditations and mantras, facilitate the process of life organization, on both personal and collective levels. Rituals help to frame daily life by regulating such matters as hygiene, diet, and sex; rites of passage surround major transitions such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death; and still other rituals, such as seasonal festivals, processions, and holidays, help people cope with the cycles of nature.

Rituals are not only limited to religious practice, however. All social institutions also rely on ritual behavior to sustain their values and participants’ consciousness of their authority. Rituals solve problems of the collective life in a time-tested way by identifying evil, marking social and ideological boundaries, and reinforcing the institutions that sponsor them. Religious rituals in particular link the experience of ordinary life with the sacred and place both trauma and joy within the context of a worldview that orders a people’s life and provides them with meaning.

Although rituals often preserve a social order and sustain old habits, they are crucial to cultural innovation and change as well. Victor Turner (1967) observes that religious rituals often signify a special or liminal period set apart from ordinary reality. During the liminal period, which involves a separation from, or marginalization of, ordinary reality, participants leave ordinary time and space and enter a sacred region in which the problematic aspects of everyday life—filled with suffering and injustice—are solved, or perhaps denied. Thus, rituals fall “betwixt and between” different worlds:
the world of everyday life, and the sacred time set apart from mundane reality. During the ritual, normal rules of interaction and social structure no longer apply or are inverted.

Some religious rituals assure people that death is not final because it is followed by rebirth and that social change is not ultimately destructive; the person who stays in the fold of the community is never alone in times of crisis. Thus, the world is renewed annually through the cycles of the seasons and the rituals that mark them, such as Mardi Gras, Divali, and the Chinese New Year. These rituals signal the paradigmatic nature of time; life is regenerated through a return to the time of the origins. This liminal period is filled with inversions and transformations (see Babcock 1978; Turner 1967). During those moments of ritual time (e.g., when the crucifixion of Jesus is relived at Easter), the mundane characteristics of life are reshaped: The children and the Princess of Spring run Old King Winter off of his throne at Mardi Gras; the God is taken out of his or her temple and paraded through the streets. The births, deaths, and sometimes resurrections of the Gods are celebrated with a renewed emphasis on the things that, contrary to the appearances of earthly, everyday life, “really matter”: family, justice, love, and order.

Rituals as a social form share a number of common structural characteristics, no matter what their content: (1) they provide solutions to problems; (2) they are rooted in experience; (3) they involve the demarcation of boundaries and the identification of evil; (4) they include nonrational as well as rational aspects of behavior; and (5) they reinforce, or reify, social processes. I will examine these characteristics in turn.

First, how do rituals solve a variety of human problems? This is a key to the important role of religion in human life: On the abstract level, religious rituals bind a social order together, linking it to the culture’s worldview and ethos. On a practical level, rituals provide a proven repertoire for social action, especially at times of crisis. When people are confronted with suffering or death, go through major passages in their life cycle, or experience rapid change, religious rituals may guide them through the crisis. Rituals provide socially approved responses, preestablished scripts, and social support for those who have suffered a loss.

Perhaps the best example of religious ritual as problem solver is the funeral rite: A death creates a crisis among the living that must be acknowledged; something must be done and something said and ritual packages provide a repertoire of words and actions appropriate to the occasion. The funeral ceremony provides a sense of closure on that stage of the grieving process and places the death within the broader worldview of the tradition. As long as the sacred canopy is in place and retains its legitimacy, the scripts provide a modicum of relief for sufferers. People surrounding the bereaved
are familiar with the rituals, and specialized institutions and ritual experts usually guide the victims of the crisis. A ritual package for the ceremony includes a repertoire of appropriate comments for the bereaved and their social networks, some general in character ("It was God’s will that he go at this time"), others tailored to a specific situation ("At least she's out of pain now"). A major feature of ritual problem solving is the provision that allows the bereaved to focus their energies on arranging details of the rituals. By accomplishing the detail work surrounding ritual, the individuals involved feel as though they have accomplished something in the midst of a crisis that would otherwise make them feel impotent; taking care of the deceased's needs after death can address lingering unresolved tensions.

Second, how are ritual practices rooted in experience? Because rituals were constructed in the past, they have the authority of time-tested formulas: As Weber (1968:226) observes of traditional authority, rituals are “believed in by virtue of the sanctity of age-old rules and powers.” People wiser than we were confronted in the past with a similar situation and created this solution. Evidence confirming that ritual brings about the desired effect is essentially anecdotal, passed on in mythical stories that contain the underlying principle: “We’ve always done it that way, and it’s always worked.” The elders recall a time, long ago, when a drought brought disaster to the village. A rain dance was performed, the rain Gods were pleased, the clouds rolled in, rain fell like a monsoon, and the village was saved. The efficacy of rituals is in the eye of the performers—they appear verifiable to those who believe in them, if not always to outsiders. Similarly, evidence calling a ritual into question can be discounted by pointing to flaws in the *performance* rather than the ritual itself. If any ritual performance is scrutinized closely enough, mistakes can be identified that could have been responsible for the ritual’s failure. The reason for failure may be attributed to sabotage by an outsider, such as an enemy who performed a more powerful counterritual.

The fact that rituals ensure continuity and reliability is both a blessing and a curse. Because the world is constantly changing, the conditions for which a specific ritual was created may alter to such an extent that the ritual is no longer appropriate. Yet the change may be unnoticed or may be considered unimportant by the ritual’s advocates, who continue to perform it anyway. This is the phenomenon known as *cultural lag* (Ogburn 1922). Rituals are valuable because people can rely upon a known procedure to maintain the social order, but they resist changing procedures when conditions change, thereby rendering the ritual behavior counterproductive. A ritual designed to protect people from drought may not be useful to a tribe moving from a desert to a rainforest.

Third, we usually need to identify a problem’s cause in order to solve it, and most rituals contain a theory about the origin of the problems they are
designed to alleviate; in short, they contain a theory of evil. Rituals mark boundaries between good and bad ideas, between “us” and “them.” An “evil” force, situation, or group is identified as the source of the difficulty, opening the way to a solution. Ritual behavior is thus an integral part of the social construction of evil by which an image of the enemy is created and then spread throughout the culture by media, folktales, and jokes. Evil is often attached to enemies outside the belief system or to those within the system who can be labeled as heretics (see Kurtz 1986). Many religious traditions personify evil in a particular figure, such as a monster or human-like creature, which needs to be defeated in battle, making the evil appear more manageable.

Whether the figure deemed responsible for evil is personified in a devil or mythical figure or found in a human enemy, rituals identify it and give people something concrete to do about mastering it. Sometimes the simple act of naming an evil and denouncing it is useful; at other times, the evil is physically punished or ridiculed, or exiled from the social order. Some will engage in exorcisms to drive away evil spirits, others will repeatedly denounce a group of people for a misdeed. Psychologically, this process of ritual identification of evil is sometimes helpful in the short run, but destructive in the end if we simply project evil onto another person or group (like the Nazis did to the Jews during the Holocaust). Such naive projections distort our view of reality: “The enemy appears as the embodiment of all evil because all evil that I feel in myself is projected onto him. Logically, after this has happened, I consider myself as the embodiment of all good since the evil has been transferred to the other side” (Fromm 1961:22).

Fourth, rituals include nonrational as well as rational aspects of human experience. Although scholars often tend to emphasize the cognitive aspects of human attitudes and behavior, we are also emotional, creative, and affective beings whose lives are influenced by many different factors. The idea of ritual goes beyond the rational, although that makes it difficult to examine empirically, since our scientific methods generally limit us to observable, rational behavior and ideas. We can still observe expressions of love, for example, as empirical facts that may not appear rational to outside observers. From an objective point of view, kissing someone or risking one’s life for another may not be simply rational or it may even appear to defy all rationality. In the liminality of a ritual, the injustices of the existing world are replaced by the justice of another world or an age to come, giving people hope to carry on in this one. The idea that “the last shall be first” may be enacted in the ritual, as when the young Princess Spring dethrones Old Man Winter in the Carnival ritual preceding Lent; the male authority figure is driven off by the people, replaced by the youthful feminine.
Finally, rituals have social as well as psychological consequences, one of which is the reification of social processes. **Reification** means the treatment of an abstraction as a concrete material object. Social institutions that sponsor rituals gain authority and legitimation from doing so in the eyes of the participants. People who never “darken the door” of a temple or church on a regular basis may still turn to their religious institutions and its authorized agents (rabbis, priests, etc.) in times of crisis or celebration.

Because rituals establish the link between a people and their worldview, social transformations and ritual changes are mutually interactive. The move toward universalism is common in religious traditions that shift from being locally oriented to being more cosmopolitan. When religions diffuse across different cultures, or when the territory in which they are based is invaded by traders or conquering armies, religious practices are almost inevitably modified. When Buddhism moved into China and the rest of East Asia, the indigenous festivals and Gods of the various cultures became part of the overall Buddhist practice, or lived side by side in the same ceremonies and temples.

*Ritual “packages.”* Religious belief systems integrate different kinds of rituals into sets of interdependent practices through which people can engage in showing devotion to the Gods while organizing their individual and collective lives. These sets of “packaged” rituals, though containing diverse practices, fit together neatly as a whole, as when one goes to a place of worship and undertakes a series of rituals designed to fit together. Going to a Buddhist temple, for example, involves a combination of a number of acts, which may all be performed or isolated individually. One might wish to gain guidance about a particular question, so a believer may consult the yarrow sticks, or increase one’s chances of a good grade on an exam or of success in romance by giving offerings of fruit, or demonstrate respect by bowing in front of an image with incense, and so forth.

Two “packages” of rituals, yoga in the Hindu tradition and the Five Pillars in Islam, deserve a closer look and I will examine them in the sections in subsequent chapters on Hinduism and Islam. Both of these ritual packages are highly developed intellectually but also contain a rich repertoire of symbolic acts constructed over many years, with many active participants.

It is helpful—to understand how these ritual packages evolve—to examine different types of rituals found across religious traditions, such as acts of devotion, communication with the Gods, and collective rites of worship.

*Acts of devotion.* Religious practices are often designed to draw a people closer to the ideals of a faith by reminding them of their Gods, their values, and the principles of their faith as well as important events and figures of their shared
history. Religious rituals thus involve many forms of communication with the Gods, or with saints, bodhisattvas, and other heroic figures from the tradition, as well as occasions for collective worship in public gatherings of the believers. Although they vary widely, some kinds of devotional acts are virtually universal in the world’s religious traditions.

Communication with the Gods. A central aspect of religious practice is the set of rituals designed to facilitate communication with the Gods, such as prayer, chanting, singing, dancing, reading from the scriptures, and offering sacrifices. From a sociological point of view, messages designed for communication with the Gods are also ways of communicating with oneself and with others, especially those within the religious community.

The devotee’s relationship with the deity is sometimes highly personal, especially in popular traditions. Protestant Christianity often emphasizes the believer’s personal relationship with Jesus, who is perceived as a friend or a brother, and with Mary who, although not formally a Goddess, is considered endowed with great power and yet empathetic, especially with the plight of poor women. When the image of God is transcendent, sometimes intermediary figures like Mary, the saints, the prophets, or living members and officials of the community may intercede between the individual and a God who is not easily approachable.

The notion of sacrifice to the deity also lies at the heart of many religious rituals, sometimes including acts of considerable violence to humans and animals. In the earliest rituals, the totem animal, usually protected from harm, was sometimes killed and devoured in an orgiastic frenzy (see Girard 1977). In ancient Judaism, sacrifices to the deity were performed in the same way as in other religions of the region: Burnt offerings were made, including animal sacrifices, along with other offerings representing the first fruits of the harvest, tithes, and taxes. Human sacrifices may have been part of the original set of ritual practices, but if so, the tradition was rejected in early Judaism, as shown in the story of Abraham’s sacrificing a ram in place of his son (Genesis 22). The relative merit of animal and vegetable offerings, as in the story of the conflict between the brothers Cain and Abel, probably reflects an early conflict between people growing crops and those raising animals.

Many religions shifted from human to animal to purely symbolic sacrifices over time; ritual practices became increasingly abstract as personalistic ferociousness declined in public behavior (see Collins 1974). Perhaps a large majority of today’s sacrifices are either symbolic acts (e.g., bowing, kneeling, or prostrating) or the offering of money, fruit, vegetables, and so forth.

Collective rites of worship. Many religious rituals are performed in identical fashion by believers at home and in temples by priests and laity alike. The
temple is usually the “home” of a deity, represented by an image that takes on the power of the God who resides in it. In Hinduism, the puraris, or temple priests, follow a prescribed daily pattern in which an image is awakened, bathed, fed, visited and honored, anointed, decorated, and retired for the night. Sometimes worship is collective, especially in Bhakti Yoga, with chanting or hymn singing. The combination of the congregation members’ mutually reinforcing attitudes, the presence of the Gods, and the stimulation of all senses through music, incense, touching of the God or offerings given to God, sometimes produces trances in zealous devotees.

In the Abrahamic religions, collective worship centers on the Sabbath, a ritual that recreates the primal creation myth in which God rested on the seventh day after bringing the world into being. As Abraham Heschel notes of the historically oriented, geographically mobile Jewish tradition, “Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events. . . . The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn” (Heschel 1962:119). In this tradition, place is not as important as time: Work ceases on the Sabbath, which is observed in both home and synagogue, and the sacred interval is marked by the lighting of candles, the reciting of prayers, the drinking of wine, and the eating of bread.

Ritual organization of life. Religious rituals link daily life routines with the broader order, allowing individuals and groups alike to place life’s crises within a broader religious frame. A variety of rituals organize personal and collective lives: (1) rituals that regulate daily life, from hygiene and diet to sexual practices, link that daily life to the broader worldview; (2) rites of passage routinize life cycle changes at birth, puberty, marriage, and death; and (3) seasonal festivals and processions bring self, society, and nature into harmony by linking human activity to the seasonal cycles of the natural environment. I will look briefly at each of these categories of rites.

Daily life. Most traditions advocate a practice of regular meditation, prayer, or chanting that provides moments for introspection. Daily devotional rituals sacralize the profane existence of a worshipper’s life, giving it larger meaning and purpose and framing it within the ongoing processes of the cosmos. Hindu devotees—especially Brahmans—are to engage in ritual washings and daily poojas, usually a ritual with chanting and the offering of food or flowers to a God. Buddhists can frame their day by meditating or chanting Om, the fundamental sound of the one undivided universe. Saint Paul told the early Christians that they should “pray without ceasing.” Devout Muslims traditionally stop whatever they are doing five times daily, bow toward Mecca, and pray to Allah.
Many daily activities such as eating become acts of faith that reflect a worldview and/or link the individual in a special way with the religious community. The act of sharing a meal together frequently functions as a ritual for the creation of group solidarity, as in the Jewish Passover meal (seder) or potluck dinners in American Protestant churches. Membership in a religious community is sometimes expressed through dietary restrictions; in India, for example, most Muslims eat meat and most Hindus do not. The vegetarian diet of many Hindus and Buddhists reflects a worldview in which all creatures are of equal importance and should therefore not be harmed. Jewish kosher and Islamic halal regulations about diet make the simple act of eating a sacred symbol of belonging and worshipping.

Ritual sometimes transforms the profane into the sacred, thus inverting the normal order of things. In this framework, eating becomes not just a way of gaining nourishment for the body but an act of worship that makes a material action spiritual. One of the most striking examples of the effort to sacralize bodily activity is the use of sexual acts and imageries as part of worship rituals. One of the best developed of the sexual rituals is Tantric Yoga, a spiritual discipline that opens a permissible avenue of sensuality in a sexually repressed society. As Sinha and Sinha (1978:142–143) explain,

Rites of Tantra affirm the need for intelligent and organized fulfillment of natural instinctual desires. . . . The essential element underlying the Tantric practices is the belief that these rites cleanse or purify mundane or profane acts and in the process sacralize the acts themselves by superimposing certain constraints on them. Hence Maithuna [participation in a sexual act] for a Tantric Yogi is a rite and not a profane act; since the partners are no longer human beings, but “detached” like gods, sexual union is elevated to the cosmic plane.

Paradoxically, then, the transformation of the sexual act into a sacred one results not in condemnation, but salvation. The tantric texts themselves are conscious of this paradox and comment frequently: “By the same acts that cause some men to burn in hell for thousands of years, the Yogi gains his eternal salvation” (Eliade [1958] 1970:263, quoted in Sinha and Sinha 1978:143).

Rites of passage. Religions provide rituals for all major life passages; these rites sanctify each transition of an individual’s life (see Weightman 1984:216ff.) Within the Hindu tradition, at the occasion of a birth, horoscopes are drawn up, a name-giving ceremony is performed on the sixth or twelfth day, the house is purified, and restrictions on the new mother are relaxed. On the first birthday, the baby’s head will often be shaved (sometimes at a temple or festival) as a sign of thanks for his or her health.
The ritual of baptism in Christianity serves, in some congregations, as a birth ritual as well as a public expression of belief for converts. Baptism, as I have noted—borrowed from ancient Judaism and used by Jesus—was extremely significant in the early church as a rite of passage into the religious community because of the absence of social boundaries around the church. The literalness of the earlier practice gave way to a more symbolic interpretation in which the death and resurrection of Jesus are celebrated by immersion in water followed by a rebirth, as if the believer first died and then emerged from the womb a second time.

Most religious traditions have a rite for the passage from childhood to adulthood, such as the bar mitzvah for boys and bat mitzvah for girls in the Jewish faith. In some Protestant Christian congregations, baptism comes at puberty rather than at birth. In orthodox Brahman families, an initiation ceremony occurs when the child enters the *Brahmachari* or student stage of life, which I will revisit when I discuss Hinduism.

One of the most significant rituals in most religious traditions is the funeral, and the process of dying is often full of religious significance as a passage from one world to another. The problem-solving character of rituals can be seen in the way that they frame the end of a human life. Typically the lifestyles, values, and social structures of an entire culture are reproduced in funeral ceremonies. Filial piety and honoring the dead, for example, are important aspects of traditional Chinese funerals as they are in daily life.

*Cycles of nature.* The more spectacular ritual events are often pilgrimages and festivals, usually associated with seasonal cycles of nature or milestones in a tradition’s sacred history. Virtually every religious tradition acknowledges the importance of special times and places during which, and at which, the sacred is experienced. Pilgrimages to places where the Gods were born or engaged in heroic encounters with each other or with humans hold special promise to believers for their own experience with God. Often a pilgrimage site offers a specialized benefit, such as healing or the prospect of a son. Similarly, the annual cycle of festivals provides regular occasions for lavish ritual practice. Many are related to the seasons and have ancient roots in the cycles of nature; others are associated with specific Gods, such as Krishna, Shiva, Ram, Lakshmi, Durga, Ganesha, and Hanuman in popular Hinduism; various *bodhisattvas* in Buddhism; and saints in the Christian calendar. Often, modern believers who participate in ancient festivals rooted in natural cycles, such as the winter and spring rituals now associated with Christmas and Easter, have lost touch with their original meaning.

In many religions, on significant festival days a God is brought out of his or her resting place in the temple, anointed and dressed, and paraded
through the streets with much ceremony. People crowd around to greet the God and pay homage, and—depending on the powers of the specific God—special benefits are received by those who participate. This process serves to remind people of the ideas and moral implications of their faith and reinforces the status of the temple and its personnel. Through regular cycles of *poojas*, prayers, pilgrimages, and festivals, the sacred canopy remains intact over the millions of Hindus on the Asian subcontinent.

**Religious Institutions**

Religious traditions do not exist in isolation but are institutionalized and often highly bureaucratized. The institutional nature of religious practice is one of its most sociologically significant aspects and has changed substantially over time despite its seemingly immutable nature. The most significant development is the shift from local to cosmopolitan religious institutions, a transformation that each of the major religions has undergone and intensified in the twentieth century as institutions in every social sphere become linked to global processes.

Religious institutions create a base from which religious beliefs and practices can have regularity over time. Indeed, the provision of continuity is the very essence of institutionalization. As social organization changes over time, however, so too does the organization of religious life. This perception of permanence in the midst of change is one of the most interesting aspects of institutional life. What we now know as established religious traditions were once small religious movements, often sustained only by the charismatic authority of a religious figure—Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha—and a small group of devoted followers. If a movement is successful, the initial period is followed by a process Max Weber (1968) calls the “routinization of charisma,” in which the mobilizing energy of founder and followers becomes routinized and “crystallized” in a social organization that sustains the beliefs and sponsors the founder’s practices.

Religious institutions tend to reflect the more general types of social organization in a given society. Wallace (1966:84–88) suggests the following categories of religious organization:

1. Individualistic cult institutions that tend to be “magical”—that is, they sponsor ritual acts to implore or coerce forces into meeting specific needs, such as general “luck” or guardian spirits or success in economic or traveling ventures

2. Shamanic cult institutions—an early and persistent form of specialization in religious practice because the shaman (either full- or part-time) is a specialist, a private entrepreneur who aids clients in ritual matters
3. Communal cults, which are not led by specialists but meet the needs of a particular community, such as that found in a family, kinship, or locality group, or other social groupings that have a common membership characteristic such as age or sex

4. Ecclesiastical institutions, which have religious professionals organized into a bureaucracy along the same lines as other nonreligious organizations in the culture as well as a clear-cut division of labor between the professionals (or clergy) and the laity

The first three types are found in the primal religions of preagricultural (i.e., primarily hunting and gathering) cultures and contemporary folk religion, including what Redfield (1957) calls the “little tradition” variants of the more well-known “great traditions.” In primal cultures, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, religious practices and beliefs are generally more integrated into the broader social organization of the environment than in modern cultures, and their institutions are not as highly specialized. That is not to say that these primal institutions—or elements of them—have not persisted into the twenty-first century. Shamanism still represents a large proportion of the world’s religious practice, although it is usually associated with primal cultures. The shaman is an individual thought to have special powers for performing beneficial religious rites and may even be “possessed” by one or more spirits, thus enabling others to encounter these forces, or at least to use their services (see Wach 1944). Even postmodern societies have shamanic roles, such as that of medium or faith healer. Hargrove (1989:94) suggests that televangelists and media celebrities function much like shamans do. Ironically, television has also made it possible for this ancient cultural artifact to become highly developed and institutionalized, sometimes in the form of multimillion-dollar corporations.

As religious traditions become part of complex societies, their institutional forms become highly embellished and specialized—as seen in the case of the shaman-evangelist, who represents something of a mixed type, with the personal charisma of the leader supported by an elaborate institutional framework. Every religious movement, especially in the global village, experiences the pressure to become increasingly institutionalized. The structural form ultimately adopted is related both to the social context in which the movement is born and takes shape and to the organizational preferences of the group that is the new religion’s carrier.

Today, all the major religious traditions are what Wallace (1966) calls ecclesiastical, because they have a highly developed institutional structure run at least in part by professionals. Each tradition also has elements of the other three types of institutional structure as well, sometimes as a
residue of earlier organizational forms that persist and sometimes as a revival responding to particular needs of the time or abilities of particular leaders or groups. Examples of revivalism include the shaman-evangelist already mentioned, communal cults of protest movements, or individualistic cult institutions like the Reverend Gene Ewing’s “Church by Mail,” which provide people with specific “religious services” for tasks that promise spiritual and financial blessings to those who participate in the program.

Considerable variation has emerged even within the ecclesiastical institutions of the major traditions, which I shall now examine briefly. Of particular interest sociologically, and because of the democratic ethos associated with the global village, is the elective affinity between particular traditions and certain types of institutional forms. Although this is not an inevitable outcome, religious institutions that encompass a diverse population and a pluralistic religious worldview may tend to be decentralized in their authority structures; monotheistic religious traditions and those with more homogeneous populations and belief systems, in contrast, may tend toward more centralized structures. There is no strict relationship, it should be noted, between degree of centralization and the extent to which an institution is formally democratized, although a decentralized system may be more lenient toward local deviations than a centralized one. Moreover, a system that is nonhierarchical across a broad geographical area (such as the Southern Baptist Church in the United States) can have local branches that are extremely hierarchical.

The broad variation within each religious tradition makes it difficult to generalize about differences among them, but some further general statements may be useful. Whereas Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism tend to be less centralized and hierarchical, Christian churches have often become more formalized as a response to the universalism of their membership. Judaism, despite its highly rational tone, has until very recently retained a more tribal, less differentiated social organization, in part as an attempt to retain the sacred canopy over a specific ethnic identity that has been reinforced by persecution and adversity as well as sharp exclusionary boundaries.

**Major Themes in the Sociology of Religion**

Sociologists cannot answer questions about the ultimate meaning of life or the relative truth or fallacy of religious traditions, but they can examine systematically how these issues are dealt with in human societies. The chapters that follow will introduce the major religious traditions inherited from the premodern world and apply the conceptual and methodological
tools of sociology to the task of understanding religious beliefs and practices. A short tour, in Chapters 2 and 3, of the central beliefs, rituals, and institutions of each major religion will focus on these traditions not as static belief systems but as dynamic processes that have changed dramatically over time as various civilizations have risen, fallen, and come into contact with one another. The historical and sociological nature of religious traditions is an essential starting point for this analysis.

Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between religious and social life. Three themes emerge from the sociological literature on the nature of religious life, especially as it has been practiced up to the modern period:

1. Religion is a social phenomenon. Each religious tradition grows out of, and in turn acts back upon, the social life of the people who participate in it.
2. Religious traditions contain a systematic set of beliefs that are acted upon and sustained by rituals and institutions.
3. Each tradition constructs a religious ethos that defines the taboo lines between acceptable and inappropriate behavior, defines identities, legitimates social orders, and provides guidelines for everyday life.

Once I have described the historical religious context of the emerging global village, I will examine the twin crises of modernism and multiculturalism, identifying three themes that are usually implicit rather than explicit in sociological literature:

1. The advent of the modern world created a crisis for religious communities, challenging traditional beliefs, rituals, and institutions with scientific critiques and competing views of the world.
2. The multicultural context of the global village precipitated contradictory responses: a revitalization of ancient traditions (e.g., “fundamentalism”), civil religion and nationalism, and religious syncretism.
3. Religious traditions in the global village can promote chaos or community, either facilitating the construction of a peaceful world or intensifying and justifying violence between conflicting social groups.

The focus of Chapter 5 is the crisis of modernism and multiculturalism. As religious communities absorbed scientific teachings while concurrently confronting other faiths on a daily basis, people within each tradition struggled to find a way to solve the crisis posed by these assaults on the absoluteness of their belief system. People within each community often develop protest theologies that revitalize their own tradition as a way of resisting elements of the modern world or look at new ways to think about their faith. Chapter 6
examines the impact of social change movements on the faith traditions, including nationalism, alternative religious movements, and women’s and environmental movements. Chapter 7 focuses on the relationship between religion and social conflict, first in the frequent link between religion and violence, and second, on the ways in which religious traditions develop non-violent means of conflict.

The book concludes by exploring the ways in which religious communities can either promote violent conflict and warfare or cultivate a global culture that facilitates the creation of a community in which diverse groups coexist peacefully. Religious life, in its various forms, involves people striving to transcend their current existence—either in positive, heroic ways like the heroes and saints of human history and their everyday counterparts, or to gain power and wealth by manipulating the reservoir of power deep within the human psyche for their own benefit.

I now embark on this inventory of the major religious narratives, practices, and communities inherited from the past to assess the current state of religion in the global village and consider the possibilities of its future direction.