Learning Outcomes

By the end of the chapter, students will be able to

- discuss the difficulty of defining religion;
- describe basic elements of religion including creed, code, and cultus;
- identify various definitions of religion offered by scholars from a broad spectrum of disciplines;
- formulate a working definition of religion and analyze its strengths and weaknesses;
- distinguish between religion and spirituality as they are used in contemporary society;
- define key terms associated with the study of religion and the understandings of divinity;
- explain the personal and social needs met by religion;
- discuss contemporary trends in religion particularly the combinative nature of religion and the growth of the nonreligious.

Key Terms

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agnosticism</th>
<th>Incarnation</th>
<th>Rites of passage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthropomorphism</td>
<td>Manifestation</td>
<td>Rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheism</td>
<td>Monotheism</td>
<td>Shopping cart/eclectic</td>
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<td>Code</td>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creed</td>
<td>Nontheistic</td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultus</td>
<td>Pantheism</td>
<td>Theistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henotheism</td>
<td>Polytheism</td>
<td>Transcendent</td>
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DEFINING RELIGION

Defining religion has never been more of a challenge than it is today. Some scholars of religion assert that religion cannot be defined. It is simply a term constructed by scholars to represent a wide diversity of practices in relation to what may be described as sacred, holy, or Other.¹ Religion implies a sense of awe and wonder at the mysteries of life; but, at the same time, it also can be seen in very specific behaviors and practices.

For many, religion is a way of life encompassing everything from methods of spiritual practice to style of dress, diet, and social interaction. Some define their fascination with a television show, football team, or band as their “religion.” Du Xin is the owner of the Central Perk Café in Beijing. In 2013, he was interviewed on National Public Radio’s (NPR’s) program, All Things Considered saying, “I’m crazy about Friends. For me, it is like a religion. It’s my life.”² Anyone who has driven by a convention center hosting a gathering of Trekkies may also see the resemblance between fandom and religion. Deadheads, Swifties, and other fans of musicians form a communal bond by their devotion. Fans of sports teams can recite statistics, wear “magic” socks on game day, and religiously follow their teams across the country. What, if anything, distinguishes these fascinations and fandoms from religion?

Worship of a higher power is frequently included in a definition of religion, yet there are nontheistic religions that have no personal relationship with a divine being or beings. Buddhism, for instance, does not view Buddha as god; rather, he is seen as a teacher or a guide passing on a path to enlightenment. His teachings are not viewed as infallible; rather, the Buddha himself speaks of testing the teachings to see if they prove true in one’s own experience. Some describe Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion. However, a visit to a meditation center or temple invariably leaves the visitor with the feeling that he or she has been in a sacred space.

Ninian Smart, a noted scholar of religion, describes seven dimensions of religion. While seven is a sacred number, there is no more frequent number than the number three when looking at religion. Muhammad was told to recite three times. In Christianity, the one God is experienced in three persons in the Trinity. In Buddhism, there is the Triple Gem of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. For our study, we will narrow the dimensions or components of religion down to three: creed, code, and cultus. Creed refers to doctrines, sacred narratives, or statements of faith. Code involves guidelines for behavior, ethical principles, dress, diet, and so on. Cultus embodies the ritual and communal aspects of the tradition. Festivals, worship, meditation, yogic pathways, and daily prayer are all part of the understanding of cultus.

When exploring these three components, it is easy to see why creating boundaries between religion and other types of devotion (i.e., patriotism or fandom) can be so difficult. “Civil religion” in the United States can be understood through these three components. Here, creed can refer to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Serving in the military, standing for the Pledge of Allegiance, or putting one’s hand over one’s heart for the singing of the national anthem can be understood as code. Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, and Fourth of July festivities serve as examples in the category of cultus.

¹For example, see Russell McCutcheon’s, Manufactured Religion.
²For full interview, see http://www.npr.org/2013/01/23/170074762/friends-will-be-there-for-you-at-beijings-central-perk.
Definitions can focus on how a religion is used (functional definitions) or on what constitutes the essence of a religion (substantive definitions). There are literally thousands of definitions that have been offered by a wide range of scholars. Paul Tillich, a Christian theologian, defines religions as “that which is of ultimate concern.” William James, a classical scholar of the psychology of religion, defines it in a more individual way. “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”³ In a similar vein, the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, emphasizes religion as a “feeling of absolute dependence” on a source outside ourselves. While James and Schleiermacher focus on the individual, the sociologist, Emile Durkheim, emphasizes the importance of community. For Durkheim, “A 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 in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”⁴ Religion, in Durkheim’s view, is a product of social organization. Moreover, some of the negative views of religion in society stem from religion’s support of the status quo. For example, Karl Marx viewed religion as the “opiate of the people.” By that he meant that religion kept people in their place and supported the hierarchy of social classes.

Religion can be understood as an institution within society, but at the same time, it is also an experience of the sacred. Rudolph Otto and other scholars of the religious experience studied neither the idea of god nor the question of the existence or nonexistence of god, but rather the human reaction to the experience of sacred power and insight.

relationship to modern life. At the same time, religion assumes an integral role in our culture. We see religious words, ideas, and practices referenced in political speeches, contemporary literature, TV sitcoms, major motion pictures, sporting events, popular music lyrics, and video games. Religion is clearly not dead, but it is in need of reform. Dale Wright, a professor of religious studies and Asian studies at Occidental College, writes:

“Important religious leaders in all traditions are reformers. They cultivate the religious dimension of life by opening up new possibilities for what it might mean to be religious in their time. If we allow religion to be identified exclusively with a particular form that it took in the past, something that will always be inadequate to the present, we fail to take our own moment in time seriously and surrender the opportunity for renewal and reform.”

Religious practice is a way for us to connect to one another and to the higher self that is our goal, particularly when it is approached with humility and openness.

**PERSONAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS MET BY RELIGION**

Religion meets a variety of personal and social needs. All societies from the earliest recorded history have established systems of religious thought and practice. What is it about social groupings that seem to inspire the need for religion?

As you reflect on the role religious faith fulfills in your life or your community, what are some of the needs you see religion addressing?

There are many needs met by religion and no right or wrong answers to the question of the role of religion within society. Some of the needs most commonly mentioned include dealing with our mortality, guidelines, or ethical principles of “right” conduct, answering life’s big questions (such as the search for meaning or the nature of evil). Religion also provides a sense of belonging or community; it is even said to enhance our physical and emotional well-being.

Sadly, religion has also been a negative force; at times, driving a wedge between people and promoting social injustice. Many wars are fought in the name of religion. Interestingly, while religion is used as a tool to motivate people to fight, it is often political power or control of natural resources (i.e., access

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to water, oil) that is the root of the conflict. Religion has also been used to justify slavery, the oppression of women, and the presence of poverty.

Is it human nature, religious teaching, or some combination of both that causes mistreatment of others in the name of religion? Do you think negative perceptions of religion influence the growth of the nonreligious today?

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### VIEWS OF THE SACRED

Great diversity exists in the way the sacred is viewed by individuals, communities, and religious movements. Terms that are often viewed as simple and straightforward are not nearly so when we look at them in practice. For example, **monotheism** is the belief in one god and **polytheism**, the belief in many. Right? When explored in practice, the terms are more like a continuum than an either/or. Hinduism is often said to have 330 million gods (polytheism) indicating the infinite number of forms the divine can take. However, in Hinduism there is only one divine essence, Brahman, (monotheism) which takes these various forms. Is Hinduism monotheistic or polytheistic? Other religious traditions are very clear in their insistence that there is one god that cannot be divided in any way (e.g., Judaism and Islam). On the other hand, Greek, Egyptian and Norse pantheons are examples of strict polytheism.

In addition to the views of monotheism and polytheism, additional understandings of the sacred pervade religious traditions. Some traditions are pantheistic. **Pantheism** is the belief that all is god and god is in everything. Some indigenous religions, like Shinto, are pantheistic. Another alternate view of the sacred is **henotheism**, which is the belief that there are many gods/manys forms of god but that one is superior to all others. In Hinduism, for example, the one supreme lord is known as **param brahma**, who is superior to all other forms. For many, the divine is a personal being that is often depicted as having human qualities and characteristics, **anthropomorphism**. Examples of this approach can include describing god as a parent or as jealous or angry. Some even view god as an old man with a long beard.

Religious traditions that view a personal relationship with a divine being as the goal of practice are **theistic**. Those religions/philosophies that view religion as an individual practice (albeit still as a part of a community) engaged in to achieve one’s own enlightenment or liberation are **nontheistic**. It is important to note that nontheism is not the same as **atheism**. Atheism is the denial of any divine reality or supernatural element beyond the physical world in which we live. Nontheism does not deny deities exist. Rather, the nontheist does not believe that those divine beings can “save” him or her.

Sacred reality can be understood as manifest in the created world (**immanent**) or separate from the created world (**transcendent**). In most religious traditions, the view of divinity is a combination of the two. There is some sense in which the sacred is wholly other while at the same time manifesting itself in the world around us. Some traditions emphasize the transcendent nature of God more heavily.
(particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam); and, others stress immanence particularly in the form of nature spirits and ancestors.

In some religious traditions, the divine becomes visible in order to interact with and call followers to faithfulness. In Hinduism, Vishnu has taken nine different forms, or **avatars**. Some of these forms are **incarnations** (i.e., Krishna and Rama) in which the divine takes human form. Others are **manifestations** by which the sacred is manifest in nonhuman form. At various times, Vishnu took the form of a boar, a fish, or a turtle. Sometime in the future, Vishnu will take a tenth and final form (Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image1.jpg)

**Figure 1**  Picture from Sri Shiva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, MD taken by Stephanie Curran on October 16, 2015. The first four avatars of Vishnu can be seen in this photo from Sri Shiva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, MD. On one side of the foyer in the temple all of the forms of Vishnu are depicted; while, on the other side, attention is given to the forms of Shiva.

**UNDERSTANDINGS OF TIME**

Understandings of time characterize most religions. These views guide the scheduling of religious festivals, influence moral action, and manifest in particular views of the afterlife. Religious festivals, pilgrimages, and sacred days mark religious time. In some traditions, a particular day of the week is sacred while in others there is no separation between the sacred and **profane** (pertaining to ordinary life). Religious festivals also tend to follow the cycles of the seasons or a worship calendar in which specific celebration
occur at a similar time each year. Many religious traditions follow a lunar-based calendar so the dates vary from year to year and don’t neatly match the solar or Gregorian calendar to which Western culture is accustomed. Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, falls on a different date each year. Over time, Ramadan occurs in summer then cycles through and falls in the winter months. Rituals and myths are often intertwined within religious traditions with rituals enacting sacred narratives.

**RITUALS**

Rituals are ceremonial acts that connect people to sacred reality. Some rituals mark the seasons in the agricultural cycle. Other rituals are ways to atone for wrongs committed against the spirits or ancestors. Everyone in the community can participate in some ceremonial acts, while religious leaders must conduct other sacred rites. All religions have some type of ritual whether it is prayer, meditation, offerings, or sacrifice. In addition, most religions include *rites of passage*, rituals that mark significant events in human life such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death helping an individual transition from one stage of life to the next.

Another form of ritual found in many religious traditions is that of *pilgrimage* to holy sites. Devotees will often travel long distances to visit temples, shrines, stupas, sacred mountains, or rivers. A common practice at pilgrimage sites is circumambulation. *Circumambulation* involves walking around a site usually in clockwise fashion while praying, meditating, or chanting. Some pilgrimages are internal. Walking the labyrinth is a form of virtual or inner pilgrimage. A labyrinth is a path that takes you to the center and back out again. It is not a maze in which one becomes lost; rather, it is a symbolic journey to the center of oneself (Figure 2).

![Figure 2](Labyrinth carved in stone.)
SYMBOLS

Symbols are images that point to a sacred reality. Religious symbols convey meaning and often depict important beliefs or practices in a given tradition. For example, the symbol of the yin and yang convey the balance and complementarity of elements and energies that are often viewed as opposites (Figure 3).

Symbols may have different meanings depending on the context in which they are used. For example, a swastika is an image that in contemporary society evokes memories of Nazi oppression. However, the swastika is an ancient symbol of well-being found in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Jainism as well as indigenous religions.

Figure 3  Yin and Yang symbol.
MYTHS

Myths are sacred narratives that convey truths about the relationship between human beings and the sacred, between human beings and each other, and between human beings and the created world. They often explain the divine origin of creation as well as the reason evil exists in the world. Joseph Campbell describes myths as fulfilling four different functions. The first is mystical. Myths evoke a sense of wonder, awe, and mystery in the face of the unknown spiritual realities of our world. The second is cosmological; that is, myths explain the sacred nature of how the world came to be. Myths also have a sociological function offering a sense of social order and a guide for proper conduct. Finally, myths serve a psychological function helping individuals realize their human potential, on the one hand, while coping with fear, death, and guilt on the other. In some religious traditions, myths are primarily oral passed down from generation to generation through storytelling, art, and dance. In other traditions, myths are written texts that are studied, read, and interpreted. Even in many traditions with written texts, there is an oral component. The words of sacred text are chanted, sung, or read aloud in the context of communal worship.

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN RELIGION

The one constant in life is change. Nothing stays the same including religion. It constantly changes and adapts to the contemporary setting as well as the cultural context. Buddhism in Japan is different from Buddhism in the United States. Christianity in the United States is not the same as Christianity in Ethiopia. Islam in Indonesia differs from Islam in Saudi Arabia (Figure 4).

The global context has also changed religion in many ways. As a religious tradition moves to another cultural setting, the religion and cultural traditions blend in a wide variety of ways. Ancestor reverence mixes with Christianity; divination blends with Islam.

Figure 4  Ark of the covenant church in Axum, Ethiopia.
Combinative Nature of Religion

One of the major trends in religion today involves the combinative realities that result from globalization, individualism, and cultural relativism. Some of these combinations are a result of missionary religions encountering indigenous religions and leaving both practices forever changed. Numerous examples exist around the world. The Native American Church is a blending of Christianity and indigenous practices, particularly the use of peyote and other entheogenic plants (i.e., San Pedro cactus, Ayahuasca) as a sacrament. Peyote is a hallucinogenic cactus that is believed to open the worshiper to the spirit and bring healing, both physical and spiritual.

**Shopping cart or eclectic spirituality** are terms to describe a growing trend in the United States and other Western countries. Individuals blend practices and beliefs from various religious traditions into their own customized form of spirituality. These individuals usually practice alone and only join with religious communities for special occasions such as a retreat or blessing ceremony. As we explore the various religious traditions, keep an eye out for examples of combinative spirituality.

Women in Religious Traditions

The history of women and religion is extremely complex. Ancient religious traditions often included the role of both male and female aspects of divinity. Some of the most ancient images found are of a mother goddess. The role of women in giving birth has inspired a view of the sacred power of women as well as any number of taboos related to menstruation and childbirth (Figure 5).

In the development of religious traditions women often play a prominent role. However, as emerging movements become more institutionalized, women’s roles decrease. For example, in Buddhism, women were early members of the **Sangha** (community of monks and nuns). Yet, as Buddhism spread and became more established a century or two after the time of Siddhartha, the number of nuns drastically decreased. Likewise, in Christianity women had a very prominent role in the early Christian community serving as disciples, apostles, deacons, abbesses, and missionaries. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the voice and power of women was diminished. As each religious tradition is explored in detail, the role of women will be included in the discussion.

Today, religious traditions that provide leadership and equality for women are on the rise. One growing religious tradition is Paganism, an earth-based movement which has always included a view of the goddess and equal access to women in leadership.

Another interesting phenomena is the global reality of more women adherents to religious traditions than male adherents. In March 2016, the Pew Forum issued a report on the global “gender gap” in religion. In many countries
around the world, including followers of all the major religious traditions, women outpace men in religious practice by a minimum of 2%. Religious practice includes affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, and daily prayer. In none of the 192 countries represented did men have a 2% or higher affiliation rate than women. In Christianity (particularly in the West), women are more likely than men to practice their faith; while in Islam, men and women are more equally likely to practice their faith.

Check out the Gender Gap report from the Pew Forum at http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/. What statistic or statement of analysis most intrigued you? What do you wish you knew more about?

Growth in Numbers of Nonreligious Traditions

Another contemporary trend is the move away from religious traditions. Atheism, agnosticism, and skepticism are on the rise. In Chapter 2, we will explore further the rise of the “nones,” those who answer “none” on religious preferences survey. At the same time, those who have rejected organized religions seem to be looking for community. This desire for belonging or a sense of communal identity can be seen in the development of nonreligious “churches,” such as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, the Church of Bacon, and the Church of the Latter Day Dude. Some of these movements will be explored in Chapter 14 on New Religious Movements.

WEB RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

http://atheistspirituality.net/some-definitions/—A forum for exploring the connections between atheism and spirituality.
http://guides.nyu.edu/c.php?g=276742&p=1848187—A summary of some of the major sociological theories of religion and the works that describe them.
http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/religdes.htm—Archived article on Reiss’ theory that humans are drawn to religion as a result of 16 different needs.
https://www.religionandgender.org/articles/—Excellent open access, peer-reviewed journal on issues of religion and gender.