

# Education and Religion



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# Educational and Religious Institutions

This chapter examines two institutions, education and religion. Both are central components of our cultural heritage and have profound effects on our society and on us as individuals. Most Americans are directly and personally affected by these institutions: almost all people in the United States have attended school, and a strong majority practice a religion. Even those who do not go to school or participate in a religion are affected by the omnipresence, norms, and values of these two institutions.

## Theoretical Perspectives on Education

At the broadest level, **education** is the institution within the social structure that is responsible for the formal transmission of knowledge. It is one of our most enduring and familiar institutions. Nearly three of every ten people in the United States participate in education on a daily basis as either students or staff. As former students, parents, or taxpayers, all of us are involved in education in one way or another.

What purposes are served by this institution? Who benefits? Structural-functional and conflict theories offer two different perspectives on these questions.

### Structural-Functional Theory: Functions of Education

A structural-functional analysis of education is concerned with the consequences of educational institutions for the maintenance of society. Structural functionalists point out that the educational system has been designed to meet multiple needs. The major manifest (intended) functions of education are to provide training and knowledge, to socialize young people, to sort young people appropriately, and to facilitate positive and gradual change.

#### Training and Knowledge

The obvious purpose of schools is to transmit knowledge and skills. In schools, we learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic. We also learn the causes of the American War of Independence and the parts of a cell. In this way, schools ensure that each succeeding generation will have the skills needed to keep society running smoothly.

#### Socialization

In addition to teaching skills and facts, schools help society run more smoothly by socializing young people to conform. They emphasize discipline, obedience, cooperation, and punctuality. At the same time, schools teach students the ideas, customs, and standards of their culture. In American schools, we learn to read and write English, we learn the Pledge of Allegiance, and we learn the version of U.S. history that school boards believe we should learn. By exposing students from different ethnic and social-class backgrounds across the country to more or less the same curriculum, schools help create and maintain a common cultural base.

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**Education** is the institution responsible for the formal transmission of knowledge.



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In all societies, education is an important means of reproducing culture. In addition to skills such as reading and writing, children learn many of the dominant cultural values. In Japan, school uniforms emphasize group solidarity over individual achievement.

### Sorting

Schools are like gardeners; they sift, weed, sort, and cultivate their products, determining which students will be allowed to go on and which will not. Grades and test scores channel students into different programs—or out of school altogether—on the basis of their measured abilities. Ideally, the school system ensures the best use of each student's particular abilities.

### Promoting Change

Schools also act as change agents. Although we do not stop learning after we leave school, new knowledge and technology are usually aimed at schoolchildren rather than at the adult population. In addition, schools can promote change by encouraging critical and analytic skills. Colleges and universities are also expected to produce new knowledge.

## Conflict Theory: Education and the Perpetuation of Inequality

Conflict theorists agree with structural functionalists that education reproduces culture, sorts students, and socializes young people, but they view these functions in a very different light. Conflict theorists emphasize how schools reinforce the status quo and perpetuate inequality.

### Education as a Capitalist Tool

Some conflict theorists argue that one primary purpose of public schools is to benefit the ruling class. These theorists point to schools' **hidden curriculum**, the underlying cultural messages that schools teach. In public schools, this curriculum includes learning to wait your turn, follow the rules, be punctual, and show respect, as well as learning *not* to ask questions. All of these lessons prepare students for life in the working class (Gatto 2002). A different hidden curriculum in elite private schools trains young people to think creatively and critically and to assume that they are naturally superior and deserving of privilege. Conflict theorists note that both private and public schools

The **hidden curriculum** socializes young people into obedience and conformity.

teach young people to expect unequal rewards on the basis of differential achievement and thus teach young people to accept inequality (Kozol 2005).

### Education as a Cultural Tool

Conflict theorists argue that, along with teaching skills such as reading and writing, children learn the cultural and historical perspective of the dominant culture (Spring 2004). For example, U.S. history texts describe the “Indian Wars” but rarely explain why Native American tribes resorted to warfare and give little or no coverage to the waves of anti-Chinese violence in the United States in the late nineteenth century or the removal of Japanese Americans to relocation camps during World War II. Art and music classes typically ignore the cultures of Latin America and Asia and gloss over the many contributions African Americans have made in the United States.

### Education as a Status Marker

One supposed outcome of free public education is that merit will triumph over origins, that hard work and ability will be allowed to rise to the top. Conflict theorists, however, argue that evaluating individuals based on their educational credentials is no more egalitarian than evaluating people based on who their parents are (Beaver 2009). Instead of asking about your parents, potential employers may ask where you went to college, and college admissions officers ask how many Advanced Placement (AP) courses you took and whether you graduated high school with an International Baccalaureate (Sacks 2007). (If you came from a poorer family and went to a poorer high school, you may never even have heard of these programs.) Because people from affluent families tend to end up with the best educational credentials—the median family income for Harvard students *who apply for financial aid* is about \$150,000 (Leonhardt 2004)—the emphasis on credentials serves to keep “undesirables” out.

Conflict theorists argue that educational credentials are a mere window dressing; apparently based on merit and achievement, credentials are often a surrogate for race, gender, and social class (Brown 2001). In the same way that we use the term *racism* to refer to bias based on race, sociologists use the term **credentialism** to refer to bias based on credentials: *Credentialism* is the assumption that some are better than others simply because they have a particular educational credential.

### Unequal Education and Inequality

The use of education as a status marker is reinforced by the very unequal opportunities for education available to different social groups and communities (Kozol 2005; Sacks 2007). In poor communities, students sit in overcrowded classrooms, where undertrained, substitute, or newly graduated teachers focus on training students for standardized tests rather than on developing students’ creative thinking skills. Students can choose to take auto mechanics or cosmetology, but their school probably does not offer calculus, creative writing, or AP classes. And regardless of which classes their schools offer, students find it difficult to learn when their classrooms lack proper heating or cooling and they must share outdated textbooks with other students. In contrast, in affluent communities, students sit in state-of-the-art classrooms and science laboratories and can choose from a variety of languages, challenging topics, and AP classes. A staff of advisors will help them gain admission to the most prestigious college that fits their needs and abilities; at the most selective U.S. colleges, 55 percent of freshmen come from families earning in the top 25 percent of income (Leonhardt 2004). Similarly, in mixed-income communities the wealthier students typically receive a far better education, with a very different range of classes, than do the poorer students (Bettie 2003).

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**Credentialism** is the assumption that some are better than others simply because they have a particular educational credential.





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It is difficult for children to learn in crowded classrooms that lack proper heating or cooling. It is even more difficult when students are taught by beginning or substitute teachers and must share outdated textbooks with other students. Such conditions are considerably more common in poor and minority communities.

Ethnic differences in access to educational opportunities mirror social-class differences. Public school segregation was outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, and segregation did decline significantly over the next 30 years. Since the mid-1980s, however, judicial support for desegregation programs has declined, and school segregation has steadily increased for both Hispanic and African American students (Frankenberg & Lee 2002). Fewer than 15 percent of students are white in some public schools, from Boston to Birmingham. The higher the percentage of minority students at a school, the lower the chances that the school will offer students the opportunities they need to learn, to graduate from high school, or to go on successfully to college. Within a given school as well, minority students are typically offered far fewer opportunities than are white students (Bettie 2003).

## Symbolic Interactionism: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

In the modern world, the elite cannot directly ensure that their children remain members of the elite. To pass their status on to their children, they must provide their children with appropriate educational credentials. To an impressive extent, they can indeed do so: Students' educational achievements are very closely related to their parents' social status.

How does this happen? Whereas conflict theorists emphasize how the *structure* of schools leads to these unequal results, symbolic interactionists focus on the processes that produce these results. Perhaps the most important of such processes is the *self-fulfilling prophecy*.

### Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

One of the major processes that takes place in schools is, of course, that students learn. When they graduate from high school, many can type, write essays with three-part theses, and even do calculus. In addition to learning specific skills, they also undergo a process of cognitive development in which their mental skills grow and expand. In the

### sociology and you

What social-class advantages or disadvantages did you bring with you to college? Did you grow up with parents who read the *New York Times*, or with parents who couldn't read, or couldn't read English? Did your parents pay for you to receive extra tutoring, music lessons, theater tickets, a computer of your own, or a junior year abroad? Or did your parents need you to work to help them pay the household bills? Did your high school have all the latest facilities, or a leaky roof and out-of-date textbooks? These advantages and disadvantages will continue to affect you as you go through college.

ideal case, they learn to think critically, to weigh evidence, and to develop independent judgment.

An impressive set of studies demonstrates that cognitive development during the school years is greatest when teachers set high expectations for their students and, as a result, give their students complex and demanding work. Teachers are most likely to do this when students fit teachers' expectations for how "smart" students should look and behave. This is most likely to happen when students are white and middle or upper class.

One explanation for this is that teachers share the racist and classist stereotypes common in our society. Another explanation is that white, well-off students typically have more cultural capital—attitudes and knowledge common in elite culture (Bourdieu 1984; Bettie 2003). They are more likely to have been introduced at home to the sorts of art, music, and books that middle-class teachers value. They also are more likely to dress and behave in a way that teachers appreciate. This cultural capital helps these students in their interactions with teachers and convinces teachers that they are worth investing time in (Farkas et al. 1990; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp 1996; Bettie 2003).

In contrast, teachers (most of whom are white) are especially likely to assume that African American and Mexican American students are unintelligent and prone to trouble (Ferguson 2000; Bettie 2003). As a result, teachers often focus more on disciplining and controlling minority students than on educating them.

This process is a perfect example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those who are now teachers themselves grew up in a society still characterized by racist, sexist, and classist biases. When teachers' biases lead them to assume that certain students cannot succeed, the teachers give those students less opportunity to do so. So girls don't get taught calculus, boys (whether African American or white) don't learn how to cook, and working-class students (whether male or female, white or nonwhite) are encouraged to take cooking or auto mechanics rather than physics. This process helps to keep disadvantaged students from succeeding.

## Current Controversies in American Education

In recent years, various proposals have emerged to improve the quality of education in the United States and to give young Americans the tools needed to be more competitive in an increasingly global job market. Three proposals that have been widely adopted are *tracking*, *high-stakes testing*, and *school choice*.

### Tracking

**Tracking** is the use of early evaluations to determine the educational programs a child will be encouraged or allowed to follow. When students enter first grade, they are sorted into reading groups on the basis of ability. By the time they are out of elementary school, some students will be directed into college preparatory tracks, others into general education (sometimes called vocational education), and still others into remedial classes or "special education" programs. At all levels, and regardless of their actual abilities, minority and less affluent students are more likely to be put into lower tracks (Sacks 2007; Bettie 2003; Kao & Thompson 2003; Harry & Klingner 2005).

Ideally, tracking is supposed to benefit both gifted and slow learners. By gearing classes to their levels, both groups should learn faster and should benefit from

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**Tracking** occurs when evaluations made relatively early in a child's career determine the educational programs the child will be encouraged to follow.

increased teacher attention. In addition, classes should run more smoothly and effectively when students are at a similar level. In some ways, this is indeed true. Nevertheless, one of the most consistent findings from educational research is that students are helped modestly by assignment to high-ability groups but hurt significantly if put in low-ability groups (Kao & Thompson 2003).

An important reason students assigned to low-ability groups learn less is because they are taught less. They are exposed to less material, asked to do less homework, and, in general, are not given the same opportunities to learn. Because teachers expect low-track students to do poorly, the students find themselves in a situation where they cannot succeed—a self-fulfilling prophecy (Sacks 2007).

Less formal processes also operate. Students assigned to high-ability groups, for instance, receive strong affirmation of their academic identity and abilities. As a result, they more often find school rewarding, attend school regularly, cooperate with teachers, and develop higher aspirations. The opposite occurs with students placed in low-ability tracks. They receive fewer rewards for their efforts, their parents and teachers have low expectations for them, and there is little incentive to work hard. Many will cut their losses and look for self-esteem through other avenues, such as athletics or delinquency (Bettie 2003). However, these negative effects of tracking diminish in schools where mobility between tracks is encouraged, teachers are optimistic about the potential for student improvement, and schools place academic demands on students who are not in college tracks (Gamoran 1992; Hallinan 1994).

## High-Stakes Testing

Both federal and many local laws now require schools to measure student performance using standardized achievement tests. In many school districts, students must now pass these “high stakes” tests before they can move on to a higher grade. In addition, teachers and schools increasingly are evaluated, punished, or rewarded based on results from standardized examinations.

The emphasis on documenting school achievement through standardized test performance has pressed schools to pay more attention to the quality of the education their students receive and has encouraged them to make sure that all students receive good training in basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

But high-stakes testing also has had unanticipated negative consequences (Berliner & Biddle 1995; Rothstein 2004). Few schools have received additional resources to meet these new goals. As a result, schools have dropped classes in art, music, physical education, foreign languages, and even history and science so they can use these teachers for classes in reading, writing, and arithmetic—even when the teachers lack the training to teach these subjects (Berliner & Biddle 1995). Furthermore, teachers can afford to spend time only on teaching those aspects of the subjects that appear on the tests. In addition, teachers now must devote



Laurence Gough/Fotolia

The rise of “high-stakes” tests has pressed schools to pay more attention to how their students are doing. It also has forced schools to drop classes in subjects that are not on the tests and pushed teachers to focus on teaching test-taking skills rather than on teaching the subject matter.

time simply to teaching test-taking skills. Meanwhile, the testing process itself costs school districts considerable time, energy, and money.

High-stakes testing also means that some students will be held back a grade and thereby stigmatized as failures. At the end of the 2002/2003 school year, for example, 23 percent of Florida third-graders were held back because they failed to score high enough on the state reading test (Winerip 2003). Yet research suggests that holding students back can *reduce* their long-term academic performance and *increase* their chances of dropping out. Moreover, those who fail are disproportionately lower class and minority, for a variety of reasons. Similarly, when standardized achievement exams are used to determine who should graduate, be admitted to college, or receive financial aid, they typically increase inequality between races and social classes (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas 1986). Finally, there is some evidence that, to artificially improve their schools' rankings on high-stakes tests, schools are encouraging or even forcing low-performing students to leave school before taking the tests—turning potential dropouts into “push-outs” (Nichols & Berliner 2007; Lewin & Medina 2003).

## School Choice

Concern about the quality of American public education has led to a variety of proposals and programs for increasing *school choice*. **School choice** refers to a range of options (including tuition vouchers, tax credits, magnet schools, charter schools, and home schooling) that enable families to choose where their children go to school. Tuition vouchers and income tax credits are designed to help families pay for private (and, in some cases, religious) schools. Magnet schools are public schools that try to attract students by offering high-quality special programs or approaches; most commonly these schools emphasize either basic skills, language immersion, arts, or math and science. Charter schools are similar to magnet schools but are privately controlled. Charter schools receive some public funding and are subject to some public oversight, such as requirements that they offer certain courses and that their students meet specified measures of academic performance.

Proponents of school choice argue that when schools compete with each other (and with home schooling) for students, they provide better quality services, in the same way that Ford and Chevrolet compete to provide better cars (Chubb & Moe 1990; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall 2000). The school choice movement reflects the animosity toward “big government” that has been building in the United States for the last quarter century and is part of a broader movement toward *privatization*. **Privatization** refers to the process through which government services are “farmed out” to corporations, redesigned to follow corporate structures and goals, or redefined as matters of individual choice rather than governmental responsibilities.

School choice has found supporters on the left as well as the right: Black separatists, liberal believers in free-form “alternative schools,” and, especially, Evangelical Christians all may prefer that their children study at home or attend carefully selected schools where parents' values will be reinforced.

Although there is some merit to the arguments for school choice, it is difficult to document its benefits scientifically. The problem is that students who participate in school choice programs differ from other students from the outset. Their parents are often more educated than other parents. More importantly, by definition their parents value obtaining the best possible education for their children and have the time and other resources needed to do so. As a result, no matter what schools their children attend or whether they study at home, they will likely do well. Currently, the best available research suggests that children sent to charter schools do no better and sometimes

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**Privatization** is the process through which government services are “farmed out” to corporations, redesigned to follow corporate structures and goals, or redefined as individual responsibilities.



worse than children in public schools (Renzulli & Roscigno 2007). Children who are home schooled typically perform above national averages on standardized tests, but this may simply reflect selection bias: those with wealthier, more educated parents are more likely to take the tests (Collom 2005; Belfield 2004).

Opponents of school choice identify several unintended negative consequences of these programs. First, the programs reinforce social inequality. Because tuition vouchers and tax credits do not cover the full cost of tuition and transportation, only middle- and upper-income children can afford to use them. The same is often true of magnet and charter schools. Second, school choice programs increase segregation. Many children are home schooled or sent to charter or magnet schools specifically because their parents want to keep them away from children and teachers who are “not like them” (Saporito 2003; Renzulli & Roscigno 2007). Third, school choice programs reduce Americans’ commitment to public education and to maintaining high-quality schools in all neighborhoods. Finally, it remains unclear whether children educated in these alternative environments are learning the skills needed to think creatively and to interact with the broad range of people they will meet as adults in ordinary American life (Collom 2005; Belfield 2004).

## College and Society

Before World War II, college and even high school graduation were common only among the elite. Since then, however, there has been a tremendous growth in high school and college education, and today almost half of recent high school graduates ages 18 to 21 are enrolled in college. As Figure 12.1 on the next page shows, all segments of the population have been affected by this expansion in education, but significant differences still remain (Kao & Thompson 2003).

### Who Goes?

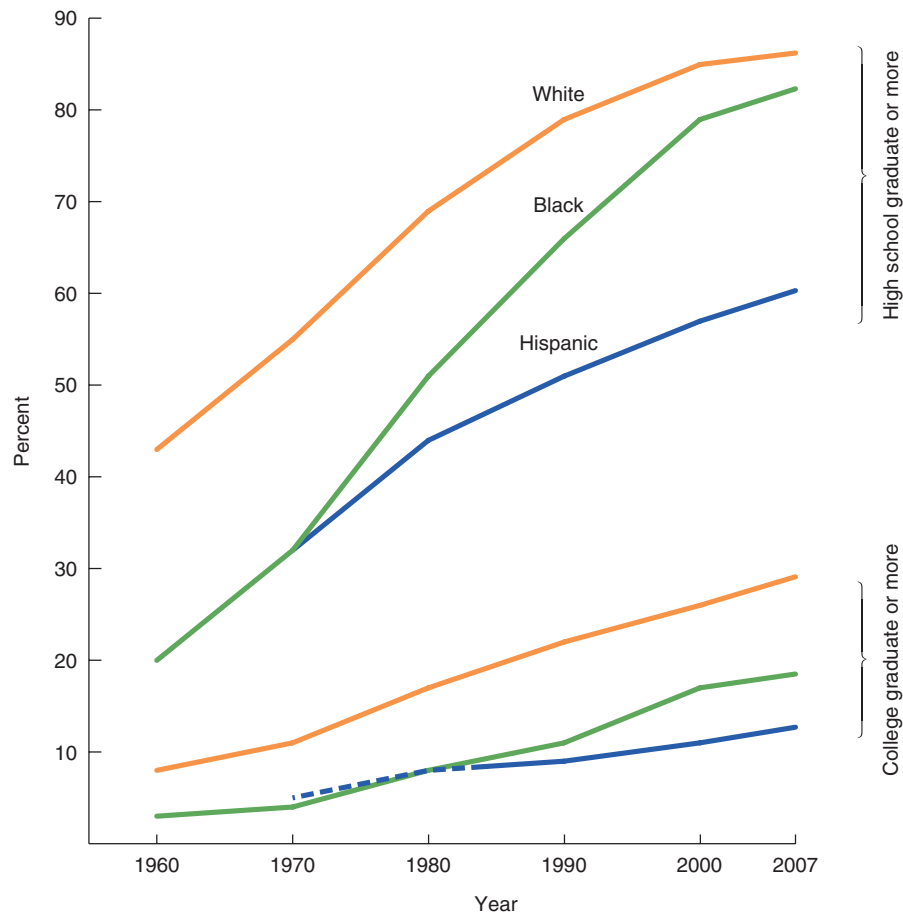
Until recently, non-Hispanic white males were the group most likely to be enrolled in college, but this has changed (Figure 12.2 on the next page). Because young men can earn a good income right out of high school, many decide against going to college—even though in the long run they would earn far more money if they did so (Lewin 2006). Young women, on the other hand, have little chance of earning a good income unless they go to college. As a result, rates of college attendance for women in all ethnic groups have increased steadily, while rates among men have stayed stable. However, white men are still the most likely to receive professional and doctoral degrees and to graduate in the fields that promise the highest incomes.

Overall, though, sex differences in college attendance are fairly small compared to ethnic and social-class differences (Lewin 2006; Mead 2006). Native Americans are the least likely to graduate from high school. African Americans are still slightly less likely than whites or Asians to graduate, and Hispanics are considerably less likely to do so, partly because many emigrated here as adults (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2006).

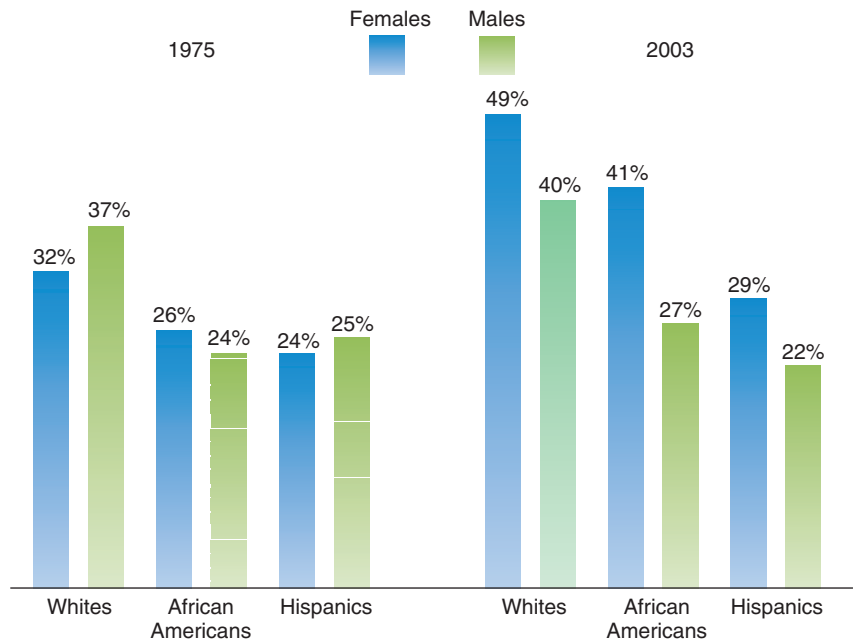
### Why Go?

There is no question that a college education pays off economically. As Table 12.1 on page 293 shows, college graduates are more likely to get satisfying professional jobs with good benefits and are less likely to be unemployed. They also earn nearly double the income of high school graduates.

**FIGURE 12.1** Educational Achievement of Persons 25 and under by Race and Ethnicity  
SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (2009).



**FIGURE 12.2** Percentage of High School Graduates Ages 18 to 21 Enrolled in College, by Race, Ethnicity, and Sex, 1975 and 2003  
SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (2006).



**TABLE 12.1 Socioeconomic Consequences of Higher Education**

Going to college pays off—literally. Those who graduate college earn nearly twice as much as high school graduates, are more likely to be employed, and are more likely to have a professional job.

Education	Median Annual Income	% with Managerial/ Professional Job	% Unemployed
9–12 years, no degree	\$20,873	6.4%	7.1%
High school graduate	31,071	15.5	4.4
Less than 4 years college	32,289	32.1	3.6
College graduate	56,788	72.0	2.0

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a.

A college education also offers many less tangible benefits. At its best, college teaches students not only specific skills in math, science, and other fields, but also how to think logically and critically about all aspects of the world. Research shows that students also emerge from college more knowledgeable about the world around them, more active in public and community affairs, and more likely to lead long, healthy lives (Ross & Mirowsky 2002; Hillygus 2005; Thoits & Hewitt 2001).

College conveys psychological and social benefits as well (Kaufman & Feldman 2004). During college, students learn to talk and behave in ways that older adults will interpret as smart and middle class (such as substituting “How are you?” for “Yo, whas up?”). College also teaches students to believe they are intelligent and are entitled to middle-class jobs. As a result, college graduates are more confident and more likely to



At its best, college encourages creative and critical thinking and broadens students' views of the world.

apply for such jobs. At the same time, because American culture stresses that college graduates are more likely than others to have the skills needed for prestigious, high-paying jobs, college graduates are more likely to receive such jobs even if their actual skills are questionable (Brown 2001).

## Understanding Religion

Unlike education, which we are forced by law to take part in, we have a choice about participating in religious organizations. Nevertheless, most people in the United States choose to participate, and religion is an important part of social life. It is intertwined with politics and culture, and it is intimately concerned with integration and conflict.

### What Is Religion?

How can we define *religion* so that our definition includes the contemplative meditation of the Buddhist monk, the speaking in tongues of a modern Pentecostal, the sacred use of peyote in the Native American Church, and the formal ceremonies of the Catholic Church? Sociologists define **religion** as a system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that unites believers into a moral community (Durkheim [1915] 1961, 62). Religion includes belief systems (such as native African religions) that invoke supernatural forces as explanations for earthly struggles. It does *not* include belief systems such as Marxism and science that do not emphasize the sacred.

Sociologists who study religion treat it as a set of values. They do not, however, ask whether the values are true or false: whether God exists, whether salvation is really possible, or which is the true religion. Rather sociologists examine the ways in which culture, society, and other social forces affect religion and the ways in which religion affects individuals and social structure.

### Why Religion?

Religion is a fundamental feature of all societies; Map 12.1 shows the distribution of religions around the world. Whether premodern or industrialized, every society has forms of religious activity and expressions of religious behavior.

Why is religion universal? One answer is that every individual and every society must struggle to find explanations for, and meaning in, events and experiences that go beyond personal experience. The poor man suffers in a land of plenty and wonders, “Why me?” The woman whose child dies wonders, “Why mine?” The community struck by flood or tornado wonders, “Why us?” Beyond these personal dilemmas, people may wonder why the sun comes up every morning, why there is a rainbow in the sky, and what happens after death.

Religion helps us interpret and cope with events that are beyond our control and understanding; tornadoes, droughts, and plagues become meaningful when attributed to the workings of some greater force. Beliefs and rituals develop as a way to control or appease this greater force, and eventually they become patterned responses to the unknown. Rain dances may not bring rain, and prayers may not lead to good harvests, but both provide a familiar and comforting context in which people can confront otherwise mysterious and inexplicable events. Regardless of whether they are right or wrong, religious beliefs and rituals help people cope with the extraordinary events they experience.

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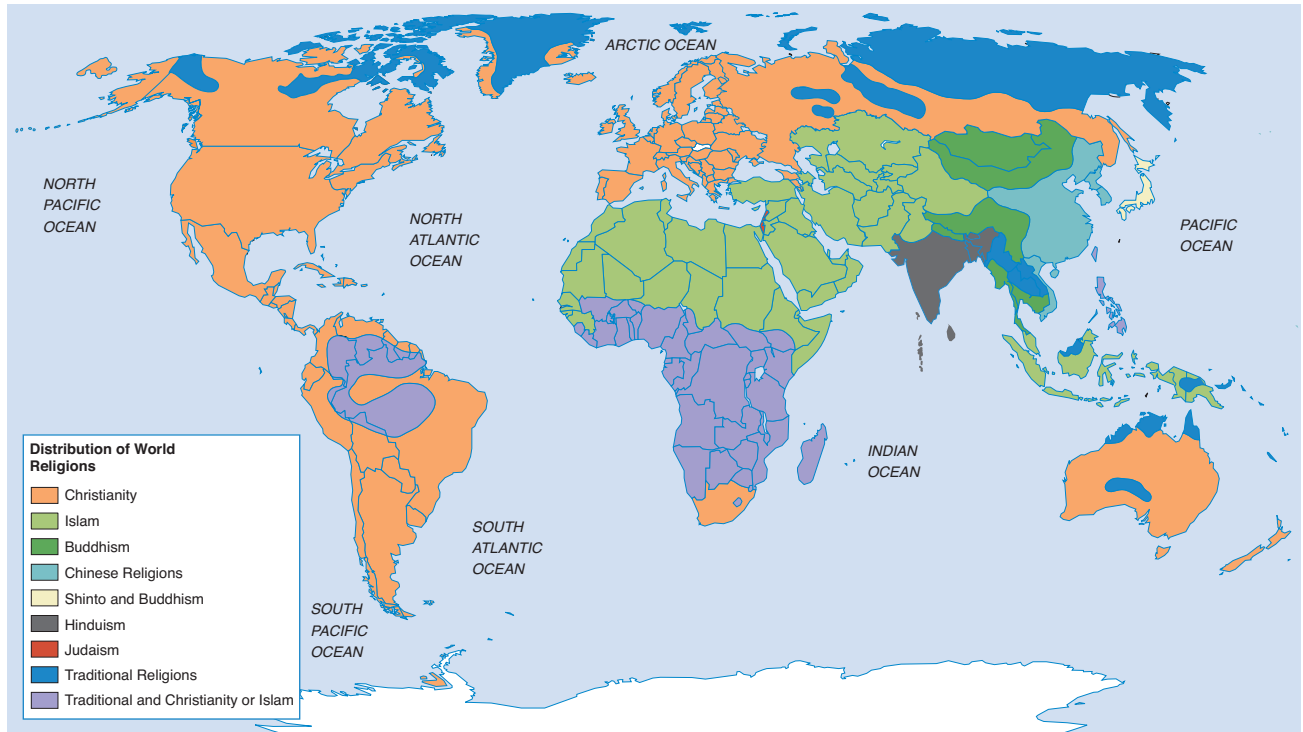
**Religion** is a system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that unites believers into a moral community.



**MAP 12.1: Distribution of World Religions**

Christianity is the dominant religion in the Americas, Europe, and Australia, but elsewhere other religions are far more common.

SOURCE: From Warren Matthews, *World of Religions*, 3E, © 1999 Wadsworth, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc.



## Why Religion Now? The Rise of Fundamentalism

Until the 1970s, many scholars implicitly assumed that religion would decline in importance as science and technology increased society's ability to explain and control previously mysterious events (Emerson & Hartman 2006). As a result, they assumed that **secularization**—the process of transferring things, ideas, or events from sacred authority (the clergy) to nonsacred, or secular, authority (the state, medicine, and so on)—would gradually increase.

Certainly science now explains many phenomena—illness, earthquakes, solar eclipses—that previously had been the territory only of religion. And compared with 40 years ago, many more Americans neither belong to religions, consider religion important in their lives, or even believe in God, as Table 12.2 shows. (In northern and western Europe, especially, the proportion of nonbelievers is exceedingly high.) But despite this evidence of secularization, commitment to fundamentalist religions has increased substantially over the last 30 years, in the United States and elsewhere (Sherkat & Ellison 1999; Stark & Finke 2000; Emerson & Hartman 2006).

**Fundamentalism** refers to religious movements that believe their most sacred book or books are the literal word of God, accept traditional interpretations of those books, and stress the importance of living in ways that mesh with those traditional interpretations. Fundamentalism exists around the world among Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and others. Their beliefs are so strong that a small minority of

**Secularization** is the process of transferring things, ideas, or events from the sacred realm to the nonsacred, or secular, realm.

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**TABLE 12.2** Changing Religious Commitment, 1962–2007

During the last 40 years, there has been a small drop in the proportion of Americans who belong to a religion, a bigger drop in those who say religion is very important in their lives, and a *sharp* drop in the proportion who think that the Bible is the actual word of God.

	1962–65	2007
Belong to a religion	98	93
Religion is very important to their own lives	70	56
Believe Bible is actual word of God, to be taken literally word for word	65	31

SOURCE: U.S. [Gallup.com](http://Gallup.com). Accessed May 2009.

fundamentalists are willing to engage in violence against nonbelievers who they feel are threatening their religion and way of life. Fundamentalist violence is most common in situations in which people believe their religion is being suppressed by the government or their culture is being corrupted by an occupying nation (Emerson & Hartman 2006). Unfortunately, whereas political terrorists aim primarily to get media attention with the goal of promoting social change, religious terrorists (like Christians who attack abortion providers and the Muslims who attacked the World Trade Center) are motivated by a sense of divine duty and often feel that the societies they attack are too morally corrupt to change. As a result, they are willing to kill for their cause (Hoffman 2006).

Rather than modernization reducing religious commitment, as earlier scholars hypothesized, it appears to have *increased* it: As individuals around the world find their basic values about life, the family, gender relations, and society challenged by modernization, they seek out conservative and fundamentalist religions to fight those changes (Emerson & Hartman 2006). Some researchers regard the adamant rejection of modern, Western beliefs about egalitarian gender relations, family structures, and social order to be so important to fundamentalism that they include this rejection in their definition of fundamentalism (e.g., Marsden 2006).

In addition, other theorists argue, commitment to religion remains a *rational* choice for individuals when the time and money costs of commitment are outweighed by its benefits. Those benefits include explanations for otherwise inexplicable events, the promise of supernatural rewards, integration into a community of like-minded individuals, and the lending of supernatural authority to traditional values and practices (Stark & Finke 2000).

## Theoretical Perspectives on Religion

As with the study of other social institutions, different sociologists bring different theoretical perspectives to the study of religion. This is the topic of the next section. As we will see, structural functionalists focus on the functions that religion serves for both individuals and societies. Conflict theorists focus on how religion can foster or repress social conflict. A third important perspective, associated with the work of Max Weber, combines elements from the other two perspectives.

## Durkheim: Structural-Functional Theory of Religion

The structural-functional study of religion begins, most importantly, with the work of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim began his analysis of religion by identifying the three elements shared by all religions, which he called the *elementary forms of religion* ([1915] 1961).

### Elementary Forms of Religion

The first of the three elementary forms is that all religions divide human experience into the *sacred* and the *profane*. The **profane** represents all that is routine and taken for granted in the everyday world—things that are known and familiar, that we can control, understand, and manipulate. The **sacred**, by contrast, consists of the events and things that we hold in awe and reverence—what we can neither understand nor control.

Second, all religions hold beliefs about the supernatural that help people explain and cope with the uncertainties associated with birth, death, creation, success, failure, and crisis. These beliefs form the basis for official religious doctrines.

Third, all religions have rituals. In contemporary Christianity, rituals mark such events as births, deaths, weddings, Jesus's birth, and the resurrection. In earlier eras, many Christian rituals celebrated the planting and harvest seasons—occasions still marked by important ritual occasions in many religions.

### The Functions of Religion

Durkheim argued that religion would not be universal if it did not serve important functions for society. At the societal level, the major function of religion is that it gives tradition a moral imperative. Most of the central values and norms of any culture are reinforced through its religions. These values and norms cease to be merely the *usual* way of doing things and become perceived as the *only* moral way of doing them. They become sacred. When a tradition is sacred, it is continually affirmed through ritual and practice and is largely immune to change.

For individuals, Durkheim argued that the beliefs and rituals of religion offer support, consolation, and reconciliation in times of need. On ordinary occasions, many people find satisfaction and a feeling of belongingness in religious participation. This feeling of belongingness creates the moral community, or community of believers, that is part of our definition of religion.

## Marx and Beyond: Conflict Theory and Religion

Like Durkheim, Marx saw religion as a supporter of tradition. This support ranges from injunctions that the poor and oppressed should endure rather than revolt (blessed be the poor, blessed be the meek, and so on) and that everyone should pay taxes (give unto Caesar) all the way to the endorsement of inequality implied by a belief in the divine right of kings.

Marx differed from Durkheim by interpreting the support for tradition in a negative light. Marx saw religion as the “opiate of the masses”—a way the elite kept the eyes of the downtrodden happily focused on the afterlife so that the poor would not notice their earthly oppression. This position is hardly value-free, and much more obviously



Religious rituals help individuals cope with events that are beyond human understanding, such as death, illness, drought, and famine.

AP Images

The **profane** represents all that is routine and taken for granted in the everyday world, things that are known and familiar and that we can control, understand, and manipulate.

The **sacred** consists of events and things that we hold in awe and reverence—what we can neither understand nor control.

than structural-functional theory, it makes a statement about the truth or falsity of religious doctrine.

Modern conflict theory goes beyond Marx's view. Its major contribution is in identifying the role that religions can play in fostering or repressing conflict between social groups. Religion has certainly *contributed* to conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq and between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, as well in many other countries. On the other hand, religion has *reduced* conflict when Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and other clergy have taught impoverished people to accept their fate as God's will or have preached that we are all God's children.

Whether it increases or reduces conflict, religion can and has served as a tool for groups to use in their struggles for power. Interestingly, although Marx believed that religion always helps to keep down the oppressed, we now know that oppressed groups can use religion to better their social position. One example of this is the powerful role the African American Church and leaders such as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., played in fighting for civil rights in the United States.

Another contribution of conflict theory to the analysis of religion is the idea of the dialectic, that is, that contradictions build up between existing institutions and that these contradictions lead to change. Specifically, conflict theorists suggest that social change in the surrounding society can foster change in that society's religions. For example, changes in attitudes toward women have led Reform Jews, Methodists, and others to allow women to serve as ministers or rabbis. Conflict theorists also argue that changes in religion can lead to broader social change. For example, the rise of evangelical churches in (traditionally Catholic) U.S. Hispanic communities is playing a substantial role in organizing Hispanics into an effective political lobby. In March 2006, more than 500,000 people, most of them Hispanic and disproportionately evangelical Christians, marched in protest against proposed anti-immigration legislation. Many of these protesters had learned of the march through evangelical ministers.

## Weber: Religion as an Independent Force

Max Weber's influential theory of religion combines elements of structural functionalism and conflict theory. Like Durkheim and other structural functionalists, Weber was interested in the forms and functions of religion. But like various conflict theorists, Weber was also interested in the links between social and religious change. However, whereas conflict theorists typically focus on how social conflict can stimulate religious change, Weber focused on how changes in religious ideology can stimulate social change.

For most people, religion is a matter of following tradition; people worship as their parents did before them. To Weber, however, the essence of religion is the search for knowledge about the unknown. In this sense, religion is similar to science: It is a way of coming to understand the world around us. And as with science, the answers religion provides may challenge the status quo as well as support it.

Where do people find the answers to questions of ultimate meaning? Often they turn to a charismatic religious leader. **Charisma** refers to extraordinary personal qualities that set the individual apart from ordinary mortals. Because these extraordinary characteristics are often thought to be supernatural in origin, charismatic leaders can become agents for dramatic social change. Charismatic leaders include Christ, Muhammad, and, more recently, Joseph Smith (Latter Day Saints), David Koresh (Branch Davidians), and the Ayatollah Khomeini (Iranian Islam). Such individuals give answers that often disagree with traditional answers. Thus, Weber sees religious inquiry as a potential source of instability and change in society.

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**Charisma** refers to extraordinary personal qualities that set an individual apart from ordinary mortals.



In viewing religion as a process, Weber gave it a much more active role than did Durkheim. This is most apparent in Weber's analysis of the Protestant Reformation.

### The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

In his classic analysis of the influence of religious ideas on other social institutions, Weber ([1904–1905] 1958) argued that the Protestant Reformation paved the way for capitalism. Early Protestants believed that work, rationalism, and plain living are moral virtues, whereas idleness and indulgence are sinful. Weber labeled these beliefs the **Protestant Ethic**. What happens to a person who follows this ethic—who works hard, makes business decisions based on rational rather than emotional criteria (for example, firing inefficient though needy employees), and is frugal rather than self-indulgent? Such a person is likely to grow wealthier. According to Weber, it was not long before wealth became an end in itself. At this point, the moral values underlying early Protestantism became the moral values underlying early capitalism.

In the century since Weber's analysis, other scholars have explored the same issues, and many have come to somewhat different conclusions. Nevertheless, this research has not changed Weber's major contribution to the sociology of religion: that religious ideas can be the source of tension and change in social institutions.

## Tension between Religion and Society

Each religion confronts two contradictory yet complementary tendencies: the tendency to reject the world and the tendency to compromise with the world (Troeltsch 1931). If a religion denounces adultery, homosexuality, and fornication, does it have to categorically exclude adulterers, homosexuals, and fornicators, or can it adjust its expectations to take common human frailties into account? If “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” must a church require that all its members forsake their worldly belongings?

How religions resolve these dilemmas is central to their eventual form and character. Scholars distinguish three general types of religious organizations: *churches*, *sects*, and *new religious movements*.

### Churches

In everyday language, we use the term *church* to refer to Christian religious organizations or places of worship. Sociologists, on the other hand, use the term **church** to refer to any religion that accepts the surrounding society and is accepted by it.

In some societies, one church is so interwoven with society that it is strongly supported or even mandated by the government. In these situations, the church is known as a **state church**. For example, in the 1500s in Spain, anyone who wasn't Catholic could be legally sentenced to death by burning. These days in Iran, anyone who doesn't follow strict Islamic rules can be legally sentenced to death by stoning.

In other societies, no church has a monopoly on state power. When a church generally accommodates to the society at large, receives no special state support, and tolerates both the state and other churches, we refer to it as a **denomination**. Most people in the United States belong to denominations, including Conservative Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Methodism. Clergy from these groups meet together in ecumenical councils, pray together at commencements, and generally adopt a live-and-let-live policy toward one another.

The **Protestant Ethic** refers to the belief that work, rationalism, and plain living are moral virtues, whereas idleness and indulgence are sinful.

**Churches** are religious organizations that have become institutionalized. They have endured for generations, are supported by and support society's norms and values, and have become an active part of society.

A **state church** is one that is strongly supported or even mandated by the government.

A **denomination** is a church that accommodates to the state and to the presence of other churches.

Churches' embeddedness in their societies does not necessarily mean that they have compromised essential values. They still retain the ability to protest injustice and immorality. From the abolition movement of the 1850s to the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s and the demonstrations against torture of prisoners at Guantánamo, churchmen and women have been in the forefront of social protest. Nevertheless, churches are generally committed to working with society. They may wish to improve it, but they have no wish to abandon it.

### Structure and Function of Churches

Churches tend to be formal bureaucratic structures with hierarchical positions and official creeds specifying their religious beliefs. Leadership is provided by a professional staff of ministers, rabbis, imams, or priests, who have received formal training at specialized schools. Religious services almost always prescribe formal and detailed rituals, repeated in much the same way from generation to generation. Congregations often function more as audiences than as active participants. They are expected to stand up, sit down, and sing on cue, but the service is guided by ceremony rather than by the emotional interaction of participants.

Generally, people are born into churches rather than converting to them. People who do change churches often do so for practical rather than emotional reasons: They marry somebody of another faith, another church is nearer, or their friends go to another church. Individuals also might change churches when their social status rises above that of most members of their church: Baptists become Methodists, and Methodists become Episcopalians (Sherkat & Ellison 1999). Most individuals who change churches have relatively weak ties to their initial religion. Nevertheless, few make large changes: Orthodox Jews become Conservative Jews and members of one small Baptist church join a different small Baptist church (Stark & Finke 2000).

Churches tend to be large and to have well-established facilities, financial security, and a predominantly middle-class membership. As part of their accommodation to the larger society, churches usually allow scriptures to be interpreted in ways relevant to modern culture. Because of these characteristics, these religions are frequently referred to as *mainline churches*.

### Sects

**Sects** are religious organizations that arise in active rejection of changes they find repugnant in modern society and modern religions (Sherkat & Ellison 1999). Sect members often view themselves as restoring a true faith that had been abandoned by others too eager to compromise with society. Like the Reformation churches of Calvin and Luther, sects want to cleanse religion of secular associations. Most modern sects have emerged as protests against liberal developments in mainstream churches, such as the acceptance of homosexuals, divorce, abortion, or "immodest" dress (for example, short skirts and short hair for women).

Some sects' rejection of society's norms is so great that the relationship between the sect and the larger society becomes fraught with tension and even hostility. Egypt routinely incarcerates members of fundamentalist Muslim sects that it considers too extreme, and the United States in the past jailed Amish men who refused to serve in the military because the Bible says "Thou shalt not kill."

The Amish church is exceptional in that it has managed to maintain its distance from the surrounding social world for generations. In contrast, most sects either dissolve or become increasingly churchlike over time. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) has over time increased its accommodation to

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**Sects** are religious organizations that arise in active rejection of changes they find repugnant in churches.



Martin Thomas Photography / Alamy

Although members of the Amish sect reject much of modern life for themselves, they have accommodated to living in the modern world around them.

the larger society (Arrington & Bitton 1992). Among other things, it officially abandoned polygamy, opened its priesthood to African American men, and left the seclusion of a virtual state church in Utah. The church and its members continue to hold religious and social views that differ from those of many other Americans, but they are now actively involved in the country's political, economic, and educational institutions.

### Structure and Function of Sects

The hundreds of sects in the United States exhibit varying degrees of tension with society, but all oppose some basic societal institutions. Not surprisingly, these organizations tend to be particularly attractive to people who are left out of or estranged from society's basic institutions—the poor, the underprivileged, the handicapped, and the alienated. For example, the members of the snake-handling Pentecostal sects of Appalachia are overwhelmingly rural, poor white people who have little chance of succeeding on modern society's terms (Covington 2009). Based on a passage in the New Testament (Mark 16:17–18), church leaders encourage members to speak in tongues, handle poisonous snakes, and drink poisonous potions. Doing so gives individuals a sense that they are close to God and that they control their own lives.

But many who follow sectlike religions are neither poor nor oppressed. Instead, they are seekers of spiritual well-being who find established churches too bureaucratic, or seek a moral community that will offer them a feeling of belongingness and emotional commitment (Saliba 2003; Barker 1986). Others join sects such as Hasidic Judaism or Christian fundamentalist groups because they want to hold on to traditional norms and values that seem to have fallen from favor (Davidman 1991).

Sect membership is often the result of conversion or an emotional experience. Instead of merely following their parents into a sect, individuals actively choose to join. Religious services are more informal than those of churches. Leadership remains largely unspecialized, and there is little, if any, professional training for the calling. The religious doctrines emphasize otherworldly rewards, and the scriptures are considered to be of divine origin and therefore subject to literal interpretation.

Sects share many of the characteristics of primary groups: small size, informality, and loyalty. They are closely knit groups that emphasize conformity and maintain significant control over their members.

## New Religious Movements

Since the 1960s there has been an explosion of what are known as *new religious movements* (NRMs). As the term suggests, **new religious movements (NRMs)** are religious or spiritual movements begun in recent decades and *not* connected to a nation's mainstream religious traditions (Clarke 2006; Saliba 2003; Dawson 2006). In common usage, NRMs are often referred to as *cults*, but that term has largely been dropped by sociologists because of its negative connotations. Examples of NRMs are the Church of Scientology, the "neopagan" Wicca religion, various "New Age" spiritual groups that draw on Eastern religions but give them very Western interpretations, and Heaven's Gate, whose members committed mass suicide in 1997 because they believed the Hale-Bopp comet was about to destroy the Earth and believed that their suicides would allow them to survive at a "higher level." Each of these religions stands outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition: They have a different God or Gods or no God at all, and they don't use the Old Testament as a text. NRMs are often led by charismatic leaders who demand strict adherence to specific beliefs and practices that differ from those of the broader society. The Concept Summary on Churches, Sects, and New Religious Movements compares these three types of religious institutions.

NRMs include both groups such as Heaven's Gate that encourage their members to withdraw from mainstream society and "New Age" groups that emphasize using meditation, affirmations, and the like to gain greater success and happiness within mainstream society.

### Structure and Function of New Religious Movements

The structure and functions of NRMs strongly resemble those of sects. By definition, since NRMs are new, most members have actively chosen to join rather than simply continuing in their parents' religion. Thus, as with sects, NRMs attract individuals whose spiritual needs are not being met by mainstream religions (Clarke 2006; Saliba 2003; Dawson 2006). Beyond this, however, NRMs differ so greatly from each other that they serve very different purposes for different people. Those NRMs that reject mainstream society best meet the needs of those who are deeply discontented with society or who believe they can never succeed in mainstream society. Those NRMs that emphasize attaining success or happiness in mainstream society obviously are attractive to those who value at least some mainstream cultural norms.

## Case Study: Islam

Islam was founded in the seventh century A.D. by an Arab prophet named Muhammad in what is now Saudi Arabia. It is currently the fastest-growing religion in the world, encompassing 21 percent of the world's population, and will likely pass Christianity to become the largest religion in the world within the next 50 years (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance 2009a).

No matter where they live, Muslims (adherents to Islam) share a set of common beliefs. All Muslims believe in a single all-powerful God whose word is revealed to the faithful in the Koran, a book that plays the same role in Islam as the Bible plays for Christians and Jews. All Muslims must follow the Five Pillars of Islam:

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**New religious movements (NRMs)** are religious or spiritual movements begun in recent decades and *not* derived from a nation's mainstream religions.



concept summary

Churches, Sects, and New Religious Movements

Churches, sects, and new religious movements are differentiated based on their attitude toward society, their attitude toward other religions, their position in a given society, and their history.

	Definition	Example	Attitude toward Other Religions
Church	A religion that accepts society as it is and is accepted by society		
State church	A church that is strongly supported or even mandated by the state	Islam in Iran, Roman Catholicism in Medieval Europe	Typically intolerant
Denomination	A church that receives no special state support and tolerates other religions	Methodism, Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism in the United States	Tolerant
Sect	A religion based on rejecting modernizing changes in a given religion	Amish, Ultra-orthodox Judaism, and fundamentalist (polygamous) Mormonism in the United States	Intolerant
New religious movement	A religion that began in recent decades and is <i>not</i> the outgrowth of an established religion in a given society	Nation of Islam, Church of Scientology, and “New Age” Buddhist groups	Varies

1. Profess faith in one almighty God and in Muhammad, his prophet,
2. Pray five times daily,
3. Make charitable donations to the Muslim community and the poor,
4. Fast during daylight hours during the month of Ramadan, the time when the Koran was revealed to Muhammad, and
5. Try to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca.

Muslim prayer usually occurs in a mosque (an Islamic house of worship) and is led by an imam (a religious scholar). Because there is no formal central authority, there is considerable variation across countries in the relationship between Islamic clergy and the government and between Muslims and non-Muslims. In some nations Islam more closely resembles a church, and in others it more closely resembles a sect.

Islam as a Churchlike Religion: Egypt and Iran

Islam is a church in both Iran and Egypt, but in the former it is a *state church* and in the latter, a *denomination*.

In Iran, church and state are intertwined. Because Islam is the state church, Islamic law is used in the courts. Under that law, individuals can be sentenced to death for adultery, armed robbery, homosexuality, or leaving the Islamic faith, among other things. Although many in Iran hope for a more secular society, the clergy continue to hold a great deal of political power, and so there is little tension between religion and the larger society.

In contrast, Islam functions as a *denomination* in Egypt. Egypt’s government is more or less secular, even though 90 percent of the nation is Muslim. Tension between Islam and the state is palpable (Rubin 2002). Radical Islamic fundamentalists periodically incite violent anti-government attacks, and the government uses terror and

In Egypt, Islamic moderates and fundamentalists coexist—sometimes peacefully, sometimes not. As a result, Egyptian Muslims have greater freedom than do Iranian Muslims to interpret Islamic rules for themselves, such as rules regarding acceptable clothing.



Bill Lyons / Alamy

repression to keep fundamentalists under control. More moderate Islamic mosques and imams, however, are allowed to function openly, and the government works with them to provide social services to the poor. As a result, Islam remains a highly organized, accepted part of Egypt's culture and society. Thus despite tension between Islam and the government, the religion remains churchlike rather than sectlike.

### Islam as a Sectlike Religion: Islamic Fundamentalism

Recent years have seen a worldwide increase in Islamic fundamentalism. Like Christian fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism is a *sect*: It emerged in protest against changes occurring within Islam.

In the same way that Christian fundamentalists argue that U.S. society has become corrupted by secularism and turned its back on “true” Christian principles, Islamic fundamentalists call for a rejection of modern secular culture and a return to “true” Islamic principles. Islamic fundamentalism appeals especially to individuals who lack economic and political power in modern society. But it also appeals to educated Muslims who, like those who bombed the World Trade Centers, despair of Western political domination, cultural domination, and, especially, physical occupation of Muslim regions (Amanat 2001; Barber 2001; Jacquard 2002). In the latter case, however, dismay at domination by Westerners usually leads to religious fervor, rather than religious fervor leading to political beliefs and action.

Only the most radical Islamic fundamentalists, however, advocate violence to achieve these goals. Most Muslims, in fact, say the concept of *jihad*—holy war—primarily refers not to actual warfare but rather to the need to defend social justice, first through spiritual, economic, and political means and only if that fails through military means (Lawrence 1998).

### Islam as a New Religious Movement: The Nation of Islam

Although Muslims have lived in the United States for centuries, most modern-day U.S. Muslims are recent immigrants or children of recent immigrants (Smith 1999). For most of these immigrants, Islam serves as a denomination: one religion among many co-existing in this country.

In contrast, the Nation of Islam, popularly known as “Black Muslims,” is a new religious movement (Clarke 2006). Although it officially began in the 1930s, most of its growth occurred after the 1960s.

The Nation of Islam emerged not in reaction to *Islam* (as a sect would) but in reaction against *Christianity* and *white American society*. Its theology draws on some mainstream Islamic beliefs and practices but adds a belief in the innate superiority of Africans and African Americans (Clarke 2006). Although many former members and leaders have rejected these beliefs and entered mainstream Islam, these beliefs remain strong under the current leadership of the Nation of Islam. The difference between the Nation of Islam and mainstream Islam is so sharp that many mainstream Muslims do not consider members of the Nation of Islam to be Muslim at all.

Membership in this new religious movement is growing most rapidly among poor and disenfranchised African Americans in inner cities and in prisons. For these individuals, Islam can provide a sense of hope, community, identity, and freedom from the white-dominated world around them.

## Religion in the United States

The United States is a pluralistic country: Its citizens belong to many different religions and to no religion at all. In this section, we offer a religious portrait of U.S. society.

### Trends in U.S. Religious Membership

Throughout its history, members of multiple religions have lived in the United States. Nevertheless, Christians have always been by far the largest group. Although Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and other non-Christian groups have visible and important presences in the United States, none accounts for much more than 1 percent of the U.S. population. In addition, Judaism is losing population while the other groups are merely holding steady. Muslim Americans are highlighted in Focus on American Diversity: American Muslims on the next page.

That said, Christianity’s numeric dominance is now slightly weaker than in the past. The percentage of U.S. residents who identify as Christian dropped from 86 percent in 1990 to 76 percent in 2008 (Kosmin & Keysar 2009). This change primarily reflects a shift away from identifying with any religion, rather than toward identifying with a non-Christian religion. Figure 12.3 on page 307 shows the relative size of various religions both globally and in the United States.

Within Christianity, there has been a steep shift away from mainline Protestant churches such as Lutheranism and Episcopalianism and toward fundamentalist churches such as Pentecostal, Nazarene, and Four Square Gospel churches (Kosmin & Keysar 2009). Similarly, the percentage of U.S. adults who identify as Catholic has held steady over the last 20 years, but only new Hispanic Catholic immigrants have made up for conversions of other Hispanic Catholics to fundamentalist Protestant sects.

### The Rise of Emerging Churches

Reflecting these changes, the newest trend in American Christianity is the rise of **emerging churches** (emergingchurch.info 2009, Kimball 2003). This trend reflects rising dissatisfaction with the impersonal, “inauthentic” life of modern Americans and the bureaucratization of religious belief in modern churches. Most who participate in emerging churches are young, white, and urban. Most also consider themselves evangelical Christians, but the appeal of these churches has spread beyond that core base.

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**Emerging churches** are linked by 1) the belief that American life and modern Christian churches are atomized, bureaucratic, and inauthentic and 2) an emphasis on informal rituals, a more open perspective toward scripture and behavior, and living a life of mission, faith, and community.

## focus on



## AMERICAN DIVERSITY

## American Muslims

The history of Muslims in the United States is an old one, going back to the colonial era (Muslim West Facts Project 2009). It is estimated that at least 10 percent of the slaves brought from Africa were Muslim. But the Muslim religion disappeared quickly, as cultural ties to Africa were lost and as slaves were forced to adopt Christianity. However, during the twentieth century many African Americans first joined the Nation of Islam and then joined more mainstream Muslim religious communities.

The first wave of chosen migration of Muslims to the United States occurred after the Civil War. Immigrants from the Arab countries typically became peddlers and factory laborers in the Midwest, while immigrants from India typically entered agricultural labor on the West Coast. Over time, many

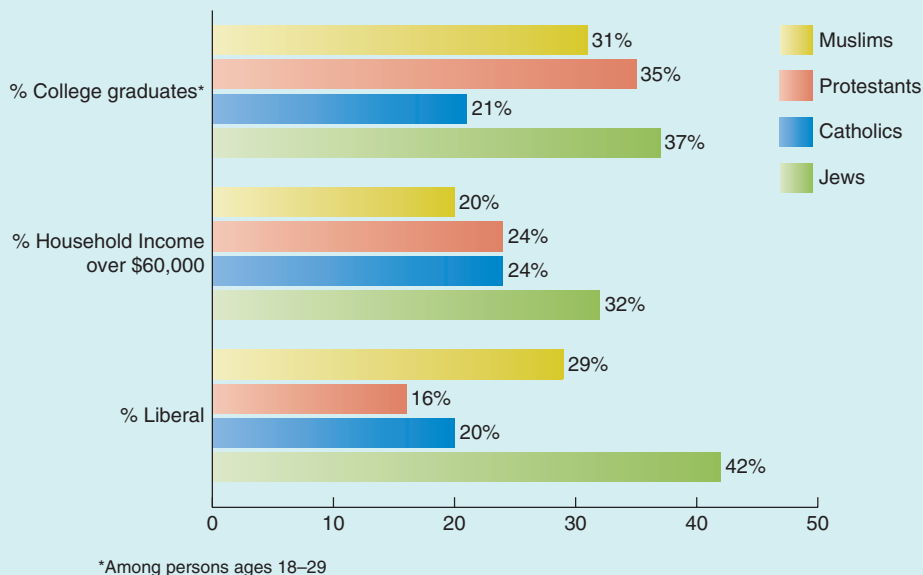
of their descendants became well-educated and highly successful.

The second wave of Muslim immigration began in the mid-twentieth century and continues to this day. This wave consists of professionals and university students from across the Muslim world. Finally, in recent years Muslim refugees from war-torn nations such as Somalia, Bosnia, and Ethiopia have settled in communities across the United States.

As this history suggests, American Muslims are a highly diverse population. On average, however, they are well integrated into U.S. society. Their levels of education and income are above the national average and they are almost as likely as other Americans to tell survey researchers that they were treated with respect throughout the day before they were interviewed. Interestingly, considering the stereotype of Muslims as ultra-conservative, a higher percentage

of U.S. Muslims describe themselves as liberal than do members of any religious group other than Jews (Muslim West Facts Project 2009).

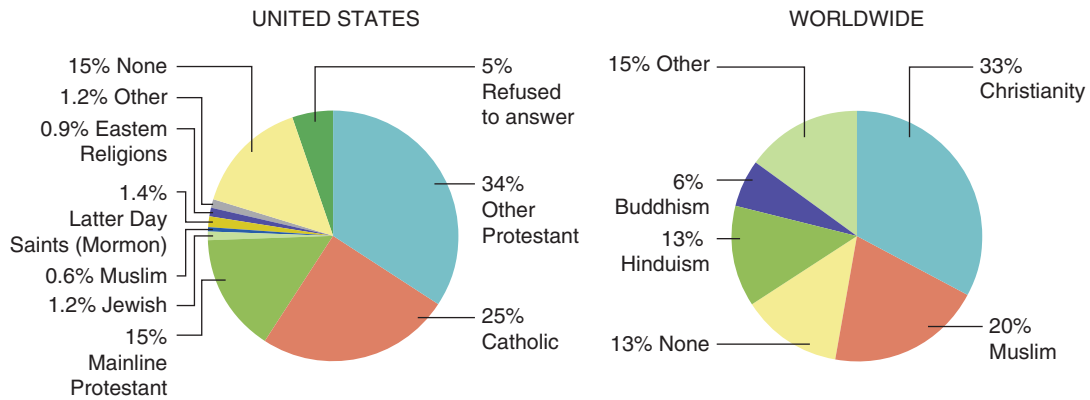
On the other hand, Muslims are more likely than other Americans to report feeling stressed, worried, or angered recently. This partly reflects the concerns of lower-income Muslims who are struggling to keep bread on the table and a roof over their heads. But feelings of stress and anger also reflect the changes that have occurred in American society since the attacks of 9/11. As noted in Chapter 4, about 40 percent of Americans now freely admit to prejudice against U.S. Muslims and to concerns about their loyalty (Saad 2006). Nevertheless, almost all U.S. Muslims are citizens, committed to making their homes in the United States.



SOURCE: Muslim West Facts Project (2009).

Emerging churches promise an authentic religious experience closely shared with others in an informal space and relying on informal practices. Rather than meeting in formal churches to read prayers and hymns, members meet in homes, talk about their feelings and beliefs, share their questions and tentative answers on matters of





**FIGURE 12.3 Religious Affiliation in the United States and Worldwide**

Three-quarters of U.S. residents are Christian. Worldwide, Christianity is shrinking and Islam is growing. Mormons are included with other Christians on the world pie chart; Jews do not appear on the chart because they comprise less than 1 percent of the world's population.

SOURCE: Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (2009b); Kosmin & Keysar (2009).

faith, and listen to music straight out of youth popular culture. Emerging churches emphasize how individuals can live a life of mission, faith, and community—qualities many find sorely lacking in a broader culture that emphasizes working, consuming, and individual self-sufficiency. Finally, whereas traditional evangelical churches define themselves partly by their rejection of contemporary American morality and culture, emerging churches have a more open perspective. As a result, they offer a better cultural fit for some young Americans.

### The Rise in “No Religion”

Another important trend is the increased number of U.S. residents who claim membership in *no* religion. Currently 15 percent of U.S. residents claim no religion, up from 8 percent in 1990 (Kosmin & Keysar 2009). Some of these individuals nonetheless have strong religious beliefs, but others do not.

*Atheists* are individuals who believe that there is no God, and *agnostics* are those who do not know whether there is a God. Neither atheism nor agnosticism is a religion, and few atheists or agnostics belong to groups organized around atheism or agnosticism.

When asked about their personal religious identification, less than 2 percent of U.S. adults describe themselves as atheist or agnostic (Kosmin & Keysar 2009). However, when directly asked whether God exists, 2 percent say no and 10 percent say that they don't know. Apparently, many people identify with the religion in which they were raised, even if they now hold atheistic or agnostic beliefs. Thus, data on religious identification underestimate the number of atheists and agnostics. Similarly, although only 15 percent of U.S. adults say they belong to no religion, fully 27 percent do not expect to have a religious funeral when they die. This further indicates that questions about personal religious identification overstate the importance of religion in the United States.

## Trends in Religiosity

**Religiosity** refers to an individual's level of commitment to religious beliefs and to acting on those beliefs. Membership in organized religions is considerably higher in

**Religiosity** is an individual's level of commitment to religious beliefs and to acting on those beliefs.

the United States than in other developed nations, and reported rates of attendance at religious services have changed very little over the last several decades (although actual rates appear to have declined).

Why is religiosity so strong in the United States? According to sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000), the answer lies in our highly developed, competitive, and unregulated **religious economy**. They argue that because there are so many religious organizations in this country, each must compete with the others to provide better “consumer products,” thereby generating greater “market demand” for them.

But although most Americans believe in God, some are more involved in religion than others. Mormons are the most likely to attend religious services at least once per week, and Jews are the least likely; Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims hold similar, medium levels of religious attendance. In addition, across religions, older people, women, Southerners, and African Americans are more likely than others to attend religious services regularly (Sherkat & Ellison 1999; General Social Survey 2009; Muslim West Facts Project 2009).

One interesting topic is the relationship between income, education, and religiosity. In the past, many scholars assumed that religion would appeal disproportionately to the poor, who were in greater need of hope, and to the uneducated, who were more likely to lack “scientific” explanations for natural and human events. It is true that those with a college education are less likely, overall, to say that religion is important to them. However, college graduates are *more* likely to attend church than are non-graduates (General Social Survey 2009). Moreover, among those who consider religion important in their lives, college graduates and nongraduates are equally likely to hold conservative religious beliefs (Sherkat & Ellison 1999; General Social Survey 2009). In general, churchgoing appears to be more strongly associated with being conventional than with being disadvantaged. It is a characteristic of people who are involved in their communities, belong to other voluntary associations, and hold traditional values.

## sociology and you

If you belong to an organized religion, you likely gain certain social benefits from it regardless of its belief system. Your congregation likely affords you a social network to whom you can turn for advice or assistance in bad times. Your network may also help you celebrate your successes and generally give you the sense that you are a valued and worthy person. Finally, your religion’s rituals can offer meaning and a sense that things happen for a reason. If you do not belong to an organized religion, you may have sought the same sort of support in other social networks, such as fraternities or friendship circles, and have sought meaning in science, politics, or other belief systems.

**Religious economy** refers to the competition between religious organizations to provide better “consumer products,” thereby creating greater “market demand” for their own religions.

## Consequences of Religiosity

Because religion teaches and reinforces values, it has consequences for attitudes and behaviors. People who are more religious tend to be healthier, happier, and more satisfied with their lives (Cotton et al. 2006; Waite & Lehrer 2003; Ferriss 2002). These benefits in large part stem from the social support and sense of belonging that individuals receive from their religious communities.

Persons who are more religious tend to have more conservative attitudes on sexuality and personal honesty; they also may have more conservative attitudes about family life, such as supporting the use of corporal punishment to discipline children (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal 1996). Not surprisingly, some conservative religious groups have played significant roles in supporting conservative political movements, such as the antiabortion movement and certain right-wing hate groups.

Yet we should not assume that church members necessarily adopt the attitudes of their churches. For example, although the Pope believes abortion and artificial birth control are sinful, more than three-quarters of U.S. Catholics think abortion is acceptable in some circumstances, and more than half believe teenagers should have access to birth control (General Social Survey 2009).

Moreover, even though religious training generally teaches and reinforces conventional behavior, religion and the church can be forces that promote social change. As noted earlier, African American churches and clergy played a significant role in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and evangelical churches are playing a significant role in the current immigrant rights movement. In Latin America,

liberation theology aims at the creation of democratic Christian socialism that eliminates poverty, inequality, and political oppression (Smith 1991). Conversely, church members don't always adopt their churches' liberal views: In recent years, some Baptists and Episcopalians, among others, have split from their central churches because they disapprove of growing church support for gay rights and other liberal agendas.

## U.S. Civil Religion

As this chapter has demonstrated, Americans are in many ways divided by religion. On the other hand, Americans in general share what has been called a civil religion (Bellah 1974, 29; Bellah et al. 1985). **Civil religion** is a set of institutionalized rituals, beliefs, and symbols sacred to U.S. citizens. These include reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and singing the national anthem, as well as folding and displaying the flag in ways that protect it from desecration. In many U.S. homes, the flag or a picture of the president is displayed along with a crucifix or a picture of the Last Supper.

Civil religion has the same functions as religion in general: It is a source of unity and integration, providing a sacred context for understanding the nation's history and current responsibilities (Wald 1987). For example, shortly after the American colonies declared their independence from Britain, George Washington was declared commander of the U.S. army. With little military experience or charisma, Washington's major qualification for the job was that he didn't want it. Within weeks, he became an object of near worship. Why did this cult of Washington develop? It emerged, in part, because Washington symbolized the fledgling nation's unity and, in part, because his disdain for power made him a hero. In worshipping Washington, the colonists were worshipping their nation and the virtues they believed it embodied (Schwartz 1983).

Since then, we have made liberty, justice, and freedom sacred principles. We believe the American way is not merely the usual way of doing things but also the only moral way of doing them, a way of life blessed by God. The motto on our currency, our Pledge of Allegiance, and our national anthem all bear testimony to the belief that the United States operates "under God" with God's direct blessing.

## Where This Leaves Us

Structural-functional theory and conflict theory are both right. On the one hand, schools and churches are preservers of tradition. Both institutions socialize young people to understand and accept traditional cultural values and to find their place in society. Occasionally schools and churches teach people to think for themselves, but more often both stress unquestioning acceptance of authority and of contemporary social arrangements, including social inequalities.

On the other hand, schools and churches are in the forefront of social change. Nowhere are the battles over oppression in the least-developed nations, abortion, or homosexuality fought more bitterly than in the councils of our major churches. Nowhere are the battles over race relations, sex and class equity, and clashing cultural values fought more bitterly than on school boards. Even if you are not religious and even after you finish your education, you cannot afford to ignore the vital roles education and religion play in creating or impeding social change.



Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum

Within weeks of his appointment as commander of the army, Washington became an object of near worship.

**Civil religion** is the set of institutionalized rituals, beliefs, and symbols sacred to the U.S. nation.

## Summary

1. The structural-functional model of education suggests that education meets multiple social needs. It socializes young people to the broader culture, provides knowledge and skills, and can promote social change.
2. Conflict theory suggests that education helps to maintain and reproduce the stratification structure through four mechanisms: training a docile labor force that accepts inequality (the hidden curriculum), using credentialism to save the best jobs for the children of the elite, perpetuating the dominant culture, and ensuring that disadvantaged groups receive inferior educational opportunities.
3. Symbolic interactionists explore some of the processes through which education can reproduce inequality. Key elements of this process are self-fulfilling prophecies and differences in children's cultural capital, both of which keep disadvantaged students from improving their lot.
4. Tracking generally helps students in high-ability groups but hurts those in low-ability groups. High-stakes testing encourages schools to pay more attention to the quality of the education they provide but has forced schools to cut programs and to focus on teaching students how to take tests. School choice gives parents and students options but can reinforce inequality and reduce support for public education.
5. About half of U.S. high school graduates between 16 and 24 are enrolled in college. Women are more likely than men to attend and graduate from college, but class and racial differences are much greater than gender differences. Men from poor, minority families are the least likely to attend college.
6. Education pays off handsomely in terms of increased income, better jobs, and lower unemployment. It also offers nonmonetary benefits such as the likelihood of a longer life.
7. The sociological study of religion concerns itself with the consequences of religious affiliation for individuals and with the interrelationships of religion and other social institutions. It is not concerned with evaluating the truth of particular religious beliefs.
8. Despite earlier predictions, secularization has not increased significantly in the United States. Rather, mainstream religious organizations remain strong, and fundamentalist groups are growing in popularity. Religious membership and attendance remain at stable levels and are far higher than in Europe.
9. Durkheim argued that religion is functional because it provides support for the traditional practices of a society and is a force for continuity and stability. Weber argued that religion generates new ideas and thus can change social institutions. In contrast, Marx argued that religion serves as a conservative force to protect the status quo. More recent conflict theorists have explored the role that religion can play in either fostering or repressing social conflict.
10. All religions are confronted with a dilemma: the tendency to reject the secular world and the tendency to compromise with it. Religions that adapt to the broader world and to other religious groups are called churches. Those that emerge in reaction against modern religions are known as sects. New religions that either promote truly new religious ideas or that draw on religions from outside a given culture are known as new religious movements.
11. Some major developments in U.S. religion are the growth in fundamentalism, in emerging churches, in new religious movements, and in those who identify with no religion.
12. U.S. civil religion is an important source of unity for the U.S. people. It is composed of a set of beliefs (that God guides the country), symbols (the flag), and rituals (the Pledge of Allegiance) that many people of the United States of all faiths hold sacred.

## Thinking Critically

1. How have you been helped or harmed by tracking? If you have not experienced it, answer this question based on someone you know.
2. How would you reorganize elementary and secondary classrooms to best meet the needs of all students? What would be the manifest functions of your system? the latent functions? the potential dysfunctions?
3. Given what you now know about the process of secularization and the rise of fundamentalism, do you expect fundamentalism to grow or to recede in coming years? Why? Base your argument on your understanding of sociology, *not* on your religious beliefs.
4. What are the attractions of the emerging churches? Compare the structure (*not* beliefs) of your religion



or the religion of someone you know to the structure of emerging churches. If you belong to an emerging church, compare its structure to that of a friend's religion.

5. If the Religious Right were to gain more power, what changes would you expect to occur in U.S. government? U.S. society? Do you think they would be good for the United States? Why or why not?

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