

## What Do We Mean by the Term *Religion*?

Substantive Definitions

Functional Definitions

A Symbolic Definition

Invisible Religion

Lived Religion

Spiritual but Not Religious?

The Concept of Religion as  
Employed in This Text

A Final Word About  
Definitions

Summary and Looking  
Forward

Here are some questions to ponder as you read this chapter:

- What is religion? What makes something “religious”?
- Why might one’s definition of religion create blinders that cause one to include some but also exclude other important phenomena?
- What does it mean to think of definitions as “tools” that are not true or false but more or less useful?
- What does the concept of invisible religion add to the conversation about how to define religion?
- How are religion and spirituality similar or different?

**W**hat do we mean by the term *religion*? What would seem to be one of the easiest questions to answer is actually one of the most complex. To students who have never studied the sociology of religion, the definition of religion may seem clear. Certainly everyone knows what religion is, right? Let’s get on with more important issues! Yet we dare not be so hasty. Some definitions are so narrow and specific as to exclude Buddhism as a religion. Other definitions are so broad and inclusive that many social behaviors may be considered forms of religion—including patriotism, systematic racism, or any other core set of values and beliefs that provides an individual or community with a sense of worth and meaning in life.

We must begin our analysis, then, by exploring the question of what it is we intend to study. What, after all, is religion? We begin to answer this question by recognizing that how we define our subject matter sets boundaries on what are and are not considered legitimate topics or groups for analysis—on what will be included in our studies of “religion” and what will be excluded. In this sense, definitions are “ways of seeing” a complex, multifaceted social reality, and as literary theorist Kenneth Burke observes, “Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (Burke 1935:70).

An important implication of this approach is that definitions are not mirrors of reality to be judged as “true” or “false,” but are *tools* that can be seen by those who use them as more or less *useful* (Berger 1967). As you read and think about the following ways in which social scientists have defined religion, think about which definitions you find more or less useful and why.

## Substantive Definitions

---

Many sociologists employ what are called *substantive* definitions of religion. This approach hinges on identification of the “substance” or “essence” of religion. Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor used this approach in 1873 when he defined religion as “belief in Spiritual Beings” (Tylor [1873] 1958:8). For many people, a reference to God or gods is an essential element in religion. The reason Tylor used the term *spiritual beings* is that many people worship their deceased ancestors. They have little or no concern about gods, as such, but their world is enlivened by many unseen beings. Hence, Tylor saw spiritual beings as a more inclusive term than gods. Some other scholars have reaffirmed Tylor’s insistence that religion involves a belief in a Being or beings that are not encountered in normal empirical processes (Spiro 1966).

Trying to define the essence of religion is a difficult task, but it becomes more difficult if our definition is to be applied cross-culturally. In the Western world, we tend to feel that religion is essentially a matter of belief. In fact, some social scientists have attempted to measure the religiosity of people—the extent of their “religiousness”—by determining how orthodox they are. An orthodox person is one who believes in the traditional doctrines of a religion. However, in many cultures, religion is “not so much thought out as danced out” (Maret 1914:xxx). That is to say, ritual and emotion are primary to religion, and belief is only secondary.

The study of traditional Native American religions shows that these faiths are expressed through tribal practices, prayer, and religious objects, not creeds, dogmas, or theologies (Gill 2004). Scholars studying Orthodox Judaism and Islam also consistently point out that a focus on behavior, rather than on beliefs and attitudes, is characteristic of those faiths (Aslan 2011; Cohen 1983; Moberg 1984). Anthropologists studying non-Western cultures insist that emphasis on belief is a Western bias that causes investigators to miss the underlying thrust of many religions. For example, several observers maintain that any concept of a deity or superhuman beings is peripheral to Buddhism (Benz 1964; Herbrechtsmeier 1993; Zaechner 1967). So a definition that emphasizes a belief in superhuman beings leaves doubt about whether Buddhism is a religion. Strictly speaking, many Buddhist gurus (who are not concerned with superhuman beings) would not be considered to be practicing religion. On the other hand, most common folks around the world who identify themselves as

Buddhists do believe in superhuman beings (Herbrechtsmeier 1993; Orru and Wang 1992; Spiro 1978). What appears at first to be a simple definitional issue on further reflection is very complex.

Another definitional approach that tries to capture the essence of religion but that avoids the requirement of a specific belief was first suggested in 1912 by Émile Durkheim ([1912] 1995), one of the founders of sociology as an academic discipline. Durkheim maintained that a recognition of the division of life into sacred and profane realms allows us to identify religion in any culture. People around the world undergo a psychological shift when engaging in rituals involving sacred objects. This shift involves feelings of awe, fear, and/or majesty. The attitude differs from anything one encounters in the everyday life of these people.

Durkheim recognized that not all individual experiences of awe, fear, or majesty are religious in character. Religion, he maintained, is a communal activity. It involves a social group: “In all history we do not find a single religion without a Church” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:59). The experience of the sacred must fundamentally be a group experience if it is to be identified as religion. Durkheim’s formal definition, then, is that “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:62).

This approach is helpful in a great many cases, and it avoids the problem of deciding which specific belief is intrinsically or inherently religious. Yet social scientists who have used this approach have often implied (if not asserted) a dualistic worldview. That is to say, life has a religious (sacred) dimension and a nonreligious (profane) dimension. For example, Durkheim insisted that

the religious life and the profane life cannot coexist in the same unit of time. It is necessary to assign determined days or periods to the first, from which all profane occupations are excluded.

. . . There is no religion, and, consequently, no society which has not known and practiced this division of time into two distinct parts. (Durkheim [1912] 1995:347)

Historian of religion Mircea Eliade concurred: “For religious [people], space is not homogeneous; he [or she] experiences interruptions in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others” (Eliade 1959:20). These spaces set apart as uniquely special have a sacred character.

While it is true that many people organize their life experience into separate categories, not all do. As we will see later in this chapter, many sociologists of religion have come to question whether a strong distinction between sacred and profane realms of life is useful or whether it creates a false dichotomy in contemporary society. Thomas Luckmann’s (1967) concept of invisible religion, Nancy Ammerman’s (2014) efforts to find religion in everyday life, and the rediscovery of spirituality (as opposed to or in conjunction with religion) are all ways of challenging the drawing of a bright line between sacred and profane aspects of life.

Photo by Emilen, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0



**PHOTO 1.1:** Shoes Outside a Mosque

In Islam the inside of the mosque is holy ground, and Muslims recognize this extraordinariness and sacredness by removing their shoes when they enter.

Highlighting the ongoing efforts of sociologists to define their object of study, Christian Smith (2017) has recently offered yet another argument for a substantive definition of religion. Smith focuses not on superhuman *beings* but on superhuman *powers*:

Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad. (Smith 2017:22)

Although Smith does highlight some of what religion *does* (the core of functional definitions, as we will see), his inclusion of superhuman powers limits the practices that can be seen as religious.

An underlying question in this whole debate, then, is whether religion by definition includes only that which has an otherworldly or supernatural or superhuman dimension. What about people whose ultimate value and deepest commitment is to their countries? They have a deep sense of loyalty to their land and will even give their lives to defend it. Their country's way of life provides a profound sense of meaning, purpose, and value. They may shed tears when their national anthem is played. Is this religious behavior? Can nationalism be a form of religion? It is not otherworldly and it is not essentially supernatural (but see Chapter 13 on "civil religion"). Certainly these individuals feel a sort of sacredness toward the nation. Yet this sacredness does not involve the same fear and trembling that Rudolf Otto (1923) and Durkheim ([1912] 1995) describe as part of the sacred attitude. How does the feeling of awe and reverence toward a nation differ from the awe and reverence toward a supernatural being or transcendent realm? Is this difference significant enough to call one experience religious and the other not? These are not easy questions to answer. Some scholars feel that nationalistic behavior as described above *is* religious in character and that a broader definition of religion is appropriate.

This has even caused one prominent scholar to suggest that we simply focus on the sociology of the sacred, even if the behavior is not “religion” in the strictest sense, since anything that is considered “sacred” is likely to interest the sociologist of religion (Demerath 2000).

A major criticism of substantive definitions is that they tend to focus the researcher’s attention solely on traditional forms of religion. Substantive definitions direct our attention to the sacred places and practices where we typically expect to find religion. This limits our ability to see people being religious in new ways (like the idea of “lived religion” in this chapter) and to find religion in new places (outside “God boxes,” as we say in Chapter 12). Substantive definitions are felt to be too narrow and too tradition-bound, hence blinding researchers to these new modes of religiosity.

## Functional Definitions

---

An alternative to substantive definitions of religion is using functional definitions. These tend to be much more inclusive of diverse forms of “religion” and therefore better able to capture some of the nontraditional forms of religion that the substantive definition misses. Milton Yinger offered one such definition. He suggested that we focus not on what religion essentially *is* but on what it *does* (Yinger 1970). Yinger proposed that we define a social phenomenon as religious if it fulfills the manifest function of religion. (Manifest functions are the *conscious* and *intended* functions of a social pattern or institution; latent functions are unconscious and unintended [Merton 1968].) He asserted that meaning in life is a basic human need, although the nature and intensity of that need will vary among individuals.

Theologian Paul Tillich has described religion as that which is one’s “ultimate concern,” and Yinger drew on Tillich’s understanding in developing his own definition. The underlying conviction is that a fundamental concern of human beings is to understand the purpose of life and the meaning of death, suffering, evil, and injustice (Tillich 1957). In line with this conviction, Yinger wrote, “Religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life” (Yinger 1970:7). Religion helps individuals cope by offering an explanation for these challenges and by providing a strategy to overcome despair, hopelessness, and futility.

Using this type of definition, the range of phenomena that we analyze under the heading *religion* is considerably expanded. Yinger insisted that nontheistic—that is, not involving a god—and even nonsupernatural systems of belief and practice can be appropriate subjects of inquiry for the sociologist of religion. “It is not the nature of *belief*, but the nature of *believing* that requires our study” (Yinger 1970:11). Wherever one sees a closing of the gap between fact and hope, wherever one sees a leap of faith that allows a person to assert that suffering and evil will somehow be defeated, there one sees the manifestations of religion.

Even a secular faith that science and technology will ultimately solve all our problems is, by this definition, a religious phenomenon. Yinger wrote, “A term that already includes, by common consent, the contemplations of a Buddhist monk and



Photo by Bill Branson for National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)



**PHOTO 1.2:** Scientists in the Lab

In modern society, a sharp distinction is often drawn between religion and science, but Yinger's broad functional definition of religion suggests that faith in and the practice of science may be a form of religion itself.

the ecstatic visions of a revivalist cult member, human sacrifice, and ethical monotheism may have room in it for science *as a way of life*" (Yinger 1970:12). Intense faith in nationalism, in capitalism, and other objects of deep loyalty may be considered by the student of religion if the object is expected eventually to solve the ultimate human perplexities over the purpose of life and the meaning of death, injustice, and suffering. Yinger argued that if a narrower definition is utilized, one may misidentify (or even miss entirely) religion in a society, particularly in societies undergoing significant cultural change.

This functional definition assumes that all people are to some extent religious. Yinger wrote, "To me, the evidence is decisive: human nature abhors a vacuum in systems of faith. This is not, then, a period of religious decline but is one of religious change" (Yinger 1970:vii). The assumption underlying the functional definition of religion does not really invite the question of whether a society is becoming less religious, but rather asks what new forms religion is taking. The sociologist adopting this approach is less likely to overlook nontraditional or alternative forms of religion or new developments in the ways that people practice religion, especially the younger generations.

Another well-known functional definition of religion is Robert Bellah's view that religion is "a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate [people] to the ultimate conditions of [their] existence" (Bellah 1970c:21). Like Yinger, Bellah's view of religion was influenced by the theologian Tillich's view of "ultimate concern." One problem with these functional definitions is that "ultimate concern" or "ultimate conditions of existence" are difficult phenomena to identify and are even more difficult to

measure using the empirical methods of social science (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, Yinger's and Bellah's definitions suggest that any system of belief and action that addresses the fundamental questions of meaning in life is a religion.

In response to these functional definitions, some scholars have argued that if a definition of religion does not include a supernatural dimension, the term *religion* may become so inclusive that it is virtually meaningless (Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). They advocate substantive definitions with their limitations for this reason.

**Critical Thinking:** Consider your own presuppositions: Is a belief in god or the supernatural necessary when you use the term *religion*? Is the fact that something is helping individuals address what is of ultimate concern enough to make that thing a religion?

## A Symbolic Definition

You may have noticed that the strengths and weaknesses of substantive and functional definitions of religion are to some extent mirror images of each other. Consequently, some scholars have attempted to offer more comprehensive definitions of religion. Their hope is to capitalize on the strengths of both substantive and functional definitions, and thereby to avoid both of their weaknesses. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1973) symbolic definition of religion is one such effort.

Geertz begins by recognizing that *symbols*—objects, behaviors, or stories that represent or remind one of something else—are powerful forces in human behavior. They are also central to religion. Given the abstract nature of the focal point of religion, symbols become its indispensable medium. Symbols include objects (e.g., the cross, the Star of David), behaviors (e.g., touching the mezuzah on the doorpost of a Jewish home before entering; kneeling, facing Mecca, and praying five times a day), and myths or stories (e.g., Siddhartha Gautama achieving enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree and becoming the Buddha; Jesus washing his disciples' feet). Geertz was impressed with the way in which various levels of meaning can be communicated through symbols. Moreover, symbols are more accessible to observation than subjective experiences of "ultimate concern." Hence, he used symbols as the starting point for his definition of religion (Geertz 1973).

Geertz's full definition is as follows:

Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1973:90)

This definition is so fully and carefully developed that each of its four components deserves a close examination.

First of all, to say that religion is a “system of symbols which acts” means the symbols provide a blueprint for understanding the world. Symbols provide a model of the world by helping people understand what the world and life really are. Many people believe, for example, that life is actually a testing ground in which God determines one’s fitness to live in the heavenly kingdom. These individuals live their lives with reference to this understanding. These symbols not only suggest a model of the world, but they also propose a model *for* the world (Geertz 1973:93). The symbol system describes what life *is* and also prescribes what it *ought* to be. Not only do many assert that life is a testing ground, but they claim access to the answers that will help them pass the test.

This system of symbols acts to “establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations” in people. In other words, the symbols affect one’s disposition. Religious activity influences two somewhat different types of dispositions: (1) moods and (2) motivations. Geertz suggested that moods involve depth of feeling, whereas motivations provide a direction for behavior. Moods vary in intensity, and they affect our total outlook on life, but they are not aimed at any particular goal. One simply experiences a mood; one does not gain a feeling of obligation about a specific goal to be attained from a mood. Some born-again Christian groups emphasize that to be a Christian is to be joyful, even in the face of adversity. The emphasis is on a pervasive mood that characterizes the believer, regardless of the specific circumstances.

Some religions may emphasize moods as primary (in Buddhism the focus is on mystical experience), while other religions stress motivations and a system of ethics (the Unitarian Universalist Association illustrates this latter focus). Nonetheless, Geertz suggested that in all religions the symbol system produces moods that intensify commitment and motivations to act in specified ways. In another context, Geertz referred to the moods and motivations together as the *ethos* of the religion.

Not only do the symbol systems enhance a particular disposition, but they also act to “formulate conceptions of a general order of existence.” A distinguishing characteristic of religion is that it provides a worldview, a mental ordering of concepts such as nature, self, society, and the supernatural. Religion not only creates intense feelings but also establishes a cosmology—an understanding of the origin of the universe and humankind—that satisfies one’s intellectual need for reasonable explanations. Geertz emphasized that not all intense feelings of awe are religious. One may be overwhelmed by powerful emotions (moods) in viewing natural beauty or a work of art, but such feelings may be either purely aesthetic or deeply religious. If no explanatory perspective or overview of the meaning of life is involved, the experience is not religious (Geertz 1958).

There are three major challenges to the meaningfulness of life that a religious worldview must resolve: (1) a sense of coherence and reasonableness of life events; (2) a sense of meaning in suffering so that it becomes sufferable; and (3) a sense of moral order in which evil will be overcome and that virtue, goodness, and justice will somehow, someday prevail. Symbol systems, then, attempt to “account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience” (Geertz 1973:108). The worldview represents an intellectual process by which people can affirm that life makes sense, that suffering is bearable, and that justice is not a mirage—that in the end, good will be rewarded.



Geertz continued his definition by attempting to answer the question of how a particular worldview or set of concepts comes to be believed. The symbols act to “clothe those conceptions in such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” How is it that despite common sense, everyday experience, and empirical evidence, people will come to believe irrational and unsupportable things? What compels a Christian Scientist to deny the reality of illness, even though the person experiences the symptoms of influenza? Why does a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that a new revelation was written to Joseph Smith on golden plates, even though no one could read them but Smith? Why do Christians affirm that Jesus is the son of God even though he died in the manner of a criminal 2,000 years ago? Geertz pointed out that religious ritual often creates a situation in which a deeper reality can be reached. Truths are experienced or understood that are more profound than everyday experience provides.

Geertz’s definition is both abstract and quite elaborate. In fact, his explanation of the definition is over 40 pages long. A clear strength of his definition, however, is that it contributes to the debate over what distinguishes religion from other cultural phenomena. His central contributions are that religion must include a symbol system that acts to reinforce both a worldview and an ethos and that has a built-in system of believability or plausibility.

In the end, Geertz’s analysis is really more than a definition. It is an essay on how religion “works” to reinforce itself and on what religion “does” in the society.



Gerrit/Stock

**PHOTO 1.3:** Revival Meeting

Religion is communal in character and often involves intense emotional experiences. The photo depicts a congregation worshipping with their pastors at a revival meeting. The intense emotional experience acts to clothe religious concepts in what Clifford Geertz calls “an aura of factuality” that makes these concepts “seem uniquely realistic.”

Because of its focus on what religion does, the symbolic definition may be considered as one type of functional definition (Berger 1974), but one which includes a strong substantive component.

**Critical Thinking:** What symbols elicit strong moods and motivations for you? Are those symbols “religious”? Does Geertz’s symbolic definition allow you to distinguish between religious and other motivating symbols?

## Invisible Religion

---

Another definitional issue that emerges in our consideration here is whether private systems of belief are to be called religion. After all, many individuals have beliefs that solve problems of ultimate meaning for them but that are not necessarily shared with others. Yinger insisted, as do most sociologists of religion, that religion is a “social phenomenon: it is shared and takes on many of its most significant aspects only in the interaction of the group” (Yinger 1970:10). An overly social conception of religion, however, runs the risk of overlooking newer forms of religiosity that are not centered on traditional religious groups and organizations.

A number of contemporary scholars have emphasized the modern individualization of religion. Each individual in modern society constructs his or her own meaning system by drawing on many religions. One of the most important works that developed this thesis is not that new, though. In 1967, Thomas Luckmann advocated an extraordinarily broad definition of religion, referring to religion as the “symbolic universes of meaning” that infuse all of life with a sense of transcendent purpose. He emphasized worldview as an elementary and universal manifestation of religion (Luckmann 1967). In this respect, Luckmann’s definition of religion is similar to other functional definitions (Yinger 1970). However, rather than limiting religion to macro systems of meaning—meaning systems that address death, suffering, and injustice—he sought to understand worldview at all levels. He insisted that “no single interpretive scheme performs the religious function. It is rather the worldview as a whole, as a unitary matrix of meaning” that defines one’s identity and serves as one’s religious orientation (Luckmann 1967:55–56). In essence, he pointed to personal identity as “a form of religiosity” (Luckmann 1967:70). People’s sense of identity—their values, attitudes, dispositions, and sense of self-worth—is part of their religiosity because all these are related to feelings about what makes life worth living. These are “invisible” forms of religion in that they do not have the social manifestations one normally associates with religion.

Luckmann believed that as society has become increasingly complex and as institutions have become specialized in their sphere of influence, traditional religions have influence over a decreasing range of human behavior and thinking. This combines with the tendency of traditional religions to fix their systems of belief so as to make them seem more eternal, absolute, and unchanging. At the same

time, technological, political, and economic changes continue. Indeed, in the modern world, change occurs at ever increasing rates. Luckmann maintained that this fluidity has caused traditional forms of religion to become irrelevant to the everyday experiences of many people. He denied that this represents a decline of religiosity. Common people are as religious as ever, but their religiosity has taken on new forms. Luckmann insisted that claims of a decline in religiosity are due to the fact that sociologists have usually asked questions that measure only traditional forms of religiosity such as formal affiliation with and worship at religious organizations or reading official scriptures.

In the modern world, people derive their sense of meaning by drawing on a wide range of religious and secular philosophies, each of which competes for the loyalties of individuals who act as consumers in the marketplace of ideas. The product that each philosophy is selling is a worldview—with its own system of values and its own definition of what makes life worth living. The world according to Oprah Winfrey (Lofton 2011), the pop psychology expressed in best-selling books like *The Road Less Traveled*, and the ideals implicit in *The Simpsons* and *South Park* (Feltmate 2017) can all affect a person's sense of the meaning of life and one's individual "philosophy of life."



Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

PHOTO 1.4: Self-Improvement Books

Go into most bookstores today, and you will find a large section of books on “self-improvement” or “self-help.” Notice how many of these books include religious ideas and ideals like soul, meditation, sacred, and ritual. The tremendous popularity of these books is evidence, from Thomas Luckmann’s perspective, of the reality of invisible religion. If we only look at traditional religious organizations, we will miss this distinctively modern form of religion.

Other organizations, social movements, or businesses also compete in the philosophy-of-life marketplace. Objectivism is a philosophical system that exalts the rights of individuals to pursue their own self-interests without interference. Objectivism was developed by Ayn Rand (1905–1982), author of the novels *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* (Burns 2009). At the height of her popularity, Rand published a newsletter that was faithfully read by believers and whose public addresses packed houses with enthusiastic followers. Rand stressed individual initiative and the survival of the fittest and believed that altruism was the worst sort of vice. Selfishness, if one followed the logic of her argument, was the most exalted virtue and would ultimately lead to the best type of society. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Marxism offers a coherent outlook on life and a constellation of values that promises to bring a better life in the future through collective action and collective consciousness (Ling 1979). Each of these social movements offers a philosophy of life and a set of values that compete with traditional religions in defining the meaning and purpose of life.

Even business enterprises, like Amway Corporation, seek to motivate by stressing the primacy of financial independence, the ultimate value of free-enterprise economics, and the rewards of close friendship with other distributors (Butterfield 1999; Palmisano and Pannofino 2013). In fact, the regular Amway weekend regional rallies can be analyzed as plausibility structures (see Chapter 2) that operate to reinforce the believability of the values and outlook presented by the corporation.

Individualization of religion involves each person developing their own meaning system or philosophy of life by drawing from many sources in modern life, including secular media, the traditional religions, and popular psychology. While Luckmann did not see the process as indicative of a decline in religion, neither did he view it as a particularly healthy trend. When individuals must construct their own meaning systems, those systems may seem less eternal and less compelling. The individual may therefore experience what sociologists call anomie—the condition of lacking social boundaries and direction in life. Further, those who do construct a sustainable meaning system often develop one that is so privatized that it offers meaning only to themselves as individuals—ignoring the larger social structure. Because many privatized meaning systems in modern society exalt the autonomy of the individual (self-realization, individual mobility, etc.), the locus of meaning is in the individual biography (Luckmann 1967). Consequently, individuals may not be likely to make sacrifices on behalf of the larger society. For this reason, the privatization of religiosity could be unhealthy in the long run for the larger society.

**Critical Thinking:** Readers may find it interesting and worthwhile to reflect on their own sense of meaning and their own system of values. Do all your values evolve out of a traditional religion? Most of them? Some of them? What other sources have affected your outlook on life? Does it make sense to you to refer to personalized systems of meaning as a form of religiosity? Why or why not?

After garnering significant attention following his initial formulation, over the years fewer sociologists have drawn on Luckmann's concept of "invisible religion." The fundamental concern that motivated Luckmann, however, has not gone away. It lives on most clearly in the concept of "lived religion."

## Lived Religion

Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of lived religion, sociologist Meredith McGuire centers her understanding on the distinction between "the actual experience of religious persons" and "the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices" (McGuire 2008:12). Lived religion, much like Luckmann's invisible religion, is *a part of* rather than *apart from* everyday life. The "Doing Research on Religion" box shows how one well-known sociologist, Nancy Ammerman (2014), has explored lived religion in the contemporary United States.

# DOING RESEARCH ON RELIGION

## FINDING RELIGION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

In a recent book on finding religion in everyday life, Nancy Ammerman challenges some dichotomies that have dominated sociological thinking including sacred *versus* profane. The way forward she offers centers on the study of lived religion. The idea of lived religion, Ammerman recognizes, has been circulating since the 1990s, but it bears repeating that sociologists need to look for religion "outside the (God) box" (as we say in Chapter 12) and can find it in everyday life, if we have the right sensitizing concepts and methodological tools.

Ammerman argues that religion is sociologically accessible through *spiritual stories* individuals tell about everyday life, and the *spiritual tribes* who are both the audience for and co-creators of those stories. Listening to stories highlights not a monolithic Spirituality (singular), but spiritualities (plural) that are culturally patterned. It also draws attention to the ways in which spirituality manifests itself not only in

spiritual practices per se or religious communities, but also at home and work, in public life, and in understandings of health and illness. In an interesting parallel to Luckmann's early ideas about invisible religion, lived religion is literally everywhere.

One reason the sociology of religion emphasizes organized religion so much is that it is easy to study religion there. If we want to study the storied nature of religion outside of organizations—spiritual stories in everyday life—how do we do it? In addition to conducting traditional interviews, Ammerman's research team used photo elicitation interviews (PEIs) and daily diaries. Drawing on Douglas Harper's (2012) work, Ammerman gave disposable cameras to respondents and asked them to photograph at least 5 or 6 places that are important to them. After having the photos developed, the photographers were interviewed about the story behind what was depicted.

(Continued)



(Continued)

In addition, adapting social scientific research that has used diaries, Ammerman's team gave digital audio recorders to respondents, asking them to record 5- to 15-minute stories about their thoughts and/or experiences daily for a week and giving fairly extensive instructions and story ideas. Most respondents did 2 to 3 weeklong rounds of recording over several months.

The way these methods come together can be seen in the case of Theresa Collins. A 66-year-old Episcopalian in Boston, Collins expresses what Ammerman calls "theistic spirituality" in her narrative interviews, PEIs, and diaries. At one point she tells her digital recorder, "[The rector] gave a really wonderful sermon that will stay with me always. This week I will

really enjoy thinking about it in depth as I do my walk in the morning." Later in the book, Ammerman reproduces a photo Collins took of the front gate of her home. This picture gave Collins occasion to talk about how she starts every day by passing through the gate while walking her collie, Digby, saying "Good morning, world" and then starting her prayers. Still later Collins, again recalling her walks, talks about making "a conscientious effort to be a good Christian, um, and to try and develop a relationship" with a "funny little woman who walks around here" (Ammerman 2014:215). From this Ammerman concludes, "Being friendly, even to a difficult person is as much a part of her spiritual practice as the prayers she recites from the Book of Common Prayer" (Ammerman 2014:216).

Photo by Theresa Collins, used by permission of Nancy Tatom Ammerman



**PHOTO 1.5:** Front Gate of Theresa Collins's Home

Without making any claim that Collins is typical, Ammerman shows in this single example, threaded throughout the book, how spiritual stories are

shaped by religious communities (sacred tribes) but also spill over into the world of everyday life, sacralizing the mundane.

---

Source: Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. 2014. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scholars have employed the concept of lived religion in a variety of different settings. For example, rather than simply examining Muslims at prayer or reading the Quran, some have examined how young Muslims in London's East End negotiate their identity in a hostile environment or how Somali migrant women understand Islam in relation to healing and illness (Dessing, Jeldtoft, and Woodhead 2013). Others have applied the concept to the cremation movement in late 19th century America and the singing of hymns by the Ojibwe (a Native American tribe) in northern Minnesota (Hall 1997). Still others have explored "transgressive" forms of lived religion in phenomena like the "ex-gay" movement, Queer nuns and celibacy, monogamy and sexual promiscuity, and BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) (Talvacchia, Larrimore, and Pettinger 2014). That the concept of lived religion appears a number of times in this textbook suggests the usefulness of the idea.

## Spiritual but Not Religious?

Another conceptual issue that raises definitional challenges for sociologists studying religion today is that some people consciously reject organized religion in favor of more individualized forms of "spiritual" belief and practice. It is increasingly common to hear people utter the phrase "I am spiritual, not religious." Spirituality in this sense is seen as a quality of an individual whose inner life is oriented toward God, the supernatural, or the sacred. Spirituality is considered primary, more pure, and more directly related to the soul in its relation to the divine, while religion is secondary, dogmatic, and stifling, often distorted by oppressive sociopolitical and socioeconomic forces. Some scholars have argued that in the new millennium, there is a "divorce" between spirituality and religion with more personal forms of spirituality destined to replace traditional, organized forms of religion (Cimino and Lattin 2002). However, the relationship between spirituality and religion is not quite as simple as that.

Robert Wuthnow argued that "at its core, spirituality consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality" (Wuthnow 1998:viii). There is nothing in this definition of spirituality that makes it inherently antithetical to religion. To the contrary, spirituality has historically been connected to religion. Even though it is a social phenomenon, individual forms of piety such as prayer, meditation, or other devotions (often with a mystical component) have long been part and parcel of many major religious traditions. Sufism in Islam, Kabbalah in Judaism, and Benedictine, Franciscan, and Dominican spirituality in Roman Catholic Christianity are well-known examples. Given the historical connection between traditional religion and spirituality, it may be better to use the term *unchurched spirituality* to refer to religious beliefs and practices that exist outside of traditional religious institutions (Hamberg 2009).

A second important point to consider is that "unchurched" does not mean "not social." Wuthnow pointed out that "spirituality is not just the creation of individuals; it is shaped by larger social circumstances and by the beliefs and values present in the wider culture" (Wuthnow 1998:viii). That is, we construct our spirituality out of the "toolbox" of cultural resources that is available to us at the time we are living.

Courtney Bender highlights this social dimension of spirituality in her study of contemporary spiritual practitioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Spirituality for these individuals is not a purely individual project but is learned and practiced in social organizations, just as religion is (Bender 2010). Some of these social organizations are religious, but Bender also finds spirituality produced in a variety of institutions that are typically considered secular, like medicine, art, and even the market economy. Examples include the Mystical Art and Talent Show and the Whole Health Expo. Spirituality among the “new metaphysicals” Bender studied is also deeply rooted in practices like homeopathic healing, astrology, regression therapy, yoga, Reiki, shamanistic drumming, and spiritual belly dance.

Because of this, Bender suggests that the phrase “spiritual not religious” obscures more than it enlightens. Although they do occupy a different space in the spiritual marketplace than those who dwell in congregational religion, Cambridge’s metaphysicals and mystics are inside rather than outside religion. In the end, although it is conceptually distinct, individual spirituality is never far removed from religion. Survey data that investigate the connection between spirituality and religion



Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

**PHOTO 1.6:** Wildlight Wellness Collective

The Wildlight Wellness Collective in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is an example of a social space providing spiritual practices like Courtney Bender analyzes in her book *The New Metaphysical*. The Collective describes itself as “a sacred space to explore and awaken your body, mind, and spirit through the daily offerings of yoga, HIIT [high intensity interval training], meditation, Tai Chi, Ayurveda, and other classroom modalities. We believe that there are many paths to wellness and spiritual growth and honor them all. Our offerings provide students the unique opportunity to explore an eclectic blend of physical, energetic, and mindfulness practices that unleash and inspire individuals to develop their own personal journey to wholeness and their True Nature” (wildlightwellnesscollective.com).

**TABLE 1.1** Religious, Spiritual, Both, or Neither?

	2012 (%)	2017 (%)
Religious and Spiritual	59	48
Spiritual But Not Religious	19	27
Neither Religious Nor Spiritual	16	18
Religious But Not Spiritual	6	6

Source: Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz. "More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual but Not Religious" (6 September 2017). *Facttank*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-they-re-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

suggest as much. An early survey of baby boomers—individuals born between 1945 and 1963 who are supposed to be on the leading edge of the revolution in spirituality in American society—found that nearly 60% of the respondents identified themselves as *both* spiritual *and* religious. Only 15% of the respondents answered that they were spiritual but not religious (Roof 1999).

More recently, the Pew Research Center has been asking a representative sample of Americans questions similar to Roof's. Rather than asking if people think of themselves as "spiritual not religious," respondents were asked two separate questions: "Do you think of yourself as a religious person, or not?" and "Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person, or not?" When Pew first asked this question in 2012, the responses looked very much like what Roof found a decade earlier (see Table 1.1). Only 18% of the sample considered themselves spiritual but not religious, while 3 times as many (59%) considered themselves both spiritual and religious. Only 16% of respondents did not consider themselves either religious or spiritual. In just 5 years, responses shifted dramatically. The percentage of individuals identifying themselves as spiritual but not religious increased by over 40% and the percentage identifying as religious and spiritual declined by nearly 20%. Although it is easy to imagine this to be a reflection of generational change, there is no difference in the "spiritual but not religious" between those 18 to 29, 30 to 49, and 50 to 64 years of age. About 30% of each of these age groups say spiritual "yes" and religious "no," compared to those older than 65, 17% of whom are spiritual but not religious (Lipka and Gecewicz 2017).

## The Concept of Religion as Employed in This Text

In attempting to present a comprehensive sociological perspective on religion, our approach is to be as inclusive as possible. Therefore, rather than dichotomizing religion from nonreligion, sacred from profane, visible from invisible, official from lived, spiritual from religious, we seek to explore anything that provides meaning and purpose in the lives of people. We ask *how* people are religious rather than *whether* they are religious. Hence, the perspective of this book will be most compatible with the comprehensive symbolic definition of Geertz, although we also incorporate the research and insights of those who use a broader functional definition or a more narrow substantive definition of religion.

To summarize, we maintain that religion is an interdependent system by which a community of people are bonded by:

- a shared meaning system (a faith or a worldview);
- a set of myths (beliefs), rituals, and symbol systems that sacralize the meaning system for the members;
- a sense of belonging to some group;
- a system of ethics or values that is directive in the lives of the members; and
- a set of routinized social expectations and patterns.

At the same time, we hope that these criteria for identifying religion are sufficiently broad so that we do not miss the religious significance of nontraditional groups and even less organized spiritual movements. We will be studying Methodists, Muslims, and Moonies, but this approach also allows us to explore belly dancing, skateboarding, and Scientology as religious practices that can impact traditional religion and that may well be emerging as new religions.

## A Final Word About Definitions

---

One's definition of religion is important, for it specifies what are and what are not appropriate objects of investigation for the sociologist of religion. The discussion in this chapter is designed to help the reader understand differences in the ways religion has been defined by scholars. We hope this discussion has stimulated you to think through your own criteria for identifying religion. A consensus among us would be convenient, but a lack of agreement need not cause problems for the empirical study of religion (Lechner 2003). The purpose of this text is not to convert readers to the authors' theoretical persuasion but to help you think more clearly about the relationship between religion, culture, and society.

Before going further, it would be helpful to consider (1) your own assumptions regarding the definition of religion, (2) the defining criteria used by the social scientists discussed in this chapter, and (3) the perspective of the authors. As we noted at the outset of this chapter, and as Yinger has written,

Definitions are tools; they are to some degree arbitrary. . . . They are abstract, which is to say they are oversimplifications. . . . We must relinquish the idea that there is any one definition that is correct and satisfactory for all. (Yinger 1970:4)

The definition we each use tends to "slice up life" a little differently and causes us to focus on slightly different phenomena as most important. Hence, we have begun by making our assumptions about religion explicit. For an exercise that can help you take a more reflexive approach to your own assumptions, see the "Illustrating Sociological Concepts" box on designing your own religion.



# ILLUSTRATING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

## DESIGN YOUR OWN RELIGION

Our assumptions about what we mean by the term *religion* are hard for us to see. That, after all, is the nature of assumptions. By outlining various ways of defining religion, as well as highlighting conceptual distinctions between religion and spirituality, this chapter helps students get some critical distance on their assumptions about religion.

An assignment created by Boston University religion professors M. David Eckel and Stephen Prothero offers students an excellent vehicle for further examining their understanding of what religion is, and also what they like and dislike about religion as they understand it. Professors Eckel and Prothero ask students to *design their own new religion* and to present it to their classmates. The class then votes on the best new religion, and the designers of the winning religion earn A's for the presentation portion of the assignment.

If you were to design your own new religion, what would it look like? Professors Eckel and Prothero encourage their students to consider the following questions when undertaking this assignment:

- How does your religion incorporate different dimensions of religion (ritual, myth, experience and emotion, organization, morals/ethics, doctrine/philosophy, material culture)?
- What holidays does it celebrate?

- How does it deal with birth? Death?
- What are its key symbols? Beliefs? Practices?
- How, if at all, does it deal with the problem of evil?
- Does it have any interesting moral teachings? A political ethic? A sexual ethic?
- Does it have a story of creation or of the end of the world?
- What kinds of institutions or activities does it support?
- Finally, what is your religion really about?

Doing this assignment at the outset of your course—whether in writing, as a presentation to your classmates, or just as a mental exercise—will help you begin to make explicit and engage your assumptions about religion.

At the end of the course, you can also take some time to reflect back on the religion you designed and see what ideas from the course were most helpful in understanding why you designed the religion the way you did. You can also take on some broader questions: Having studied the sociology of religion, what would you change about the religion you designed? What does the particular religion you designed tell you about the current state and future prospects of religion in your society?

---

Source: Kevin Matthew Taylor, 2016. "What American College Students Want from Religion: Facebookism, Lucid Dreaming, and Bodhisattva Tupac Shakur." *Implicit Religion* 19(2):237–65.

Although there is no consensus on the definition of religion, there is agreement among sociologists that any investigation of religion must be based on empirical methods of investigation. In the next chapter, we explore what it means to take a social scientific approach to studying religion.

## SUMMARY AND LOOKING FORWARD

Definitions of religion are usually one of two types: (1) substantive (which focus on the substance or essence of religion) and (2) functional (which focus on what religion does). Substantive definitions usually emphasize a specific belief, such as in spiritual beings or in a supernatural realm, or they stress the distinction between sacred and profane realms of experience. Substantive definitions tend to focus attention on the traditional forms of religiosity. Functional definitions identify religion as that which provides a sense of ultimate meaning in life. Social scientists who are interested in cultural change and new forms of meaning that are emergent tend to favor functional definitions. Because they are not overly focused on traditional forms of religiosity, they often view religion as changing rather than as declining.

This text is based on the definition of religion as an interdependent system by which a community of people are bonded (a) by a shared meaning system (a faith or a worldview); (b) by a set of myths (beliefs), rituals, and symbol systems that sacralize the meaning system for the members;

(c) by a sense of belonging to a reference group; (d) by a system of ethics or values that is directive in the lives of the members; and (e) by a set of routinized social expectations and patterns.

Taking seriously our own idea that definitions are tools to be judged not as true or false but as more or less useful, in this chapter we considered other phenomena that share boundaries with religion (like invisible religion or lived spirituality) and in some cases challenge accepted understandings of what religion is and what it is not. Invisible religion, lived religion, and the relationship between spirituality and religion each remind us of the importance of making conceptual distinctions, but also of being open to new social developments that may challenge our assumptions about what should or should not be considered under the heading “religion.” Looking forward, we need to be willing to adapt our understanding of religion—including the very definition of religion we use—in order to capture a complex and ever changing social reality.

**Concluding Questions:** What do you mean by the term *religion* and how does this chapter inform your previous understanding? Looking at the world around you today, is there anything you think of as religion or religion-ish that out to be included in any comprehensive and useful definition?