Why Religion?

1. What is religion?
2. What functions does it serve?
3. What is the difference between religion and “god”?
4. What is sociology?
5. Why is religion interesting to sociologists?

Religion is a pervasive force around the world. As the newsflashes in the introduction suggest, religion shapes how people behave and how they think about the world and their place in it.

Before we can understand the effects of religion in our world, however, we need to understand what exactly religion is. For many Americans, the word evokes familiar images of church, worship, prayer, traditions, and pilgrimage. Religion is harder to recognize, however, when it takes less familiar forms:

- Following strict rules that govern the killing of an animal
- Carefully washing hands before a meal
- Performing a dance or a song
- Frequently repeating a particular greeting or kind words
- Following restrictions on food or drink that have nothing to do with dieting or being a picky eater

Each of these acts is infused with religious meaning, at least to some groups of people. It is easy to overlook the significance of these acts, however, if you do not know much about religious beliefs and practices outside your own faith.
Baylor University sociologists Jerry Park and Joseph Baker recently reported the results of their survey exploring how often people “consume” (buy or view) religious goods (Park and Baker, 2007). The survey asked about art and jewelry with religious themes, sacred books, religious music and educational materials, and bumper stickers and cards with religious content (e.g., “What would Jesus do?”). Park and Baker also collected data on specific books and visual media. For example, they asked people whether they had watched *The Passion of the Christ* or *Veggie Tales*. Had they read *God’s Politics* by the liberal Christian Evangelical Jim Wallis, Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life*, or Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*? Had they seen TV programs like *7th Heaven, This Is Your Day*, featuring Benny Hinn; or *Touched by an Angel*? Had they read any of the *Left Behind* series, a book on Dianetics, or anything by James Dobson?

Many people recognize the religious connotations of these items. But that is probably because the exemplars—the objects the researchers chose to represent religious products—represent a fairly narrow range of religions. All but two of the exemplars are associated with variants of Christianity. The exceptions include Dianetics, which comes from L. Ron Hubbard’s Scientology religion, and the TV show *Touched by an Angel*, which presents a world populated by spirits in human form (“angels”) who are sent by an otherwise unnamed “holy father.” The religion in *Touched by an Angel* is monotheistic, but it does not mention Christianity, Jesus, or a savior. This study’s findings mostly tell us about buying or viewing products that are associated with the major religious traditions of Christianity.

What about less well known religious traditions? A vast array of religious traditions exists beyond Christianity and Scientology in the United States and worldwide. Each of these traditions has its own beliefs and practices, along with associated objects that people might buy or books or other media that people might view. Wouldn’t it be interesting to know about those, too?

Perhaps you do not care about the unfamiliar. As long as you follow your own beliefs and practices, you may think you do not need to understand those of others. When it comes to religion, you may just want to mind your own business. (We doubt that this describes you! If it did, why would you read this book?) But there are consequences of not seeing the religious in the unfamiliar. We offer one well-known and tragic example.

In her nonfiction book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, author Anne Fadiman chronicles a clash of cultures between American doctors and immigrant Hmong refugees from Laos (Fadiman 1998). Doctors in Merced, California, concluded that Lia, the young daughter of a Hmong couple, had epilepsy. Over the next couple of years, the toddler had a series of traumatic grand mal seizures that caused her parents to repeatedly bring her to the local emergency room. To the doctors, Lia’s treatment was obvious: a complex regimen of medications to manage epilepsy. Nonetheless, Lia’s case confounded the doctors and other hospital staff. They were perplexed by crescent-shaped indentations on her skin, not knowing that the marks resulted from a healing ceremony. They were taken aback when her parents brought traditional healers to visit her. And they were grossed out by the strange foods that her parents brought to her hospital room. (Imagine what the doctors would have thought of the pig sacrifice that the family conducted in the parking lot of their apartment building?) Most of all, Lia’s physicians were frustrated when her parents often seemed to ignore their medical directions.

During the years that they treated her, Lia’s doctors never wondered what her parents thought was happening to her. A language barrier complicated the situation: The parents spoke no English and the doctors spoke no Hmong. But working through
translators, Fadiman uncovered the parents’ understanding. They explained to her that right before Lia’s first grand mal seizure, her older sister slammed the door and frightened Lia’s spirit away. Whereas Lia’s doctors saw an organic condition typified by misplaced electrical impulses in the brain, Lia’s family saw a spirit lost in a world where bodies and spirits live side by side, in constant interaction with each other. Even if the parents spoke English, or the doctors understood the Hmong language, how would members of an ethnic group driven from their isolated home in the mountains of Laos communicate about the presence of spirits to scientifically trained Western doctors? Animistic religion was so central and powerful to the lives of Lia and her family that Fadiman wrote of the Hmong people: “Medicine was religion. Religion was society. Society was medicine.” But this sort of religion, so integrally tied to every sphere of life and populated by spirits both benign and malevolent, is invisible to doctors who are trained to see the world from a Western, scientific perspective. Their understanding of disease allows no room for the existence of spirits or an influence of the spirit world on a little girl.

Add to that chasm in understanding the difference in the way that Lia’s parents and her doctors evaluated the meaning of her seizures. To the doctors, the seizures were a serious medical disorder that needed to be controlled lest Lia suffer permanent brain damage. Her parents, though frightened by the severity of her seizures, believed that their daughter had a special connection to the spiritual world, a connection that could give her an elevated status in the Hmong community. As a result, they were not always sure that they wanted to “cure” her condition.

But her doctors knew none of this. When they were informed, years later, about how Lia’s parents understood her condition, the doctors were incredulous. Animism, the injection of the spiritual into objects we encounter in day-to-day life, was alien to these doctors. More importantly, it never even occurred to them to ask the parents what they believed about their daughter’s condition, not just because of a language barrier but because the doctors took for granted their scientific explanation of events. The gap between the scientific and religious explanations became an invisible impediment to her care: It impaired trust between the doctors and the family and led to profound misunderstandings about Lia’s condition, its treatment, and her prognosis. Lia’s care was compromised because of a lack of cross-cultural understanding, and everyone who encountered Lia—her family, medical staff, and social workers—experienced a lot of fear, stress, and uncertainty, partly because of the severity of her illness and partly because of their lack of understanding.

Whether the Hmong beliefs reflected scientific reality or not, they exerted a real force in this situation: Religious beliefs drove how her parents responded to and understood events, despite being unseen by Lia’s doctors. Had the doctors recognized the distinctive Hmong religion and culture, they might have approached her treatment differently and more effectively. For example, they might have worked with her family, Hmong shamans and elders, and the family’s religious beliefs and traditions to develop a treatment plan. The experience of the care process for Lia, her family, and her doctors might have been transformed by better understanding.

In this instance, and in others like it, at levels of analysis from the interpersonal to the cross-national, there are practical implications of being bound by the familiar and not recognizing the pivotal role of religion in our world today. This is why we need tools to understand religion—what it is, what it does—that allow us to see beyond that which is familiar to us to appreciate a wide range of religious beliefs and their effects on ourselves and those around us.
WHAT IS RELIGION ANYWAY?

Stop for a moment. Write or type an answer to this question: What is religion? Go ahead. Take a stab at this. We’ll gladly wait.

Did you find it easy to define religion? Creating a definition that stands up under scrutiny is harder than you might expect. One approach used by sociologists (scientists who study people and human social behavior) is to create criteria that they then apply to decide whether a practice or belief indeed represents a religion. For example, Melford Spiro, an American cultural anthropologist, defined religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Spiro 1996, 98). You may be thinking, “What in the world does that mean?” It will help if we walk through an example. Let’s apply Spiro’s definition to the branch of Christianity known as Catholicism. First, we’ll consider whether Catholicism is an institution that consists of culturally patterned interactions. In other words, are patterns of relationships, behaviors, and beliefs embodied in it? Well, Catholicism has an organizational structure that extends from Rome into local communities worldwide. It has a hierarchy of authorities (e.g., the Pope, cardinals, archbishops, priests). It has a clearly articulated theology that covers a wide range of subjects, ritual practices, and expectations for the behavior of followers. So Catholicism meets our first criterion. As for our second criterion, do those interactions involve culturally postulated superhuman beings? “God” certainly qualifies as such a being. When we can answer yes to both questions, then we are dealing with a religion according to Spiro’s definition.

If we consider the case of consumerism, we may answer those questions differently. Consumerism is certainly an “institution that consists of culturally patterned interactions.” It is embodied in social and cultural practices including mass production, marketing, shopping and waste disposal, and driven by beliefs about shopping being good for the economy and an enjoyable pursuit. But consumerism has no “culturally postulated superhuman beings”: The “dollar as the almighty god” really is just a metaphor. So, although consumerism is a powerful social force, it falls short of being a religion by Spiro’s definition.

So, it wasn’t so difficult to define religion. But the minute you settle on criteria, someone is bound to come up with a compelling counterexample, forcing you to adjust your thinking. In part, this happens because we tend to generate definitions on the basis of what is familiar to us. So, if you build your definition of religion around what is most familiar to you, and you are a typical modern Westerner, you may form a definition of religion that includes a single supernatural being: a “god” such as the one found in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. But this definition focuses too narrowly on monotheistic traditions. Our definition should include polytheistic faiths (ones with multiple gods). As you may remember from high school mythology, Greek and Roman religious belief systems were populated with a lot of gods. Some scholars have argued that the Catholic faith posits more than one “spiritual being” because it embraces a Trinitarian conception of God in which three components—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—make up the entity of God, and because Catholicism features a multitude of saints and angels.

Even if your definition of religion includes belief in god or gods (plural), it may unwittingly exclude other belief systems. For example, animists believe in the existence of an unseen reality (the supernatural), but not in “gods” per se. The Hmong people, who believe that spirits inhabit the world alongside us, are animists. And if you extend your definition of religion to encompass beliefs and practices related to the supernatural, you...
will still miss other belief systems commonly understood to be religious. For example, Buddhism is oriented around practices that are thought to lead to a richer and fuller life but it does not involve gods, spirits, or even a supernatural realm.

Spiro provided us with a substantive definition of religion. A substantive definition tells us what religion is and provides criteria for elements that should be included in the category of “religion.” But substantive definitions are dead ends because they are rooted in particular times, places, and cultural contexts. They blind us to what may serve as religion in other times, places, and contexts.

To avoid this trap, we may take a different approach to defining religion: thinking through what religion does as opposed to explaining what religion is. Although the content of religious systems varies widely across time and place, sociologists have identified some key functions that religion serves. These functions are common across widely disparate systems of belief, practice, and community:

1. Religion provides comfort and quells dissatisfaction.
2. Religion strengthens human community.
3. Religion assures its followers that there is a larger cosmic order.

**Religion Provides Comfort and Quells Dissatisfaction**

Perhaps the most famous functional definition of religion was provided by Karl Marx when he claimed that

> Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritualistic point d’honneur [trans.: principle], its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless condition. It is the opium of the people. (Marx 1843, 53–54)

Marx believed that religion arose out of oppressive conditions and supported the status quo by justifying inequality, consoling the downtrodden, and dulling the pains of daily life. To Marx, religion was fundamentally conservative in that it confirms and reinforces existing social arrangements. It justifies laws that limit people’s freedoms, it validates the rule of the powerful and oppression of the weak, and it makes sense of economic inequality and other forms of social disparity. In so doing, religion also suppresses people’s resistance to oppressive systems.

To serve these purposes, religion need not take any specific form, posit a god or supernatural beings, or embody particular practices. It need only justify existing conditions and soothe those who suffer. Marx’s understanding of the functions of religion does not apply to all cases, of course. As we will discuss in Chapter 7, there are numerous examples in history when religious groups stood up to challenge existing social arrangements—unfair laws, discriminatory practices, or economic inequality—and when religion served more to drive social change than to inhibit it. Marx did not acknowledge this fairly common use of religion. Thus, his functional definition of religion—“it is the opium of the people”—is oversimplified. It nonetheless provides a useful starting point for thinking about the functions of religion: Religion provides comfort to individuals and justifications for existing social arrangements.
Religion Strengthens Human Community

The 19th-century French sociologist Emile Durkheim offers a more comprehensive explanation of the function of religion when he writes that religion is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1912, 44). It is a densely worded definition, but unpacked; it contains a number of important elements of religion: belief, ritual, sacred elements, and community. It is also a strong statement that the main function of religion in society is to strengthen human communities.

ON BELIEF AND RITUAL

Durkheim (1912) identifies two key elements of religion: belief and ritual. According to him, beliefs are “states of opinion and consist in representations.” Essentially, beliefs are what we think. Rituals are “determined modes of action.” They are what we do. Recall that substantive definitions of religion typically try to define the content of religious beliefs; specifically, belief in a god or the supernatural characterizes religion.

After studying a wide variety of world religions past and present, Durkheim concluded that religions share one significant common belief. He argued that all known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred (Durkheim 1912, 34).

But what is the difference between the sacred and the profane? The definition of sacred varies across religious systems, so we will not find the answer in particular objects, beliefs, persons, or practices. There are hierarchical rankings even within the categories of sacred and profane. Some sacred objects are more sacred than others, for example. So saying that sacred elements are superior in dignity and power to profane elements does not help us distinguish them. To solve this problem, Durkheim settles on the “absolute” heterogeneity of these categories. That is, the sacred and profane are completely and totally different from each other. Any interaction between the two must be undertaken with the greatest of care:

The sacred thing is par excellence that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity . . . this establishment of relations [between the sacred and the profane] is always a delicate operation in itself, demanding great precautions and a more or less complicated initiation . . . . (Durkheim 1912, 38)

To distinguish the sacred from the profane, Durkheim does not focus on the specific content of the categories of sacred and profane, because these vary so widely across religious systems. Instead, he focuses on the way that the sacred and profane are treated in human societies, particularly with respect to each other:

Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. (Durkheim 1912, 38)
Rituals are “the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects” (Durkheim 1912, 38). Because the sacred and profane are mutually exclusive and completely dissimilar categories, problems arise when the sacred and profane meet. We have trouble imagining how the two can safely mingle: What if the profane contaminates the sacred? What if the profane is transformed into the sacred? These scenarios are understood to be socially dangerous possibilities. Nonetheless, the sacred and profane do sometimes interact—for example, when humans, whose bodies may be considered profane, touch or consume sacred objects. When this happens, people generally take great care to structure their contact with rituals, specifying a set of steps that makes interaction between the sacred and the profane safe. Thus, humans may reach out to the sacred through prayer, liturgy, dance, or song.

We see rituals, undertaken as precautions, across numerous religious traditions. Once, after attending an Episcopal worship service in an outdoor chapel, one of the authors (Monahan) proposed feeding the leftover consecrated bread to the birds. She was trying to avoid having to eat it herself. The priest who had led the service was unwavering: The bread must be consumed or saved for a later worship service. It was absolutely forbidden to throw the bread on the ground or leave it for the birds. A sacred element—the consecrated bread—cannot be treated in profane ways, even for the benefit of the birds. “Ah,” your author thought, “that explains why, at the end of a communion service in a Christian church, the celebrant guzzles the leftover wine up at the altar at 11 A.M. on a Sunday morning. You can’t just pour it down the drain!”

Because of concerns about the profane contaminating the sacred, Judaism understands the name of God ("Yhwh") to be unpronounceable by humans, preserving its mystery and majesty; Orthodox Judaism bans menstruating women from attending temple; and Hindus abstain from eating the meat of cows, which are sacred to them.

Thus, Durkheim argues that religion is a system with two interrelated parts: (1) beliefs about how the world is divided into distinct, mutually exclusive, and wholly encompassing spheres of the sacred and the profane; and (2) practices through which sacred objects, people, ideas, and actions can safely come into contact with the profane. But that raises the question, What is the point of all of this?

ON COMMUNITY As a class exercise early in a Sociology of Religion class, we sometimes ask students to come up with a list of questions for a survey that would measure the "religiosity" of individuals, that is, how strongly people hold their religious beliefs. We remind students that they should expect to survey a culturally and ethnically diverse group of people. (Think beyond Christianity!) What questions would you ask?

To get students started, we provide a list of questions that researchers have used in the past to measure aspects of religion. We tell students that they may use, adapt, or eliminate any of these questions. Very quickly, the class eliminates questions about specific religious beliefs. Being able to recite the Ten Commandments serves as evidence of religiosity only in people who are Christian or Jewish, and being able to recognize prominent quotes from the Koran does not speak to religiosity in other traditions. Praying, attending worship services, and donating money to a church are also aspects of some religions but not others.
Common ground emerges in an intriguing place, in questions that on the surface seem not to be about religious belief and practice at all: How much time do you spend with friends who share your religious beliefs, and how likely are you to marry within your faith? In fact, most students eliminate almost all other questions before arriving at these two as ways to measure religiosity. What is intriguing is that the first question does not capture how much time a person spends participating in religious activities with friends who share the same beliefs, just how much time in general the person spends around such friends. Yet students conclude that it is likely to be a good measure of general religiosity. Similarly, the second question does not measure a person’s engagement in religious activities with his or her spouse. Instead, it captures how likely the person is to partner for life with someone else who shares the same faith.

These questions highlight the fundamentally social nature of religion. That is, while religion includes beliefs and practices, these elements exist to build religious community and integrate people into that community. When students lean toward measuring the strength of religious faith through questions that focus on affiliation with other members of a religious group, they implicitly understand this.

In fact, Durkheim claims that religion happens only within a community or collective setting. Those who adhere to the notion of individual spirituality might object to that limitation, claiming that their solitary practices also constitute “religion.” But Durkheim is clear that a central function of religion is to create and strengthen common bonds among members of social groups and to tie members to the group as a whole. Note that he makes no claim that individual spirituality does not exist, only that it is tangential to the cohesive function of religion for the group as a whole. The “unified system of belief and practice” matters because it emerges from the social group and belongs to the group as a whole: Beliefs and rituals are communally recounted and practiced, and together they provide vital glue that holds the social group together.

Thus, the type of people with whom you regularly interact, especially voluntary interaction on nonwork time, is generally a strong indicator of your degree of religiosity. People who hold strong religious beliefs and engage in regular religious practice often associate with others who share their beliefs and practices, irrespective of the content of the religion. Likewise, marriage within the group is a robust measure of degree of religiosity because marriage typically has both civil and religious meaning and creates a presumably permanent social tie with another person. Of course, some people marry outside their religious group. Almost everyone knows someone who has done so. But the tendency toward marrying within the group is stronger among those who profess higher levels of religiosity. In sum, religious beliefs and practices unite the community and provide a powerful foundation for the rest of social life. In Chapter 5, we will explore in more detail the ways in which religion builds community and strengthens community cohesiveness.

**Religion Assures us of Cosmic Order**

Peter Berger, a sociologist and a Lutheran theologian, takes a broader approach to understanding the function of religion when he argues that religion is “the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as humanly significant” (Berger 1967, 28). (See Box 1.1) He argues that humans are fundamentally meaning-seeking creatures: It is our very nature to impose order on our experiences and seek meaning in day-to-day events. In so doing, we reject chaos and the possibility that events are random in nature. We see much anecdotal
evidence that Berger is right about this. A child dies, and through their grief, parents vow that the child's death will “mean something”: They may start a foundation, lobby for passage of a law, or speak publicly about a larger issue related to their child's death. The child's death is transformed from an isolated, random, tragic event that happens with some degree of regularity—diseases strike, drunk drivers kill, accidents happen—to an event with meaning and larger purpose, an event connected to the greater social order. Similarly, an elderly woman wins the lottery and believes that she is being repaid for a lifetime of financial struggles and generous acts. It is entirely unsatisfying to think that picking the right lottery numbers might be just dumb luck and unrelated to the moral fiber of the lucky winner to conceive that a selfish and callous person could be fortunate enough to beat the odds.

According to Berger, humans constantly seek order and meaning in daily events as a way to fight off the alternative—the admission that our lives are full of random unpredictability, which leaves us enmeshed in the terrifying and dark morass of chaos. Chaos, or the absence of order, is terrifying to humans because it suggests a potentially risky situation over which we have no control.

One common type of order is what Berger refers to as nomos, the imposition of order by humans on everyday events so that events seem more predictable and stable. Schedules and appointments, laws of science, social norms such as driving on the right side of the road, and stereotypes about other people all take masses of information, actions, and events and place them in a system of humanly constructed and understood order.

But the most robust order is cosmos, a conception of order that links human experience to a transcendental order, providing a sense that our lives are not mere aggregations of random events but instead that our experiences are connected to some larger sacred order. As people often say in both good and bad times, “It’s all part of God’s plan.” Events that otherwise make no sense are explained through their connection to a cosmic order. When terrorists crashed a plane into a building, Jerry Falwell, a prominent religious leader, claimed that “the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians . . . the ACLU, People For the American Way . . . created an environment which possibly has caused God to lift the veil of protection . . .” (CNN 2001). Falwell is convinced that such a tragic event must be connected to some larger and sacred order. It cannot be an accident, a fluke, or a mundane failure of airport security. The universe cannot be so cruel. It must mean something.

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**BOX 1.1**

**Some Definitions of Religion:**

- **Melford Spiro (1966):** Religion is “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”
- **Karl Marx (1843):** Religion is “the opium of the people.”
- **Emile Durkheim (1912):** Religion is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all who adhere to them.”
- **Peter Berger (1967):** Religion is “the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as humanly significant.”
In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, people expressed a variety of attitudes toward those who stayed in New Orleans as the storm approached. Some of the harshest evaluations came from those whose criticisms suggested that they would have done things differently: “I would have hoofed it out of there” said one student who was not the least bit compassionate toward—and indeed seemed disgusted by—the people who remained behind. She even said, “They got what they deserved.” This student was certain that those who stayed behind were basically flawed human beings, and she insisted that their suffering was not random but deserved. Berger’s lens suggests that she had a different underlying thought, something along the following lines: “I cannot believe that this was just a random event that happened to random people, because that would mean that someday something like this could happen to me. There is order in this world and nothing so awful could ever happen to a deserving person like me.”

To admit that a terrifying and tragic event could befall anyone at any time is to acknowledge the significant degree of randomness in our day-to-day existence. It is this sense of inherent chaos that, with the help of religion, we fight so hard to fend off. Humans resist the notion that events are random by conceiving that the events are meaningful in some larger cosmic order.

**A SOCIOLOGICAL CONSENSUS: RELIGION IS A HUMAN PRODUCT**

Sociologists and anthropologists agree on one essential point: Religion is a product of human beings. Across time and place, human beings create religion: They originate belief systems, they develop rituals, and they form communities of faith. Sometimes this happened so far in the past that we forget religion's origins. But religion originates in human societies.

So what is the relationship between religion and its subject (e.g., God, gods, the supernatural and so on)? Think of it this way: Religion is the human system that reflects our understandings of reality, order, and appropriate ways to engage the sacred, whereas supernatural formulations such as a god or gods are posited as existing and are understood through the lens provided by religion. Religion is not the same thing as “god.” Instead, religion creates the perception of a bridge between humans and what is variously called “god,” the supernatural, or the cosmic order. It is a way for human beings to understand and to reach out and connect to something larger and unknowable that they believe is out there.

Many people find this understanding of religion to be contentious because it suggests that “god” does not really exist but is instead a product of human imagination. Peter Berger responds to this concern in an endnote to his book *The Sacred Canopy*, in which he points out that the claim that religion is a human creation does not speak to the question of whether “god” or some other larger cosmic order really exists (Berger 1967). The existence of “god” or that larger cosmic order is simply not empirically verifiable. Despite copious efforts by believers and nonbelievers, it is not possible to either confirm or disprove the existence of “god.” Understanding religion as a human product, Berger argues, implies nothing about the existence of some ultimate reality.

What is most important to sociologists is that the claim of this reality drives the creation of religious beliefs, rituals, structures, and communities. Those phenomena are consequential and empirically observable. While there is no empirical evidence that religious structures, beliefs, and practices are inspired by some ultimate being, force, or order, there is plenty about religion that is worth exploring and understanding. Religion is real in its consequences and effects. And, of course, it feels real—in its substance—to believers.
It is worth examining the nature of religion that makes people take it for granted, the sense that it is simply is and always has been. Much of any institution’s power lies in its ability to make its human roots invisible. In other words, when an institution—such as religion—is understood to be timeless, enduring, or emerging from other than human sources, that institution is more likely to be taken for granted (in the sense that people will believe and trust in it), and its stability is enhanced. On the other hand, when the human origins of an institution become apparent, the institution is often weakened in the eyes of observers.

Consider, for example, Jon Krakauer’s account of the origins of The Book of Mormon, the text that lies at the heart of the Mormon faith, which in 2008 claimed over 13 million adherents. Krakauer recounts how Joseph Smith, a farmer in upstate New York, found buried treasure using “divining.” On four attempts, Smith failed to find the treasure, but on the fifth attempt he supposedly was greeted by an angel named Moroni who had been sent from God, who allowed Smith to dig up a box that contained a sacred text written on golden plates. The text was written in “reformed Egyptian,” a dead language, but Moroni gave Smith magic glasses that allowed Smith to read, translate, and transcribe the plates. When Smith completed the 116-page translation, Moroni reclaimed the golden plates and the magic glasses. As the story goes, the original translation was lost, and Moroni returned to Smith with the golden plates but not the magic glasses, so Smith relied on another technique for “translating” the text:

Day after day, utilizing a technique he had learned from a local girl, Joseph Smith would place the magic rock in an upturned hat, bury his face in it with the stack of gold plates sitting nearby, and dictate the lines of scripture that appeared to him out of the blackness. He worked at a feverish pace... averaging some thirty-five hundred words a day, and by the end of June 1829 the job was finished. (Krakauer 2003, 63)

The result was The Book of Mormon.

Krakauer’s striking account lays clear the human roots of religion—how religion is originated by human beings. Whether you believe that Joseph Smith was divinely inspired or not, the account is unsettling because it suggests that a rapidly growing worldwide religion began with the mundane, if somewhat odd, act of a man who lived less than 200 years ago. In this case, the human roots of this religion are so obvious that it is hard to see how a faith—one that is obviously compelling on the basis of recent growth in its adherents—could have been founded on it.

But is the narrative of the founding of Mormonism really any more outlandish than the founding stories of other religions—stone tablets inscribed with text handed down on a mountain, or an individual who dies and comes back to life again? Or is the founding story more transparently a human product because not enough time has yet passed to render the belief system part of the taken-for-granted cultural landscape?

In his New York Times Magazine article, “What Is It about Mormonism?”, Noah Feldman confronts the common response to this tale of the religion’s origins:

... [E]ven among those who respect Mormons personally, it is still common to hear Mormonism’s tenets dismissed as ridiculous. This attitude is logically indefensible insofar as Mormonism is being compared with other world religions. There is nothing inherently less plausible about God’s revealing himself to an upstate New York farmer in the early years of the Republic than to
the pharaoh’s changeling grandson in ancient Egypt. But what is driving the tendency to discount Joseph Smith’s revelations is not that they seem less reasonable than those of Moses; it is that the book containing them is so new. When it comes to prophecy, antiquity breeds authenticity. Events in the distant past, we tend to think, occurred in sacred, mythic time. Not so revelations received during the presidencies of James Monroe or Andrew Jackson. (Feldman 2008)

Over time, the human roots of a given religion become less visible, and the religion itself becomes more taken-for-granted as timelessly and universally real, rather than being the ideas and practices of a person or group at one particular point in time. None of this changes the fact that religion is a human product. It only explains how, over time, we come to overlook that uncomfortable reality.

People have also sought to uncover the human roots of older and more established religions, a practice that often causes discomfort and dissent within religious communities. In her memoir *The Spiral Staircase*, religious historian and former Catholic nun Karen Armstrong describes her surprise upon encountering “New Testament criticism,” a scholarly body of work that examines in detail how the New Testament of the Bible was constructed. New Testament critics have concluded that the Bible was written years after the death of Jesus and that there were fierce political debates among the contributors about what to include and exclude. In addition, the text underwent numerous transformations at the hands of humans: It was translated from one language to another, people made copies that were slightly different versions, and people used gradual to abrupt adaptations of certain words. New Testament critics claim that, in all, decisions made by humans over time shaped the Christianity we know today, and the Bible is only the current record of a document that has been evolving for a long time, despite the fact that some people hold it to be fixed, sacred, and constant (or even literal). Bart Ehrman, a religious historian at the University of North Carolina, popularized New Testament criticism research in his books *Misquoting Jesus* and *Lost Christianities*. His work and that of fellow New Testament critics have elicited strong negative responses, especially from fundamentalist Christians. For example, Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace, theology professors at the Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote *Dethroning Jesus* to counter the claims of the New Testament critics: The book’s promotional materials claim that it will “help readers understand that the orthodox understanding of Christ and his divinity is as trustworthy and sure as it ever was.” For Karen Armstrong, however, this scholarship was eye-opening. After she spent a lifetime in the Catholic Church, “New Testament Criticism” challenged the previously unquestioned reality of her religious beliefs by highlighting their very human roots.

**THE PROMISE OF SOCIOLOGY**

Students often say that they are drawn to sociology because they are “interested in people” and they have heard that “sociologists study people.” Probe more deeply, and you will hear that people do “stuff” that the students want to better understand: They think, act, and feel. But the typical student has yet to grasp the full meaning of the word *people*, and with it, the inherent power of sociology.
Students of sociology often start out as closet psychologists. In order to understand people better, they take the methodological approach of focusing on individuals. They naively assume that if they study enough individuals—their beliefs, behaviors, and feelings—they will reach a full understanding of “people” as a group, as well. The belief has an intuitive and compelling logic on the surface, one that fits well with the way that Western culture socializes us to see the world around us as made up of individual actors with free will.

But the approach demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of sociology’s object of study and, more important, sociology’s power as a tool for explanation. To many students, the term *people* is merely the plural of *person*; it is the aggregation of two or more individuals. But to social scientists, the term *people* connotes something different: Though indeed a “people” is made up of individuals, it is noteworthy because it is larger than the mere sum of its constituent parts. Sociologists do not study individuals or “people” in the adding-up-individuals sense. “People” are not merely “persons,” and sociology is not, as students often assume, the study of the experiences of individual persons, viewed in isolation from their social relationships or ties. Instead, sociology focuses on the collective itself: the nation, the community, the family, the group, the organization, and so on. It ponders all the ways that people organize themselves and examines human arrangements.

Those arrangements include what sociologists call “structure,” or stable patterns of social relationships. Groups, communities, bureaucracies, and families are examples of institutions that demonstrate social structure. The arrangements also include “culture”—the values, norms, and knowledge of a group or society. Social practices, including recurrent patterns of behavior, are also a type of human arrangement. So the practices of going to church on Sunday, attending synagogue on the Sabbath, praying five times a day, or dipping infants in holy water all have social content and meaning. At the heart of sociology is the study of “people” in this sense, as social collectives that have ties among members, connections to other groups, shared understandings, and patterned behaviors.

How, then, can we study those human arrangements? Emile Durkheim, whose ideas about the sociology of religion we have already mentioned, was one of sociology’s founders. He wrote that *social facts*—patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting—exist outside of any individual but exert force over individuals in systematic—though not wholly deterministic—ways. So when we see someone express a thought or feeling, or act in a certain way, we are often observing something larger and more significant than the individual’s expression. That is, we are often observing an instance of a pattern that exists in society.

Our day-to-day lives are structured by an infinite number of such patterns, everything from handshaking, to “flipping the bird” (in response, of course, to different stimuli!), to valuing the newest technology, to feeling grief at a funeral. Certainly, thoughts, feelings, and actions related to religion are instances of broader patterns. A Muslim woman who wears a veil is not making a personal fashion decision but instead is engaging in the religious practice of hijab. A man who professes belief in “God’s plan” did not invent that belief; instead he is drawing on an existing pattern of belief that is widespread in his social community. Similarly, an observant Jewish person who washes his hands carefully before each meal did not invent the practice, nor does he engage in it in isolation from its larger social context. People’s thoughts, feelings, and actions often
have their origins in patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that exist outside them. Those external patterns are what interest sociologists: We note them in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals, but never forget that they have an existence outside the individual.

These patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting also exercise “an external constraint” over the individual: The patterns have coercive power to push us to think, feel, and act in particular ways. People often initially reject or resist the idea that there are coercive social facts, because we like to think of ourselves as individualists, actors with free will. But a closer examination of our daily lives reveals endless instances where we are following well-established patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. To name but a few: driving on the right side of the road (in the United States), saying “excuse me” when you bump into someone, avoiding eye contact in an elevator, waiting in line, applying for college or jobs, tipping service providers, kneeling during prayer, feeling teary during a wedding (although that pattern is probably related to gender!), and so on.

You might respond that people do violate these patterns on occasion and so there are not really any constraints. Durkheim does not dispute that sometimes the patterns are violated, but he locates evidence of their coercive nature in the broader social response to violation, a response from those around us and, perhaps more interestingly, from within ourselves. When people violate existing patterns of thinking, feeling, or acting, those around them often respond in a negative way: a funny look, a sharp word, a rolling of the eyes, a denial of assistance or service, or a formal punishment. Those responses remind the transgressors of the existing patterns and of the benefits of conforming to them. In that sense, the patterns and the responses to violations exert a coercive influence over us: We become more likely to follow the patterns than to violate them because we wish to avoid negative sanctions. Violations also elicit responses from within the violator, such as heightened self-consciousness, a queasy or nervous feeling in the pit of the stomach, a feeling of guilt, or an overwhelming desire to simply conform. The patterns exist outside of us but we have also internalized them.

Consider again the Islamic practice of women wearing the veil or the orthodox Judaic practice of women covering their hair (e.g., by wearing a wig or a scarf). As we stated earlier, this behavior is not merely a personal fashion choice; it is a religious imperative. In his book The Culture of Disbelief, legal scholar Stephen Carter considers cases in which nonbelievers reduce religious patterns or imperatives—to perform animal sacrifice, to consume an illegal substance, to rest on a specified day—to “individual choices,” suggesting that a religious person has a choice about whether or not to adhere to his or her faith (Carter 1993). Carter argues that understanding religion as a “personal choice” trivializes faith because, in the lives of believers, religion is not a choice but a powerful social fact. It comprises ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are external to and coercive over us. It is a particularly powerful social influence because it is made up of an interconnected set of beliefs, practices, structures, and communities and is central to the way that we think about and experience our lives.

To say that religion is a social fact does not, in any way, imply that what religion purports to represent and connect us to—the supernatural or a deity—is itself an empirically observable fact. But religion, the human-created system that connects communities to the unseen, is very much a “fact” in the social sense. It is observable, it exists outside any one person, and, as we will see, it exerts a tremendous influence in our world.
SUGGESTED READING


