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INTRODUCTION

America: Diversity and Freedom

Before you begin to read this chapter, ask yourself what your attitude is toward those whose religious beliefs and practices are different from your own. Do you feel curious? Interested to know more about them? Defensive? As if their religion is not "true" or "right"? Would you want to convince them of your own views? Do you think your own point of view might be enriched by dialogue with them?

Religious diversity in the United States and throughout the world is increasing. All of us can expect to be part of communities, workplaces, and social groups that include people of many faiths and of none. The development and growth of this diversity is an important social phenomenon and one that extends far beyond the confines of religion:

The radicalism of religious diversity is a fact of contemporary life and may well become the most significant feature in the development of society and culture in the twenty-first century. . . . A Muslim living in the United States today is not a Muslim only when he [or she] visits the mosque, recites *Allahu akbar*, or fasts during the sacred month of Ramadan. He is a Muslim when he votes in a local election, goes to market, visits a museum, or reads the newspaper. He is, indeed, a Muslim when he meets a Christian or a Jew in the local park.¹

We also encounter many other kinds of diversity—racial, lifestyle, political, and sexual orientation, to name but a few. Thinking through our responses to religious diversity can help us be more conscious of how we respond to diversity of other kinds, as well. There is also a particular feature of religious diversity that we should note. Most—although certainly not all—religions make claims to absolute truth. The existence of wide-ranging religious diversity coupled with absolute truth claims poses a particularly interesting challenge for thoughtful, reflective response.

RESPONDING TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Each of the five responses described below stems from authentic human concerns. Many are grounded in the sacred writings of their proponents' religious tradition or in specific interpretations of those writings. Each has its adherents

¹Richard Evans Wentz, *The Culture of Religious Pluralism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), p. 13.

within most of the religions, as well as among the different religions. Different authors who write on responses to religious diversity may use the terms differently, as well.

We first need to distinguish all of these responses from *tolerance*, which may go along with any of them. Tolerance refers to the willingness to grant basic civil liberties to members of a faith other than one's own, regardless of how one feels about that other faith. Tolerance encompasses willingness to grant freedom to gather for religious meetings or to speak publicly in the hope of winning other people to one's viewpoint, and avoiding religious discrimination in matters of employment or housing, for example. A person who is tolerant may disagree, may be convinced that the other's position is wrong, but is still willing to see the other person share these fundamental freedoms.

Exclusivism is the most clearly defined response. The exclusivist holds that, because religion deals with ultimate truth, there can be only one true or correct religion and the rest are completely wrong. Exclusivism is found within most of humankind's religions. The following statement from *Evangelical Affirmations* provides a good example:

Without Christ and the biblical gospel, sinful humanity is without salvation. . . . Any "gospel" without the Christ of the Bible cannot be the saving gospel, and leaves sinners estranged from God. . . . We affirm that only through the work of Christ can any person be saved and resurrected to live with God forever. Unbelievers will be separated eternally from God.²

Although exclusivism is a prominent response within the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it is not wholly confined to them. Buddhism, for example, exhibits a great deal of openness toward other faiths, but followers of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism regard it as "the One True Way . . . whereby all the people are able to fundamentally overcome the basic universal sufferings of being born, of old age, sickness, and death as well as doubts and disillusionments that plague mankind."³

Relativism is at the opposite end of the response spectrum. There are different forms of relativism, but all of them share the premise that all perspectives are limited, even those that lay claim to absolute truth. There is no unlimited viewpoint from which a truth that is relevant for all times, places, and persons could ever be known or expressed. This perception may lead the relativist in one of two directions: One approach is to maintain that, because religions claim absolute truth and absolute truth cannot be known, no religion is worthy of one's commitment. This approach leads to secularism or irreligiousness. Another kind of relativism, however, holds that, in the absence of knowable absolute truth, it is simply up to individuals to pick the religion that feels right for them.

²Kenneth S. Kanzer and Carl F.H. Henry, eds., *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), pp. 30–31 and 36.

³Nichiren Shoshu United States Web site (www.nst.org/intro3.html).

Inclusivism is a third approach. The inclusivist holds that there is one true or best religion, one that holds within itself the fullness of religious truth and human salvation. However, inclusivists believe there is something of this truth in some other religions, as well. Most Muslims believe, for example, that the revelation of God to the Jews and the Christians was true and brought salvation to its followers, but that it had been distorted by Muhammad's time. God's revelation to Muhammad is believed to confirm the truth of earlier revelations, while eliminating the distortions. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church also affirmed an inclusivist view:

From ancient times down to the present, there has existed among diverse peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life; at times, indeed, recognition can be found of a Supreme Divinity and of a Supreme Father too. Such a perception and such a recognition instills the lives of these peoples with a profound religious sense. . . . The Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions. . . . Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18–19), men find the fullness of their religious life.⁴

The fourth viewpoint may be called *synthesis*. This view holds that all religions are essentially the same beneath a veneer of cultural particularity. Synthesis downplays the differences among religions in favor of the similarities among them. Thus, all will—or should—come together in a unity.

Hindu theologian and former president of India Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan takes this position, believing that what he calls *Sarvatana Dharma* (the "eternal religion," a name often used by Hindus to describe their faith) is the one religious reality that encompasses all others and toward which all others will eventually evolve. As human beings collectively mature religiously, the various manifestations of religion will converge on "the One Spirit which takes us beyond the historical formulations," which are only "imperfect halting expressions."⁵

The relatively recent world faith of Baha'i also holds a view that humankind is evolving toward one world religion. For Baha'is, one world religion is a central aspect of a larger belief in a global civilization that will include a worldwide government, judicatory system, and currency. The authors of *The Baha'i Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* state that "in reality, there is only one religion, the religion of God."⁶ Baha'u'llah, the founder of Baha'i, is quoted as saying that "all nations should become one in faith and all

⁴Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), pp. 661–663.

⁵Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, "Religion and Religions" in *Relations Among Religions Today*, ed. Moses Jung et al. (Leiden, 1963), pp. 131–132.

⁶William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin, *The Baha'i Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 82.

In discussing how such dialogue could go forward, Coward notes it requires that people have accurate information about one another's religions. In light of the fact that many persons are not well informed about their own religion, nor those of others, the academic study of religion has an important role to play. It facilitates dialogue informed throughout by accurate information and animated by a spirit of inquiry and respect for the experience of others without compromising one's own commitments.

In her thorough discussion of this stance, which she labels "pluralism," Diana Eck, Director of Harvard University's Pluralism Project, notes these five points that help to clarify what an affirming stance is, as well as how it differs from some of the other views I have described.⁹

- It is not just the fact of religious diversity but "active positive engagement with it."
- It is not simply tolerance and a commitment to insure the rights of the followers of all faith traditions but "the active effort to understand difference and commonality through dialogue."
- While relativism does not allow for commitment, affirmation assumes that members of the different communities of faith are deeply committed to their chosen paths while practicing openness toward the chosen paths of others.
- It does not expect all religions to fuse together but looks for "ways to be distinctively ourselves and yet to be in relation to one another."
- The foundation of affirmation is interreligious dialogue based on understanding rather than on agreement, holding that the understanding of difference is as important as agreement.

The attitude we hold toward those whose religion differs from our own has pragmatic ramifications as well as philosophical ones. For example, it influences our willingness to grant freedom of religious expression to them. A Christian pluralist, for example, would be more likely to *willingly* give a Muslim employee time off from work during Ramadan, Islam's holy month, than would a Christian exclusivist. A college student whose approach was pluralistic would respond differently to a roommate of another faith than would a student who was an exclusivist. Our attitude toward religions other than our own also helps determine whether we try to "convert" others to our own viewpoint.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR REVIEW, DISCUSSION, AND WRITING

1. What two features make religious diversity in the United States an especially interesting issue for reflective thought?
2. Describe each of the five responses to religious diversity.
3. Describe the affirmative response in greater detail.
4. Write an essay in which you describe your own attitude toward religious diversity. Be sure that you include any ideas you may have about *why* you feel as you do.

⁹Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), pp. 191–199. Professor Eck's book remains one of the best accounts of the perspective I take in this book.

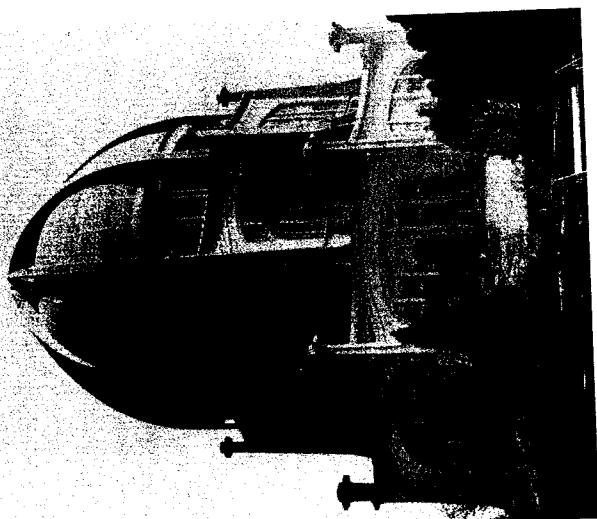


Figure 1-1 The Baha'i House of Worship, located just north of Chicago on the shore of Lake Michigan at Wilmette, Illinois. The nine-sided building symbolizes the unity of all religions. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. (Photo courtesy of Baha'i Publishing Trust.)

men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled. . . .⁷

We can describe the fifth response as the *affirmation of religious diversity*. This view holds that the different religions are simply different, not headed toward a synthesis and not subsumable under the big umbrella of inclusivism. At the same time, each is ultimately true and must be honored as such. Affirmation makes for both commitment and openness. Describing this perspective, religious studies scholar Harold Coward writes:

It is a recognition that deep religious commitment is necessarily felt as absolute and, as such, functions as the validating criteria for all of one's personal experience. This, however, does not impose it on others or rule out the recognition that in other persons there is a similar absolute commitment to a particular experience, which . . . will be different from one's own. . . . Thus, one is able to honor one's own commitment as absolute for oneself and at the same time respect the different absolute commitments of others. . . . In a dialogue this would mean the preservation of our differences in dignity and mutual respect.⁸

⁷Quoted in J.E. Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era: An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1950), pp. 117–118.

⁸Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 106–107.

5. With several classmates, role-play different ways that members of one religion might approach members of another.
6. Visit the Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance Web site (www.religioustolerance.org), and read one of the essays. Write a response to what you have read. Be certain to include the title of the essay that you read.

FOR FURTHER READING

In this book, we look at world religions as they are found in the United States. The following two books provide additional information on world religions.

ELLWOOD, ROBERT S., and BARBARA A. MCGRAW, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths: An Introduction to the Religious Life of Humankind*, 9th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008.

This and the Fisher book that follows are good standard introductory texts.

FISHER, MARY PAT, *Living Religions*, 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008. This is an easily accessible, brief introduction that does not, however, oversimplify.

Two relatively recent books that focus on religious diversity are worthy of attention.

ECK, DIANA L., *A New Religious America: How A "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. Notable for its accounts of specific congregations and people.

LEON, LUIS, and GARY LADERMAN, Eds., *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expressions*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

The editors are particularly concerned to document diversity in religions and cultures in the United States. It is especially valuable for its coverage of popular religion.

RELEVANT WORLD WIDE WEB SITES

The Interfaith Alliance: www.interfaithalliance.org

The Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance: www.religioustolerance.org

The Pluralism Project: www.pluralism.org

Studying and Describing Religion

Before you read this chapter, think about how and where you have learned about religion so far. What kinds of things did you study? What was the purpose of your study? Also, think about how you define or describe religion. All of us have some idea of what religion is. What does the word *religion* mean to you?

WHY STUDY RELIGION?

Many, perhaps most, of you reading this are studying religion to receive academic credit for a course. But there are other reasons for studying religion. Those of us who are religious study our own religion to learn more about this significant dimension of our lives. Our commitment to it matures as we base our devotion on greater knowledge and understanding.

Why study other people's religions? Doing so can help us to understand other people. Religion is an important, even essential, part of many people's lives, and by understanding and appreciating it, we come to know them better. Prejudice often results in part from a simple lack of knowledge and information. While knowledge and understanding do not guarantee freedom from prejudice, a lack of knowledge greatly increases the likelihood of prejudice.

It is also important that we understand religion because it has had an important role in history and continues to have a significant impact on contemporary events. Religion has had and continues to have an impact on cultural forms such as literature, art, and music. Finally, because all religions have deeply human roots, to understand anyone's religion helps us understand ourselves better. By understanding the similarities and differences between our own religion and those of other people, we also come to know our own better.

Statements by notable religious studies scholars highlight several important themes, including the practical applicability of religious studies, which helps to relate the study of religion to the discussion of religious diversity.

Historian of religion Martin Marty points out that faith,

both in individually packaged and communal forms, while it may not always be deep, is so widespread that it commends itself for study by anyone who wants to understand humans.

He continues that in our diverse culture, religion both defines and links sub-cultures. For example, a person may be identified primarily as an African American Baptist in one setting, while being more identified as an African American Baptist in another. Similarly, one can be both a Catholic feminist and a Catholic feminist.¹

Amanda Porterfield, another analyst of the role of religion in the culture of the United States, notes that the discipline of religious studies helps to stabilize the public role of religion. Religious studies

encouraged respect for religious difference along with increased self-consciousness about how religious symbols work and a general tendency to understand religion in humanistic terms. . . . [Religious] studies contributed to greater understanding of the ways in which religion functions to divide people from one another and the ways in which it could function to promote equality and build community. . . .

Through its approach to religion as a universal human phenomenon manifest in a variety of different cultural forms, religious studies has contributed to the respect for religious difference that distinguishes the United States from countries where religious difference feeds violence and civil war.²

STUDYING RELIGION AS A PART OF THE HUMANITIES

The study of religion has many dimensions. Studying religion as a part of a course of study in the humanities may involve attitudes and methods that are new to you.

Most of us who think about religion first learned to do so within our families and later in a religious organization or a community of faith. Maybe it was in preparation to become a member of a church or synagogue.³ Perhaps it was learning about our own religion in Sunday school or Hebrew day school classes. For some, it was learning the prayers of our faith from our parents. This way to study religion is sometimes called *theology*. This is study undertaken by members of a community of faith when they learn or study the practices and beliefs of their own religion. Therefore, we can call it an inside perspective. It involves the personal faith commitments of both teachers and students. It is, in Saint Anselm's classic definition, "faith seeking understanding."⁴ Theology uses intellectual concepts to understand a particular religious tradition and to express its relevance for the present. It takes as its beginning point the faith of the community, the givens accepted as a part of their tradition. For Christians,

for example, the uniqueness of Jesus and Jesus's special role in God's plan for the world is such a given. For Jews, the oneness of God has a similar role. Buddhists⁵ take the early teachings of the Buddha as foundational. These starting points are often found in or derived from the group's sacred writings.

The goal of this kind of study is that those who engage in it will become more knowledgeable about and more committed to their faith. It need not involve assertions of the superiority of one's own faith, although it sometimes does. It is an important part of educating people in their faith and helping them to mature as religious persons. It is a significant aspect of the growth and development of any religion. A firm understanding of one's own faith is also one foundation for dialogue with others.

The *academic study of religion* differs from theology in that it makes no assumptions about the beliefs, or lack of beliefs, of the scholar. Religious studies teachers and students alike may be believers, nonbelievers, or agnostics (people who believe that we cannot be certain about religious matters) in their personal religious lives.

Rather than concentrating on one religion, the academic study of religion promotes a lively awareness of the diversity of religious beliefs, practices, and experiences that people have. It encourages open-minded investigation of that diversity. It investigates religions in their historical and cultural settings and examines a broad range of materials to provide the most balanced treatment possible. It distinguishes between things that most people accept as historical facts and other things that are taken as true only within the context of a particular community of faith. For example, most people in the United States would agree that the founder of Christianity was an historical person named Jesus who lived in the area of Nazareth. Non-Christians usually do not accept that Jesus was in a unique sense the Son of God.

In studying religion from an academic standpoint, we may try to *explain* religious behaviors and beliefs as well as simply *describe* them. However, such explanations should never become *reductionistic*. Reductionism is an oversimplification that claims to exhaust the meaning of a phenomenon by explaining it in terms of some other, external factor. For example, saying that people are religious because economic deprivation in their earthly lives makes "pie in the sky by-and-by" attractive is a case of reductionism. While there may be some truth to this for some persons, it does not exhaust the meaning of religion.

When we study religion academically, the study takes place in an atmosphere that is free of advocacy. It promotes neither religion nor nonreligion. It educates about all religions and neither favors nor belittles any. It is loyal first of all to the guidelines of public scholarship. Its commitments are to knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to religion as a vigorous dimension of humanity's story (Figure 1-1). It does not involve the personal beliefs of its teachers and students. It is especially important to keep the distinction between theology and the academic study of religion clear in public, tax-supported schools, colleges, and universities. An institution supported by

⁵You will learn more about Buddhism in Chapter 12.

¹Martin E. Marty, "An Exuberant Adventure: The Academic Study and Teaching of Religion," *Religious Studies News*, vol. 12, No. 3 (September, 1997), p. 20.

²Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of A Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 203-204.

³A synagogue is a Jewish place of worship and study.
⁴Saint Anselm was a Christian theologian who lived between 1033 and 1109 C.E. The abbreviations C.E. for "Common Era" and B.C.E. for "Before the Common Era" have replaced A.D. (*Anno Domini*, the year of our Lord) and B.C. (Before Christ) in most scholarly writing.

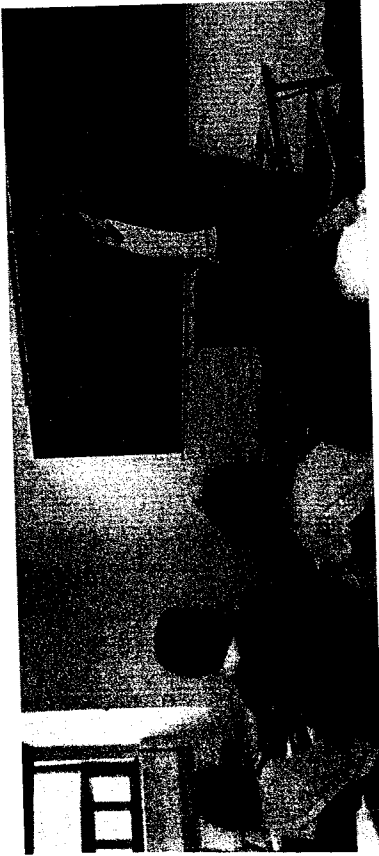


Figure 1-1 The study of religion is an integral part of education in the humanities.
(Photo by the author.)

taxes paid by people of all faiths and by those who are not religious cannot favor one religion over others. Nor can it favor either religion or secularity. To do so clearly violates the disestablishment clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Our personal religious views *might* change when we study religion academically, but, if that happens, it is a personal by-product of the study and not its goal.

One study⁶ has looked at how religion is studied on four college campuses in the United States. One is a state university, two are religiously supported schools, and the fourth is an historically black college that describes itself as nondenominational. This study of four representative institutions found several common themes:

- Religious studies is a “vital and appealing” topic on all four campuses.
- In addition to religious studies classes, religion is a topic in many other classes as well.
- General education and core curriculum classes, especially, expose many students to the study of religion as a part of their educational experience.
- Even at the religiously sponsored schools, teachers do not try to convert students to their own point of view. Students at all four schools feel free to express their own views in class. Religious studies classes in the religiously affiliated schools tend to promote religion more than do their secular counterparts. Religious diversity and pluralism are freely acknowledged, and critical inquiry into religion is encouraged.
- That having been said, faculty often try to relate course content to students’ own lives and spiritual journeys. Students make this connection even when faculty do not.

The 1963 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Abington v. Schempp* ruled that public schools and school personnel could not mandate devotional activities in their schools and classrooms. People who favored activities such as prayer and

Bible reading in the public schools charged that the Court had, in effect, supported the religion of secularism (nonreligion). Justice Clark, in replying to this charge, distinguished between the *practice* of religion, such as devotional exercises, and *study about* religion. He went on to say that study about religion as a part of human culture and the humanities is well within the guidelines established by the First Amendment to the Constitution. This Supreme Court decision allows for the academic study of religion at all levels of public education.

Religious groups cannot be barred from using public school facilities or other public buildings, however. If secular groups can use these facilities, then religious groups must have the same privilege. The *Equal Access Act* was passed by the 98th Congress in 1984 and upheld by the Supreme Court in *Board of Education of Westside Community School District v. Mergens* (1990). For example, if a school board permits such noncurricular clubs as a chess club or Boy or Girl Scouts to use their facilities for meetings, then a Bible study club must have the same right. Usually, interpretation holds that teachers or other school personnel may not be officially involved in such groups. If a city or county building has a public meeting room, then religious groups must be allowed to use it on the same basis as secular groups. The combined effect of *Abington v. Schempp* and *Mergens* is that schools cannot actively promote religious activities, but neither can they prohibit them.

You may be wondering whether religious studies is defined by having a distinctive method or a distinctive subject matter. Religious studies scholars do not agree on the answer. In my opinion, religious studies is a distinct and identifiable academic discipline because it investigates the subject of religion in all its forms. Its *subject matter* is distinctive. In its investigation of its subject, it uses many methods. Human religious behavior is a very complex phenomenon and calls for many investigative tools. There is no single best way to study religion. A variety of methods is necessary, and no one of them can claim primary authority.

Within the academic study of religion, we can distinguish two interrelated types of inquiry. The *social-scientific study of religion* focuses on observation and on data that are quantifiable. Its goal is to be as objective as possible. The data that it provides makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of religion. Psychologists and sociologists who study human religious behavior often use social-scientific methods. The widespread use of computers for data processing and analysis has greatly enhanced this branch of the academic study of religion.

People *study religion as a part of the humanities* to understand a religious group, belief, or practice from the standpoint of what it is like for those who follow it. This approach encourages students and teachers to enter empathically into the life and experience of the religious other. It seeks imaginative participation, developing what can be described as an inside-outside point of view. We can, with practice, become increasingly able to see religions other than our own *as if* from the inside, while remaining on the outside. We do not become followers, but we learn to value and appreciate the meaning that the religion has for those who are participants in it.

The academic study of religion may come under attack from either of two sides. On one side are traditional believers who are threatened by any viewpoint

⁶Conrad Cherry, Betsy A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield, *Religion on Campus: What Religion Really Means to Today's Undergraduates* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

that refuses to judge the truth or falsity of religious beliefs. On the other side are those who refuse to take religion seriously and think that it must be explained away in terms of social, psychological, or economic factors. As the philosopher of religion Ninian Smart writes, in either case, people "forget that religions are what they are and have the power they have regardless of what we may think about their value, truth, or rationality. They also forget that . . . we have to listen to one another"⁷ in a nation that is as religiously diverse as the United States.

Perhaps you have felt one of these two ways at times, or perhaps you do now. You might occasionally find yourself feeling threatened by some of the material studied, by the way it is studied, or by your classmates' comments. Remember that the study of religion from an academic viewpoint allows every-one ideological space in which to exist. All that is required is that you extend to the beliefs and practices of others the same respect that you wish for your own.

DESCRIBING RELIGION

Religion is an ambiguous word. People use it to mean various things. Even scholars in religious studies cannot agree on its meaning. We do, nonetheless, have some idea of what religion is. If someone asks, for example, "What religion do you practice?" we know how to answer the question. If someone mentions a religious service, we have a general idea of what sort of activity is meant.

By itself, this everyday, unreflective approach is inadequate. It is probably limited to our own experiences with religion. Our understanding might be biased in some way, based on what we have been taught about religion. People's everyday definitions differ, and the same person may use different definitions at different times.

For purposes of study, we must have a good working description. A *working description* is one that is useful and adequate, but it is not the only possible one, nor even the only good one.

1. A *good working description of religion is broad enough to include all religions*. It should not define religion in a way that leaves out some manifestations of religion. Nor should it leave out any specific religion. For example, if we say that religion means belief in God (having in mind God as Jews and Christians think about God), we will leave out those people who worship many deities (a general word meaning gods or goddesses) and those who worship none at all. This description also focuses on belief and excludes other important dimensions of religion.
2. At the same time, *it must be sufficiently specific to distinguish religion from other similar things*, such as a nonreligious philosophy of life or a deeply held and passionate commitment to a social or political cause.
3. *It also needs to be as free of prejudice or bias as we can make it*. Descriptions that state what true or genuine religion is often fall into the trap of imposing one person's or group's bias on the description of religion generally.

⁷Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), p. 17.

Box 1-1

WORKING DESCRIPTION OF RELIGION

A *developed religion* is an integrated system of beliefs, lifestyle, ritual activities, and social institutions by which individuals give meaning to (or find meaning in) their lives by orienting themselves to what they experience as holy, sacred, or of the highest value.

We will use the working description given in the box. It is important to know and understand this description, because it underlies everything that follows throughout the book.

Religions are also *communities of faith and practice*. They are groups of people knitted together by their shared commitment to a common worldview and their participation in shared experiences. The nature of religious commitment and experience means that it often claims its adherents' greatest, most intense loyalties. The ties within communities of faith are frequently among the strongest and most meaningful of human relationships.

Let's discuss this description of religion in greater detail. A developed religion is an *integrated system*. Ideally, all the dimensions in a religion hold together to make a comprehensive, coherent whole. Its various parts work together without conflict and with mutual support. The extent to which this is the case varies from one religion to another and from one person to another. But ideally, a religion does have coherence among its various dimensions. These dimensions include beliefs, a lifestyle, rituals, and institutions.

Belief takes many forms. Beliefs are the ideas of a religion. For example, most religions have an idea about what the purpose of human life is. Most have beliefs concerning how the world came into being and what happens to people after death. These beliefs are found in scriptures, statements of faith, creeds (official written statements), hymns, stories, and theology books, to name but a few locations. The beliefs of a community of faith also exist in what its members actually affirm as truth for themselves.

Nearly all religions have guidelines for their members' *lifestyle*. These include codes of conduct and standards of behavior, as well as carefully worked out ethical systems. They involve both formal requirements and customs and less formal folkways and habits. Examples include dietary regulations followed by Jews and Seventh-day Adventists and dress codes followed by certain Christian groups and many Muslims.

Religions also include *ritual activities*. These are the ceremonial actions, usually repetitive in nature, which people perform as a part of their religious behavior. Religious rituals include worship, along with prayer, chanting, meditation, the lighting of candles, pilgrimages, and the devotional reading of religious books, to name but a few examples. There are religious rituals that are public and corporate, and there are those that individual people and families do

privately. For many religious people, the rhythm of regular participation in the ritual life of their religion is more important than is reflection on religious beliefs.

Finally, although religion has to do with individual people, it also includes *social institutions*. Like-minded people join together for instruction, for rituals, and for fellowship. Structures for governance and decision making are necessary. Also in this category are arrangements for admitting members to the group and expelling them from it, educational functions, and arrangements for the selection, training, and support of leaders.

Religion is one way that *people give meaning to or find meaning in their lives*. Any religion is a human creation or development. Its beliefs, lifestyle, rituals, and institutions are the products of human thought and activity. It is continuous with the many other ways that we either create or find meaning in our lives, such as through the personal relationships that are dear to us, the work that we do, and the values, ideals, and causes to which we give our loyalty. Religion is continuous with these other structures of meaning and shares their profoundly human roots.

Religion involves that which people experience as *sacred, holy, divine, or of the highest value*. Although religion is continuous with other structures of meaning, it is also unique. Most interpretations of religion hold that its uniqueness is in its reference to the sacred or to the highest value. It reaches beyond the individual and the ordinary concerns of day-to-day living. Religion puts us in touch with the sense of mystery that glimmers through the cracks of our common world. It has to do with the most comprehensive, fullest expression or embodiment of reality.

Our working description of religion has both functional and substantive elements. When functionalists describe religion, they are interested in what it does—what its functions or roles are. Our description identifies religion as something that has to do with meaning in human life. It also has a substantive element in that the distinguishing feature of religion is its core experience of the holy or sacred, in whatever way that may be experienced and labeled.

POPULAR RELIGION

Earlier in the chapter, I defined religion in a way that emphasizes religions as structured social systems, institutions, or organizations. This aspect of religion can be called *institutional religion*. The words *ecclesial* and *ecclesiastical* are sometimes used to describe this aspect of religion. There is another aspect of religion in the United States that is at least as significant: This is *popular religion*—religion that occurs outside the formal boundaries of religious institutions. These manifestations of religion are popular in two senses:

On the one hand, they have “mass appeal,” they “sell.” On the other hand, they are “of the people”: they are examples not of the kind of religion that is taught

by theologians in seminaries, but rather of that which appeals to a wide variety of people of no special theological sophistication outside the context of formal “Sunday-morning” worship in the churches.⁸

The existence of widespread and flourishing popular religion in the United States indicates that, as one scholar puts it, the “determination of what counts as religion is not the sole preserve of academics.”⁹

Most people in the United States belong to some sort of religious community—they are Protestants within particular denominations, Catholics, Jews, or Buddhists, for example. Many, however, supplement their formal membership and participation with a variety of other religious activities that do not come directly from their community of faith—participating in revivals, watching religious television, engaging in various devotional activities such as private prayer and reading, chanting, and meditation, wearing religious jewelry, or placing religious bumper stickers on their cars and trucks. For some, these activities and others similar to them become the primary focus of their religious life.

Figure 1-2 This interstate billboard in Ohio is a good example of popular religion. (Photo by the author.)



⁸Peter W. Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), pp. 3–4.

⁹David Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock n’ Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, No. 4 (Fall, 1996), p. 760.

Popular religion is a “dimension of religious life that is elusive and difficult to describe,” as one study of the phenomenon puts it.¹⁰ There is no one agreed-upon definition of popular religion, but we can describe it.¹¹

- Popular religion is the religious belief and practice of ordinary people rather than of theologians and religious leaders. It is transmitted through various channels outside of religious institutions.
- It exists alongside institutional religion as a complement to it. It is a supplement to participation in formal religion for some people and a substitute for it for others. People do not abandon formal religion for popular religiosity but use the latter to personalize their religion.
- It offers people more direct access to the sacred than they have through the mediation of formal religious groups. Formal religious organizations impose order and structure on religion. Popular religion is distinguished by a lively sense of the supernatural without the imposition of formal structure. It does not have the “conceptual coherence” of organized religion.
- It draws on the core religious institutions of the culture (in the United States, primarily Christianity) but blends the core religious attributes with other sources and traditions. It often reflects both mainstream and alternative values. It draws heavily on secular popular culture.

[For] the vast majority of Americans, a sense of the supernatural so lively that it cannot be contained in creed and doctrine permeates life. . . . [O]rdinary men and women have sought and continue to seek direct access to the realm of the supernatural in order to use its power to give them control over their lives and to endow their lives with meaning. . . . Sometimes they gain that access through religious traditions and institutions, but more often [they do so] through fusing together an array of beliefs and practices to construct personal and very private worlds of meaning. If we would understand the dynamics of being religious, American style, we must explore the phenomenon of popular religiosity.¹²

Examples of popular religion abound. Although angel popularity may have peaked, there continues to be considerable interest in them. Catalogs regularly offer angel-related articles, as do gift shops, evidence that the interest level remains at least fairly high. Near-death experiences provide what some people believe to be a glimpse into a world beyond this one. A series of billboards with snappy messages signed “God” dot the landscape. One example is “That love your neighbor business—I meant that.”

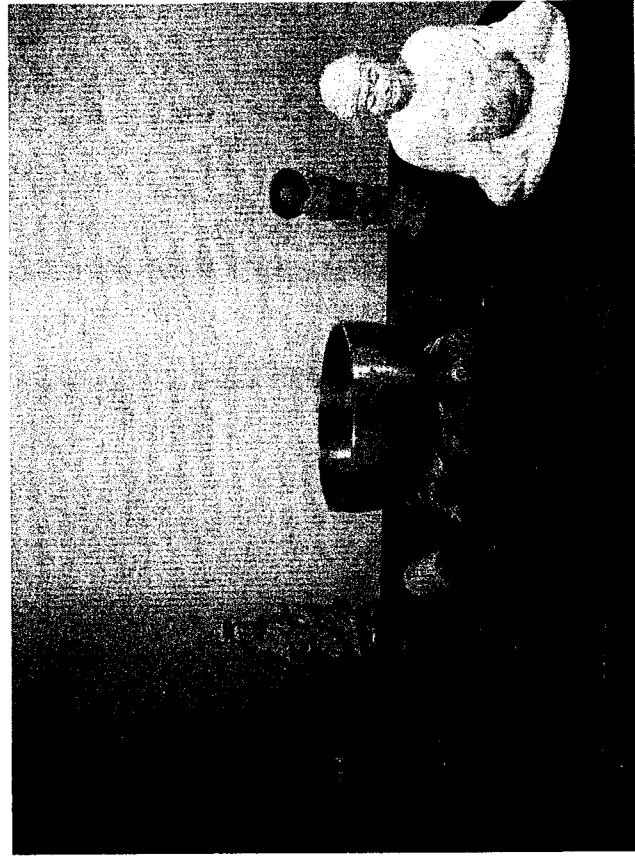
The *Wall Street Journal* has reported on what it termed “Do-It-Yourself Religion.” Some Americans are participating in a variety of special interest religious groups to supplement or in some instances replace participation in a more traditional community of faith. These groups may be organized around worship, prayer, discussion, or other interests of the participants. Not a new

phenomenon, these groups are similar to the Christian “house churches” and Jewish *havurah* of the 1960s. Similar groups have come and gone at various times, and the *Journal* article notes that, although the movement is strong now, history indicates that its lifespan is limited.¹³

In the commercially oriented culture of the United States, the strength of popular religion is shown in part by how well it sells. Christian retail is a multi-billion dollar industry. Some people place statues of Jesus, Mary, Saint Francis, or the Buddha in their yards, or cross or fish symbols on their cars or trucks. Many people wear religiously themed tee shirts. There is religious music in any format people like. The musicals *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, and *Godspell* continue to attract audiences. Gift items such as religiously oriented figurines, decorative items, and greeting cards sell well in religious book and supply stores and in secular stores as well. There are religious-theme computer games and educational software to help children learn about the Bible or the Qur’an.¹⁴

As noted earlier, most popular religion in the United States is in at least some sense Christian. However, it is not exclusively Christian. A number of catalogs offer a variety of items for people devising their own spirituality. One such catalog has an umbrella that features the eight major symbols of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as items reflecting Native American (and other) religions. In

Figure 1-3 A Buddhist home shrine is another manifestation of popular religion. (Photo by the author.)



¹⁰Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 1.

¹¹This section draws loosely on Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style*, Chap. 1.

¹²Lippy, *Being Religious*, pp. 18–19.

¹³Elizabeth Bernstein, “Do-It-Yourself Religion,” *Wall Street Journal* (June 11, 2004), pp. W1 and W5.

¹⁴The Muslim sacred scripture. See Chapter 11 for more discussion of Muslims and the Qur’an.

FOR FURTHER READING

NYE, MALLORY. *Religion: The Basics*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003. Professor Nye's book is a very accessible introduction from the perspective of religious and cultural studies.

PAIS, DANIEL L., *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pais' study of eight of the classical theorists of religion includes biographical information, exposition of the theory, and analysis and critique in a very usable format.

SEGAL, ROBERT A., *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. This comprehensive survey of approaches to the study of religion ranges from anthropology and phenomenology to the economics of religion.

RELEVANT WORLD WIDE WEB SITES

The American Academy of Religion: www.aarweb.org

The Society for Biblical Literature: www.sbl-site.org

The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture: www.iupui.edu/~raac

another catalog, those of Jewish faith can choose from a vast assortment of Jewish religious items such as prayer shawls, menorahs, Passover plates, and mezuzahs (which are described in Chapter 9). Several sources exist for Buddhists to obtain statues, meditation cushions and benches, and audiotapes or videotapes. *Hinduism Today*, a magazine for North American Hindus, routinely advertises Hindu religious articles such as deity statues, beads, and incense.

Although a large part of popular religion concerns material culture, it also involves religious practices, many of which are learned and practiced in people's homes. Countless parents pass on to their children the practice of saying bedtime and mealtime prayers—often the same prayers they themselves learned as children. Parents read stories of faith to their children. College students pray for aid on exams. People wear cloth bracelets bearing the letters “WWJD.” The acronym stands for “What Would Jesus Do?” a reminder to the wearer to ask that question when they cannot figure out the answer to a moral dilemma. Many people read devotional magazines, watch religious television, and listen to religious radio programming.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR REVIEW, DISCUSSION, AND WRITING

1. Write a paragraph in which you explain what you hope to gain from your study of religion in the United States. Are your goals academic, personal, or a combination of both? Compare your answer with those of other people.
2. Visit the American Academy of Religion Web site (www.aarweb.org) to learn how they answer the question, “Why study religion?” Look at the Overview and Mission Statement especially.
3. What are some classroom activities that would be prohibited under Abington v. Schempp? What activities would be allowed?
4. Do you think that religious clubs such as student Bible study clubs or prayer groups should have the same opportunities to use classroom space before or after school hours as do nonreligious groups? Why or why not?
5. Take an issue in which religion has been involved, such as the abortion controversy or recent Middle Eastern wars, and analyze it from the perspective of theology, the social-scientific study of religion, and the humanities approach to the study of religion.
6. Ask several of your friends how they describe religion, and compare their answers. How are they alike? Different?
7. Look up the definition of religion in any standard dictionary, and write an essay in which you evaluate it based on what you have learned in this chapter.
8. If you are a part of a religious group, think about how the four dimensions of religion we discussed apply to it.
9. Discuss with others in your class the manifestations of popular religion with which you are familiar. Organize a “popular religion scavenger hunt” for a day or two in which people are alert for evidence of popular religion and then report what they find.