

religion, culture and society

a global
approach

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what is religion and spirituality?

After reading this chapter you will:

- be able to define religion and spirituality;
- know the seven substantive elements of religion; and
- understand how social scientists study religion.

This book examines religions, spiritualities and faiths in the contemporary world. Due consideration will be given to apparently diverse groups: Christians in Latin America who, during their exuberant services of worship, appear to speak in unknown languages; Buddhists in England who gather each week in someone's house to meditate; teenage witches in Australia celebrating in spring an ancient, European pagan festival. What do these diverse groups have in common? What makes their activities religious? How would a social scientist study them? This chapter examines the fundamental features of religion and spirituality, and introduces the social scientific way of studying religions.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Recently I was filling my car with fuel when I noticed that the cashier, whose car was parked out front, had a license plate with the word 'F'BAHÇE' on it. I was pretty sure I knew what that meant. When I was paying for the fuel, I asked the cashier if he was a supporter of Fenerbahçe, the Turkish football team. He eyed me suspiciously and asked how I knew about this team, living here in Australia, so far away from Turkey. I mentioned that I was a keen student of the world game, and now, in this globalized era, it was easy to follow teams and leagues anywhere in the world. So, I asked him again. Was he a fan of Fenerbahçe? Tears almost welled in his eyes. 'It's my life', he said. This made me wonder: is it his religion?

One of football's most outstanding exponents, Diego Maradona, reputedly once said, 'Football isn't a game, nor a sport, it's a religion.' In like manner, a BBC journalist, Stephen Tomkins (2004) wrote: 'We're increasingly deserting the church in favour of the pitch. Players are gods, the stands are the pews, football is the new religion.' Can football – in all its variations – reasonably be described as a religion? Many football fans will declare happily that football is their religion. Football teams have places of 'worship', devoted followers, heroes with glorious past deeds, creeds and supporting music. For the individual fan, following a team might give life meaning, purpose and fulfillment. But it seems wrong to declare that football is a religion. Isn't religion about the transcendent? Believing that there is some being, power or force that is greater than humans?

Substantive and functional definitions of religion

It is important to distinguish between religious and nonreligious phenomena, behavior and meaning systems, otherwise a scholarly investigation of religion ought to treat the powerful social forces of football and, say, Islam equally. To my mind they are far from the same, and I can't imagine writing a book that covered all the world's religions and football.

So what makes football and Islam different from each other, and why is one a religion and the other not? Here we must look at definitions of religion. Some scholars feel that defining religion is inherently problematic (e.g. Asad 1993). For these scholars, definitions are either too exclusive or too broad, historically limited or culturally specific, a point I expand upon later. Others have attempted definitions of religion, and while there is considerable variation, they tend to fall into one of two camps: **substantive** definitions, which describe the 'substance' of religions, that is, their distinctive properties or attributes; and **functional** definitions, which focus on the 'function' religions perform in the lives of individuals and communities. Both these ways of defining and understanding religion are helpful for those interested in studying it.

Substantive definitions explained

Most substantive definitions emphasize that religion is about humanity's relationship with the supernatural, the transcendent or the otherworldly. For example, Australian sociologist Gary Bouma (1992: 17) defines religion as 'a shared meaning system which grounds its answers to questions of meaning in the postulated existence of a greater enviroing reality and its related sets of practices and social organization'. This definition draws attention to the fact that religion has a 'beyond-this-world' dimension to it. This sets religion apart from other worldly systems of beliefs, values and practices. Marxism, for example, a well-known political ideal and philosophy, is very much focused on the material world. For Marxists, there is no god. Humanity's problems are caused by social forces and can be resolved through social action.

All religions posit the existence of some kind of transcendence, that is, something greater than the individual *and* beyond the earthly or natural world. Followers of the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – believe in the existence of a single invisible entity, called variously God, Yahweh or Allah. A belief in this entity is an irreducible part of these religions. The Hindu tradition posits the existence of many gods. Some Buddhist traditions do not believe in the existence of a god or gods; indeed Buddhism is often described as ‘a philosophy of life’. However, Buddhists believe that when humans die they are reborn, a process that occurs many times over. It is possible to break free of this cycle and pass into a state where consciousness ceases to exist. The belief that one can be reborn is a belief in a different order of existence, one that transcends the ‘here and now’. Other Buddhist traditions believe in a complex supernatural world with gods and demons. In contrast, the heroes of football are not gods, but mere mortal men and women. As such, and because it lacks a transcendent or otherworldly dimension, football cannot be counted as a religion.

The transcendent element posited by all religions may or may not exist – a question we can not ultimately answer – but all religions proceed as if this transcendent dimension is real. That said, religion involves more than just a belief in the transcendent; it has several other important elements as well. This will be discussed briefly.

The seven elements of religion

Most readers would be familiar with hip-hop or rap music. For the purists of this musical genre, music is only part of the equation. The culture of hip-hop has five distinct elements: rapping itself, dancing, graffiti, DJing and beat-boxing (drum noises made with mouth). To truly live the hip-hop life, or be immersed in its culture, a person must partake of all of these elements, and do so with other like-minded individuals. So it is with other kinds of social life, such as religion.

In his book *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (1996), renowned scholar Ninian Smart argues that religion has seven elements to it. These are: ritual; mythological; doctrinal; ethical; experiential; social and material. Each of the dimensions are explained below.

Ritual

Religious rituals are deliberate, traditional actions and activities which forge a link between a religious person or religious community and the ‘transcendent’ (that which is beyond). Performing a religious ritual can assist a person to feel some kind of connection – be it intellectual, emotional or physical – to the transcendent. Every religion has distinct rituals. Well-known examples include prayer, Holy Communion, pilgrimage and meditation. Some religious rituals, like the Catholic Mass, or the Hajj (the pilgrimage to Islam’s Holy City of Mecca) are governed by formal rules, while other rituals occur informally and spontaneously, such as the Pentecostal

Christian practice of ‘speaking in tongues’. (All of these rituals are discussed later in this book.)

Mythological

Religious myths are the stories and teachings shared among members of a religious group. These stories address topics such as the origins of the universe, ways in which to live, the nature of the universe or a religious group’s history. Calling something a ‘myth’ doesn’t mean it is untrue. Rather, calling it a ‘myth’ signifies that it is a story or teaching that has great social significance. Mostly, religious myths are recorded in sacred or important texts. Latter Day Saints (Mormons), a Christian group, have two sacred texts, the Book of Mormon and the Christian Bible. The Hindu tradition has many important scriptures, including the Bhagavad-Gita. In some religious traditions, myths are shared by word of mouth.

Doctrinal

Religious doctrines are the formal or accepted teachings that govern a religion. Doctrines usually address matters of belief, practice or morality. If you attended a Catholic school you will recall reciting the Nicene Creed during Mass: ‘We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God ...’. This statement of belief was first formulated in the fourth century CE. For Catholics, the sources of doctrine are scripture (the Bible) and tradition (the constant teaching of the Church). The same is true of most religions.

Ethical

Followers of a religion are expected to obey a code of ethics. These are the values and standards of behavior expected of the faithful (or even of all humans). For example, Muslims are required to refrain from consuming alcohol and to eat meat that has been prepared according to stringent guidelines (Halal meat). Many evangelical Christian teenagers in the United States will formally pledge not to have sex before marriage as part of the ‘True Love Waits’ program. Some Buddhist traditions insist that people should not eat meat. Following a code of ethics enables the believer to draw closer to the transcendent – in this life, or the next.

Experiential

Via rituals and other means, religions facilitate religious experiences, that is, ‘direct, subjective experiences of ultimate reality and supernatural agency’ (Yamane and Polzer 1994: 2). For Hindus, this might be achieved by walking in a circular fashion

around the inside of a temple, a ritual that draws them closer to the particular deity that resides there. Among the snake-handling Pentecostal churches of the American South, a moment of transcendence might be achieved by holding a deadly copper-head snake, an act which, done successfully (i.e. no deadly bite), leads believers to consider themselves ‘anointed’ by God.

Social

Religion is a profoundly social enterprise – it is not something conceived of and practiced by just one person. One of the earliest sociologists, Frenchman Emile Durkheim, called the collective, shared component of religion the ‘Church’, not in the Christian sense, but more broadly: ‘A society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world, and by the fact that they translate these common ideas into common practices’ (Durkheim 1912/1995: 42–3). Humans practice religion together, agree on important beliefs together and have organizations and institutions (like churches or mosques) that assist individuals to encounter the transcendent.

Material

All religions have a material dimension: sacred spaces, objects and places, whether it be a temple, a place in a forest or a statue. In some religions, temples, places or statues



Figure 1.1 Example of a place of worship (I): a traditional Australian ‘bush’ church
Source: The author



Figure 1.2 Example of a place of worship (II): statue of Mazu the Heavenly Queen, a Chinese folk religion deity

Source: The author

are of utmost importance, as deities are thought to reside there. For other religions, buildings are simply a place to gather and worship. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show two very different kinds of worship places in contemporary Australia.

These seven elements, along with the posited existence of the transcendent, represent the *substance* of any religion. People who partake in these dimensions are those we describe as **religious** (although the strength of this commitment can vary); the involvement and meaning it has for them in their everyday life is their **religiosity**. Drawing attention to the substantive features of religion is useful because it sensitizes us to some of things the social scientific study of religion typically examines: religious belief, ritual, experience, ethics and social organization.

Functional definitions explained

Functional definitions are helpful too, pointing to the various functions that religion performs for individuals, religious communities and the larger society. The prominent anthropologist of religion, Clifford Geertz (1966), offered this definition:

[Religion is] ... (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1966: 3)

Here, religion is something that establishes 'long-lasting moods and motivations' among people by relating aspects of everyday life to something transcendent. At the individual level studies have shown that religious faith can contribute to, and promote, wellbeing, personal security and social connectedness (for examples see Kinnvall 2004; McClain-Jacobson et al. 2004). Religion can also motivate people to be altruistic and civically minded (for examples see Smith and Denton 2005; Mason et al. 2007).

Religion has a broader impact beyond influencing individual lives. I noted above that a key element of religion is ritual. Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that 'collective effervescence' is generated in the midst of large religious ceremonies or during religious rituals. The experience of collective effervescence can unite members of the same religion and reinforce group solidarity and collective identity. One notable example of a massed religious ritual that has this effect is the yearly Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj.

Doctrines and beliefs can also function to consolidate and strengthen the identity of a religious community. For example, many religions have clearly defined concepts of 'good' and 'evil'. Pentecostals, a modern Christian movement, believe that the forces of good and evil are engaged in a real spiritual war, fought in an unseen, spiritual realm populated by angels and demons, God and the devil. This spiritual war may manifest itself in the material world through demon possession or personal misfortune. Prayer from faithful believers can influence activity in both the spiritual and material realms. Pentecostals also believe that God has won this war for all time, even though small battles still rage. Because of this sense of victory many Pentecostal Christians believe that their worldview is right and that those who share their worldview – their community – are truly God's people (see Singleton 2001a). This is just one example of how belief strengthens community.

Arguably, football can perform these different functions for both individuals and communities. Following one's team each week can provide meaning, purpose and act as a comfort in times of trouble. If a team beats its fierce rivals in a closely fought match – be it Real Madrid vs. Barcelona or the Alabama Crimson Tide vs. the Auburn Tigers – the experience of the match and the ecstasy of victory might engender among supporters a profound sense of 'collective effervescence' that solidifies the belief that theirs is the greatest of clubs. But this is not religion: religions link the world of the everyday with some 'truly transcendent being, force or principle' (Bouma 1992: 15). Football doesn't forge a link with some greater transcendent reality; it simply makes the everyday more worthwhile for those who love it.

To summarize what we have learned about religion: religions posit the existence of some kind of transcendence, and each religion has many elements to it; myths about the world, guidelines for living, rituals for the faithful to follow, and specific experiences of transcendence. These elements also perform certain functions in the life of individuals and for larger communities, whether that be a motivation for altruistic action, or consolidating group identity. Importantly, religions link the world of the everyday with a transcendent reality.

These elements and functions can be found, more or less, in anything collectively understood to be a religion, whether it be Wicca (contemporary witchcraft), Scientology (a religion founded in the twentieth century by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard) or Mandaism, a religion founded in what is now modern Iraq. Mandaeans follow the teachings of John the Baptist and see Jesus and Muhammad (central figures in Christianity and Islam respectively) as ‘false prophets’.

The foregoing discussion has presented a social scientific understanding of what constitutes a religion. As noted above, such efforts are not without controversy. Anthropologist Talal Asad (1993: 29) argues that what has come to be defined as religion is ‘not merely an arbitrary collection of elements and processes’ of the kind identified in the previous section. Rather, definitions of religion are essentially the product of Western thought, arising largely from ‘Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations’ (Asad 1993: 29). Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, came to be seen as religions largely because of Western systems of classification, first applied in the nineteenth century, and not because Hindus and Buddhists thought what they doing was ‘religion’ (see Fitzgerald 1990; Faure 2009). For such reasons, Asad (1993: 29) argues: ‘there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.’

So where to from here? Definitions of religions and their constituent elements are best used as heuristic tools, and for imposing a border around an area of inquiry. Different ‘religions’ do not accord equal weight or importance to the various dimensions described above, and each religion has its own distinctive cultural and historical trajectory which shapes the lives and experiences of those who follow, in whatever fashion, that religion.

Having defined religion it is valuable to understand its relationship to an increasingly popular word: spirituality.

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality is a term that is being used more frequently in Western societies, and often as an alternative to religion. In the past twenty years, works by some of the most important contemporary scholars of religion have appeared that treat spirituality as both a part of religion, and something beyond religion. Examples include the American books *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* by Robert Wuthnow (1998), *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* by Wade Clark Roof (1999) and *Spiritual But Not Religious* (2001) by Robert Fuller. Australian and European examples include Gary Bouma’s (2006) *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the 21st Century* and Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead’s (2005) *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*.

Recent research suggests that many people believe that religion and spirituality refer to different things (Marler and Hadaway 2002). A national study of US teens found

that 8 percent thought it was ‘very true’ that they were ‘spiritual but not religious’ and 46 percent thought this was ‘somewhat true’ of themselves (Smith and Denton 2005: 77). What we see here is the widespread idea – among both scholars and the general public – that religion and spirituality can be different things.

So what is ‘spirituality’? Well, in the first instance, it is *part* of religion. It was noted above that religion is something experienced by the individual. A person participating in a religious ritual, such as a communal prayer, liturgical dancing, meditation or chanting, may well have an experience of transcendence. This might be a moment of ecstasy, an experience of God or the gods as real, or a mystical vision. This ‘personal, interior dimension’ of religion (Singleton et al. 2004: 250) is traditionally described as spirituality. Spirituality has long been understood as the personal, affective element of religion.

As noted above, spirituality is now thought of as something that can exist outside of organized religion. For the purposes of this book, and summarizing what I think is common to many contemporary understandings, I suggest that **spirituality** is any enduring, meaningful experience or consciousness of something greater than the self. This something ‘greater than the self’ might be some ethical ideal, a supernatural concept (like karma or reincarnation), supernatural beings (the spirits of the deceased) or it might be something more nebulous, like a sense of ‘oneness with all living things’. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow proposes a similar definition. He argues that ‘spirituality can be defined as a state of being related to a divine, supernatural or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a suprareality [sic] that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced’ (Wuthnow 2001: 307).

Clearly, people believe they can be spiritual without the aid of religion. This kind of spirituality might be achieved through the regular practice of yoga, tai-chi, astrological consultation or tarot-card reading, or a strong commitment to beliefs such as reincarnation. However, religious people also maintain that spirituality is an irreducible element of religion too; religious experiences, rituals and practices cultivate for the individual an enduring sense of transcendence.

Thus far, I have defined religion and spirituality, and discussed elements of both. I now look very briefly at the many different *kinds* of religion found all around the world. Specific detail about different religious traditions is provided later in the book.

THE WORLD’S RELIGIONS: BIG, SMALL, OLD AND NEW

A remarkably large proportion of the world is religious – estimates suggest almost nine out of ten people around the world affiliate with a religion (Johnson and Ross 2009: 6). Several religions claim the majority of the world’s adherents: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism and Buddhism. These are the **major world religions**. They have ancient histories and long-established creeds and practices. All have ancient texts or oral traditions which provide guidance for their followers. Each of these religions has a global reach: while originating in one place long ago, substantial groups of followers can be found everywhere.

The religions of Islam, Christianity and Buddhism comprise people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The other major religions – Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism – are mainly **ethno-religions**, where cultural and ethnic identity are closely aligned to religious identity. Hinduism and Sikhism are predominantly found among peoples living in modern India, and people of Indian heritage living elsewhere. The size of these diasporic communities is extremely large: hundreds of thousands live in Britain, the United States and Australia. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people, who have settled all around the world. Each of these major world religions has regional characteristics and customs, and important divisions when it comes to matters of doctrine.

The world has plenty of other **traditional religions** (old and long-established), but these are smaller, and remain more confined to one location, culture or people. Examples include Asian religions like Shinto and various African, Brazilian, Native American and Aboriginal religions. Here we might count **Chinese religions**, which includes Chinese folk religions and Chinese philosophies of life, such as Taoism and Confucianism (some scholars see Confucianism and Taoism as distinct religions, while others see them as systems of ethics). Chinese folk religion, according to Cheng and Wong (1997: 300) is a ‘loose category for traditional syncretic beliefs [e.g. ancestor veneration] with a mixture of elements from Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism’. The phrase ‘Chinese folk religion’ refers also to the worship of one of many traditional Chinese gods, such as Mazu, the Heavenly Queen (see Figure 1.2). The migration of people has meant that communities of these traditional religions can be found across the globe, but not in the same numbers as the major world religions (with perhaps the exception of Chinese religions).

Many of the world’s new religions – those founded in the last two hundred years – have an international reach, but have far fewer adherents than the major world religions. These are often called **new religious movements**. Examples include Spiritualism, Wicca and Scientology. These are discussed in detail elsewhere in this book. There’s one last group worth mentioning: nonreligious people. Estimates suggest that around 12 percent of the world’s population is nonreligious, that is, either atheist or agnostic (Johnson and Grim 2013: 10). Chapter 12 discusses in detail the different ways in which people are nonreligious, including atheism, agnosticism and humanism.

Figure 1.3 shows the religious affiliation of the world’s population. These are estimates, and as will be discussed later in this book, the importance of the place religion takes in a person’s life varies considerably from one person to the next.

None of the world’s faiths are monolithic, and each has many doctrinal (agreed or official statements of belief) divisions and branches, along with considerable regional variation in ritual. Scholars have formulated typologies – conceptual maps – for making sense of these divisions. The most well known typology in the sociology of religion is the Christian-focused **church-sect typology**, developed by German Ernest Troeltsch (1931), among others. I won’t elaborate upon it here, as it has limited utility for making sense of differences among other religions.

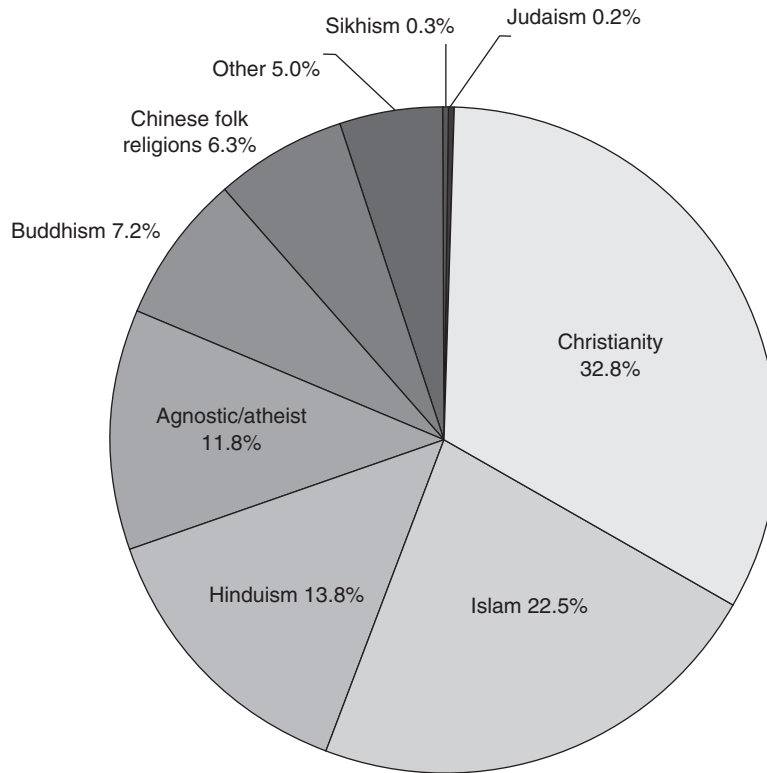


Figure 1.3 Religious affiliation of the world's population

Data Source: Johnson and Grim (2013: 10). Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION

This book takes a largely comparative, social-scientific approach to the study of religion. Many academic disciplines study religion. The fields of religious studies and theology are devoted entirely to religion. Sociology, history, psychology, political science, communication studies, human geography and anthropology all have significant sub-branches that consider different aspects of religion. While these disciplines each have a slightly different focus, together they represent the social sciences.

The social sciences use empirical methods to study human activity and look to explain this activity through reference to social and cultural factors, rather than religious or biological factors. I am a sociologist by training, and when I started writing this book I was intending to write about my discipline only. While this remains my abiding emphasis, along the way I make use of insights and studies from across the social sciences. This section describes how the social scientific study of religion proceeds.

The social scientific study of religion is well over one hundred years old. Important nineteenth-century thinkers, like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, had much to say about religion. Their work and its enduring influence is the subject of the next chapter. Indebted to these early thinkers, contemporary social scientists focus on the *interrelationship* between religion and the social and cultural worlds. Any aspect of religion can be studied, large-scale or small: religious change at a societal level, the functioning of religious organizations or the contours of personal religiosity.

The social scientific study of religion considers the interrelationship between religion, culture and society in two key ways. The first of these examines how social and cultural factors *influence* religion. I consulted several recent issues of a field-leading journal, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (JSSR), and as expected, found many excellent examples of this kind of analysis. Jonathan Hill (2011), for example, examines the impact college education has on aspects of religious belief. Using representative survey data and some sophisticated statistical methods, he finds that ‘some, but not all, religious beliefs are altered by higher education ... respondents become slightly more skeptical of the super-empirical if they attend and graduate from college’ (Hill 2011: 548). Here, Hill examines how the culture of university *influences* personal religiosity.

Sociologists of religion also examine the ways in which society, groups and individuals are *influenced* by religion. Another example from the JSSR illustrates this kind of analysis. Emily Sigalow and colleagues (2012) examine the extent to which religious factors influence decisions about career choice, marriage, place of residence and fertility decision-making. They found that ‘particular religious communities differ in their emphasis on the role that religion plays in everyday life. While religion shapes values, beliefs and ideologies and informs cultural and ethical understandings, it seems to motivate decision making in complicated ways’ (Sigalow et al. 2012: 318). As these examples illustrate, no matter what aspect of religion is being studied, the social scientist seeks to explain and understand religion through reference to social and cultural factors. Another ingenious example of this way of studying religion is the subject of this chapter’s case study.

CASE STUDY

RODNEY STARK ON THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

The birth, growth and death of religions are inextricably linked to human activity. The world’s major religions have grown and spread across the world through a variety of means, including military expansion, sovereign patronage, large-scale migration of the faithful, missionary activity, evangelism and high birth rates. Later in this book, I consider the modern movement of religions around the world. Understanding the distant past is usually the preserve of historians, archeologists and textual scholars, all using methods specific to their discipline. For the most part, social scientists consider recent religious change, rather than the ancient world.

One exception is the book *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (1996) by Rodney Stark.

American sociologist of religion Rodney Stark is one of the leading figures in the discipline, best known for his work on 'rational-choice' theorizing of religion (see Chapter 4). In *The Rise of Christianity*, he deployed his considerable sociological skills to understand the growth of Christianity in its earliest days. Stark explores the question: 'How did a tiny obscure Messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire ... become the dominant faith of Western Civilization?' (1996: 3). He uses modern sociological theories in order to answer this question. In his view, many interrelated social factors explain the rise of this religion in the centuries before it was promoted through royal patronage (in the fourth century CE Christianity was installed as the official religion of the Roman Empire by Emperor Constantine).

Christianity began in the Roman Empire. Christianity's rapid rise throughout the Roman Empire was not the result of widespread mass conversion, but steady, exponential growth among interconnected networks of people. To explain this point, Stark draws on contemporary sociological theory. He notes first that converts to new religions usually have a personal relationship with existing members. Second, converts are not usually that committed to another religious tradition: 'New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and disconnected' (1996: 19). Third, the religious groups that attract converts usually have open networks rather than closed ones (i.e. brothers, sisters, friends who can join). Stark sees these factors at play in the rise of Christianity. Crucially, the success of Christianity was aided by the fact that the early Christians had 'open networks' and could recruit easily new members.

Like other contemporary religious studies scholars, Stark believes that the growing Christian religion drew its support not from the disenfranchised and poor living in the country, but from the urban middle-class in cities throughout the Mediterranean empire. Recent sociological research suggests the middle classes are attracted especially to new religious movements and cults. Stark thinks the same was likely true of the urban middle class at the time of Christianity's beginning.

Christianity also prospered because of the role, status and fertility of women in the movement. Throughout the Roman Empire there were more men than women, but Christianity appealed disproportionately to women – it treated them better and gave them higher social status. With more women involved – and because of Christianity's prohibition of abortion and infanticide – more Christian children were born, thus enabling Christianity to continue to grow.

Additional to Christianity's success was the way Christians conducted themselves during the various epidemics that swept the Roman world in the first few centuries of the Common Era (CE). The ethos of the Christians led them to take better care of one another, and thus more survived public health disasters. Stark (1996: 89) argues 'Modern medical experts believe that conscientious nursing *without any medications* could cut the mortality rate by two-thirds or more' (italics in original).

In sum, Stark uses various sociological insights to show how (most likely) Christianity prospered. While some might see this growth as an 'act of God', Stark demonstrates that very human processes were at play.

AND FINALLY ... DOES GOD EXIST?

I can still remember my first class in the sociology of religion. It was completely new to me to start thinking sociologically about religion, for example, discussing why women are more likely than men to be religious. I did wonder where personal belief and commitment came into these discussions. Religious people all around the world certainly don't think of their faith in social-scientific terms. For them it is just faith – something they believe, accept or do. A devout, African-American Christian girl living in Louisiana most likely thinks she is religious because God made it so, and she made a choice to follow Jesus, not because being black, female and living in America's South increases the likelihood that she will be Christian rather than Buddhist (which it does).

So, where does God fit in the social scientific enterprise? First, social scientists do not typically try and provide answers to existential, theological or philosophical questions (e.g. 'Does God exist?'). Such questions are simply not the focus of our inquiry. James McClenon (1994: 2), a sociologist who studies paranormal phenomena, argues that social scientific research examines and makes conclusions that are pertinent to the *social* domain, not the religious, theological or philosophical. We answer questions about the social and cultural aspects of religious life, like 'Why are women more likely than men to believe in God?', and ground our answers in the cultural and social domains. In any case, it is possible to discuss people's beliefs, what these mean to them and why they believe without needing to resolve whether such beliefs are true or not.

As for personal opinions, the idea is that we 'check our beliefs at the door'. The social scientific study of religion is not about promoting any theological point of view. As much as possible, personal commitments shouldn't be allowed to influence the conclusions that are made. In this book, I do not comment on the 'truth claims' of any religion. I consider, for example, the atheism of Richard Dawkins and the beliefs of Muslims, without passing comment on the veracity of their beliefs.

This chapter has defined religion and spirituality and examined the social scientific approach to the study of religion. The next chapter considers the first steps in the development of this mode of analysis.

Points to ponder

Think of a religious ritual. How does this forge a link between the practitioner and the transcendent? How would you define spirituality? Would you describe yourself as spiritual, but not religious? If so, how do you express this?

Next steps ...

For a nuanced discussion of the complexities of defining religion, see James Beckford's book *Social Theory and Religion* (2003) and Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and*

Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (1993). Do the differences between religions matter? Scholar Stephen Prothero, in his provocative and thoughtful book, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World and Why Their Differences Matter* (2010), argues they do. Those interested in the emerging social scientific study of spirituality should consult Flanagan and Jupp's edited collection *The Sociology of Spirituality* (2007).

Documentaries

A wonderful introduction to the wide world of faiths is the 2009 BBC TV series, *Around the World in 80 Faiths*, hosted by Anglican vicar Peter Owen-Jones. Available on DVD.

Web

A reliable source of information about the world's religions is the website: www.religionfacts.com Also highly recommended is the BBC religion website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion>. The World Christian Database <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org> provides reliable statistical information on the world's religions.