the idea of reward or release from suffering in another world. Those who fulfill their religious duties can sometimes escape suffering by leaving this existence altogether, either in the Hindu–Buddhist effort to liberate oneself from the cycle of rebirths or in some sort of heaven or otherworldly plane, as in Christianity or Islam. A second major solution to the problem of the suffering of the righteous is to hope for some positive result to come out of the struggle itself—the "no pain, no gain" belief that pervades many theodicies. A third solution is to recognize that one's current woes are not as bad as they could be; suffering is thus reframed and placed in another context.

Religious Rituals

Ritual, a regularly repeated, traditional, and carefully prescribed set of behaviors that symbolizes a value or belief, plays a central role in all the world's religions and is usually studied ethnographically in the field. Much can now be learned, however, by getting on the Internet, where we can observe not only documentary films that represent rituals but weddings, funerals, processions, festivals, and other rituals posted by participants or institutions wanting to share their rituals with other members of their community or the general public. Rituals come in a wide variety of forms; some help people to show devotion to the Gods, as in corporate worship and certain modes of communicating with the Gods, such as praying, chanting, singing, and dancing. Others, such as meditations and mantras, facilitate the process of life organization on both the personal and the collective level. Rituals help to frame daily life by regulating such matters as hygiene, diet, and sex; rites of passage surround major transitions such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death; and still other rituals, such as seasonal festivals, processions, and holidays, help people cope with the cycles of nature.

Rituals are not only limited to religious practice, however, and the idea is a sensitizing concept that helps us understand more about what is going on in much human behavior; once you get it in your mind, you see it everywhere. All social institutions rely on ritual behavior to sustain their values and participants' consciousness of their authority as well as to build solidarity among their members. Rituals solve problems of the collective life in a time-tested way by identifying evil, marking social and ideological boundaries, and reinforcing the institutions that sponsor them. Religious rituals in particular link the experience of ordinary life with the sacred and place both trauma and joy within the context of a worldview that orders a people's life and provides them with meaning.

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observed that religious rituals often signify a special or **liminal period** set apart from ordinary reality. During the liminal period, which involves a separation from, or marginalization of, ordinary reality, participants leave ordinary time and space and enter a sacred region in which the problematic aspects of everyday life—filled with suffering and injustice—are solved, or perhaps denied. Thus, rituals fall "betwixt and between" different worlds: the world of everyday life and the sacred time set apart from mundane reality. During the ritual, normal rules of interaction and social structure no longer apply or are inverted.

Some religious rituals assure people that death is not final because it is followed by rebirth and that social change is not ultimately destructive; the person who stays in the fold of the community is never alone in times of crisis. Thus, the world is renewed annually through the cycles of the seasons and the rituals that mark them, such as Mardi Gras, Dewali, and the Chinese New Year. These rituals signal the paradigmatic nature of time; life is regenerated through a return to the time of the origins. This liminal period is filled with inversions and transformations (see Babcock, 1978; V. Turner, 1967). During those moments of ritual time (e.g., when the crucifixion of Jesus is relived at Easter), the mundane characteristics of life are reshaped: The children and the Princess of Spring run Old King Winter off his throne at Mardi Gras; the God is taken out of his or her temple and paraded through the streets. The births, deaths, and sometimes resurrections of the Gods are celebrated with a renewed emphasis on the things that, contrary to the appearances of earthly, everyday life, "really matter": family, justice, love, and order.

Rituals as a social form share a number of common structural characteristics, no matter what their content: (1) they provide solutions to problems; (2) they are rooted in experience; (3) they involve the demarcation of boundaries and the identification of evil; (4) they include nonrational as well as rational aspects of behavior; and (5) they reinforce, or reify, social processes. I will examine these characteristics in turn.

First, how do rituals solve a variety of human problems? This is a key to the important role of religion in human life: On the abstract level, religious rituals bind a social order together, linking it to the culture's worldview and ethos. On a practical level, rituals provide a proven repertoire for social action, especially at times of crisis. When people are confronted with suffering or death, going through major passages in their life cycle, or experiencing rapid change, religious rituals may guide them through the crisis. Rituals provide socially approved responses, preestablished scripts, and social support for those who have suffered a loss.

Perhaps the best example of religious ritual as problem solver is the funeral rite: A death creates a crisis among the living that must be acknowledged;

something must be done and something said, and ritual packages provide a repertoire of words and actions appropriate to the occasion. The funeral ceremony provides a sense of closure on that stage of the grieving process and places the death within the broader worldview of the tradition. As long as the sacred canopy is in place and retains its legitimacy, the scripts provide a modicum of relief for sufferers. People surrounding the bereaved are familiar with the rituals, and specialized institutions and ritual experts usually guide the victims of the crisis. A ritual package for the ceremony includes a repertoire of appropriate comments for the bereaved and their social networks—some general in character ("It was God's will that he go at this time"), others tailored to a specific situation ("At least she's out of pain now"). A major feature of ritual problem solving is the provision that allows the bereaved to focus their energies on arranging details of the rituals. By accomplishing the detail work surrounding ritual, the individuals involved feel as though they have accomplished something in the midst of a crisis that would otherwise make them feel impotent; taking care of the deceased's needs after death can address lingering unresolved tensions.

Second, how are ritual practices rooted in experience? Because rituals were constructed in the past, they have the authority of time-tested formulas: As Weber (1968, p. 226) observed of traditional authority, rituals are "believed in by virtue of the sanctity of age-old rules and powers." People wiser than we were confronted in the past with a similar situation and created this solution. Evidence confirming that ritual brings about the desired effect is essentially anecdotal, passed on in mythical stories that contain the underlying principle: "We've always done it that way, and it's always worked." The elders recall a time, long ago, when a drought brought disaster to the village. A rain dance was performed, the rain Gods were pleased, the clouds rolled in, rain fell like a monsoon, and the village was saved. The efficacy of rituals is in the eye of the performers—they appear verifiable to those who believe in them, if not always to outsiders. Similarly, evidence calling a ritual into question can be discounted by pointing to flaws in the *performance* rather than the ritual itself. If any ritual performance is scrutinized closely enough, mistakes can be identified that could have been responsible for the ritual's failure. The reason for failure may be attributed to sabotage by an outsider, such as an enemy who performed a more powerful counterritual.

The fact that rituals ensure continuity and reliability is both a blessing and a curse. Because the world is constantly changing, the conditions for which a specific ritual was created may alter to such an extent that the ritual is no longer appropriate. Yet the change may be unnoticed or may be considered unimportant by the ritual's advocates, who continue to perform it

anyway. This is the phenomenon known as **cultural lag** (Ogburn, 1922). Rituals are valuable because people can rely on a known procedure to maintain the social order, but they resist changing procedures when conditions change, thereby rendering the ritual behavior counterproductive. A ritual designed to protect people from drought may not be useful to a tribe moving from a desert to a rainforest.

Third, we usually need to identify a problem's cause in order to solve it, and most rituals contain a theory about the origin of the problems they are designed to alleviate; in short, they contain a theory of evil. Rituals mark boundaries between good and bad ideas, between "us" and "them." An "evil" force, situation, or group is identified as the source of the difficulty, opening the way to a solution. Ritual behavior is thus an integral part of the social construction of evil by which an image of the enemy is created and then spread throughout the culture by media, folktales, and jokes. Evil is often attached to enemies outside the belief system or to those within the system who can be labeled as heretics (see Kurtz, 1986). Many religious traditions personify evil in a particular figure, such as a monster or human-like creature, which needs to be defeated in battle, making the evil appear more manageable.

Whether the figure deemed responsible for evil is personified in a devil or mythical figure or found in a human enemy, rituals identify it and give people something concrete to do about mastering it. Sometimes the simple act of naming an evil and denouncing it is useful; at other times, the evil is physically punished or ridiculed or exiled from the social order. Some will engage in exorcisms to drive away evil spirits; others will repeatedly denounce a group of people for a misdeed. Psychologically, this process of ritual identification of evil is sometimes helpful in the short run but destructive in the end if we simply project evil onto another person or group (like the Nazis did to the Jews during the Holocaust). Such naive projections distort our view of reality:

> The enemy appears as the embodiment of all evil because all evil that I feel in myself is projected onto him. Logically, after this has happened, I consider myself as the embodiment of all good since the evil has been transferred to the other side. (Fromm, 1961, p. 22)

Fourth, rituals include nonrational as well as rational aspects of human experience. Although scholars often tend to emphasize the cognitive aspects of human attitudes and behavior, we are also emotional, creative, and affective beings whose lives are influenced by many different factors. The idea of ritual goes beyond the rational, although that makes it difficult to examine

empirically, since our scientific methods generally limit us to observable, rational behavior and ideas. We can still observe expressions of love, for example, as empirical facts that may not appear rational to outside observers. From an objective point of view, kissing someone or risking one's life for another may not be simply rational or may even appear to defy all rationality. In the liminality of a ritual, the injustices of the existing world are replaced by the justice of another world or an age to come, giving people hope to carry on in this one. The idea that "the last shall be first" may be enacted in the ritual, as when the young Princess Spring dethrones Old Man Winter in the Carnival ritual preceding Lent; the male authority figure is driven off by the people, replaced by the youthful feminine.

Finally, rituals have social as well as psychological consequences, one of which is the **reification** of social processes. Reification means the treatment of an abstraction as a concrete material object. Social institutions that sponsor rituals gain authority and legitimation from doing so in the eyes of the participants. People who never "darken the door" of a temple or church on a regular basis may still turn to their religious institutions and their authorized agents (rabbis, priests, etc.) in times of crisis or celebration.

Because rituals establish the link between a people and their worldview, social transformations and ritual changes are mutually interactive. The move toward universalism is common in religious traditions that shift from being locally oriented to being more cosmopolitan. When religions diffuse across different cultures—or when the territory in which they are based is invaded by traders or conquering armies—religious practices are almost inevitably modified. When Buddhism moved into China and the rest of East Asia, the indigenous festivals and Gods of the various cultures became part of the overall Buddhist practice or lived side by side in the same ceremonies and temples.

Ritual "Packages"

Religious belief systems integrate different kinds of rituals into sets of interdependent practices through which people can engage in showing devotion to the Gods while organizing their individual and collective lives. These sets of "packaged" rituals, though containing diverse practices, fit together neatly as a whole, as when one goes to a place of worship and undertakes a series of rituals designed to fit together. Going to a Buddhist temple, for example, involves a combination of a number of acts, which may all be performed or isolated individually. One might wish to gain guidance about a particular question, so a believer may consult the yarrow sticks, or increase one's chances of a good grade on an exam or of success in romance by giving

offerings of fruit, or demonstrate respect by bowing in front of an image with incense, and so forth.

Two "packages" of rituals, **Yoga** in the Hindu tradition and the **Five Pillars of Islam**, deserve a closer look, and I will examine them in the sections in subsequent chapters on Hinduism and Islam. Both of these ritual packages are highly developed intellectually but also contain a rich repertoire of symbolic acts constructed over many years by many active participants.

To understand how these ritual packages evolve, it is helpful to examine different types of rituals found across religious traditions, such as acts of devotion, communication with the Gods, and collective rites of worship.

Acts of Devotion

Religious practices are often designed to draw a people closer to the ideals of a faith by reminding them of their Gods, their values, and the principles of their faith as well as important events and figures of their shared history. Religious rituals thus involve many forms of communication with the Gods, or with saints, **bodhisattvas**, and other heroic figures from the tradition, as well as occasions for collective worship in public gatherings of the believers. Although they vary widely, some kinds of devotional acts are virtually universal in the world's religious traditions.

Communication With the Gods

A central aspect of religious practice is the set of rituals designed to facilitate communication with the Gods, such as prayer, chanting, singing, dancing, reading from the scriptures, and offering sacrifices. From a sociological point of view, messages designed for communication with the Gods are also ways of communicating with oneself and with others, especially those within the religious community.

The devotee's relationship with the deity is sometimes highly personal, especially in popular traditions. Christianity often emphasizes the believer's personal relationship with Jesus, who is perceived as a friend or a brother, and sometimes with Mary who, although not formally a Goddess, is considered endowed with great power and yet empathetic, particularly with the plight of poor women, especially in the Roman Catholic branch of Christianity. When the image of God is transcendent, sometimes intermediary figures like Mary, the saints, the prophets, or living members and officials of the community may intercede between the individual and a God who is not easily approachable.

The notion of sacrifice to the deity also lies at the heart of many religious rituals, sometimes including acts of considerable violence to humans and

animals. In the earliest rituals, the totem animal, usually protected from harm, was sometimes killed and devoured in an orgiastic frenzy (see Girard, 1977). In ancient Judaism, sacrifices to the deity were performed in the same way as in other religions of the region: Burned offerings were made, including animal sacrifices, along with other offerings representing the first fruits of the harvest, tithes, and taxes. Human sacrifices may have been part of the original set of ritual practices, but if so, the tradition was rejected in early Judaism, as shown in the story of Abraham's sacrificing a ram in place of his son (Genesis 22). The relative merit of animal and vegetable offerings, as in the story of the conflict between the brothers Cain and Abel, probably reflects an early conflict between people growing crops and those raising animals.

Many religions shifted from human to animal to purely symbolic sacrifices over time; ritual practices became increasingly abstract as personalistic ferociousness declined in public behavior (see Collins, 1974). Perhaps a large majority of today's sacrifices are either symbolic acts (e.g., bowing, kneeling, or prostrating) or the offering of money, fruit, vegetables, and so forth.

Collective Rites of Worship

Many religious rituals are performed in identical fashion by believers at home and in temples by priests and laity alike. The temple is usually the "home" of a deity, represented by an image that takes on the power of the God who resides in it. In Hinduism, the *puraris*, or temple priests, follow a prescribed daily pattern in which an image is awakened, bathed, fed, visited and honored, anointed, decorated, and retired for the night. Sometimes worship is collective, especially in **Bhakti Yoga**, with chanting or hymn singing. The combination of the congregation members' mutually reinforcing attitudes; the presence of the Gods; and the stimulation of all senses through music, incense, touching of the God or offerings given to God sometimes produces trances in zealous devotees.

In the Abrahamic religions, collective worship centers on the Sabbath, a ritual that re-creates the primal creation myth in which God rested on the seventh day after bringing the world into being. As Abraham Heschel (1962) noted of the historically oriented, geographically mobile Jewish tradition,

> Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events. . . . The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn. (p. 119)

In this tradition, place is not as important as time: Work ceases on the Sabbath, which is observed in both home and synagogue, and the sacred

interval is marked by the lighting of candles, the reciting of prayers, the drinking of wine, and the eating of bread.

Ritual Organization of Life

Religious rituals link daily life routines with the broader order, allowing individuals and groups alike to place life's crises within a broader religious frame. A variety of rituals organize personal and collective lives: (1) Rituals that regulate daily life, from hygiene and diet to sexual practices, link that daily life to the broader worldview; (2) rites of passage routinize life cycle changes at birth, puberty, marriage, and death; and (3) seasonal festivals and processions bring self, society, and nature into harmony by linking human activity to the seasonal cycles of the natural environment. I will look briefly at each of these categories of rites.

Daily Life

Most traditions advocate a practice of regular meditating, praying, or chanting that provides moments for introspection. Daily devotional rituals sacralize the profane existence of a worshiper's life, giving it larger meaning and purpose and framing it within the ongoing processes of the cosmos. Hindu devotees—especially **Brahmans**—are to engage in ritual washings and daily **poojas**, usually a ritual with chanting and the offering of food or flowers to a God. Buddhists can frame their day by meditating or chanting *om*, the fundamental sound of the one undivided universe. St. Paul told the early Christians that they should "pray without ceasing." Devout Muslims traditionally stop whatever they are doing five times daily, bow toward Mecca, and pray to Allah.

Many daily activities such as eating become acts of faith that reflect a worldview and/or link the individual in a special way with the religious community. The act of sharing a meal together frequently functions as a ritual for the creation of group solidarity, as in the Jewish Passover meal (*seder*) or potluck dinners in American Protestant churches. Membership in a religious community is sometimes expressed through dietary restrictions; in India, for example, most Muslims eat meat and most Hindus do not. The vegetarian diet of many Hindus and Buddhists reflects a worldview in which all creatures are of equal importance and should therefore not be harmed. Jewish **kosher regulations** and Islamic **halal regulations** about diet make the simple act of eating a sacred symbol of belonging and worshipping.

Ritual sometimes transforms the profane into the sacred, thus inverting the normal order of things. In this framework, eating becomes not just a way of gaining nourishment for the body but an act of worship that makes a material action spiritual. One of the most striking examples of the effort to

sacralize bodily activity is the use of sexual acts and imageries as part of worship rituals. One of the best developed of the sexual rituals is *Tantric Yoga*, a spiritual discipline that opens a permissible avenue of sensuality in a sexually repressed society. Sinha and Sinha (1978) explained it as follows:

> Rites of Tantra affirm the need for intelligent and organized fulfillment of natural instinctual desires. . . . The essential element underlying the Tantric practices is the belief that these rites cleanse or purify mundane or profane acts and in the process sacralize the acts themselves by superimposing certain constraints on them. Hence Maithuna [participation in a sexual act] for a Tantric Yogi is a rite and not a profane act; since the partners are no longer human beings, but "detached" like gods, sexual union is elevated to the cosmic plane. (pp. 142–143)

Paradoxically, then, the transformation of the sexual act into a sacred one results not in condemnation but salvation. The Tantric texts themselves are conscious of this paradox and comment on it frequently: "By the same acts that cause some men to burn in hell for thousands of years, the Yogi gains his eternal salvation" (Eliade, 1958/1970, p. 263, as quoted in Sinha & Sinha, 1978, p. 143).

Rites of Passage

Religions provide rituals for all major life passages; these rites sanctify each transition of an individual's life (see Weightman, 1984, p. 216ff.). Within the Hindu tradition, at the occasion of a birth, horoscopes are drawn up, a name-giving ceremony is performed on the 6th or 12th day, the house is purified, and restrictions on the new mother are relaxed. On the first birthday, the baby's head will often be shaved (sometimes at a temple or festival) as a sign of thanks for his or her health.

The ritual of **baptism** in Christianity serves, in some congregations, as a birth ritual as well as a public expression of belief for converts. Baptism, as I have noted—borrowed from ancient Judaism and used by Jesus—was extremely significant in the early church as a rite of passage into the religious community because of the absence of social boundaries around the church. The literalness of the earlier practice gave way to a more symbolic interpretation in which the death and resurrection of Jesus are celebrated by immersion in water followed by a rebirth, as if the believer first died and then emerged from the womb a second time.

Most religious traditions have a rite for the passage from childhood to adulthood, such as the bar mitzvah for boys and bat mitzvah for girls in the Jewish faith. In some Protestant Christian congregations, baptism comes at puberty rather than at birth. In orthodox Brahman families, an initiation

ceremony occurs when the child enters the **Brahmachari**, or student stage of life, which I will revisit when I discuss Hinduism.

One of the most significant rituals in most religious traditions is the funeral, and the process of dying is often full of religious significance as a passage from one world to another. The problem-solving character of rituals can be seen in the way that they frame the end of a human life. Typically the lifestyles, values, and social structures of an entire culture are reproduced in funeral ceremonies. Filial piety and honoring the dead, for example, are important aspects of traditional Chinese funerals, as they are in daily life.

Cycles of Nature

The more spectacular ritual events are often pilgrimages and festivals, usually associated with seasonal cycles of nature or milestones in a tradition's sacred history. Virtually every religious tradition acknowledges the importance of special times and places during which, and at which, the sacred is experienced. Pilgrimages to places where the Gods were born or engaged in heroic encounters with each other or with humans hold special promise to believers for their own experience with God. Often a pilgrimage site offers a specialized benefit, such as healing or the prospect of a son. Similarly, the annual cycle of festivals provides regular occasions for lavish ritual practice. Many are related to the seasons and have ancient roots in the cycles of nature; others are associated with specific Gods, such as Krishna, **Shiva, Ram, Lakshmi**, Durga, Ganesha, and Hanuman in popular Hinduism; various bodhisattvas in Buddhism; and saints in the Christian calendar. Often, modern believers who participate in ancient festivals rooted in natural cycles, such as the winter and spring rituals now associated with Christmas and Easter, have lost touch with their original meaning.

In many religions, on significant festival days a God is brought out of his or her resting place in the temple, anointed and dressed, and paraded through the streets with much ceremony. People crowd around to greet the God and pay homage, and—depending on the powers of the specific God—special benefits are received by those who participate. This process serves to remind people of the ideas and moral implications of their faith and reinforces the status of the temple and its personnel. Through regular cycles of poojas, prayers, pilgrimages, and festivals, the sacred canopy remains intact over the millions of Hindus on the Asian subcontinent.

Religious Institutions

Religious traditions do not exist in isolation but are institutionalized and often highly bureaucratized. The institutional nature of religious practice is

one of its most sociologically significant aspects and has changed substantially over time despite its seemingly immutable nature. The most significant development is the shift from local to cosmopolitan religious institutions, a transformation that each of the major religions has undergone and intensified in the 20th century as institutions in every social sphere have become linked to global processes.

Religious institutions create a basis from which religious beliefs and practices can have regularity over time. Indeed, the provision of continuity is the very essence of institutionalization. As social organization changes over time; however, so too does the organization of religious life. This perception of permanence in the midst of change is one of the most interesting aspects of institutional life. What we now know as established religious traditions were once small religious movements, often sustained only by the charismatic authority of a religious figure—Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha—and a small group of devoted followers. If a movement is successful, the initial period is followed by a process Max Weber (1968) called the "routinization of charisma," in which the mobilizing energy of founder and followers becomes routinized and "crystallized" in a social organization that sustains the beliefs and sponsors the founder's practices.

Religious institutions tend to reflect the more general types of social organization in a given society. Wallace (1966, pp. 84–88) suggested the following categories of religious organization:

1. Individualistic cult institutions, which tend to be "magical"—that is, they sponsor ritual acts to implore or coerce forces, such as general "luck" or guardian spirits, into meeting specific needs, such as success in economic or traveling ventures

2. Shamanic cult institutions, which are an early and persistent form of specialization in religious practice because the **shaman** (either full or part time) is a specialist, a private entrepreneur who aids clients in ritual matters

3. Communal cults, which are not led by specialists but meet the needs of a particular community, such as that found in a family, kinship, or locality group or other social groupings that have a common membership characteristic such as age or sex

4. **Ecclesiastical institutions,** which have religious professionals organized into a bureaucracy along the same lines as other nonreligious organizations in the culture as well as a clear-cut division of labor between the professionals (or clergy) and the laity

The first three types are found in the primal religions of preagricultural (i.e., primarily hunting and gathering) cultures and contemporary folk religion,

including what Redfield (1957) calls the "little tradition" variants of the better-known "great traditions." In primal cultures, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, religious practices and beliefs are generally more integrated into the broader social organization of the environment than in modern cultures, and their institutions are not as highly specialized.

That is not to say that these primal institutions—or elements of them—have not persisted into the 21st century. Shamanism still represents a large proportion of the world's religious practice, although it is usually associated with primal cultures. The shaman is an individual thought to have special powers for performing beneficial religious rites and may even be "possessed" by one or more spirits, thus enabling others to encounter these forces or at least to use their services (see Wach, 1944). Even postmodern societies have shamanic roles, such as that of medium or faith healer. Hargrove (1989, p. 94) suggested that televangelists and media celebrities function much like shamans do. Ironically, television has also made it possible for this ancient cultural artifact to become highly developed and institutionalized, sometimes in the form of multimillion-dollar corporations.

As religious traditions become part of complex societies, their institutional forms become highly embellished and specialized—as seen in the case of the shaman–evangelist, who represents something of a mixed type, with the personal charisma of the leader being supported by an elaborate institutional framework. Every religious movement, especially in the global village, experiences the pressure to become increasingly institutionalized. The structural form ultimately adopted is related both to the social context in which the movement is born and takes shape and to the organizational preferences of the group that is the new religion's carrier.

Today, all the major religious traditions are what Wallace (1966) called ecclesiastical, because they have a highly developed institutional structure run at least in part by professionals. Each tradition also has elements of the other three types of institutional structure as well, sometimes as a residue of earlier organizational forms that persist and sometimes as a revival responding to particular needs of the time or abilities of particular leaders or groups. Examples of revivalism include the shaman–evangelist already mentioned, communal cults of protest movements, or individualistic cult institutions like the Reverend Gene Ewing's "Church by Mail," which provide people with specific "religious services" for tasks that promise spiritual and financial blessings to those who participate in the program.

Considerable variation has emerged even within the ecclesiastical institutions of the major traditions, which I shall now examine briefly. Of particular interest sociologically—because of the democratic ethos associated with the global village—is the elective affinity between particular traditions and

certain types of institutional forms. Although this is not an inevitable outcome, religious institutions that encompass a diverse population and a pluralistic religious worldview may tend to be decentralized in their authority structures; monotheistic religious traditions and those with more homogeneous populations and belief systems, in contrast, may tend toward more centralized structures. There is no strict relationship, it should be noted, between degree of centralization and the extent to which an institution is formally democratized, although a decentralized system may be more lenient toward local deviations than a centralized one. Moreover, a system that is nonhierarchical across a broad geographical area (such as the Southern Baptist Church in the United States) can have local branches that are extremely hierarchical.

The broad variation within each religious tradition makes it difficult to generalize about differences among them, but some further general statements may be useful. Whereas Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism tend to be less centralized and hierarchical, Christian churches have often become more formalized as a response to the universalism of their membership. Judaism, despite its highly rational tone, has until very recently retained a more tribal, less differentiated social organization, in part as an attempt to retain the sacred canopy over a specific ethnic identity that has been reinforced by persecution and adversity as well as sharp exclusionary boundaries.

Major Themes in the Sociology of Religion

Sociologists cannot answer questions about the ultimate meaning of life or the relative truth or fallacy of religious traditions, but they can examine systematically how these issues are dealt with in human societies. The chapters that follow will introduce the major religious traditions inherited from the premodern world and apply the conceptual and methodological tools of sociology to the task of understanding religious beliefs and practices. A short tour, in Chapters 2 through 4, of the central beliefs, rituals, and institutions of each major religion and the parallel indigenous religions will focus on these traditions not as static belief systems but as dynamic processes that have changed dramatically over time as various civilizations have risen, fallen, and come into contact with one another. The historical and sociological nature of all these traditions is an essential starting point for this analysis.

Chapter 5 focuses on the religious ethos—that is, the relationship between religious and social life. Three themes emerge from the sociological literature on the nature of religious life, especially as it has been practiced up to the modern period:

1. Religion is a social phenomenon. Each religious tradition grows out of, and in turn acts back upon, the social life of the people who participate in it.
2. Religious traditions contain a systematic set of beliefs that are acted upon and sustained by *rituals* and *institutions*.
3. Each tradition constructs a religious ethos that defines the taboo lines between acceptable and inappropriate behavior, defines identities, legitimates social orders, and provides guidelines for everyday life.

Once I have described the historical religious context of the emerging global village, I will examine the twin crises of modernism and multiculturalism, identifying three themes that are usually implicit rather than explicit in sociological literature:

1. The advent of the modern world created a crisis for religious communities, challenging traditional beliefs, rituals, and institutions with scientific critiques on the one hand and competing views of the world on the other.
2. The multicultural context of the global village precipitated contradictory responses: a revitalization of ancient traditions (e.g., "fundamentalism"), civil religion and nationalism, and religious syncretism.
3. Religious traditions in the global village can promote chaos or community, either facilitating the construction of a peaceful world or intensifying and justifying violence between conflicting social groups.

The focus of Chapter 6 is the crisis of modernism and multiculturalism. As religious communities absorbed scientific teachings while concurrently confronting other faiths, people within each tradition struggled to find a way to solve the crisis posed by these assaults on the absoluteness of their belief system. People within each community often develop protest theologies that revitalize their own tradition as a way of resisting elements of the modern world or look at new ways to think about their faith. Chapter 7 examines the impact of social change movements, including nationalism, alternative religious movements, and women's and environmental movements, on the faith traditions. Chapter 8 focuses on the relationship between religion and social conflict, first in the frequent link between religion and violence and second on the ways in which religious traditions develop nonviolent means of conflict.

The book concludes by exploring the ways in which religious communities can either promote violent conflict and warfare or cultivate a global culture that facilitates the creation of a community in which diverse groups coexist peacefully. Religious life, in its various forms, involves people striving