or her beliefs to rational scrutiny. The historical prejudices of the sociological tradition, developed primarily by white Western men, also stands in the way of objective observation. Even the language we use to discuss religion is riddled with prejudice. In talking about the deities of the world's religions, for example, it is difficult to generalize. If we talk about a "God," we imply a monotheism common in Western—but not Eastern—religions. If we refer instead, to "the Gods," monotheists may object. Some, like Buddhists, are uncomfortable with the idea of a transcendental deity, because they believe that all creation is ultimately a unity.

Do the Gods—or God—exist? The norms of science require us to be as objective as possible, yet science cannot answer this question because it involves a faith stance, not a strictly empirical one. Scientists examine phenomena indirectly by looking at indicators. If we could agree on what or whom God is and what indicators might prove his/her/their existence, then we could test its reality. We could not, however, agree on the most basic indicators, and if we did, measuring them would be difficult as well.

Each of the sets of sociological tools I have examined here—definitions, metaphors, and theoretical frameworks—aids the task undertaken in this book. The sociology of religion, growing as it did out of the social turmoil of 19th-century Europe, identifies the struggles of late-20th-century multiculturalism and points us in a direction that will assist us in understanding the current state of religion in the global village. The tumultuous history of the field betrays its assets and liabilities: The sociology of religion is relevant and valuable because it was born out of the early stages of battles we continue to fight. Yet those who forged it were partisans in the fight, and we must remain conscious of their limitations as well as of their insights.

Three Pillars of Analysis: Beliefs, Rituals, and Institutions

The focus of the following discussion is the interplay among beliefs, rituals, and institutions, which Durkheim (1915/1965) identified as the central components of religious life in his classic study *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Social scientists studying comparative religions have often focused on this aspect of the faith traditions because so many texts are readily available to explore, analyze, and compare across space and over time. I will undertake a brief overview of many contemporary religious patterns not only in terms of how they function (Durkheim's primary focus) but also in terms of how they have been interpreted and changed over time. The change process especially has profound implications for the future of religious life and collective life in the 21st century.

Anatomy of a Belief System

Each religious tradition has a set of interdependent beliefs that are woven together in such a way that the integrity of the entire fabric is dependent on each strand. The structure of these cultural systems involves the identification of what is considered sacred and meaningful, a set of theories about how and why the world was created, and an explanation for suffering and death.

Belief systems express a worldview—that is, a culture's "picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order" (Geertz, 1973, p. 127). In contrast, Geertz continued, the ethos of a people encompasses the culture's "tone, character, quality of life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude that people have about themselves and the world that life reflects" (p. 173).

Religious myths both reflect and inform the world or, as Geertz (1973) put it, provide both *models of* and *models for* reality. First, they are models of reality in the sense that they offer information and explanations about the world. As models *for* reality, sacred stories also show how the world "really is," in spite of appearances to the contrary. They often highlight the gap between appearance and reality or between the sacred and the profane. I will now examine each of these elements of a belief system.

The Sacred and the Profane

Émile Durkheim (1915/1965) believed that the entire world of human experience could be divided into two categories: (1) the sacred, what is of ultimate concern, and (2) the profane, what is considered ordinary and mundane. The fact that Durkheim was the son of a Jewish rabbi may have influenced his theoretical model, because the division of the world into these conceptual categories is central to Judaic thought and ritual. Durkheim's distinction became central to the academic study of religion even though some religious traditions insist that all of life, not simply one sector, is sacred. To understand most of the world's religions, however, one must grasp this fundamental distinction, which has been elaborated by comparative religions master Mircea Eliade in his 1959 classic *The Sacred and the Profane*.

The two categories of sacred and profane may actually lie on a continuum. Some things are considered more sacred than others and are ranked according to their sacrality. What constitutes the sacred varies from culture to culture and changes over time. The sacred may be recognized (or "manifest itself") in the form of a stone or tree, a flag or mountain, or even an idea. Scholars use the term hierophany to identify the process in which people

encounter and experience the sacred. Sometimes two phenomena defined as sacred may come into conflict, and people must choose which is the most sacred. A theophany is a type of hierophany referring to the appearance of the sacred in a visible form to a human being, either a human or humanlike figure (Jesus, Radha, Krishna, angels) or a natural object such as the "burning bush" that many believe Moses saw in the wilderness. The problem of representing the sacred in art or imagery led to prohibitions on doing so in Judaism and Islam.

The idea is that it is impossible to represent God accurately because human efforts to do so are always inadequate and therefore misleading. All one has to do is to go to a major art gallery in the West to see the problem—the famous classical European paintings of biblical characters (including Jesus and even God) usually represent them as fair-skinned Europeans. Even a master like Michelangelo may present a very misleading idea of what God is like by painting God as an aging bearded white man reaching down from heaven. Whether angels could be represented was an interesting controversy in medieval Byzantium culture (see Peers, 2001).

For the religious, specific times and places are identified as sacred. Most societies designate holidays ("holy days") and sacred sites (Eliade, 1959). A certain location—a temple, mosque, or cathedral; a war memorial or cemetery; the birthplace or grave of a famous person—often affords an encounter with the sacred. Crossing from profane to sacred space often requires certain actions, dress, or attitudes: taking off shoes, genuflecting in front of the cross, bowing in respect, refraining from loud talk, and so on. In the modern world, some of these spaces become sources of great political controversy (such as Jerusalem) or tourist sites (see MacCannell, 1976).

Religions also traditionally divide time into the sacred and the profane. Religious festivals and rituals involve the **reactualization** of sacred events that took place "in the beginning" or during some significant hierophany; the sacred elements of time are thus transformed and shifted to the present moment. Belief systems of the various religious traditions are almost always systematized and disseminated by a select group of religious elites but also in the speech and rhythms of everyday life; for most people, their faith is encountered not in the subtle theologies or massive writings of their tradition, but in its rituals, that is, the regularly repeated behaviors that symbolize the values of their belief system. Ritual behavior, as Durkheim (1915/1965) observed, provides the occasion for an encounter with the sacred, and it is socially organized in such a way as to reinforce the values and authority of the community.

Religious pilgrimages, such as the **hajj**, the Islamic duty to go to Mecca if possible during one's lifetime, sometimes combine sacred space and time, so

that it is optimal to visit a sacred location during a particular season or time of the year. Muslims may try to go to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah. Similarly, a Catholic might try to visit the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12. That is the day she was believed to have appeared to the Native American peasant Juan Diego in 1531 and an official national holiday in Mexico complete with pilgrimages, masses, fiestas, and processions honoring the event.

Faith communities preserve their religious beliefs in often contradictory narratives united at an abstract level by the structure of the stories themselves (see Kurtz, 1979). Life and death, good and evil, the divine and the human all exist side by side within the narrative. The world gets created twice in every culture: First, in the material sense, the world comes into being. Then it is re-created through sacred stories or mythologies (or by means of scientific theories) in a **cosmogony** that links the present with the past. Some sacred events are more significant than their frequency would suggest (like religious visions, death, and sexual intercourse).[3] They may even be statistically insignificant but still have a profound impact on our lives—what is significant statistically may not be the best indicator of what is important to people, especially in the realm of the sacred.

Cosmogonies

Most religious systems have a cosmogony, a story about how and why the world was created. These stories tell us a great deal about a religion's most significant ideas. All the world's creation stories fall into a few basic patterns: A God creates the world out of nothing (ex nihilo). Life emerges from a cosmic egg. A prechaotic animal pulls mud up out of the water. A mountain rises up. A giant sustains the sky. The world takes shape as a spiral. A God delegates power to a demiurge (minor deity)—and so forth.

These cosmogonies link the people who tell the story with the creation process, because their Gods and/or ancestors were involved in giving birth to the world. Most creation stories also have an **anthropogeny**—that is, a theory about the creation of humans and how they should think of themselves. Sometimes the Gods are bored and want to play; other creation stories provide no clear reason why humans come into existence. Sometimes people are created out of clay, mud, water, or blood; other times, they are chiseled out of stone or a primeval tree trunk or are brought out of a plant. Not everything always goes right in the process of creation, nor are the Gods uniformly good or evil. Sometimes the Creators are good, other times they are amoral jokers or tricksters. In most cases, however, the events at the beginning of time have special significance for the faith community's present

situation. The stories provide a paradigm for all creation, blueprints of necessary accomplishments to prevent evil or the reversion to chaos. A cosmogony is one of several basic building blocks of the world-constructing process—the means by which a system of beliefs is developed that explains the world and its implications for daily life.

Not all religious traditions posit a clear-cut beginning point for creation. The Vedas, for example, present a vision of vast time and space that involves endless cycles of birth and rebirth. The cosmos has no beginning or end, although the known ages of the world are born and die just as individuals do. Consequently, the Hindu belief system suggests there are strict limitations on what one individual can change about this vast world and even on the given cycle of time in which one now lives. Buddhist cosmogonies present a similar philosophical view of the universe, in which the five cosmic elements (**skandhas**)—(1) form, (2) sensation, (3) name, (4) conformation, and (5) consciousness—participate.

Because a religion's worldview and ethos are closely related, its creation story provides clues into the nature of the culture to which that religion is linked. In the Babylonian creation story, a great God made minor Gods out of stone, brick, and other materials; because these lesser Gods had to do menial tasks, they in turn created humans to do their work. Such a cosmogony implies that the meaning of human life is to be found in serving God, or perhaps God's representatives. In other religions' creation stories, God created humans in God's own image, thus setting homo sapiens apart from the rest of creation. Such a creation story may empower the species to take control of the rest of nature in an effort to force it to serve humans.

Theodicies

Theodicies are the explanations a religion offers for the presence of evil, suffering, and death in the world, a perennial concern of religious traditions. What causes these events, how can they be alleviated or transcended, and why should the righteous suffer? Each tradition has a theory about suffering and a wide range of explanations occur, including punishment for an individual's sinful behavior, a battle between good and evil forces, the result of natural processes, and so forth. Just as nature has cycles of death and regeneration, so an individual may experience death and rebirth or patterns of illness followed by health. Because suffering and death are such obviously universal and mysterious elements of the human experience, a tradition's theodicy plays an important role not only in religious traditions but in social relations as well. Though we are not usually conscious of it on a daily basis, the ever-present fact of death affects the way in which we organize our lives

(see Dunne, 1965). In addition, a theodicy that explains suffering primarily as punishment for wrongdoing, for example, can lead to a justification of social oppression of those who suffer. Different traditions and subtraditions have varying themes and emphases in their theodicies (see Table 1.3).

One significant element of most theodicies is the social construction of evil—that is, identifying the sources of evil in the world. This framing of evil often has a profound impact on collective life because it affects the nature and intensity of social boundaries; as a social construct, it encourages certain kinds of conflict and discourages others. The most potent construction of evil occurs when a social group's enemies are defined as a deity's enemies so that the latter's destruction or subordination is seen as divine retribution. Sometimes, the same God is claimed by both sides, as in the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s or in World War II, when Allies and Germans alike claimed a Christian God on their side.

Evil may be of divine or human origin, although the two are often intertwined, especially in the heat of conflict. **Dualistic theodicies** connote a struggle between the powers of light (good) and those of darkness (evil). Suffering is thus caused by the evil forces as part of the ongoing battle for control of the universe. Dualistic theories, most highly developed in Zoroastrianism, Mandaeism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism but also found in other religious traditions including Christianity, often lead to contentious political views. Enemies are identified with evil cosmic forces, making peaceful coexistence difficult and affecting the style and tone of interpersonal and intergroup relations as well as cross-cultural and international conflicts.

Eastern religions do not delineate good and evil as clearly as Western religions because they tend to claim that the cosmos is unified and that such distinctions are mere illusions. On another level, however, Eastern (especially Hindu) sacred texts are richly populated with demonic figures that battle with heroes. Even the worst characters have some element of good in them, and the Gods themselves can cause pain and suffering, so that evil can still be seen as something independent of persons or even the Gods themselves. Mahatma Gandhi, as I will discuss later, emphasized this characterization of evil as an independent entity in his effort to promote the idea of struggling against ideas and systems rather than other people.

One of the most troubling realities for a religion to explain is why the righteous suffer. Because most theodicies offer a way out of suffering through ethical behavior, the fact that the righteous suffer presents a difficult anomaly. The major religions prefer to suggest that suffering is simply embedded in the nature of the universe and leaves no one, including the righteous, untouched.

This tension between admonitions to live an ethical life and the apparent lack of immediate reward for doing so has inspired theodicies that promote

Table 1.3 Comparative Theodicies

Archaic Religion

- No sharp boundaries: between individual and society, between society and nature
- Significant boundaries: between social groups
- Suffering: result of crossing social boundaries, violating taboos
- Death: part of the natural rhythms of nature

Mysticism

- Seeks union with sacred forces or beings
- Individual death and suffering are trivial and insignificant

Messianic/Millenarian Eschatologies

- Millenarian: an ideal society will come (often through revolutionary action)
- Eschatology: concern with final events of history
- This-worldly: transformation of society; a hero or messiah will bring justice; suffering may be rewarded
- Otherworldly: change will come in the afterlife or next world

Dualism

- Mandaeism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism
- Struggle of powers of darkness (evil) versus light (good)
- Zoroastrianism: suffering is caused by evil forces as part of an ongoing, often cosmic, battle

Karma and Transmigration

- No bifurcation of the world as in dualism, although there is guilt and merit
- Karma: action or action energy; has effects that later become causes as part of an inexorable law of cause and effect ruling all actions
- The world is completely connected
- Cosmos of ethical retribution
- Transmigration: a wheel of rebirths (samsara) in which guilt and merit are compensated by fate in successive lives of the soul

Sources: Adapted from Weber (1968) and Berger (1969).

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.

Although rituals often preserve a social order and sustain old habits, they are crucial to cultural innovation and change as well. Victor Turner (1967)

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;