



There may be no god in Buddhism, but these Thai Buddhists seem to be praying to something during a religious festival.

Many interesting questions are raised by the differences between these two definitions. If supernatural beings are required for religion, where does that leave Buddhism, the “religion” of about 360 million people? Buddhist doctrine is formally atheistic—no god or gods are part of the belief system. On the other hand, many practicing Buddhists act as if they believe in spirits, and many of them pray to statues of the Buddha for assistance. Furthermore, because most Buddhists believe in the transmigration of souls (i.e., reincarnation), do “souls” qualify as supernatural beings?

Alternatively, defining religion as the way people deal with the sacred means that religion has plenty of room not only for Buddhism but also a number of phenomena not conventionally thought of as religion. For example, a good case can be made for including the revolutionary communism of early-twentieth-century Europe, or Chinese Marxism under Mao Zedong, as a religion.

We usually call political worldviews such as communism ideologies, not religions. Interestingly, however, religion also fits the common definition of **ideology**—a set of ideas that constitutes one’s goals, expectations, and actions. If sacredness turns ideology into religion, consider the fact that communism has its sacred texts—“The Communist Manifesto” and Mao’s “Little Red Book”; its sacred prophets—Lenin and Marx; and even its mystical beliefs—such as the historical necessity of the triumph of the working class. Thus, many sociologists do consider communism the equivalent of a religion. Perhaps an even better case can be made for Nazism. For most Germans of his time in power, Adolf Hitler became a god, or at least a sacred being. Hitler’s book *Mein Kampf* was a sacred text; racial purity and Aryan superiority were promoted

as sacred ideas. Conquest of other countries was pursued with religious fervor.

The “sacredness” definition of religion has led sociologists to recognize a common, even necessary form of religion known as **civil religion**. Consider the way Americans feel about their Constitution—for most, it is a sacred text; or about the flag—a sacred symbol; or about July 4—a day of ritual and worship at the shrine of sacred America. Consider the frequently repeated claim that “Ground Zero,” where the World Trade Center once stood, is “sacred ground.” According to what religion is it sacred? Not Protestantism nor Hinduism, nor any recognized religion. From a Durkheimian perspective, the civil religion that makes these things

sacred is the same as all religions—it is the worship of the community and society, from which all good things eventually flow and on which we are completely dependent. In that sense, all religions are “civil” religions.

Regardless of which definition they use, sociologists take a rather fluid approach to understanding religion. Religion is not defined by one set of doctrines or another. Instead, it is defined by the behaviors, beliefs, and commitments of the people of a group or society. Yes, doctrine matters, because religious doctrine is also the product of people’s behaviors (writings, arguments), beliefs, and commitments. But doctrine is only part of what defines a working religion.

In the real world the rigidities of doctrine are often neglected by the faithful. For example, in Catholic doctrine it is clearly wrong to use contraception, yet 98 percent of sexually active Catholic women in the United States have done just that (Guttmacher Institute 2011), most without a moral qualm. What, then, is the correct description of the Catholic religion? As another example, most Islamic scholars agree that the Koran only asks women to dress “modestly” and does not require them to be veiled in public. Yet women in Saudi Arabia must be fully veiled or risk arrest. The Wahabbi sect that controls religious matters in Saudi Arabia insists that wearing the veil is an essential part of being a good Muslim. In other words, it is part of their Islam. In Morocco, some women who think of themselves as pious do not wear a veil, while others do. And these women, with different opinions, can be seen everywhere walking and talking together in friendship.

Even more fluid are the religious traditions and practices of most East Asian societies (Demerath 2003). In Japan, Korea, China, much of Indonesia, and elsewhere,