

intricate **theology**—discussions of the interpretation of religious matters—that mesmerizes their priest.

In fact, the authors of an influential contemporary analysis of religion, *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985), were particularly taken with the example of a woman named Sheila, who called her religion “Sheilaism.” She described Sheilaism as taking the bits and pieces from various religions that she thought were useful or convincing and combining them into her own personal religion.

Such privatization of religion is an important contemporary trend. But it is not the central sociological reality about religion. Instead, religions are first and foremost what sociologists call **institutions**—structured and enduring practices of human life built around well-established rules or norms, and centered in important organizations (like the government, courts, churches, schools, or military). From a Durkheimian perspective, the primary social function of religion as an institution is the promotion of social order. Most actual religious organizations specialize in teaching and demanding that people follow societal norms—especially those thought of as the commandments of god or the gods or, as in Buddhism and Confucianism, the lessons of revered teachers or prophets. Religion is full of “oughts” (what is right) and “ought-nots” (what isn’t), and of threats of punishment or failure in this world or the next if one does not follow these rules. In other words, religion is one of society’s central mechanisms for social control over the behavior of people. It is no accident that in many older societies it was the shamans, rabbis, imams, and priests who were also the judges in the legal system.

In most places around the world and in the past, there tended to be one dominant religion, often closely aligned with political power. Because religions tend to see themselves as the truth, they have long had a tendency to fight to dominate the community or society in which they are embedded. In small, early communities there was little deviation from a single set of animistic or pagan beliefs. This was the assumptive world that everyone shared, and one lived with it much as we believe in atoms or evolution.

In the Holy Roman Empire (ca. 800–1806 CE) there were minority religions, sometimes persecuted, sometimes not. Gradually, however, everyone was expected to be Catholic. But what came together later fell apart. After the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, the Anglican Church became the state church of England and the Lutheran Church became the state church in Sweden and throughout all of those parts of Europe where Protestantism had won definitive victories (not, for example, in France and Germany, where Catholics and Protestants were both entrenched). This is why America’s early legal commitment to religious **pluralism**—accepting many different religions, or all religions, as legitimate, and the separation of church and state—was so important and so unique.

Denominations and Congregations: Serving the Needs of the Community

14.1.5 Describe the role that denominations and congregations play in organizing religious activity in a community.

Separation of church and state—one of the hallmarks of the American Revolution and now true in most but not all countries around the world—has allowed many flowers to bloom in the religious garden. Most of the world’s major religious traditions contain several different types of groups under their umbrella. Known as **denominations**, these are organized religious groups with at least a few distinctive doctrines or practices that distinguish it from other such groups that are also adherents of the same religion. After decades of immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Roman Catholicism became the largest Christian denomination in the United States, but it still only represents a minority of religious Americans. Most Americans were and are today Protestants. But there are many denominations among Protestants: the Baptists are the largest, but there are many Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, and so forth. By one measure there are more than 200 different denominations in the United States, and many of these have been further divided into competing branches. *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Melton 2009), in its eighth edition, is an attempt to identify every single religious group in the United States and Canada and includes detailed descriptions of over 2,500 distinct religious groups. Table 14.2 identifies some (not all) of the different Protestant denominations in the United States and their relative size.

It is at the level of the denomination that we find much of the organization in what we call organized religion. Denominations train and ordain priests, ministers, rabbis, and imams. They may assist individual churches or synagogues in financial trouble. They frequently, if not always, determine the “correct” doctrine (although individual priests/ministers/imams/rabbis or other local religious leaders may not always follow those doctrines in their preaching). They provide model liturgies to be followed and lessons to be taught in the church sanctuary and religious education programs.

It is within as well as between denominations that the “big” religious conflicts are fought. For example, several Episcopalian congregations recently left that denomination because the national Episcopalian leadership made an openly homosexual priest a bishop. When the Catholic Church decided to move from the Latin mass to one in the regional language of each society in the 1960s, so that parishioners could understand what was being said, many congregations threatened to defect—although in the end few did. The Church of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) have suffered internal wars over polygamy (where a man