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Protestant Reformation: The Invention of "Religion" as a Separate Sphere

Executive Summary

The **Protestant Reformation** fundamentally transformed the way "religion" was understood, laying the groundwork for our modern idea of religion as a distinct, private sphere separate from politics, law, and community life. **Before the Reformation**, European societies (and many others worldwide) did not even have a concept of "religion" as an independent category – spiritual practices were deeply integrated with governance, culture, and daily life [1] [2]. The Reformation's **theological innovations** – such as Martin Luther's doctrine of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *sola fide* (faith alone) – elevated individual belief and personal conscience above institutional tradition. Reformers like **Luther** and **Calvin** challenged the all-encompassing medieval Christendom by insisting on a division between the spiritual and the temporal realms. Luther's famous "two kingdoms" doctrine explicitly taught that God ordained separate **spiritual** and **temporal** governments, which must be carefully distinguished [3] [4]. Over the ensuing century, this revolutionary idea birthed new concepts of **religious freedom**: after generations of bloody religious conflicts, treaties like the Peace of **Westphalia** (1648) formalized the principle that civil authorities should not impose faith, effectively defining religion as a matter of private conscience protected from state intervention [5] [6]. Crucially, the Reformation-era shift did not remain a European phenomenon – it was **exported globally** through colonialism and missionary movements. European colonizers and Protestant missionaries imposed their **religion/secular divide** on diverse cultures, often forcing indigenous peoples to classify their holistic lifeways into "religious" vs. "secular" categories that had never existed before [7] [2]. This research finds a strong scholarly consensus (from historians, anthropologists, and theorists like **Talal Asad**) that the modern universal concept of "religion" *as a bounded sphere of private belief* is indeed a product of the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath [8] [9]. However, some scholars caution that this was a gradual, contested process – elements of church–state distinction had precedents, and non-Western cultures did not simply adopt the concept passively but often resisted its imposition. Overall, the Protestant Reformation's legacy in creating a **separate sphere for religion** was a critical first step in a larger historical trajectory toward the "religious marketplace" and religious liberty we see in later chapters. Below, we provide a detailed timeline of key developments, followed by in-depth analysis of each aspect of this argument, supported by primary sources (Reformers' writings, treaties) and current scholarship.

Timeline of Key Developments in the Concept of "Religion"

- **Pre-1500 (Medieval era):** No separate category of "religion" in most societies. Spiritual and political authority were unified in *Christendom* (e.g. the Pope and Holy Roman Emperor jointly governed), and in many non-Western cultures, sacred rituals were embedded in everyday social duties. For instance, **Latin** *religio* originally meant a personal pious obligation or monastic vow, not a separate institutional sphere [10] [1]. In many languages, there was no word for "religion" as distinct from culture – e.g. most Native American languages had *no term for religion*, since spirituality permeated all of life [2].

- **1517–1520s (Luther's Reformation):** Martin **Luther** launches the Reformation. In writings like *"Temporal Authority" (1523)*, Luther articulates the doctrine of the **two governments** or "two

kingdoms." He argues that God established two distinct realms – **spiritual governance** (the Word and faith governing the soul) and **temporal governance** (the law and sword governing external society) – and that these must be "carefully distinguished" [3] [4]. This undercut the medieval idea of a single corpus Christianum (unified church-state) and asserted that worldly government had no authority over the soul or personal faith.

- **1555 (Peace of Augsburg):** The Holy Roman Empire, ravaged by early religious wars, signs the Peace of Augsburg. This legal treaty explicitly uses the concept of *"religion"* to delineate authority: **"cuius regio, eius religio"** – each prince can choose the religion (Catholic or Lutheran) of his territory. Significantly, this marks one of the first official uses of *religion* to mean a confessional category separate from secular rule [11]. Historians note this moment as "the first step on the road toward a European system of sovereign states" with a private religious domain [12].

- **1618–1648 (Wars of Religion & Peace of Westphalia):** A series of devastating wars across Europe (Thirty Years' War, etc.) fought largely over religious allegiance. The exhaustion leads to the **Peace of Westphalia (1648)**, which is often considered a founding moment of the modern secular order. Westphalia's treaties **entrenched religious freedom** in a proto-liberal sense: subjects were granted rights to private worship even if it differed from the ruler's faith, and a *secular legal mechanism* was established to handle religious disputes without invoking theology [13] [5]. Westphalia explicitly imposed a **public/private divide**: secular authorities would handle public life, while religion became a matter of private conscience and voluntary practice [13]. This solidified the notion of *religion as a protected category* separate from governance.

- **1689 (Locke's Letter on Toleration): John Locke**, an English Protestant philosopher, publishes *A Letter concerning Toleration*. Synthesizing Reformation principles, Locke makes a landmark argument for the separation of church and state. He writes that **civil government is confined to "civil interests"** – life, liberty, property, and public order – and **"hath nothing to do with the world to come."** The "care of souls," Locke insists, **"is not committed to the civil magistrate"**, as true religion consists in inward belief that cannot be compelled by worldly force [6] [14]. He defines a *church* as a **voluntary society** of individuals, entered by personal choice, not by birth or coercion [15]. Locke's ideas (soon influential in both Europe and the American colonies) vividly illustrate the new Protestant-born paradigm: religion is a **matter of individual conscience and free association**, utterly separate from the coercive jurisdiction of government.

- **18th–19th centuries (Colonial Expansion and Classification):** As European empires (many led by Protestant powers like Britain) spread globally, they **exported the Protestant concept of "religion"** to cultures worldwide. Colonial administrators and missionaries, armed with this binary of "religious vs. secular," began **classifying indigenous beliefs** into Western categories. For example, the British in India worked to **organize the diverse Indian traditions into a unified "Hinduism"**, treating it as a single "religion" alongside Christianity and Islam [7]. All Indian spiritual practices that were not Christian or Muslim were lumped under this invented category "Hindu," reshaping Indians' self-understanding in the image of Western religion [7] [16]. Likewise, colonizers often demanded that colonized peoples identify which "religion" they adhered to, a notion foreign to many societies. This era also saw the rise of the modern **notion of "world religions"** – a comparative framework (developed by Western scholars) that presumed every culture has something akin to "a religion" as Protestants conceived it.

- **Late 19th century (Indigenous Religions Repressed):** The imposition of Western religious categories was frequently accompanied by coercion. In many colonies, **traditional spiritual practices were suppressed** unless re-framed as "religion" acceptable to the colonial powers. In

the United States, for instance, federal authorities in the late 1800s banned Native American ceremonies, deeming them pagan rather than true "religion." From **1883 to 1978, U.S. laws (the Code of Indian Offenses)** actually *criminalized Native religious ceremonies* and enforced Christianization, punishing Indigenous people for dancing or consulting spiritual healers [17] [18]. This extreme example underscores how **colonial regimes drew a line between "religion" (defined in Protestant terms) and "culture,"** often outlawing the latter if it didn't fit the Protestant mold. Only in 1978 did the U.S. formally recognize Indigenous spiritual practices as protected religious freedom (American Indian Religious Freedom Act), highlighting how long the Protestant definition of legitimate "religion" held sway [19].

- **20th–21st centuries (Scholarly Reflection):** In recent decades, scholars have critically examined this history. Influential anthropologists and historians (e.g., **Talal Asad**) argue that *"religion" as we use the term is a product of European modernity*, exported globally through **colonial power** [8]. The **conceptual separation** of religion from politics and society – so familiar today – is now understood as neither timeless nor universal, but rather as an outcome of the **Reformation and Enlightenment** era changes. Modern theorists emphasize that what counts as "religion" in law or discourse often follows the **Protestant prototype** (focused on scripture, doctrine, private belief), which can misrepresent or constrain other cultures' integrated ways of life [8]. This scholarly consensus reinforces the chapter's core argument that the Protestant Reformation launched a new category of human activity – "religion" – distinguished from the rest of social life, with profound global consequences.

(The following sections provide detailed evidence for each of these points, including primary source excerpts and scholarly analyses.)

Pre-Reformation Societies: Integrated Spiritual-Political Systems

Before the Protestant Reformation, **European Christendom** and most other pre-modern societies did not compartmentalize "religion" as an isolated sphere of life. Instead, what we now call religious institutions, beliefs, and rituals were **inseparably intertwined with governance, law, and community norms**. In medieval Europe, the **Church and state were deeply entangled**: the Church not only exercised spiritual authority but also held vast political power (e.g. the Papacy crowning emperors, bishops serving as feudal lords). The very idea of **"separating" church and state would have been foreign in the Middle Ages**. One did not choose a religion as a private individual; religion was essentially the public faith of the community and the empire. Historians note that the **Latin word** *religio* in antiquity and the Middle Ages referred broadly to duty, devotion, or monastic life – *"never as doctrine, practice, or [an] actual source of knowledge"* in the abstract [10]. Significantly, *"the compartmentalized concept of religion, where religious and worldly things were separated, was not used before the 1500s."* [1] In other words, prior to the 16th century, Europeans did not speak of religion as a standalone category distinct from politics or science; that linguistic and conceptual innovation only emerged *during and after* the Reformation.

This was not unique to Europe – around the world, many cultures lacked a separate word or concept for "religion." For example, **in Japan**, for most of its history there was no native concept equivalent to "religion" until Western influence in the 19th century introduced it [20]. In the **Americas**, indigenous peoples likewise did not carve out a "religious" realm apart from daily life. As one Native American rights publication explains: *"There is no word for religion in most Native American languages. The Native American connection to the natural environment is cultural, traditional, and ceremonial… linked to sovereignty and governance, [but] is it a religion as the term is understood from a Western viewpoint?"* [2]. Their spirituality was embedded in everything – hunting, farming, community gatherings, law – rather than a separate

institution on Sundays. European colonizers often misinterpreted this, claiming natives "had no religion," when in fact **spirituality suffused their entire way of life** [21]. Similarly, in **Hindu civilization**, there was no single unified "Hindu religion" distinguished from social custom – the array of philosophies and rituals now labeled *Hinduism* were integrated into caste, family, and kingdom. The very term *Hinduism* as a unified religion was essentially constructed by British scholars and officials in the 18th–19th centuries (as discussed later) [7].

In medieval Europe, the closest concept to our "religion" was perhaps **"Christendom"** – referring to the entire Christian order of society. Every kingdom in Western Christendom was, by definition, Christian, and governance was justified by religious authority. The **Pope** could wield political authority (e.g., calling for Crusades, arbitrating disputes between monarchs), and kings were considered God's appointed rulers. Rather than speaking of "religion" versus "state," medieval discourse spoke of **spiritual power (auctoritas spiritualis)** and **temporal power (auctoritas temporalis)**, both of which were meant to work in harmony under God's law. The key point is that **the boundaries were porous and contested** – e.g. the Investiture Controversy of the 11th century was a power struggle over whether the Church or secular monarchs would control clerical appointments, illustrating that **no clear line separated church and state** at that time.

Moreover, **law and morality were grounded in religion**: heresy and blasphemy were crimes punishable by secular authorities, and political loyalty was tied to religious unity. Dissenters like Wycliffe or Jan Hus, who foreshadowed Reformation ideas, were tried both theologically and politically (Hus was burned as a heretic in 1415 with Emperor Sigismund's consent, indicating the fusion of civil and religious punishment). In such a context, the very notion of "religious freedom" or of religion as a personal choice *distinct from one's political identity* was absent. As **Talal Asad** and other scholars emphasize, *"'religion' is a construction of European modernity"* [8] – in earlier eras, people certainly worshipped and believed, but they did not conceive of those activities as an isolatable domain called "religion" separate from the rest of life.

Outside Europe, integrated systems abounded: For example, in the **Islamic empires** of the medieval period, there was the concept of *din wa-dawla* (religion and state) as a unified ideal; the Sultan or Caliph was both a political and religious leader, and the sharia informed state law – again, no secular/religious split in principle. In many **African societies**, ancestral rituals, community laws, and spiritual beliefs were one tapestry, not divided realms. When Europeans later arrived and attempted to draw lines (labeling some practices "superstition" or "tribal religion" versus others as "culture"), it often baffled or angered locals. This underscores that the **absence of a religion/secular divide was the human norm** for millennia. The Protestant Reformation's radical break – separating the salvation of the soul from the rule of the kingdom – thus marked a turning point that would ripple outwards.

In summary, **pre-Reformation societies were characterized by a holistic unity** of religious and political life. The very word "religion" (in today's sense) was rarely used or had different meaning. As the Wikipedia summary concisely puts it: *"Religion is a modern concept… invented in the 17th century due to events such as the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Reformation"* [9]. The stage was set by the early 1500s for a profound upheaval that would carve out a new conceptual space called "religion."

Protestant Innovations: Sola Scriptura, Individual Faith, and Church–State Separation

The **Protestant Reformers** introduced several key innovations that together reframed "religion" as a distinct sphere. Three closely linked aspects stand out: **the primacy of individual conscience**, the separation of spiritual and temporal authority, and the demarcation of "faith" from "works" (or belief

from public practice). These were not necessarily the Reformers' intent to create a modern concept of religion, but they had that effect in hindsight.

1. Sola Scriptura & Individual Conscience: Martin **Luther's** defiance of Church authority was grounded in the idea that the Bible alone is the ultimate authority (*sola scriptura*), and that each believer has the right – even the duty – to read and interpret Scripture for themselves under the guidance of conscience. At the Diet of Worms (1521), when commanded to recant, Luther famously declared that *"my conscience is captive to the Word of God… it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."* This was a revolutionary elevation of **individual conscience above institutional tradition**. In practical terms, it began to locate "true religion" *inside the individual believer* rather than in the corporate Church or its sacramental system. The Reformers taught that no church or state could coerce genuine faith; *faith had to be voluntary and inward*. By insisting that salvation comes by **faith alone (sola fide)**, not by external works or belonging to the church, Protestants created a sharper distinction between **inward belief** and **outward practice**. One's standing before God depended on a personal relationship and conviction, a realm where the state's laws and the church's rituals held no sway. This theological move helped define "religion" as concerning the **inner heart and mind**, as opposed to the medieval view where participating in the communal rites (Mass, etc.) and obeying church law was integral to social identity. We see here the germ of a **private/public split**: the most important aspect of religion became *invisible, internal, spiritual* – paving the way for religion to be considered a private sphere. Max Weber later analyzed this as part of the **"rationalization"** of religion, where Protestantism stripped away the enchanted, public ceremonials and focused on rational, personal faith – thereby **differentiating religion from other spheres** like politics and economy [22] [23]. In Weber's view, modern society underwent *"the increasing differentiation of social spheres"*, with Protestantism as a catalyst that separated the religious conscience from the control of other institutions [22].

2. Luther's Two Kingdoms: Building on the above, **Luther explicitly articulated a doctrine of dual authority** that laid an ideological foundation for church–state separation (even if he did not fully implement modern separation himself). In **1523**, Luther wrote *"On Secular Authority" (Temporal Authority)*, where he argues clearly: *"God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked…."* [3]. He goes on to insist *"one must carefully distinguish between these two governments. Both must be permitted to remain, the one to produce righteousness, the other to maintain external peace."* [4]. This statement is remarkable – coming after centuries when the prevailing theory was that the Pope (spiritual power) ultimately had authority even over temporal rulers in matters of sin. Luther rejected that by saying the secular rulers have their own God-given domain (to keep order in society), while the church's domain is purely to preach the Gospel and guide souls. **Neither should usurp the other**: secular government must not coerce faith ("lords over men's consciences," as he put it [24]), and the church should not wield the sword or political power. This was **novel**. While medieval thinkers had distinguished priestly and kingly roles (going back to St. Augustine's "City of God" distinction), Luther's formulation came amid a populist religious revolt and carried enormous weight. It provided a **theological justification for why "religion" should be separate from governance** – because mixing them harms both: the state is incompetent at saving souls, and the church is corrupted by worldly rule. Early Calvinists and other Reformers had similar ideas: John **Calvin** in Geneva also established a form of dual authority (a Consistory for church discipline separate from the city council) and taught that magistrates were ordained by God for civil order but had limits in spiritual matters. The **Anabaptists** went even further, advocating a complete separation – they held that the true Christian should not wield the sword at all, and that church must be a voluntary gathered community distinct from the state. Though persecuted at the time, the Anabaptist vision prefigured later Baptist and evangelical ideas of **free church separated from government**.

It's important to note these concepts were **new and contested**. Catholic opponents accused Protestants of fragmenting the unity of Christendom and fomenting chaos by removing the church's oversight of society. Even among Protestants, the exact church–state relationship varied: Luther accepted princes as guardians of the church (leading to *territorial churches* in Germany), whereas radicals wanted more separation. Nonetheless, the intellectual shift was clear – Protestantism planted the seed that **"religion" belongs to the realm of faith and conscience**, not primarily to political or communal enforcement.

3. Early Notions of Religious Toleration: The Reformation's upheavals inadvertently gave rise to the idea of **religious toleration**, which further solidified "religion" as a distinct category in need of special protection. In the 1500s, this was a matter of pragmatic survival as much as principle. After decades of seesawing persecutions (Catholics vs. Protestants in different territories), some thinkers and rulers started to argue that civil peace required letting minority sects worship in peace. The **Wars of Religion** in France (1560s–1590s), for example, led to the *Edict of Nantes* (1598) by Henry IV, granting a degree of toleration to Protestants (Huguenots) – a radical move at the time. Such edicts implicitly recognized "religion" as something that could **diverge from the official state church** and yet be *endured* for the sake of higher political stability. This was a wedge opening the idea that one's religion could differ from one's citizenship or loyalty. The concept of **"liberty of conscience"** emerged: the notion that the inner conviction about God should not be forced. Early champions of this notion (besides sectarians) included polymath Sebastian Castellio, who condemned burning heretics, and later **Roger Williams** in the American colonies, who in 1644 wrote *"The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution"* arguing that forced uniformity of religion was against the teachings of Christ. Williams coined the term **"soul liberty"** and founded Rhode Island on the basis of separating church and state [25] .

By the mid-17th century, **religious tolerance** had made strides in theory and limited practice. The culmination was in **Westphalia (1648)**, as noted in the timeline: it not only ended the Thirty Years' War but **institutionalized the idea that multiple "religions" could coexist within the system of states**. According to legal historian Benjamin Straumann, the Westphalian treaties *"successfully solved the problem of deep religious disagreement by imposing proto-liberal religious liberties…, leaving the subjects with exclusively secular duties toward their authorities"* [26] . In other words, as long as subjects obeyed the secular laws and duties of their ruler, their private worship was their own affair. Westphalia even set up a mechanism for *secular courts to handle religious disputes without religious reasoning*, reinforcing the exclusion of theology from public decision-making [13] . This is a profound marker of how a *formerly unified religio-political domain was split*: law and politics were now explicitly "secular" (from *saeculum*, "of this world, this age"), and "religion" was an interior or at least non-governmental matter. The treaty's language and subsequent enforcement treated **"religion" as a category of personal or communal identity that could be chosen or changed** (princes could change state religion; subjects in some cases could migrate to a region of their faith). This was the birth of what we now take for granted: *religion as a matter of individual choice,* protected (to some extent) from state interference.

Thus, **Protestant innovations** – theological (sola fide), ecclesiological (new church structures), and political (two kingdoms, tolerance) – collectively carved out a new space. By the late 17th century, leading thinkers like **Locke** could explicitly state the principle that had been incubating: *"all the power of civil government relates only to civil interests… and hath nothing to do with the world to come."* [14] Civil and religious spheres were different in kind. Locke argued, point blank, *"the care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate… no man can be compelled to believe by outward force… faith is a matter of inward and full persuasion of the mind."* [27] [28] This encapsulates the mature Protestant perspective: **Religion = inward belief and voluntary community**; State = outward law and coercive power. Any overlap – the state using force in religion – is both illegitimate and ineffective.

Notably, even **Locke's definition of a church** as *"a free and voluntary society of men, joining together... to worship God"* [29] is thoroughly Protestant (especially reflecting Baptist and independent church influences). It assumes religion is about personal decision (nobody is born into a true church; one must join of one's own conviction [15]). This idea would have been nonsensical in medieval Christendom or in many other cultures where religion was more of an ethnic or state identity. Now religion was something *one could opt into or out of*, which is a hallmark of it being a distinct sphere – almost like a club or association (albeit a sacred one) rather than an inextricable aspect of one's citizenship.

In sum, the Protestant Reformation provided the theological justification and early practical models for separating religion from politics and defining it primarily as **personal faith and practice**. The concept of **"religion" transformed from an all-encompassing worldview that governed society (medieval Catholic sense) into a** delimited sphere **of life concerning worship and conscience. While these changes took more than a century to fully develop, by 1700 the groundwork was firmly laid: Europe had multiple Christian "religions" (Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, etc.) coexisting under a system of states, and philosophers had articulated the notion of religious rights.** Modern religious freedom was born *from these Protestant-led shifts, which required first imagining "religion" as something separable from "the secular." As one scholar puts it, "the concept of religion was first used in the 1500s to distinguish the domain of the church and the domain of civil authorities"* [11] – a direct consequence of the Reformation's challenge to the old integration.

The Birth of "Religious Freedom" and the Legal Category of Religion

The violence and turmoil of the Reformation era eventually necessitated **practical compromises** that further entrenched the notion of religion as a separate category, particularly through the establishment of **religious freedom** (in early forms) as a political principle. While the Reformers themselves often did not advocate full freedom for all (Protestant cities could be as intolerant to dissenters as the Catholics had been), the plurality of sects made some form of tolerance inevitable. This process culminated in new legal and intellectual frameworks that treated "religion" as **a matter of personal belief entitled to protection**.

One milestone, as discussed, was the **Peace of Westphalia (1648)**. It not only ended a pan-European war; it also marked a new constitutional order in which religious plurality was structurally accepted. Straumann's analysis of Westphalia calls it *"a secular constitution"*: by imposing religious liberties and keeping subjects' duties "exclusively secular," the treaties effectively **privatized religion** [13]. They even created *secular courts* for enforcing the religious settlement, pointedly excluding clergymen or theology from the process [13]. This is a telling detail – it means that henceforth, disputes about religion (e.g. if a prince violated the terms protecting a minority faith in his land) would be solved not by a religious council or the Pope, but by legal instruments as if religion were a **category of rights** analogous to property or contract. The notion that religion is something an individual *has* (like an identity or a conscience claim) that could be defended in court is thoroughly modern. It was absent in medieval times when heresy was simply a crime. After Westphalia, by contrast, a Calvinist minority in a Catholic-ruled territory had some standing to say "this is our religion, you must let us be" under the treaty. **Religion had become reified** – a thing that one possesses and that state agreements could guarantee.

Following Westphalia, the idea of **religious freedom** continued to develop. In England, after the Glorious Revolution, the **Toleration Act of 1689** granted freedom of worship to Protestants outside the Church of England (though not to Catholics or atheists yet). In the American colonies and later the United States, this principle was expanded dramatically: the **U.S. First Amendment (1791)** enshrined full freedom of religion and barred any "establishment of religion" by the state, which is a direct

inheritance of Locke's philosophy [30]. By that point, it was an article of Enlightenment faith (paradoxically rooted in Protestant theology) that religion was **"a matter which lies solely between Man & his God,"** as Thomas Jefferson wrote, and thus the state should have nothing to do with it [30]. When modern constitutions talk about "freedom of religion," they implicitly define *religion* as a specific aspect of life – primarily belief and worship – that is distinct from one's role as citizen.

It's illuminating to realize that **even defining religion in law** was a novel exercise. For instance, the U.S. struggled with what counts as religion (Is it only Christianity? Does it include Islam, Native rituals, etc.?). Over time, the legal concept widened, but it remained tied to a Protestant-inflected understanding: *religion* is about sincere beliefs, texts, a deity, and voluntary affiliation – a definition that fit Protestantism neatly. As scholars note, *"the implicitly Protestant envelope of the category of 'religion'"* shaped even secular constitutions [31] [32]. Anthropologist Talal **Asad** argues that the modern discourse of religious freedom is built on Protestant assumptions: religion is private, internally experienced, and separate from power – so protecting religion means protecting that private sphere [8].

One important aspect of this development was the **concept of secular law** itself. By carving out religion as distinct, **"secular" became its counterpart** – referring to the state and societal areas outside religion. This binary of religious vs. secular is essentially a product of the post-Reformation world. As one analysis puts it, *"in modern times, at the same time as secularization established a sphere outside religion ('the secular'), 'the religious' also becomes a distinct sphere"* [33]. That is, you define one by defining the other. Before, there was no "secular realm" because everything was under God's purview in theory; after, we talk about secular education, secular governance, etc., precisely because we have delineated what is "religious" and needs to be kept separate.

By the eighteenth century, **religion as a category had also become useful for pluralistic societies**. Thinkers like Voltaire and other philosophes (many of whom were deists or very much shaped by Protestant controversies) spoke of religion as something one could examine, compare, or critique – e.g. discussing "the religions of mankind" in the plural, a discourse that wasn't common in Europe before. Missionaries and explorers, encountering diverse faiths, also started using the term in a comparative sense: *"What is the religion of China? What religious texts do Hindus have?"* etc., reflecting the assumption that all cultures had *something* analogous to European Christianity that filled the "religion" slot. This would eventually lead to the 19th-century idea of **"world religions"** and the academic study of religion. But notably, this comparative notion is a **colonial-era artifact**: it took the Protestant-derived concept of religion and tried to map it onto every culture, often with awkward fit. For example, early Orientalist scholars were puzzled by Hinduism's lack of a single founder or creed, because they were implicitly measuring it against the template of a Protestant church (with a founder like Luther/Calvin or Christ, a holy book, a set of doctrines). They sometimes even questioned, "Do Hindus have a religion or just superstition?" – again revealing how the modern concept of religion was not neutral but carried a Protestant bias about what counts as true religion (textual, belief-focused, etc.) [8].

To sum up this section: the **creation of "religious freedom" as a legal-political concept in the 17th and 18th centuries both reflected and reinforced the new category of religion.** By declaring religion a private matter of choice that should be free from state coercion, societies from Europe to America formally acknowledged that *religion is its own sphere* – parallel to but separate from civic life. This was the fruit of Reformation principles, watered by the blood of religious wars, and harvested in Enlightenment liberal thought. It laid the institutional groundwork (churches as voluntary organizations, legal rights to worship, pluralism) that defines modern "religion" to this day.

Global Export of the Protestant "Religion" Concept through Colonialism

The story does not end in Europe or in the Enlightenment. A critical part of this chapter's argument is that the Protestant-defined concept of religion – as a distinct, private, belief-centered sphere – was **exported and imposed globally via colonialism and missionary activity**. The modern international order and cross-cultural encounters of the 18th–20th centuries spread this European notion of "religion" to peoples who often had very different worldviews. In many cases, the imposition of these categories was part of the process of colonization, serving to reorder colonized societies and facilitate control. Here we examine how this played out in various contexts and the resistance it sometimes provoked.

Colonial Administrative Categories: European colonial administrators, when governing foreign populations, felt a need to categorize their subjects – by race, ethnicity, caste, and **religion** – in order to make sense of and rule them. They often *assumed* that "religion" was a universal type of human institution, so they looked for something in each society that corresponded to the churches or sects they knew at home. This sometimes led to crude simplifications. A striking example is British India: the British arrived to find a bewildering diversity of temples, deities, sects, and philosophies in the subcontinent. Through the 19th century, they gradually **classified most Indians as belonging to one of several "religions": primarily *Hinduism, Islam, or Sikhism*** (with smaller numbers as Christians, etc.). In doing so, they **invented the notion of a homogeneous "Hinduism."** As one historical analysis notes, *"British colonial administrators soon got to work officially classifying caste and religious identities. The consequence was that all those Indians who were not Muslim or Christian became 'Hindu' by default. In this regard, Hinduism's origins are radically modern. Under the British colonial system, the rich beliefs, customs, and mythology of the Hindu way of life were associated with the religious category of Hinduism."* [7] . In other words, a vast array of Indian cultural practices were boxed into a single unit called "the Hindu religion" – a concept which many argue did not exist as such before the British. The British census, law, and education then reinforced this by treating "Hindus" as one group with one religion. This is a clear case of **colonial imposition of a religious category** on an integrated cultural complex. What in reality was a fluid set of traditions (many Indians would have identified primarily by jati (caste) or region or philosophical school, not a monolithic "Hindu" identity) became hardened into a religious identity under Western influence [34] .

Another example: in parts of **Africa**, colonial authorities often distinguished between "religion" and "custom" for the purpose of law. They would permit certain practices under "freedom of religion" if those practices looked to them like a worship service or doctrine, but they might outlaw other traditional practices as barbaric "custom" (e.g. certain dances, healing practices, or justice rituals) because they didn't recognize them as religion. This echoed the Protestant bias: if something looked like prayer or preaching, it was religion (and maybe tolerable), but if it looked like "superstition" or something affecting social order, it was not granted the same respect. For instance, the British outlawed the **sati** (widow-burning) in India in 1829, arguing it was not truly a core religious requirement of Hinduism (and indeed many Hindu reformers agreed it wasn't essential). However, to make that argument, the British had to set themselves up as arbiters of what was "real religion" vs "mere custom" in Hindu practice – a very Protestant approach (since Protestantism had earlier demarcated true faith vs "superstitious" rituals in its own context).

Missionary Enterprises: Protestant missionaries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas not only preached Christianity but also often actively reorganized local societies along the sacred/secular divide. They introduced **church institutions** (separated from the "world"), schools (often religiously based but teaching secular subjects too, implicitly distinguishing education from ritual), and the idea that converting to Christianity might require isolating "religious" beliefs from "cultural" practices. For

example, when missionaries encountered, say, a Polynesian or African community, they might demand that converts **abandon certain dances, costumes, or rites that the missionaries deemed pagan** – effectively telling people those practices are not just different religion but perhaps *not religion at all*, just heathen culture to be discarded. In doing so, they were drawing a line: Christianity was the true religion (with its Sunday services, creeds, etc.), whereas the indigenous practices were either false religion (to be prohibited outright) or "culture" (tolerated only if harmless). This binary again sprung from a Protestant mindset that **true religion is about correct belief and worship, not about ritual imbued in everyday life**. Many indigenous converts struggled with this, as it was a radical mental shift. Some would attempt to preserve their old ceremonies by reframing them as secular traditions, but colonial regimes were often suspicious of any native gatherings that weren't explicitly Christian.

"Discovery" of Indigenous Religion: In some cases, colonizers initially claimed a people "had no religion" (because they found no churches or scriptures), only later to "discover" and classify their practices as a religion. The Oxford Handbook of Religion notes how colonial scholars *"suddenly began to 'discover' that [natives] did in fact have religion, although it [was]…(some observation follows)"* [35] – essentially inventing an "other" religion. A concrete example: Spanish colonizers first dismissed many Native American rituals as devil worship or ignorance. But by the 19th century, American and European scholars started to categorize "Native American religions" as an object of study – a shift from "they have no religion" to "they have a different religion." This reflects the change in Western thinking: by the 19th century, **having "a religion" was seen as a universal trait of human societies**, so even if it wasn't Christianity, natives must have "something" – be it shamanism, animism, etc. The very terms "animism" and "totemism" were 19th-century scholarly constructs to give a name to what indigenous people were doing, slotting those practices into the "religion" box (albeit as primitive religion in the eyes of those scholars). This allowed colonial powers to then say they were respecting "freedom of religion" if they allowed some traditional rituals, while still outlawing those they deemed uncivilized.

Resistance and Misfit: Colonized peoples reacted in varied ways. Often, they **resisted the pressure to compartmentalize** their lives. For instance, many Native Americans continued to perform ceremonies in secret when they were banned as "not religion." As noted, the United States had explicit prohibitions on Native ceremonies for decades [17] [18]. The native perspective was that dancing, vision quests, use of sacred herbs, etc., were part of the fabric of life given by the Creator – they did not separate them as "religious observances" distinct from culture or politics. The U.S. government, however, insisted on seeing these as *religious choices* that could be regulated or replaced by Christianity. This led to tremendous cultural loss and conflict. Some indigenous leaders eventually *adopted the Western discourse of religious freedom* to argue for their rights – essentially saying, "These ceremonies are our religion and thus should be protected like your religion is." In doing so, they to some extent had to translate their holistic traditions into the Western category of "a religion." For example, the **American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978)** explicitly uses the term "religious freedom" to secure rights to ceremonies, showing how even to defend their traditions, indigenous activists had to use the Protestant-liberal framework of religion as a distinct protected sphere.

In **Asia and Africa**, there were also cases where local reformers embraced the concept of religion to solidify their identity under colonial rule. The Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj in 19th-century India, for example, reformed Hindu practice to make it look more like what the British would recognize as a proper religion (fewer idols, more sermonizing, ethical focus), partly as a defense mechanism. In East Asia, when Japan opened to the West, it rapidly tried to define Shinto and Buddhism in modern terms, creating a category of "State Shinto" (as non-religious patriotic practice) versus "religion" (which was Buddhism and later Christianity, which were to be kept out of politics). This complicated maneuver shows Japan absorbing the Western secular/religious split: the Meiji government said Shinto was just national tradition (therefore could be state-sanctioned) while other faiths were "religions" and belonged

in the private realm. Ironically, they learned this partly from Western insistence that a modern nation needed to distinguish church and state.

Protestant Template Imposed: Missionary records often exhibit frustration that converts would not fully relinquish old ways – highlighting how unnatural the strict Protestant division could be in cultures that saw fertility rituals for crops, loyalty to ancestors, etc., as simply part of life. Colonial authorities sometimes convened **"customary law" tribunals** to handle what they considered secular native customs, as opposed to **"religious" matters** which either fell under mission influence or were ignored. This administrative split – between customary (tribal law) and religious (often equated with missionary-taught Christianity) – again forced a binary that hadn't existed. One could argue, as Asad does, that this was part of a broader project of **disciplining colonized peoples**: by defining and confining "religion" (something to be privately respected but publicly limited), colonial regimes could undermine the power of indigenous spiritual leaders and practices that formerly unified communities [8]. It's easier to govern a people if you tell them their resistance dances or war rituals are "not religion, and thus merely disorderly conduct" – then you can ban them without violating "freedom of religion," since you only recognize certain activities *as* religion.

Indeed, some of the **indigenous resistance movements** to colonialism took on explicitly religious dimensions that confounded the Western categories. For instance, the Native American **Ghost Dance** movement of the 1890s was a spiritual revival aimed at resisting U.S. domination – was it a religion? To the Lakota and others, it was hope granted in vision to restore their lands; to the U.S. Army, it looked like a dangerous cult. The resulting massacre at Wounded Knee (1890) showed the tragic clash of worldviews: Native spirituality as resistance met a government that did not recognize that "religion" can inspire political action (in their view, religion should be private and acquiescent). Similarly, anticolonial revolts in India, Africa, and the Pacific often used spiritual traditions as rallying points – blurring the Western line between religious and political. The British suppressed some of these as "rebellions" and often discredited the leaders as witch-doctors or false prophets, precisely because **acknowledging them as religious leaders would have given them a legitimacy under the empire's own claims of upholding religious freedom**.

Global Secularism and Religious Identity: By the 20th century, nearly every newly independent nation had to address religion in its constitution, and almost invariably they used the framework inherited from colonial powers: either adopting **secularism** (like India declaring a secular state but guaranteeing freedom of religion) or some limited establishment (like countries that declared an official religion but still spoke of "freedom of religion" for others). This shows the near universality of the concept by mid-20th century – even societies with non-Western majorities had internalized the idea that religion is a distinct aspect of life that the state might protect or regulate, but which is separable from governance.

Critics from a postcolonial perspective point out that this Western framework sometimes ill fits local realities. For example, in India today debates rage about what counts as an *essential religious practice* (for constitutional protection) vs. what is just social custom – echoing the colonial era questions. The courts, in trying to be secular, ironically evaluate religion in a manner reminiscent of Protestant theology (focusing on texts and doctrines to decide what is "essential"). Thus, the export of the Protestant category of religion continues to have ramifications, sometimes constraining how people can express their traditions (if those traditions don't meet the formal definition of religion, they might not get protected legal status).

In summary, colonialism was the vehicle that took the **European Protestant idea of "religion"** – personal belief, separate from politics – and **globalized it**. This imposition was neither smooth nor uncontested: it involved conscious efforts by colonial powers to remold subject cultures, and conscious adaptations or resistances by indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, by the mid-20th century, virtually the

entire world had been pulled into a discourse where "religion" is assumed to be a basic, distinct category of human life. As Asad succinctly writes, *"religion as a historical category emerged in the West and has come to be applied as a universal concept"* [32]. The fact that we can today talk about "Islamic religion" or "African traditional religions" or "freedom of religion" in the United Nations – all in the same breath – is due to this history. It started with the Protestant Reformation's cleavage of religion from other spheres, and through the subsequent centuries that template was **universally disseminated, often by force**. In the process, non-Western practices were transformed: sometimes they were shoehorned into the mold of religion, other times they were sidelined as "culture." This has had lasting effects on how societies organize themselves and how people understand their own spiritual lives (often now as a "faith" that one can hold, adopt, or change, paralleling Protestant Christian experiences).

Theoretical Frameworks: Understanding Religion as a Modern Category

Several influential theorists have analyzed this historical development, offering concepts and language to make sense of how the Reformation created "religion" in the modern sense. It is helpful to briefly review their insights, as they provide a **framework to support the chapter's argument**:

- **Talal Asad's Genealogy of Religion:** Talal Asad, an anthropologist, has been a leading voice arguing that *"religion" is not a universally given phenomenon but a concept with a specific history* [8]. Drawing on Michel Foucault's idea of discourse, Asad in *Genealogies of Religion (1993)* and *Formations of the Secular (2003)* traces how what we call religion was reshaped in early modern Europe. He underscores that **Protestantism played a key role**: by redefining religion as **inner belief** rather than external ritual, and by aligning with emerging nation-states which wanted loyal but spiritually free subjects, Protestantism set the stage for the **secular/religious binary** [32] [8]. Asad notes that the concept was then exported via colonialism, as previously discussed, and that Western scholars (like 19th-century anthropologists) then constructed definitions of religion that often mirrored Protestant Christianity (focus on scripture, doctrine, etc.). A crucial Asad argument is that **what counts as "religion" in modern times was basically the result of liberal Protestant and Enlightenment scholars deciding what *should* count** – for example, they elevated ethical monotheism as true religion and dismissed things like magic or ancestor worship as inferior. Thus, calling something a "religion" (or conversely, denying it that label) was a power move that went hand-in-hand with colonial domination [31]. Asad's work supports this chapter by providing the conceptual backbone: *the very idea that religion is a private, personal, universal experience is a product of a certain history – chiefly the Reformation and what followed.* It was neither natural nor neutral.

- **Max Weber on Rationalization and Differentiation:** Max Weber, a founder of sociology, did not write about the Reformation creating the concept of religion per se, but his analysis of **the Protestant ethic and the "disenchantment" of the world** is closely related [22] [23]. Weber argued that Protestantism (especially Calvinism and sectarian Pietism) helped rationalize economic life (giving rise to capitalism) and also **rationalized religious life itself** – stripping away sacraments, saints, and communal festivals in favor of individual Bible reading, personal prayer, and moral discipline. This, in Weber's broader theory, is part of the differentiation of value spheres in modernity: the religious sphere becomes **specialized** (concerned only with personal salvation and ethics), while other spheres like economy, law, politics become autonomous and follow their own rationalities (profit, legality, power). Weber's concept of **"social differentiation"** – often taken up by secularization theorists – dovetails with our argument: as society modernizes (beginning with the Reformation as a catalyst), **institutions specialize and separate**. Religion stops governing all aspects of life and instead **focuses on the spiritual** [22].

Meanwhile, the state and market claim to be "secular" domains. Even though Weber doesn't frame it as "Protestants invented religion," he effectively describes how they reshaped it into a delineated sphere. In secularization theory influenced by Weber, it's commonly said that modernity entails *"the differentiation of the secular spheres (like politics, education) from the religious sphere."* [22] In other words, part of becoming modern was exactly the process this chapter examines: carving out "religion" distinct from government, economy, etc. Weber also noted that Protestant sects in America turned religion into a kind of **voluntary association competing for adherents**, which is a theme picked up in the next chapter (Great Awakening and religious marketplace).

- **Benedict Anderson and Print Capitalism:** Benedict Anderson's work *Imagined Communities (1983)* is about nationalism, but he touches on the Reformation's role in the rise of print-languages and new imagined identities. Anderson pointed out that the **vernacular Bible translations and religious pamphlets of the Reformation** were among the first widely circulated print media in Europe. This had a few effects: it created linguistic national communities (e.g. people reading Luther's German Bible started to see themselves as a German Protestant public), and it also **fractured the universal Latin Catholic world** into distinct communities of faith [36]. How does this relate to the invention of "religion"? Essentially, Anderson shows that **once multiple printed Bibles and liturgies existed (German, English, Dutch, etc.), "Christendom" shattered into different traditions**. People began to recognize that what had been one Church was now many "religions" – a necessary step for conceiving religion as a category (one can only abstract "religion" once you see multiple examples of it; e.g. Christianity vs. Judaism vs. Islam came into sharper relief). Print capitalism also encouraged the spread of **ideas of tolerance and pluralism** through pamphlets and books by figures like Locke, Milton, and Bayle, which circulated arguments for religious liberty widely. So one could argue that the technology and capitalism unleashed by Protestant-influenced print culture propelled the new concept of religion into public consciousness and discourse. Anderson doesn't explicitly say "Protestants invented religion," but he does imply that the **cultural conditions for modern ideas (including secular nationhood and a privatized religion) were set by the Reformation's media revolution** [31].

- **Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Conceptual History:** Although not mentioned in the prompt, it's worth noting scholar W.C. Smith, who wrote *The Meaning and End of Religion (1962)*, one of the first works to argue that the word "religion" as a reified thing is a modern, Western construct. Smith famously showed that in many classical languages (Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Arabic) there was no term that corresponds to the abstraction "religion" – each had terms for faith, law, way, etc., but not an umbrella concept. He linked the emergence of the concept to the Enlightenment era. This supports our narrative: **the very idea that disparate beliefs like Hindu practices or Native ceremonies could all be instances of the same kind of thing ("religion") required European intellectual effort** in the 17th-19th centuries. It was Protestant-influenced scholars who catalogued "world religions" and gave them names, effectively *creating the plural category of religions* where previously a culture only knew its own way without needing a generic label.

- **Gramsci and Hegemony (Civil Society):** From a more critical theory angle, one could bring Antonio Gramsci – though he dealt with later periods – to interpret how religious institutions were co-opted into civil society as part of bourgeois hegemony. In the Progressive Era (Chapter 11), we'll see how religion becomes part of civil society separate from state but aligned with elite interests. The seeds of that are here: by relocating religion to civil society (voluntary realm), it can be both marginalized from power and yet used to maintain moral order. This theory suggests the Reformation unintentionally helped **elites later on** by removing church as a rival power and turning it into one instrument among others in molding consent (though this is more applicable

to later U.S. context, it's mentioned here as a framework of understanding the socio-political function of separating religion).

Each of these frameworks reinforces the central idea: **"Religion" as we know it today is a product of specific historical forces, not an eternal given.** The Protestant Reformation's role in this is highlighted by all: Asad explicitly ties it to Protestantism; Weber implicitly starts his story of rational modernity with Protestantism; Anderson uses Reformation as a springboard; Smith points to post-Reformation developments for the term's emergence. The theoretical consensus is clear that the **Reformation was a key turning point** in demarcating religion.

However, **contrary perspectives** or nuances should be acknowledged. Not all historians would say the Reformation *alone* created the secular/religious divide – some might point to earlier developments (for example, the distinction between priestly and royal authority goes back to ancient Israel and the Roman "two swords" doctrine in the early Church). Medieval history isn't just monolithic unity; there were church-state clashes that presaged separation. Also, Eastern Orthodox Christianity had a concept of symphonia (church and empire in harmony but distinct). So one could argue the Reformation built on latent ideas. Additionally, some scholars note that **Catholicism itself eventually adopted the notion of religion as separate** – by the 19th century, the Catholic Church was also talking about religion as a sphere (and Vatican II in the 1960s declared religious freedom a basic human right, a remarkable turn for an institution that once enforced uniformity). This shows that even those initially opposed to the Protestant idea eventually absorbed it, indicating its practical success more than its inherent truth.

Another nuance: **Political interests** played a role. Some rulers supported Reformation ideas of church-state separation not out of theological purity but because it gave them more control (e.g. princes in Germany liked being "heads" of their territorial church – ironically, Luther's idea of two kingdoms sometimes meant the prince became the chief of the church's worldly affairs). Thus the separation was not immediate or complete. In many Protestant lands, the church was still entangled with the state (Anglican England has an established church to this day, for instance). How, then, did that create religion as separate? The answer is that even where a church was official, the concept of individual dissent and different religions existing had taken root – you could still think of yourself as of a certain religion separate from the state. The pluralism existed mentally and legally even if one denomination was favored.

In conclusion of theoretical perspectives: the arc from the **Reformation to modern secularism** is well recognized. The **scholarly consensus** is that *the Reformation was indispensable in producing the idea that religion is a private, voluntary, and thus universally applicable sphere* [9]. It set in motion processes that eventually yielded our contemporary world where one can subscribe to a religion like subscribing to a set of beliefs, and where we expect to keep religion out of politics (at least in theory). The conceptual shift was so successful that it became hard to see it as historically contingent – it feels obvious now that "religion" is separate. But as we've shown, this was **constructed** – a fact that has profound implications for understanding subsequent chapters (Great Awakening's denominational competition, Mormon entrepreneurial religion, Progressive Era civil religion), all of which build on this initial conceptual foundation.

Scholarly Consensus and Debates on Protestantism's Role

Having marshaled historical evidence and theoretical insights, we can now assess the **scholarly consensus** on the chapter's core argument – that the Protestant Reformation created the modern category of religion separate from politics/culture – and address any **contradictory evidence or alternative views**.

Consensus: In the field of religious studies and history, there is broad agreement that the use of the term "religion" as a generic, comparativist concept *emerges in the wake of the Reformation*. The quote from the Wikipedia article (which itself aggregates scholarly sources) encapsulates it well: *"Religion is a modern concept… found in texts from the 17th century due to events such as the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Reformation"* [9]. Academic authorities from Wilfred C. Smith in the 1960s to Talal Asad in the 1990s to more recent scholars continue to reiterate this point.

Scholars like **Peter Harrison** (historian of religion and science) have also noted how **early modern intellectuals redefined 'religion'** as propositions believed (rather than rituals performed), and they tie this to Protestant influence. Furthermore, historical linguistics shows that many languages **coined new words for "religion"** in the 19th century under Western influence (e.g. **"宗教" (shūkyō)** in Japanese was created to translate the Western concept of religion in the Meiji period; **"dharmic panth"** or just adopting "religion" in Indian languages, etc.). This linguistic evidence supports the consensus that **the concept was not there before and was imported**.

Political historians concur that the **Peace of Westphalia and similar treaties** were milestones in secularizing politics – essentially inventing a **"secular constitution"** where religion was cordoned off as private belief [13]. Many textbooks cite Westphalia as the start of the modern international system for that reason [5]. Even though some revisionist historians argue Westphalia's effect has been exaggerated (saying the process was gradual), none deny that over the 16th–18th centuries Europe moved from a unified Christendom ideal to a pluralist state system where religion was demoted to a matter of state choice or individual choice.

Contradictory Evidence or Nuance: One might ask: did **any form of separate religion exist before Protestantism?** A counterpoint could be the ancient world: For example, **ancient Rome** had the idea of *religio* as duty to the gods and *superstitio* as improper excessive devotion – a kind of categorization of religious behavior. But crucially, Rome did not separate religion from state – in fact the Roman state was very involved in religious cult (pontifex maximus was a state office, emperor worship was expected, etc.). The concept of *religio* was not a private sphere free from state interference; it was part of state identity. Similarly, one might mention **Jesus's own saying** "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" as a biblical root for separation of realms [37]. Some Christian writers (like Tertullian) in antiquity used that to claim the emperor had no authority over the soul. However, this remained a theological argument under a still-united church-state (once emperors became Christian, they certainly didn't stay out of church matters). So while early Christianity sowed seeds of "two kingdoms" (Augustine's City of God vs City of Man, etc.), it never became a social reality until the Reformation forced the issue.

Another angle: **The Reformation era was not only about lofty principles; it was also about power**. For instance, in Protestant regions rulers often gained more control over the church (state churches), which might seem like less separation rather than more. How do we reconcile that with our narrative? The answer is that even where a prince led the church, the underpinning idea had shifted – the church was no longer a trans-national authority above princes; it was effectively part of the state or a voluntary body. In either case, the unified medieval structure was broken. And importantly, the *concept* of different religions was now accepted. So ironically, even as some Protestant states had officially established churches, the awareness of multiple denominations existing and needing toleration grew. Over time, those established churches themselves lost power (e.g. US disestablishment, European secularization).

Alternative causation: One might argue that the **Enlightenment or rise of science** created secularism and the religion concept more than the Reformation did. Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire and Diderot certainly advanced the cause of separating religion (which they saw as superstition) from public

life. However, those philosophes were operating in a terrain already pluralized by the Reformation. Without the prior fragmentation of Christianity, it's hard to imagine Enlightenment thinkers having the same leverage – if Europe had remained one Catholic block, dissenters would have been fewer and more marginalized. Also, many Enlightenment figures were themselves from Protestant countries or influenced by Protestant debates (Locke, for example, is a bridge figure – both a devout Protestant and a founding liberal). So, the Enlightenment secularism is more a second chapter building on the first (Reformation) than a completely separate cause.

Scholarly critique: Some modern scholars question the **Eurocentric narrative** of religion's invention, cautioning that it might underplay non-Western agency. For example, some historians of India argue that Indian reformers and intellectuals *collaborated* in shaping modern Hinduism as a "religion" – it wasn't just foisted by colonizers, but also adopted and adapted by Indians for their own purposes (like creating a unifying identity against colonial rule). This is a valid complement: yes, the framework was European, but local actors were not passive. In Africa, independent churches and movements arose that mixed Christianity with local practice, arguably carving out their own concept of religion that sometimes challenged the colonial one (e.g. prophets who led rebellions, which combined political and religious action and blurred the lines again). These cases show a kind of dialectic: the Protestant concept of religion was introduced, but then *reinterpreted* or resisted in various ways by those it was imposed upon.

Nonetheless, the overarching thesis holds: **the modern global understanding of "religion" as a distinct category is overwhelmingly a result of European (especially Protestant) historical trajectories.** Even if other cultures had spiritual pluralism or philosophical distinctions, none developed the **exact institutional and conceptual separation** that became normative worldwide. As a result, most scholars (across disciplines like history, sociology, anthropology, religious studies) support some version of this claim. In textbooks you'll commonly find statements like *"The Reformation planted the seeds of religious freedom and the secular state"* or *"Before modern era, religion was not seen as separate from other aspects of life"* – both of which are exactly what we have documented.

Finally, we should note that seeing religion as separate has huge consequences (some say benefits, like pluralism and liberty; others say downsides, like alienation of spirituality from public life). This chapter doesn't take a stance on whether it was "good" or "bad," but understanding it historically is crucial. It sets the stage for the next chapters: the **Great Awakening** will show how, once religion was a separate sphere, it became a **competitive marketplace**; **Mormonism** will illustrate the creativity and conflict when new religions are spawned in that environment; and the **Progressive Era** will show how religion as a sphere could be harnessed by professional and political interests. All of those developments presuppose the foundational shift we've described here. If the Reformation hadn't cleaved "religion" from "society," one couldn't have religious entrepreneurs or volunteer revivals in the same way – religion would have remained a taken-for-granted aspect of the social order rather than a realm of innovation and choice.

Additional Research Suggestions: While this research is comprehensive, further investigation could explore: (1) **Comparative cases** – e.g., how the concept of religion developed in non-Christian contexts (did any parallel movements happen elsewhere, or was it all diffusion from the West? Scholars of China or the Middle East might have insights on how those regions integrated the Western concept during modernization); (2) **Micro-histories of colonial encounters** – detailed studies of how specific missionary efforts classified local beliefs (for instance, the process by which Buddhism was reinterpreted by 19th-century scholars as a "world religion" somewhat modeled on Protestantism – with a canon (Tripitaka) and founder (Buddha) emphasized, whereas earlier Asian practitioners didn't spotlight those aspects in the same way); (3) **Intellectual histories of key terms** – e.g., a deep dive into when exactly words meaning "religion" appear in languages like Arabic, Hindi, Chinese in response to

the West; (4) **Contrary voices in the Reformation** – e.g., examining if any Reformation-era figures argued against separating religion (perhaps the Catholic Counter-Reformation stance or radicals who wanted a theocratic society) to see how debates were resolved in favor of separation.

Such avenues would further illuminate the nuances of how the "religion" concept was formed and solidified. But the evidence presented here strongly undergirds the chapter's thesis: **The Protestant Reformation, through its doctrinal shifts and the subsequent political accommodations, fundamentally created the modern idea of religion as a distinct sphere of life – an idea that was later spread worldwide, reshaping global cultures under the banner of religious freedom and secular governance.**

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These sources and others woven into the analysis provide a robust evidentiary basis for the conclusions drawn in this research. The Protestant Reformation's impact on the concept of religion is not just a matter of theological history but a foundational shift in how humans categorize their experience – a shift whose repercussions are evident in the structure of modern societies and the global discourse on religion and secularism. [1] [8]

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