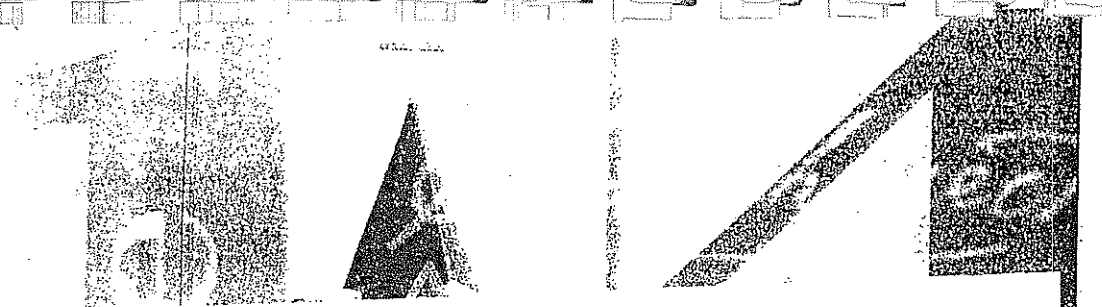

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Sociology

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chapter

14

RELIGION IN RURAL AMERICA

Three country churches, photographed by Dorothea Lange in South Dakota during the summer of 1938, illustrate the vigorous competition among denominations that occurs whenever a society has an unregulated religious economy. Many critics have used this photo as proof that denominationalism is a silly waste of resources—that local farm families would have been better off with one united congregation. But the people who attended these churches knew that the three differed substantially in their doctrines and forms of worship, and they thought these differences were important. And if the buildings looked much alike, that was because each was purchased as a precut kit, and the kit manufacturers provided for only minor differences, such as the shape of the steeple.

RELIGION

Nobody knows when humans first acquired religion. Unlike tools chipped from stone, cultural ideas do not lie secure for millions of years, awaiting the archeologist's pick. So while we know that humans living over a million years ago made tools, we can only guess about their religion. However, there can be no doubt that our Neanderthal ancestors had religion at least 100,000 years ago, because evidence of their faith has been unearthed. The Neanderthal buried their dead with great care and provided them with gifts and food for use in the next world. And deep in their caves, the Neanderthal built small altars out of bear bones. These relics make it clear that the Neanderthal believed in life after death and conducted ceremonies to seek the aid of supernatural beings. Such beliefs and practices are properly called religion, and all human societies since the days of the Neanderthal have had religion.

In this chapter we shall try to understand why religion is a vital part of human societies. What does religion do for people? How does it influence social life? Then we will explore the concept of a religious economy: the marketplace of competing faiths within a society. Although societies often claim to have only one faith (and sometimes use military force to keep competing faiths out), this is never really true. We shall see why not, why "underground" faiths exist even in the most repressive nations, and why these tend to erupt into significant movements whenever repression eases. Viewing the religious sector of societies as economies of faith permits us to examine how religious organizations influence one another. We shall see that in time the most successful religious organiza-

Chapter Outline

tions become increasingly worldly, a process called secularization. As this occurs, conditions become favorable for new organizations to break away and restore a less worldly form of the conventional faith, a process known as revival. We shall also see how wholly new religions can arise in societies, a process called religious innovation or cult formation.

We shall use the model of religious economies to examine current conditions and trends in the United States. Then we shall apply the model to Canada, the nations of western and eastern Europe, and the nations of Latin America.

The Nature of Religion

A most difficult problem facing sociologists of religion has been to define their subject matter. An adequate definition must include the vast array of faiths found in the world without including too much. As Georg Simmel urged in 1905, a general definition of religion must apply "alike to the religion of Christians and South Sea Islanders." It must isolate the common elements in Buddhism, Islam, and other faiths of modern times, as well as the faiths of our primitive ancestors, such as the Neanderthal.

For a few decades, this problem was solved by recognizing that all religions have one feature in common: They always involve answers to questions about ultimate meaning, such as, Does life have a purpose? Why are we here? Is death the end? Why do we suffer? Does justice exist?

It is characteristic of humans to ask such questions. Indeed, these questions must have troubled the Neanderthal, for they had accepted answers to some of these questions. Hence, religion has been defined as socially organized beliefs and activities offering solutions to questions of ultimate meaning. But that definition is too broad. It applies to communism as well as Catholicism. And it applies to a philosophical system that denies that there can be answers to questions of ultimate meaning. It is inconvenient to have a sociological concept that ignores differences between what are widely regarded as religious and antireligious positions.

Thousands of years ago our ancestors created sacred chambers by painting superb animal figures like these on the walls of natural caverns. Even modern visitors are awed by these exotic images and immediately sense the sacred intentions of those who used to come here at times of special religious significance.

In the end, most sociologists of religion agreed that the term *religion* ought to be applied to only particular kinds of answers to questions of ultimate meaning—those that posit the existence of the supernatural. Defined this way, religion can invoke the power, wisdom, authority, and aid of the gods, a capacity that nonreligious philosophies lack (Spiro, 1966; Berger, 1967; Stark, 1981; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985).

The Gods

If we closely examine the ultimate questions that humans keep asking, many of them clearly require a very special kind of answer. People do not usually ask if life has meaning; they ask, What is the meaning of life? Why does the universe exist? Why do I exist? For life to have meaning, in this sense, history must be guided by intention. For this to be true, a consciousness capable of imposing intention on history must exist. In other words, if the universe is to have purpose, then it must have been created and directed by a conscious agent—a being capable of making plans and having intentions. Such a being has to be of such power, duration, and scale as to be beyond the natural world. That is, such a being must be supernatural.

Many questions of ultimate meaning, therefore, can be answered only by referring to the supernatural—to beings or forces beyond nature who are able to suspend, alter, ignore, and create physical forces. To believe, for example, that there is life beyond death is to accept the supernatural. To believe that earthly suffering is compensated in the world to come also requires belief in the supernatural. Some things that humans greatly desire cannot possibly be attained in this world but can come only from the gods.

By defining religion as socially organized patterns of belief and practices that concern ultimate meaning and assume the existence of the supernatural, sociologists can isolate the essential element that sets religion apart from other aspects of social life and accounts for its universal appeal.

Systems of thought that reject the supernatural cannot satisfy the concerns of most people. Atheists can search for explanations of how the universe functions, but they cannot say that these functions have underlying purpose. Communists can promise to reduce poverty, but they cannot offer an escape from death. In any society, some people can accept the beliefs that the universe has no purpose, that what we gain in this life is all we shall receive, and that death is final. But as we shall see throughout this chapter,

These Roman Catholic girls are taking their first Holy Communion—a sacrament that illustrates the capacity of religions to answer questions of ultimate meaning. Communion, also known as the Lord's Supper among many Protestants, symbolizes the belief that all souls may be saved and gain everlasting life through symbolic and literal acceptance of Jesus Christ.

for most people this is not enough: Only religion can fulfill their needs, their hopes, their dreams.

Table 14-1 shows that most people in most nations say they are religious. Keep in mind that most who did not say they were religious were *not* saying they were "irreligious." Rather, many people who do not claim to be "religious" understand this question to be asking if they are "especially religious." But they are sufficiently religious so that they do not regard themselves as atheists (people who deny the existence of supernatural beings), for these are few everywhere except in China, where 38 percent claim to be "a convinced atheist." The Chinese data are suspect because the communist government of China stresses atheism. In the 1980s surveys found comparable percentages of atheists in other communist societies such as the Soviet Union. As will be discussed later in this chapter, with the fall of repressive, antireligious regimes, many people no longer felt the need to say they were atheists, as evidenced by the data shown here for Russia and other eastern European nations. In any event, religion remains a potent social factor in most of the world.

Legitimization of Norms

Religions do more for humans than supply them with answers to questions of ultimate meaning. The assumption that the supernatural exists raises a new question: *What does the supernatural want or expect from us?*

Let us return to the Neanderthal. They believed that life has purpose and that the individual survives death. They also believed that the supernatural controls events in this world. How should they prepare for the next life? How could they enlist the aid of the supernatural in this world?

The Neanderthal were greatly concerned with escaping the anger of the supernatural. All around them were signs of the terrible wrath of the gods: lightning bolts, violent winds and storms, deadly forest fires, floods, droughts, sickness, and injury. As demonstrated by their altars and their burial customs, the Neanderthal had beliefs about what the gods required. Like other primitive peoples, they undoubtedly observed elaborate codes of behavior meant to please the unseen spiritual forces that surrounded them.

By specifying what the gods require of humans, religions in effect regulate human behavior by formulating rules about how we must and must not act. Such rules of behavior, of course, are social norms. Religions explain why certain norms exist and why they should be obeyed. For norms to be obeyed, most members of a society must believe that the norms are proper and right. Sociologists have long recognized the important role of religion in legitimizing norms. Why shouldn't we steal? Because the gods forbid it. Why should we obey our parents? Because the gods demand it. Why should we obey the king? Because he was chosen by the gods to rule over us.

Thus, religious institutions can be a major force in holding societies together—providing legitimacy to the norms and giving divine sanction to other social institutions, such as the family or the state. Indeed, as we have already seen in Chapter 4, religion fosters conformity to the norms primarily by creating moral communities, not simply by influencing individuals' beliefs and practices. Recall that religious teenagers were less delinquent than nonreligious teenagers only in communities where the majority belonged to a church. The power of religion to create moral communities is also demonstrated by research showing that cities with high church membership rates have considerably lower rates of crime, suicide, venereal disease, and alcoholism than do cities with low church membership rates (Stark and Bainbridge, 1997).

Of course, religion is not the only reason people observe norms. In Chapter 3 we saw that norms also arise from interaction. Many people who lack religious beliefs accept social norms and obey them (Hirschi and Stark, 1969). For many people in all societies, however, religion has served as the ultimate justification for norms.

This aspect of religion shows up very clearly in Table 14-2, which displays the impact of church attendance on attitudes toward the norms and laws in six nations. In all comparisons in all nations, people who attend church weekly are more conformist than those who never attend church. Here there is a substantial

TABLE 14-1 Religiousness Around the World

Nation	Say Religion Is Important in Their Lives (%)	Are Convinced Atheists (%)
Poland	95	2
Nigeria	94	1
Brazil	88	1
India	84	1
Italy	84	4
South Africa	83	3
United States	83	1
Austria	81	2
Chile	77	3
Iceland	75	2
Mexico	75	2
Romania	75	1
Turkey	75	1
Switzerland	74	4
Slovenia	73	8
Denmark	73	5
Argentina	73	4
Ireland	72	1
Canada	71	3
Portugal	69	5
Spain	68	4
Belgium	68	8
Netherlands	60	4
Finland	59	3
Germany	57	8
Hungary	57	4
Russia	56	8
Great Britain	56	5
Lithuania	55	3
Latvia	54	4
Slovak Republic	54	8
France	51	11
Norway	48	3
Belarus	41	9
Bulgaria	36	8
Czech Republic	33	11
Sweden	31	7
Japan	26	11
Estonia	21	3
China	6	38

Source: Prepared by the author from the *World Values Survey, 1990–93.*

TABLE 14-2 Church Attendance and Conformity in Selected Nations

Nation	Men: Attends church weekly	Men: Never attends church	Women: Attends church weekly	Women: Never attends church
Percent who think that extramarital sex is never justified				
United States	83	53	83	45
Canada	66	45	66	24
Mexico	49	24	71	47
Great Britain	71	47	73	40
Germany	73	40	63	20
Italy	63	20		
Percent who think that cheating on taxes is never justified				
United States	76	59	69	54
Canada	69	54	40	31
Mexico	40	31	75	46
Great Britain	75	46	63	47
Germany	63	47	63	49
Italy	63	49		
Percent who think that smoking marijuana is never justified				
United States	83	62	75	53
Canada	75	53	69	49
Mexico	69	49	87	71
Great Britain	87	71	92	84
Germany	92	84	89	57
Italy	89	57		
Percent who think that knowingly buying stolen property is never justified				
United States	81	66	82	66
Canada	82	66	50	46
Mexico	50	46	90	62
Great Britain	90	62	86	71
Germany	86	71	79	67
Italy	79	67		

Source: Prepared by the author from the *World Values Survey, 1990–93.*

risk of spuriousness, since (as we saw in Chapters 4 and 7) women are less apt to break laws and to approve of deviant behavior and also are substantially more likely than men to be religious. However, these relationships are not spurious. With each gender, strong church attendance effects remain. Having raised the issue, it seems appropriate at this point to pursue gender differences in religiousness.

Gender and Religious Commitment

One of the most intriguing questions about gender differences is, Why are women always more religious than men? Popular sayings from across the continents and the centuries universally attribute greater religiousness to women. Women were far more likely than men to convert to the early Christian movement (Stark, 1996b). American religious movements throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries typically overrecruited women (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). And all contemporary research shows that women are more likely to hold religious beliefs and to engage in religious behavior than are men (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis, 1993; Miller and Hoffmann, 1995). Table 14-3 fully supports this research literature. In each of these nations women are more likely than men to attend church, to pray, and to identify themselves as a religious person.

Many efforts have been made to explain these differences. It was long believed that gender differences in religion derive from the traditional female role, that as part of being socialized to care for other family members, women are raised to take responsibility for their religious needs too—as reflected in the traditional German saying that women's work consists of "church, children, and cooking." Another, somewhat similar explanation proposed that because many women do not work outside the home or pursue careers they simply have more time to allocate to religious activities (Azzi and Ehrenberg, 1975). However, both explanations were rejected by research showing that career women are as religious as housewives, and both are more religious than their husbands or male peers (de Vaus, 1984; Cornwall, 1988). Furthermore, the genders differ not only in terms of time-consuming religious participation, but also in terms of belief and actions, such as prayer, that do not impose demands on time.

More recently, differences were successfully traced to general male/female personality differences on the basis of differences *within* genders. Thus, Edward Thompson (1991) found that the higher their score on a standardized measure of femininity, the more apt men were to be religious, while women who scored high on masculinity were less religious than women who scored lower. This led Alan S. Miller and John P. Hoffman (1995) to suggest that gender-based religious differences are like gender differences long observed for crime and delinquency. Recall that Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that criminal actions are part of a more general set of behaviors that offer short-term gratifications in exchange for risk and that men are far more likely than women to have weak self-control and thus to engage in these risky actions. That is, burgarly, rape, and robbery, like drinking, smoking, speeding, taking drugs, and engaging in unprotected sex, are behaviors that produce immediate gratifications but that are obviously risky and thus are behaviors avoided by people who are able to defer gratification in favor of greater long-term benefits. To this list of risky behaviors, Miller and Hoffman added irreligiousness, noting that "one can conceive of religious belief as risk-averse behavior and the rejection of religious beliefs as risk-taking behavior."

Miller and Hoffman's logic is in accord with a classic argument in theology known as "Pascal's wager." Blaise Pascal (1623–62), a French philosopher, wrote that anyone with good sense would believe in God, because belief is a no-loss proposition. He noted that God either does or does not exist and people either do or do not believe in God. Considering each of the four combinations involved here, Pascal reasoned that if God exists, then after death those who believe will gain the rewards promised by religion and avoid the punishments of nonbelief. In contrast, nonbelievers will miss out on the rewards and receive the punishments. On the other hand, if God does not exist, those who believe will simply be dead and will not receive either rewards or punishments. But they will be no worse off for having believed, for the same fate will await nonbelievers. Given these alternatives, the smart bet, or wager, is to believe, for a person has everything to gain, and nothing to lose by believing. But Pascal overlooked something—believers give up some gratifications here and now. Religious belief implies willingness to exercise self-control in this life, forgoing some immediate gratifications. Thus, if one is willing to risk that God does not exist, one can enjoy many immediate gratifications prohibited by religion. Since most sins also are illegal, and vice versa, the interests of sociologists of religion and of criminologists converge on the same set of behaviors that overwhelmingly are committed by

TABLE 14-3 Gender and Religiousness in Selected Nations

Nation	Women	Men
Percent who attend church at least monthly		
United States	61	54
Canada	44	32
Mexico	70	57
Great Britain	30	17
Germany	36	23
Italy	62	42
Russia	9	3
Japan	16	11
Percent who pray		
United States	94	87
Canada	88	75
Mexico	95	89
Great Britain	78	54
Germany	74	59
Italy	90	74
Russia	50	21
Japan	90	85
Percent who say they are "a religious person"		
United States	86	80
Canada	77	65
Mexico	80	71
Great Britain	65	47
Germany	64	48
Italy	89	78
Russia	69	39
Japan	32	20

Source: Prepared by the author from the *World Values Survey, 1990–93.*

males. People who are prone to risk the secular costs of immediate gratification also are prone to risk the religious costs of their misbehavior. If this analysis is correct, then the gender differences in religiousness have the same root as the gender differences in other forms of risky behavior. That is, if men are more likely to commit crimes because they "are differentially socialized to be risk takers, then they are also being differentially socialized to be less religious." When they analyzed appropriate data, Miller and Hoffmann (1995) found that within each gender, those scoring high on risk aversion were more religious. Moreover, when they compared

men and women with an equal orientation toward risk, their religious behavior and belief did not differ.

Of course, we still don't really know why women are more averse to risk taking. But this gender difference seems to hold in all cultures for which adequate data exist.

Religious Economies

Early religions were local affairs. A tribe or very small society and its religion were one. A person was born into a religion as part of being born a member of his or her group. Although religion constantly changed even in small, primitive societies, the idea of choosing a religion was as alien as the idea of choosing one's tribe or family.

As societies became more complex, they began to include several cultures and religions. Larger cities of ancient Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire contained a variety of different religions (Johnson, 1976; Meeks, 1983). In such cities, people could compare religions, worry about which one was best, and regard religion as a matter of choice. Such a religious situation is best described as a *religious economy*. Just as commercial economies consist of a market in which different firms compete, religious economies consist of a market (the aggregate demand for religion) and firms (different religious organizations) seeking to attract and hold a clientele.

The notion of religious economies underscores the dynamic interplay of different religious groups within a society. This interplay accounts for the religious makeup of societies at any given time and explains why and how religions change.

As with commercial economies, a key issue is *the degree to which a religious economy is regulated by the state*. To what extent do free-market conditions prevail, and to what extent is the religious economy distorted toward monopoly by coercion? For reasons to be explained shortly, the natural state of a religious economy is religious pluralism, wherein many religious "firms" exist because of their special appeal to certain segments of the market (or population). However, as for a commercial organization, it is always in the interest of any particular religious organization to secure a monopoly. This can be achieved, and even then to just a limited extent, only if the state forcibly excludes competing faiths.

In medieval Europe, states used coercion to create a monopoly for Catholicism. Anyone who deviated from orthodoxy was subject to punishment, including execution. However, even at the height of its power, the medieval Catholic Church was beset by dissent and heresy from all sides and never achieved full monopoly. Whenever and wherever state coercion wavered, competing faiths burst forth and prospered (Johnson, 1976). Nevertheless, regulation often made it difficult and dangerous for competing faiths, thus greatly reducing religious choice. Yet even medieval society is best understood in terms of its religious economy.

To understand why religious economies incline toward pluralism, we need to understand the major processes at work within them. We shall explore these processes by first seeing why a virtually endless supply of new and competing organizations exists in any religious economy.

Church-Sect Theory

In 1929 H. Richard Niebuhr published *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. In this book he tried to explain why Christianity was fractured into so many competing denominations. Why weren't Christians content with one church? Why did they constantly form new ones?

The answer he proposed combined two concepts developed by Max Weber with elements of conflict theory. Weber had distinguished two kinds of religious organizations: churches and sects. Churches intellectualize religious teachings and restrain emotionalism in their services. They offer an image of the gods as somewhat remote from daily life and the individual. Sects stress emotionalism and individual mystical experiences and tend toward fundamentalism, rather than intellectualism, in their teachings. They present their gods as close at hand, taking an active interest and role in the lives of individuals.

Churches and sects also differ greatly in terms of their network structures. Churches tend to be based on cosmopolitan networks, while sects tend to consist of intense local networks. This easily is seen in Table 14-4. Nearly half (47 percent) of members of Protestant sects say that four or five of their five best friends belong to their church congregation, and fewer than one in ten has no close personal friends in her or his congregation. In contrast, nearly half (43 percent) of members of Protestant "churches" have no close friends in their congregation and only about one out of ten has four or five. This is not a function of proximity since the average sect member travels much farther to attend services than does the average church member. These network differences greatly influence the experience of participants. Attending a church is more like being a member of an audience at a movie or lecture than being a member of a group. But for members of sects, religious participation offers a strong sense of community and solidarity.

Table 14-4 Network Structures of Churches and Sects (Protestants Only)

	Churches*	Sects**
Four or five	12%	47%
Two or three	27	37
One	18	7
None	43	9
	100%	100%

Source: Prepared by the author from the *Study of Religion in American Life*.

*United Church of Christ, United Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran (ELC).

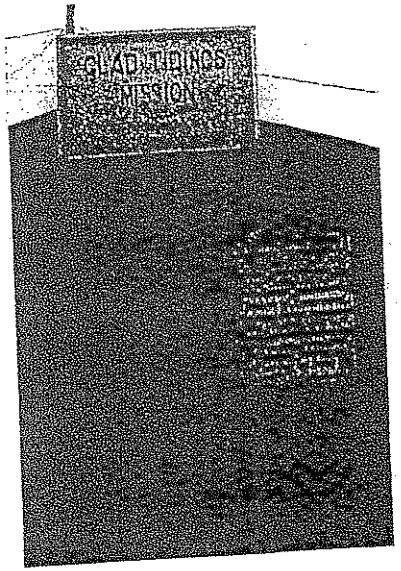
**Assemblies of God, Church of God, Church of Christ, Nazarene, Seventh-day Adventist, Gospel Lighthouse, Foursquare Gospel, Pentecostal.

Just as classes differ in terms of their networks, the network structures of churches and sects appeal to persons of different classes. Niebuhr argued that sects provide for the religious needs of people low in the stratification system—the masses. Churches provide for the religious needs of the middle and upper classes (McKinney and Roof, 1982). Class conflict, according to Niebuhr, underlies the religious conflicts that split Christianity into many different denominations.

Niebuhr stressed the unique ability of religion to make life bearable, even for those in misery. This is achieved by turning one's thoughts away from this world and stressing the primacy of the spiritual world. The more we believe that this life is only a brief prelude to the afterlife and that we shall find relief from our pains in the more perfect world to come, the more easily we can bear life's burdens. Indeed, religions commonly teach that if you spurn material pleasures in this life, you will increase your rewards in the everlasting life to come—that the social order will be turned upside down in the next life, where "the first shall be last, and the last, first."

To make these views convincing, however, religions must resist the pleasures of the material world. A religious organization filled with members, especially its leaders, enjoying material pleasures is hampered in its efforts to serve the religious needs of the deprived.

When members of a congregation actively participate in the services as these members of the Pentecostal Holiness Church in Port Wentworth, Georgia, are doing—when members seem to be really enjoying themselves—chances are the group is one that sociologists would classify as a sect. Congregations with more formal and sedate services usually are classified as churches.



Members of this Protestant congregation, located in a tiny Inuit village far above the Arctic Circle, belong to a Protestant sect. As is typical of sects, members are expected to devote a lot of time to their religion; most attend three times on Sunday, and on Wednesday and Friday evenings, too. What the Glad Tidings Mission lacks in terms of a building is made up for in the excitement and emotional intensity of the services, which stress salvation and personal religious experience. According to church-sect theory, the poor and dispossessed seek the comforts of an intensely otherworldly religion, whereas the more affluent prefer a religion more accommodated to this world. Out of this tension comes a succession of sect movements.

The key to Niebuhr's theory is the proposition that *successful religious organizations always shift their emphasis toward this world and away from the next*. He argued that as religious organizations grow and become more popular, the proportion of middle- and upper-class members will increase. These members have much less need than the deprived to reject this world in favor of the next. Indeed, they will want to harmonize their religious beliefs with their own worldly success. In time, these members will prevail, and the religious organization will cease to preach that material success in this life will be punished in the next. These faiths will cease to emphasize the spiritual and will portray the supernatural in ever more remote and less vivid terms. That is, the religion will become progressively worldly.

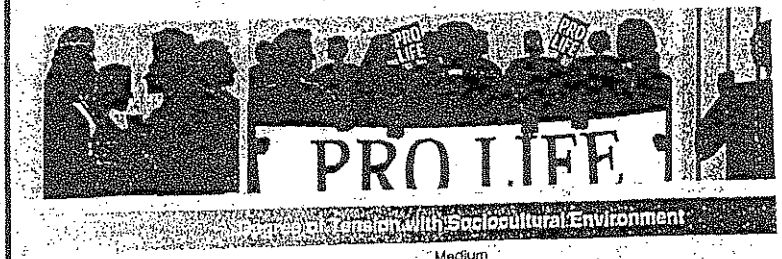
However, such a shift will erode the ability of the religious organization to satisfy the religious needs of the lower classes. This will lead to growing discontent. Eventually, *the masses will defect to form a new religious organization*, a sect, which emphasizes the original otherworldliness of the former organization.

Thus, Niebuhr proposed a dynamic cycle. Religions originate as sects designed to serve the needs of the deprived. If they grow and flourish, then these sects increasingly serve the interests of the middle and upper classes and are transformed into churches, thereby making them less effective in satisfying the needs of the poor. Then the conditions that prompted the original sect formation are re-created, a split occurs, and a new sect is formed. In time this sect, too, is transformed into a church, whereupon a new sect is born; thus, there is an endless cycle of the birth, transformation, and rebirth of new religious organizations. Niebuhr explained the existence of the huge array of Christian denominations as the result of countless cycles of this church-sect process.

In the almost seventy years since Niebuhr first sketched his church-sect theory, it has been much refined and elaborated (Wilson, 1959, 1961, 1970; Wallis, 1975). Niebuhr's definitions of church and sect were not clear or efficient, and in 1963 Benton Johnson proposed better ones. He suggested that church and sect are opposite poles on an axis representing the degree of tension between religious organizations and their sociocultural environment (see Figure 14-1). Tension, as Johnson defined it, is a manifestation of deviance. To the degree that a religious organization sustains norms and values different from those of the surrounding culture, it is deviant, and tension will exist between its members and the outside world. In the extreme case, tension is so high that the group is hunted down by outsiders. Religious groups whose norms and values resemble those of the larger society have no tension. *Churches* are religious bodies with relatively low tension; *sects* are religious bodies with relatively high tension.

Niebuhr tended to limit this application of church-sect theory to religious organizations.

FIGURE 14-1
Degrees of Tension Between Religious and Societal Values



Degree of Tension with Sociocultural Environment

Low

Medium

Clergy who "fit right in" illustrate that some religious groups are wholly accommodated to their social environment. Clergy who demonstrate against pornography or abortion reflect that some degree of tension exists between their religious group and the social environment. Clergy who are jailed for refusing to submit to state regulation of church-sponsored grade schools show that religious bodies can exist at a level of high tension with their environment. The higher the tension between a group and its environment, the more sectlike it is.

But the theory is even more useful when it is applied to whole societies. Let's see how church-sect theory has recently been linked with the concept of religious economies.

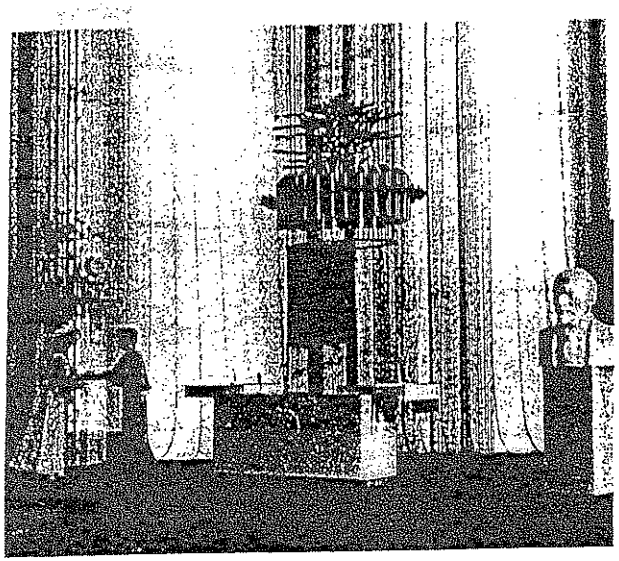
Secularization and Revival

Social scientists and modern intellectuals have generally paid close attention to only one aspect of church-sect theory: They have noted the movement away from traditional Christian teachings by many of the largest and most respected denominations. Projecting these trends into the future, they have predicted that soon religion will disappear. Noting that these denominations continue to retreat from a vivid, active conception of the supernatural, many social scientists have concluded that this is because supernatural beliefs cannot be maintained in an increasingly scientific age, and therefore human societies will soon, to paraphrase Sigmund Freud (1927), be cured of the infantile "illusion" of religion.

The process by which religion will disappear has been called *secularization* to indicate a turning away from religious and toward secular explanations of life. This process is regarded as far along and irreversible. Indeed, the distinguished anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace (1966) spoke for the majority of modern social scientists when he wrote:

> The evolutionary future of religion is extinction. Belief in supernatural beings . . . will become only an interesting historical memory. To be sure, this event is not likely to occur in the next generation; the process will very likely take several hundred years. . . . But as a cultural trait, belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge.

Other scholars have theorized that science might provide a substiture for religion—people might perform solemn rituals patterned on those of religion but with an explicitly antisupernatural thrust (see the photo on p. 412). In fact, the French philosopher Auguste Comte, who coined the term *sociology*, intended that sociology serve as the scientific substiture for religion. Thus, the assumption that religion is both false and doomed has been widespread among social sci-



A Russian couple was married some years ago in a "socialist wedding palace" complete with an "altar" and a bust of Lenin. This reflected a seventy-year government campaign to eradicate religion in the USSR. However, as recent changes have swept through the country, it has become clear that religion remains a powerful force in Russian society. Sociologists of religion argue that religion without the supernatural is no religion at all and therefore that efforts like this can always be expected to fail.

entists from the start. This assumption has led them to discover terminal symptoms in every sign of decline in religion but to ignore or be perplexed by every sign of vigor. For 300 years, social scientists have predicted the triumph of secularization (Stark, 1999). Whenever they have confronted broad-based religious revivals, they have dismissed them as death spasms.

I must confess that as a young sociologist I largely shared these views. But as I did research on religious groups, I found it very difficult to square these claims with what I saw. For millions of people, faith was alive and well. Many sophisticated scholars appeared to have no problem in reconciling science with a belief in the supernatural. Could the secularization thesis be flawed? By 1980 I had concluded that it was—that secularization was but one aspect of religious change (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980, 1985; Stark, 1981). Other sociologists began to express similar views (Bell, 1980; Martin, 1981). Together, we began to apply church-sect theory to religious economies and to argue that the secularization thesis rested on a misperception—that social scientists had mistaken the obvious decline of once powerful religious organizations for a general decline of religion. In this sense, they had seen only the transformation of some religious organizations into states of ever lower tension, but had failed to note the reactions to this trend elsewhere in religious economies. A more comprehensive view of religious economies suggests that *secularization is a self-limiting process that leads not to irreligion but to a shift in the sources of religion.* One of the ways this occurs was already implicit in church-sect theory.

Church-sect theory suggests that many religious bodies are always in the process of becoming very worldly. That is, secularization should occur in all religious economies. But we must also expect the trend toward secularization to produce religious reactions: the formation of sects. We can call this process *revival.* As secularization weakens some organizations, new ones split off to revive less worldly versions of the faith. This helps to explain not only why some religious bodies have declined as the secularization thesis predicts they should but also why religion refuses to fade away: why, for example, a religious body like the Church of God in Christ can grow at an extraordinary rate in contradiction of the secularization thesis. The Church of God in Christ has moved into the market vacuum created by the secularization of once-dominant Protestant bodies. The result is a change in the source of religion—a shift in what religious group people turn to—not the demise of religion.

But there is a second response to secularization besides revival. Sometimes people do not revive the conventional faith by embodying it in new organizations. Sometimes they turn to new faiths altogether.

Innovation: Cult Formation

Sects are not new religions; they are new organizations reviving an old religion. They claim to have returned to a more authentic version of the traditional faith from which its parent organization has strayed. Thus, a set of churches and sects will form a single religious tradition. For example, most churches and sects in the United States and Europe are part of the conventional Christian religious tradition.

Sometimes, however, organizations appear that are based on religions outside the conventional religious tradition. This may occur by *importing* a faith from another society; Hinduism in the United States and Christianity in India are examples. New faiths also appear through *cultural innovation.* Someone may have new religious insights and then succeed in attracting followers.

New religions, whether imported or the result of innovation, are deviant and thus elicit unfavorable reactions from others. Like sects, they are in a high state of tension with surrounding society. But unlike sects, new religions cannot claim cultural continuity with conventional religious beliefs and practices.

The hostility usually directed at new religions is reflected in the name applied to them: cults. Sociologists use this term without prejudice to distinguish new religions from sects arising out of old religions. Cults are religious movements that represent a new or different religious tradition, whereas churches and sects represent the prevailing tradition in a society. The negative connotations of the word *cult* reflect the unusually high tension between these movements and their social environment.

All religions begin as cult movements. All of today's great world faiths once were regarded as weird, crazy, foolish, and sinful. How Roman intellectuals in the first century would have laughed at the notion that a messiah and his tiny flock in Palestine, an obscure corner of the empire, posed a threat to the mighty pagan temples. But from obscure cult movements have risen not only Christianity but also Islam, Buddhism, and other faiths that today inspire hundreds of millions of faithful adherents.

Given their current rate of growth, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the Mormons—may be repeating this pattern of a meteoric rise from obscurity to world significance. In 1830 this faith began with six members: the three Smith brothers, the two Whitmer brothers, and Oliver Cowdry. Today there are more than 10 million Mormons, and even if they continue to grow at a somewhat slower rate, there will be at least 265 million Mormons worldwide a century from now (Stark, 1984, 1993).

New religions appear constantly in all societies (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). Nearly all of them fail. To succeed, many things are required, but the primary necessity involves *opportunity.* That is, for new firms to make their way against large, long-established firms in a religious economy, the older firms must be failing to serve the needs of a significant number of people. People do not abandon a faith that satisfies them to embrace a new faith: *New faiths prosper only from the weaknesses of old faiths.*

Sometimes new faiths find opportunity because of great social crises that overwhelm conventional faiths. For example, plagues or natural disasters may cause a sudden loss of confidence in conventional faiths (Wallace, 1956; Stark, 1992a). Wars can have the same effect, especially on the losing side: New faiths repeatedly swept through the Indian tribes of North America as their efforts to resist white encroachments failed (Mooney, 1896), and many new religions have flourished in Japan since World War II (McFarland, 1967; Morioka, 1975).

But a major opportunity for new faiths results *from the excessive secularization of the old.* That is, after many cycles of the church-sect process, an entire religious tradition may lose its ability to provide a plausible faith for a substantial portion of the population. Such moments are rare, but when they occur, new faiths quickly rise in influence, just as Christianity overwhelmed a highly secularized and complacent paganism. Thus, secularization prompts two reactions that restore religion: revival and innovation (cult formation). Rather than being a symptom of the death of religion, *secularization provides the impetus for religious change.*

Charisma

We saw in Chapter 3 that people join new religious movements primarily because of their attachments to members of those movements; when a sufficient proportion of a person's attachments are to members of some religious group, the person is likely to accept that religion. That tells us something not only about how religious movements recruit and grow but also about *how they begin.*

As long as only one person accepts a new religious message, no religious movement exists. To launch a social movement, this person must convince other people to share his beliefs and join him. Many people each year believe they have discovered a new faith, but only a few of them can convince others to join. What characterizes those who can attract followers?

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TABLE 14-5 American Denominations Enrolling at Least 1 Percent of the Population

Denomination	Percent of U.S. Population
Roman Catholic	23.5
Southern Baptist Convention	6.1
United Methodist Church	3.5
National Baptist Convention of the United States	3.1
Church of God in Christ	2.2
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	2.1
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	1.7
Jewish*	1.5
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	1.5
Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	1.1
National Baptist Convention of America	1.1
Assemblies of God	1.0
Episcopal Church	1.0
Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.	1.0
More than 1,200 other denominations	11.6
Total	62.0

Sources: Prepared by the author from the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1997*, and from Stark (1987). These statistics include a number of religious bodies not included in the rates shown in Figure 14-2.

*Includes all Jewish congregations.

Pondering the special gifts of religious founders, Max Weber credited them with charisma. Charisma is a Greek word meaning "divine gift." Weber used it to indicate the ability of some people to inspire faith in others, to get others to believe their message. For contemporary sociologists of religion, *the basis of this gift is an unusual ability to form attachments with others.* Just as people join religions out of attachments to members, in the beginning people accept the claim of a founder of a new faith because they develop very strong attachments to the founder. All studies of new religions report that the founders possessed remarkable gifts for interpersonal relations (Wallis, 1982).

Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 3, founders of new faiths typically turn first to those *with whom they already have strong attachments in their quest for converts.*

Having outlined the dynamic character of religious economies and the processes by which sects and cults form, we can now analyze religion in the United States. Then we shall see how the same dynamic patterns occur in a variety of other nations.

The American Religious Economy

Europeans have long marveled at both the diversity of religions and the high levels of participation in religious activities in the United States. Max Weber, for example, noted that Americans gladly contributed sums of money to their churches that would shock people in Europe. Others wondered how so many faiths could exist side by side.

It is true that the American religious economy is very diverse. Over 1,500 religious denominations exist in the United States (Melton and Gedridge, 1998). Church attendance is high: In any given week, about 40 percent of Americans attend services. Moreover, almost two-thirds of Americans (62 percent) are official members of a local congregation (Table 14-5).

However, the American religious economy is unusual only in that it is an exceptionally free market with little regulation. Within this economy, the three major processes of secularization, revival, and innovation are well developed and related.

Secularization and Revival

Many major religious bodies in the United States have become highly secularized in the sense that they no longer present traditional versions of their faith or emphasize the supernatural. Table 14-6, based on the General Social Surveys for 1996 through 1998, shows one indicator of this shift. I was able to combine these national samples because the very same question was asked about the Bible in each year. Combining the samples provided enough cases to characterize the beliefs of members in the larger denominations.

Looking at the table, we see that only small minorities of members of the Unitarian-Universalist Church, the United Church of Christ, the newly merged Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the United Presbyterian Church, and the United Methodist Church expressed their belief that "the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word." A century ago most members of these denominations would have affirmed this statement. But to find majorities holding this traditional tenet of Christian doctrine today, we must look to the lower half of the table, to groups that are best described as sects.

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If secularization weakens the holding power of religious organizations, then those denominations at the top of Table 14-6 ought to be showing signs of decline. On the other hand, if secularization is inevitable as science triumphs over faith, then the denominations holding to Bible literalism ought to be the ones in decline.

Table 14-7 offers compelling evidence for the notion that as religious bodies deemphasize the supernatural, they seem less able to satisfy religious needs. The United Church of Christ, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Lutherans all have experienced substantial losses in their shares of church membership. But in the middle of the table the sign turns from negative to positive, reflecting growth rather than decline. Beginning with the Southern Baptists, denominations are significantly on the rise. Indeed, the higher the proportion of members who take the Bible as the literal word of God, the higher the group's rate of growth. What we see happening here is the interplay between secularization and revival. As some denominations are eroded by secularization, new sects erupt and seize the opportunity to attract members to a less secularized faith, thus reviving and revitalizing the religious tradition.

Sect formation is very common in the United States. At least 417 American-born sect movements currently exist, and probably hundreds of others have existed in times past (Stark and Bainbridge, 1981). Most sects are very small: 28 percent have fewer than 500 members today. However, some are very large: The Southern Baptists, with more than 15 million members, are the largest Protestant body in the nation.

Sect formation revives the conventional religious *tradition* and reflects efforts by church members to remain church members: Those committed to the religious tradition but who find their church has become too worldly form sects to restore the otherworldliness of that tradition.

This analysis suggests that membership in conventional religious groups will be highest where sects are most active. This is precisely what contemporary data show. Sect movements are clustered in those states where membership in Christian churches is highest. Sects are very underrepresented in parts of the country where overall church membership and attendance are low (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). That is, sects move not into market openings where there is general religious inactivity but only into those where people are active but dissatisfied. I shall

TABLE 14-6 American Denominations and Literal Faith in the Bible

Denomination	Percent of Members Who Agree That the Bible Is the Actual Word of God and Is to Be Taken Literally, Word for Word
Unitarian-Universalist	7
United Church of Christ	12
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*	22
Episcopal Church	22
United Presbyterian Church	25
United Methodist Church	31
Jehovah's Witnesses	51
Church of Christ	56
Southern Baptist Convention	57
Church of the Nazarene	58
Assemblies of God	68
United Pentecostal Church	69
Church of God	81
All Protestants	43
Roman Catholics	20

Sources: Prepared by the author from National Opinion Research Center, General Social Surveys, 1996–1998.

TABLE 14-7 Some Growing and Some Declining American Denominations*

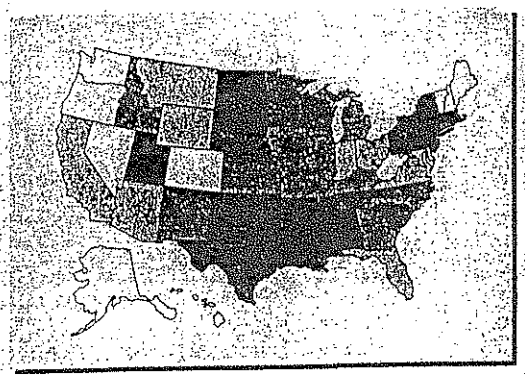
Denomination	Members per 1,000 U.S. Population, 1926	Members per 1,000 U.S. Population, 1990	Percent Change
Christian Church (Disciples)	10.0	4.1	−59
Unitarian-Universalist	1.0	0.5	−50
United Church of Christ	12.4	6.4	−48
Episcopal Church	18.1	9.8	−46
United Methodist Church	58.9	35.8	−39
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	23.0	15.2	−34
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	29.3	21.1	−28
Roman Catholic	233.0	235.5	+1
Southern Baptist Convention	53.8	60.5	+12
Church of the Nazarene	1.7	2.3	+36
Seventh-day Adventist	1.8	2.9	+60
United Pentecostal Church	1.0	2.0	+100
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	8.2	17.1	+109
Jehovah's Witnesses	1.4	3.5	+150
Church of God (Cleveland, TN)	0.9	2.5	+177
Assemblies of God	2.8	8.8	+214
Church of God in Christ	2.2	22.1	+905

Source: *Yearbook of American Churches, 1962*, and *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1992*.

*American members only.

FIGURE 14-2

The Social Geography of Church Membership



Massachusetts	65.5
New York	65.7
Oklahoma	66.8
South Dakota	68.1
Mississippi	70.2
Louisiana	70.5
Alabama	71.0
North Dakota	75.9
Rhode Island	76.7
Utah	79.8

Arkansas	60.6
Tennessee	61.2
New Jersey	61.3
Pennsylvania	61.4
South Carolina	61.9
Connecticut	62.3
Nebraska	63.0
Texas	64.1
Wisconsin	64.6
Minnesota	64.9

Nevada	32.1
Oregon	32.2
Alaska	32.2
Washington	33.1
Hawaii	35.3
Maine	36.4
Colorado	39.3
New Hampshire	39.5
West Virginia	41.4
Vermont	42.1

Church membership is different from religious preference. If asked their religion, more than 90 percent of Americans state a preference for some particular religious body. However, many who say they are Baptists, Catholics, or Jews, for example, do not actually maintain a current membership in any local religious group—about 62 percent of Americans maintain local memberships. This map shows the percentages in each state who actually belong to a local congregation. The variation is huge—from a low of 32.1 percent in Nevada to a high of 79.8 percent in Utah. There also is a very distinct regional pattern to church membership rates. The western states are very low in comparison with the rest of the nation, and the five lowest states are all western. Moreover, in 1980 California was sixth lowest with 36.8 percent belonging to a church. Between 1980 and 1990, church membership rates rose somewhat in nearly every state, but California's increase was larger than most and moved it out of the bottom ten. Observers attribute this rise to the large number of foreign immigrants who came to California during the decade, since recent foreign immigrants—including those from Asia—are overwhelmingly active church members. It also should be noted that, contrary to the popular belief that the South is the "Bible belt," southern states do not dominate the top of the list. If three states from the South are in the top ten, so are three states from the Northeast, including Rhode Island, New York, and Massachusetts.

expand on this point as we examine the contrasting patterns of cult success.

Secularization and Innovation

If sects represent efforts by the churched to *stay* churched, then cult movements represent efforts by the unchurched to *become* churched. That is, cult movements arise where both sects and churches fail to satisfy the religious market. To see this more fully, let's examine the geography of religion in contemporary America.

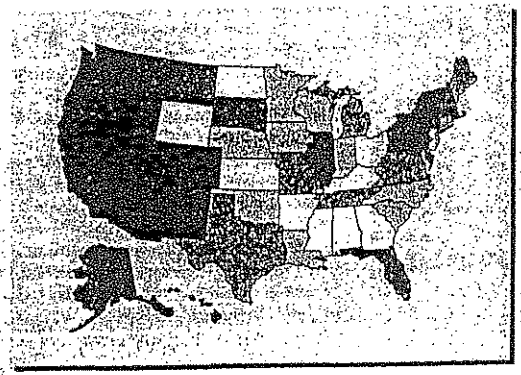
The "Unchurched" Belt The American South is frequently called the "Bible belt," where religion, especially evangelical Protestantism, is unusually strong. In many of our studies, however, William S. Bainbridge and I have failed to find evidence of such a belt (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, 1997). The South does not differ from most other regions of the nation in terms of church membership rates, church attendance rates, belief in God, or belief in life after death.

Although the South may not be a Bible belt, the Far West is certainly an "unchurched" belt. As is clear in Figure 14-2, church membership is far lower in the Pacific region than in any other region.[1] The Far West also has low rates of church attendance. Clearly, the conventional churches have failed to take root along the shores of the Pacific. However, it is church membership, and not religious belief, that is missing in the Far West. Westerners are nearly as likely to have faith in God and believe in life after death as people elsewhere in the country. Thus, the average westerner believes in the supernatural, but lacks a church affiliation that gives form and expression to his or her beliefs. This should provide an ideal market opportunity for cult movements able to form attachments with unchurched West Coast "believers."

1. The rates used in Figure 14-2 underestimate church membership. They have been corrected so that they accurately reflect regional differences in church membership, but the figures are somewhat depressed because of omissions in reporting. If these rates were summed, they would produce a national church membership rate of 58 percent, whereas the correct rate for the United States is about 62 percent.

FIGURE 14-3

Cult Movements Headquartered per Million Population



New Mexico	7.3
California	5.0
Nevada	4.2
New York	3.4
Colorado	3.3
Arizona	3.0
Massachusetts	2.7
Hawaii	2.7
Washington	2.5
Idaho	2.0
Illinois	2.0
Rhode Island	2.0

New Hampshire	1.8
Oregon	1.8
Vermont	1.8
Alaska	1.8
Utah	1.7
Delaware	1.5
South Dakota	1.4
Montana	1.3
Maryland	1.3
Florida	1.3
Pennsylvania	1.3

Kansas	0.4
Arkansas	0.4
Ohio	0.3
Georgia	0.3
Alabama	0.2
North Dakota	0.0
Kentucky	0.0
Mississippi	0.0
Wyoming	0.0

These rates are based on the location of the headquarters of each of hundreds of cult movements listed in J. Gordon Melton's (1993) *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. This measure understates the strength of new religious movements in America because several of these movements are very large and have centers in many states, but only the state where they are headquartered gets credit. No state has no cult centers, but four do lack a headquarters.

The Geography Of Cult Movements It should be no surprise that religious innovation is far more common and successful in the Far West than elsewhere in the nation. Figure 14-3 shows the distribution of the headquarters of cult movements active in the United States today. The states of the Far West tower above the rest. Moreover, Nevada, the state with the lowest church membership rate, leads the nation in cult headquarters. Nor is the West's affinity for novel religion and mysticism a recent development. Data collected in a special 1926 U.S. census tally of religious groups showed that even then church membership was comparatively low in the Far West and cult membership very high. This was true even as long ago as 1890 (Stark and Bainbridge, 1997).

A major cause of low church membership rates on the West Coast is constant and rapid population movement (Welch, 1983). When people move frequently, as has always been common in the West, they abandon attachments to all social organizations—not just churches but also fraternal clubs, hobby groups, veterans organizations, PTAs, political groups, and the like. Arriving in a new place, they also find it difficult to reestablish such connections in communities where many others are also newcomers and tran-

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TABLE 14-8 CANADIAN DENOMINATIONS ENROLLING AT LEAST 1 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION

DENOMINATION	PERCENT OF CANADIAN POPULATION
Roman Catholic Church	42.4
United Church of Canada*	7.6
Anglican Church of Canada	3.1
Jewish†	1.1
More than 200 other denominations	8.8
Total	63.0

Source: *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1997.*

*Created in 1925 by a merger of the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists, plus some independent congregations.

†Includes all members of the Jewish community whether or not they actually belong to a local congregation.

sients. Instead, they are likely to form attachments to people who are not attached to such organizations. Recall from Chapter 3 that after moving to San Francisco, the Unificationists began to grow again only when they discovered how to locate and build attachments with other newcomers to the city. In places where unattached newcomers abound, new movements have a much greater opportunity to grow than in places where the population is settled and attached. And unlike most of the conventional churches in the Far West, cults actively search out new members.

In a sense, the disorganization of the Far West caused by population instability is somewhat like that created in times of crisis, when religious changes are likely to occur. Wars and natural disasters result in dramatic social disorganization. Constant population movement provides a less obvious but persistent form of the same thing.

However, the fact that cults attract members in all parts of the nation shows that secularization itself, even when not assisted by disorganization, produces a market for new faiths. Indeed, data on who joins cult movements demonstrate this factor.

Who Joins Cults? The belief that secularization is leading to the demise of religion assumes that people who discard conventional faiths have embraced rationalism and no longer find supernatural beliefs plausible. Thus, sociologists have interpreted increases in the proportion of people who say "none" when asked their religious affiliation as very significant evidence of the trend to irreligion.

I also long assumed that people who claimed no religious affiliation were primarily nonbelievers. I was extremely surprised, therefore, when one of my studies showed that far from being secular humanists or rationalists, people who say they have no religion are those most likely to express faith in unconventional supernatural beliefs (Bainbridge and Stark, 1980, 1981). These people were many times more likely to accept astrology, reincarnation, and various psychic phenomena and to value Eastern mysticism.

Subsequently, my colleagues and I obtained the results of surveys of members of various contemporary cult movements: Unificationists, Hare Krishnas, Scientologists, witches, and several groups studying yoga. In each case, we found extraordinary overrepresentation of persons who had grown up with parents claiming no religious affiliation. Most of the other members had parents who were not active members of any faith, although they had a nominal affiliation (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985).

Thus, *to the extent that large numbers of people grow up in irreligious homes* (that is, in times and places where large numbers have drifted away from the conventional faiths), *large numbers of potential converts to cult movements will exist.*

The Canadian Religious Economy

A comparison of the Canadian and American religious economies reveals striking similarities and differences. In both nations, church membership is relatively high: 62 percent in the United States and 63 percent in Canada. But in Canada this membership is spread across far fewer religious bodies. In the United States, the fourteen largest denominations enroll 50.4 percent of the population (see Table 14-5); in Canada, the three largest enroll 53.1 percent of the population (Table 14-8). Clearly, the Canadian religious economy is less diverse than that of the United States.

Harry W. Hiller (1978) has suggested that one reason for less diversity is that the close ties between church and state in Canada produced policies and institutional arrangements designed to "discourage religious experimentation." But another reason there is less apparent diversity in Canadian religion is the merger of Canadian Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists into the United Church of Canada back in 1925; these remain separate denominations in the United States. In part it is also because the large African American population of the United States tends to belong to separate denominations (the National Baptist Convention of the United States, for example). And partly it is because the Roman Catholic Church enrolls nearly twice the proportion of Canadians as Americans. Moreover, Canada's Catholics are more highly concentrated. As Kenneth Westhues (1976) has pointed out, only 9 percent of American Catholics live in a neighborhood where they make up a majority of the population, while almost 60 percent of Catholic Canadians live in an overwhelmingly Catholic neighborhood.

In Canada, too, the more secularized denominations have been getting smaller, while the more sectlike groups have been growing. For example, between 1971 and 1991, according to census figures, the United Church and the Anglicans showed a decline, while the Baptists, Pentecostals, and other evangelical Protestants registered substantial gains.

Unlike the American census, the Canadian census asks religious preference. Canadian membership figures for various cult movements are shown in Table 14-9. Several significant things can be read in the table. First, except for Satanism, these groups overrecruit women, which is entirely consistent with the earlier discussion of religion and gender differences. In fact, that men far outnumber women among Satanists seems in keeping with research relating lack of religiousness among males to the general tendency toward risky behavior, as does the high ratio of males to females among self-identified atheists.

A second important finding has to do with the rather small numbers involved in these groups, given that they receive a great deal of media attention. The membership figures attributed to new religious groups in the media usually are wildly exaggerated, and most new religious movements are, and remain, very small. For example, a Toronto magazine estimated that there were about 10,000 Hare Krishna members in that city when, in fact, there were but 80 full-time members (Hexham, Currie, and Townsend, 1985). In similar fashion, based on the amount

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TABLE 14-9 CULT MEMBERS IN CANADA

	NUMBER OF MEMBERS	
	Males	Females
Spiritualist	1,485	2,255
Scientology	570	645
New Age	460	735
New Thought	2,035	2,575
Kalabarian	40	70
Paganism	2,540	2,990
Satanism	260	75
Atheism	8,925	4,580

Source: Prepared by the author from the 1991 Canadian Census.

of media coverage they are given, who would have guessed that barely 1,200 Canadians would give their religious preference as Scientology, or that even fewer would identify themselves with the "New Age"?

Despite being few in number, Canadian cultists are located where secularization theory would predict—in those places where the conventional faiths are weakest. In Canada, just as in the United States, "where" is the West. Overall, 12.5 percent of Canadians reported on their 1991 census forms that they had no religious affiliation. But in western cities, such as Vancouver and Victoria, about a third said they had none, in comparison with many eastern cities having fewer than 3 percent unchurched. And the western cities have many times the cult membership rates of cities in eastern Canada (Stark and Bainbridge, 1997).

A CLOSER VIEW

Gordon Melton: Cult Movements in Europe

If cults flourish where conventional churches are relatively weak, then parts of Europe ought to be extremely fertile ground for new religious movements. For example, in Iceland and Denmark, weekly church attendance is less than 4 percent, and in Sweden only 6 percent are in church on an average Sunday—rates far below those found even in the Canadian and American West. If sec-

TABLE 14-10 Cult Movements in Europe and America

NATION	CULT MOVEMENTS PER MILLION POPULATION	NUMBER OF CULT MOVEMENTS
Switzerland	16.7	108
Iceland	12.0	3
United Kingdom	10.7	604
Austria	7.9	60
Sweden	6.8	57
Denmark	4.5	23
Netherlands	4.4	64
Ireland	3.9	14
West Germany	2.5	155
Belgium	2.4	24
Norway	1.9	8
Greece	1.5	15
Italy	1.2	66
Portugal	1.0	10
France	0.9	52
Finland	0.8	4
Spain	0.7	29
Poland	0.5	17
Europe*	3.4	1,317
United States	1.7	425

Source: Stark, 1993.

*Total based only on the nations listed in the table.

ularization leads to innovation, then these nations ought to be awash with new religions. Yet for a long time European sociologists of religion claimed that North Americans flocked to such groups but that Europeans found them of no interest. As it turned out, however, it was only European sociologists, not Europeans, who took no interest in cult movements. In fact, such groups are far more numerous in many European nations than they ever have been in North America.

The impetus for this breakthrough was provided by J. Gordon Melton and his associates at the Institute for the Study of American Religion. During the 1970s Melton single-handedly researched and assembled the monumental *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, first published in 1978 and now in its fourth edition (1993). For his first edition, Melton managed to track down and write profiles of 1,200 separate American religious bodies. To do this, he had to locate hundreds of tiny sects and cult movements (which provided the data for Figure 14-3). He is so good at finding such groups that by the third edition, the number of religious groups in his encyclopedia had increased to 1,588.

Early in the 1980s Melton began work on what he hoped would be a similar encyclopedia for the nations of Europe. Consequently, he began traveling in Europe doing what he had done in the United States: cultivating local informants and ransacking bookstores (especially religious, occult, and New Age bookstores) for directories, magazines, tracts, and newsletters. In some nations he was given very effective assistance by local scholars. In Great Britain, for example, he was aided greatly by Eileen Barker of the London School of Economics, who had begun to assemble materials on obscure religious groups in England, Scotland, and Wales. In most places, however, Melton was on his own, and dependent on his own funds, until an American publisher advanced funds so that Melton could hire Gary L. Ward and Isotta Poggi to assist him. More trips to Europe followed, and each visit expanded the number of religious groups located in any given nation. Along the way, Melton delegated the primary responsibility for completing the European volumes to Ward and Poggi in order to devote his primary attention to a huge, forthcoming *Encyclopedia of African-American Religions*.

Melton's efforts notwithstanding, the investment of time and labor in locating European religious movements still has been minor compared with that devoted to American religion. Not only has Melton been actively engaged in gathering American data far longer, he had the benefit of a very solid and voluminous literature from which to begin—American scholars have long been interested in new cults and sects. Moreover, Melton has had time to gain the trust of many smaller, more obscure American religious groups, which accounts for the addition of nearly 400 groups between the first and third editions of his American encyclopedia.

The preceding discussion leads to several very important cautions about the findings. First, European religious groups will have been significantly *undercounted* thus far. Second, the undercounting will primarily apply to the kinds of religious movements of greatest interest vis-à-vis the debate about secularization, for these groups are often secretive and usually obscure. Finally, undercounting will be greater in some nations than in others, thus producing a significant but unknown degree of *spurious variation in rates*.

As this edition of the textbook goes to press, the three-volume *Religions Directory International* compiled by Melton, Ward, and Poggi is not yet in final draft. But, because Melton and I have been colleagues for many years, he graciously supplied me with the latest drafts, which have been used to create cult movement rates for many European nations. Before examining the results, however, several points need to be made.

The three directories include the nations of eastern Europe. However, aside from Poland, the data from the eastern bloc include only conventional religious bodies. Indeed, until very recently, anyone searching for unusual religious groups in most of eastern Europe was attempting to outdo the secret police. For this reason I eliminated all of eastern Europe (including the former East Germany) except for Poland. I also decided to exclude the tiny nations such as Liechtenstein, Andorra, and Monaco. In the end I settled on eighteen nations—fifteen on the continent plus the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Iceland. I then counted the groups in each of these nations that would be considered a cult movement. Next, I turned to the fourth edition of *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Melton, 1993) and applied the same criteria.

The results are shown in Table 14-10. Overall, these European nations have *twice* as high a rate of cult movements as does the United States! Moreover, many European nations have rates many times that of the United States—in fact, Switzerland has a rate about ten times that of the United States. Keep in mind, too, that not only are European cult movements undercounted, but the nations with the lowest rates are mainly those where Melton believes the undercounting was greatest. As an example of the magnitudes that might be involved in some of these undercounts, consider that in the draft initially made available to me, Melton and his associates reported thirty-two cult movements in Italy, for a rate of 0.6. Subsequently, it became possible to dispatch an Italian-speaking researcher to look again. She found an additional thirty-four groups during a four-week stay, thus doubling Italy's rate.

So much, then, for claims by European scholars that, compared with the United States, Europe has few cult movements. Rather, as the theory would predict, much of Europe is awash in nonstandard religious movements.

The Protestant Explosion in Latin America

Several years ago, David Martin, a sociologist at the London School of Economics, told one of his English colleagues that he was planning to write a book about Protestantism in Latin America. The response he received was "A very small book, surely" (Martin, 1989). When Martin's *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* appeared in 1990 there was nothing small about it. It not only ran to 352 pages but attracted a great deal of attention in the media as well. For the fact is that the steady and rapid growth of pluralism in Latin America, and the successful entry of highly competitive sects, had gone unnoticed in both scholarly and media circles. Indeed, most of the scholarly world assumed that such changes were impossible. Some agreed that Catholic Liberation Theology had a bright future in Latin nations, but a successful outbreak of evangelical Protestantism was dismissed as absurd—hence the haughty reactions Martin experienced when he began his study.

Ironically, while Martin deserves great credit, his was only the second book published on this subject in 1990 (Stoll, 1990), and neither book was all that timely. A very good study could have been done thirty years earlier, for evangelical Protestants had already achieved "liftoff" by 1960. For example, they had converted about 12 percent of the population of Chile by 1960. Given the very low rates of participation by nominal Catholics in Latin America (Barrett, 1982), rather small evangelical "minorities" will make up a very significant proportion of those active in religion. Hence, the growth during the 1950s was far more significant than it might have appeared to outsiders. Moreover, much was being written about the rapid gains of Protestantism in Latin America as early as the 1950s. However, because it appeared only in sectarian publications, the millions of Americans who regularly contributed funds to support missions to Latin America were the only ones who knew all about the "explosion of Protestantism" south of the border. It took the scholarly world thirty or forty years longer to catch on.

In any event, Protestant groups—most of them of the Pentecostal variety—are sweeping over most of the continent. In Chile an estimated

22 percent are now *active* in evangelical Protestant congregations, as are at least 20 percent in Guatemala, and 16 percent in Brazil (Martin, 1990; Stoll, 1990). Moreover, if the present rates of conversion hold for the next twenty years, Protestants will be the majority in many Latin American nations.

Why is this happening? Primarily because over the past few decades government coercion against non-Catholics declined and a pluralistic religious economy became a possibility. Into this vacuum came a flood of Protestant missionaries representing a number of vigorous North American sects. Lacking a protected and subsidized status, these groups had to aggressively seek members in order to survive. In the beginning, the missionaries provided the leadership for these groups. But in recent decades local leaders have taken charge. Masses of people in Latin America are finding the attractions of higher-tension sects as appealing as do people elsewhere and have taken the opportunity to join. And the process by which they join is the network pattern discussed in Chapter 3; that is, one person joins and soon brings in his or her family members, friends, or co-workers.

Many sociologists of religion now recognize that the greater the number of competing firms in a religious economy, the greater the proportion of the population who will be active in religious groups. That is, many specialized firms can, together, satisfy a far greater range of religious needs and tastes than can one or very few religious groups. Indeed, to the extent that one religious group dominates a religious economy, it will tend to be lazy and to be satisfied with low levels of participation. Writing in 1776 about established religions in general and the Church of England in particular, Adam Smith noted their lack of "exertion" and "zeal":

> The clergy, reposing themselves upon their benefices, had neglected to keep up the fervor of faith and devotion of the great body of the people; and having given themselves up to indolence, were incapable of making vigorous exertion in defence even of their own establishment.

For centuries it was claimed that everyone or almost everyone in Latin America was Catholic. But, if one looked very closely one could notice widespread religious apathy—few attended mass on Sunday. Government repression prevented the church-sect process from functioning to satisfy those dissatisfied with the monopoly faith, and this tended to hide the actual weakness of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Ironically, the sweeping Protestant successes will probably do much to reinvigorate Catholicism. In several new studies I have found that Catholics are far more active where they are in the minority than in so-called Catholic nations—the great vigor of American Catholicism being a case in point (Stark, 1992b, 1997; Stark and McCann, 1993). In having to respond to Protestant challenges, the Catholic Church in Latin America may well find that it is far stronger (in terms of member commitment) when it is far smaller (in terms of claimed membership).

Eastern Revivals

The collapse of the Soviet Union had many remarkable consequences, not the least of which was to reveal the abject failure of several generations of dedicated efforts to indoctrinate atheism in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Almost immediately after they seized power in Russia in 1917, the communists embarked on a massive campaign to stamp out all traces of all religions. "Scientific atheism" was made a required part of the educational curriculum, beginning on the first day of school. Nearly all churches, synagogues, and mosques were closed, many were destroyed, and many others were converted to other uses, such as museums of scientific atheism. A few places of worship (most of them Russian Orthodox churches) were placed under very strict state control and allowed to remain open, but all others were closed. It is estimated that only about 5,000 religious congregations of all faiths (fewer than the current number in the state of Kentucky) still existed in the Soviet Union by the 1960s, an extraordinary decline. For example, in 1917 there were more than 20,000 Muslim mosques in the Soviet Union. By 1965, only 351 remained open (Ro'i, 1996).

In addition, there was a great deal of official as well as informal discrimination against persons suspected of being religious. As Andrew Greeley (1994) explained:

> If one wanted to get ahead . . . one either professed atheism and stayed away from churches or kept one's religious propensities a secret. . . . Never before in human history has there been such a concerted effort to stamp out not merely a religion but all trace of religion. . . . Atheistic Communism thought of itself as pushing forward the inevitable process of secularization in which religion would disappear from the face of the earth.

The communist regimes imposed by the Russian army on most of eastern Europe at the end of World War II also instituted efforts to eliminate religion. Although enforcement efforts generally were less vigorous and brutal than those initiated in Russia following the revolution, they were as fully intended to wipe out religion. For example, in Hungary one of the first acts by the government in 1945 was to nationalize all church lands and confiscate all religious school buildings. This stripped the churches of their historic financial basis. To prevent the replacement of these funds by member contributions, it was ruled illegal for the churches to accept such support. Shortly thereafter the government ordered the dissolution of 53 Catholic religious orders, excluding only several orders of teaching nuns, who were limited to recruiting two novices per year. The authorities also frequently arrested priests and members of various religious groups on grounds that they corrupted the morals of young people by talking to them about religion. It was believed that such measures would only need to be temporary. Thus, when sentencing seven Jehovah's Witnesses, the Hungarian Court explained: "We shall lock you up for ten years, and when those ten years are up, our People's Republic will be stronger than it is now, and the people will be ideologically trained and immune to your trying to influence them with the Bible. Then we shall be able to release you" (*Yearbook*, 1996:99).

With the recent breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communist regimes in eastern Europe, religious repression subsided. So, after many decades of vigorous efforts to stamp out religion, what were the results? Is the average Russian and eastern European the "scientific atheist" the schools were expected to create? Hardly, as a glance back at Table 14-1 will show. Atheists are few in eastern Europe and Russia, and large numbers identify themselves as religious. This is not what surveys would have found when the communists were still in power, for then many people were (rightfully) too suspicious of survey interviewers to tell them the truth. Consequently, Sergei Borisovich Filatov and Dmitrii Efimovich Furman (1993), who have access to old government-conducted surveys of the Soviet Union, describe the results of recent polls as showing "an abrupt growth in religiosity and the disappearance, equally abrupt, of atheism." For example, a survey conducted in the major cities of Russia in 1990, after the Russian religious revival was well under way, found that 24 percent still said they were atheists. The same researchers found that only 8 percent gave this response two years later (Vorontsova and Filatov, 1994). It seems entirely plausible that a similar rapid drop in the percent of atheists would take place in China if the government were to permit religious freedom.

Table 14-11 Nontraditional Beliefs in 12 Major Russian Cities

	YES
I believe in the "evil eye"	67
I believe in astrology	56
I believe in UFOs	46
I believe in the abominable snowman	37

Source: Adapted from Vorontsova and Filatov, 1994.

However, Soviet educational efforts to root out religion were not without some interesting side effects. Recall that whenever conventional supernatural beliefs are weakened or lack organized expression, unconventional beliefs will prosper, as we have already noted for the western parts of the United States and Canada. Applied to Russia, this principle would lead us to expect nontraditional beliefs to be very popular as a result of the repression of conventional churches. Table 14-11 powerfully supports this expectation. Keep in mind that this survey was *not* based on those who attended the most backward schools in rural areas but on residents of the 15 largest cities in Russia, who attended the best schools available (Vorontsova and Filatov, 1994). Of these best-educated Russians, two-thirds believe in the "evil eye." More than half believe in astrology. Nearly half believe in UFOs, and more than a third believe in the abominable snowman. So much for a generation of scientific atheists!

In any event, massive religious revivals currently are under way in the nations of the former Soviet Union and in the former Soviet-controlled nations of eastern Europe as well. Some sense of the size of this revival comes from Dagestan, one of the republics in the new Russian Federation.

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In 1917 there were 1,702 mosques in Dagestan. In 1988, as the Soviet era drew to a close, there were but 27. By 1992 there were 800 mosques in Dagestan; in 1994, nearly 5,000 (Bobrovnikov, 1996).

The Universal Appeal of Faith

At the start of this chapter, we examined the unique capability of religion to satisfy basic human needs. So long as people want to know what existence means, so long as they are prone to disappointment, suffering, and death, the religious impulse will not be stilled. Only religions, only systems of thought that include belief in the supernatural, can address problems of this magnitude.

From this line of analysis, we can see that Niebuhr left a vital element out of his church-sect theory. In stressing the needs of the deprived and the lower classes for an otherworldly faith, he failed to note that in the face of some of life's greatest questions, all human beings are deprived. No one, neither the rich or the poor, can achieve immortality in the natural world. And both rich and poor seek to find meaning in existence. The rich as well as the poor join religions. Granted, the rich tend to prefer more worldly churches, but there comes a point at which a religion can become too worldly, too emptied of supernaturalism, to serve either rich or poor. Thus, rising, vigorous, otherworldly religions attract the rich as well as the poor. Although well-educated and successful people tend not to join sects that are in a very high state of tension with the environment, they are often overrepresented among cult converts. In fact, the average cult convert these days is not a social outcast lacking education and good job prospects. Rather, the average convert is unusually well educated, with excellent career potential (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985).

Conclusion

For three centuries, social scientists have confidently predicted the end of religion. Each new generation of social scientists has expected that their children, or surely their grandchildren, would live in an irreligious society.

Yet religion has not gone away. Granted, many of the great religious organizations of today may be fated to slide into oblivion. But to notice only their decline and to ignore the vigor of new religious organizations and of new religions in general is to look only at sunsets and never at the dawn. In the long course of human experience, many religions have come and gone, but religion has remained.

Oddly enough, while social scientists have awaited the end of religion, they have been content to teach that religion has been a universal social institution, found in all societies. They attribute this universality to the ability of religion to serve worldwide human needs. Thus, to expect religion to vanish meant that such needs would vanish or at least that a new institution such as science would replace religion.

However, this implication ignores the unique aspect of religion and the fundamental differences between religion and science. As discussed early in this chapter, some things that humans seem to desire can come only from the gods. So long as such desires exist, religion will exist to satisfy them. Moreover, the supernatural claims of religion are, in their purest form, immune to scientific disproof. Scientists can send cameras and detection equipment through space to inspect the planets for signs of life, but they cannot send probes to test for life after death.

Review Glossary

Terms are listed in the order in which they appear in the chapter.

religious economy The set of competing faiths, and their adherents, within a given society or geographic area of a society.

secularization The process by which particular religious organizations become more worldly and offer a less vivid and less active conception of the supernatural.

revival Movements within religious organizations, or the breaking away of new organizations, to reaffirm less secularized versions of a faith (*see* sect formation).

religious innovation The appearance of new religions in a society either by founding of a new faith (*see* cult formation) or by importing a new faith from another society.

ultimate meaning, questions about Questions about the very meaning of life, the universe, reality—for example, Does life have purpose? Is death the end? Why do we suffer?

supernatural That which is beyond natural laws and limits.

religion Any socially organized pattern of beliefs and practices concerning ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural.

religious pluralism The existence of several religions in the same society.

churches Religious bodies in a relatively low state of tension with their environment.

sects Religious bodies in a relatively high state of tension with their environment but which remain within the conventional religious tradition(s) of their society.

sect formation The breaking off of a group from a conventional religion in order to move into a higher degree of tension with the environment.

church-sect theory The proposition that, in time, successful sects will be transformed into churches, thereby creating the conditions for the eruption of new sects.

cults Religious movements that represent faiths that are new and unconventional in a society.

cult formation The process by which a person or persons with new revelations succeed in gathering a group of followers.

charisma The unusual ability of some religious leaders to influence others.

Suggested Readings

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