# Chapter 17Religion

## Social Issues in the News

***“America’s First Muslim College to Open This Fall,” the headline said. The United States has hundreds of colleges and universities run by or affiliated with the Catholic Church and several Protestant and Jewish denominations, and now it was about to have its first Muslim college. Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, had just sent out acceptance letters to students who would make up its inaugural class in the fall of 2010. The school’s founder said it would be a Muslim liberal arts college whose first degrees would be in Islamic law and theology and in the Arabic language. The chair of the college’s academic affairs committee explained, “We are trying to graduate well-rounded students who will be skilled in a liberal arts education with the ability to engage in a wider framework of society and the variety of issues that confront them.…We are thinking of how to set up students for success. We don’t see any contradiction between religious and secular subjects.”***

***The college planned to rent a building in Berkeley during its first several years and was doing fund-raising to pay for the eventual construction or purchase of its own campus. It hoped to obtain academic accreditation within a decade. Because the United States has approximately 6 million Muslims whose numbers have tripled since the 1970s, college officials were optimistic that their new institution would succeed. An official with the Islamic Society of North America, which aids Muslim communities and organizations and provides chaplains for the U.S. military, applauded the new college. “It tells me that Muslims are coming of age,” he said. “This is one more thing that makes Muslims part of the mainstream of America. It is an important part of the development of our community.” (Oguntoyinbo, 2010)******[[1]](http://catalog.flatworldknowledge.com/bookhub/reader/1806?e=barkan-ch13_s02" \l "ftn.fn-1)***

The opening of any college is normally cause for celebration, but the news about this particular college aroused a mixed reaction. Some people wrote positive comments on the Web page on which this news article appeared, but two anonymous writers left very negative comments. One asked, “What if they teach radical Islam?” while the second commented, “Dose [sic] anyone know how Rome fell all those years ago? We are heading down the same road.”

As the reaction to this news story reminds us, religion and especially Islam have certainly been hot topics since 9/11, as America continues to worry about terrorist threats from people with Middle Eastern backgrounds. Many political and religious leaders urge Americans to practice religious tolerance, and advocacy groups have established programs and secondary school curricula to educate the public and students, respectively. Colleges and universities have responded with courses and workshops on Islamic culture, literature, and language. The controversy over Islam is just one example of the strong passions that religion and religious differences often arouse, in part because religion involves our dearest values.

This chapter presents a sociological understanding of religion. We begin by examining religion as a social institution and by sketching its history and practice throughout the world today. We then turn to the several types of religious organizations before concluding with a discussion of various aspects of religion in the United States.

**17.7 End-of-Chapter Material Summary**

1. All societies have beliefs and practices that help them understand supernatural and spiritual phenomena. Religion takes different forms in the many types of societies that have existed, but ultimately it seeks to make sense out of life, death, and the other mysteries of human existence.
2. The world’s major religions today include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism. They differ in many respects, including the nature of their belief in God, whether their religion began with the efforts of one particular individual, and whether a sacred text is involved.
3. Religion serves several functions for society. It gives meaning and purpose to life, reinforces social stability and social control, and promotes physical and psychological well-being. Yet religion can also perpetuate social inequality and promote social conflict among peoples with different religious faiths. Traditionally religion has also reinforced gender inequality. Symbolic interactionism explores the micro side of religion and focuses on the role religion plays in our daily lives and the ways in which we interpret religious experiences.
4. The primary types of religious organization include the church (either an ecclesia or a denomination), sect, and cult. These types differ in many ways, including their size and integration into society. Cults have a very negative image, but Christianity, Judaism, and various denominations all began as cults.
5. The United States is, according to many measures, one of the most religious societies in the industrial world. Most people believe in God, and a strong majority belong to a church or synagogue. Religious affiliation is related to several demographic variables in which sociologists are interested, including social class and race. Liberal Protestants and Jews tend to be relatively wealthy and well educated, while Conservative Protestants tend to be poorer and less educated. Catholics and Moderate Protestants tend to occupy a middle ground on these variables.
6. Religiosity is a multidimensional concept that gets beyond actual membership in a church or synagogue. The more religious people are, the more conservative they tend to be on various social and moral issues.
7. Two religious trends in recent decades in the United States include secularization and the rise of religious conservatism. Despite fears that the United States is becoming a less religious society, the best evidence indicates that religion continues to play an important role in the lives of individuals and their families. The rise of religious conservatism has an important and controversial impact on national political affairs.
8. Religion seems to have at least two important effects on the lives of individuals. Higher levels of religiosity are associated with reduced involvement in deviant behavior and with greater physical and psychological well-being.