

COMMUNITY. Although groupings or community formations are a regular feature of the phenomenon of religion, it is important to recognize that they are neither necessary nor equally prominent in all religions. There are situations otherwise completely typical of the category "religion" wherein the communal element is lacking, and others wherein it is loosely structured, evanescent, or deemed unimportant. For example, even though monasteries constitute a rigorous and elaborate kind of community, the name for them in Western languages derives from the Greek *monos*, meaning "single, alone." Hermit monks and wandering *samnyāsins* take as a major element in their piety and ascetic practice the renunciation of community. Also, many people in modern, industrialized societies consider themselves religious because of certain attitudes, practices, and beliefs but do not take part in a communal structure in which these religious factors are shared or are decisive.

Therefore, in the following paragraphs, as various types of religious communal organization are reviewed and their dynamics analyzed, one must remember that these groups vary in intensity and importance in their respective cultures and traditions, and that they do not exhaust the possibilities for religious life. Nevertheless, it is not too much to say that nearly all religious situations do have a communal dimension and that in many the community is the decisive factor.

It is a prejudice of modern society to speak of "organized religion" as if organization added an extraneous element to what legitimately exists without it. It is possible, of course, to define or to believe in a religion that is a matter of one's

aloneness. It should also be recognized, however, that for many other people the social factor—belonging to and having a place in a religious community—may be the dominant aspect of their religious life and that, further, it may be a hidden factor even in the life of the one who rejects its significance.

The following description and typology of religious communities is highly abstract and theoretical. It describes poles, although most groups actually lie somewhere on a continuum between such poles; it speaks of pure types, even though most of life is compromised and blended; it isolates factors and structures that are in actuality mixed with other social patterns as well as influenced and changed by belief, rite, and experience. All this notwithstanding, focusing on these social structures, abstracted from their living contexts, may be helpful in sorting out the communal element from among the many contributing factors in a religious phenomenon and so may lead to a better understanding of the whole.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY. Some form of initiation usually marks entrance into a religious community. Entrance rituals may also be duplicated, reinforced, or elaborated on subsequent occasions. Later transition ceremonies often mark the beginning of new status within a group (e.g., ordination or monastic profession). There are also rituals and procedures for leaving a group, by incorporation into a higher status beyond the perimeters of the former group, or by censure and repudiation. Even death, which would seem to end an individual's membership in a community, can be understood as an initiation into a yet higher degree of existence in the group. In such cases, certain ceremonies during the ritual year may celebrate the return of the dead to participate in the life of the community.

Communal ritual activities for other purposes or on other occasions than initiation or ordination are also characteristic marks of religious communities. These rituals may be focused on seasonal change, agricultural processes, famous events of history, and doctrines, usually with all these elements blended together. Gathering as a group for such rites is perhaps the most persistent aspect of religious community, and is arguably its reason for being.

Differentiation of function and of merit or value is often recognized in communal structure. In some cases special functions within the group, especially leadership in ritual activities, are assumed by individuals specially selected and consecrated; in other cases leaders emerge from the group charismatically. That is, some religious traditions are highly sensitive to structural arrangements and carefully delineate lines of command and authority, carefully categorizing all functions and degrees. In other traditions the patterns of authority are quite casual, very much dependent on individual initiative and lacking ritual recognition.

Religious communities often validate, or give religious meaning to, natural or social distinctions. Gender, for example, is often a significant determinant of an individual's role

in a religious community. One's role in the family (as mother, son, etc.) or one's lineage (e.g., in a caste system) may also determine religious status, and one's political office or status as a leader in the society at large tends to take on religious significance.

Religious communities are different from other social groups in their concept of the community as a sacred phenomenon. Instead of conceiving of the community in practical or casual terms, the distinctly religious group sees itself as part of a larger structure, plan, or purpose, one that transcends the immediate or basic needs of humanity. Conscious correlation of the community with patterns of symbols that are not social in their primary reference is a signal of the presence of religious rather than secular community.

Where nature and its processes are the focal point of religious attention, the community is conceived and structured with reference to the natural world. The subgroups within a tribe, for example, are linked in the mind with animals, stars, and the like. This totemism does not indicate an obliteration of the distinction between nature and culture in such peoples but rather shows an attempt to correlate one with the other or to use the elements of the natural world as a means of labeling and systematizing society.

Among religious groups for whom nature is not the primary concern, the concept of the community as a sacred entity takes a variety of forms. A special relationship with one or more gods or goddesses may be expressed by seeing the group as the servants, the messengers, or perhaps the co-workers of the divine beings. There is a fine line between metaphors and ontological assertions in theological language, so one often does not know how precisely to take images, such as the church as the "body" of Christ, that seem to give a group a kind of organic participation in the sacred.

A concept of the group as sacred can be linked with the merit or attainments of adepts with various degrees of skill. Those who are most advanced in ascetic practice, meditation, or yoga may constitute a sacred core around or below which those of lesser attainments are ranked. This arrangement leads to a pattern illustrated by Buddhism, according to which the term for the community, *sangha*, may refer to the inner circle of monks (*bhikkhus*) or to the larger group, the laity, who subscribe to the doctrine but practice it less exclusively.

It is possible, of course, for a religious community to be structured along lines that are not particularly religious from the point of view of believer or observer, as is so, for example, in the military model of the Salvation Army and the constitutional administrative arrangement of some American Protestant denominations. In such cases, concepts of the group as a sacred entity might become almost entirely separate from its actual structural appearance. Tensions can develop in religious groups when the social structure and the theology become too divergent. It is odd, for example, to have a monastic pattern that is almost inevitably based on merit and

attainment existing within a tradition that doctrinally asserts equality before God or some alternate kind of sacred hierarchy.

To summarize, we can assume that we are observing a religious community, whether it is so labeled or not, when most or all of the following characteristics are evident in reference to the sacred: rituals of initiation and incorporation (as well as those of rejection); other communal rituals; and status levels and functional distinctions.

"NATURAL" RELIGIOUS GROUPS. One of the clearest distinctions to be made among religious communities is that between groups specifically and self-consciously organized around religious beliefs and activities and those societies or "natural" groups wherein whatever is religious is part of the whole social structure. This distinction may also be made by noting that the specific religious groups are typically or theoretically voluntary, while one is born into the latter type of community, and there is no choice about joining it. A further way of making the distinction is by observing the relationship between the religious dimension and the political or governmental dimension: specific religious groups are not involved *per se* in governing, whereas the natural religious group is identical with the social group as a whole, including its political functions.

These broad categories have been labeled in many ways; for example, the terms *differentiated* and *undifferentiated* have been used, based on the degree to which the religious group is differentiated from the society as a whole. Sometimes it seems better to designate the natural, or undifferentiated, type of religious community as "folk" religion and, by contrast, to see the specific religious community as "universal" in character. Folk religion is part of the culture of a particular group of people and is not easily distinguished from all the other patterns and practices that define the culture. A universal religious group, however, tries to cross cultural and ethnic boundaries by assuming that all people everywhere can become members of its community.

The terms *specific* and *natural* are used in this article to name these groups, even though the latter term presents a problem of multiple meanings. Many presuppositions lie behind any use of *nature*, and most of these are irrelevant to their present use. One should not assume, for example, that natural religious groups are sociobiologically based in a way that specific groups are not. In fact, nothing that follows need be understood as affecting theories concerning the biological determination of human social behavior. All that is meant by the use of *natural* in this context is the identity of the religious community with those forms of social organization that are mostly inevitable in human life: family, clan, ethnic group, and nation.

Even though one is born into such social structures, initiation into "real" participation in the community is one of the signs that the social unit is also a religious community. At birth or puberty, or at both of these life passages, a cere-

mony such as circumcision or some act of consecration marks the official (or ontological) entrance into society. In many places such initiation is more marked for boys than for girls, although there may be rituals connected with the onset of menstruation. It is to be expected that gender, lineage, and comparable identifications will be more significant in natural religious groups than in others.

In natural religious groups the religious leaders or functionaries are generally the leaders of the society as a whole. It is rare, however, to find a community that does not also have its religious specialists, perhaps a shaman or medicine man, whose appearance and role depend on a special recognition that is not determined by "nature" in the sense used here.

It should also be noted that specific religious organizations may exist within natural religious groups. The primitive secret society is an example of such a group: it has its own dynamics as a voluntary group with special religious functions and rites apart from the society as a whole. Similarly, groups based on family, gender, ethnic background, and related natural factors may be found within or alongside specific religious communities or may even seem to merge with them. Men's fraternities are a common example of a gender-based grouping, and the practical identity (at least in former years) of Spanish background and Roman Catholicism is an example of the apparent merging of the natural with the specific religious community.

Humans face a special situation in the phenomenon of the nation as a religious community—special in that the basis of community is not necessarily "natural" in the way that it is for gender, family, or lineage. In a nation, unrelated peoples can be joined together, slaves or slave populations may be incorporated into the political unit, and foreigners may have a place in the society as merchants or mercenaries. When the nation is also a religious community, however, it typically develops a set of stories (a mythology) to make the diverse groups appear to be a family. It is not at all certain, for example, that the ancient Israelites were all descended from Jacob; but new tribes could be included by having their patriarchs included among Jacob's sons. Emphasis on the "natural" in this type of religious nation may also be seen in the Israelites' insistence on the number twelve (the names of the sons of Jacob vary, but they are always twelve in number); this probably reflects a desire to repeat in human society the pattern of the heavens: twelve lunar cycles within a single solar cycle.

To the Israelites and other ancient peoples, political and religious functions were indistinguishable. While in modern times people differentiate between religious and civil law, ancient lawgivers recorded both in the same codes and in the same manner. The king was political, military, and religious functionary in one. Society, nature, and the gods were all seen as part of one interrelated organism. This outlook led to such phenomena as blaming crop failure on the weakness or immorality of the king. The king was characteristically

seen as a god, the son of a god, or a representative and link from the heavens to earth and society.

This set of concepts is not entirely limited to the past. Some modern nations take on many of these characteristics (for some of their people) and thus become religious communities of a sort. Nations, both ancient and recent, have been known to cultivate epics of their origin, promote their peculiar concepts of the world, claim special connection with a god or gods, and link their success (or failure) to divine purpose. Not all of these nation-religions are generally recognized as such, but the Shintō tradition of Japan clearly exemplifies this phenomenon.

The religious and political dimensions of human life may be connected in another way as well, one that goes beyond the nation as a political unit. Islam, the most recent of the major religions, exhibits some of the characteristics of the very ancient natural religious community. It is based on the premise that the religious regulation and the civil regulation of life are to be derived from one source and litigated in one way. The international community of Islam thus presumes that a family of nations or peoples can be Muslim in law and belief. Some Muslim nations have begun to reject the notion of a secular government (i.e., one that is determined not by religious belief but by human deliberation) in favor of a religious government based on the Qur'ān. Although Islamic government of this sort does not necessarily have a kinglike figure or a theology of agriculture, in most other ways it is like the ancient nations, a natural religious community.

SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES. Specific religious communities are sometimes called "founded" religions because they have appeared within the scope of recorded history as the result of efforts of a particular person or small group. As noted above, this category could also be termed "universal," "differentiated," or "voluntary." Contemporary pluralistic societies include religious communities of this type, even though some characteristics of natural religious communities can be observed on occasion.

Sociologists of religion, mainly Westerners interested in Christian groups, have put most of their energies into analyzing specific religious groups. As the examination of the social dimensions of religion became a recognized scholarly discipline, the categories "church" and "sect" were developed to distinguish between religious communities. This terminology applied well to sixteenth-century Europe but was insufficient elsewhere. For America it was necessary to add at least the category "denomination." One widely used typology of religious groups that developed out of the earlier distinctions lists six major types of religious community: cult, sect, established sect (or institutionalized sect), denomination, ecclesia, and universal church. These categories were developed particularly with reference to the ways in which the religious community is integrated into the society as a whole and to a lesser degree with reference to the internal dynamics of each group or its theology. Nevertheless, these six types can provide a framework for understanding Christian communities

and can be applied with some adjustments to other religions as well.

The kind of group that is least involved in the rest of society is called a "cult." A cult may comprise barely more than the audience for a charismatic leader or healer. It is loosely organized; often it is small and short-lived. Its religious style is personal and emotional.

A "sect" is a religious community that is more clearly organized than a cult, that provides a great amount of religious value to its members (in terms of social relationships, ritual activities, ethical and doctrinal direction, and so forth), but that plays little role in the society at large. Taken to its extreme, a sect can form a completely separate miniature state either mixed into the society geographically or located in its own separate territory.

It is also possible, however, for a sect to move in a different direction and become more stable within the larger society. A sect so changed would be an "established sect," or an "institutionalized sect." In this situation the wider society's acceptance of the sect can be great even though the sect remains exclusive and self-centered. An established sect has lost its appearance of opposition to the rest of the society and other religious groups, but it remains doctrinally or theoretically exclusive.

At this point the "denomination" assumes its place in the six-type scheme as another type of Western religious community. It is the kind of group that maintains separate and distinct organization despite its acceptance of the legitimacy of other denominations or communities. It may conceive of itself as the best, but hardly the only, community in which adequate religious practice can be found. It is also relatively more involved with and accepted by the larger society.

Students of American religious communities have been struck by the tendency of each Christian sect and denomination to be made up of people from a single socioeconomic class. Furthermore, they note that a sect tends to become an established sect or a denomination and that as it does, the class composition of its members tends to change. Some of the characteristics of the transition from sect to its more established form or to a denomination are an increase in the members' and the institution's wealth; movement toward the center of the surrounding culture and away from criticism of it; less ridicule of other religious communities and more cooperation with them; less exclusion of potential members for being thought potentially unworthy; fewer casually prepared part-time leaders and more professionally trained full-time ministers; more concern for children and education; less emphasis on death and the next world and more attention to life in this world; and less spontaneity and emotion in worship and more use of hymns and texts from the liturgical traditions. The established sect and the denomination might be similar in most of these departures from the patterns of a sect, but the denomination has a different theology, while

the established sect, no matter how institutionalized or accepted, retains its exclusive and condemnatory thought and speech.

The next two categories, beyond denomination, represent the most established and, culturally and socially, the most prominent kinds of religious community. One has been called the "ecclesia" and consists of the established national churches, for example, the churches of England and of Sweden. The other is termed "universal church." It is as well established as the ecclesia but exists in many nations and cultures; the classic example is the Roman Catholic church of the thirteenth century.

One of the characteristics of the specific religious community as compared with the natural religious community is its voluntary character. Yet this characteristic is almost completely absent in the ecclesia and universal church and is of little importance in the denomination and the established sect. The sect is noted for its emphasis on conversion, a voluntary, adult decision to join the group. The more established churches, however, incorporate the children of members almost automatically into the community, thus operating somewhat like a natural religious group. Furthermore, kings and other political functionaries tend to become semireligious officials in the ecclesia and the universal church categories.

As noted above, most of the terminology used here has been derived from studies of Western Christian religious communities, but it can be applied to Eastern Christianity and other religions with some limited success. Sunnī Islam can be seen as a universal church; Shī'ī Islam in Iran can be seen as an ecclesia; other Shī'ī groups can be seen as sects or established sects, and so on. Eastern Christian groups are usually of the ecclesia type in their home countries and have had to shift character in order to be denominations in America. In Thailand and Sri Lanka, Buddhism has had ecclesia status; its role in China can be analyzed in various periods as taking the forms of sect, denomination, and so on—all this despite its essentially monastic structure.

It is more important in examining non-Western religious communities to note their patterns of internal relationships and their role in the larger religious tradition than to concentrate on their relationship to the state or society. In non-Western societies, the different mix of natural and specific groups must be considered, as well as the recent and incomplete phenomenon of secularity (the separation of civil from religious jurisdiction). For example, Hinduism is, for the most part, a natural religious community, but some associations within it are of the specific type. These groups (*sampradāyas*) select a certain god or family of gods, a certain style of worship, and certain temples from the whole range of Hinduism, and these elements become the basis for the group's religious life. Thus a community with its own leaders and priests emerges. This phenomenon has many of the characteristics of the denomination in its recognition of other (almost as good) practices and gods in Hinduism, but it is sec-

ularian in its lack of involvement with the society as a whole and in its governmental structures.

The different circumstances of non-Western religious communities can be understood better in terms and categories other than the six reviewed above. The following categories have been developed especially by anthropologists and ethnologists, and they help people to understand the subgroups within larger religious communities or traditions.

COMMUNITIES WITHIN COMMUNITIES. One large distinction that can be made within both natural and specific religious groups is that of "great" and "little" traditions. The professional leadership of a society or a specific religious community promotes a literate, fairly sophisticated, and often transcultural understanding and practice of its religion. The ordinary members of the group, however, may be imperfectly incorporated into this tradition. They may maintain some notions and practices from older religions or participate in the tradition in a way that is based on different media. These two strata do not form clearly separate communities but constitute a pattern in many countries.

On a much smaller scale there are other communal formations that can be found in both natural and specific religious communities. Prominent among these is the master, guru, or teacher with his following. This is the basic format of the cult as defined above, but it is also both a regular phenomenon in almost all religions as well as the point of origin for many new religious communities. The master with his disciples is an evanescent phenomenon. Beyond the first generation it must become something like a sect, pursuing a separate identity; it must institutionalize the master-pupil pattern in a more or less monastic structure; or it may do both (as does, for example, Buddhism). The model of the Hindu ashram or of the Muslim Ṣūfī shaykh with his disciples indicates a recognition of this kind of religious community in their respective traditions but without much regularization or institutionalization.

The monastic community is often to be found within larger religious communities. It may be defined as a group of people drawn from a larger religious community who live together for shorter or longer periods of time in order to cultivate religious techniques and disciplines. This inclusive definition can apply to secret societies or to men's groups within tribal societies as well as to the institutions prominent in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Islam displays a variation of this kind of community in the Ṣūfī orders.

Monastic communities may be at the center of their larger traditions, as in Buddhism. Here the monks may be the only leaders of the religious community and thus take on functions characteristic of priests and ministers in other traditions. Within Christianity, however, monasticism has been a supplementary pattern of religious leadership that exists alongside the priestly hierarchy. Often monastic communities as well as other subgroups have originated in a protest against prevailing practices or doctrines in the larger group.

When such a protest becomes estranged, a new religion is formed, but often the protest is institutionalized and becomes another option within the larger community.

Certainly the most common subgroup in any large religious community is the worshiping unit. This can be quite an independent group with little involvement in the larger tradition (such as the Christian "congregationalist" polity), or it can be a casual association of people whose primary communal identity is with the larger group (e.g., those Hindus who happen to be at the same temple at any given time). Pilgrimage to a certain shrine can give a very large community the sense of being essentially one worshiping group even when most religious practice actually takes place in various localities. Islam's concept of the *ummah*, with its *hājj* and orientation of prayer toward Mecca, is the most prominent example.

SEE ALSO Church; Cults and Sects; Excommunication; Expulsion; Jewish People; Monasticism; Religious Communities; Saṃgha; Schism; Secret Societies; Society and Religion; Ummah.

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