11

RELIGION, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

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Summary

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO
PONDER AS YOU READ THIS CHAPTER

- Does religion—and Christianity in particular—contribute to negative attitudes and discriminatory treatment of women?
- How can the meaning systems of religion contribute to gender equity and gender bias?
When examining the relationship among religion, gender, and sexuality, one confronts an interesting paradox. Religion is historically connected to sexism and gender inequality, and yet in most cases women exhibit higher levels of religiosity than men. Why would this be the case, and why would members of a group whose identity is stigmatized in most major religious traditions—the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) community—remain religiously active, oftentimes in religious communities whose teachings stigmatize them?

Women’s groups that are committed to changing gender roles and attitudes have often charged that religion perpetuates traditional role expectations of men and women. Historically, many groups have refused to ordain women—barring them from the major leadership positions in the religious group. A few denominations continue to maintain this position today. Studies have suggested that this is not only true of the established religious bodies; women have often been singled out and accused of sexual weakness, sinfulness, and impurity in the new religious movements (NRMs) as well (Jacobs 1987). Some pagan religious traditions, such as Wicca, have a much more positive attitude toward the feminine, with female gods and leadership positions for women. However, as John Hawley concluded, “Theological appreciation of the feminine does not necessarily lead to a positive evaluation of real women” (Hawley 1986:235). Moreover, religious ideas about gender and religious standards of sexual ethics have often influenced attitudes toward same-sex relationships. In the following pages, we explore the role of religion in sacralizing gendered behaviors and roles and in shaping attitudes toward LGBTQs.

To keep the scope of this chapter manageable, we again focus primarily on the relationship between Christianity and gender prejudice. Although the coverage is not comprehensive of all religious traditions, students should be developing skills in analysis and should gain a sense of how sociologists approach the issue for any religious tradition. We begin by exploring the empirical evidence about whether organized religion really does stigmatize women and legitimate male dominance.

**Gender and Religious Involvement**

We begin by documenting and explaining the higher levels of religious involvement among women. Table 11.1 on page 278 shows the gender difference in identification by religious tradition. The most heavily female religious traditions are the historically black churches and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The members of the largest religious traditions in the United States also are more than half women: Catholic (54%), Mainline Protestant (54%), and Evangelical Protestant (53%). Indeed, over three quarters of Americans belong to religious traditions in which the majority of members are women.
Table 11.1 Gender Composition of Religious Groups in the United States (by percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Share of Total U.S. Pop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historically Black Churches</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Unaffiliated</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Unaffiliated</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Men, by contrast, dominate among the nonreligious: atheists (70%), agnostics (64%), and secular unaffiliated (60%). Men are also the majority of members in the major non-Christian traditions in the United States: Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu.

Beyond religious affiliation, women also exhibit higher levels of religiosity than men across a number of measures. As Table 11.2 shows, in terms of religious participation, women attend religious services weekly at a 22% higher rate than men and pray at least daily 62% more than men. Women also report 30% higher levels of belief in God and 300% lower levels of atheism. All of these differences are considerable, and they hold true across almost all religious affiliations (and non-affiliation). In addition, D. Paul Sullins found similar gender differences in religiosity in over 65 countries, suggesting this is not a uniquely American phenomenon (Sullins 2006).

There is no definitive explanation for this gender difference in religion. Some argue that differential gender roles explain the gender gap in
Religion (Levitt 1995). Women are responsible for child rearing, so the argument goes, and this encourages greater religious affiliation and involvement. Although it is true that parenthood has a positive effect on religiosity, the effect of parenthood on religiosity is stronger for men than for women; parenthood alone does not fully explain the gap. Others argue that not being in the labor force gives women more free time for attention to faith issues. This is also partially true. Full-time employment does have a negative effect on religiosity, but the gender gap persists even when controlling for women’s employment status. In other words, women who work full-time are more religious than men who work full-time.

In the next two sections, we consider two other ways of understanding the gender gap in religion: a more cultural approach that focuses on the “feminization” of religion and an approach grounded in a rational choice perspective that focuses on the relationship between religion and risk tolerance.

### Feminization of Religion

Although women were viewed for centuries as spiritually more vulnerable to sin and corruption than men and as a source of evil influence, an interesting shift occurred in the United States in the 19th century. As opposed to the sternness and harshness of 18th-century American Christianity, the sentimentality of the 19th century was clearly more “feminine” in tone. Barbara Welter, who referred to this as the “feminization of American religion,” wrote, “When... a more intuitive, heartfelt approach was urged, it was tantamount to asking for a more feminine style” (Welter 1976:94). Welter pointed out that the most popular hymns written at that time stressed passive and accepting roles. Such hymns as “Just As I Am, Without One Plea,” “To Suffer for Jesus Is My Greatest Joy,” and “I Need Thee Every Hour” illustrate a pattern in hymnody of exalting dependency, submissiveness, and a willingness to suffer without complaint as Christian virtues. These were also viewed as feminine characteristics and as feminine virtues in 19th-century American culture. In contrast, the ideal characteristics of the male were embodied in the aggressive, independent, self-sufficient industrialist. This transformation of American religion was perhaps most noticeably seen in the imagery of Jesus. In the 18th century, he had been viewed as the stern taskmaster and as the exalted ruler of God’s kingdom. In the 19th century, the major characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender Differences in Religiosity (by percentage) and Gender Gap</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows God exists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t believe in God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prays at least daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never prays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends worship services at least weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes part in other religious activities (beyond worship) at least monthly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Authors’ calculations from 2006–2012 General Social Surveys.
attributed to Jesus were loving self-sacrifice, tenderheartedness, and willingness to forgive those who injured him.

Given the mixed signals that men were receiving about masculine and Christian virtues, it is not surprising that male church attendance dropped off and religion came to be viewed as a woman’s concern. As depicted in almost any popular novel or sermon of that day, women were more spiritual, more noble, and more generous than men. As Welter put it, “Womanhood was believed to be, in principle, a higher, nobler state than manhood, since it was less directly related to the body and was more involved with the spirit; women had less to transcend in their progress” (Welter 1976:95). Religion also came to be viewed as less rational (Ruether 1975). Rationality was associated with science, technology, and industry—all of which were male-dominated spheres. Women came to be viewed as more religious than men and as the transmitters of morality but still not as highly rational. The clergy, who were still almost entirely male, were sometimes viewed as naive, unknowing, and incapable of understanding business practices. As religion was feminized, the leaders of the church were also attributed with feminine virtues and vices (Ruether 1975).

Although women came to be seen as more spiritual, this happened at a time when religion was having decreased influence on the affairs of the world. Commerce and politics were increasingly secular and governed by principles of secular rationality. At the very time when women were being identified with religiosity, religion was being demoted to a less influential position in society. In fact, the feminization of religion may have occurred precisely because religion was being dislodged from direct access to political power; it was becoming identified as a concern of the home, the hearth, and the individual. This loss of social power was equated to taking on a more feminine role in society. To state it in its most negative form, to be religious was to be unknowing, lacking in power, and guided by naive sentimentality rather than by realism and reason. The stereotypes of women as irrational and emotional had remained constant, but the role of religion in society—and hence its image—had changed significantly from its image prior to the 1800s.

Research from the 1990s indicates that persons—male or female—who have more “feminine” value orientations (valuing feelings and expressiveness) tend to rate higher in various measures of religiousness than persons of either sex who have more “masculine” (instrumental) orientations. In fact, gender orientation in one’s values is a better predictor of religiousness than is the sex of the person (Thompson 1991). At least in the contemporary United States, religion continues to have feminine overtones, despite the fact that it has often been less than sympathetic to women.

Critical Thinking: Do the faith traditions with which you are familiar have more feminine than masculine values—stressing cooperation, support, nurturance, and relationships as central, rather than competition and individualistic achievement? If so, does this explain why fewer men affiliate and attend services?

Religion and Risk Tolerance

Sociologists Alan Miller and John Hoffman developed a rational choice explanation for the higher levels of religiosity of women relative to men that focuses on risk aversion. Recall that the basic premise of the rational choice perspective is that in making decisions people try to minimize their costs and maximize their benefits. In terms of deciding whether to engage in religious practices, one of the potential benefits of being religious is the possibility of a better next life, and one of the potential costs of irreligion is the possibility of eternal damnation. From this perspective, irreligion is risky behavior. Because women have a lower tolerance for risk than men,
this approach argues they are more religious (Miller and Hoffman 1995).

Much of the research in this area since the original statement of the theory has focused on trying to understand the origins of risk tolerance and aversion. Not surprisingly, the major competing explanations are nature and nurture, biology and socialization. On the side of nature, Miller and Stark tested socialization explanations of gender differences in risk preference and concluded that “physiological differences related to risk preference appear to offer the only viable explanation of gender differences in religiosity” (Miller and Stark 2002:1401). This position argues that men have a biological propensity for risk taking owing to higher levels of testosterone.

Others have focused on nurture, examining how socialization processes could lead to a gender difference in religiosity. One promising line of explanation is based on what is known as “power–control theory” (PCT). PCT was originally developed to explain gender differences in propensity to engage in risky behavior—such as committing crime. PCT maintains that variations in the social control of sons and daughters within a household are linked to risk preference and behavior outside the household. In more patriarchal households, daughters are more subject to social control than sons, and so sons develop more preference for risky behavior than daughters. In more egalitarian households, there is less of a gap in the risk preference between sons and daughters, just as there is less gender-based difference in the freedom or control of children.

Jessica Collett and Omar Lizardo applied PCT to the gender difference in religiosity and found, in line with PCT, that gender differences in religiosity are greater for individuals raised in “traditional” (patriarchal) households than those raised in more gender-egalitarian households. They also found that women raised in more egalitarian households tend to be less religious than women raised in more patriarchal households (Collett and Lizardo 2009). These findings suggest that there could in fact be a connection between the socialization of women into risk tolerance or aversion that affects their subsequent levels of religiosity.

Although the gender difference in religious commitment is one of the most consistent findings in the sociology of religion, we still have no solid explanation for it. The explanations previously given have been suggested but not definitively confirmed. Socialization explanations for the gender difference and the connection between risk preference and gender have both been challenged (Freese 2004). In the end, this remains a finding in search of an explanation.

Critical Thinking: Do religious affiliation and behaviors by women seem to you to be more about female risk aversion (fear of consequences), or does socialization seem to be the better explanation for gender differences? Why? Which explanation best takes into account the fact that male involvement is higher than that of females among Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus?

SEXISM IN THE RELIGIOUS MEANING AND BELONGING SYSTEMS

As we noted at the outset, one of the interesting paradoxes we encounter when examining religion and gender is women’s higher levels of religiosity despite the historical connection between religion and sexism.

One might expect George Kelsey’s thesis that racism and Christianity are incompatible (explored in Chapter 10) might apply to sexism and Christianity as well. After all, Christian theology has stressed that one’s worth is founded not in one’s chromosomes but in one’s relationship to God. Basing one’s sense of self-worth on gender rather than on skin color would seem to be no less a form of idolatry. Indeed, logic would seem to require such a position. However, the history of sex bias is much longer than that of
racial bias. Sexism is not a modern phenomenon; it is deeply rooted in the religious and philosophical traditions of the Western world. Sexual differences have been viewed as creations of God, and sexual inequality has frequently been viewed as God-ordained.

Hence, the meaning system has often reinforced both definitions of gender (concepts of “masculinity” or “femininity”) and gender roles (tasks designated as “women’s work” or “men’s work”). Because inequality based on a person’s sex is so much a part of the history of the Western world, it is appropriate that we briefly explore sex-role attitudes in Western philosophical and religious thought. Obviously we can only scratch the surface in the space we have here, but it is instructive to note some of the views held at various points in history by influential religious and philosophical thinkers and by religious bodies.

A Historical Overview of Gender Attitudes in Western Christianity

Because of the increase of women theologians and biblical scholars, more attention has been given in the last four decades to gender role and gender assumptions in the biblical tradition. Familiarity with the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic has allowed feminist scholars to find patterns that were previously overlooked. For example, the Hebrew language has two different words that have commonly been translated as *man*. One of these words, *'adhám*, is a generic term that refers to all of humanity. The other word, *'ish*, refers specifically to males. Because both terms have been translated into English as *man*, some of the subtle implications are lost in translation of biblical verses. The passage in the first chapter of Genesis that says that God created man is written with the term *'adhám*. Hence, it should read “God created humanity in his own image, male and female God created them.” Here the scriptures are less sexist than some people assume when they are limited to English versions (Bird 1974; Trible 1979).

Elsewhere it is clear that the scripture was written for males, as in the books of law (Bird 1974). The legal code is divided into apodictic law (moral commandments) and casuistic law (case law). The apodictic law is written primarily to men in that the literary voice and the examples are relevant to males. The Tenth Commandment provides a good example: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” Not only does the passage specify *wife* rather than the more general term *spouse*, but the wife is included in a list of property that was owned exclusively by men. Furthermore, the Hebraic second-person pronoun, which we translate as *you*, had masculine and feminine forms (similar to the way our third-person pronoun has masculine and feminine forms: *he* and *she*). In the Ten Commandments, as in most of the apodictic law, the masculine form of the second-person pronoun was used. Note as another example the audience that is being addressed in Exodus 22:22–24: “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do . . . then your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.” The intended audience, in much of the Bible, was clearly male.

Similar assumptions are part of the casuistic law, in which punishments for committing prescribed acts are spelled out. Most casuistic law begins with the formula “If a man does X, then . . .” However, the term *man* here is the masculine term *'ish* that is used. In those instances in which laws were articulated for women, they often served to remind them of their inferior position. Women were defined as unclean during their menstrual period and were unfit to enter the temple for 7 days after the birth of a son and for 14 days after the birth of a daughter. Such contamination was not normally associated with the natural bodily processes of men.

Of course, attitudes toward women are not consistent in the Hebrew Bible (called the Old Testament by many Christians), for it was written...
over a period of many centuries and contains many types of literature. The book of Proverbs, for example, depicts women as sources of great wisdom. There are also ancient stories about women, such as Ruth, Esther, and various women in the Book of Judges, that depict women as strong and courageous. Still, the overall effect of the Hebrew Bible is that women are subordinate.

Even much of the symbolic action is limited to males; the primary symbolic act that represents the covenant with God is circumcision. Hence, only men could be ritually inducted into the cov- enanted community of God’s people. Clearly, there were elements of intrinsic sexism in the early biblical period. Such attitudes are taken particularly seriously today by those Christians who accept the totality of the Bible as literally true.

Christian thought has, of course, been more than just a continuation of ancient Judaism; historically, it represented a synthesis of Hebrew and Greek worldviews. Many of the early theologians drew heavily from Greek philosophers. The Greek tradition was actually more explicitly sexist than was Hebrew culture. Aristotle’s biological and political sciences, for example, depicted free Greek males as the embodiment of rationality. Such rationality was to be the ruling force in the good society, and the “spirit people” (males) were obligated to subjugate the “body people”—slaves, barbarians, and women (Ruether 1975).

Furthermore, Aristotle taught that every male seed should normally produce its own image in another male. Females were the result of an accident or aberration in the womb in which the lower material substance of the female womb subverted and warped the higher characteristics of the male. Women, clearly, were viewed as defective human beings (Ruether 1975).

Even before Aristotle, Plato and other thinkers maintained that reason and affectivity were mutually exclusive and were associated with good and evil, respectively. Moreover, reason and spirituality were identified with males; emotion and the natural world were associated with females.

This sort of dualistic worldview is characteristic of nearly all philosophical systems in classical Greece. Religious historian Rosemary Ruether sees the problem as hierarchical dual- ism, an outlook that divides all of life into two distinct realms, one of which is higher than the other (this world/other world, darkness/light, carnality/spirituality, emotion/reason) (Ruether 1975). Ruether maintained that this sort of dualism is universally associated with sexist thinking (Shields 1986). Women are invariably associated with the “lower” processes and with worldliness. Women are viewed as the cause of passion and are believed to be preoccupied with it; furthermore, they are identified with worldly creation because of their biological function in childbirth. Ruether insisted that dualistic thinking—in which the empirical world is defined as evil and the spiritual world is viewed as good—has an inherent sexist bias.

Ruether maintained that much of the sexist bias in Christian history comes from the Greek, not the Hebrew, legacy. She wrote that, unlike Christianity and Greek philosophy, “Hebrew religion, especially in its preexilic period, is a religion of alienation that views nature as inferior or evil” (Ruether 1975:187).

The New Testament Gospels depict a much more positive view of women (Parvey 1974; Ruether 1975). Jesus himself violated many of the gender role taboos of his day. He allowed women to join his traveling group (Luke 8:1–3) and encouraged them to sit at his feet and learn (traveling and studying with a rabbi were viewed as very improper for women in that day). Jesus disregarded a number of gender taboos of his day (Mark 5:25–34; Matthew 9:20–22; Luke 8:43–48; John 4:27). He frequently contrasted the faithlessness of the religious leaders with the profound faith of poor widows and outcast women. In that day, unattached women were considered suspect and were to be avoided. His comments would certainly have been insulting and sacrilegious to many people (Luke 4:25–29).
Jesus taught that the role of the faithful was one not of glory and fame but of service. He capped his ministry by washing the feet of his disciples, a task normally assigned to women or servants, and at the time of his greatest disappointment outside the gates of Jerusalem, he described himself as feeling like a “mother hen”—an interesting analogy because of its feminine connotation.

The New Testament epistles are more ambivalent regarding gender. Some people have a view of Saint Paul as one of the world’s worst misogynists. He ordered women to obey their husbands, he told them not to speak in church, and he held to the old Hebrew belief that women serve men and only men could serve God. Much has been written on these passages; they are frequently used today in some congregations and denominations to reinforce traditional roles. However, there are numerous references to women preachers who were sent by Paul or who accompanied him. In actual practice, he did not prohibit women from leadership roles. He also asserted that in Christ, “There is neither male nor female,” a statement affirming egalitarian values.

The ancient Greek view that women are defective humans found its way into the Christian New Testament. The Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation) describes the procession of the redeemed as a company of virgin men “who have not been defiled with women.” Women were viewed as lesser beings who were not capable of being saved and might even interfere with men being saved.

Still, it was Paul who emphasized so heavily the sin of Adam and Eve, and he believed that the responsibility for original sin lay with Eve. The implication is that women are an easier mark for the forces of evil. Interestingly, the idea that Eve introduced original sin is discussed only in the first few chapters of Genesis; it is never mentioned again in the Hebrew Bible. Yet, centuries later this was to become a major theme in the teachings of many Christian evangelists and theologians. Tertullian, one of the early Christian leaders, picked up on this theme and continually reminded women that each one of them was an Eve, “the first deserter of the divine law” (Bullough 1973:114). At a much later time, Martin Luther also emphasized that a woman was responsible for the Fall. Although he generally opposed ridicule of women in public, he did on one occasion follow his comments on the story of humanity’s Fall with the directed observation, “We have you women to thank for that!” (cited in Bullough 1973:198). So it was that the Adam and Eve story became a much more important justification of misogyny in Christian history than it ever was in the ancient Hebrew tradition.

Saint Augustine, a theologian who has influenced Christian thought for centuries, held to the Platonic view that passion was evil and that the sexual act lowered humans to the frenzied and unthinking level of beasts. So appalled by passion was Saint Augustine that he held the male erection to be the essence of sin. Moreover, if an erection was the essence of sin, it was clear who was responsible for causing it: women (Ruether 1974a). This sort of projection of sexual lust on women and a general view of women as temptresses were common among Christian theologians (Bullough 1973).

This sort of sexism has been integral to the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church for centuries (Schoenherr 2002), and continued in the Protestant Reformation. It can be seen in the writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and other prominent reformers. In fact, The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women was published by John Knox (the founder of Presbyterianism) in 1558 and stands to this day as one of the most misogynistic statements in Christendom. Moreover, the removal of Mary as a primary religious figure of adulation left Protestantism without a major saint or model who was female (Douglass 1974; Ruether 1975).
Critical Thinking: There are strong anti-female images and rules in both Christianity and other faith traditions, but there are also affirmations of the dignity of all children of God. How important is the meaning system in creating and preserving gender inequality? Why?

Religious Belonging Systems and Gendered “We” versus “They” Thinking

When members of conflicting ethnic or racial groups also belong to different religious groups, the likelihood of religiously based prejudice increases. However, in the industrialized world, men and women are not segregated as happens with race. Men and women are members of the same families and the same religious organizations. Hence, it might seem that “we” versus “they” distinctions would not occur. Nonetheless, these distinctions are often given sanction in religious groups. Among Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, men and women sit separately during worship. The same pattern has prevailed among certain Protestant groups in the United States, such as the Shakers and the Old Order Amish, and among the Eastern Orthodox in places like Greece. Such religiously sanctioned segregation of the sexes would seem to reinforce “we” versus “they” distinctions that are part of the larger culture. The nature of belonging is shaped by one’s gender, male or female.

Beyond the issue of gender segregation, informal norms within the religious community may cause people to adhere to prejudicial attitudes in order to feel accepted—regardless of the position of the clerical hierarchy or of official denominational theology. To feel included—a sense that one belongs—one may feel compelled to laugh at jokes about someone out of the “proper” gender role. The penalty for ignoring the informal, unwritten standards is social exclusion; the reward is a sense of belonging. The official positions of the denomination—which may downplay gender difference and gender roles—frequently lack such immediate and concrete reinforcements. Hence, the informal culture of a local congregation and the desire to belong may be more important in shaping attitudes than the group’s formal or official doctrines.

The belonging function of religion, then, may foster sexist attitudes in several ways. Insofar as the religious outlook stresses the fact that males and females are utterly different, the sense of “we” versus “they” may be heightened, and the sense of belonging may be tied to sex group rather than to faith community. This may lead to suspicion and prejudice. Beyond this, the informal community that provides the sense of belonging may have informal norms that foster sexism. This leads to the next major way in which religion may enhance sex bias—the formal organizational structure itself.

Religion and Institutional Sexism

Perhaps the most vexing problems of religious prejudice toward women lie in institutional patterns—the structural dimension of religion. After a study of Christianity and Islam, Bullough concluded, “Regardless of what a religion teaches about the status of women, or what its attitudes toward sex might be, if women are excluded from the institutions and positions which influence society, a general misogyny seems to result” (Bullough 1973:134). We have already seen that denigration of women became part of the theological system (meaning system) of Western Christianity. This would be less likely to have occurred if women had been in positions to formulate and shape the official theology of the faith community. For this reason, denial of ordination becomes a significant issue. Furthermore, as long as a significant distinction is made between clergy and laity and as long as the clergy are looked up to as leaders, as those most in tune with God and as the...
legitimate messengers of God, the denial of ordination to women affirms their inferior position among the “people of God.”

**Ordination of Women**

Many women scholars have seen ordination of women as a key issue: “By this exclusion the church is saying that the sexual differentiation is—for one sex—a crippling defect which no personal qualities of intelligence, character, or leadership can overcome” (Daly 1970:134; see also Ruether 1975). When the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) refused to ordain African Americans—a policy in place until 1978—it was widely recognized as a statement about the inferiority of black people. Yet, some of the same denominations that were critical of the Mormons have opposed ordination of women. In this latter case, the argument that denial of ordination was a statement of inferiority was vigorously denied. Theologically trained women who have sought ordination have not found the denial convincing. Furthermore, the lack of women in leadership positions can subtly influence attitudes, especially of small children. The absence of women in important positions often communicates to children—much more vividly than any words to the contrary—the social inferiority of females.

The reasons for exclusion of women from ordination are noteworthy. Some scholars trace this exclusion back to Saint Paul who, in keeping
with the contemporary attitude toward women, wrote that women were not to speak in church. However, he did not vigorously follow that policy himself, and he stressed that gender was unimportant “in Christ.” At least one historian has traced the original restriction on ordination to Constantine. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, it came under some of the cultic attitudes then prevalent. Specifically, religious leaders were to maintain ritual purity. Because women were viewed as unclean at particular times of the month because of menstruation, they were unfit for ministry (Cox 2009; Ruether 1975). Because males dominated the priesthood and formulated the theology, women were continually defined as unfit. In fact, in the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas adopted Aristotle’s view that women are defective males—biologically, morally, and intellectually. Hence, he reasoned that only men could fully represent Christ (the perfect human being) in the ministry. Such a rationale would not likely have occurred if women had been part of the hierarchy all along.

Interestingly, although the Catholic Church does not ordain women as priests, many of the most active members of Catholic parishes are women, and women “religious” (“nuns”) have long played a key role in Catholic life (Fialka 2003). Even more dramatically, in some small parishes today, where the church cannot supply a priest, women sometimes act as functional equivalents of priests at the local level. Indeed, Ruth Wallace found that in some Catholic churches, these women are called “pastor” (Wallace 1992). Given the declining number and advancing age of Catholic priests in the United States, if the church continues to deny ordination to women, there may be more and more women acting as de facto leaders of their Catholic congregations (Schoenherr 2002).

Most major denominations now ordain women, and the official pronouncements of most churches reject sexism and endorse equality for women at all levels. There is also a willingness by rather large majorities of members of congregations to have a female minister (Lehman 1980). Despite all this, few theologically trained women are receiving appointments to large congregations. They continue to be placed in positions as assistant ministers, as directors of religious education, or as the sole minister in small, struggling congregations that have very low salary scales.

If the official position of these church hierarchies is that women are equally competent and should be placed in positions of leadership, why is this not happening? The answer seems to lie in the inherent biases and goals of complex organizations.

The Organizational Survival Impulse and Women Clergy

Once an organization is in existence, it tends to take on characteristics and needs of its own, the most important being viability. If the organization is to survive, it must mobilize and control critical resources: the financial support of members; the skills, time, and energy of members; and so on. However, in such voluntary organizations as churches and temples, people must be convinced rather than coerced into compliance. Members who are not convinced can simply withdraw their support from the organization.

Although Edward Lehman’s research on American Baptist and Presbyterian churches indicated that a majority of church members had no objection to having a woman minister, many believed that other members were opposed to having a woman pastor. The primary concern was that having a woman as minister would cause controversy and conflict, and such conflict might result in members leaving the church or withholding financial support. Because this sort of action could threaten the continuation of the entire organization, the controversy is studiously avoided. In virtually all churches, the pulpit committee or search committee is elected from representative areas of the church life. In almost all cases, the members of the committee are
chosen from among the most active members in the church—people who have made an investment in the church and care about its health and survival. Hence, pulpit committees normally have a built-in bias to avoid anything that might threaten its vitality or viability—including conflict (Lehman 1981, 1985, 1987a, 1987b).

In a follow-up study, Paul Sullins has argued that conflict-aversive behavior is more severe in religious communities than in other types of organizations. The reason for this is that faith communities are more like families than they are like typical bureaucratic organizations—with sensitivity to feelings of others and concerns about not alienating anyone being a core value of the organizational culture. This makes churches, temples, and mosques more change resistant than most organizations, despite what their meaning system may say about equality of treatment (Sullins 2000).

Although the official position of the denomination may encourage local congregations to accept women in positions as senior pastors, organizational concerns regarding viability often play against that. The local congregation is simply more interested in promoting and maintaining its cohesiveness and stability than in responding to denominational resolutions. The needs of the structural system trump the proclamations of the meaning system.

In the 21st century, ordination of women and the frequency of women clergy lag far behind the involvement of women in other professions, such as law and medicine. While the ratios of men to women in law and medicine and ministry were very comparable up until 1970, there are now significant gaps. Roughly 34% of lawyers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009) and 32.3% of physicians and surgeons are women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006); by contrast women are only a bit more than 10% of the clergy (Chang 1997). Women are the primary ministers of about 8% of congregations, while roughly 5% of American Christians attend a congregation led by a woman (Faith and Leadership 2010). While the numbers vary considerably by denomination, women clergy in virtually every denomination still lag behind the numbers of women in most other professional fields, and they rarely are appointed senior pastor of a large church. In a recent analysis, Mark Chaves has offered an insightful analysis, one that is consistent with our open systems model (Chaves 1997).

Open Systems, Comparison Communities, and Religious Gender Roles

Chaves discussed ways in which outside forces may shape or have inputs into decision making in religious organizations. Chaves started with the issue of legitimacy of organizations in a society:

> [W]hen an organizational practice or structure becomes commonly understood as a defining feature of a “legitimate” organization of a certain type, organizational elites feel pressure to institute that practice or structure. If there is a cultural norm that says “In order for an organization to be a good organization, it must have characteristic X,” organizations feel pressure to institute characteristic X. (Chaves 1997:32–33)

The more an organization is assimilated into the mainstream of the society, the more pressure it experiences to conform to the norms of other legitimate organizations and corporations. When the larger society did not stress gender equality and when patriarchy was the norm, it was often the more avant-garde or more sectarian groups that violated social expectations by recognizing women as ministers; the mainstream faith communities conformed to the patriarchal model. Of course, in the 19th century, ordination of women even among sectarian groups was not linked symbolically as a statement of gender equality as it is now. Sectarian groups simply did not care about credibility in the eyes of the secular society. The mainstream religious groups did.

As greater gender equality has become the norm, there is greater pressure on organizations
that care about legitimacy in the dominant secular society to accept women as equals. This would cause us to predict a greater likelihood of ordination of women among Unitarians, Congregationalists (the United Church of Christ), United Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Reconstructionist and Reform Jews than among more sectarian or isolationist groups. This is indeed what the evidence shows. As ordination has come to symbolize a secular principle (gender equity), the sectarian groups have become more resistant to it, and mainline groups have become more open.

One reason that ordination and numbers of active female clergy lag behind other professions is the role of the state. Discrimination against women can be prohibited by the state in the fields of medicine and law. By contrast, Chaves wrote, “Religious organizations, as a population, are slower than other types of organizations to institute formal gender equality because of their greater autonomy from the state” (Chaves 1997:42). In Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, where the state church is run by the government, sex-based restrictions on ordination were banned by the parliaments. In the United States, where there is a separation of church and state, ordination of women has occurred mostly during one of the two great waves of the women’s movement: the first beginning with the Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 (peaking in the 1880s) and the second beginning in the 1960s (hitting full stride in the 1970s). Indeed, more denominations began to ordain women in the 1970s than during any other decade in the previous 40 years. The cultural climate of the larger society involved “inputs” into the cultural and structural system of religious communities, even if the government was not mandating it. Indeed, even in denominations that oppose ordaining both genders, the terms of the debate have changed so that women’s inferiority is no longer an acceptable argument. The women’s movement has changed the grounds for the debate even in those associations that resist female clergy (Chaves 1997).

Furthermore, most denominations think of themselves as similar to certain others; they tend to form alliances and even formal organizations of denominations. Denominations or local churches that are very evangelical or fundamentalist do not generally use the United Church of Christ or the PCUSA as models of how to do things. Indeed, the more liberal denominations are often vilified and used as anti-models by very conservative groups. Chaves suggested that in very broad terms we can identify three sorts of Christian religious organizations that look to one another as comparison communities:

1. mainstream liberal denominations (United Church of Christ, PCUSA, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, American Baptist, and the majority of groups that belong to the National Council of Churches),
2. scriptural inerrancy churches (Southern Baptist, Church of God, Assemblies of God, Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, and virtually every other group that belongs to the National Association of Evangelicals or the Council of Bible Believing Churches), and
3. sacramentalist churches (predominantly Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, but to some extent Anglican, Episcopalian, and Lutheran).

When they adopt new policies, denominations often do research on other churches; however, their search is often limited to churches “like” themselves. Thus, groups seek credibility in large measure in relationship to other groups in the same general family. Even if their histories are quite different in origin and organizational style, religious communities are aware of their kinship with other groups that share much in the way of theological outlook.

An issue, then, is the symbolic meaning of ordination of women within a denomination. For scriptural inerrantist churches, literal reading of certain selected passages of the scripture has defined what
is or is not acceptable, and ordination of females is interpreted to be beyond the pale. While many of those passages could be interpreted in several ways, faith communities tend to be influenced by the interpretations of kindred groups. Indeed, a number of Christian denominations that believe strongly in the inerrancy of scripture—but that are not highly integrated into the fundamentalist denominational subculture—do ordain women and have done so for more than a century (Evangelical Covenant Church, Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army, Church of God—Anderson, and Pillar of Fire). They simply focus on different scriptures that stress gender equality, believing that the churches prohibiting ordination of women are out of line with scriptural teachings. Most inerrantist churches, however, have defined ordination as unbiblical, with the central issue being that to be a Christian is—in their eyes—to be antimodernist (Chaves 1997). Those fundamentalist religious bodies that do ordain women typically began doing so in the 19th century—before the matter was defined as an issue of gender equality (a secular and therefore modernist theme).

Sacramentalist churches have historically insisted that the person distributing the elements in the mass or Eucharist (communion) is symbolically in the role of Christ and therefore must be “like” Christ. Now there is no compelling reason that gender must be the defining feature of being “like” Christ, since each person has many qualities that are quite unrelated to her or his sex. However, the Catholic Church has defined sex as highly salient, and other Christian groups with sacramental leanings have tended to follow the lead of the Vatican. As one bishop said during the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1992, “A woman priest is as impossible for me to have a baby” (quoted by Chaves 1997:88). Indeed, Chaves believed that sacramentalism has historically been characterized by a measure of antimodernism, and since gender equality is a key element of modernism, rejection of that symbol of modernism becomes an affirmation of orthodoxy. The fact of the matter is that churches that deviate from the expected norm within a family of denominations may be threatened with a kind of “excommunication” from that family of churches. The pressures on denominations from other denominations are sometimes quite overt, as when the Roman Catholic Church has made it explicit to other sacramentalist religious organizations that ordination of women would destroy any prospects of ecumenical union in the future (Chaves 1997).

A key element of Chaves’s analysis is that we cannot understand ordination of women as solely an internal decision within a denomination. It is influenced by “inputs” by the larger society (norms about the conduct of business within legitimate organizations) and by pressures from comparable religious groups. Most ordinations of women occurred during one of the two major waves of women’s rights activism, demonstrating the influence of secular social movements within religious social systems (Chaves and Cavendish 1997). As open systems theory would predict, any organization exists in dynamic interaction with its larger environment.

The current trend (at least as it is expressed in the official resolutions of most major denominations) is in the direction of ordaining and appointing clergywomen. Some denominations continue to deny ordination to women, the most notable example being the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. The first Protestant denomination in North America to ordain women was the Congregational Church (now called the United Church of Christ) in 1853 (Chaves 1997). The first African American group to ordain women was the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church in 1898 (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). The last three U.S. Protestant denominations to ordain women were the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1976, the Reformed Church in America in 1979, and the Christian Reformed Church in 1995. As we have seen, however, even in those denominations that have been more aggressive in endorsing ordination of
women, clergywomen have a hard time gaining positions in larger churches, unless they settle for an assistantship or a directorship of religious education. The problem is not one of outright prejudice as much as one of organizational goals and assumptions taking precedence over other considerations. In short, the church has been guilty of institutional sexism. Clergywomen have encountered an “invisible ceiling” that limits their opportunities. The ceiling is invisible because it is an indirect result of policies and attitudes within the church.

One fact is highlighted by this exploration of institutional factors: Religion is both a world-view (set of beliefs, attitudes, and outlooks) and an institution in society. Understanding religious behavior can never be limited to one or the other. As organizations in society, religious bodies are often influenced by purely organizational considerations. In many ways, the organizational considerations take precedence. Hence, a strictly philosophical analysis of belief systems can never provide anything more than a partial analysis of religious behavior. It is precisely the interplay between social forces and belief systems that fascinates the sociologist of religion.

The central theme of this unit thus far has been that Christianity has often contributed to sex bias through its meaning system, its belonging system, and its institutional structure. Many denominations are currently trying to reverse these trends, but the countervailing forces of gender inequality are deeply embedded. Still, the empirical question remains regarding the connection between the outlooks and policies of religious organizations and the values and perceptions of individual members of those organizations. Further, some women intentionally join groups that appear to be oppressive to them. These create intriguing questions for sociologists.

**Critical Thinking:** How can religious organizational structures combat gender inequality while simultaneously contributing to it?

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**RELIGION, INDIVIDUAL GENDER ROLE ATTITUDES, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE**

The Catholic Church officially has remained steadfastly opposed to the ordination of women, and yet the majority of individuals who identify as Catholic support women’s ordination (Baggett 2009; D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gruhier 2013; Dillon 1999). This suggests that sexism in the teachings and the institutional practices of churches, temples, and mosques may not simply translate to sexist attitudes in individual members. In fact, over the past half-century or more, attitudes toward traditional gender roles have changed dramatically throughout the world, but especially in Europe and the United States (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Voci 2009).

How this overall change relates to religion and religiosity is a question sociologists continue to investigate. We have much less empirical research available on the connection between religion and gender attitudes of individual members than we have on religion and racial attitudes. Most of the studies available contrast the religiously affiliated with the unaffiliated, or they compare gender role attitudes between denominations. Nonetheless, researchers have turned up some interesting findings over the years.

In spite of the broad shift in the direction of more egalitarian gender ideologies, religion remains a strong predictor of traditional sexist gender ideologies. That those who are active members of particular faith communities are the most sexist has been documented in the 1970s (Mason and Bumpass 1975; McMurry 1978), 1980s (Hertel and Hughes 1987; Petersen and Donnenwerth 1998), 1990s (Gallagher and Smith 1999; Gay, Ellison, and Powers 1996), 2000s (Bang et al. 2005; Hoffman and Bartkowski 2008), and 2010s (Whitehead 2012).

Although some studies indicate that conservative or evangelical Christians are increasingly
negotiating gender role expectations (Bartkowski 2001; Gallagher 2003), they continue to subscribe to the most traditional gender ideologies (Bang et al. 2005; Denton 2004). By contrast, active members of liberal denominations like the United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church, and Presbyterian Church USA are more supportive of gender equality.

Related to this is the connection between particular religious beliefs and gender ideologies. Those who believe that their holy scriptures are the literal word of God and/or without error (“inerrant”) are more likely to hold traditional gender role attitudes (Chaves 1997; Denton 2004; Whitehead 2012). In an interesting study of a little understood ethnic group in the United States, Jen’nan Ghazal Read found that both Arab American Muslims and Arab American Christians who believed in scriptural inerrancy scored higher on her gender traditionalism scale (Read 2003). Another recent line of work looks at the effect of different “images of God” on individuals’ attitudes and actions (Froese and Bader 2010). Among the images that are included in survey studies are active, distant, critical, angry, and loving. A less examined image of God is as a “He.” Andrew Whitehead has recently explored the relationship between a masculine image of God and traditional gender ideologies using data from the Baylor Religion Survey. Recalling Geertz’s definition of religion in Chapter 1, Whitehead observed:

Cultures containing religions that worship a “male” God are influenced by the “moods” and “motivations” created by . . . religious symbols that legitimate and perpetuate social inequality. (Whitehead 2012:143)

He in fact found that the more strongly individuals held a masculine image of God, the more traditional were their gender role attitudes. Masculine image of God was a stronger predictor than either Biblical literalism or religious practice.

Online Resource: Paul Froese and Christopher Bader argue strongly for the explanatory power of people’s different images of God in their book, America’s Four Gods (2010). On the website of the Association of Religion Data Archives, Froese and Bader have made available additional information about the images of God idea, as well as an interactive “God Test” (thearda.com/whoisyourGod/index.asp). Click on “The God Test” link, and you will be asked a series of questions about yourself and how you imagine God. When you complete the test, you will see your results as well as a comparison between your views and those of others.

Perhaps not surprisingly, women—who stand to benefit more from gender equality—hold more egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Whitehead 2012). Despite this, some women intentionally join faith communities that have high boundaries between men and women and seem to offer limited options for females. This in itself is intriguing, and we look at it more closely in the next section.

Critical Thinking: How is religiously based differentiation similar in the cases of racial and sex-based inequality? How is it different?

Negotiating Gender Barriers in Religious Communities

Of course, social reality is more complex than closed-ended surveys of religion and gender role attitudes can capture. Several scholars have used qualitative research methods such as ethnography and open-ended interviewing to understand in greater depth the process by which women negotiate gender barriers in organized religion. Women are not simply pawns of patriarchal religious
leaders but actively engage conservative religion in a way that leads them to find personal fulfillment and empowerment.

Lynn Davidman sought to understand why young, secular women—women who have come of age since the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s—would choose to convert to Orthodox Judaism, a tradition with very restrictive gender roles for women. To do so, she immersed herself in the lives of those she wanted to understand by joining a Hasidic community in Minnesota and an Orthodox synagogue in New York City. In addition to this participant observation, she also formally and informally interviewed over 100 women who were turning to Orthodox Judaism (Davidman 1991). The title of Davidman’s book based on this study, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*, captures her main argument: Orthodox Judaism is attractive to women who feel a lack of fulfillment in the contemporary world and seek to become grounded in an ancient tradition. Part of that grounding is in the clarity of the gender roles Orthodox Judaism provides, but that combines with the rootedness of those roles in long-established religious traditions and family life. This contrasts with the gender role confusion in contemporary secular society and the emptiness of working life in the modern corporate world.

Following Davidman’s work, several scholars interviewed conservative Protestant women about their understanding of the subservient role of women in their religious traditions’ theology and practices. In *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (1998), Brenda Brasher reported on her ethnographic study of women in two conservative Protestant churches in Southern California. Like Davidman’s converts to Orthodox Judaism, these fundamentalist women (also largely converts) were seeking refuge from a secular world in which the competing demands of work and home were often overwhelming. Fundamentalist teaching offered some relief to these women by providing clear dictates to focus on the domestic sphere. The women responded to their exclusion from formal positions of power by erecting a “sacred wall of gender” behind which they created single-sex ministries that ultimately became sites of empowerment for them. They were able to develop supportive bonds and exercise leadership in the women-only settings.

That sacred wall of gender is writ even larger in *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (2000). R. Marie Griffith’s two-year-long ethnographic study of Women’s Aglow Fellowship International—the world’s largest interdenominational evangelical women’s organization. In observing this sex-segregated organization, Griffith found that when it was at its best, the women experienced considerable psychological healing, satisfaction, and even transformation from the group processes of prayer and testimony.

Christel Manning’s research covers some of the same ground as the previous studies but has the advantage of putting women in conservative religious traditions in a comparative frame. Manning spent two years observing conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish women in three Los Angeles–area congregations. In each case, the women in these patriarchal religious traditions see themselves not as victims, but as active agents in defining gender roles for themselves (Manning 1999). Catholic women are excluded from the priesthood, but they look to the many women saints in the Catholic tradition as role models for their own leadership. Evangelical Protestantism strongly professes the submission of women to men, but the Protestant tradition also emphasizes the individual relationship of each believer to Jesus Christ, which can be used to justify women’s empowerment. Likewise, Orthodox Judaism requires sex-segregated worship in the synagogue, but it gives women a central role in the domestic rituals that are so important to the Jewish tradition. In the end, although they would never accept the label, the women Manning studies are in certain ways feminists. Indeed, one of Manning’s points is that in the contemporary
United States, even patriarchal religious traditions must engage feminist ideas, since these ideas have become mainstream. The negotiation of gender and religion takes place in every religious tradition, as is shown in the next “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature. The bottom line is that we cannot simply assume a mechanical relationship between patriarchal religious teachings and the acceptance or interpretation of those teachings by individuals, especially in the American context where voluntarism is strongly emphasized.

Illustrating Sociological Concepts

Is Veiling Oppressive to Muslim Women?

As the number of Muslims in American society has increased, so has the visibility of the traditional veil (known as a hijab in Arabic). In a society that values clothing as a form of personal expression and individuality—indeed, even as a right—the veil is profoundly countercultural. Because only women are required to veil in Islam, it is seen by some observers to be an oppressive means of controlling Muslim women.

Recent research in the sociology of religion, however, has called into question outsiders’ view of the hijab. Scholars are taking seriously the experiences of Muslim women who choose to veil, and their findings are quite surprising.
Women in fundamentalist Muslim societies are separated from men (except for fathers and brothers) in work and in worship, and they generally remain covered. When they come to North America, the women are often accustomed to the practices and continue with them in the new country. Purdah, meaning curtain, refers to practices of seclusion and separate worlds for women and men. Screens in households and veils in public enforce female modesty and prevent men from seeing women who are not part of their families (Ward and Edelstein 2006).

Today, some Muslim women argue that the headscarf they wear is for modesty, for cosmetic purposes, or to protect them from stares of men. They see it as a statement of identity as a Godly person and as a protection against intrusion by men. It is often a way to negotiate between the ethnic identity of their parents and the open, free, and sexually promiscuous society around them. It becomes a symbol of transition and dual identity, with some feeling that wearing a hijab is part of their free expression at the same time it expresses their moral standing.

Interestingly, Williams and Vashi also found that the style of wrap around the head, the material and color of the scarf, and the way it drapes over shoulders becomes a “fashion statement.” So while some people claim that the veil is a symbol of oppression and subservience, Orthodox Muslim women often do not experience it the same way (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Knickmeyer 2008; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Williams and Vashi 2007).

**Critical Thinking:** So far in this chapter, the focus has been on ways that religion might be a causal or contributing factor in gender inequality. However, religion may sometimes simply be the arena in which larger social conflicts are expressed and justified. In this case, religion is primarily a reflection of conflict rather than a cause. A number of scholars feel that this perspective is more helpful in understanding the witch-burning craze of Europe, which you may explore on the website for this book at www.SAGE.com/rsp6e. Which causal sequence—religion as cause of bigotry or religious attitudes as effect of other social conflicts—seems more plausible to you? Why?

**Religion and Sexuality**

A number of commentators have noted that homophobia (intense fear and hatred of homosexuality and homosexuals) is related to sexism, for homophobia is highly correlated with and perhaps a cause of traditional notions of gender and of sex roles (Shaw and Lee 2005). Homophobia, a concept from the discipline of psychology, suggests that fear or hatred of gays and lesbians is a personality trait or even an abnormality (Weinberg 1973). Heterosexism, a more sociological concept, is the notion that the society in many ways reinforces heterosexuality and marginalizes anyone who does not conform to this norm. Heterosexism focuses on social processes that sacralize heterosexuality and define LGBTQ people as deviant (Gender Equity Resource Center 2013; Oswald 2001; Wilcox 2003).

Most established religious groups have had a strong assumption about the normality of heterosexuality. Marriage is sanctified by ceremony in all major religious groups, but it has only been recently that some denominations have even openly debated the possibility of officially authorizing weddings for gays and lesbians. Regardless of whether we focus on psychological or sociological approaches, same-sex marriage and ordination of LGBTQ persons have become hot issues in faith communities, threatening to split some denominations.
Religious Divisions Over Homosexuality

The liberalization of Americans’ attitudes toward homosexuality in the past half-century has been dramatic (Loftus 2001; Saad 2012). Most Millennials today have no memory of a world in which consensual same-sex sexual activity was illegal and police would raid bars to arrest people who were cross-dressing (Carpenter 2012). Yet acceptance of LGBTQ people is far from universal even today. At the extreme end is the 20.8% of hate crimes in 2013 that were based on sexual orientation. This is the second highest category, next to racial hate crimes at 48.5% (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2014). More mainstream, however, is the 50% of the American population who believe that homosexual behavior is sinful (see Table 11.3).

The dominant story, then, is growing overall acceptance of homosexuality along with considerable polarization in attitudes. The polarization is strongly associated with religion, and also exists on a global scale as discussed in the “Global Perspectives” feature.

Global Perspectives

Religion and Heterosexism Cross-Nationally

As in the United States, the liberalization of laws governing same-sex marriage globally is quite recent. According to the Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life Project (2015), at the beginning of 2015 there were 18 countries (out of 196 in the world) that allowed same-sex marriage nationwide. The Netherlands was the first country to grant marriage equality (in 2000), and Scotland and Luxembourg are the most recent (in 2014). Five countries in the Southern Hemisphere allow same-sex marriage: Argentina, Brazil, New Zealand, South Africa, and Uruguay.

In the vast majority of the world, therefore, heterosexism prevails. Some societies ignore or deny the existence of LGBTQ members of their national communities. Some consider them to have psychological illnesses or forms of depraved immorality. Some societies even consider these forms of sexuality a crime. This is true in 38 out of 54 African nations today (as it was in most of the United States during much of the 20th century). In the worst case, to be accused of homosexuality can result in the death penalty in Sudan, Somalia, Mauritania, and the northern part of Nigeria (Nossiter 2014).

The status of homosexuality in nations around the world is heavily influenced by the extent of religiosity in those countries. In fact, one study of 39 countries by the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project (2013) found a correlation of −0.78 between level of religiosity and acceptance of homosexuality (where 1.00 is a perfect correlation). The negative correlation means that as one variable goes up (religiosity), the other goes down (acceptance of homosexuality).

The dominant religious group in these societies matters also. Muslims overwhelmingly believe that homosexual behavior is morally wrong, including 99% of Muslims in Thailand and Cameroon, 98% in Ethiopia, 97% in Ghana and Lebanon, and 96% in Jordan and Kenya (Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life 2013).

By contrast, historically Catholic countries in Western Europe are among the most accepting of homosexuality. Only 19% of Italians, 14% of French, and 6% of Spaniards say it is morally
Since 1973, the General Social Survey (GSS) has asked: “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex . . . do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?” In 1973, 70% of respondents answered always wrong, and only 10.8% answered not wrong at all. By 2008, only a minority answered always wrong (49.8%), and over one third said never wrong (35.9%). This trend has continued through the most recent year of the GSS available: Almost equal portions of the U.S. population say that homosexual activity is always wrong (43.4%) and not wrong at all (41.6%). There is a significant difference, however, in attitudes toward homosexuality by gender. In 2012, 48.6% of men held that same-sex sexuality is always wrong, and 48.3% of women answered that it is not wrong at all (Smith and Son 2013).

There are also strong age and cohort effects in attitudes toward homosexuality. In every year of the GSS, younger respondents are more accepting than older respondents. In 2012, 53.1% of those 18 to 34 thought that homosexual behavior is never wrong, and 62.6% of those 65 and older said it is always wrong (Smith and Son 2013). Even though older generations of Americans are also becoming more liberal in their views of homosexuality, Millennials and GenXers are still more accepting of LGBTQ people than are Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation (Pew Research Center 2014a).

The key division in attitudes toward homosexuality that concerns us here, of course, is religion. As Table 11.3 on page 298 shows, there is significant variation by religious tradition. Nearly 8 in 10 Buddhists and Jews agree that homosexuality should be accepted by society, compared to fewer than 3 in 10 Muslims, evangelical Protestants, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. About half as many mainline Protestants as evangelical Protestants see homosexual behavior as sinful, despite the fact that they draw on the same religious tradition. Although the data are not as complete, the second column of data in this table highlights the clear connection between seeing homosexual behavior as sinful and not accepting homosexuality in society.

Mainline Protestants are more likely to be theological liberals. They tend to assume that homosexuality is an inborn trait, and so the issue is one of prejudice against persons for a characteristic that is immutable. Evangelical Protestants (as well as black Protestants) are more likely to be theological conservatives. They tend to see homosexuality as a behavior that is acquired through socialization, and therefore as a choice that has moral implications. The positions themselves are interesting in that they reverse the assumptions liberals and conservatives tend to make about gender and social roles. Conservatives are more likely to posit that gender is innate and inborn, whereas liberals argue that gender and the social roles associated with each gender are learned.

In any case, religious conservatives tend to see liberal notions about homosexuality and gender roles as a threat to the viability of society and as clear debasement of the moral social
order. By contrast, liberals often feel that sexuality within a committed relationship is not a moral issue at all. Indeed, it is lack of tolerance of other lifestyles that liberals deem morally reprehensible.

These liberal–conservative differences between different religious traditions can also be seen within traditions. For example, the official teaching of the Catholic Church is that homosexuality is “objectively disordered” and that LGBTQ people should refrain from sexual activity (as should anyone who is not married). This view is supported by organizations of lay Catholics (not members of the church’s official hierarchy). Two examples are Catholic Answers (catholic.com) and the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (catholicleague.org), both of which seek to explain and defend the Church’s teachings on all issues including sexuality. In contrast are groups of lay Catholics like New Ways Ministry (newwaysministry.org) and DignityUSA (dignityusa.org), both of which challenge those teachings by advocating and providing a safe haven for LGBTQ Catholics. As Michele Dillon observed in her study of Dignity, these Catholics remain faithful to a religious organization that marginalizes their sexual identity by using the Catholic tradition itself to critique the tradition’s teachings (Dillon 1999; see also Baggett 2009).

Table 11.3 Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Groups in the United States</th>
<th>% agreeing homosexuality should be accepted by society (2008)</th>
<th>% who say homosexual behavior is sinful (2014)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>ND (No Data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholics</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestants</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestants</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestants</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormons</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTE: The Pew Research Center did not publish data for attitudes on homosexuality as sinful for every religious group.
Among the many religious groups marching in the Washington–Capital Pride parade in 2014 were LGBTQ Mormons, despite the fact that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officially teaches that homosexual behavior is sinful.

Rather than fighting for a place within existing denominations, some gay and lesbian Christians have opted to establish their own denomination: the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC). The UFMCC, which has 172 local congregations in 37 countries, is a “gay/lesbian positive” church that affirms homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle for Christians (mccchurch.org). See the next “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature for some history of this denomination. One study conducted on a UFMCC congregation in New York found that gays and lesbians who are affiliated with this church have exceptionally positive personal adjustment; they are more likely to have an integrated self-concept both as gay people and as religious people (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000).

ILLUSTRATING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Origins and Development of the Metropolitan Community Church

One of the hallmarks of American religion, according to R. Stephen Warner, is that it is a locus of individual and group empowerment. Religious involvement, he writes, “has historically been one way that groups have improved their lot” (Warner 1993:1068). Warner goes on to observe that “the gay liberation movement is itself a practitioner of the art of church-based (Continued)
mobilization” and that the Metropolitan Community Church is “the organizational center of the attempt to legitimate gay culture in the United States” (Warner 1993:1068–1069).

The Metropolitan Community Church began in 1968 with a gathering of 12 people in Reverend Troy Perry’s living room. Perry had pastored Pentecostal churches in Florida, Illinois, and California. Then in the early 1960s, Reverend Perry was defrocked as a minister by a Pentecostal denomination. The issue was that he is gay. He spent several years struggling to reconcile his commitment to Christianity and his sexual inclination.

Some years later he had a bout with depression—a deep despair in which he questioned the very meaning of life. In that context, his religious faith was unable to help him. After recovering from a nearly successful suicide attempt, he began to experience a renewed sense of his own spirituality. When a friend was arrested as part of a familiar pattern of police harassment in gay bars, his friend commented that no one, not even God, cared for gay and lesbian people. Perry was inspired by this incident to mobilize a church that served the homosexual community. He writes that “God wanted me to start a new church that would reach into the gay community, but that would include anyone and everyone who believed in the true spirit of God’s love, peace, and forgiveness” (Perry 2010). This was to be not a gay church but a Christian church.

Given the individualism and independence of the LGBTQ community, his friends were skeptical that anyone would come. Further, the longstanding hostility of the Christian church to gays and lesbians created a huge barrier—for many people felt they could not be LGBTQ and a child of God. Still, many members of that community had grown up in religious homes, and the liturgy and hymns of Christianity were a deep part of their memories and their identities.

The first worship service in 1968 was deeply moving to those who came, and the gatherings grew. In less than three months, the attendees had tripled—too many for his residence. The worshippers had come from many traditions, and the services needed to appeal to their childhood traditions, but the diversity meant that they could not be limited to one particular faith community. Perry developed a synthesis of prayers, hymns, and liturgies drawn from Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Lutheran denomination resources. Still, Perry believes it was not the mechanics of worship that drew people, but the authenticity for the feeling of worship and the deep sense of belonging that was compelling in the lives of the new members. Perry commented, “People came out of the shadows, out of the closets, out of the half-world. They were drawn to the Metropolitan Community Church. For what? Some were curious. Some were incredulous. We were new. We were a novelty. We were an item in the gay world. . . . We excluded no one. We welcomed everyone. We still do.” Indeed, roughly 20% of the membership is heterosexual.

The new movement was so novel that it got a good deal of press within the LGBTQ community, and in 40 years the group has expanded to 43,000 adherents and 300 congregations. It is a vivid example of a denomination being created in response to experiences of rejection and stigma—similar to other ethnic religious communities.

Religious people who are LGBTQ and members of theologically more conservative religious traditions tend to experience less sense of integration in their self-identity. One way that conservative Christian gay men have attempted to reconcile these competing identities is through ministries that counsel them on how to change (or at least restrain) their sexual orientation (Wolkomir 2006). This is sometimes called “sexual reorientation therapy,” “conversion therapy,” or “gay cure.” Tanya Erzen conducted an ethnographic study of one such organization: New Hope Ministry, a residential “treatment” center in California. She found that individuals who completed the program experienced a sort of religious conversion in terms of strengthening their Christian identity, but did not often have less same-sex attraction (Erzen 2006).

Given the marginalization of sexual minorities in most religious traditions historically and many religious traditions today, it is not surprising that nearly half of LGBTQ people opt out of religion altogether. In Chapter 6, we highlighted Zuckerman’s finding that those whose sexuality is non-normative (homosexual, bisexual, transgender, etc.) are more likely to become apostates (Zuckerman 2012). A survey of a representative sample of LGBTQ adults in 2013 found that 48% of all LGBTQ adults are unaffiliated, compared with just 20% of the U.S. adult population as a whole (see Table 11.4). The difference is even more dramatic when looking at those aged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Groups in the United States</th>
<th>% of LGBTQ Adults</th>
<th>% of All Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist/Agnostic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in Particular</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic, Black, Other, or Mixed Race Protestant</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Faith</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTE: Totals do not add to 100 due to rounding.
18 to 29. Of LGBTQ young adults, 60% are unaffiliated, compared to 31% of all young adults. For every other religious tradition except “other faith” and Judaism, LGBTQ adults are underrepresented relative to the adult population (Pew Research Center 2013).

In recognition of this alienation of LGBTQ people from religion, some Christian denominations have taken more positive steps to be officially hospitable and supportive. These movements go by various names: More Light (Presbyterian), Open and Affirming (United Church of Christ and Christian Church), Reconciled in Christ (Lutheran), and Reconciling Ministries (Methodist). Official numbers are hard to come by for some of these traditions, but, for example, the More Light Presbyterian (MLP) website (mlp.org) lists 192 member churches in the United States that affirm the MLP mission statement:

Following the risen Christ, and seeking to make the Church a true community of hospitality, the mission of More Light Presbyterians is to work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and in society.

This represents just under 2% of the 10,038 PCUSA congregations in the United States. Similarly, only 649 United Methodist congregations (or 2% out of more than 30,000 congregations) are part of the Reconciling Ministries Network within that tradition (rmnetwork.org). A little over 5% of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations (550 total) are “Reconciled in Christ” (ReconcilingWorks 2015). The United Church of Christ was not only the first to have an open and affirming policy; it has the most congregations (1,235 or 23% of UCC churches) opting for being Open and Affirming (Schuenemeyer 2015). The UCC was also the first Christian congregation, in 1972, to intentionally and openly ordain a LGBTQ clergy person (www.ucc.org/lgbt_about).

Although just a small percentage of congregations within these denominations officially align with these LGBTQ-friendly movements, many more attempt to be welcoming on their own. Data from the National Congregations Study (NCS) allow us to see the pattern of change in acceptance of gays and lesbians at the congregational level from 2006–2007 to 2012. (The wording of the questions in the NCS does not allow us to comment on views of individuals who identify as bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning.) As Figure 11.1 shows, over this brief five-year period, the percentage of congregations in the United States that would permit an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship to be full-fledged members increased by 28% to nearly half of all congregations (48%). The 26.4% of congregations in 2012 that also allow these couples to hold any volunteer leadership position in the church represents a nearly 50% increase in five years (Chaves and Anderson 2014).

As Chaves and Anderson note, however, not all congregations are accepting of gays and lesbians. Liberal Protestant churches have the highest rates of acceptance of gays and lesbians as both members (76%) and volunteer leaders (63%). Conservative Protestant churches have the lowest levels of acceptance: 24% for membership and just 4% for church leadership positions. Catholic parishes fall in between these two other traditions, but also show a pattern contrary to the overall trend. In 2006–2007, 74% of Catholic parishes accepted gays and lesbians as members, and 39% accepted them as volunteer leaders (Chaves and Anderson 2014). Five years later, the proportion of parishes dropped to 53% for members and 26% for volunteer leaders—a reduction in openness. Chaves and Anderson speculate that these declines could represent an organizational backlash against the spread of legal same-sex marriage in the United States during this period of time.

As we noted in the beginning of this section, attitudes toward sexuality (heterosexism) are related to attitudes toward gender (sexism).
Whitehead explores this connection at the organizational level by analyzing the 2006–2007 wave of the NCS. He finds that whether a congregation would allow an “otherwise qualified . . . woman . . . [to be] the head clergyperson or primary religious leader of your congregation” is a significant predictor of whether the congregation accepts gays and lesbians as members or leaders within the congregation (Whitehead 2013). While half of congregations that allow women to be leaders accept gays and lesbians as members, only one quarter of congregations that do not allow women to be leaders do so. The difference is even more dramatic for acceptance of gays and lesbians as volunteer leaders: 32% of congregations that allow women to be leaders compared to just 7% of congregations that do not (Whitehead 2013).

The relationship between the nature of congregational leadership and sexuality suggests a further division between and within various religious traditions: whether clergy themselves must be heterosexual.

**LGBTQ Clergy Controversies**

One of the most controversial issues in several mainline denominations is over ordination of gays and lesbians as ministers. A divide between the Global North and Global South countries has arisen on this issue within some denominations. For example the election of a gay clergyman as bishop in 2003 caused a major schism, with congregations in the United States and Canada breaking away to form a new...
denomination and African leaders in that denomination deciding to sever their communion with the mother church (discussed below) (Anglican Church in North America 2015; Zaimov 2013).

A Gallup poll taken in the late 1990s already showed a shift toward acceptance of homosexual clergy by the majority of Americans: 53% approving in 1996 as opposed to 36% in 1977 (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). Nonetheless, in most religious traditions, the issue of ordaining openly practicing LGBTQ individuals as clergy is a nonstarter. This is true of Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Even in a more moderate tradition like United Methodism, the official position of the denomination is to deny ordination to “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”

In those denominations in which LGBTQ ordination has been considered, controversy has raged. The case of the PCUSA is instructive here. The ordination issue among Presbyterians focuses on what is called the “fidelity and chastity amendment” to the Book of Order passed in 1996. This amendment addresses sexually appropriate behavior for ministers, insisting that clergy must either be faithful within heterosexual marriages or remain celibate in singleness. Four times since 1997—including a 373 to 323 vote in June 2010—the PCUSA General Assembly (the denomination’s highest legislative body) has voted to repeal the ban on noncelibate homosexual clergy. In each of the first three instances, a majority of individual presbyteries (associations of congregations in a geographic area) did not ratify the General Assembly vote, and so the old standard remained in place. In the case of the 2010 vote, a majority of presbyteries approved. As a consequence, nearly 300 congregations have left the PCUSA, many of them affiliating with the more conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) or the newly formed ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (eco-pres.org).

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has become the largest Protestant body in the United States to ordain noncelibate gay clergy (Goodstein 2010). Its path to this position was many years in the making. The denomination appointed a task force in 2001 to study the issue and debated the issue over the following eight years before voting in 2009 to allow noncelibate but monogamous gays and lesbians to be ordained. In July 2010, the first seven LGBTQ Lutheran ministers were welcomed onto the denomination’s clergy roster and approved for service, though the decision to hire individual clergy is left to the congregation. In 2013, another major development came when the openly gay Rev. Dr. R. Guy Erwin was elected bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA. These decisions have not come without some cost to the denomination. In the five years from 2009 to 2013, 675 ELCA congregations disaffiliated from the denomination (out of nearly 10,000 total congregations). As in the Presbyterian Church, a coalition of theologically conservative Lutheran churches have formed a new denomination—the North American Lutheran Church—in response (recall our discussion of schisms in Chapter 8).

In the Episcopal Church, an even bigger step was taken when in 2003 the Right Reverend V. Gene Robinson—an openly gay Episcopal priest—was consecrated as bishop in New Hampshire. This created great controversy. Some Episcopal congregations and even some dioceses have withdrawn from the denomination and the worldwide Anglican Communion (the global network of Anglican ecclesiastical groups with which the Episcopal Church has a long-standing connection) and have also rebuffed the liberal U.S. church. African Anglican bishops were especially upset by the decision, and many have severed ties (Harrison 2007). The Episcopal Church has not faltered in its support for Bishop Robinson, however, and in 2009 yet another diocese elected the Reverend Mary Glasspool to be their next bishop, believing that her openly lesbian identity was irrelevant. That appointment was approved by a majority of dioceses in the
United States, and she was consecrated as the bishop for the Los Angeles diocese in May 2010. Churches and dioceses that have been displeased by the decision and have left the Episcopal Church have usually affiliated with the conservative Anglican Church of North America.

Religious Divisions Over Same-Sex Marriage

A seemingly logical extension of acceptance of homosexuality is the granting of LGBTQ people the same rights as heterosexuals. The biggest and one of the most contested areas of change here has to do with same-sex marriage. Although same-sex marriage is legal in many countries (including the Netherlands, Spain, Canada, Norway, and Argentina), in the United States, jurisdiction on this issue resides with individual states. Therefore, the issue has been debated and decided on a state-by-state basis, beginning with the decision of the Supreme Court of Hawaii in 1993 that laws denying same-sex couples the right to marry violated their constitutional rights to equal protection under the law (a decision overturned by the voters of Hawaii in 1998). Alaska had a similar scenario in the 1990s. In 2004, following a state supreme court ruling, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to allow same-sex marriage. As of the beginning of 2015, 37 states and Washington, D.C., are issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Although the majority of these states (24) have same-sex marriage by court decision, 8 have adopted it through their state legislatures (Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont), and 3 by popular vote (Maine, Maryland, Washington).

The same patterns we saw with respect to acceptance of homosexuality in society, we see in terms of attitudes toward same-sex marriage. The overall trend is toward greater support for same-sex marriage, especially among women and younger cohorts, though the American populace remains quite divided (Emerson and Essenburg 2013). The GSS is again instructive here. Beginning in 1988 it asked respondents how they felt about homosexual couples having the right to marry. In 1988, only 10.9% of American adults agreed or strongly agreed that they should have the right, while 68.9% disagreed or disagreed.
strongly. By 2012, support had grown to 48.4%, and opposition had fallen to 38.7%. Indicative of polarization, the two most common responses were strongly agree (24.9%) and strongly disagree (24.7%) (Smith and Son 2013).

Although every age group is becoming more liberal in its attitudes toward same-sex marriage, change in the youngest cohorts has been particularly dramatic. According to the GSS, in 1988 only 13.2% of young adults (aged 18–34) agreed or strongly agreed that LGBTQ citizens should have the right to marry. By 2012, this had increased by almost fivefold to 61.7% (Smith and Son 2013).

As with views of homosexuality generally, religion is a significant predictor of attitudes toward same-sex marriage. According to the Pew Research Center, 77% of the unaffiliated, 60% of white mainline Protestants, and 57% of Catholics favor same-sex marriage, compared to just 31% of black Protestants and 21% of white evangelical Protestants. For all of these religious traditions, support for same-sex marriage has increased since 2001 (Pew Research Center 2014a).

The legal expansion of the right to same-sex marriage and the growing popular support in certain quarters has made the issue of performing marriage ceremonies an issue in some churches. Marriage is sanctified by religious ceremony in all major religious groups, but only some religious bodies officially sanction weddings for same-sex couples. Most of the nation’s largest denominations (e.g., Roman Catholicism, Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, Mormon Church) define marriage as between a man and a woman. However, a growing number of smaller denominations have begun to allow same-sex weddings. The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations sanctioned them in 1996 and the United Church of Christ began to perform same-sex marriages in 2005. Both the Conservative Jewish movement and the Reform Jewish movement sanction same-sex marriages. At their general assembly in 2014, members of the PCUSA voted to allow their clergy to perform same-sex marriages, making the denomination one of the largest to sanction them.

Of course, just because a denomination does not allow its clergy to perform these ceremonies does not mean that its clergy do not do so. Another aspect of the United Methodist Church (UMC) controversy has centered on ministers who have performed holy unions (a commitment ceremony for gays or lesbians that is similar to a marriage ceremony). A number of ministers have been performing these ceremonies, and the UMC’s official position is that a clergyperson can be defrocked from the ministry for doing so.

Further, whether the national denomination officially sanctions same-sex marriage or not, many denominations face internal structural divisions. The UMC illustrates this as well. The governing document for the UMC states that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” This statement has been used to prevent same-sex marriages and ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. After the church’s national legislative body voted to keep that line in church policy, the West Coast regional organization issued a statement of “Gospel Obedience” that, in keeping with Christian faith, the West Coast Methodist church would act as though that policy “does not exist.” Thus, same-sex marriage is affirmed by Methodists in at least one region of the country (Western Jurisdictional Conference 2012). Methodists in southern states, in particular, are outraged by this stand. One study has found that religious affiliation and religiosity continue to be powerful predictors of public opinion about same-sex marriage, so the position of one’s denomination does seem to play a role in attitudes (Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Whitehead 2010).

A helpful perspective on this issue is the open systems analysis. Open systems theory says that religious organizations influence society (in this case, creating more traditionalism and therefore more resistance to homosexuality) and that the larger society influences the religious group.
Chaves argued that attitudes toward gender issues are shaped by other similar denominations; each denomination looks around to comparable others to see what is defined as acceptable in those denominations (Chaves 1997). From this point of view, very conservative organizations are less likely to change because the other conservative denominations serve as “comparison communities”; however, the PCUSA’s recent change in its policies may well have a liberalizing effect on the United Methodists since they tend to see themselves as similar. That the PCUSA moved toward a more open policy after the United Church of Christ is not surprising as liberal Presbyterians tend to see the Congregationalists as a comparison community.

Moreover, attitudes in a local community or a region of the country would be expected to influence attitudes within a congregation—irrespective of the positions of the official denomination (Koch and Curry 2000). People living in a local community are in regular contact with neighbors, friends, and coworkers, and the attitudes of those community people are likely to shape outlooks of those within a religious community. In addition, many new recruits to a congregation involve people whose views were shaped—prior to their joining the faith community—by local customs. One study that sought to test this open systems proposition found that most resolutions to the Presbyterian synod seeking to restrict sexual behavior to heterosexuality come predominantly from congregations located in religiously conservative regions (Koch and Curry 2000). People living in a local community are in regular contact with neighbors, friends, and coworkers, and the attitudes of those community people are likely to shape outlooks of those within a religious community. In addition, many new recruits to a congregation involve people whose views were shaped—prior to their joining the faith community—by local customs. One study that sought to test this open systems proposition found that most resolutions to the Presbyterian synod seeking to restrict sexual behavior to heterosexuality come predominantly from congregations located in religiously conservative regions (Koch and Curry 2000). Likewise, we could predict that regions of the country with more liberal attitudes are more likely to have “Open and Affirming” or “More Light” congregations.

While this chapter has focused on gender and sexuality issues within the Christian tradition, the same sorts of issues face many religious traditions. For example, Mary Jo Neitz (2000) and Helen Berger (1999) found that some American spiritual communities within Wicca were highly focused on heterosexual tension and attraction, emphasizing the polarity and complementarity of the genders. So even Wicca has sometimes assumed the normality of heterosexuality and provided a sacralization of such relationships. However, one of the major annual celebrations of Wicca has undergone significant change in the past decade as homosexuality is becoming more visible and more accepted within the movement (Neitz 2000). Some Wiccan covens are exclusively female, and lesbian relationships have come to be more normalized. All religions experience influence due to inputs from trends and issues in the larger society.

Critical Thinking: How is hostility toward LGBTQs similar to, and how is it different from, negative attitudes toward women? Do you think homophobia contributes to sexism? Is it fair to say that religion sometimes fosters heterosexism and homophobia? Why or why not?

**Summary**

Although the ways Christianity fostered racism were for the most part subtle and indirect, Christianity has encouraged sexism much more directly. Except for the most liberal churches and temples in the United States, traditional images of women are correlated to high levels of congregational involvement and religiosity. Christianity has contributed to inequality and stereotypes of women in a variety of ways. First, women have been conceived as subordinate citizens in the meaning systems of most religions and philosophies of the Western world, and Christianity is no exception. Second, we–they thinking is sacralized in some religious communities, and informal norms of the community that communicate women’s inferiority may actually trump official statements of the denomination or the theology. Finally, formal institutional concerns, such as concern for maintenance of the health and vitality of the local congregation, can predispose lay leaders against having a
clergywoman. When women are not ordained and in leadership positions, there is a greater likelihood that the meaning systems will develop with a strong bias against women. The fact of the matter is that ordination itself has become a symbol of modernity, for equal treatment of women is increasingly expected—defined as rational behavior—in secular organizations; this adds pressure for ordination of women on those religious groups that want legitimacy in the eyes of secular institutions. By contrast, antimodernist groups reject the idea precisely because it symbolizes modernism.

One cannot make generalizations about Christianity as a whole on any of these characteristics. Some Protestant Christian groups, for example, have been remarkable for their lack of sexism. The Shakers believed in a female Christ figure (Mother Ann Lee), and the Christian Scientists were founded by a female charismatic leader (Mary Baker Eddy). One also cannot conclude that sexual segregation of men and women into monasteries and convents in the Roman Catholic tradition was always bad for women. It did allow for leadership roles otherwise denied to women. The foregoing discussion should serve to illustrate the complex way in which any given religious body can have countervailing influences. This is precisely why the sociologist who studies religion is not satisfied with an investigation only of the beliefs of a religious group. Religion can influence human behavior in a variety of ways. Just as gender equality has become a hot issue, so has homosexuality become a tinderbox. The questions of ordination of gays and lesbians and performance of sacred ceremonies to celebrate same-sex marriages divide some denominations and local congregations. Religions have historically sanctioned only heterosexual conduct and commitments. As the society comes to see this as discriminatory, conflict reigns in many groups. Some denominations now ordain gay and lesbian clergy, and some support same-sex marriage, or at least holy unions. Clearly, religious values and behaviors are intertwined with social conditions in the larger society. Moreover, religious organizations affect secular ones, and secular organizations influence religious ones: The causal connection runs in both directions.