11 Institutions II: Politics and Government, Religion, and Health

John Moore/Staff/Getty Images

Chapter Outline

11.1 Politics and Government
11.2 Religion
11.3 Health and Health Care

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize the functions of the government, religion, and health institutions.
- Understand the interconnection of each institution within the system as a whole.
- Understand the various forms of government and the role of power in each.
- Identify various issues with the system of democracy run by the United States.
- Explain the ways to define religion and the challenges that accompany each definition.
- Discuss the various forms of religious organization.
- Understand classic sociological theorists' analyses of religion.
- Know the relationship between health and medicine.
- Discuss the importance of public health and recognize the role of stratification in the health of individuals.

Dina2001/iStock/Thinkstock

Public debate about the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010) involved the institutions of government, religion, and health care—among others.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010; often referred to as "Obamacare") included several mandates that work toward assuring access to health care for as many Americans as possible. One of the ways this law hopes to improve the health of all Americans is by implementing a no-charge policy for any FDA-approved preventative medicine. Under this part of the ACA, things like immunizations and cholesterol tests will have no out-of-pocket expense for the patient, which should encourage the use of such treatments and minimize the illnesses and diseases associated with allowing these conditions to go undiagnosed and untreated. Also included under this part of the policy is birth control for women. Any FDA-approved method of contraception, such as the pill, the patch, the vaginal ring, or intrauterine device (IUD), will be free to women (Young, 2014a). While many applauded this part of the legislation, others found it problematic. Several private businesses and institutions argued that the requirement that they pay for their employee's birth control was a violation of their religious freedom. The University of Notre Dame, the largest Catholic university in the United States, argued that requiring the university to provide contraception to their employees as part of their health plans amounted to requiring it promote the use of contraception—a practice still forbidden by the Catholic Church (Devaney, 2014). Even for-profit businesses, most notably craft store Hobby Lobby, made similar claims. The chain, run by the Green family, who

are Christians, has argued that requiring their company to cover birth control is the same as requiring them to cover abortion services, which they would never do. The federal government responded in both cases that the Catholic Church (in the Notre Dame case) and the Green family (in the Hobby Lobby case) are not personally paying for contraception—their businesses are. Therefore, the health of the employees outweighs any personal beliefs held by the owners of a company (The Economist, 2014).

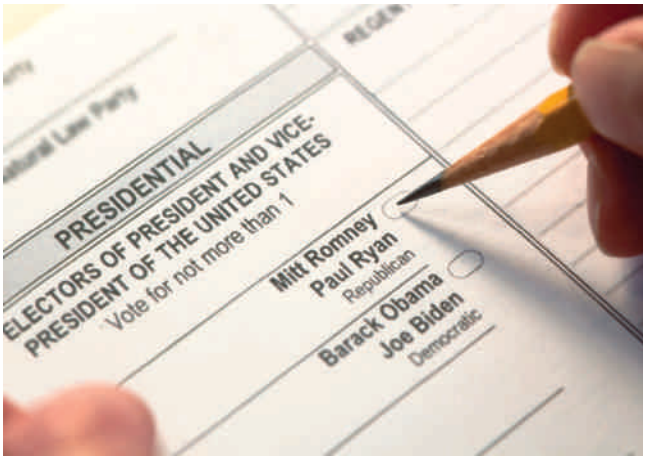
In this example, we see an intersection of the three social institutions covered in this chapter: the government, religion, and health care. The federal government passed the Affordable Care Act to try to provide access to health care to the estimated 46 million Americans who were uninsured and therefore unlikely to seek medical care for an illness. While the public debate was contentious, the law as passed seems to have reduced that number to the lowest rates of uninsured since the 1990s (Young, 2014b). However, many on the conservative end of the political spectrum found it unacceptable that the government would *require* the purchase of any good on the open market. Many doctors expressed concerns that the government might interfere with their ability to provide care to their patients. And although many religious groups supported a plan to provide more people—often those in vulnerable populations—with access to health care, the details of the policy caused many of the same religious institutions to express concern.

As we did in Chapter 10, we will discuss three institutions here. Recall that social institutions are those organized systems that are consistent across time and help to meet the needs associated with social life. They are designed to face the recurring challenges, needs, and problems that confront both the individual and society. As was noted above, sociologists generally recognize that there is some degree of interdependency among the various institutions. Different institutions can address similar social needs, and changes and challenges in one institution can have a profound impact on other institutions. Below we will analyze government, religion, and health care using these standards and our theoretical perspectives as well.

11.1 Politics and Government

The **state** is a political organization or government with the power over a given territory. The state typically has a strong relationship with a **nation**: people with a shared identity or culture and a feeling of belonging to a state. The citizens of the nation, because of their sense of belonging, typically provide some level of support to the power exercised by the state (what we saw Weber earlier refer to as "legitimate authority"). For example, the state often has a monopoly on the use of force, which the state will use to enforce laws and keep order among their citizens. However, if that power is abused or overused the people may begin to question the legitimacy of the state and withdraw their power. The government has power, or the ability to direct and control the actions of others, even against their will. It can involve consent, coercion, and even force. This force may be monetary, such as the case of fines and asset forfeiture. The government can also deprive a person of their liberty and even their life. Berger (1963) noted that when it comes to dealing with governmental power, the citizen can either cooperate willingly or be coerced into compliance. For instance, if a person is issued a citation for a motor vehicle offense, they many opt to pay the fine willingly. However, if they fail to do so, a judge can have the police forcibly bring that person to court and have them jailed for contempt until they pay.

According to Hobbes (1651/1969), if humans existed in a "natural state," there would be total disorder and a war of "all against all." Government is seen as necessary and responsible for an orderly society. As an institution, the government serves a number of important functions. First, the government serves to enforce the laws and other important regulatory norms. Second, it is responsible for the planning and directing of social activities by establishing holidays and calling for periods of celebration or mourning. Third, it oversees the formulation and implementation of public policy. Fourth, the government serves as a means to arbitrate and resolve conflicts between individuals and groups. Fifth, the government is responsible for protecting citizens from external threats. Finally, in the United States, the government provides citizens with a safety net that takes many forms, including financial, housing, and nutritional assistance. In each of these functions, the government clearly plays the role of a social institution by establishing standards, meeting needs of the people within the system, and providing a mechanism that allows the system to reproduce itself.



Andy Sacks/Getty Images

Critics of the United States' two-party political system contend that it can downplay alternative views and promote voter apathy.

The state is an organized political society, while the government is an instrument of the state needed to carry out activities. The **government** is the actual political structure ruling over a given location. It is more far-reaching and formal in jurisdiction than the other institutions (Bierstedt, 1970). **Politics** is the process by which people seek to acquire, exercise, and maintain power and is at the root of the state and its system of government. The political process determines whose values will be reflected in policy, and how resources will be distributed in a society. It can involve a variety of factors, including force and manipulation, which can take the form of **propaganda**—the use of ideas and facts in a highly selective fashion with the goal of manipulating others. Political systems can take on a variety of forms, including monarchies, totalitarianism, theocracies, and democracies. The primary differences among these are in the ways in which the citizens can participate.

Forms of Government

Monarchies are governments ruled by an unselected king or queen. They were once a very popular form of government in which power was derived from belief in a divine right to rule or from overthrow of the previous monarch. The increase in participatory systems of governance has made true monarchies rare, leaving only a handful—most in the Middle East (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Jordan). There are constitutional monarchies in which a royal family exist in name only and have relatively little power. In such cases (e.g., Great Britain, Sweden, Japan), the political power lies with a prime minister or president, whose selection is designated by the constitution. Various forms of governments can be described as **autocratic**, ruled by a single individual; the true monarchies fit here, as would many totalitarian systems.

Totalitarian governments are usually run by a single party that promotes extreme nationalism. The government censors residents and severely restricts the flow of information into the country. Totalitarian governments (e.g., North Korea, China, Cuba) exhibit control over all elements of life, including politics; media; and the social, cultural, economic, and private lives of individuals.

Theocracies are states that are run under religious law. Similar to monarchies, pure theocracies are rare in modern society, but many traditionally Islamic states are struggling with extremist groups like ISIS/ISIL (Islamic States in Iraq and Syria/the Levant) attempting to overthrow the current government and establish strict Islamic theocracies—which would likely look like totalitarian systems.

The United States is an example of a democracy. **Democracy** is a form of government by popular consent deriving its power from those who agree to submit to that government. In most democracies, a constitution outlines the essential tenets that must be followed, including protection of minority groups, the size and scope of government, checks and balances among various institutions of the state, and procedures to allow for change within the system. Most importantly, the population must have an opportunity to control decisions (Lipset, 1960). America is technically a "representative democracy" because the populace votes to elect various individuals who then represent them in the government. America has been prone to ethnocentric thinking about the quality of its form of government, but there are clear issues that plague its political and governmental systems.

Politics and Government in the United States

One criticism is that the political process in the United States is limited to a two-party system. A party is a type of political organization intended to place its candidates in office and realize its will in political affairs. In the broadest sense, both parties are politically mainstream and relatively moderate. It is hard to distinguish between a "conservative Democrat" and a "progressive Republican." Other political ideologies, such as socialism, libertarianism, and communism, are rarely represented. The two political parties endorse candidates, and any third-party candidate finds it difficult to stand a realistic chance of being elected without such an endorsement, even on a local level. In fact, it is very difficult for third-party candidates to meet the complex requirements to get on the ballot.

Some critics also argue that mass democracy rarely works in a large, highly populated nation. Instead of democracy being about the people, it instead becomes about the politician. Rather than having representatives work to echo the needs and concerns of their constituents at a state or federal level, the politicians work to retain votes for the next election cycle, which often means they must do nothing questionable (Schumpeter, 1954/1983).

Moreover, there has been a serious lack of diversity in the American political process. Initially, neither women nor African Americans were even allowed to vote. Both of these groups continue to this day to be underrepresented in government. The first non-White president, Barack Obama, wasn't elected until 2008. That same year, Sarah Palin was the Vice-Presidential nominee for the Republican Party, yet she was only the second woman on the ballot at that level for one of the two major parties. (The first was Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic VP nominee in 1984.) As was noted in Chapter 9, currently there is the largest number of females thus far

serving in Congress. Women hold approximately 19% of the 535 seats, but that number is still far below the 52% of the population who are female.

Further, a disproportionate amount of political power has resided in the hands of the upper class. In a 2015 report, the Center for Responsive Politics found that nearly 51% of the members of the U.S. Congress are millionaires. It would take 18 average U.S. households to equal the net worth of the average member of Congress (Choma, 2015). At one point in time, voting rights were restricted to land owners; once those rights were extended to others, literacy and poll taxes were put in place to limit participation. Now, although voting rights are more accessible, there is some argument as to whether or not the votes matter. C. Wright Mills (1956) claimed that there was a ruling class in America, which he termed the "power elite," who made most of the U.S. policy decisions out of the eyes of the American public. Elites running the government, the economy, and the military made decisions to reinforce their own power.

Sociology in Action: The Power Elite

In his controversial and influential book *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills (1956) argued that important decisions that affect the typical American citizen are not made in the formal channels of government. Instead, there are a small group of individuals who control American society. These are the people who hold the top positions in business, government, and the military. This **power elite** is a ruling class of people who hold most of the wealth, power, and prestige in the United States.

As a group, the power elite members are sympathetic to each other's interests, and many share a common background. These individuals often have similar characteristics that set them apart from ordinary Americans. Many of these people are from wealthy and influential families. They often attended elite boarding schools, universities (e.g., Harvard or Yale), or military academies. They are usually White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). Using Weberian terms, they come from the same class and status groups and tend to see the world in a common way. Due to their influence across these three institutions, it becomes increasingly easy to pass laws that support the needs of the capitalists on Wall Street and those who support a military-industrial complex in which a robust and active military results in economic success.

It is important to note that Mills did not believe the power elite were part of some hidden "secret society" that worked to control the world and all that were in it. This is no Illuminati-type conspiracy theory. Instead, these are people born into wealth and status who are used to being in control of things and making decisions without having to deal with backlash from others or even repercussions of failure. Members of the power elite often come from historically notable families (i.e., Vanderbilts, Carnegies, Kennedys), but they can also be CEOs and major shareholders of elite companies, decision makers within the military, those in and around the executive branch of government, and even celebrities. The bureaucratic nature of decision making assures that voices of the non-elites are rarely heard in the decision making discussions and that these discussions are done behind closed doors. For Mills, it is important to note who is not privy to these decision making sessions: neither the mass population of the country nor their democratically elected representatives have access to the elites. This makes the idea that we control our government through elections unlikely.

One final point to consider; Mills wrote The *Power Elite* in 1956 in the beginnings of the Cold War between the United States and the USSR. Have things changed in our country since the second military superpower has dissolved? Or have the elites simply manufactured new enemies to take the place of the Soviets?

A great deal of concern has been expressed about the tremendous importance and influence of money in the American political process. The exceptionally high costs of conducting a campaign prohibit most people from running for office. Not only does a politician need money to get elected, this money also provides a decided advantage for incumbents. Since measures have been enacted to limit the influence of individual political contributors, Political Action Committees (PACs) were developed to get around these limits.

PACs are developed to either support or oppose political candidates. These organizations are generally well organized and those representing corporate interests are exceptionally well funded. There has been an explosion in the number and influence of these organizations since the 1970s. There are also lobbyists who are paid to exert influence on law-makers on behalf of their (often corporate) clients. The major concern with the PACs and lobbyists is the widespread purchase of influence.

In the 2012 Presidential election, those concerns grew as "Super PACs" arose. Super PACs are permitted to raise unlimited sums of money from corporations, unions, associations, and individuals, and then spend unlimited sums to overtly advocate for or against political candidates. Unlike traditional PACs, Super PACs are prohibited from donating money directly to political candidates and must not coordinate their efforts with any individual campaigns (Center for Responsive Politics, 2015). In 2012, over 1,300 Super PACs were formed, which raised over $822 million and spent more than $609 million in attempts to influence the outcomes of various elections (Center for Responsive Politics, 2012).

Although democracy is theoretically based on the consent of the majority, there is a troubling lack of participation in the political process by American citizens. Americans are far less likely to vote in elections than citizens of other western nations. About one third of adults aren't registered to vote. Out of those who are registered, fewer than half vote in any election on average.

In 2012, there were approximately 206 million Americans eligible to vote in the Presidential election. More than 146 million were registered to vote (~70%) and more than 131 million did vote (~64% of eligible voters and ~75% of registered voters) (Statistic Brain, 2014). While this may seem impressive at first glance, it means more than one third of eligible voters and one quarter of registered voters didn't bother to go to the polls. Both numbers are worse than the two previous Presidential elections (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2012). This is especially shocking considering how contentious the election was and that candidates spent over $7 billion (Parti, 2013).

Members of groups who are more likely to vote include older adults (over the age of 45), those with a higher income, and those with a higher level of educational attainment (Center for Voting and Democracy, 2012). Whites have traditionally been more likely to vote than African Americans, but African Americans turned out at a higher rate than White voters for the first time ever in 2012. Both African Americans and Whites voted at higher rates than either Latino/a or Asian American voters in 2012 (Center for Voting and Democracy, 2012).

One way in which public opinion and voter demographics may have a greater influence on contemporary politics is through scientifically advanced polling. Candidates and incumbents now can tailor their stances or modify their positions based on the findings of a pollster (Ritzer, 2013). It remains to be seen if the attention paid to polls is a mechanism for the people to become active and influential in the political system or simply a way to narrow the focus of candidates onto specific issues.

11.2 Religion

As a social institution, religion serves many purposes in a society. Religion is typically a source of morality and values, and to the extent that the morals and values of a given faith are the same as those encouraged by the culture as a whole, religion becomes a strong source of social control. Religious communities are often effective means of social support for individuals, which, along with religious belief, serves to bond individuals to the group and provide a sense of guidance and connectivity. Religion can also provide a sense of efficacy to its followers by encouraging prayer and devotion. If members of a faith are faced with a crisis that seems outside their control, prayer to a higher power is perceived as a means to control the uncontrollable. As is the case with other institutions, these functions are not solely provided by religion, nor does religion operate in isolation from the other institutions. Recall the story that started this chapter: Health care legislation caused concern among religious organizations and individuals as well as within the political body, private businesses, and hospitals. On just the single, specific topic of health care, religion affects nearly every other social institution.

While religion is clearly an element of society that must be understood by sociologists, it is a challenging topic to be studied scientifically. As concepts like "faith" and "belief" are at the core of most religious traditions, attempting to "test" empirically and ultimately determine which religion is most effective is far outside the bounds of sociology. However, tracking the beliefs themselves and indicating patterns that exist across religious traditions or those that emerge from various beliefs are well within the range of social scientific questions.

Attempting to arrive at a standard definition of religion proves problematic. Some scholars working from a *substantive definition of religion* find the study of religion is most effective when we determine what religion is at its core. Once we have determined what religion is, it becomes much easier to identify which groups fit the category of "religion" and which do not. Issues arise with the substantive definition because of the strong overlap between culture and religion. For example, in the United States most major religions are **theistic**, meaning that they include a belief in one or more supernatural beings viewed as a higher power. However, there are various faiths around the world that see natural forces as the higher power or view all parts of the world as a single unified force. Using a substantive definition, Buddhism and most Native American faiths would not fit the theistic criteria and, therefore, would not be viewed as religions. As the substantive definition of religion is defined by what one culture already knows as religion, it casts a rather narrow net and is plagued by ethnocentrism.

On the other hand, there is a *functional definition of religion* that focuses on the functions served by religion in a society. A functional definition simply requests an inventory of all functions served by religion (i.e., means of gaining ultimate meaning, attempts to interpret the unknown, attempts to control the uncontrollable, provision of personifications of human ideals, integration of culture and the legitimation of the social system, creation of groups for social support, projection of human meaning and social patterns onto a superior entity, etc.). Once established, anything that serves these purposes can be considered a religion (Geertz, 1966). While this definition provides the flexibility lacking in the substantive definition, it can go too far in the opposite direction and catch many institutions that are clearly not religions (for instance, see the discussion in the section on civil religion). A case can be made that professional sports fandom meets all the above criteria and therefore the Dallas Cowboys can constitute a religion—after all, the NFL does consume most of each Sunday during the season for football fans.

Those studying religion sociologically have arrived at a compromise, which includes a definition and discussion of elements of religion. **Religion** is a series of commonly shared cultural beliefs and practices that provide a sense of ultimate meaning and reality that is tied to a supernatural force (Berger, 1967; Wuthnow, 1988). Any religion should have *beliefs*, which are thoughts that help people understand events and color the way people perceive, understand, and describe their world (including themselves). Religions typically have a sense of *community* around the believers that encourage common experiences and assure a continuation of traditions that provide a sense of identity to the individuals. Religions will have *rituals*, which are symbolic actions that represent religious meanings and reinforce unity within the group. Finally, there will be personal experience with the sacred, which will vary in intensity and content from person to person (Johnstone, 2007). Many of these elements of religion were highlighted in Emile Durkheim's work, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1995), which is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Religious Organizations

Religions are, by definition, groups and, therefore, have the same goals, issues, and challenges discussed in Chapter 5. As the size of the group changes, the organization of the group and the way group members interact with one another is likely to change as well. Generally speaking, as the size of the religious group increases, consensus declines and variation in belief (and deviance) increases. As members of the community increase, the likelihood that all members will encode and strictly follow the rules decreases. As a result, the group norms become more formalized. With the formalization of norms come other facets of bureaucracy, including role specialization or division of labor. Here, certain people are responsible for specific tasks in the community and a hierarchy is put in place so an expert can be in charge of making decisions and coordinating all other roles, including defining what those formal roles are and deciding how to deal with variation and deviation from those roles and rules (Mott, 1965). In short, as a group increases in size, the organization must change to accommodate the challenges of the new success.

A **church** is a well-established religious group that has wide popularity in the general population. As churches tend to be large, they mirror many of the characteristics discussed above. Due to the broad appeal of churches, these communities tend to have a strong connection with the culture as a whole and will be a strong moral force with the ability to determine what is sacred and what is profane for all, even those who are not believers. For example, as a nation with a long history with Christianity, most Christian holidays are considered sacred in the United States. Most of us would not expect retail stores to be open on Christmas Day, and in fact many would be offended if they were. However, in large parts of the country, many people would be surprised if a local business were closed on a weekday to celebrate Passover, primarily because in areas with few Jewish people, they would not know it was a holiday.

In religiously plural societies, there are **denominations**, which are mainstream religious groups who are on good terms with the culture and the society but do not claim to be the "one true faith." Denominations are not radical in their beliefs, will tolerate some dispute within their belief systems, and recognize other denominations. They also recognize that their members have other demands in the secular world (job, family, hobbies, etc.), which makes denominations popular among the middle and upper social classes. As most denominations are fairly large and well established, they will, like churches, employ a formally trained clergy

(Neibuhr, 1929). While churches are typically the religions that most people know, denominations are segments of those broader faiths. Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Unitarians would all consider themselves "Christian"; each group has unique norms, beliefs, and challenges that make it a specific form of Christianity. Each knows of the existence of one another's communities and rarely are they seen to be in competition with one another.

Both churches and denominations are assumed to have large populations and a close relationship with the dominant culture, yet many smaller groups present themselves as an authentic, purged, refurbished version of the faith from which they have split. These are **sects**. The sect emphasizes purity of doctrines and traditional ethical principles, is comprised of only true believers, and is deliberately small. When the group is smaller and more homogenous in belief, the need for bureaucracy is eliminated. Group participation is encouraged and the group is more democratic in that all participate in the groups rather than waiting for a designated, trained leader to make decisions. The group grows almost exclusively due to religious conversion (Demerath & Hammond, 1969). Typically the membership of sects consists of lower social class believers looking for supernatural support in order to deal with the deprivation in their lives (Glock, 1964). Because the lower classes encounter more structural disadvantages in their society, the appeal of a religion that strongly supports the status quo is low. Religious sects become a source of sanctuary from the abuses of the mainstream culture. Sects tend to be more radical in their beliefs and are hoping to return the culture to a time when the culture wasn't so corrupted. Over time, some sects develop into denominations, growing in size and becoming more mainstream in their beliefs, which usually causes another split in which the "true believers" leave to start a new sect (Yinger, 1970).

Cults are similar to sects in their rejection of the denominations and churches, but rather than wanting to return to a pure form of a current religion, cults wish to establish a new religious form. In this way, cults tend to parallel secular countercultural movements in that there is a rejection of the established religious standards and a desire to replace these with something new. Cults tends to be loosely structured and often centered on a charismatic leader, which provides a catalyst for radical change but often leads to an instability in the group when the leader dies or is discredited.

Alan Dawson/age fotostock/SuperStock

Scientology is a newer religious movement that has gained worldwide popularity in recent decades despite much controversy. What sociological factors contribute to the debate over its validity?

Sociologically, the term **new religious movement** is increasingly used to discuss these types of groups, as the term "cult" is often used to marginalize and downgrade unfamiliar or emergent religious trends. There has been an upswing in new religious movements that can be attributed to a variety of social patterns, including an increase

in pluralism in general, immigration causing the interaction of various faiths, and the appeal of new religious movements as free of the deficiencies of churches and denominations and better able to address modern issues and challenges (McGuire, 2008). Groups like the Branch Davidians (who were infamously killed in a stand-off with the U.S. government at Waco, Texas), Rev. Jim Jones' People's Temple (whose population was murdered in a forced suicide in Jonestown in Ghana), and Marshall Applewhite's Heaven's Gate group (who committed mass suicide in hopes of being taken "home" by a spaceship they believed to be in the tail of a passing comet) are often classified as "cults" mainly due to their strange beliefs and untimely ends. However, Buddhism and Hinduism, two of the largest religions on earth, are often seen as "new" to the United States and have become more common over the last 50 years due to immigration and the ease of trading cross-cultural information.

Secularization

The popularity of new religious movements, coupled with religious pluralism and the increased value on science, has led to an argument that religion is declining in influence. The problem with discussing **secularization** is similar the problem of defining religion; without knowing how we should define the influence of religion, it is difficult to determine whether it is decreasing in influence. Most would agree that religion doesn't have the influence it once did in the United States. Greeley (1989) did longitudinal research over 40 years and found greater religiosity across 15 time points between 1924 and 1978. Two thirds of the United States claims membership in a religious group, 90% believe in God and pray regularly to Him, 75% believe in life after death and in Christ as messiah (Greeley 1989, pp. 57–67), and 40% claim weekly church attendance (unchanged in 40 years) (Greeley 1989, pp. 43). More recent work by Mark Chaves (2011) indicates that a strong movement away from traditional religions in the United States is underway. Globally, the discussion surrounding increased secularization is less clear. As we have seen recently in the attacks around the world—for instance, on the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*—religion is still of vital importance, and perceived disrespect toward a faith still arouses strong passions. The rise of extremist religious groups working to impose theocracies in Africa and in the Middle East also indicates the continued importance of religion. That said, research continues to emerge indicating that secularization is increasingly common in Europe, especially among younger generations (Voas & Doebler, 2011).

Civil Religion

Civil religion is any set of beliefs and rituals, related to the past, present, and/or future of a nation, which are understood in some transcendent fashion (Hammond, 1976). Civil religion is designed to make a nation cohesive by stirring religious-style fervor and sentiments by using elements of familiar religions to connect members to the society. These include rituals to commemorate significant national events and renew commitment to the society, sacred objects and sites, national myths, and saints who represent the highest level of honor.

From left to right: Laura Stanley/All Canada Photos/SuperStock; Scott Gries/Staff/Getty Images

Monuments and art commemorating the terrorist attacks of September 11th, like these in Battery Park in New York (left) and Bayonne, New Jersey (right), serve as sacred objects for the American public.

In the United States, we see yearly celebrations on July 4 and somber remembrances on Memorial Day and September 11. On these days we put out American flags on our porches, travel to cemeteries to visit loved ones, and retell stories of sacrifice and of saints and martyrs who have given of themselves for the freedom of all. Robert Bellah (Bellah et al., 1985) wrote about American civil religion and its close connection to stories from Christianity—not because America is a "Christian nation" where the Christian faith should be favored above all others, but because the stories from the Christian Bible are ones with which Americans are most familiar. As was mentioned previously, Christmas becomes not just a holy day for Christians but a holiday for all Americans. The celebration of the birth of a messiah of one religion is celebrated with American-style capitalism; gifts should be purchased for anyone and everyone we care about in order to adequately celebrate. The increase of civil religion may mask secularization, especially among churches and denominations where there is already a strong overlap between religion and culture.

Sociology in Action: Divorce in the Bible Belt

There are some interesting patterns to be found in the divorce rates in the United States. Divorce rates are actually higher in the "Bible Belt" (i.e., Southern States) and much lower in the more "liberal" or "progressive" Northeast. Recent research by Glass and Levchak (2014) confirms that divorce is actually more common in the "red states" (Republican leaning) than in the so-called "blue states" (Democratic learning). This finding is counterintuitive because red states have a higher number of "conservative" or "fundamentalist" Protestants. These individuals tend to view marriage as religious sacrament and consider divorce to be a failure to conform to "God's will."

However, the observed differences have to do with the social structures of the areas rather than any individual belief systems. Areas with a high number of religious conservatives, such as the South, have lower levels of education and income on average. Moreover, people get married at a younger age in these regions than in the rest of the United States. Lower education level, income, and age at first marriage all raise a person's likelihood of divorce. In essence, the divorce rate is a function of structural variables, not religious belief.

There is also a red-state/blue-state difference on how sex education is approached. Blue states are more likely to offer comprehensive sex education, including encouraging the use of birth control. Red states tend to offer, and in some case *require*, only abstinence-based sex education often because of the religious values of those in the school district. When sexual activity occurs among teens, the likelihood of an unwanted pregnancy is increased in these states, which can lead to the low education levels, low ages at first marriage, and low income levels (Collins, 2010).

These findings again show why it is a mistake to view any of the social institutions apart from the larger social context. While marriage is often considered a religious event, there are various economic and cultural influences that affect the marriage experience just as much as religious belief does.

Theory and Religion

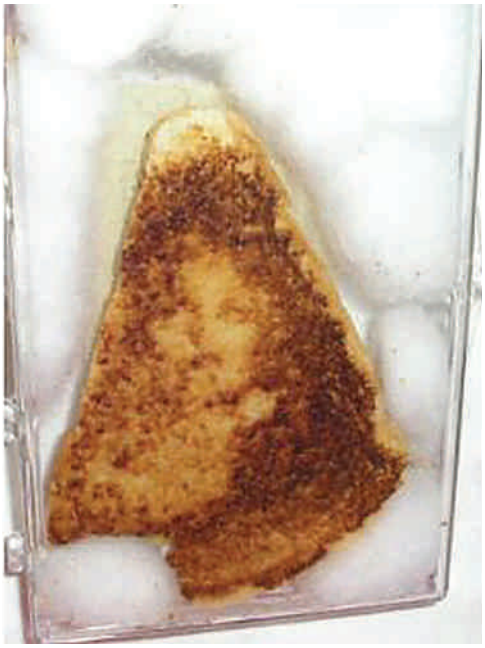
Religion has been a vital topic since the start of sociology as a discipline. As a result, many of our classical theories provide essential analyses that help us understand the creation, use, and function of religion today.

Durkheim's Elementary Forms of Religious Life

In *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim (1912/1995) argues that religion and society strongly overlap and reinforce one another. Early in life, we are socialized to believe that there is a strong, invisible force that wants us to follow set rules and behave in certain ways. We learn to follow these rules so that good things happen and no one needs to be punished. This sentence may refer to a religious person doing God's will, but it may also refer to society encouraging normal behavior among its members.

While Durkheim does not see society and a supernatural being as the same, he does indicate that the religion has become the preeminent moral force in society and can often make requests of its members that the culture at large cannot. (Imagine the response if the President announced that everyone were required to go to a government building once a week to listen to the reading of U.S. history and to have a mass recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. However, religion can make that demand and have it met without fuss.) Assuming that the culture and the predominant religions share much of their morality, religion can encourage pro-social behavior and help assure people behave "normally," resulting in the reinforcement of social patterns.

Durkheim argues that the social and religious realms are clearly separated. All religions have elements that are **sacred**, which are things that have taken on supernatural significance because of our interactions within the religious community. For Christianity, sacred objects could include a cross or crucifix. For Islam, the Holy Quran is a sacred text. The place where worship happens may be considered sacred ground. These items and locations raise within us some feeling or emotion that ties us to the supernatural. The definition of *sacred* simultaneously creates the **profane**, the simple, visible, knowable objects and ordinary experiences that allow us to function daily within society. Profane things are too numerous to list, but these are the items that get us through the day and likely hold no significance other than their purpose. If your pen runs out of ink, you likely won't experience a profound loss throwing the pen away.



AFP/Stringer/Getty Images

Diane Duyser saw the sacred image of the Virgin Mary in this ordinarily profane sandwich, and sold it for $28,000 to an online casino.

What happens if something profane becomes sacred? For example, what if a holy apparition appears in your lunch? A woman named Diana Duyser, while eating a grilled cheese sandwich, believed she saw in it a picture of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. In this case, we can see the exact moment that this item went from profane to sacred (NBCnews .com, 2004). The sandwich was simply nourishment—you can even see a bite missing from the corner. However, after seeing the face, Duyser stopped eating and preserved the sandwich, believing it to be a sign from God. In similar cases, people believe they have seen apparitions on windows, wooden doors, even in Cheetos. In each case, what was a normal, profane object suddenly takes on religious significance.

Durkheim also discussed the importance of **ritual**, or a highly routinized act that expresses and reinforces membership in the community. A symbolic cleansing before prayer, or the prayer itself, are rituals that show the group that the individual is one of them while reminding the individual that, even if she or he is alone at the time, there are thousands of people engaging in the same behavior. The Passover Seder is a communal meal eaten by several generations of a family to symbolize the freeing of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt.

The meal involves specific foods and specific drink, representing elements of the story, interspersed with prayer and readings from sacred texts. Even if someone is separated from their family, celebrating Seder is a ritual that connects them back to their family and to their faith as everyone around the world is celebrating at the same time (Chabad.org, 2014). The ritual itself is sacred and involves sacred items as well. As rituals are typically scheduled, individuals will often keep sacred items close to them to remind them of the emotion and the excitement of the ritual and the communal feelings during the profane times between ritual ceremonies.

Religious rituals can often mark important events within the life course (see Chapter 4). Baptism marks a point of entry into a religious group. Confirmation in the Catholic faith and bar/bat mitzvah in Judaism are indicators that the individual should now be seen as an adult in the eyes of the religion. As we will see below, marriage is often seen as a religious rite in addition to a legal contract, precipitating a clear change in the behavioral patterns of those being wed.

Marx and Religion

Durkheim focused on the form and function of religions. In Chapter 1, we summarized how Max Weber discussed the role of religious belief in creating culture movements when he dissected the relationship between the Protestant work ethic and the rise of capitalism. Weber argued that the values required by the Protestant faith (i.e., self-sacrifice, acceptance of fate, restricted spending, constant work) led to an entire faith filled with ideal capitalists—either as unquestioning workers or as owners of businesses with large amounts of capital to invest. In short, religious belief caused ideal capitalist behavior. If a different religion had been predominant in Europe at the start of capitalism, it might not have taken root the same way.

Another founder of the discipline, however, doesn't see the value in religion. Those who work in the tradition of Karl Marx would find any trends toward secularization a hopeful step. Marx is often famously paraphrased as calling religion the "opiate of the masses." The full quote provides some context for Marx's opinion on religion: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1974).

Marx believed the source of all problems in modern society were in capitalism, specifically in the alienation of the worker from the outcome of his or her labor. The workers' labor never resulted in their lives getting any better and, in fact, caused them to be further enslaved by the products they created. In this context, religion only provides false hope. Opiates dull pain and make it easier to live through a painful existence. Marx would have preferred a revolt that eliminated the source of the pain rather than a pain management technique that only protects the system.

As most mainstream churches and denominations provide support for cultural ideas, those who suffer in a capitalist world have often been told not to complain, work for change, or revolt against a corrupted system because to do so would jeopardize their reward in the next life. This message is perhaps best embodied by the Christian saying that it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. If you are poor in this life—good! Your reward comes in the afterlife. Of course, this reward is jeopardized if you covet, steal, kill, or do other things to upset the current order that the church supports.

Another interpretation of Marx explains the additional alienation *caused* by religion. This places God in the position of the object created by man, which returns to enslave him. Just as a proletarian worker in capitalism must work long hours to create a product that he can never benefit from (for even if he can buy it, he is then trapped into labor to pay it off—often plus interest—as well as maintain it, clean it, insure it, repair it, and so on), the importance of religion encourages people to devote time and energy to the worship of a deity who has been created by society and whose benefits they can never reap. Devotion to religion keeps the poor distracted from their true plight and tied to a belief system that only harms them. Marx would see an increase in secularization as the fall of a significant barrier preventing the end of capitalism.

11.3 Health and Health Care

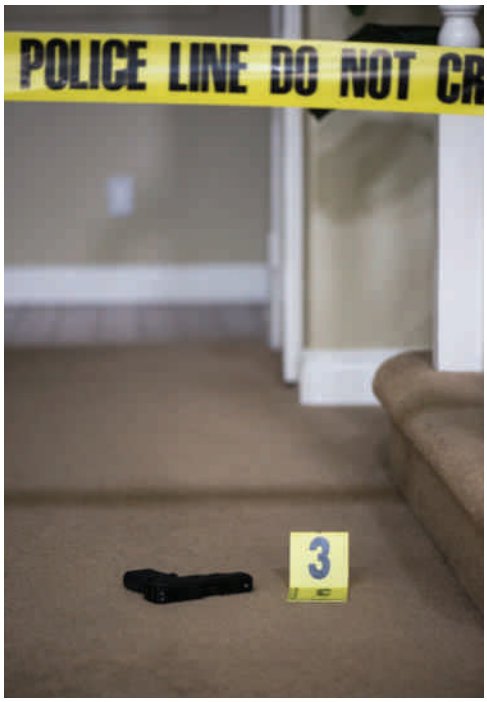
Of all the institutions listed in these chapters, this is the one that is most likely to raise questions. Why are sociologists interested in health and health care? Isn't this an issue better addressed by biology, chemistry, pharmacy, or some other physical science? After all, sick is sick and doctors know how to treat people because of science. While most sociologists probably wouldn't debate either of those statements on the surface, we also want people to realize that health care and medicine are social practices involving people from certain social environments, done in certain social settings, with certain power dynamics that are almost always in place. Consider the last time you argued with your doctor: Have you ever argued with your doctors or do you simply listen to what they have to say without questioning them?

Now consider the role of the nurses. They are "on the same side" of the medical institution as the doctor but are always in a subservient role, which means that doctors do not always listen to their opinions—even though nurses typically spend more time with patients and are privy to more details about the patients' lives. Nurses are often expected to stay in the background and let the doctors do the diagnosing. Doctors may even feel pressure to ignore nurses' advice so they don't look incompetent in front of patients or other doctors (Stein, 1967). All of these interactions are rooted in power dynamics that affect the way medicine is practiced.

Now return to the idea that illness is objective and is diagnosed and treated through strictly objective means. If this were the case, why would there ever be the need for a second opinion or an expert consultation? Why would there be variation in illness diagnoses across regions of the United States? Why would there be competing "forms of medicine" arising due to increasing distrust of the modern medical model? As we have seen in previous discussions, the answer to each of these questions is rooted in the meanings and definitions of the social reality that surrounds health and medicine.

Health and Medicine

Health is the extent to which a person experiences a state of physical, mental, and social well-being. A couple of important points leap from this definition. First, health is more than simply physical well-being. If someone is physically sound but mentally ill, the person's overall well-being is jeopardized. If we have someone who is both physically and mentally fine but is placed in a dangerous, corrupted, or unhealthy social environment, these healthy states



aijohn784/iStock/Thinkstock

The American College of Physicians recently called firearm violence a public health issue, to the dismay of many critics who disagree. Sociologically speaking, what factors make gun control an issue of public health?

will not last (World Health Organization, 2005). This leads to the other important point in the definition of health: Health is more than simply a lack of illness.

Medicine is the institutional system designed to scientifically assess, diagnose, treat, and prevent illness. Again, for our purposes, there are a couple of key elements in this definition. As a social institution, medicine is in place to serve a purpose in the larger social system and meet the needs of the population. In this case, the need is to maintain the health of the population. This can be done through the diagnosis and treatment of existing conditions, but it should also have a preventative element to it in which the medical community attempts to recognize challenges to public health and safety and encourage the populace to live healthy lifestyles.

If the job of the medical institution is to deal with illness when it occurs and to encourage healthy behaviors so illness occurs less frequently in the first place, then there are clearly social elements that need to be understood. For example, despite having world-class medical facilities and serving as a world leader in medical innovation, the United States is estimated to rank 55th in infant mortality in 2014 (defined as the number of deaths of children under 1 year old per 100 live births). The United States is just below Serbia, Lithuania, and Croatia and is just above the Cayman Islands, Qatar, and Estonia (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). What explains our relatively low ranking in this category?

Many in the United States lack access to health care and can only afford to visit their physician in times of severe illness or injury. If a pregnant woman lacks adequate insurance, she is unlikely to have access to high quality care during and immediately following her pregnancy, which leads to a higher likelihood of infant fatality. This is a pattern that is seen throughout the United States. There is a strong relationship between health and social class—as social class decreases, so does health in nearly all categories. According to Ruess (2007):

- People with incomes below the poverty line (when compared with the middle class) are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from a chronic condition that limits their life activities and are 3 times as likely to characterize their health as "fair" or "poor."
- "Diseases of affluence" (obesity, heart disease, diabetes, illnesses caused by lack of physical activity) are most prevalent among the *least* affluent in industrial and post-industrial societies.
- Homicide, accidental death, communicable diseases, and smoking are all more common among the poor.
- African American children between the ages of 3 and 10 are twice as likely to have had an asthma attack as White children.

- African American men are 7 times (and African American women are 4 times) more likely to fall victim to homicide than Whites.
- Additionally, African Americans are more likely to die of heart disease, liver disease, diabetes, AIDS, all cancers combined, and accidental injury than are Whites. (Ruess, 2007)

With the adoption of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010) and its implementation in 2014, the hope is that these health gaps among the poor will shrink in size. Such disparities will not disappear, though, mainly because lack of insurance is not the only issue that results in differing health outcomes in the United States.

Public health is the practice of the maintenance of health at a community level. Public health practitioners and social epidemiologists work to understand how health and illness operate in the community at large. Rather than simply assume that the ironically named "diseases of affluence" mentioned above are the result of personal failures (i.e., you got fat because you ate too much, you got diabetes because you failed to exercise), public health looks for social patterns that help explain such outcomes among the poor. For example, people living in inner-city communities and in some rural areas can find themselves in a **food desert** where unprocessed and lightly processed foods—fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, legumes, and whole grains—are largely unavailable because few or no retailers offer them or they are too expensive to purchase. Even those living in a food desert who want to eat healthier are unable to do so without transportation and funds to get to an area where they are sold. As a result, residents eat the food available to them, sold at fast-food restaurants, discount grocery stores, and convenience stores. These foods are highly processed, with additives for longer shelf-life, and filled with sugar, sodium, and trans fats, which often lead to poorer health (Walker, Keane, & Burke, 2010).

Social Construction of Illness

While reading the previous section, you may have thought, "How is obesity considered a disease?" or "Why is 'homicide' being mentioned in a section on health and health care?" The answer to both questions is that our society has decided that these are things that should be considered to be treatable conditions under the broad definition of health established at the start of this section. As we have seen repeatedly through this text, the social construction of meaning will vary across culture and time, and health and illness are no different.

In the mid-1950s, there was a movement to treat addictive behaviors as diseases as opposed to personal failings. By declaring things like alcoholism to be diseases, the social shame of the addiction could be removed, and people would be more likely to seek help for their problems (American Medical Association, 2013). As this construction was effective, the "addiction as disease" model is now widely accepted. Conversely, prior to the mid-1970s, the American Psychiatric Association considered homosexuality to be a mental disorder that could be treated with a range of treatments from talk therapy to electric shocks. The APA changed their diagnostic manual to eliminate the diagnosis as homosexuality became increasingly accepted in society. Thus, over time, the meanings associated with addiction and homosexuality have changed and made them more or less likely to be seen as illnesses.

These constructions of illness and health vary across cultures and subcultures. People in Latino cultures may suffer from *susto*—a series of psychological and physiological symptoms

caused by witnessing a traumatic event. The cultural cause for these symptoms is believed to be the person's soul being scared away from their body. The treatment for susto is to calm the soul and encourage it to return. In western psychology, this condition would be diagnosed as a post-traumatic stress reaction and the treatment would have little to do with "coaxing the soul to return" (Murphy, 2012).

In each of these cases, whether the condition is seen as an illness or not, whether it is considered treatable or not, and which treatments should be used varies depending on the cultural standards in play. Talcott Parsons observed that in the United States, individuals claiming to be ill are placed in a sick role. The **sick role** exempts the ill person from their daily responsibilities on the condition that the person attempt to get better as soon as possible. Working from a functionalist perspective, Parsons' only concern is the effective functioning of the system as a whole. Rather than force a person to work while at less than full effectiveness (and run the risk that the illness could spread), it is better to give the ill person time off to allow for recuperation so he or she can return to full strength quickly. It is the sick role that permits "sick days" at our jobs and schools, but it is also the sick role that requires we provide proof that we sought care at a doctor's office to be given the exemption. This places significant power in the hands of medical professionals, who now have the ability to accept an illness definition and encourage its acceptance in the culture or refuse it—which essentially means certain people are not sick and do not receive exemption (Parsons, 1951).

The sick role itself is socially constructed as well. If you call in sick because of the flu, the sick role will likely be gladly offered to keep you away from the group. However, if you call in hung-over, you may be seen as responsible for your illness and therefore ineligible for the exemptions from responsibilities the sick role offers. Yet, as already discussed in this chapter, the construction of alcoholism as a disease has been widely accepted—so if the hangover is due to this chronic disease, the sick role *should* apply. Unfortunately, those with mental illnesses, certain chronic illnesses, and addictions are often still stigmatized as being responsible for their conditions. In such cases, the exemptions associated with the sick role are not as forthcoming.

Some sociologists and social theorists are concerned that too many conditions are being constructed as illnesses, which could ultimately lead to an abuse of power. Writing from a conflict perspective, Peter Conrad (2007) discussed the **medicalization of society** and his concern that the influence of medicine, pharmaceutical companies, and biomedical successes has encouraged us to find a "pill for every ill." At its core, Conrad's argument is a concern that society will construct every less-than-typical human behavior as an illness that has a treatment. You no longer have a nervous twitch; you have "restless leg syndrome." You are no longer shy; you have social anxiety disorder. You are no longer sad because it's cold and dark during the winter; you *have* SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) because it's cold and dark in the winter. It's important to point out that Conrad's work is attempting to address over-diagnosis (some people certainly do have a crippling affective disorder due to the lack of sunlight in the winter—but probably not as many as we've diagnosed with it) and an overuse of medication.

This over-construction of illness has personal consequences for those placed on medications. It potentially has social consequences, as well, in that medicalization may feed into society's desire for a quick fix to any issue (see the discussion of McDonaldization in Chapter 5). Conrad also argues that the medicalization trend results in a power disparity as one group of people, within the institution of medicine, now has the power to define, diagnose, and decide

the treatment of any illness. This is essentially unchecked power to turn any quirk into a treatable condition that requires a regular payment to the medical community and its related industries.

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

Over the past two chapters we have highlighted many of the key institutions in society in order to provide a basic understanding of the role each institution plays in the social system and several of the challenges faced within the institution. While it may seem on the surface that the government, religion, and health care have little in common with one another, it is important to see that each are part of a larger social system that is interconnected.

This chapter outlined options for organizing a government in order to maintain lawfulness and establish goals for the state. Using American democracy as one example, we discussed some of the consequences, both positive and negative, of choosing any of these systems.

Similarly, the organization of a religion often arises from the size and needs of its membership. However, regardless of the style or organization, religion provides support, answers difficult questions, and bonds its members to a value system.

On its surface, the health care system exists to serve the sick. In examining its structure, we recognize the challenges involved in such a task. The health care system interacts with other institutions and reflects existing systems of stratification; thus, there are obstacles that make it almost impossible for segments of the population to stay healthy or recover well from illness and injury.

The analysis of six social institutions (in Chapters 10 and 11) is by no means exhaustive, but by understanding the role of institutions and some of the basics of each system, the macrostructure of a society comes into clearer focus.

Web Resource

Medical Sociology

http://www.asanet.org/medicalsociology/

This is the section of the American Sociological Association that focuses on issues of health, health care, and medicine from a sociological perspective.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the key functions of each institution discussed in this chapter? Explain how the Obamacare birth control controversy is informed by each of these functions.
2. For each of the three institutions in this chapter, provide an example in which an institution interacts with an institution from Chapter 10.
3. What are the various forms of government? Identify at least one criticism of each.

4. According to Mills, what is the *power elite*? The leaders of which institutions make up the elite? Why? Explain why the PACs and Super PACs may be making the power elite more powerful.
5. What are the three ways one can define religion? Discuss potential problems with each.
6. What are the various ways that religions organize? In which of the organization categories would Judaism be placed? Why?
7. Explain the importance of "the sacred" and "rituals" to maintaining religious groups.
8. Why was Marx so critical of religion?
9. What is the social construction of illness? How do the sick role and the medicalization of society both relate to this idea?
10. What is meant by public health? Explain how stratifying variables can have an effect on public health.

Key Terms

autocratic Governments ruled by a single individual.

church A well established religious group that has wide popularity in the general population.

civil religion Any set of beliefs and rituals, related to the past, present, or future of a nation, which are understood in some transcendent fashion.

cults Groups that reject existing denominations and churches to establish a new religious form.

democracy A form of government deriving its power from those who agree to submit to that government.

denominations Mainstream religious groups that have a positive relationship with the mainstream culture and do not claim to be the "one true faith."

food desert Areas where unprocessed and lightly processed foods are unavailable because few or no retailers offer them or because they are too expensive to purchase.

government The actual political structure ruling over a given location.

health The extent to which a person experiences a state of physical, mental, and social well-being.

medicalization of society The influence of medicine, pharmaceutical companies, and biomedical businesses encouraging a medical solution to every problem.

medicine The institutional system designed to scientifically assess, diagnose, treat, and prevent illness.

monarchies Governments ruled by an unselected king or queen.

nation People with a shared identity or culture and a feeling of belonging to a state.

new religious movement A term that is increasingly used to discuss emergent religious groups because of the negative connotations and marginalizing tendencies of using the term "cult"

politics The process by which people seek to acquire, exercise, and maintain power.

power elite The small group of individuals in the top positions in business, government, and the military that constitute a ruling class that holds most of the wealth, power, and prestige in the United States.

profane Simple, visible, knowable objects and ordinary experiences that allow people to function daily within society.

propaganda The use of ideas and facts in a highly selective fashion with the goal of manipulating others.

public health The practice of the maintenance of health at a community level.

religion A series of commonly shared cultural beliefs and practices that provide a sense of ultimate meaning and reality that is tied to a supernatural force.

ritual A highly routinized act that expresses and reinforces membership in the community.

sacred Things that have taken on supernatural significance because of individuals' interactions with the religious community.

sects Smaller groups that present themselves as an authentic, purged, refurbished version of the faith from which they split.

secularization The decreasing influence of religion on social life.

sick role Exempts an ill person from their daily responsibilities on the condition that the person attempt to get better as soon as possible.

state A political organization with power over a given area.

theistic A belief system in which there is a supernatural being who should be viewed as a higher power.

theocracies States that are run under religious law.

totalitarian Governments run by a single party that promotes extreme nationalism.