

Religious Organizations

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover religious organizations, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Churches and State Churches
2. Denominations
3. Sects
4. Cults
5. Civic-Religions
6. Fundamentalism

1. CHURCHES AND STATE CHURCHES

There are various types of organized religious groups in society, each with varying degrees of social integration. The **church** is the institution of religion that is integrated into society as a whole. There are two kinds of language commonly used when people refer to a church:

- If you are saying something like, “The church has decided that we should not allow gay marriage,” then you are speaking about the church as an institution.
- If, however, you say, “I’m going to church,” referring to a specific physical space where you worship and gather with everyone else in the church, then you’re speaking about the church as an actual space.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Scientology is an institution of religion that is integrated into society as a whole, as is Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Unitarian Universalist—all of these are examples of churches.

These churches in the institutional sense could last for centuries. They have many rules and regulations governing the conduct of practitioners and clergymen. Often, you have to be educated and ordained in order to be a religious leader in institutionalized churches.

There also exists what are called **state churches**. State churches are churches that are formally integrated with the nation-state as a whole.

➦ **EXAMPLE** The state of Islam, Pakistan, and Iran, for instance, are state churches. Many countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East are state church countries.

State churches consider everyone in society as a member. In this sense, they're much less tolerant of outside

or contradictory religious views.



TERM TO KNOW

Church

The institution of religion that is integrated into society as a whole.

State Church

A church that is linked to a nation state.

2. DENOMINATIONS

Next in the list of religious organizations are **denominations**. Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians are all denominations. Each of these denominations has its own beliefs, but they recognize that others have their own beliefs as well, so they are largely tolerant of each other. You can think of Christianity, for instance, as having many denominations



TERM TO KNOW

Denomination

A church that recognizes religious difference and exists separate from the nation state.

3. SECTS

A **sect** is a smaller, less formal, and more spontaneous religious group that exists apart from the larger society.



EXAMPLE The Amish in America are a sect. They're not very integrated with the rest of American society as a whole--in fact, they live most of the time separated from the rest of the larger society in terms of culture, geography, etc.

Leaders in a sect aren't formally trained most of the time, but are charismatic people capable of producing emotional responses in others. Typically a sect forms when a group spins off from a denomination or church. Since sects are smaller, they don't necessarily last for centuries, but can survive as long as the charismatic leader guides the sect.



TERM TO KNOW

Sect

A smaller, less formal and more spontaneous religious group that exists apart from the larger society.

4. CULTS

More extreme than a sect is a **cult**, which is a small close-knit group who devoutly follow the instruction of one leader or a small group of charismatic leaders.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You might remember the Heaven's Gate cult who committed suicide following the Hale Bopp Comet, believing that their spirits could go to an alien ship that was thought to be following the comet.

Typically, a charismatic leader--like Marshall Applewhite of the Heaven's Gate cult--convinces a group of people to follow an alternative vision or an alternative way of life. He starts to amass followers and a cult forms. Cults stand largely outside of society--they're not socially integrated with the larger society, in terms of culture and custom. They're also often short lived, either fizzling out or failing to gain enough followers to sustain themselves. Sometimes they become more integrated with society, and become denominations themselves.



TERM TO KNOW

Cult

A small, close-knit group who devoutly follows the instruction of a charismatic leader.

5. CIVIC-RELIGIONS

Civic-religion is not religion in the common sense of the word, but certainly nationalistic and civic activities come to resemble religious activities. Civic-religion is a devotion to the State and to the citizenship ideals of that State.

IN CONTEXT

Think about the times people collectively venerate the flag at sporting events, and in the Pledge of Allegiance and the National Anthem. You could even view these as rituals, in the Durkheimian sense, that unify the collective through the veneration of the State.

People come together to venerate and engage in rituals that reaffirm the collective--their way of life is holy, and everyone should follow that way of life. Any given American citizen might feel that anyone not living like an American is 'living in sin,' so to speak.

You may have heard of the term "nationalism." Excessive nationalism is akin to religious devotion, therefore civic-religion is an interesting way to look at how, as a collective nation, Americans behave in a religious fashion.



TERM TO KNOW

Civic-Religion

A religious-like devotion to a state and the citizenship ideals of that state.

6. FUNDAMENTALISM

Different religions can contain elements of **fundamentalism**--there are Christian Fundamentalists, Islamic

Fundamentalists, etc. Each denomination can have a fundamentalist faction. Fundamentalists take their respective book and beliefs as truth, and have no tolerance for contradictory beliefs. They are highly tradition-bound groups that stick rigidly to the teachings of the past.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Christian Fundamentalists will take every word in the Bible as truth, whereas a more progressive Christian might view the writings of the Bible as general guidelines, or allegorical stories not necessarily meant to be taken literally. A fundamentalist would reject that notion and take it as the literal truth.



TERM TO KNOW

Fundamentalism

A highly traditional worldview that dismisses all other religious groups by taking one book as word-for-word truth.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the various types of organized religion, including **churches, state churches, denominations, sects, cults, civic-religions, and fundamentalism.**

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Church

The institution of religion that is integrated into society as a whole.

Civic-Religion

A religious-like devotion to a state and the citizenship ideals of that state.

Cult

A small, close-knit group who devoutly follows the instruction of a charismatic leader.

Denomination

A church that recognizes religious difference and exists separate from the nation state.

Fundamentalism

A highly traditional worldview that dismisses all other religious groups by taking one book as word-for-word truth.

Sect

A smaller, less formal and more spontaneous religious group that exists apart from the larger society.

State Church

A church that is linked to a nation state.

