

## Chapter 12

# Practices and Religious Communities

For most people with a religious orientation, religion is not a *thing* but it is something that they *do*, a set of individual and communal **practices** that they perform to develop and express their spiritual nature (cf. Section 6.3.4). Thus, no consideration of the topic of religion and psychology is complete without a thorough examination of the individual and communal actions performed in pursuit of religious or spiritual goals.

### 12.1 Religious and Spiritual Practices in Community

There are two ways of approaching the study of religious and spiritual practices. In the modernist and positivist view, practices are a technique or technology engaged in for a particular purpose. These techniques can be learned and performed regardless of the beliefs and lifestyle of the person performing them. In this view, a person can practice Buddhist meditation without holding any Buddhist beliefs or engaging in any other Buddhist practices or community life. This is quite different from a postmodern perspective (see Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.4), which holds that all activity is contextual and thus assumes a particular set of beliefs or worldview. In this view, any single practice cannot be understood apart from other practices and the community life that supports them. Studying or using a practice in an isolated way, even if possible, is somewhat like taking an electronic part out of a cardiac pacemaker and expecting it to work on its own, or inserting it into an entirely different device like a computer and supposing that it will perform the same function. The part may (or may not) function in its new context; it may even have a helpful effect, but its function is likely to be different. In the postmodern view, any attempt to understand religious practices outside of their context may lead to fundamental errors.

There is value in both modern and postmodern approaches to practice. In support of the modernist perspective, it is true that people can and do engage in spiritual practices while divorced from the communities and traditions that produced them, such as in the use of Buddhist approaches to the treatment of psychological problems (see Section 11.4.2). It is also true that research in a positivist framework has helped us understand some biological and psychological factors connected with practices like meditation (see Section 13.6).

However, the postmodern approach has particular advantages when considering practices because of the inherently contextual nature of spirituality (cf. Section 1.2.2). In the religious perspective (and many nonreligious ones), spirituality is where all the aspects of life meet and run together; it is the common theme that brings unity and coherence within ourselves and with the world. This means that everything affects our spirituality and so “working on our spirituality” is not picking a single practice that we do every once in awhile but choosing a *way of life* that supports spirituality and leads us toward wholeness. It involves the whole person, including the body as well as our beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions. Addressing this whole person requires a system of intertwined practices. This way of life will inevitably affect our relationships and actions toward others and our connections to the communities that surround us; it thus has a moral quality (Polkinghorne, 2004, pp. 1–9; Wuthnow, 2001). Religious and spiritual practices exist within this contextual and communal framework, and religious communities and traditions have been the primary places where these practices have been developed and refined over many generations.

Postmodern approaches are popular in the contemporary study of religious practices done by Christian theologians and religious studies scholars. An example can be found in the practical theology of Browning (1991) and others, which draws on hermeneutic philosophy, practical early Christian thought, and theologies like that of Reinhold Niebuhr or David Tracy (see Sections 1.5.2 and 1.5.3). It emphasizes that (1) religion involves practices; (2) these practices take place within a communal ideological context and cannot be understood apart from the context, so they are theory laden; and (3) practices are responses to the specific needs of individuals in particular situations and thus cannot be comprehended by reductionist statements of general laws (Forrester, 1999; Fowler, 1999a, 1999c; Tracy, 1975, p. 46; 1983, p. 76). Practical theology argues that practices and their descriptions in religion—and also in psychology—are theory laden. This means that their effect is dependent upon the ethical and theoretical assumptions of the individual and community that stand behind the practices, as well as the concrete situation within which they are performed. Transformation is thought to be multidimensional and include all these aspects (Browning, 1999; Viau, 1999).

Postmodern approaches to spiritual practice have largely been absent from psychology. One of the main reasons for this is that psychology has generally ignored the communal and social aspects of religion or been unsophisticated in its approach to the topic (Pargament & Maton, 2000; Pargament, 2002b). This is understandable, as a thorough understanding of community dynamics includes a wide variety of areas including (1) sacred space, symbols or rituals; (2) community relationships, including patterns of leadership; (3) community climate, what it feels like for members; (4) beliefs and values; and (5) practices (Roehlkepartain & Patel, 2006). However, it is also unfortunate, as there are many indications that community life forms a vital part of religious or spiritual development, although the kind of community best suited to the individual may vary according to their stage of development (Love, 2002).

In this chapter, we will consider religious communities, as well as practices that are typically done in group settings, while in the next chapter we will focus on individual practices such as prayer and meditation. While these are treated separately,

in fact it is not truly possible to put practices into strict categories like “individual” or “communal.” Individual practices like prayer can intensify social support and are dependent upon a rich communal tradition of goals and methods (Ladd & McIntosh, 2008). Likewise, communal practices like worship have a deeply individual aspect to them. Our discussion will highlight these connections.

## 12.2 Religious Self-Understandings of Community

From the very earliest times, spiritual seeking has brought people together into religious communities. Central to the life of a religious community is an **ideology**, a set of beliefs that has three components—(1) descriptive statements about the world, (2) normative statements about how we ought to act, and (3) sociological imperatives that define social existence for believers (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 118–119; 1988, pp. 349–369). Also important for the community are shared practices that are sometimes performed individually but are often done in small or large group settings. In psychological language, the community and the supportive mentoring relationships within it are designed to provide a container within which transformation can be supported and worked out in positive ways (Gunn, 2000, pp. 126–127, 276–280; see Sections 14.1.1 and 14.1.2). In this section, we consider the understandings of community developed within two religious traditions—Buddhism and Christianity. In contrast to social scientific views of religion that attempt to study communities *as they actually are in society*, religious understandings focus on communities *as they should be* and discuss typical barriers and problems that occur in attempting to attain this goal. Of course, social scientists studying religious communities bring their own values and ideas about ideal communities to their work, so in practice these two approaches are not strictly separated.

### 12.2.1 Buddhism and the Sangha

The **sangha** or community is considered to be so important in Buddhism that it is included as one of its Three Jewels along with the Buddha and dharma (see Section 3.2). Although probably not the original intent of the Buddha, the earliest sangha were **monastic communities** of men, and later women, who lived in unisex groupings apart from society and were distinguished from lay Buddhists who remained in the world. A man who lived in one of these communities was known as a *bhikkhu* or **monk**. In early Buddhism, the term *sangha* referred to a particular monastic community, but in later times the term was also applied to a more universal collection of all monks, or even all practicing Buddhists, and as a model for the ideal society. Over time, these communities settled in particular locations and built buildings or **monasteries**, initially just as dwelling places but later to provide facilities for teaching and learning. Initially monks lived on alms, but more sophisticated forms of support also developed over time (Putuwar, 1991).

In order to join the community, one had to have a certain level of moral purity and traditionally be at least 15 years of age. The prospective member often had a sponsor who presented the person to an assembly where the community decided on admittance. On presentation the person recited the formula “I take my refuge in the Buddha, I take my refuge in the Dhamma, and I take my refuge in the Sangha” (Hazra, 1988, p. 181). Once admitted, there were two levels of ordination for monks. At the first level, one became a novice (*samanera*) and chose two teachers—a general teacher (*upajjhaya*) and a person to train them in meditation techniques (*acariya*). Many leave after a couple of years, but those who stayed went through a second ceremony to become a bhikkhu (Hazra, 1988, pp. 81–97).

The sangha had two social structures: First, there was an administrative structure for managing community affairs. The early sangha did not have a monastic community leader or **abbot**; instead, most important decisions were made by democratic vote and generally required unanimous approval. Thus, there was no requirement of obedience to a superior and equal rights among members were emphasized. However, moral conduct (*sila*) including obedience to outward rules (*vinaya*), and following inner beliefs or attitudes (*dhamma*) was expected as essential support for teaching and practice. These rules included prohibitions of sexual behavior and owning personal property (Putuwar, 1991, pp. 36–60). Second was a more hierarchical teaching structure. Offices or ranks included the (1) *thera* or chief monk, (2) *theras* of lesser degrees who acted as teachers, and (3) junior bhikkus still undergoing training. Criteria for advancement to the status of a *thera* included observance of rules, accomplishments in learning and study, satisfaction with life, and proficiency in meditation (Hazra, 1988, pp. 195–196).

In more modern thought, while Buddhist monasteries still exist in large numbers particularly in Asia, a sangha need not be a collection of monks but simply a group of friends who practice mindfulness together, inspired by each other, the historic Buddha and his teachings. In other words, Buddhism is about practice (Lawlor, 2002a). Taking refuge in the sangha is taking refuge in practices supported by friends with similar ideas. These practices are thought to help provide stability, joy, and collective energy, as well as lead to increased awareness and compassion (Hanh, 2002, pp. 9–27). Historically in the West, members of a sangha knew little about each other, but more recently the formation of spiritual friendships has been increasing in importance (Lawlor, 2002a, 2002b), along with a number of other practices including the following:

- Mindfulness retreats and weekly gatherings where members can share teachings, discuss problems of practice, and support each other (King, 2002)
- Acts of compassion and service, although some see Buddhism’s primary social role as offering values (Dockett & North-Schulte, 2003)
- Participation in regional, national and international events (Hanh, 2002)
- Outreach to others, for instance by starting mindfulness practice centers that are open to members of other religions.

Buddhists have always recognized the problems of community and their potential to interfere with practice (cf. Casey, 1995, p. 98). For instance, the early Buddhist

meditation manual the *Visuddhimagga* contained lists of the faults of a monastery (Buddhaghosa, 1999, p. 118). Some modern treatments of Buddhist communities also discuss problems, including autocratic leadership, intolerance, internal divisiveness or conflict, members with serious mental illness, and sexual or financial misconduct by community leadership (Lawlor, 2002b, 2002c; Schmied, 2002). Some commentators see these problems as more serious in Buddhist groups outside of the Asian context, although specific data on this are not available. Many of these problems are found in all kinds of organizational or workplace settings, although the degree of similarity or difference between religious and secular organizational settings is not clearly known. At any rate, like all groups, Buddhist sangha developed ways of dealing with rule-breaking and other problems of community life. Early sangha distinguished between disciplinary or disputable matters and nondisciplinary or nondisputable problems. Disciplinary matters included rule breaking and immoral conduct, while nondisciplinary matters involved things like appointments of officers for managing community affairs. Disciplinary matters were handled according to a set of formal procedures for accusation and trial (Hazra, 1988, p. 107). Buddhist communities in the West tend to have less systematic ways of dealing with disciplinary problems.

### ***12.2.2 Religious Communities in Zen Buddhism***

Dogen (1996) and other Zen writers also developed visions for an ideal religious community. While Zen communities tend to have a less egalitarian structure than the classical sangha, all, regardless of rank or wisdom, are viewed as equal members, and writers recognized that wisdom is often unrelated to rank. A number of temple administrators from the chief cook or *tenzo* to the abbot or head of the monastery are described by Dogen. He taught that the most important attitude of an abbot is to serve the community for the benefit of others, maintaining high standards and respectfully following in the footsteps of predecessors. Temple administrators should strike a middle ground in terms of strictness: They should be gentle but not overly compassionate, welcoming to strangers but also screening out potential monks who do not possess the proper faith and habits. Leaders were to have an attitude of service and use skillful means when helping monks in training or **novices**. Newcomers were to be provided with basic necessities and education about the local region and rules of the community. In return, monks were expected to live according to Zen and not be critical of faults or hardships; rather they were to maintain a joyful attitude and avoid contentiousness.

The daily schedule at a monastery included early rising (4 am!), gatherings for meditation and sutra-chanting or study in a dignified atmosphere, meals and work time, with the monks retiring at about 9 pm. Annual observances throughout the year would include Buddha's birthday, enlightenment and death, remembrance services especially for the founder of the order, and repentance services (Foulk, 1988). Simple events like meals were structured to become times for contemplation and abandonment of flaws like greed.

### 12.2.3 *Christian Communities*

In the Christian tradition, monastic communities for men and women began to form in the early 4th century near towns and in more isolated areas of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. These communities were in part a response to social conditions that were thought to present obstacles to following a truly Christian way of life (Gould, 1993, pp. 139–140). Especially in Western Christianity, a supportive community of like-minded individuals following a common rule of practice was thought to offer the best atmosphere for pursuit of Christian ideals and spiritual development. It was thought that most people would flourish better in a community setting than following a hermit life of individual seeking (Goehring, 1999; Spidlik, 1986, p. 151; Welch, 1996, p. 81; Merton, 2005b, p. 39; Driver, 2002, p. 23; Veilleux, 1980, pp. 151, 238). This idea of mutual accountability and encouragement also lies at the foundation of a number of Protestant communal traditions such as Methodism (Watson, 1986).

However, Christian texts like the Bible clearly recognize the existence of both good and bad religion, and as Luther once noted, even good communities have problems (Hendricks, 1986, p. 17; Kärkkäinen, 2004, p. 61). There is a need to steer a course between the extremes of rampant individualism and excessive organization that can become mechanical or even totalitarian (Merton, 2005b, pp. 44–45). As a result, Christian communities have worked to define rules for common life that would minimize problems and maximize benefits, turning problems of community life into opportunities for spiritual growth. The earliest monastic rules, the *Rule of Pachomius* (Veilleux, 1981, pp. 141–223; Merton, 2006, pp. 72–114; Harmless, 2004, p. 124) and the *Rule of St. Basil* (Holmes, 2000) were based on Biblical principles and early church practices. They not only emphasized community life as a way of withdrawal from distraction and worldly concerns, but also made it clear that love of others and love of God are interrelated and are best learned together in community. Basil referred to a harmonious religious community as “a stadium for athletics, a method for traveling forward, a continual exercise (gymnasia) and a practice of the Lord’s commandments” (Holmes, 2000, p. 142). He saw intense community life as a practice for all Christians, not just for monks (Merton, 1973, pp. 68–69). Others offer us an insightful perspective on our gifts and flaws, and the community provides a framework for the pursuit of relational goals like service, mentoring and hospitality. The community also supports individual devotional practices that help us develop inner stillness and awareness. These inner states help us to advance spiritually and deal constructively with the anger and judgmentalness that can occur in a community (Gould, 1993). In the ancient world, the communities also provided education such as basic literacy so that members could read the Bible and sacred texts. At various times in history these rules were more or less successful in achieving their ideals, although periods of decadence also provided an opportunity for the flourishing of the mystical life and creativity as communities struggled to reform (de Certeau, 1992, p. 25). Some rules like that of Basil were designed for general use by Christians, while others like that of Pachomius were for separated monastic communities. The intention was to provide a framework for growth while

maintaining flexibility for individual needs, aptitudes and capacities (Merton, 2006, p. 125; Veilleux, 1980, p. 83).

In the early 5th century, Christians like John Cassian from Western Europe brought back news of Eastern monasticism and began forming their own religious communities. The basic ideal of these groups is stated in the *Rule of St. Augustine* as: “Mutual love expressed in the community of goods and in humility” (Canning, 1986, p. 11). In the early 6th century, the monk St. Benedict developed the *Rule of St. Benedict* (Benedict, 2001), which provided a detailed vision of community for Western Christians. Areas covered by the various monastic rules included the following:

1. *Leadership*. The abbot should be one who shows no partiality, governing by deeds as well as words. While they have the final authority and responsibility, power should not be used in an arbitrary fashion, and the abbot should consult with all about any important matter. Humility was considered to be a key virtue (Veilleux, 1980, p. 316). The Western rule tends to be more hierarchal than Basil’s rule.
2. *Relational practices*. Monks were directed to practice mutual obedience and develop humility in order to foster spiritual growth of both the individual and the community.
3. *Communal religious practices*. Most of the day was structured around set times for prayer and worship known as the **Daily Office**. During the day this included the prayer times of *Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers,* and *Compline*, and at night a period of silence or *Vigils*. Prayers were to be reverent, short, and pure. Some of the prayer times were individual, while others took place in an assembly (Harmless, 2004, pp. 128–129).
4. *Discipline*. Discipline for rule breaking should not be arbitrary but for good reason and only after private and public admonishment. Patience was encouraged. In more serious cases, a person might be excluded from some or all community activities and given the guidance of a mature brother, while others prayed for him. If problems remained, then expulsion from the community was allowed.
5. *Communal life*. Private property was not allowed; goods were to be distributed based on need rather than rank or social status, and while equality was stressed there was also attention to the individual, for instance that all should work according to their ability. Duties included kitchen work and a regular daily schedule of manual labor with time set aside for reading and the Daily Office. Life was to be regulated with the goal of spiritual advancement and the needs of others in mind.
6. *Membership*. While hospitality and reception of guests, pilgrims, and prospective members was important, full membership in the community was more difficult to attain. Individuals joining the community needed to make difficult vows of stability (remaining with the community), reformation of life, and obedience. Age and other limits were established to make sure people had the personal stability necessary to take these vows, and a preparatory period of novitiate helped determine whether the individual was suited to the way of life offered by the community.

### 12.2.3.1 Modern Views

Modern Christian thought continues to emphasize the importance of community in human development and spiritual formation. A Christian psychological view is provided by Balswick, King, and Reimer (2005) who argue that (1) people are essentially relational, and so (2) community and the intimacy it can provide are necessary to human growth. Strong communities produce a “reciprocating self” that is integrated with good resources and stands in the middle of a continuum between the extremes of a “fortress self” that is highly defended and a “fragmented self” with few resources. This kind of relational self allows for moral development and full faith and intimacy in God without sacrificing the particularity of the individual. Thus, most Christians reject the idea that community and personhood are somehow opposed to each other, and argue that any spirituality must have access to a tradition that provides community and a set of concrete spiritual practices designed to foster growth. This connection to community allows one to separate authentic and inauthentic spiritual experience. In Christianity, the Trinitarian focus of belief and practice means that spiritual growth is relational in nature and should be reflected in interactions; it is not just a solitary quest or pattern of ethics (Rahner, 1963, pp. 122–126, 235–239; Herrera, 2000; Sheldrake, 1998). Community also provides support for Christian belief that is increasingly important in a culture dominated by secular ideas and ways of thinking (Pannenberg, 1996).

While some modern Christian religious communities aim for isolation or avoidance, most try to connect the individual with society. Along with evangelism, types of mission include (1) social activism—social justice which involves changing existing structures, (2) civic activism—supporting existing structures that meet social needs, or (3) social service—improving existing structures. Other mission priorities involve providing sanctuary and protection to individuals in need (Pargament & Maton, 2000).

Within the Christian tradition, there is a large diversity of community practices and ideals. Many of the issues discussed in the ancient rules of Basil and Benedict continue to be wrestled with by Christians in popular literature and in **ecclesiology**, the branch of theology devoted to the study of religious community. Differences of opinion exist about a number of issues (Kärkkäinen, 2002, p. 84; Dulles, 2002). For instance, some see the visible Church as the presence of God in the world (e.g., Calvin, 1960, pp. 1011–1053), while others see the true Church as invisible, operating in the midst of a community that externally may seem quite broken. Others like Luther hold that it is both, offering a “hospital for the sick.” Other debates within ecclesiology revolve around the relative importance of various aspects of community, such as (1) institutional and hierarchical or episcopal structures, (2) sacramental practices, (3) personal holiness, (4) traditional customs and beliefs, (5) proclamation through preaching or evangelism, (6) personal mysticism, and (7) outreach to other groups and religious traditions or **ecumenism** (cf. Gilkey, 1994). Some Christian groups emphasize institutional, traditional, and sacramental aspects of communities, while others stress more personal and mystical aspects. This debate contains both a discussion of the goals for an ideal community and a debate over the

best way to deal with problems that regularly occur in community life. This discussion takes place amidst constant social, cultural, and economic shifts that put pressures on groups to change and adapt. This constant pressure for change often leads to conflict and is a significant problem in contemporary US Christian communities (Dudley & Roozen, 2001).

## 12.3 Psychological Perspectives on Religious Communities

Research by social scientists and psychologists adds a valuable complement to self-understandings of religious communities. We begin by considering aspects of modern culture that affect the nature and status of community and then move to research that focuses specifically on Christian communities.

### 12.3.1 *The Modern Backdrop to Community Life*

General patterns of social organization in our culture have a large impact on the functioning of communities, including religious ones. Research suggests that these overall patterns can be classified into three types—individualist, collectivist, and communitarian (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). In the pattern of **individualism**, society is thought to be a collection of loosely linked individuals who are motivated by personal preferences, needs, and rights. It is assumed that the autonomy, goals, values, and successes of the individual should govern our association with others and have priority over group objectives. The individual should be protected against group forces that are assumed to inhibit the individuals in their quest for success or happiness. In this view, the individual becomes the authority on what is true or right. Freedom and power are stressed as primary virtues (Bloom, 1992, pp. 21–26). Modernist societies such as the US are thought to be primarily organized around individualist values. Interestingly, a strong dominance of religion at a societal level can promote a more individualistic approach to religion, as has been the case in Iran (Kazemipur & Rezaei, 2003).

**Collectivism** is a social pattern that emphasizes giving priority to the goals of the collective over personal needs of the individual. Harmonious functioning and obligation to others are primary, and interdependence is assumed. This does not necessarily translate into close or affectionate relationships; it is possible to be superficially polite without trust or love. In this system, morality is based on duty and reciprocity rather than personal caring of individuals (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). Societies like China are traditionally thought to be collectivist in orientation.

In early research, individualism and collectivism were thought of as contrasting worldviews on opposite sides of a continuum. However, recent research has found that they are independent dimensions. For instance, many regions of the modern world such as the US, other English-speaking nations, and countries in

South America tend to be relatively high on measures of individualism, but the US and many English-speaking countries are also low on collectivism, while countries in Latin America are high on both (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). The issue of social organization is also complex because differences are sometimes subtle, and everyone from a particular national, racial, or ethnic group does not follow the same pattern (Williams, 2003). Other factors that can alter the effects of social organization are as follows: (1) the presence of a *vertical structure* that accepts inequality and difference or a *horizontal structure* that emphasizes equality and sameness, (2) the amount of flexibility and complexity allowed, and (3) the way control is exercised, either through a *grid* of social classification or through *group* influence and social pressure on the individual (Douglas, 1996, pp. 59–62).

A third type of social organization that offers an alternative to individualism and collectivism may be called **communitarian**, which holds that the ideal form of social organization promotes both (1) a strong sense of individual autonomy and uniqueness, and (2) a deep commitment to relationships, community values, and goals. In this view, the individual person and community support each other, and the goals of each are balanced in the context of specific practical situations. It recognizes both our experience of finiteness and our sense of shared belonging, values, and perspectives (cf. Steinbock, 2004). Some religious communities are built around this communitarian ideal. For instance, monastic communities promote an intensely relational way of life, but they also support autonomy through requiring members to voluntarily choose to affiliate with them. They also support uniqueness by individually modifying the responsibilities and benefits of membership depending on need and ability, as well as individualizing the pattern of suggested spiritual practices for each individual.

### 12.3.1.1 Effects of Social Organization on Religious and Other Communities

It is clear that the dominant form of social organization in a society has important effects on individual and community life, although the exact nature of these effects is still a matter of debate. Traditionally, scholars and Western political theorists have argued that more individualism is better and that it is impossible to get too much of it (e.g., Veenhoven, 1999). However, an increasing number of researchers argue that extreme individualism has a corrosive effect on social institutions and groups, as it is hard to combine individualism with social bonding (Almond, Appleby, & Sivan, 2003, p. 231; Taylor, 2007, p. 477). Critics of individualism point to its apparent effects in the US, where surveys have found that 25% of the population says they have no close confidante they could talk to about a serious personal problem, and 50% says they have none outside their immediate family. These percentages have doubled since the 1980s, suggesting that individualism in American society is increasing and having negative effects on social support, one of the most important factors connected with positive mental health (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). (Robert Putnam 2002; Putnam & Goss, 2002) note that advanced democracies all over the world have declining rates of participation

in beneficial social organizations and increasing levels of distrust and cynicism, particularly in young adults. He attributes this to the increasing anonymity and technological orientation of modern society that fosters withdrawal and individualism, while working against the formation of social networks. Extreme individualism is related to increased levels of loneliness and loss of meaning, less social support, higher divorce and crime rates, more stress-related illness, and higher rates of depression. In Western societies this appears to be especially the case for men, who tend to be socialized into roles of more extreme individualism. It is especially problematic in poor societies, those that are undergoing rapid social change, or those that do not value things connected with individualism (Ahuvia, 2002; Scott, Ciarrochi, & Deane, 2004; Reid, 2004; Diener, 2000; Möller-Leimkühler, 2003). Extreme individualism, which promotes disconnection from the group, is also thought by some to be one of the prime prerequisites for totalitarianism, as the disconnected individual is more likely to offer total loyalty to a leader (Arendt, 1968). In terms of religion, some researchers argue that individualistic trends in society hinder cohesiveness in congregations (Pargament & Maton, 2000).

The evidence collected by Putnam and others would seem to argue that individualism is a problematic system and that an alternative like collectivism might be preferable. However, collectivist societies generally have lower levels of self-esteem and subjective well-being among their members and may have lower scores on some indicators of mental health (Triandis, 1995, p. 108). Also, some aspects of individualism are connected with positive conditions like freedom, spontaneity, privacy, and respect for human rights that often suffer in collectivist societies (Veenhoven, 2000; Myers, 1999). This leads some to conclude that a kind of a communitarian balance between individual and collective needs is desirable (Diener & Suh, 1999; cf. Kirsh & Kuiper, 2002). For instance, research with college students has found that those with a communal orientation are more likely to help a person and respond to sadness than those who are not. Low communion males are more likely to endorse flattery, withholding affection or physical aggression as acceptable means of getting what they want. They also are more likely to complain about doing a favor for someone and are less likely to listen to other points of view. They rate power and wealth as important, while those high on the communal dimension rate duty and service as more important (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Millberg, 1987; Bankart & Vincent, 2001).

How can a communitarian system manage to support individuals and the community at the same time? In approaching this question, it is helpful to distinguish between individualism and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2001, 2006; cf. Ricoeur, 1966). Extreme individualism is based on the assumption that all our choices should be based on our own personal needs and desires. **Autonomy** does not make this assumption; it is perfectly all right to concur with the preferences of others, as long as we freely chose to do this and the choice is congruent with our values. We can choose to be dependent on others or sacrifice our personal goals in the interests of the community, as long as the individual freely elects these decisions (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, pp. 136–139; cf. Dwairy, 2006, pp. 49–52). It is forced choice and loss of control that are associated with lower levels of well-being and higher levels

of suffering or psychopathology, while autonomy is associated positively with intimacy and creativity (cf. Shults & Sandage, 2006, p. 113). In practice, autonomy might or might not also be associated with religious participation. Dillon and Wink (2007, pp. 66, 207) argue that in the US, autonomy has meant freedom from cultural elites with an antireligious agenda so that autonomy results in increased religious participation. Those interested can become involved, and those who are dissatisfied can explore.

In their ideal form, religious communities in the Christian and Buddhist traditions are communitarian in nature. For instance, monastic communities support autonomy and freedom of choice; no one is forced to join, for each person freely elects membership and has opportunities during a trial period to withdraw. They also recognize and support the uniqueness of each individual in the spiritual guidance process and the fitting of spiritual disciplines to the specific gifts and problems of each person (see e.g., Section 14.1.1). On the other hand, religious communities also support the idea of individual sacrifice in support of the community and its goals. Examples of this in the Christian tradition include the sharing of material resources and labor according to ability and need, as well as the emphasis on development of obedience and humility. This of course does not mean that every religious group is communitarian in nature. It is easy to find examples where religious groups—either deliberately or by accident—have adopted structures that were either excessively individualist or collectivist in nature.

The communitarian ideal is congruent with contemporary Christian views of the human person. For instance, Zizioulas (2006) argues that personhood involves three primary characteristics: (1) communion and relationship, (2) uniqueness, and (3) the freedom to open ourselves to communion while maintaining our uniqueness. He believes that modern individualism confuses difference with division and that real communion respects difference without creating divisions. Individualism tries to maintain uniqueness but ends up creating division and destroying communion, while collectivism destroys uniqueness that forms the basis for authentic relationships. The union of human and divine in Christ and models of relationality in the Trinity provide models of how this should work, although in practice human fallenness and fear limit our ability to attain this dynamic interaction of uniqueness and communion.

### *12.3.2 Christian Churches and Congregations*

While psychologists have devoted relatively little attention to religious communities, quite a bit is known about them from the work of scholars in sociology and religious studies. In the US, church members tend to be older than the US population average, although some communities are mostly young adults and children. Communities known as **congregations** are mostly small—under 200 members—but more than half of church attendees go to the 10% of congregations that are larger—over 350 participants. Regular participants in worship number about half of membership;

80% or more of regulars report worshipping every week and always or usually experience God's presence during worship (Ammerman, 2005; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). In the Christian tradition, most congregations are voluntary religious communities, although in Europe and some American Christian groups, a congregation is also defined geographically. Since membership is voluntary, churches must actively recruit members, and so the community is under continuous creation (Warner, 1994). Churches have resemblances to other voluntary associations but are also different. In industrial and post-industrial societies they embody the sacred in a secular world, both at the broad level of life narratives and the mundane level of everyday concerns or problems (Woolever & Bruce, 2002; Browning, 1994).

Congregational life includes a variety of activities, which are frequently aimed at specific gender and age groupings (Ammerman, 2005). Surveys of congregational leaders in the US suggest that members give the highest ratings to (1) a style and quality of worship and preaching that builds close connection to God; (2) educational and small group activities that foster spiritual growth, and in conservative churches opportunities for evangelism; and (3) fellowship activities that are structured around normal life events but also give support in more difficult times. These activities are relationally intensive and affective in character, leading to high rates of friendship and social connection among attendees (Wuthnow, 2004, pp. 97–98). More frequent attendees report bigger and more diverse social networks, as well as a higher quality of social relationships that are more supportive (Bradley, 1995; Ellison & George, 1994). In general, surveys show that over 80% of members report that their congregation is meeting their needs, and the majority of those reporting strong growth in their faith attribute this to their congregation (Woolever & Bruce, 2002, p. 27).

Differences in activities and relational patterns, as well as community history and context, lead to different styles of community environment. Pargament, Silverman, Johnson, Echemendia, and Snyder (1983) found a number of dimensions of congregational climate including sense of community, activity level, degree of social concern, openness to change, stability, expressiveness of feelings, order and structure, and levels of intrinsic or extrinsic orientation. Some types of churches have a wider range of climate styles, with small African American Protestant congregations showing the most variability and uniqueness. Small white Protestant churches were higher on expressiveness of feelings, had a stronger sense of community, and were more open to change than some larger white Protestant churches. Large Catholic churches reported lower expressiveness and sense of community but higher levels of activity, stability, and social concern. Members of fundamentalist congregations reported more expressiveness and involvement in religious beliefs, and greater autonomy among their members was linked with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction. It is likely that this culture evolves developmentally over time (cf. Liebert, 2000, pp. 146–161), but little is known about the existence and nature of these patterns.

Congregations are grouped into **denominations** and other larger affiliations. In the US, Protestants dominate with about 80% of congregations, 2/3 of which are conservative with more traditional beliefs and include **Pentecostal** or **charismatic**

churches that focus on spiritual gifts. Conservative and charismatic groups are growing rapidly worldwide, and traditional or mainline ones are shrinking; in the US, between the mid-1960s and 1980s, some 13,000 mainline congregations disappeared, while more than 13,000 conservative churches were set up (Gilkey, 1994). So, while some authors argue that US religion is suffering from decreased participation and connectedness, this evidence is mixed especially in conservative churches (e.g., Wuthnow, 2004). Roughly a third of US Christian communities strongly identify with a denomination and another third more modestly, although there is some evidence that these denominational bonds are weakening (Warner, 1994; Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Dougherty, Johnson, & Polson, 2007). Denominational bonds mean that congregations and the people in them are not isolated but embedded and interrelated, although the implications of this vary according to the culture of the denominational group (Ammerman, 2005, pp. 206–210). Congregations thus exist at several points of tension between (1) a local culture vs. transnational organization, (2) local or historic past tradition vs. evolving future, and (3) a public organization related to the greater community vs. a private grouping that exists to serve its members. Each of these tensions contributes to the construction of identity of the group and the individuals in it (Marty, 1994; Bass, 1994). While congregations take some character from their denomination, each is unique and members certainly feel this uniqueness and a strong sense of belonging. Community narratives hold the group together and convey a shared sense of unity and purpose (Wind & Lewis, 1994; Woolever & Bruce, 2002; Webb-Mitchell, 2001; Hopewell, 1987; cf. Macintyre, 1984, p. 205).

### *12.3.3 Specific Religious Communities and Movements*

Perhaps because of the negative view of organized religion held by many social scientists, existing research on religious communities has tended to focus on movements or groups perceived to be unusual or pathological in some way. Nevertheless, this research has yielded interesting findings in a variety of groups.

#### **12.3.3.1 Fundamentalism**

*Definition and characteristics.* Although the origins of Christian fundamentalism go back into to the 19th century, the term was first used by a Baptist periodical in 1920 to describe a group willing to do battle to preserve fundamentals of Christian religion against attacks from liberalizing seminaries and universities (Johnson, 2004). The most thorough exploration of this type of religious movement is the Fundamentalism Project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Marty & Appleby, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995; Almond et al., 2003). According to them, **fundamentalism** is a broad type of pattern found in all major religious traditions and can be defined as “a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled ‘true believers’

attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors” (Almond et al., 2003, p. 17). This pattern has both ideological and organizational components. Ideological characteristics include the following:

1. *A negative reaction to social trends* such as individualism, the marginalization of religion by modernist secular societies, and corruption within mainstream religious groups who are failing to resist these trends. This is the key behind all other characteristics. Groups vary according to elements in the mainstream religious tradition they embrace and what parts of secular culture they oppose or use to gain their goals.
2. *A view of religious texts as presenting absolute truth* in a literal and inerrant fashion. These texts become authoritative and define the nature of virtue or vice and the boundary of who stands within the group and on the side of good.
3. *A dualistic view of the world* as composed of light and dark, pure and impure, and good and evil. History is viewed as pointing toward an upcoming culmination of this conflict, which will happen in the near future.

The beliefs underlie a characteristic organizational structure:

1. *Membership is selective and voluntary*, and those within the group tend to see themselves as an elect group who are specially chosen. There is a sharp division between members and nonmembers, with those on the outside seen as potentially harmful or dangerous. Membership might involve ethnic, political, or geographical criteria as well as religious status. Members follow strict rules for behavior that affect all aspects of life, and the social life of the person revolves around the fundamentalist community.
2. *There is a charismatic leader and an authoritarian leadership structure* that carries out the dictates of the leader or perhaps a small leadership group. In contrast to cults, however, allegiance of the members is to the movement, not to the leader.

Overall, the group is marked by selectivity, rigid boundaries, a sense of uniqueness and confidence in the group and its leadership.

*Causes.* Three primary approaches have been taken attempting to explain why fundamentalist movements develop. Within psychology, the traditional approach has been that fundamentalism is a psychological phenomenon, a form of personal rigidity that can affect any organization but is found particularly in religious ones. It occurs when people are threatened either with the beliefs of others or the ambiguity inherent in human existence (Ellens, 2004a). It can be thought of as a phenomenon of arrested development (Fowler, 1996, p. 63) or an expression of a certain type of character structure such as the authoritarian personality that tends toward submission to authority, aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1996, p. 161). Certainly it is the case that fundamentalists often place their religion at the center of their identity (Kreidie, 2004). Psychological theorists like Altemeyer (2003) argue that this personality pattern and us-them mentality can be produced by strict religious training and identification in fundamentalist communities, although he acknowledges that the data on this question could be interpreted differently.

Scholars in the Fundamentalist Project and Islamic writers generally reject a strictly psychological interpretation of fundamentalism and take a more sociological approach. They hold that fundamentalisms are not just religious movements but instead are reactions to sociopolitical circumstances such as secularizing trends, socioeconomic development, and increasing moral and cultural fragmentation. Short-term and chance factors such as policies of local governments and especially leadership choices act as triggers, promoting the movement and determining whether it will pursue a *renouncer* strategy of withdrawal or a *conqueror* strategy of attack. In this view, Islamic fundamentalism is seen as a reaction to the formation of secular and repressive governments in the Middle East, as well as the perception that globalization is a cultural aggression against Islamic society that will lead to social misery and narrow control by outside interests (Almond et al., 2003; Mol, 1989; Moaddel & Talattof, 2002; Ali, 2002; Moaddel, 2005; Arkoun, 2000).

Recently other psychologists have argued that fundamentalism is ideological in nature, rather than psychological or sociopolitical in its origins. In this view, fundamentalism is seen as a type of religious meaning system that emphasizes transcendence and helps determine the goals and activities of a group. It is a set of beliefs about the world and the self that is built around a particular *text* and the principle of *intratextuality*, which is the belief that the text is (1) sacred, (2) speaks for itself, and (3) contains absolute truths. It is a response to the principle of *intertextuality* of modern and postmodern society, which holds that no text speaks for itself and all possess some authority. Fundamentalism as a meaning and value system provides a unifying philosophy, way of life, and sense of coherence organized around this single text. Other meaning systems are valuable only if legitimated by the text (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005, pp. 2–39).

*Effects.* It has been presumed for a long time that fundamentalism was synonymous with a wide range of pathology, but recent research paints a more nuanced picture of fundamentalists that departs from these stereotypes. Fundamentalists do not generally have higher levels of pathology than other groups and score well on many measures of mental health (Wulff, 1997, p. 247; e.g., Burton, 1993).

One stereotype is that fundamentalism and perhaps conservative Protestant Christianity in general is associated with toxic family environments. However, research has shown that these concerns are at least overstated and in many cases untrue (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999; Bartkowski, 2007). One problem in the older literature was an assumption that a way of life that includes high standards for conduct and morality would lack warmth. Recent research has found that conservative Protestantism is associated with an **authoritative parenting** style that combines high demand with high levels of expressed support and warmth. This is in contrast to an **authoritarian parenting** style that is cold and demanding. The authoritative style is advocated in prominent conservative Protestant parenting literature, and surveys indicate that this style is associated with more positive emotional interactions in the family and healthy outcomes as well as enhanced transmission of parental values like religiosity (Wilcox, 1998). Some researchers suggest the pattern leads to enhanced autonomy, moral development, and emotional maturity (McAdams, 2006, p. 56). There are mixed findings about whether child abusers are more likely to

come from fundamentalist backgrounds. Child abusers and fundamentalists have some similar attitudes toward child rearing, but abuse rates do not appear to be higher in fundamentalist groups (Neufeld, 1979). Fundamentalists are also thought to have negative attitudes toward education, but fundamentalism has been found to affect attitudes toward education in both negative and positive ways (Sherkat & Darnell, 1999).

Another issue that has been debated is whether fundamentalism promotes racism and prejudice. It seems logical that belonging to an elect group would encourage rejection and intolerance, and many studies support the idea that religion—especially of an orthodox or conservative variety—is associated with ethnocentrism, racism, and hostility toward groups like homosexuals (Hunsberger, 1996). In studies from the early 1990s with parents of Canadian college students, correlations of fundamentalism with prejudice were in the 0.3–0.4 range, suggesting a low-to-moderate association (Altemeyer, 1996, p. 159). However, this research is correlational and some suggest that the relationship between fundamentalism and prejudice is really a product of other factors like extrinsic religious motivation or authoritarian personality patterns, rather than fundamentalist teachings or social influences (Batson, Schoenrade, & Pych, 1985; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Other research has suggested that fundamentalists are not higher in racism although as a group they are less tolerant, in part because of a different moral vision which translates into strong positions on issues like abortion, pornography, or homosexuality (Woodberry & Smith, 1998; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997). Saroglou (2002) argues that fundamentalism is not about intolerance per se but a need for closure and meaning along with an aversion to inner disorder. Members of both traditional and conservative groups score high on need for closure, and a preference for predictability is associated with discomfort with ambiguity. This is not to say that fundamentalism is never connected with problems—just that research does not support the idea that these groups are inherently or typically problematic.

*Critique.* All of the academic approaches to the study of fundamentalism have been criticized. The Fundamentalist Project perspective has been attacked for conflating various religious, political, and militant groups together under one head, while brushing over differences among various religious and cultural contexts and within each tradition (Woodberry & Smith, 1998; Moaddel, 2005, p. 7; Schimmel, 2000). For instance, fundamentalism in the Christian West seems more related to intellectual issues with modernity, while in Islam the focus is on political and social concerns. The concept of fundamentalism also does not work well in the nontheistic Asian context and brushes over the fact that secular ideologies can have fundamentalist qualities. All this suggests a need to avoid stereotypes (Almond et al., 2003, pp. 14–15). There have been arguments in the literature about the methodology of Altemeyer, which has provided much of the empirical basis for connecting fundamentalism with prejudice (Gorsuch, 1993; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1993). Some scholars have argued that Altemeyer's questionnaires are ideologically biased against conventional religious beliefs and assume a conflict stance between science and religion. Critics contend that when his questions are reworded to reduce bias, correlations between fundamentalism and authoritarianism disappear. A different

reading of the data then suggests that fundamentalism is not connected to a distinctive personality type such as authoritarianism and is only weakly linked with dogmatism or inflexibility of beliefs. This has raised the possibility that some of the research critical of fundamentalism reflects cultural stereotypes or prejudices of social scientists rather than any real religious phenomenon (Hood et al., 2005; Watson et al., 2003).

### 12.3.3.2 New Religious Movements and Cults

New religious movements and groups known as cults have also attracted the attention of researchers. A **new religious movement** (NRM) is a group of individuals that affirm a common identity and unique set of religious beliefs distinct from those in the world's main religious traditions. These beliefs may be entirely new, or they may include elements of other current or ancient religious traditions and practices. While some groups are rejecting and separatist in nature, many are affirming of some individual or deity, or the revival of ancient religions in a kind of "repa-ganization" of Western culture (Braaten & Jenson, 1995, p. 1). Probably the most commonly discussed NRM is the **new age movement**, which holds that "inner spirituality—embedded within the self and the natural order as a whole—serves as *the* key to moving from all that is wrong with life to all that is right" (Heelas, 1996, p. 16). New agers typically believe that we have been indoctrinated by our culture into materialism and inauthenticness and that each individual needs to find their own spiritual path to seek their inner being. When this happens, the world will move toward a new age in the evolution of humanity (Jones, 1995b; Bloom, 1992, pp. 225–226).

Cults can be seen as a type of NRM. The exact definition of cult is a matter of debate, but scholars often distinguish them by comparison with other groups such as churches and sects. According to a distinction developed by Troeltch and others, **sects** are offshoots of churches that follow somewhat different doctrines, emphasize voluntary commitment, and have a membership that is less diverse and more underprivileged than a mainline church. **Cults** are like sects in most of these ways except that they do not have or maintain any connection with a church or other religious group of origin. They tend to have a set of common characteristics including (1) a primary focus on a charismatic, powerful, authoritarian leader, (2) a claim to possess and teach esoteric knowledge that offers a sure and clear path to salvation, and (3) a loose organizational structure that changes frequently over time. Cults also often have strong interest in sexuality or gender issues, and are often known for aggressive recruiting tactics, allegedly trying to separate new members from family and friends (Dawson, 2006, pp. 26–29; Hunter, 1998). The clear beliefs and practices of a cult can be especially attractive to adolescents anxious to establish their identity in an uncertain world (Richmond, 2004b).

NRMs are often portrayed negatively in the psychological and popular literature, and former members of cults are often thought to have high levels of serious psychopathology as a result of their experience. Recent research has revised this

view, deemphasizing the level of psychopathology in these groups, as well as questioning the methodology of previous work (Saliba, 2004). For instance, high levels of psychopathology in former members are now thought to reflect psychological problems that predate their entrance into the NRM, although certainly people with no history of psychopathology join cults. Also, charges of “mind control” or brainwashing that have appeared in popular literature have not been substantiated by scholarly research. Nevertheless, criticism of the effects of NRMs continues, particularly with respect to cults, and certainly it is possible to find examples of cults with conditions that can produce high levels of psychopathology (e.g., Kliger, 1994). While mind control is no longer thought to be a central problem, opponents of cults point to examples of deceptive information and approaches by cults when recruiting new members. They also note that the tight organization of these groups around a single leader often leads to conflict and problems. In extreme cases, it can also lead to violence and ritual or other types of abuse (Kraus, 1999; Noblitt & Perskin, 2000, p. 43; Dawson, 2006, pp. 96–101, 144–166). Exiting a cult can also be difficult, as persons must reconstruct their lives and deal with psychological issues such as depression, loneliness or low self-esteem when they cut their dependency upon the group. Those with bad experiences in a cult may also experience guilt, paranoia, or even posttraumatic types of symptoms (Singer & Lalich, 1995, pp. 295–297). However, NRMs and cults are difficult to study, and there is a tremendous diversity among the groups, so lumping all NRMs and cults together to produce neat descriptions and explanations is problematic (Dawson, 2006, p. 11).

How do NRMs form, and why do people join them? The answer to this probably varies, depending somewhat on the group in question. NRMs in general are often thought to result from cultural and social changes, such as dissatisfaction with traditional religion that leads to exploration of religious alternatives (Partridge, 2004). In the case of cults, many scholars point to individual psychological factors. Despite the fact that people who join cults come from egalitarian and upper socioeconomic status (SES) families, cult joiners tend to be alienated from their families, as well as mainstream social groups, culture, and religion. They also tend to be younger and struggling with issues of personal identity. The NRM offers approval, strong affective ties, a supportive social group, and a focus for structuring an identity (Hunter, 1998; Dawson, 2006, pp. 77–80).

Meissner (2000) has articulated a psychodynamic theory of cultic or religious group process that might help explain some of the characteristics of cults and NRMs. In his view, **cultic process** is a normal defensive tendency of religious groups to form exclusive subgroupings that are at odds with dominant social hierarchies and environment. This exclusive group has a number of positive effects: it bolsters identity and self-esteem, increases feelings of power, and acts as a mechanism to cope with anxiety. This process operates in all religious groups, but under conditions of great social or personal uncertainty, it directs inner anxiety and anger toward objects that are perceived as a threat. This external enemy, along with any remembered traumas, becomes an organizing point for individuals, who fight the enemy as a way of dealing with internal anxiety and anger. Especially if traditional authority structures are failing, the cultic process encourages the idealization of a leader who

offers protection. Once the cult forms, the group becomes a powerful motivating force because it supplies many needs: a sense of belonging and affiliation, shared tasks, a sense of meaning and identity, as well as control of internal aggression and anxiety which can be displaced externally.

### 12.3.3.3 Religious Communities and the Internet

The Internet affects many aspects of modern life, and some researchers have become interested in its impact upon religion. However, the Internet is rapidly evolving so that any snapshot of online religious activity will probably be out of date before it can be published. In 2003 data, the US had about 128 million Internet users, and 64% of these used the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes. The most common uses were personal correspondence such as email with spiritual content, and visiting Web sites for information about religious organizations and practices such as where to attend services for a particular group. About 84% of religious Internet users belong to religious communities or organizations, although they may tend to view themselves as outsiders. Evangelicals are strongly represented. However, internet religious users have a higher percentage of people who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious than is true of the general population, and individuals identifying themselves as neither religious nor spiritual tend to have the highest Internet usage (Dawson & Henneby, 2004; Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004; Larsen, 2004).

Religious activities on the Internet can be thought of as taking one of two forms (Prebish, 2004; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; O'Leary, 2004). First, Internet sites can provide **religion online**, activities and materials designed to supplement existing activities that are not online. These additions might include (1) increased communication and convenience, e.g., learning about community events, support through email or IM prayer requests, and staff contact; (2) information and educational materials or discussion forums with links to denominational information; or (3) a virtual temple or church with worship activities. Evangelism and outreach is also a possible function, although most sites currently do that by links to other sites specifically oriented to that purpose (Sturgill, 2004). Other possible functions include encouraging attendance by visitors, providing information about the community like a mission statement, providing devotional materials such as sermons, and publicity about activities (Larsen, 2000). Web-based services might parallel existing offerings or provide completely new types of activities; even those web functions that are similar to current community activities may have a different effect when translated to the web (Lovheim, 2004). Currently, Internet usage about religion is mostly of this supplemental and conventional type and involves both frequent attendees and new seekers (Larsen & Rainie, 2001). Perhaps because of this, Internet usage does not appear to be connected with lower religious participation or social involvement (Campbell, 2004). However, a small negative correlation between religiosity and Internet use that has appeared in a few studies has raised concern that the bias in the media against religion is also becoming dominant on the Internet (Armfield & Holbert, 2003).

A second option is that Internet sites can provide **online religion**—an entirely online community. This is much less common than religion online, but virtual churches and temples have begun to appear and seem to be increasing in popularity (Young, 2004b). Virtual communities allow people from diverse locations to interact and reach out to others not currently involved. This ability may be especially important for NRMs and other groups not already established. However, online religious groups have at least indirect connections with existing religion. For instance, teenagers using the Internet for spiritual seeking often depend on word of mouth from people they know when selecting sites, and they tend to trust the information they get on the Internet much less than from other sources like parents, teachers, friends, and religious leaders (Lutz & Borgman, 2002).

Internet NRMs include a number of groups, including witchcraft, pagan, Goddess, and Egyptian religious sites. It is hard to say how much old research on communities and conversion will apply to these new ones. Early studies have noted that NRMs tend to operate multiple linked pages in an attempt to maximize their visibility but do their recruitment mostly through existing social contacts with friends and family. Studies focusing on Wiccan sites have noted a high degree of transience, and that individuals who participate offer a great variety of points of view and a mixture of reverence and irreverence. Different sites have competing voices, making it difficult for any one of them to attract many followers without becoming increasingly radical. As a result, some scholars are unsure how much an Internet presence will help NRMs in the long term (Dawson & Hennebry, 2004; Lovheim, 2004; O'Leary, 2004).

The rise of religious groupings and networks on the Internet challenges traditional definitions of what constitutes a religious community. Churches and other religious groups are typically **geographical networks** formed in proximity to where people live and work. Internet groupings, on the other hand, are **associative networks** based on common interest and in theory are independent of geography. Such networks can be found in the history of religious traditions, as in letter writing that formed social bonds in early Christianity. They certainly resemble traditional communities in that they involve (1) interactive relationships, (2) personal concern for others, and (3) the ability to gather periodically in a kind of public space. However, many think that such networks are too shallow to count as the kind of real communities that form a necessary basis for religious life (Dawson, 2004; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Foltz & Foltz, 2003). Scholars have pointed out a number of limitations of Internet communities:

1. Group memberships on the Internet can be constantly changing, leading to more short-term and fragmentary relationships with weaker bonds. The authenticity of these relationships is also a question, as people can select any identity they choose and the accuracy of their self-disclosure cannot be verified. In this situation, relationships are going to become more anonymous, and the focus of interactions will be more exchange-oriented, specialized, and aimed at accomplishing some specific purpose. These relationships may not be adequate for the establishment of true community.

2. Internet groups have limitations in terms of their ability to control boundaries and appropriate behavior. In unmoderated interactive forums, skeptics can visit sites of different traditions and turn them into debating sites, so struggles for control can become public. However, these sites have insiders who exercise some control, with insider status defined by frequency of contribution, technical skills, and taking on the convictions dominant in the group (Lövheim, 2007). Established groups with authority structures do sponsor popular sites, and these have more control over content, but users more often visit informal, popular, and unofficial sites such as those devoted to Isidore of Seville, the informal patron saint of the Internet (Helland, 2004).
3. Technical factors structure and limit the kinds of interactions that can take place on the Internet. Since all Web sites appear on a computer screen and utilize common features like hyperlink navigation or blog interaction, a visit to a religious site has a similar feel to visiting an online retailer. Individuals visiting a site can visit links in any order, making it difficult for site managers to develop important kinds of structure such as narrative that are dependent upon sequence. Some argue that this encourages people to view religion as another part of consumer culture, a resource to be selected at the need or whim of the participant (Dawson & Hennebry, 2004).

A positive evaluation of online religion is that it is different, not inauthentic. It orients users toward a more self-directed spirituality outside of a hierarchy and emphasizes personal religious experience. It allows people to belong to many communities with weaker connections rather than a single more tightly connected group (Campbell, 2004; Cowan, 2005). It offers an alternative method of religious identity construction for adolescents and young adults when traditional channels for this have become less attractive. However, such identities are likely to be eclectic, and building a coherent identity outside of the support of a traditional organization is more difficult. For the foreseeable future, it appears that online identity construction will continue to be strongly influenced by offline structures (Lutz & Borgman, 2002; Lovheim, 2004).

## 12.4 Religious Practices in Community

Many religious practices take place in a community context or are dependent upon community support. Here we consider three important examples of religious practices—ritual, pilgrimage, and service.

### 12.4.1 *Ritual*

**Ritual** is an important form of religious practice and a central aspect of religious commitment (Stark & Glock, 1968, pp. 14–16; Fig. 12.1). Ritual is difficult to



**Fig. 12.1** *Pilgrimage ritual on Buddha's Birthday, Lhasa.* All religious traditions include important rituals such as pilgrimage that have powerful psychological effects. Photo by the author

define because it is extremely varied; any definition except a very broad one misses some examples (Bowie, 2000, p. 154). It can be broadly defined as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” that are dependent upon tradition and community influences (Rappaport, 1999, p. 24). Rituals generally include some kind of standard or traditional elements, although rituals also change over time, particularly in cultures that are antitraditional like current Western society. They are intentional activities, generally sanctioned or carried out by some authority, that create an ordered world separating sacred from profane and helping us interpret experience (Bell, 1997; Vergote, 1997, p. 309).

There are a number of different kinds of rituals such as (1) rite of passage or life crisis, (2) commemorative, (3) sacrificial, (4) healing or purification, (5) festive, and (6) organizational or political. These exist in hierarchies with some rituals thought to be more important than others (Bell, 1997, p. 94; Fuller, 1988, pp. 117–121; Forest, 1997, p. 67). Sequences of rituals such as **liturgical orders** that take place at set times also have a special meaning by making a period of time (e.g., Advent and the Christmas season) or the entire year sacred. These often use music and other devices to link individual spiritual activities like prayer to other aspects of ritual (Rappaport, 1999, p. 169; Begbie, 2001).

Religious rituals are also important within families, as they help maintain religious identity, reaffirm relationships, and teach correct behavior. These can include big festivals like Christmas or everyday practices at meals. Marriage brings together two people from different families of origin, offering an opportunity to construct new patterns of ritual that have special meaning. Most families construct rituals by drawing on traditions in both families, although some couples form their practices mostly around those of only one family, and about 20% of couples create

entirely new patterns (Visscher & Stern, 1990). Participation in joint ritual activities increases marital satisfaction, and couples report that both the shared meaning of ritual and the act of practice are important (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001).

### 12.4.1.1 Theories and General Perspectives on Ritual

Many different theories about ritual exist that offer perspectives on their nature and function. Anthropologists who have reflected on the psychological and cultural importance of ritual have produced much of this literature. Early theories tended to focus on analysis of the rituals themselves. In the **mythic** school (e.g., Otto, 1950; Eliade, 1963; cf. Arlow, 1996), ritual is seen as related to master narratives we have about reality, the place of humanity in the world, and explanations for the universe or social order. In this view, religious myths tell stories in relation to some kind of divine reality; this content can be reenacted and experienced in a ritual so that people can understand and identify with it. Ritual thus has a communicative aspect (Vergote, 1998, pp. 59–65; Bowie, 2000, pp. 157–158; Bloch, 2004). The emphasis in the mythical school is on the *content* of ritual, in contrast to the **structuralist** school of Levi-Strauss (1963), which finds the meaning of ritual in its *form* or *structure*. Both schools touch on important aspects of ritual, although they have been criticized as promoting an unnecessary separation of thought and action, neglecting the physical aspect of ritual, and using categories of analysis that are irrelevant to the participants (Bell, 1997, pp. 10–12, 80–82).

An alternative is to think of rituals as **practices** (see Section 6.3.4). In this view, rituals offer a framework or strategy for action to be used in a particular situation that sets things apart from the ordinary (cf. Erikson, 1966, 1977; see Section 5.3.2). It involves the body, physical action, and structuring of the environment in a way that has a practical coherence. Like other practices, people can participate in ritual and understand some of its practical aspects or implications without understanding all the details of the meaning system behind them (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 118; 1990). This theory fits well with explaining ritual in the European situation, where people often participate in rituals without believing in their underlying meaning or have others do them on their behalf (Davie, 2007).

Recent psychologically oriented perspectives on ritual have tended to reject a practice view that deemphasizes meaning, as well as structuralist or cognitive views that separate the structure of ritual from its content. In **interpretive theories** developed by writers like Victor Turner or Clifford Geertz, the meaning that ritual has for participants is its central feature (Ouwehand, 1990; D'Andrade, 1995, p. 19; Heimbrock, 1990). Geertz (1973) emphasizes that (1) religion and ritual are cultural systems of meaning, (2) ritual does not just express culture but changes people's perceptions and interpretations through kinesthetic or other kinds of learning, and (3) people are active agents in the process (Bell, 1997, pp. 62–74; Geerts, 1990). In other words, religion and ritual help people actively interpret events and make sense of their world. Some psychological interpreters use Winnicott's concept of transitional object or space as a framework for explaining the interpretive process (cf. Section 5.4.3).

However, others have pointed out that ritual is more than a transitional object so that this framework cannot capture the full complexity of ritual (LaMothe, 1999; Moore, 2001, pp. 138–139). Another approach has been to focus on the **symbolic** nature of ritual as a structure for the representation of meaning. Rituals are supposed to have power through their use of symbols; they connect our existence with that of a different world, thereby altering our own in some way (Vergote, 1997, pp. 306–307). Community rituals are especially powerful because they involve an entire group in a sacred place with multiple symbols including objects, actions, and **liturgy** or special ritual language (van der Lans & Geerts, 1990).

While it is sometimes possible to place a theory or theorist within a particular school of thought such as structuralist or interpretive, many theorists treat some or all of these themes and are thus not easily placed in a typology of ritual theory. Rituals involve an interaction between a socially transmitted worldview or practice and the emotional needs and representation of God in the individual. Ritual is thus a different experience for everyone that cannot be entirely explained by a single theory (Wikstrom, 1990).

#### 12.4.1.2 Victor Turner and *communitas*

One of the most influential and psychologically sophisticated theories of ritual is that of Victor Turner (1920–1983). In his view, religion is not just a reflection of economic or political relationships, rather it is important for understanding how people think and feel. Central to religion and to human thought are symbols, which form the basic building blocks of ritual and a primary means by which people interpret the meaning of their world (Schechner, 1988; Turner, 1988, p. 160). These symbols can take a number of forms including images, objects, physical movements, and language. Turner believed that symbols naturally occur in dyads or triads and that ritual is a *performance* that both highlights polarities in symbols and reveals their unity. Rituals and the symbols that are part of them thus have a paradoxical, mysterious, and affective quality that is beyond classic Aristotelian logic (Turner, 1969, pp. 37–65). For instance, in baptism water is a symbol both for death of our old life and birth of our new one.

Turner also related religion and ritual to feelings and social relationships. Drawing on the work of van Gennep (1960), Turner believed that we generally relate to others in structured hierarchical systems but that it is possible to change these structures or our position in them. This involves separating and detaching the individual from normal space and time and entering an in-between, ambiguous or **liminal** state of anti-structure and potential in which old characteristics are erased, so new ones can be substituted. Turner believed that ritual controls this powerful process by providing practices that symbolize crisis, detachment, separation, and return (Turner, 1969, pp. 94–109, 166–169). Religious rituals in particular are associated with the mysterious, powerful and sacred quality of liminality; when this is shared among members of a group a strong emotional experience of unity or *communitas* results. This experience has a powerful simplifying and leveling effect, breaking

through structure so that people experience a spontaneous and transforming bond of commonality (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 13; Turner, 1988, p. 157; Bradley, 1978, pp. 8–46; Moore, 2001, p. 46). This anti-structure experience works in dialectic with the normal social structure, leading to a balance of stability and change that supports the individual and society (Turner, 1969, pp. 127–142).

Although Turner's theory is based on extensive fieldwork, critics have questioned its empirical base, pointing out that *communitas* does not occur in many situations and that rituals can produce conflictual experiences. They also argue that it is too reductionistic, reducing ritual to the satisfaction of emotional needs and ignoring its intellectual, social and spiritual elements that may vary with different religious traditions and practices. Thus, while *communitas* may occur as a kind of temporary state, they argue that it is not transformational or fundamental to ritual (Morinis, 1992, p. 8; 1984, pp. 236–238, 257–261; Moore, 2001, p. 49; Bilu, 1988; Bradley, 1978, pp. 14–36). However, it does offer a phenomenology of ritual experience and symbolic process that is valuable. This aid to the understanding of symbolism is especially important, as it has been neglected by psychologists studying religion (Boudewijnse, 1990).

### 12.4.1.3 Effects of Ritual

Rappaport (1999) and others argue that ritual has a number of important effects. For Rappaport, ritual is a form of action that helps generate and bring together the conceptual, experiential, and other parts of religion. In particular, ritual joins ideas about the sacred with numinous experience. Some other specific effects include the following:

1. Providing a focus for community life and identity that helps sustain the group, develop social solidarity and coordinate religious practices among members. More active involvement in liturgical ritual is associated with stronger community bonds (Hinde, 2005; Bell, 1992, p. 171; van der Lans & Geerts, 1990).
2. Making religious truths a socially important and meaningful fact through rehearsal. Rituals embody historical or spiritual realities, making them tangible and concrete in space and time. These truths include what Rappaport calls Ultimate Sacred Postulates, fundamental beliefs that form the basis for society. Rehearsal helps reinforce their truth value and establish a religious identity in the believer (Rahner, 1963, p. 117; Vergote, 1997, pp. 312–314; Geertz, 1973, pp. 112–114; Ammerman, 2003).
3. Helping to integrate action and belief, as well as highlighting important aspects of conduct such as ethics. In this way, ritual provides direction, increases conviction, and strengthens commitment to moral action (Reich, 1990; Hinde, 2005).

Scholars of ritual, like Rappaport, argue that although ritual is an essential way by which we construct the beliefs and worldview of the human world, its power has been damaged in modern culture without providing an effective replacement, although some modern practices like psychotherapy can have ritualistic aspects

(Anderson, 2005; Cole, 2003). Turner believed that modern society has moved away from supporting rituals that produce powerful liminal states to optional, individualized, and commercialized activities like sports that produce **liminoid** states lacking in transformational power (Moore, 2001, p. 49; Turner, 1969, pp. 49–50; Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 253). Although rituals meet basic needs for structure, safety and reliability, many scholars see ritual as declining in contemporary world due to the erosion of community life and emphasis on autonomy (Faber, 1990; Vergote, 1997, pp. 102–103).

### 12.4.2 Pilgrimage

**Pilgrimage** is an ancient and complex practice found in all major religious traditions. It involves a journey from a familiar place and routine to someplace unfamiliar, typically a location that is special or sacred and difficult to reach. The journey may be done as an act of devotion. It can also be part of a search for something or pursuit of an ideal, perhaps a cleansing or renewal that will allow us to connect with another worldly power and solve some current and seemingly intractable problem.

Pilgrimage takes place in personal, cultural, social, and physical planes that interact in unique ways. It is personal because going on a pilgrimage is an individual and voluntary decision. Whether or not a journey is a pilgrimage involves the individuals' perception of their activity as religious rather than recreational as in tourism (Cohen, 1992). It is cultural and social in that it involves symbols, history, legends, and ritual locations that are part of a religious tradition and culture. In most cases, a social group exists that maintains the site, passes on its meaning, and provides specialists who mediate contact between pilgrim and deity. Pilgrimage is often done as a solitary activity, but at times huge groups journey together, as in the *hajj* to Mecca or a Christmas journey to Bethlehem (Morinis, 1984, pp. 212–221; 1992, pp. 1–26; McKay, 1998; Turner & Turner, 1978, pp. 30–31; Forest, 2003; Blasi, 2002).

There is tremendous diversity in the motives and socioeconomic backgrounds of pilgrims. General goals of a pilgrimage may be (1) *devotional*, seeking an encounter with the sacred, perhaps to express love, give thanks, or ask for forgiveness; (2) *instrumental*, worldly goals like health, perhaps seeking a miracle or hoping to earn merit; (3) *religious*, part of a ritual cycle, obligation or initiation; or (4) *undefined*, with no predetermined goal (Morinis, 1984, pp. 278–282). Specific motivations are numerous and might involve profound religious or spiritual reasons like answering an inner call, achieving pardon or reclaiming parts of the self, or simply curiosity and for escaping routine. In modern pilgrimage, there is also a blurred line between pilgrimage and vacation, so visits to a site can be more about adding adventure, interest, and beauty to a trip than advancing toward a spiritual goal (Clift & Clift, 1996; van Spengen, 1998). Motives of pilgrims may also be specific to a particular site and religious tradition. For instance, common reasons among pilgrims visiting Lourdes in Europe include (1) deepening of faith, (2) asking for a cure and a blessing for self and others, especially the young, and (3) looking for

peace and quiet reflection. Especially important for most pilgrims is construction of meaning, a personal quest for identity or a revitalized sense of faith (Voyé, 2002).

Pilgrimage sites have important and complex psychological meanings for the visiting pilgrims. The site is thought to be a place of spiritual power and immanent divine presence, typically because of its association with miraculous events, a famous religious personage, or because of geographical features such as difficulty of access and the presence of water or mountains (Jenson, 1995; Brennehan, 1993; Clift & Clift, 1996, p. 20). Some sites have regional appeal and might be visited often, while others like Jerusalem or Mecca might be the target of a once in a lifetime journey. They may have a formal connection to an organized religion or be more popular in nature. Some are open all the time and are important social and religious centers, while others operate only at annual festivals. The importance of the site may vary across time, gaining in popularity, or becoming a mere tourist spot, and eventually being abandoned (van Spengen, 1998; Markus, 1999; Buffetrille, 1998; Turner & Turner, 1978). The physical layout of the site may also have special meaning. If it is difficult of access, the journey to the site and the surrounding geography can have a sacred quality and symbolize the struggles of the spiritual life or increasing proximity of God, facilitating the production of transitional states (Vergote, 1998, pp. 198–220; Voyé, 2002; McKay, 1998; Morinis, 1992, pp. 2–6, 50–51). The site itself often consists of mundane zones separated from sacred ones, centered on a main shrine that may be staffed by people who offer rituals related to worship, sacrifice, or purification. Historical artifacts and stories about the site allow the collective memory of tradition to speak and be experienced. The layout of the site in circles or other shapes can also symbolize religious meanings (Friedland & Hecht, 2006; Morinis, 1984).

There are interesting connections between pilgrimage and ritual. In a Jungian view, pilgrimage is a ritual and also contains rituals that the pilgrim may perform at the pilgrimage site to facilitate connection to the sacred. Along with special activities as the person approaches the site such as traveling around it, or **circumambulation**, common motifs of pilgrimage rituals might include (1) water rituals and cleansing, associated with purification; (2) symbolically leaving part of oneself at this site, such as through an offering; or (3) taking a sacred object home from the site, typically some physical or religious artifact (Clift & Clift, 1996, pp. 9–20, 70–82; Loseries-Leick, 1998; cf. Morinis, 1984, pp. 222–224). From a Turnerian perspective, pilgrimage has some aspects of the liminality of passage rites: (1) a release from structure and production of *communitas*, (2) a ritual enactment of correspondences that reflects the meaning of religious and cultural values and movement from mundane to sacred, and (3) simplification of dress and behavior. Many pilgrimages are voluntary and not part of religious routine and so are technically a liminoid or quasi-liminal experience, although there are liminal features in liturgical rituals performed at the site. Often, smaller shrines are more likely to be liminal than larger ones that become tourist sites (Turner & Turner, 1978, pp. 232–239).

Individual and group pilgrimages can be special, powerful events. The effects of such pilgrimages depend upon the extent to which the event has been personally experienced and may have positive or negative long-term benefits. Successful

pilgrimages are marked by considerable preparatory work and an emotional connection to the activity, either positive or negative (Watson, Tuorila, Detra, Gearhart, & Wielkiewicz, 1995; Poland, 1977). For instance, follow-up studies with older and younger pilgrims to Lourdes do not reveal physical improvements at the group level (cf. Section 10.3.1) but do find that both groups show decreases in anxiety and depression after the pilgrimage. Differences were larger for older pilgrims, especially those with more existential than recreational motives for the visit (van Uden & Pieper, 1990). Change of environment, spiritual atmosphere of shrine, hope for future in this life and next all apparently contributed to the beneficial effects (Morris, 1982).

### *12.4.3 Service*

Most religious traditions encourage service to others as a central practice, and scholars have typically seen these kinds of actions as one important aspect of religious commitment. In the US, Europe, and other parts of the world, religious traditions and organizations provided much of the impetus for the creation of modern social services (Wuthnow, 2004, p. 9). This service orientation is true of both Christian and non-Christian religious groups, although at least in the US there is a tendency for non-Christian groups to focus more on care for their own communities rather than service as a general obligation (Stark & Glock, 1968, pp. 14–16; Ammerman, 2005, p. 115). Survey data suggest that religion and religiosity is indeed associated with more giving to the poor and involvement in volunteering: for instance about 75–80% of church members give to the poor, while the figure for nonmembers is about 55–60%. Social ties and religious beliefs are both factors in this impulse toward service, linking volunteering with community identity (Regnerus, Smith, & Sikkink, 1998; Ammerman, 2005; Putnam, 2000, p. 67; Park & Smith, 2000). This has led a number of sociologists to argue that religion in the US plays a positive role in helping lower income families and strengthening civil society, although there are exceptions (Wuthnow, 2004, p. 2; Curlin, Dugdale, Lantos, & Chin, 2007). In Christianity, this service takes place at a number of levels: individuals, churches or religious communities, and larger groupings such as denominations.

At the congregational level, it is only during the 20th century that the size of some US congregations grew to where they could offer specialized services and staff for them. Today about 2/3 of churches—including most larger ones—offer formal service programs. Fewer small churches have specific community programs as most assistance is provided on an informal basis; however they devote a larger percentage of their budget to charitable work. Small and large churches also support service work by providing volunteers, offering frequent sermons on topics like poverty, caring or forgiveness, and organizing small groups that engage in service work (Wuthnow, 2004, pp. 3, 66). These congregational programs tend to be oriented toward family and youth issues such as day care or education, but food pantry or soup kitchen ministries are also common—about 80% of congregations support

one or the other of these services. Churches also frequently support homeless shelters. Other than the effect of congregational size, it is difficult to find a clear pattern as to what kind of churches are likely to offer service programs. Social change has traditionally been prominent in the agendas of African American, Catholic, and some mainline Protestant churches, and these groups are in fact more likely to sponsor service programs. However, researchers have found more generosity among theological and political conservatives, and there are many exceptions to any of these trends (Regnerus et al., 1998; Ammerman, 2005).

The amount of funds devoted toward service by any single church is generally modest, an average of perhaps \$25,000–30,000 per year for churches with a membership of over 200. However, the totals for groupings of churches can be significant. For instance, in 2000, the Presbyterian Church–USA altogether spent close to \$150 million on service activities. The total spent on formal service programs by all churches in the US is probably around \$15–20 billion per year. When one includes the cost of clergy and staff time spent on programs, as well as building and utility costs, probably 10% of church operating budgets goes toward service work (Ammerman, 2005, pp. 47–50; Putnam, 2000, p. 67).

Churches also offer indirect service, either through denominational ministries or nondenominational networks. These networks can be formal ties to a service agency or informal coalitions among churches. Almost every US church has at least one outside service partner, and on average contributes about \$2000 per year, sends volunteers to 2.8 organizations, and provides space for 1.8 service groups. Types of partner organizations include human service (e.g., food banks), self-help groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous), and missions groups (e.g., Habitat for Humanity) at both the national and international level (Wuthnow, 2004, pp. 159–185).

### 12.4.3.1 Faith-Based Organizations

Another service activity that is indirectly connected with religious communities is the **faith-based organization** (FBO). These are groups generally founded by religious people that get contributions from them and would include something related to faith or religion in their mission statement and regular activities (Wuthnow, 2004, p. 138). In their daily activities, FBOs may not be particularly religious, but they do retain some sense of religious identity and mission. In 2001, four of the ten largest nonprofits in the US were FBOs, including Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, United Jewish Communities, and the Salvation Army. Probably about 18% of private human service provision in the US comes from FBOs (Ammerman, 2005, pp. 179–181).

While FBOs have a religious base, they actually resemble secular agencies in many ways, and their services and clientele differ in some ways from those helped by individual congregations. Part of this is due to the fact that FBOs must follow the same legal and professional standards as secular groups. The main difference between FBOs and secular agencies appears to be the type of service provided. FBOs are more likely to be involved in day care, family counseling, and mental

health issues, while secular nonprofits focus on job training and health. Congregations tend to be different from both FBOs and secular nonprofits. People seek them more for spiritual or emotional assistance, and churches tend to be particularly good at building whole-person relationships and communicating care to individuals seeking services. In addition, many poor people looking for help are themselves religious and may appreciate the caring community environment that churches try to provide. In surveys, clients generally report high levels of trust and satisfaction with congregational services, and the lowest levels with public welfare agencies (Wuthnow, 2004; Wuthnow, Hackett, & Hsu, 2004; Bonnycastle, 2004).

### 12.4.3.2 Volunteering and Social Capital

Church attendance and religiousness are also connected with increased volunteering, although not with informal helping. Weekly church attendees are twice as likely as nonattendees to volunteer, although individuals with very high levels of attendance tend to limit their volunteering outside of the church setting. While this trend is equally true for conservative and more liberal Christian groups, the meaning of the experience is somewhat different. Conservatives tend to see volunteering as a spiritual obligation that offers opportunities for growth, while individuals in more liberal groups view it more as an obligation of citizens to society. Volunteering is correlated with the amount of religious practice—especially devotional reading and prayer—as well as the self-rated importance of spiritual growth, while the effect of theological beliefs is less prominent. Also a key factor is the social network of the individual. The majority of volunteering happens because the person has a connection to someone else who is working in or is served by the program where they volunteer (Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Wuthnow, 2004; Lam, 2002). This helping no doubt has personal benefits to those who are involved: helping others improves mood and self-evaluation, particularly among those who value communal (e.g., friendship) rather than exchange (e.g., business-type) relationships (Williamson & Clark, 1989). However, the evidence for the existence of altruism and empathy as motives for helping is also very strong (Batson, 1998).

The relationships developed by congregations in service and volunteering have led some sociologists to note an indirect benefit of religious organizations and service: the development of social capital. Developed by Bourdieu (1985), the concept of **social capital** refers to the value produced by “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). This is an issue of concern in contemporary society; US surveys find that large percentages of the population are dissatisfied or even alarmed by declines in community life that are related to decreased civility and lower moral standards and attitudes of trust. In addition, institutions like schools that depend upon social bonds for their functioning are having increasing problems.

Social capital comes in two varieties: **bonding capital** that holds groups together, facilitating emotional support, and **bridging capital** that builds ties between different cultural or socioeconomic groups, thus strengthening society. Robert Putnam

(2002, pp. 22–27, 66–74) argues that congregations through their regular and service activities may be the most important source of social capital in US society. There is no question that congregations are rich sources of relationships and social capital. Surveys suggest that almost half of church members have more than 10 close friends in their congregation, while only 7% indicate they have no close friends—figures that are very different than general values for the US population. Frequent participants more often have strong social networks, especially if there is a good fit between the identity of the congregation and the personal values or beliefs of the individual. Talking with friends in these social networks is seen as helpful in times of crisis. Church members are also more likely to have relationships with people in a different socioeconomic group than nonmembers, although membership does not by itself increase the odds of cross-ethnic or interracial friendships (Wuthnow, 2004, pp. 82–94; Wuthnow, 2002; Becker & Dhingra, 2001). However some European researchers have questioned the link between religiousness and social capital at the individual level (Halman & Pettersson, 2003b).

## **12.5 Problems of Religious Communities**

While religious communities offer many benefits to their members and society as a whole, they also have problems ranging from hypocrisy of church members to cruelty and strife (Schulman, 2002; Altemeyer, 2004a). We have seen previously that religious traditions are well aware of the potential for trouble and have tried for many years to devise structures to deal with the common problems found in their communities. In this section, we look at psychological and social scientific research related to these problems. When reviewing the psychological literature on religious communities, one is immediately struck by the fact that the issues of interest to psychologists have mostly diverged from the issues pinpointed by religious traditions as areas of concern. The advantage of this is that the literature tells us about potential problems that may have gone unrecognized by religious groups. The disadvantage is that the literature is often of little help in understanding many of the problems of concern to religious communities and how they might best be improved.

### ***12.5.1 Prejudice***

The self-understanding of most religious traditions is that they promote love, not prejudice. Traditional research has shown that religious individuals are indeed more helpful to strangers, more kind and honest, and contribute more to charities but are also more prejudiced and judgmental (Argyle, 1985). A large amount of research in the social scientific study of religion has been devoted to understanding this odd combination.

Quite a bit is known about prejudice from the general social psychological literature. Groups exert a powerful force on identity formation, judgment, and behavior.

As we have seen previously (e.g., Sections 5.3.1 and 8.5.2), identification with a group and ideology is one of the primary ways that people form identity. However, identification with a group carries with it other consequences. It leads to perceptions of people as members of groups, either our own **ingroup** to which we relate, or an **outgroup** that is perceived as different from us. These categorizations are subject to common social psychological processes. We tend to see members of outgroups as homogenous and possessing similar characteristics, and in situations where we belong to an ingroup that is central to our identity, but in a minority position in society, we also think of its members as homogeneous. This perceived similarity could lead to **stereotyping**—cognitive judgments about individuals based on their group membership. As these opinions become emotionally laden and touch on our basic sensibilities of good and bad, they can become **prejudice** directed against others, which when acted upon lead to differential treatment or **discrimination**. Research has shown that problems with stereotyping and prejudice become more common under conditions of negative emotion, if the other group is seen as a threat or as interfering with important goals. Under these circumstances, we rate fellow group members as more trustworthy and peaceful and members of the other group as untrustworthy and dishonest. This kind of thinking is pervasive even in the face of good intentions and becomes more likely with increasing emotional prejudice, leading to avoidance or attack directed at people in the other group.

Prejudice can be entirely secular, related to sociocultural factors like nationalism, class or ethnicity; however it can also be related to religion (Allport, 1966). Religious groups have unique characteristics that might make them either less or more susceptible to ingroup-outgroup thinking, stereotyping, and prejudice. Religious belief systems often hold all people to be of equal worth and thus oppose prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, religious traditions can promote strong identification of their members with the group, and the strong philosophical and moral convictions associated with religious belief systems might increase the tendency for outgroup judgments to become emotional and prejudicial. This may be even more likely if belief systems promote in-group superiority by holding that the group has exclusive possession of the truth, or that the group is chosen especially by God, and if membership is also limited along lines of class and ethnicity (Eisinga, Billiet, & Felling, 1999; Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967; Allport, 1979, pp. 444–449).

Given this conflicting situation, it is not surprising that the relationship between religion and prejudice is a complex one. In general, research has found higher levels of prejudice among religious people, although much of the fight against prejudice has been religiously motivated (Allport, 1966). A number of things seem to affect the relationship. It is less likely in those with high commitment or those who have had positive, equal status contacts with other groups. It is more likely if religious beliefs encourage discrimination, there is a history of negative interactions, or high levels of authoritarianism are present (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Fiske, 1998; Eisinga et al., 1999). Allport and others have also argued that religious motivation is related to prejudice, with intrinsic religiosity associated with lower levels of prejudice and authoritarianism. However, this conclusion has been chal-

lenged because of methodological and measurement problems in the research, as well as data that suggests it is not true with respect to certain kinds of prejudice (Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967; Donahue, 1985; Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003; Wulff, 1997, pp. 223–229; Tsang & Rowatt, 2007). Because societal attitudes toward prejudice have changed, older research may not reflect current relationships.

### *12.5.2 Authoritarianism (The Sin of the Pharisees)*

Another problem apparently connected to religion is the increased incidence of **authoritarianism** and the authoritarian personality (Adorno, 1950), a style marked by conservatism, intolerance, rigidity, and prejudice. Altemeyer has identified a variety of authoritarianism correlated with some forms of religion called **right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)**: a tendency toward submission to authority, conventionalism, and aggression toward others if sanctioned by authorities. RWAs tend to uncritically accept what others tell them, so they are susceptible to manipulation; they also tend to externalize and compartmentalize things and so have double standards, criticizing others for the things that they are guilty of as well (Altemeyer, 1996, pp. 28–31, 93–95). Some researchers believe that prejudice in religious people is really an expression of authoritarianism. This is supported by European and North American research, which has found no relation between church involvement or Christian belief and ethnic prejudice when adjusted for other variables. In this sophisticated research, predictors of ethnic prejudice are authoritarianism and nationality, suggesting that authoritarian personality patterns are the problem behind prejudice in religious individuals. This may be particularly the case in fundamentalist groups, as some research has found correlations between fundamentalism (not religious orthodoxy) and RWA (Eisinga et al., 1999; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Spiritual seeking appears to be negatively related to authoritarianism, while religiousness is positively related (Wink, Dillon, & Prettyman, 2007). However, instruments used to measure RWA have questionable validity in other cultures, suggesting that findings may not generalize to all groups. Certainly not all religious people can be described as authoritarian or prejudiced (Rubinstein, 1997; Altemeyer, 1996, pp. 147–163).

The problem of prejudice in RWAs is even more striking in a subgroup who are high in both RWA and social dominance. While most high social dominators lack religious backgrounds, those that are involved have different attitudes from other religious individuals. In a Canadian study, Altemeyer (2004b) found them to be highly prejudiced, dogmatic, and amoral with little genuine religious belief. They were more likely than the rest of the congregation to believe in lying, cheating, or manipulation and to prefer a system that benefits them, regardless of its effects on others. His description of high social dominating RWAs is similar to that of the authoritarian personality as described by Hannah Arendt (e.g., 1968). Leadership by social dominating authoritarians is a major factor in the development of totalitarian governments and organizations.

What makes authoritarians, and what is its association with religion? Social psychologists like Allport argued that a common underlying dynamic was the prejudiced personality, a pattern marked by fear and insecurity coupled with poor insight and low tolerance for ambiguity. Individuals confronted with these problems seek definiteness, order and stability, which can be provided by structure and authority. This leads to authoritarianism, a willingness to follow a strong individual, externalize problems, and accept accusations against other groups. Allport believed that authoritarianism was a multi-determined personality trait related to both inborn temperament and education (1979, pp. 396–436). In this way of thinking, authoritarianism is connected to religion because authoritarians seek out religious authority structures they find attractive, not because religion necessarily leads to authoritarianism. Instead, intolerance and authoritarianism come from temperamental factors, as well as the basic human desire for structures and views of the truth that can provide security. Since religion tries to seek truth and build groups, it can become ensnared when these processes become dysfunctional, although any human organization or belief system is also susceptible (Vergote, 1997, pp. 93–97).

Other explanations for the relationship between religion and authoritarianism have also been proposed. Altemeyer has argued that RWA is more related to experiences such as religious training associated with fear of God's wrath or obedience to rules (Altemeyer, 1996, pp. 148–149; Altemeyer, 2004b). However, recent developmental research has questioned this link, suggesting that authoritarianism is much more related to personality and temperament than early religious socialization (Dillon & Wink, 2007, pp. 151–152). Meissner (2000, pp. 3–9) attributes authoritarianism and prejudice to a dysfunctional working out of the **paranoid process**, a normal function of the ego that helps sustain and integrate our self and identity by contrasting us with those around us. The paranoid process helps to build strong groups but can shift toward pathology under life stress or social change and perhaps particular styles of leadership.

### ***12.5.3 Leadership and Its Abuses***

As we have seen, religious communities are concerned about the need for good leadership. Early community rules provided guidance on the choosing of leaders and how they should fulfill their responsibilities. There are many fine leaders of religious organizations; however, problems with individual leaders and leadership structures continue to plague religious communities. While Christian leadership scandals are the ones noticed in the West, financial and sexual improprieties within Hindu and Buddhist communities have also been reported on a number of occasions (e.g., Taylor, 1999, p. 276), suggesting that leadership is a potential problem in all religious traditions.

Little systematic research exists in psychology on the problems of religious leadership. We do know that leaders are a focus point for their communities, attracting both more social support and negative interactions than rank-and-file members (Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998). A significant literature exists on psychological

evaluation of candidates for the ministry, and many religious groups have systematic procedures for screening candidates, looking for potential problems, as well as indications that the individual will be successful in a pastoral role (e.g., Malony, 2000). The sociological and religious studies literature also contains research on the problem of burnout among religious professionals, a particular problem among US Roman Catholic clergy who face increasing demands with decreasing numbers of priests (Knox, Virginia, & Lombardo, 2002).

The sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church has attracted the attention of a number of psychologists, so there is a small body of work on this leadership failure. It provides some clues to the nature of leadership problems and their solution.

The sexual abuse scandal became public in the US in January 2002 with a number of accusations by individuals that priests had sexually abused them. A number of studies examining the extent of the problem suggest that probably about 2% of priests are implicated, most of the time involving a single incident but sometimes a priest who abused multiple individuals. Most abuse incidents occurred during the 1970s and 1980s; about half the victims were children at the time, while the other half were adolescents. The rate is similar to the rate of child abuse in US adults during that period, so the problem is unfortunately not a unique one. However, the religious office of the abuser makes the problem especially damaging, leading to feelings similar to incest and causing a dissociative pattern of stress response and spiritual injury (Gartner, 2004).

Most observers agree that the response of church leadership to the crisis was defective (Plante, 2004; Coleman, 2004; Jenkins, 1996; Markham & Mikail, 2004). Prior to 2002, the power of clergy abusers and attitudes toward them within the church discouraged people from reporting problems and impeded investigations. When problems were identified, effective action was often not taken, and priests were transferred rather than removed from roles where they had contact with potential abuse targets (Doyle, 2006; Gartner, 2004). As has been the case in other helping professions (including psychology), outside pressure from the media and lawsuits was necessary to mobilize effective action. In June 2002, a conference of Catholic bishops adopted a charter for protection of children, and set up a series of oversight review boards comprising mostly lay people to handle accusations of sexual abuse (de Fuentes, 2004).

Psychologists and others studying the problem have identified a number of structural and leadership problems within the church that impeded an effective response (Gonsiorek, 2004; Doyle, 2004; Spohn, 2004):

1. *Systemic problems*, including lack of separation of powers, and an absence of checks and balances in the hierarchical leadership system of the church. This was compounded by the aristocratic leadership style of some church leaders and the development of a siege mentality that sometimes led to cover-up attempts. Errors in judgment and decision-making by figures in power positions with no outside checks is consistent with social psychological research that associates power with automatic information processing and disinhibited behavior (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003).

2. *Poor knowledge base*, including a lack of information and unrealistic ideas about abuse, for instance, believing that priests are somehow magically immune to temptation. This was compounded by difficulties discussing sexuality within the church, a difficult topic in part because of debates over celibacy issues.
3. *Individual factors*, including a variation in the quality of investigative mechanisms, outside evaluators and mental health professionals. Also, adversarial relationships between churches and mental health workers developed on occasion.

### 12.5.4 Violence

Major religious traditions all value peace and oppose the taking of human life (Arinze, 2002, pp. viii, xiii). However, the religious record does not match this ideal, with many instances of violence between and within religious groups, involving both physical and psychological injury (Bellinger, 2001, p. 100; Selengut, 2003, p. 9). This anomaly has been remarked upon for many years by critics of religion and has recently become a target of psychological investigation.

The topic of violence and religion also includes the problem of secular violence directed against religious individuals. Religious people who die as a result of antireligious violence may be victims who have no choice or **martyrs**—those who choose to die rather than give up their religious commitment under coercion (Bergman, 1996). Sometimes these individuals are missionaries sent to another country to provide service or spread a religious message (Mariani, 2002, p. 47), but most often they are people living in their homeland. Persecution ranges from harassment by others when attempting to carry out religious practices (e.g., Forest, 1997, p. 32) to death as a victim or martyr. It is an enormous problem, as the 20th century saw the worst persecution of Christians since Roman times. For instance, millions of Orthodox believers perished in purges by atheists in the former Soviet Union. In the anti-Christian campaign by Stalin and Soviet communism, many churches were closed, and monks were arrested and deported to labor camps. As many as 40,000 Orthodox priests were killed or died from abuse during the first half of 1936 alone, and it is believed that the total number of priests, monks, and nuns killed during the purges of the 1930s are in excess of 200,000 (Forest, 1997, pp. 134–149; Wynot, 2004). Estimates of the total number of all Christian martyrs in the former Soviet Union are about 12 million. Estimates from the 20th century of Christians who died from secular antireligious violence worldwide are over 25 million, more than all previous centuries combined (Bergman, 1996).

#### 12.5.4.1 Causes

In the social sciences there are a number of competing theories to explain religious violence, but no one viewpoint is widely accepted (Bellinger, 2001, p. 4). Types of causes considered include the following: (1) *theological*, looking at the role of

religious writings, beliefs, or practices; (2) *psychological*, asking whether religious violence meets inner needs and goals; or (3) *sociological*, tying religious violence to social trends such as cultural threat (Selengut, 2003, p. 11). Within psychology, no consensus exists about whether violence is individual or social in origin (Cooper, 2007, p. 212).

*Theological explanations.* Some people argue that religious beliefs or structures inherently lead to violence. Evidence supporting this view is (1) the power of appeals to religion in support of national power and authority or military campaigns, and (2) the presence of patriarchal structure and warrior motifs in religious writings that can be used to legitimize violence. An assumption of some theological critiques is that religion is an obstacle to world unity, and that peace would prevail if religion was marginalized or eliminated (Anderson, 2004). Recent versions of this thesis sometimes associate violence with a particular religion like Islam, a type of religious thought or system like theism, or the passionate conviction that can be generated by any religious beliefs, a condition thought to promote both violence and irrationality (Jacobs, 2003, pp. 224–228).

These explanations have been criticized by religious studies scholars and theologians (e.g., Noll, 2003; Arinze, 2002). While not wanting to minimize the problem of violence, they have raised a number of objections to the idea that religion is a source of violence and so should be eliminated:

1. Christianity and other religions are not the unique or even main source of social evil or violence found in the world. Societies as well as religions can have a myth of redemptive violence. Comic book heroes are a case in point (Wink, 2004).
2. Religion has also been a force for good and positive social change in the world; any fair assessment of religion must look at Gandhi and Mother Teresa, as well as Osama bin Laden (Kimball, 2002, pp. 32, 187; Pargament & Park, 1995). When not entangled with the status quo political order, religions have a history of challenging elitist cultural forms that can lead to violence, and the religious teaching or leadership of monotheistic and other religious traditions have provided the foundation that allows for moral critique (Mabee, 2004). Currently there are many religious and interreligious dialogues under way about peacemaking issues (Arinze, 2002, pp. 99 ff.). Religion can and does engage in constructive dialogue on common problems, promote reconciliation and goodwill gestures that build peace, and promote values like humility and forgiveness.
3. Sometimes religion becomes involved in conflict when it is justified or inevitable, and this can have a positive result. Writers who take this view often argue that peace is not just an absence of violence or war but includes freedom and justice, conditions necessary for the development of the human person. Promoting peace means encouraging these things. This may lead to struggle, for instance, when preaching for social justice arouses opposition from the status quo, or when violence is necessary to gain reforms to restore social balance or right wrongs (Arinze, 2002, p. 34; Millbank, 2003, p. 197; Davis, 2004; Anderson, 2004). This highlights the problem of the **ambivalence of the sacred**: religious individuals want peace and tolerance but have strongly held beliefs for which

they may be willing to fight, so a sacred obligation may take different paths. The possible need to use force in the service of transforming society and eliminating injustice can make it difficult to automatically judge violence as either good or bad (Appleby, 2000; Taylor, 2007, p. 674; Ellens, 2004d).

4. Often the involvement of religion in violence is a betrayal of religious teachings—it happens in spite of religion not because of it. Terror is not generally condoned by religious traditions, even in Islamic jihad or Christian just war doctrines; sacrificial motifs are more dominant (Davis, 2004). For instance, in Islam the main form of jihad is not political but the *jihad al-akhbar* or struggle with the self (Thurston, 2005; Rumi, 2004, pp. 86–87). Violence more often happens when a religious group becomes involved in political affairs or is in an actual alliance with the state, so that religious membership is automatically granted to everyone in a particular national group, and then national interests are given religious justifications. Religion then becomes a façade for justifying violence (Wink, 2004; Bellinger, 2001, pp. 105–108; Greinacher, 1999, p. 248; cf. Aden, 2004). In a secular society, religion can then become an easy target to blame when in fact the problem lies elsewhere (Anderson, 2004).
5. Sometimes the involvement of religion in violence is due to human error rather than religion per se. Christianity does not argue that the church is a perfect community; rather it is a group of sinners seeking perfection. This recognition of fallibility means that Christians must constantly engage in the examination of conscience and need to have the willingness to ask for forgiveness and seek reconciliation (Arinze, 2002, pp. 34–35, 84–93). Also while religions can help by uniting people in communities, they must be alert for separatist forces that promote division, if communities are based on ethnicity or social class. A consideration of the relational aspects of spirituality is necessary for understanding these kinds of problems (Sandage & Shults, 2007).

It is also possible that while religion in general does not foster violence, certain kinds of religious beliefs and structures might. For instance, a theology or community structure that emphasizes legalism and control can lead to shame, which in turn can set the stage for violence (Sloat, 2004a, 2004b).

*Explanations based on social conflict and resistance to secularization.* Many scholars see violence as an act, process, or relationship that is a response to social and cultural factors, which can produce spirals of violence (Ellens, 2004c). Changes associated with modernity and secularization pose powerful challenges to traditional identities, often directly attacking those based on religion. This can lead to what is called the **good copy problem**, where a person cannot construct a fully satisfactory identity that is both acceptable to modernity and loyal to one's culture (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 1039). Scholars like Juergensmeyer (2003) argue that these threats trigger a process of seeking empowerment through acting in a great cause—often a religious cause—in a chaotic and problematic world. Religious conviction provides a platform for response to a perceived attack by secular society and failure of social structures. Individuals fighting these trends may see themselves as engaged in cosmic conflict that provides a framework for understanding their

suffering. These ways of thinking are dependent on a black-and-white view of the world that discourages compromise, and may encourage religious violence as a way of reasserting religion as a force, or simply as a demonstration of power that counters feelings of powerlessness and social marginalization. Many of these factors also apply to other types of political, ideological, or ethnic violence, although religious violence may be more symbolic and tied to religious claims of absolutism or moral justifications.

There is considerable evidence for the idea that religious violence is intimately connected to political and economic issues. For instance, many scholars believe that Islamic religious violence directed at the US and other Western countries is related to political policy issues and social conditions. Studies have found that dislike for the US rather than religiosity is related to support for violence among people in the Middle East (Haddad, 2003). Some religious conflicts such as the violence in Northern Ireland are obviously more political than religious in their origin (Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp. 37–41), but religion can become entangled or hijacked by political and secular groups (Selengut, 2003, pp. 224–227). However, it is important to avoid simplistic explanations that draw an arbitrary line between political and religious violence. This is particularly true in Islam, where the interweaving of legal, political, and religious institutions is very important, and so the idea of a secular political state divorced from religion is not a natural one (Moghaddam, 2005; Davis, 2004).

*Psychological explanations.* Many psychological explanations for religious violence have been proposed; one of the most significant is that of Rene Girard (Bellinger, 2001, p. 72). Girard (1977, 1986, 1987), argues that violence is not an aberration but a fundamental human problem caused by our tendency toward imitation or mimesis, and religious practices actually work to prevent violence. In this view, violence begins with what Girard calls *acquisitive mimesis* or **mimetic desire**. This occurs when we identify with others and seek to emulate them by copying their desires, polarizing individuals and putting them in competition for desired objects (Stirling, 2004). This creates a **double bind** in which we are both imitators and rivals, leading to **conflictual mimesis**, where we focus on defeating our adversary at any cost. This process leads to escalating vengeance and violence. As we copy our adversary, we become more like them—a **mimetic double**—although because of polarization we see ourselves as different and blame the other for the escalating competition and violence.

Girard argues that religion is one way humans deal with the problem of keeping peace and preventing vicious circles of mimetic vengeance and reprisal. Religions offer moral prohibitions to prevent mimetic conflict. They also prevent escalation through the practice of **scapegoating** and sacrifice, where a member either actually or ritually takes violence on themselves. This sacrifice and its healing effect raise powerful emotions, transforming potential conflict and disintegration into cooperation and unity, and preventing the mimetic process and spread of violence. Girard criticizes modern secular society for removing helpful religious rituals and prohibitions, or even making religion the scapegoat, thus eliminating one of the primary mechanisms we have for resisting mimesis. This increases the chance of violence

and other kinds of psychopathology (Stirling, 2004). In his view, Christian answers to the problem of mimetic desire such as the message of Jesus to avoid vengeance, revenge, or recrimination offer a new message of love that is needed to control the problem of mimetic violence.

Girard claims that at least aspects of his theory such as his analyses of individual situations are testable, although some question whether the empirical data supports his positions (Selengut, 2003, p. 54). Certainly behind his theory is an implicit view of the human person influenced by the work of Freud and Jung, which some might doubt (Ellens, 2004e). Others have also questioned whether his theory goes far enough. Simply saying violence is an outcome of sin or mimetic process (or other explanations like childhood trauma) is an inadequate stopping point. It does not explain important aspects of the problem such as the lack of proportion of the initial problem to its effect. It also evades questions of moral responsibility. Finally the question is, why do we feel a lack that we try to fill through imitation? This is an existential and spiritual issue left unanswered by Girard (Bellinger, 2001, pp. 6–25, 73–77).

Social psychologists have also been active in attempts to explain religious violence. For instance, Struch and Schwartz (1989) have looked at the relationships between inter-religious group aggression and in-group vs. out-group attitudes. They found that strong identification with a religious in-group was generally unrelated to aggression, but under certain conditions aggression was much more likely. Contributing or mediating factors related to aggression included (1) beliefs that dehumanized the out-group, (2) a lack of empathy for individuals in the out-group, and (3) a perception that there was a conflict between the interests of the two groups. Dehumanization has been identified in an important factor in other research on violence (e.g., Zimbardo, 2007). This suggests that interventions to humanize out-group members, increase empathy, and build shared interests can be effective in reducing aggression. Of course, it leaves unanswered the question of why some people who are subjected to an aggression-promoting environment go along with it and others do not.

#### **12.5.4.2 Conclusion**

Ideas that religion is the source of violence in the world or that eliminating religion would somehow reduce or eliminate violence are obviously too simplistic (Jacobs, 2003, pp. 230–233). Instead, it is clear that any viable explanation for the relationship between religion and violence must take into account many factors, including sociopolitical, economic, and historical forces and differences between various religious traditions (Kimball, 2002, pp. 25–35). The best way to understand the problem is a holistic approach, looking at the unique theological, historical, economic and psychological features of each case rather than imposing a particular theoretical framework at the outset. We also need to understand sub-groups with different attitudes toward violence and peace making (Selengut, 2003, pp. 228–234).

However, research to date does suggest some factors occasionally connected to religion that can make violence worse. These would include the following: (1) autocratic, hierarchal leadership that needs external enemies to maintain power (Lotufo & Martins, 2004), (2) teachings by leaders that violence is sanctioned by God (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007), (3) group anonymity, (4) feelings of superiority of one group toward others (Mabee, 2004), (5) claims of special access to truth and moral standing (Pearlin, 2002), (6) apocalyptic beliefs (Bromley & Melton, 2002), and (7) other beliefs such as moral nihilism or indifference that dehumanize people, stripping them of their inherent worth (Levinas, 1998; Pontoriero, 2006). This means that religion does not necessarily cause violence but can provide justifications and potentially escalate it—as well as helping to solve it. Secular causes in pursuit of a higher good may be liable to similar problems, as was seen in the terrible persecution of Christians by the atheistic Soviet government (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p. xi; Kimball, 2002, pp. 4–11; Taylor, 2007, p. 687).

## 12.6 Conclusion

**Key issue:** *An understanding of potential problems in religious communities is a potential major contribution of psychology to the dialogue with religion. However, this addition has been seriously limited by flawed and partial psychological understandings of these communities.*

The disdain for religious communities obvious in much of the older psychological literature has proved to be one of the biggest errors in the 20th-century scientific study of religion. The research on religion and physical or mental health (see Chapters 10 and 11), as well as some of the material reviewed in this chapter, is enough to suggest that communities offer tremendous power for positive change in the lives of individuals and society at large. However, many areas of the communal life, practices, and problems of religious communities remain unexplored. Fortunately, some researchers recognize this failure and are working to further our understanding of the benefits and problems of religious communities.

Religious self-understandings of community and its problems offer a good beginning point of a dialogical approach to understanding the power of community. The communitarian ideal put forward by both Christianity and Buddhism is interesting for a number of reasons, one of which is that it fits well with what we know about social organizations that are most effective at promoting the well-being of their members. The communitarian vision provides a balance of communal dwelling and individual seeking that is an essential foundation for religious life (Wuthnow, 1998).

Like every type of social group, religious communities have their problems and difficult people. It is a fact recognized for thousands of years by religious traditions, which have wrestled with the best format for community life that promotes spiritual development (Forest, 1997, p. 33). The *Rule of Benedict* as well as some of

the other authors we have reviewed in this chapter suggest that strong and healthy communities

- Offer strong caring leadership but avoid the trap of blind obedience to an authority figure in a hierarchical system that lacks checks or balances (Kimball, 2002; Pargament, 2002a)
- Promote relational practices that foster close, supportive relationships among members, as well as respectful attitudes toward others
- Encourage communal religious practices such as rituals that have an important role in supporting spiritual development.
- Deal with problematic behavior in a sensitive, constructive but firm manner.
- Promote community life while meeting individual needs—communitarianism
- Welcome others but have a strong sense of identity, only accepting members who will be able to live within the beliefs and practices of the community.

One thing that may be obvious from this review is that there is a large disconnect between the problems of religious groups discussed by psychologists (e.g., prejudice) and those of concern to religious communities and their members (e.g., leadership problems). However, both groups recognize that religious organizations designed to help people confront the realities of life and grow spiritually may sometimes have the opposite effect (Merton, 1973, p. 36). Social and organizational psychologists could contribute much to the understanding and solution of these problems. A dialogical approach here would be helpful so that psychologists could understand the nature of the problems from the perspective of the community. In return, religious communities may offer to psychology a model for how to construct a stronger community life, a pressing need in our contemporary global culture (Arnett, 2002, 2003).

No religious tradition or community is all good or all bad (Pargament, 2002a). It seems likely that some communities are more helpful than others, but even traditions sometimes thought to be more problematic may have advantages. Overall, connection to community is probably more helpful when the involvement is well integrated into the person's whole life. It is also a valuable support to those in need and facing stressful situations. Communities appear to be more problematic when they are (1) hierarchical and without checks or balances, (2) directive or cold, and (3) providing no balance of individual freedom and community. These are effects that can be studied by psychology, and the results can help religious traditions achieve the aim of providing a community life that facilitates spiritual growth.